

TEACHING POETRY TO YOUNG LEARNERS: WHY AND HOW?

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ABSTRACT

While reading poetry, readers encounter new combinations of words, words that denote as well as connote and in order to understand it, the readers must go far beyond the information given in order to make cognitive or emotive meaning out of it. Also, poetry proves to be effective in enhancing reading skills in young children. The rhyming patterns and lyrical quality in poetry provides cues to a reader for predicting words and phrases. Poetry calls for interesting post-reading activities than can engage young learners in meaningful ways of expressing themselves through writing. This paper is an attempt to discuss the ways in which teaching poetry can help in affective, cognitive and literacy development of young learners and to suggest steps towards harnessing its potential in the classroom.

KEYWORDS: Poetry, Reader Response, Reading Comprehension, Writing

INTRODUCTION

Poetry is the most ancient form of literature. Poetry stirs emotion and stimulates mind through its metrical rhythms, musical lines and its sense impressions and language. In a language classroom poetry reinforces word sounds, rhymes, patterns and pronunciation. It introduces to new vocabulary and figurative language as well as examples of synonyms, antonyms, puns, word play and coining of new words and expressions. It also provides practice for language development, listening and oral fluency.

Due to peculiar use of language in poetry, the words evoke, generate and help in associating the images created by them with one's own experiences. Words in poetry are not limited to lexical definitions and referential meanings. They carry plurality of meanings from their contexts, the various associations along with sensory qualities.

Poetry makes us aware of some idea or insight, evokes some lost emotion, and brings to mind significance of some detail. D.H. Lawrence (1931) claimed that "The essential quality of poetry is that it makes a new effort in attention and 'discovers' a new world within the known world."

POETRY FOR COGNITIVE ENHANCEMENT

Since poetry makes use of elliptical writing, readers of poetry may find its language difficult to comprehend. In an essay titled "On Difficulty", George Steiner (1978) presents a classification of various barriers to comprehension of poems. He proposes four distinct categories of problems to be addressed when dealing with a poem and shows that meaning is not immediately understood.

These categories are: *contingent*, a lack of understanding of the vocabulary of the poem; *modal*, a disparity between the poet's and the reader's frame of reference; *tactical*, any unusual syntactical usage employed by the poet and *ontological*, poetry that does not conform to standard poetic concepts of the Western poetic tradition.

Understanding and comprehending poetry involves dealing with concrete level of contingent difficulties as well as abstractions such as ontological difficulties. Such an engagement with poetry requires specific skills to be used in reading poetry, which are also essential to the full development of the individual. Studies in the cognitive sciences describe the function of mind as problem solving activity that employs many strategies for making sense of the world. In this view, language plays a vital role in the formation of coherent worldviews.

Seminal psychologist Jerome Bruner has been one of the most firm proponents of this view of the mind. He proposes that man, in interaction with the world and with other men; in practical and social problem solving situations is constantly “going beyond the information given”. The assumption that goes with this idea is that mind is a collection of problem solving skills for interacting with the world.

While reading poetry, readers encounter new combinations of words, words that denote as well as connote and in order to understand it, the readers must go far beyond the information given in order to make cognitive or emotive meaning out of it. Poetry, therefore, not only challenges our minds, it expands our tolerance of that which is complex and augments our comprehension of abstractions.

The skills for comprehending poetry can be seen as generalizable problem solving skills that constitute an essential part of the human toolkit for social as well as physical survival.

In order that these skills be developed through reading of poetry, it leads to certain pedagogical implications for teaching of poetry. After the advent of “Practical Criticism” by I. A. Richards in the 1920s to the development of New Criticism, the emphasis of which were the ‘formal’ aspects of literature, the teaching of poetry was reduced to solving comprehension exercises. The reader’s response to it was considered extraneous to the study of poetry.

POETRY FOR AESTHETIC RESPONSE

The emergence of reader-response theory, particularly Louis Rosenblatt’s transactional theory in the 1970s, altered the way poetry was looked at. She advanced a theory that a poem came into being only when it received a proper “aesthetic” reading. She maintained that reading was a dynamic transaction between the reader and the text. She placed all reading transactions on a continuum between ‘aesthetic’ or reading for pleasure and experiencing the poem and “efferent” or reading to gain information.

The development of a methodology that is based on informed concepts of reading and response is a priority now, rather than mere comprehension and criticism. Contemporary thought about classroom pedagogy gives importance to the process of reading and responding, that facilitate the development of comprehension abilities. Such pedagogy emphasizes re-reading lines and verses, enjoying an image or a rhyme. It calls for exposing children to a lot of poetry so that they can hear, read, write, speak about it, dramatize and illustrate it.

With younger children, the fun of rhyming sounds and strongly marked rhymes is enough to encourage them to read poetry, but their experience can be augmented by performances that lift the words off the page. These include shared readings, choral speaking, taped audio programmes which help children to remain alert to the auditory stimulus of the poem. These encourage them to respond in different ways such as, tape record their recitations, do display boards based on themes in the poem and so on.

Through poetry children can have access to a variety of voices and a range of feelings. It is important that pupils experience oral folk poetry, songs and poems from around the world. Poetry anthologies can provide this exposure to the children.

Providing time and opportunity for individual reflection and articulation of personal responses are important for grasping and understanding the poem. Sharing of their impression about the poems and discussing in groups helps to shape and modify ideas and further exploring and developing their responses.

Reflective reading and responding lets poetry be experienced and enjoyed and facilitates the process of comprehending poetry. The skill set that develops in the course of comprehending poetry is only a result of the whole reading process, without which comprehension can degenerate into mere inquisition (Benton, 1990) and be reduced to solving textbook exercises.

