

Guiding ESL Learners to Appreciate Poetry

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Importance of Appreciation

Those familiar with the definition of literature as interpretation of life would find in ‘poetry’ an interpretation of life through imagination and feeling. One chief characteristic of poetry which such a view helps to perpetuate is that poetry relates to our feelings and at the same time by the exercise of imaginative power transfigures existing realities. M. H. Hudson concludes his detailed study of poetry by pointing out “In our reading of poetry we should always remember that the poet appeals directly to the poet in ourselves, and that our real enjoyment of poetry...depends upon our own keenness of imaginative apprehension and emotional response”, and so he adds that the cultivation of the faculty of poetic appreciation is important.

Appreciation Can be Elusive

If appreciation can be used vaguely to mean liking or enjoyment, it is up to the teacher to use a pedagogical approach that enables the learner to be moved by the emotion in the poem. Given the fact that there are several types of poetry and that poets are often invariably experimenting with language even as they compose poems, a fuller comprehension of a poem that leads to appreciation of the poem can be often elusive.

There are three areas that need focused attention for a better appreciation of poetry and these can at times be elusive. These areas are:

- Cultural Background of Poems
- Rhythm
- Poetic Craft

Cultural Background

Culture plays a prominent role in shaping language and literature. Culture can be defined as the “shared beliefs, values, and patterns of behaviour that define a group and that are required for group membership” (Peregoy and Owen, 1993). A literary work reflects a specific cultural trait and poetry is no exception to it. For instance one can understand the Indian poet Sarojini Naidu’s *The Flute Player of Brindavan* only when one is well-versed in Indian mythology and culture. Hence sensitizing learners to the cultural aspects of a poem is important.

Further, the language we know is related to culture, and poetry -- a composition using words would at some stage reflect the cultural milieu from which it has evolved. Literary historians have been able to identify poetry types and literary periods. And to comprehend a poem it sometimes requires the reader to familiarize himself with the socio-cultural background of both the writer and the age in which the poem was composed.

The culturally based interaction patterns increase the abilities of the students. Cathy Collins Block mentions, that several test results reveal that many students are “unable to reach their language arts potential merely because of their unfamiliarity with the background of cultural and social knowledge that was contained in their reading material.”

Therefore, while teaching poetry, special care must be exercised by the teacher to select poems and activities that are culture specific and familiar to the students. This will not only ensure the proper responses from students but also make the activity

beneficial to their own growth.

Rhythm

Rhythm may be interpreted as patterned sound. Unconscious but inevitable rhythm patterns are produced by the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. Rhythm is one essential quality of poetry.

Rhythm in poetry can be described as a natural manifestation of an emotional state, and expression of an emotional consciousness. Conscious and planned rhythm is one distinguishing feature of poetry. However many modern poets have consciously manipulated line lengths, word groupings and even metrical patterns which tends to make a shift from emotional enjoyment to intellectual appreciation.

When we speak of the teaching of rhythm, we refer to the guidance of a natural rhythmic sense to express itself in patterns recognizable as poetry. No one needs to know the names of metres and of patterns to grasp the concept of rhythm. When we read aloud to the learner, he hears the rhythm, and it is recorded in his mind. When he reads the poem aloud for himself, he reproduces the rhythm, swaying his body or moving his head as he reads. Rhythm is as natural to a child as breathing. All language has rhythm. The child is born into a world of rhythm.

Poetic Craft

Niha Willis, in her book *Let Them Write Poetry*, gives plenty of advice on poetic composition: Don't think...of writing a poem...think of it as exercising imagination. Try to make a single image about a thing by asking yourself what it looks like or sounds like to 'you'. Don't let yourself fall into the habit of remembering other people's images for common experiences; create your own.

There are several issues to be addressed still...the right word, the right rhythm, the right figure of speech in order to produce an intensity. Above all the poem should both communicate to the reader, the message and produce an aesthetic experience. A task which is by no means easy and something which requires plenty of practice.

The learners should be introduced to several types of poems chosen for informing the poetic craft. And it is for the teacher to give the learners exercises in poetic composition to guide and inspire them to compose lines. A few sources of inspiration could be the following:

The Outdoor

- trees, flowers, growing things
- animals, birds
- mountains, rivers, lakes
- stars, sun, clouds
- seasons, sunrise, sunset, day, night
- wind, rain

Relations with People

- parent, friend, neighbour

Special Occasions

- excursion, holiday

City

- park, street, buildings

Country

- farm, field, forest

Personal Experience

- immediate, remembered and imagined experience

A teacher can give creative experiences by giving the learner an opportunity to read, hear and discuss poetry. This will awaken in them an appreciation of words and word pictures. In the development of appreciation we should begin with the known and proceed cautiously to the unknown.

The author of *Let them Write Poetry* lists the following advice:

- Begin with poems learners already know and love. Read them aloud
- Teach learners to read poems aloud, individually and in chorus
- Allow those who wish to do so, memorize their favourite poems
- Encourage the class to select poems for reading aloud from magazines or newspapers
- Allow the class to collect poems closely related to a poem that is taught
- Allow learners to illustrate the poems
- Allow learners to find pictures to match poems they like

Such activities can awaken an interest in poem as an art form and the complete poem as an artistic expression of the poet's idea.

Evaluation of Compositions by Students

Appreciation and enjoyment can and should lead to composition. However in evaluating a poetic work perhaps the most important requirement is not the acquisition of scholarship but the cultivation of poetic appreciation. So when assessing the composition of a learner one has to :

- View the work objectively without prejudice
- Avoid attempting to read into it reflection of our own emotional state
- Give weight to the learner's maturity, background, experience and inhibition

It would be unfair to look into the learner's work characteristics and qualities that distinguish good adult poetry from mere verse. A few essential qualities that could be looked into :*

- **Imagination**-The conscious or unconscious use of imagery, figure of speech original thought and phrasing
- **Emotion**-It should be the fundamental basis and motivating force that enables the reader to seek a reflection of ones own emotional experience
- **Idea**- Presentation of new insights or interprets experiences or implies a philosophy of life
- **Universality**-Experience that can be shared by all
- **Unity**-Unity of idea, impression and treatment (A central idea expressed in a single point of view)
- **Rhythm**-Appropriate rhythm whether patterned or cadenced
- **Concreteness**-Communicate ideas in concrete terms that have sensual appeal
- **Pattern**-Must have a sound pattern, word pattern, rhythm pattern stanza pattern that contributes artistic effect
- **Intensity**-Which is achieved through deliberate use of words with emotional association, increased use of metaphor by interpretation of experience in terms of the five senses

The teacher can evaluate along these lines and help students to focus their attention on these aspects both at the level of comprehension and composition.

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