Including poetry in the language classroom: advantages and a lesson plan proposal

Juan José Santillán[*] - Universidad de Cuenca, Ecuador
Fabián Darío Rodas, Universidad de Cuenca, Ecuador

ABSTRACT

The use of poetry in the language classroom is, to say the least, a controversial issue. The medium has been traditionally excluded from ESL/EFL contexts on the basis of generalized beliefs regarding its complexity and actual benefits. Nevertheless, this position disregards potential advantages, which have been reported in the pertinent literature, that poetry-based tasks can have on the learning process of a second or foreign language. Under these circumstances, this paper aims at describing the reported advantages of incorporating poetry-based tasks in several areas of language learning. Additionally, a proposal for an EFL lesson plan that includes poetry composition is provided.
Keywords: poetry, language instruction, advantages, approaches.

RESUMEN

El uso de la poesía en el aula de idiomas es, por decir lo menos, un tema controvertido. Este tipo de texto ha sido tradicionalmente excluido de los contextos de enseñanza del inglés, a razón de creencias generalizadas con respecto a su complejidad y beneficios reales. Sin embargo, esta posición no toma en cuenta las potenciales ventajas, reportadas en la literatura pertinente, que las actividades basadas en poemas pueden tener sobre el proceso de aprendizaje de una segunda lengua o lengua extranjera. Bajo esta perspectiva, este artículo pretende describir las ventajas de dicha incorporación de actividades basadas en poesía en varias áreas del aprendizaje de idiomas. Adicionalmente, una propuesta de plan de clase que incluye composición de poesía (es presentada) para contextos de enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera.
Palabras claves: poesía, enseñanza de idiomas, ventajas, enfoques.

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* Corresponding author; email: juan.santillan@ucuenca.edu.ec

Introduction

Poetry has traditionally been shunned from the language classroom. Khatib (2011) reports that, for the last twenty or thirty years, literary texts have been excluded from ESL/EFL environments. Panavelil (2011) explains that many language teachers believe that the inherent features of poetry make it too challenging for language learners. Moreover, this reluctance to use poetic texts can be linked to the teacher's experience with this literary medium. Maldonado (2015) claims that the performance of a teacher is significantly influenced by the person's mental models about education, which are forged on the basis of experience and cultural context. In fact, Scrivener (2011) states that many language teachers are reluctant to use poetry because they themselves feel insecure when it comes to reading and writing poetic texts. Povey also reports that "one of the most difficult things about teaching poetry to foreign students is handling the teacher's own deeply wrought unhappiness with verse, the result of experiences he or she has suffered" (as cited in Khatib, 2011, p. 165). Aside from these assertions, sprung from practitioners' experience, the relative lack of empirical evidence (Hall, 2005) does not allow for an in-depth analysis of this issue. However, negative attitudes towards poetry in students are frequently reported (Bloemert, Paran, Jansen & van de Grift, 2017; Iida, 2012; Hanauer, 2012). Khatib (2011) links this rejection to the inadequate selection of texts and their use through traditional methodologies that do not take into account the students' reactions to the literary pieces included in the lesson. Nevertheless, opposing the use of poetry written in the target language (TL) because of generalized beliefs and personal experiences can keep students and teachers from taking advantage of the benefits that have been reported about the use of poems in the language classroom. As a point of fact, Bloemert et al. (2017) argue that, notwithstanding modern attempts, literary texts have not been efficiently integrated into the language-learning curricula.

The discussion that ensues contributes to the field of ESL/EFL instruction through the vindication of a traditionally neglected resource. This attempt is of special significance in a teaching-learning practice that is currently marked by an overemphasis on the development of easily-measured observable skills. Hence, language learners are often reduced to passive reproducers of linguistic conventions that are imposed to them (Kramsch, 2009). This situation has been identified as an important cause of deficiencies in real-life performance (Iida, 2012; Hanauer, 2010). The intrinsic characteristics of poetry and its capacity to awaken the intra-personal potentialities of learners bring forth several advantages in various dimensions of ESL/EFL communicative competence. This paper, therefore, attempts to answer the following questions: *a) What are the advantages of the inclusion of poetry in language-learning contexts? c) What are the stages and features of a lesson plan that incorporates such practice?*

Advantages of the use of poetry in the language classroom

Providing a straightforward definition of poetry is unquestionably challenging, as there are innumerable perspectives and points of view as to what makes a text poetic. However, as this paper does not deal with literary theory, it is appropriate to use W. H. Auden's characterization, as cited in Burroway (2011), and define poetry as *memorable speech*. The same source explains that, since its origins, poetry has had the purpose of being read aloud and remembered by its audience. Therefore, poetic texts reflect an unbreakable and everlasting connection between sound and meaning. To this, it has to be added that one of the most important features of poetry is figurative language; consequently, poetic texts transmit a message that goes beyond the literal meaning of its constituent words. Hence, a text is poetic when, independently of the formal aspects it subjects itself to, it conveys meaning beyond the denotational level, stimulating oral reproduction and recollection.