Hughes (2007) opines that paying attention to the language and rhythms of poetry helps to develop oral language skills and those children with well-developed oral language skills are more likely to have higher achievement in reading and writing

POETRY FOR READING COMPREHENSION

Poetry proves to be effective in enhancing reading skills in young children. The rhyming patterns and lyrical quality in poetry provide cues to a reader for predicting words and phrases. Systematic anticipation or prediction is vital to the process of reading (Kumar, 1994). According to Newman, "The skill that's developed in becoming a fluent reader is learning how to use relevant prior knowledge to select the fewest, but most productive, print cues. The more we know in advance, the easier it is to read; the less we know before-hand, the more difficult it is to understand." Singing poems regularly can enhance the skill of systematic prediction since rhymes help identify patterns in language. A lyrical poem sung often by the child can easily become a part of children's memory. When the same poem is read out to the child, he/she will try to predict the words in the poem. Moreover, reluctant readers also feel confident while reading aloud poetry for pleasure (Winch, Johnston, March, Ljungdahl, & Holliday, 2006).

Poetry also provides a meaningful and interesting context for teaching children to identify and grasp phonetic sounds through rhyming words. These phonetic sounds are often taught to children in isolation through repetitive drill tasks that are devoid of meaningful context and hence cumbersome for the child. In order to develop sound reading skills it is imperative that readers are motivated to read in the first place. Readers are more likely to stay hooked on their reading material if they are interesting to read. Poetic devices such as assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, refrains, the beauty of the sound intensifies that which is sought to be conveyed through poetry and all these lend a musical quality to poetry. Poetry satisfies human need for harmony and rhythm. The rhythm and mellifluous quality of poetry has a natural appeal to humans and little children intuitively respond to it. Immersing students in poetry where they can read and respond in meaningful and pleasurable ways, augments the readers' senses and imagination (Whitfield, 2009).

Another crucial aspect of developing effective reading skills is to be able to construct meaning out of what is read. Since no text is self-explanatory readers need to interpret the text in order to derive meaning. The figurative use of language and the connotative meanings of the words in poetry yield themselves to more than one interpretation. A poem can thus have interpretations that offer scope for discussions where each person can have his own perception of the poem. One can generate variety of outputs from compact language input of a poem (Maley & Duff, 1989). Owing to different

figurative and literal meanings, poetry opens up possibilities of interpretations. Poems with multiple or 'hidden' or ambiguous meanings offer an opportunity to let students discuss and share ideas and experiences.

POETRY FOR CREATING WRITING OPPORTUNITIES

Poetry calls for interesting post-reading activities than can engage students in meaningful ways of expressing themselves through writing. Students can be asked to jot their understanding and interpretations of the poem in their journals which can then be read out and shared and enjoyed with the whole class or small groups. (Winch et al., 2006). Students can also be given an opportunity to respond to the poem through ten minute 'quick writes' (Tompkins, 209). During this uninterrupted time students write their perceptions about the poem they've read. Emergent writers can also be asked to draw what they feel the poem means to them. An interesting and creative writing activity that can be taken up with students after doing a poem with them is to ask them to extend the poem. Students can be asked to add new characters and setting to the poem. Poems created by the students can be published in a students' poetry anthology or displayed in the writing/poetry corner of the classroom. Another creative writing activity can involve students converting the poems into narratives or converting any story that have read into a poem. This activity would help students play with syntactic structures while converting one form of writing into another since poetic license gives the liberty to the writer to alter regular sentence structure to suit the rhyme pattern while writing a poem.

Thus, engaging with poetry enhances creativity and imagination among young learners by allowing for creative ways of self-expression.

SUGGESTIONS FOR EFFECTIVE TEACHING OF POETRY

The aim of teaching poetry must be to make pupils feel. The main value of teaching poetry lies in the process, not in the result. In order to harness the full potential of poetry in augmenting literacy skills repeated readings and discussions, shared and choral readings of the poems should be at the heart of a poetry class wherein the students are supported by their teacher to compose their own poetry to define their feelings through it. While teaching poetry, the pupils should be allowed the joy of discovering for themselves. The poem should be allowed to have its own effect on them. In order to realize the full potential of poetry teaching in the classroom, teachers can ensure the following:

- Provide learners with ample opportunity to explore and engage themselves with words and poems.
- Organize interesting and meaningful reading-writing activities based on the poem and encourage active role of the learners
- Create an environment where the teacher should act as the facilitator and motivate the learners to bring in their experiences while reading poetry.
- Develop poetry corner in classroom providing with poems/ poetry anthologies of wide variety and themes. Regularly update material. Encourage students to add new poems to the corner. Display students' creative work based on poems they've read in this corner.
- Set aside time for the children to read poetry other than those prescribed in their textbook for enjoyment.
- Arrange for small and large group discussions and regular activities such as setting up boards based on the themes of the poems, writing responses to poems, celebrating special occasions with poetry recitations. Do not subject it

to any formal assessment.

CONCLUSIONS

Responding to the question “Why poetry?” Ruurs (2001) explains: “Because poetry can be so satisfying and support a wide range of learning. Because the rhythm of poetry comes naturally to children. Because the potential of poetry lies within the minds of all children... Because the use of poetic language in the classroom brings along certain energy, a joy that is hard to capture in prose...”

To reiterate, the importance of poetry in children’s learning is that it can foster skills that can be transferred to or generalized to the process of making sense of the world, as well as provide opportunities for aesthetic response and meaningful literacy learning, provided a pedagogy that facilitates a holistic engagement with poetry is made available to its learners.

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