

Original Research Article

Opportunities of Poetry Pedagogy in Literature in English at Two Leribe Schools: Teachers' perceptions

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Abstract

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This study examines the opportunities of poetry pedagogy and learning in two high schools in Leribe district. Focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from teachers about poetry opportunities in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. The findings show that teachers are aware that poetry has roles to play culturally, linguistically, historically, for reading and writing purposes and for enhancing both analytic and critical mind. The conclusion drawn is that teachers should have portraits of good teaching in action and learners be part of poetry; as writers and readers, enjoying all the aspects of the genre. It was also concluded that despite the fact that there might be strong emphasis on more functional or instrumental notions of literacy in literacy programs in many Lesotho classrooms, poetry is pivotal for understanding the deeper meanings in the use of language and the power of language to convey tone and emotion, as well as the rhythmic patterns possible between words and within word groups, thus, personal development and raising cultural awareness.

Keywords: Lesotho schools, Literature in English, Opportunities, Poetry, Teaching and learning, Teachers' perceptions

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, when societies contemplate the locus and study of Literature as a discipline, both for the individual and society, the most rudimentary and recurrently pronounced question is, "why does the study of Literature matter?" The riposte to that is that Literature is one of the significant aspects of English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms. Literature in English is one of the indispensable parts of the curriculum. Boas (1931, as cited in Violetta-Irene, 2013) outlines literature as the assemblage of human's expression, ideas, and emotion. This then makes it a sound annotation that literature forms an integral part in honing the critical thinking of human beings on how they appreciate the world and therefore it is in the eyes of Boas that this study will operationalise and rationalise Literature.

In the vision of the Singapore Literature in English syllabus, according to the Ministry of Education in

Singapore (2019), it is stipulated that the study of Literature empowers learners to make meaning of texts, and see themselves and the world from diverse perspectives. In congruence to this, National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) and Examinations Council of Lesotho (ECOL) (2018, p. 2), in the Literature in English syllabus, state that the teaching of Literature in English 'provides insights into what other people think, do and say and helps learners to see more through the eyes of others.' It can be drawn then that, based on these assertions, Literature pedagogy inspires learners to empathise with others, to find their own voice as they reflect on the human condition and to consider the impact of their beliefs and actions on society.

One of the objectives to be attained at the finish of the literature syllabus is to enable learners to provide their personal responses to the texts and also to display an

awareness of how language is operationalised in attainment of a particular purpose (NCDC and ECoL, 2018). From my professional experiences as a teacher, many learners, conversely, are far from accomplishing these objectives in reading and understanding literary works for several reasons. One conspicuous thing which even some teachers are unconscious of is the role of literary know-how.

Poetry is a piece of creative writing which is generally composed in verse. Poetry is, according to Dressman et al. (2014), a conventional form of art where one can find aesthetic pleasure and knowledge expressed in beautiful language, thought, forms, emotion and rhythm. In poetry, sentences are sometimes broken into parts and each part is on its own line. Poetry is usually shorter than other genres. In poetry, sound and meaning of language are compiled to create ideas and feelings and language is connotative.

Even though it antedates formal education, poetry is unfortunately and unfairly subordinated to other genres of Literature. At schools (in both the international and Lesotho contexts), poetry is not accorded bounteous space in the curriculum and teaching time-table. Worse still, both learners and teachers seem to fear it, thus a grossly side-lined discipline. Also, its starring role to grow human know-how and generate language awareness has not been well apprehended. Conversely, empirical investigation into the teaching of poetry writing is narrow with respect to teachers' perception of and desire to teach poetry writing.

Notwithstanding the fact that poetry writing instruction is known to be of assistance in language classrooms, Hanauer (2012) suggests that many learners and teachers in English as a Second Language (ESL)/English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts are skeptical about using poetry in their writing class. The reason that many teachers avoid teaching poetry writing is they think that poetry is more likely to be taught as part of the reading curriculum rather than as part of the writing curriculum. As well, the teachers believe that poetry writing is 'difficult.' The dearth of desire to give grounding in poetry writing could be triggered by educational experiences that teachers have had, such as the level of exposure and experience in writing poetry in both their personal and academic lives.