Once these general considerations about poetry have been discussed, it is time to address the advantages of its use in the language classroom.

Bobkina and Dominguez (2014) assert that advocates of the use of literature in the EFL/ESL environments consider literary texts to be providers of authentic language manifestations with significant variety regarding style, text type, and register; thus, there is exposure to real-life language use which promotes familiarity with TL's formal structures and functional communicative elements. In relation to poetry, Panavelil (2011) claims that the use of this literary medium in the language classroom facilitates acquaintance with real-life uses of TL. Additionally, Brumfit and Carter argue that poems can constitute themselves in contextualized models of language as used by native speakers (as cited in Panavelil, 2011). It is important to remember that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), a language teaching/learning approach widely accepted and appreciated in modern days (Brown, 2015), encourages employing authentic materials in the foreign and second language classroom. Larsen-Freeman (2011) states that CLT advocates promote the use of authentic materials as a way of helping students apply what is learnt in class in real situations outside teaching-learning environments. The author also emphasizes the need to select texts that are suitable for the students. Furthermore, Lazar (1993) mentions that in EFL environments learners might find it difficult to gain access to authentic spoken language; as a result, written English attains preeminent significance for the process of acquiring or learning a foreign language. Consequently, literary texts can become a source of valuable contexts to assist the analysis and interpretation of TL. The same author also addresses the alleged issues that arise from the unconventional use of language in poetry, and argues that the language teacher can employ this unique feature of poetic texts as a means of improving the learners' linguistic responsiveness and attentiveness, along with their interpretative skills, through contrasting what is found in a poem with the linguistic conventions and norms dealt with in class. For his part, Kırkgöz (2008) suggests that poetry-based activities allow language learners to effectively and meaningfully practice and

reinforce their grammatical knowledge. It is imperative, however, to remember that all of this must arise from an effective selection of texts that takes into account the students' level.

Another element of the linguistic aspect of the advantages of using poetry in the EFL/ ESL classroom relates to vocabulary. Nation (2005) claims that vocabulary acquisition ought to be seen as a process of accumulating knowledge through repeated and diverse encounters with the lexical element, that is, the word. In association with Nation's assertion, the use of poems when teaching/learning a foreign or second language can be promoted on the basis that poems stimulate vocabulary enrichment; the reason for this claim is that, in a poem, words are meaningfully contextualized; and therefore more likely to be remembered (Panavelil, 2011). Scrivener (2011) also highlights this feature of poetry and asserts that, to more efficiently recall a language item, the person needs to be startled by an innovative and peculiar idea or lexical choice. The author also mentions that one should bear in mind that children acquire many L1 elements in this fashion. The linguistic features of poetry described above address Nation's and Scrivener's assertions. In fact, Kırkgöz (2008) asserts that the inclusion of poetry in the classroom stimulates retention, as "the repetitive nature of the words and patterns can promote learning of phrases and lexical items that can be transferred to not only writing but also to everyday use" (p. 104).

In addition to the abovementioned assertions, it is appropriate to briefly explain how poetry can be used to foster the development of writing and reading skills. Authors such as Collie, Slater, and McKay maintain that creative writing endeavors can be stimulated in language students through the use of poetry, as they can be inspired and thus emulate the texts with which they work (as cited in Panavelil, 2011). In the same line of thought, Harmer (2010) asserts that writing poetry is a suitable and beneficial activity for both young and adult learners, since it encourages creativity in a way other written expressions do not. Pushpa and Savaedi (2014), moreover, remark that poetry-based tasks allow language learners to relate to universal issues and topics, while providing opportunities for self-expression which foster creativity and genuine communication.

