

Original Paper

Developing Poetic Writing Skills: A Teaching Technique for Advanced ESL/EFL Learners

Mamadou Dieng (Ph.D.)^{1*}

¹Gaston Berger University, Saint-Louis, Senegal

* MamadouDieng, Gaston Berger University, Saint-Louis, Senegal

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Abstract

This article attempts to showcase a number of techniques to teach poetic writing skills in EFL settings. First and foremost, we have tried to identify and propose corrective attitudes to work out the psychological obstacles that impede the practice of poetry in many EFL classrooms. Then, we have selected some basic characteristics of poetic discourse through lyric songs to increase learners' awareness of the specificities of poetry. The mastery of the structure and functioning of figurative language has been the essential skill to develop. Furthermore, the technique privileges the process-oriented approach which is based on well-structured, harmonious and interrelated phases to help learners start composing simple verses and poems.

Keywords

poem, verse, discourse, figurative, process

1. Introduction

A review of literature on poetry in language learning reveals a unilateral orientation from the part of educationalists and researchers in general. Almost all of them agree upon the crucial role poetry and songs play in language learning in general and ESL/EFL learning in particular. According to Caroline Linse, poems and songs are part and parcel of early childhood education in the United States which families and teachers systemically integrate as essential tools in the linguistic behaviour and development of kids. She goes on to contend that the genre is extremely resourceful and effective in second and foreign language acquisition. Other researchers are rather obsessed with the principles or mechanisms of poetic perception which requires a profound knowledge of poetic language, rhythm and structural patterns.

The historicity related to the traditional value of poetry has captured the interest of researchers. The genre is, in this perspective, described as one of the oldest in view of its nascence quite before the advent of literacy (Okpewho, 1992). Senghor (1977), one of the pioneers of the Negritude Movement, tags along with the same perspective as he sustains that poetry in Africa is a very ancient art form that would enliven several kinds of events and ceremonies. Kitty Johnson's study (2006) stands as an exception among a global tendency to analyse poetry from the point of view of historicity, social function, structural and linguistic patterns and role in language acquisition. The article is a sustained attempt to delineate the role of poetry in language learning and the development of poetic writing skills. Still activities and procedures remain too sophisticated to be within the reach of all categories of learners including second and foreign language learners. The author looks and sounds to have chosen native speakers as a target.

This paper is attempting to fill in this gap by focussing on EFL/ESL learners' needs. The approach is based on simple procedures that place the learning of poetic writing skills within the reach of advanced ESL/EFL learners. What is more, the objective is not overambitious to pursue unrealistic goals that would consist in ensuring a thorough command of poetic writing skill forthwith. The paper essentially aims at initiating learners to basic poetic language. To reach the set goals, it is crucial to raise learners' awareness and build confidence by debunking the poetic language. An exposition of the nature and structure of poetic language patterns combined with appropriate and sustainable training activities will enhance the initiation project and arm learners with basic tools to integrate the language of poetry not only as interpreters but also as creators.

2. The Psychological Challenge to Meet

The demystification of poetry must be a prior concern for the EFL teacher. It is a psychological work to be absolutely done as perceptions both at the level of the teacher and the learners are generally negative and therefore impede any effort or project to deal with poetry. Indeed, the attitude of EFL teachers towards poetic language is generally pessimistic. Many teachers often believe that learners' general English language proficiency is not apposite enough to respond to the requirements of poetry which is perceived as too hermetical and elaborate. My belief is that a process-oriented and well-structured approach can enclose an enormous potential for poetic consciousness raising and poetic writing skills development even among the weakest learners. Teachers should bear in mind that the most important aspect of EFL teaching is first and foremost the approach that sets out to pursue a remote objective, a final product. Besides, the Senegalese context represents an appropriate ground as advanced learners start dissecting and exploiting poetic language in French as early as their first year in high school. Therefore, it is often the language that changes rather than the linguistic realities and patterns which remain generally the same in English. I do admit that the teaching and learning of English accents and meters may be complex and even daunting in EFL settings and should therefore be discarded in an

initiation project. Instead, the structure of poetry remains the same across many languages.

It is crucial, from start, to debunk a set of myths or perceptions that lay as ice to break between teachers/learners and poetry. Another hindrance in the achievement of such a project might be related to the general sidelining of poetry which is regarded as a gift in the hands of “happy few” geniuses, prophetic people and supernatural writers. The interconnection between poetic discourse and social discourse must be established. Learners should realise that poetic language is nothing but a refined reduplication of social language.

Besides, in this paper, I use a lyric song (I’m Alive by Celine Dion) to plunge the learners in the language of poetry. The choice of a song is meant to ensure motivation and attention as learners, irrespective of their age or level, are generally focused and motivated when music is around. Starting with pure poetry may negatively contaminate the process as learners will precociously put forward their habitual negative perception about poetry. The song is, therefore, a pretext that should lead to a pleasant expedition inside the linguistic realm of poetry.

3. The Reasonable and the Unreasonable in Poetic Discourse

Poets are among the most imaginative writers. While novelists and playwrights are often social-oriented in their fictionality, poets love embarking on journeys to totally imaginary worlds. The readers are impressed by the imaginative capacity backed up with a type of language that is extremely beautiful and captivating. The impression that poets are unrealistic and unreasonable is certainly the most shared feeling among readers. It is because poems, like lyric songs, are more often than not fraught with exaggerations and extrapolations. Learners should therefore be sensitized about those linguistic specificities and the freedom of the poets to express out feelings and ideas according to their desires. The teacher should, through a task-based approach, expose the language game poets have the right and freedom to play.

Task: Read and decide whether these statements are reasonable or unreasonable. Discuss your decision with your partner.