Also, regardless of it antedating formal education, poetry is unfortunately and unfairly subordinated to other genres of Literature. At schools (in both the international and Lesotho contexts), poetry is not accorded bounteous space in the curriculum and teaching time-table. Worse still, both learners and teachers seem to fear it, thus a grossly side-lined discipline. Also, its starring role to grow human know-how and generate language awareness has not been well apprehended. Conversely, empirical investigation into the teaching of poetry writing is narrow with respect to teachers' perception of and desire to teach poetry writing.

Poetry, as one of the genres of Literature was not popular in many schools in the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC) examinations which comprised of GCE O Levels, marked and graded by Examinations Council of Lesotho (ECOL) in Lesotho since 1989. In COSC, Literature in English was not done by most schools and even with those that were doing it, they kept on dropping it out of the curriculum. As part of the national educational development in Lesotho, in 2013 the COSC was substituted by the Lesotho General Certificate of Secondary Education (LGCSE).

LGCSE was believed to be more germane than COSC in that LGCSE is a qualification that appreciates subject performance in distinct acknowledgment unlike COSC which was based on a group award system and that all the subjects in the curriculum will have the same status and English Language ceased to be a passing or failing subject. Literature in English was made one of the electives in the Social Sciences group in LGCSE in 2014 and was first examined as part of LGCSE in 2015. It is in this curriculum shift where poetry was made compulsory to all the schools that were doing Literature in English. This move, though was intended to be a positive one based on the significance and value of poetry teaching, saw more schools relinquishing the study of Literature in English. When talking with teachers of such schools, the main answer would be that they are forced to teach such a challenging genre.

A poem is usually not a favoured item for most ESL learners mainly because of its "deviant use" (Widdowson, 1985, cited in Byars, 2016) of language. I have also observed that learners rate poetry as making the least contribution to language skills development and they probably consider it as insignificant to any advancement in their studies or their future careers. Teaching poetry is a challenge for teachers and learners because it mandates the two parties; teachers and learners, to have extra thinking to get the meaning of the poem that they read especially if it is written in foreign language. This study therefore explores the teachers' perceptions on the opportunities of teaching and learning poetry. This problem is investigated in order to understand how to create better poetry teaching and learning environments and even open their eyes to the opportunities they are missing in not teaching poetry.

METHODOLOGY

In order to receive the data needed for analysing teachers' perceptions of poetry teaching, various data collecting methods were applied. As stated in the foregoing paragraph, the study consisted mainly of qualitative research, which allowed only a few participants that contributed with their thoughts, ideas and conceptions on the teaching and learning in question. The study applied an approach where

conclusions were made based on inference of respondents' responses. The design of the study was to perform semi-structured interviews with five teachers at two high schools in Leribe district, Lesotho. Datko (2015) posits that a semi-structured interview is a qualitative research method that is a combination of a pre-determined set of open questions (questions that prompt discussion) together with the opportunity for the interviewer to explore particular themes or responses further. According to DeJonckheere et al. (2018), this technique typically consists of a dialogue between researcher and participant, guided by a flexible interview protocol and supplemented by follow-up questions, probes and comments. This information appropriated semi-structured interview for this study because it allowed the participants (teachers and learners) a chance to give out data that became helpful for the study, not locking out their personal and subjective content out.

Face-to-face semi-structured interview encounter was used, allowing me to ask open-ended questions and probe participants' responses. The participating teachers were five high school teachers from the two high schools in Leribe district, in the northern region of Lesotho; two from Khetha High School and three from Letsema English Medium High School. Grades 10 and 11 and Form D (conventionally known as Grade 11) and Form E (Grade 12) teachers were taken as participants at Khetha High School and Letsema English Medium High School, respectively, purposively selected based on the convenience of the researcher. This was because the selected participants were believed to be an accurate source of data because they were respectively teaching and studying and learning poetry with different experiences.