In relation to reading, Kong (2010) asserts that, when efficiently applied in the classroom, poetry is a valuable tool towards the development of the students' reading skills. The author links this claim to the fact that poetry can enhance motivation, stimulate imagination, increase experience, and improve self-cultivation. In accordance with these ideas, Silberstein (1994) states that, because of its special features, poetry allows learners to practice the totality of reading aspects. Complementarily, Hammer (2010) and Lazar (1993) empathize on the fact that poetry can also promote the development of listening and speaking skills; this is explained by the fact that, as described in the first section of this paper, poetry is originally meant to be read aloud and heard by an audience.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that, as Panavelil (2011) explains, poetry has the quality of significantly motivating language learners. Scrivener (2011) states that the teaching-learning process of a foreign/second language can become monotonous and

uninteresting if the teacher and the students exclusively use course book materials and examples. Additionally, Lazar (1993) makes reference to the fact that learners might find working with literary texts to be a very rewarding activity. Since it is considered that literature has a high level of complexity, adequately performing an activity that involves a literary text can bring forth authentic feelings of success. Moreover, and dealing specifically with poetry, the author considers that poems are likely to stimulate intense emotional responses in the learners.

To finalize this section, a table summarizing the reported advantages of the inclusion of poetry in the language classroom, which was compiled from research studies, is presented below:

Table 1. *Reported advantages of the use of poetry in the language classroom*

Study	Aspect of research	Participants	Data collection	Results
Kırkgöz (2008)	Benefits of poetry-based reading and writing activities	28 Turkish university students	Journal entries and informal feedback.	Grammar practice. Vocabulary acquisition. Incorporation of personal experiences in the learning process. Benefits on retention.
Khatib (2011)	Advantages of reader-centered approaches to poetry use.	200 Iranian university EFL students	Control experimental group / Pre and post test	Significant differences in performance.
Pushpa and Savaedi (2014)	Influence of poetry on autonomous EFL courses (performance and attitude)	60 Iranian university students	Control experimental group / Pre and post test	Positive impact on performance. Motivation improvement.
Hanauer (2001)	Poetry reading promotes the development of linguistic and cultural awareness.	20 – 10 dyads – Hebrew teacher trainees	Protocol analysis	Advanced learners are capable of reading and interpreting poetry. Attention to meaning construction and linguistic form
Bjelland (2016)	Experience towards Frost's "The Road	39 tenth-grade Norwegian	Qualitative analysis of	Successful interpretation of figurative language and

	Not Taken"	EFL students	responses	poetic devices.
				Departure from own experience.
Hanauer (2010)	Whether writing poetry is too hard.		Analysis 844 L2 poems	Writing poetry is not a difficult task for well-stimulated students.
Liao (2012)	Relationships between the reported writing experiences and the perceived values of poetry writing	18 TESOL graduate students in the U.S.	Interviews and a rating scale to collect data	Positive attitudes Self-expression, self-discovery, and emotional release Vocabulary enrichment Ownership of TL.
Chamcharatsri (2013)	Experience when expressing love through poems	4 Thai ESL students	Writing prompts Interviews	Overcome initial difficulties. Shift from form to meaning.
Iida (2011)	Influence of haiku on academic writing	20 Japanese EFL students	Essay-based tests Interviews Six-week intervention	Positive influence on academic writing (textual analysis) Most participants consider haiku as valuable. Vocabulary enrichment. Self-expression. Skill transfer.
Iida (2012)	Influence of haiku writing on EFL learning	20 Japanese EFL students	Analysis of poems and interviews.	Positive attitudes. Development of linguistic awareness. Vocabulary enrichment.
Iida (2016)		1 Myanmarese EFL student in Japan	Analysis of poems and interviews	Self-discovery. Making learning personal

A proposal for the inclusion of poetry in the language classroom

In this section, a succinct description of a lesson plan that incorporates poetry composition practices in the language classroom is presented. The activities are thought for young adult (20 – 30 years old) EFL students at an intermediate proficiency level. The lesson plan encompasses two one-hour sessions.

Stage 1: Introducing the topic (10 minutes)

This stage includes short opening activities that aim at awakening the students' attention and interests. The lesson opens with a brief conversation about loss. The teacher starts by relating a personal loss of an object that he has recently experienced, stressing the reason why this event has had an effect on him. An example could be a withered plant that he had been nursing. Students are invited to share similar experiences. The discussion should close with a reflection about the diversity of ways in which people experience loss.

Stage 2: Engagement (25 minutes)

During this stage, students read and discuss a published poem, preferably by an author of renown. This endows the whole lesson with importance and provides a pertinent model for the tasks to follow. For this example, the title of the poem "One Art" by Elizabeth Bishop is projected or written on the whiteboard. The teacher asks students to try to predict the general message of the poem. Answers should not be challenged.