Of the five teachers that I interviewed, four were male and one was female. Since the interviews were conducted anonymously, the informants have been assigned the following labels: Teacher A, Teacher B, Teacher C, Teacher D and Teacher E. All of the informants were LGCSE Literature in English teachers working in the two high schools in question whose experience in teaching Literature in English varied between five and 13 years. The interviews with these five informants were conducted in person at their respective schools. The data has not been analysed according to the gender of the respondents or to their age because I have not found significant differences between the male and female participants' answers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

It appeared from the teachers that poetry has an advantage and opportunity across the curricular. According to the teachers, due to the brevity of poetry, some complex components of other subjects can be taught through poetry. Teachers A, C and E exemplified

that they have helped their Science teaching colleagues to use poems to teach tricky concepts and they claimed it worked well in such classes. Therefore, it is evident that poetry can be used creatively, artistically and generatively, not only in English and literacy programs, but across the curriculum to support discipline-specific literacy, artistic and textual practices (Marshall, 2014). Apart from that, teachers revealed that poetry's ability to cut across disciplines enhances further critical thinking in learners because they begin to question and critique concepts from other subjects through poetry lens. Poetry can be regularised and unified with the delivery of teaching and learning in a school context. There is potential to conceive poetry as a modality for creativity, embodied expression and oral discourse, and deep conceptual thinking that can be experienced across the curriculum (Parker, 2014; Davis, 2015).

Reading in another language has a significant impact on the learner's acquisition of the target language because of the exposure to appropriate input (Alvi and Alvi, 2019). The participants were unanimous in their view that poetry impacts positively on language improvement. Teacher D stated this as the main reason why poetry should be taught in the ESL classroom:

Except for being... fun and interesting, I think (literature) is a wonderful tool for teenagers or all learners to pick up new words and phrases and to see idiomatic language; it's reading comprehension so it's not just for entertainment, but for learning. Poetry offers chance to exposure of rich language which enables us to be dynamic in usage of words while writing our essays. Thus we can say it is an effective entry point to understanding English Language better.

This teacher perceives poetry as a tool that they can use to reach the final goal of English learning, which is language learning. Teacher B gives a similar comment on this aspect:

I love poetry lessons because they build on language skills and also help us understand the significance of words in writing. Poetry improves our vocabulary especially when we are helped by our teacher and we help ourselves with dictionaries.

They agree that language development is an aspect of studying poetry that should be as important as gaining understanding and use of language in a varied way and also clarify that a teacher should be there to guide them. They shared similar sentiments that poems are helpful because they open eyes to beauty of language in use and make them to be better people via the use of language and that they need guidance of a teacher.

Another benefit of poetry teaching, as revealed by the teachers is widening cultural awareness to both teachers and learners. On the cultural argument, we have to look

at culture as content that has to be worked on to demystify stereotypes and make learners more tolerant towards other cultures (Moea, 2021). The contact with different cultures also permits learners to boost their creativity. In this line of thought, we can talk about intercultural experience. A literary text contains this potential, leading learners to confront themselves with any ideas and stereotypes they might have or did not conceptualize as part of their lives. According to data collected, teachers value poetry for being a cornucopia of various cultures. They claimed that due to the fact that poetry exists in all the existing cultures of the world, it covers them all and thus educates one culture of the other.

Respondents A and B emphasised the might of poetry in being a cornucopia for different cultures and being exposed to such cultures through the writer's eyes, as though it is a first-hand experience. This clarifies and supports that reading poetry opens the readers' eyes to different cultural influences, thus moulding one to see and empathise with characters in the poem. Generally, all the participants highlighted the value of poetry in being a multiple disciplinary train where learners can learn various subjects and cultures while still studying poetry.

One of the questions I asked was 'What do you like about poetry lessons? Why?' All of them asserted that they enjoy reading the poems because of several aesthetic reasons. To the above stated question, all the teachers appeared to enjoy poetry and said that they enjoy the poems because of their literary beauty, value how the poems evoke good feelings and depict interesting human universal topics. Respondent E stated:

I really like them, especially because they are connected to profound human mysteries such as death and God, religion and nature. I love all of them because they reflect different personal emotions, such as love and passion, and I get excited while reading them. Poetry helps us explore and be cognisant of life from different angles. It also helps us to think beyond our imagination; that is think outside the box. These factors make us love poetry.