Then copies of the poem are handed-out, and the text is read aloud by the teacher, with the students silently following. The teacher addresses some problematic vocabulary such as *intent, fluster, shan't,* and any other item that the students might bring up. Additionally, the problematic structure of the last section of line eight and the beginning of line nine – *and where it was you meant / to travel* – should be dealt with. The teacher can simply present an alternate construction.

Next, the teacher draws the students' attention to certain formal features of the poem, which is a villanelle. It is not advisable to dwell in the meter – iambic pentameter – or rhyme scheme of the poem, but rather in the skillful and systematic repetitions of the words *master* and *disaster,* which are known as refrains.

The teacher organizes students in small groups (3 – 4) and asks them to discuss their impressions and interpretations of the poem for five to seven minutes. Then the teacher asks members of each group to report on the discussion. Again, answers and opinions should not be challenged.

Stage 3: Sensorial stimulus (25 minutes)

As Iida (2010) suggests, given poem composition relies on imagery, it is imperative to activate the students' senses in a pre-writing activity. Thus, the teacher can write the following questions on the whiteboard: When was the last time you remembered losing

something? Where were you? Were you alone? Was it cold or hot? Did you hear anything? Did you smell something in particular? What color can you connect the event with? Why?

If possible, students should be allowed to leave the classroom and find a place of their preference where they can individually reflect on the posed questions. The teacher encourages students to write down their answers. This stage provides opportunities for language study; hence, students may be required to use specific vocabulary and/or language structures in their answers.

After 15 minutes, students are called back inside and paired up; preferably, students are allowed to choose their partner. Each pair discusses their answers to the questions.

Stage 4: Composition (homework + 20 minutes)

As homework, students are required to write a first version of their poems. The topic can be, but is not restricted to, the event on which students reflected when answering the questions during the previous stage. The teacher asks students to write at least 12 lines of poetry that include refrains. Specific metrical requirements are not advisable.

The following session, students are given 20 minutes to finish their drafts. The teacher should provide assistance when asked. Students are required to write their poems in a single piece of paper with no name.

Stage 5: Publication (40 minutes)

The teacher should encourage, but not force, sharing these creations; doing so provides the activity with real and practical value.

The teacher collects the poems and hangs all of them on one wall of the classroom. Then the whole class is asked to stand up and read the compositions. Each student is asked to select a specific poem that he or she would like to discuss more thoroughly with the author. In a whole-class activity, students are to look for the author of the poem they have selected. Students are then allowed to work in pairs (reader and author) to discuss the interpretations that the reader might have about the poem he or she has chosen. Students continue pairing up until all poems have been discussed.

Finally, the teacher asks all authors to write their names in their compositions and hand them in. The personal and intimate value of poetry should cause instructors to carefully consider the strategies that they use to provide feedback. This provision should by no means be detrimental to the students' motivation. Teachers ought to always bear in mind that poetry-based tasks are especially challenging for language learning; thus, inappropriate provision of feedback can be interpreted as harsh criticism. As a result, inaccurate use of language in a composition should be addressed individually, providing, but not imposing alternate language items and constructions.

Conclusions

The inclusion of literary texts in the language classroom through traditional assumptions and procedures that are based on the texts and/or an imposed interpretation is not likely to bring forth much benefit to foreign or second language teaching-learning processes. However, language learners can certainly profit from the inclusion of tasks that, vindicating the crucial role of the reader, exploit literary texts to promote language proficiency along with personal and expressive growth. Literature in general and poetry in particular have the capacity of placing the self as the focus of the teaching-learning process, thus increasing motivation by directly linking this process to the students' experience and emotions. Though benefits on all the language skills can be brought about by using poetry in the language classroom, poetry-based creative writing practice is of special interest, as it stimulates and empowers learners to meaningfully and aesthetically express themselves while practicing grammatical elements and enriching vocabulary. Sadly, not much research has been carried out regarding the effects of poetry in EFL environments, especially in Latin American contexts. This is particularly latent with regard to the perspectives and beliefs that teachers hold about the inclusion of poetry in the language classroom. Some authors discuss the personal experience of teachers as a deterrent for the inclusion of poetry; however, there is not enough empirical evidence to confidently endorse this assumption. This empirical gap is certainly appealing for further research on the topic.

Nevertheless, this want of empirical support should not discourage language teachers from implementing poetry-based tasks in the classroom. Doing so might cause inattention to the students' needs and deprive them of activities with potential – and to some extent, empirically tested advantages for language learning.

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