Repeated words in the data such as "I really liked," "I loved," and "I felt," clearly portrayed the aesthetic stance that teachers experienced during the reading transaction. They admitted having responded emotionally through feelings of joy, pleasure, pain, and sadness when they said that they had developed aesthetic sensibility to poetic structure and figurative language. This is how respondent C sees poetry for personal growth:

I like the knowledge, information, experience and insight gained in poetry lessons. I like how they allow me to exercise empathy and sympathy. They also open my eyes and attention to issues of love and nature and things that matter to the society.

This participant states that poetry has enhanced their feeling for others which is a great personal growth and development. Similarly, participant B added:

I like ideas and perspectives expressed through poetry. This guides one on how to behave and judge things thoroughly looking at pros and cons not only on the general perspective of society only. It also brings us to the world of humanity, by accepting the facts, emotions and feelings.

This notion connects with Hanauer's (2012) view of the role of poetry learning in ESL/EFL: To facilitate "personally meaningful expression" and accentuate the "presence of the living, historically situated, individual human being at the centre of the language learning process" (p.106).

Again, data revealed another theme about poetry for reading and writing. The respondents also revealed that through engaging with poetry, their flow of reading has improved and even their writing styles too. This is in line with Iida (2016) and McIlory, (2013) that poetry learning enhances higher achievement in reading and writing.

Another theme that surfaced from the findings is poetry's ability to enhance critical thinking. According to the participants, for the fact that poetry has various layers of meaning, it demands a critical and analytical mind to be able to dissect the meanings. In the process, according to participants, hones one's critical and analytic skills and makes them better people. Teacher A declared:

Poetry helps both teachers and learners to be critical thinkers. Poetry carries more than one meaning and that encourages us to find the different layers of meaning embedded in the poem.

From the above quotation, it is needless to say that poetry analysis cannot happen if one is not vigilant enough for surveillance of hidden meanings. It therefore becomes clear that with the study of poetry, comes the honing process of analysis and critical thinking. This situates best the study of poetry in the national curriculum.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the findings of this study, poetry is rich in helping in honing language, culture awareness, personal growth of an individual and building both the analytical and critical skills. It is imperative to note that literacy is essentially fundamental for the comfort and welfare of society in one piece and for the capacity building of every person to function efficiently and commendably in that society. Poetry empowers the autonomous process, cultivates interconnection of members of the people as well as being a requisite instrument for affluence. That

being the case, accommodating and assimilating the unequivocally compelling potential of poetry for improving literacy in the ways this study's results have pronounced is key. After all literature is language in practice therefore when dealing with poetry the four language skills are involved. based on learners' opinions, this study concludes that poetry is an influential material to improve the four language skills (reading, listening, speaking, and writing), for the reason that it enables learners to be critical readers and better speakers and writers to develop arguments based on evidence.

I want to be bold in my affirmation of poetry as a powerhouse in literacy practice thus a huge need to realise that poetry needs greater centrality in literacy programs and in content decisions in the curriculum, especially in the middle school where attitudes to poetry are often formed. This further affirms a call for the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) to help teachers in dealing with this gem of a genre.

It is important, now more than ever, to be able to have portraits of good teaching in action. I hope that this study contributes to a healthy, specific, and sustained conversation regarding the importance of having the excellent teaching of poetry and strive to ensure that poetry is a consistent, integrated part of the secondary English Language and Literature in English classroom.

There is much at stake here. If we want to produce learners who think critically, who can use literature and poetry to help make sense of their increasingly complex world, who see themselves as connoisseurs, who read poetry and seek out art outside the classroom, and who have a sense of agency and ownership over their education and can see themselves as agents in their own lives, we must continue to ask ourselves what it means to teach poetry well- and why it is important to teach it at all.

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