Table 1. Reasonable Vs Unreasonable Discourse

Discourse	Reasonable	Unreasonable/Hyperbole
When I hear you breath		
I got wings to fly		
When you look at me		
I can touch the sky		
All my world is right		
You set my heart on fire		
Filled me with love		

Made me a woman
My spirit takes flight

The decision of learners should be free and subjective. Furthermore, learners will be invited, in the process, to voice out the reasons of their choices. The identification between reasonable and unreasonable discourses is a basic point in the discovery process. On top of that, it paves the way to unprecedented communicative situations and interactions between learners and the intermittent arbitrage and verdict of the teacher is sometimes not enough to reconcile learners. But, in any case, the teacher should calm down the communication atmosphere at a given moment by delineating the initial rationale behind the task which consists in exposing the complex and figurative character of poetic language. Learners should be aware of the inability of ordinary language to embody poetic dimensions. The expression of inner feelings in their fullest scope is always the making of unordinary language that relies on tropes, symbols and imageries. By the way, this unordinary feature is the main hallmark of poetic language.

4. On Similes

Similes are often pervasive throughout poems and poetic discourses in general. Learners should be awoken about people's tendency to resort to comparison, even in social discourse, to better expose the scope of qualities, characteristics, states and feelings. It is just like situations, objects and people possess their immediate or remote doubles and are likely to be interchangeable and substitutive. Those doubles might belong to different categories or species which does not prevent them from epitomising the similar essential values. For example, a person might be compared to a tree as both elements live, grow, produce and die. Therefore, similes allow a fuller characterisation. Developing simile building skills can rely on activities inspired by specific materials and themes. The theme of love in Celin Dion's song can lay the foundation of this poetic skill. The teacher may ask the learners to find out hyperbolic comparisons to the feeling of love as in the activity below.

Step 1: Find out elements of comparison to the feeling of love

Table 2. Comparison Building

Theme	Some elements of comparison suggested by learners
LOVE	Ocean
	Forest
	Fire
	Tree

Step 2: Discussing, justifying and interpreting comparisons

The relevance of this phase lies mainly in the integration of the cognitive approach in the process of poetic creation. The capacity to build parallels is highly valued when it comes to interpret the semantic connexion between the chosen elements to compare. The first moment consists in involving learners in the search for elements that are comparable at the surface structure level. The second and perhaps more challenging moment consist in requiring from learners to provide justifying evidence at the deep structure level. That is why this stage of the process is extremely communicative. Better still, it calls for learners' interpretive skills and critical thinking competences. The teacher will unavoidably be astonished by learners' capacity to build comparisons. The positive surprise of the teacher stems from the ability of learners to interpret comparisons which is a crucial dimension in poetry. I must confess my amazement due to students' profound interpretative insights which are informative enough about their enormous poetic potential. The activity is consequently very effective in communication practice for EFL/ESL learners. It also enhances critical thinking as learners engage in reasonable linking of concepts and elements that superficially might appear different and opposed.

Still, the ultimate target of the lesson is the building of poetic comparisons. The teacher should therefore provide with grammatical tools to allow learners to achieve the set goal not only in oral discourse but in written poetic discourse.

Step 3: The use of “to be like” and “as” for comparison building

The development of poetic skills among ESL/EFL learners can tap from grammar resources to be successful. The teaching of hyperboles, for example, is an apposite moment to raise learners' awareness of the grammatical instruments that are used in the building of comparisons. Students should know that the making of comparisons in English basically resorts to phrases such as “to be like”, “to look like”, “as...as”, “as” or “akin to”. As a result, the previous activity can be turned into poetic hyperboles using “to be like” or “as”.

- Love is like a forest
- Love looks like a tree
- Love acts as fire/Love is like fire
- Love is akin to a tree

5. The Metaphorical Discourse Construction in EFL/ESL Settings

Metaphors are part and parcel of human discourse which all mature speakers tend to call for to be more communicative. It is as if figures of speech and figurative language in general conjure up a sort of inability in ordinary language to fully express out feelings and ideas. The figurative language is therefore a sort of makeshift linguistic tool for humans to be more expressive. So, tropes, contrary to the postulate of Anthony Burgess, are not linguistic tools used by poets to tell lies (Mathiam, 13). I would rather defend the position that metaphors are perhaps only superficial lies if they are to be

regarded as lies. Indeed, like all other figures of speech, they result from a real communication need that does not find satisfaction in ordinary language. They are, as such, ways and means, to fill in the gaps and voids. Denise Lowery almost tags along with this perspective when he argues: “All languages rely heavily on metaphor because human beings use metaphor to make sense of abstract ideas” (2013, p. 17).

Producing figurative language like metaphors may, at first sight, be perceived by non-native speakers as herculean and difficult to achieve. The role of the teacher consists in taking off this negative perception from ESL learners’ mindset. In my teaching, I often try to build the relation between real-life communication patterns and classroom language, which is even a strong principle in communicative language teaching. The classroom should be transformed into a society at the microcosmic level. It is only in this way teachers can trivialise communication in the mind of the EFL learner and increase motivation. Resorting to learners’ L1 to provide illustrative examples can be a praiseworthy strategy to raise awareness and build confidence. This is all the more important that learners often call for elements of comparison from their surrounding environment. The compared elements in the activity dealing with simile building are all derived from learners’ realities. One of the specificities of the region (Casamance, southern part of Senegal) is the existence of dense forests and heavy rains. There is then no wonder when all elements are derived from nature which represents a lot in the life of the community.

If the phase about simile building is successfully achieved, the teaching and learning of metaphorical discourse construction should not be that challenging for the learners. Technically, and in a simple way, a metaphor creates confusion between elements. While similes create parallels, metaphors build confusion and oneness between similar elements. The comparative grammar tool is to be taken off to pave the way to a sort of equality. The activity in the comparison building phase can serve as a springboard.

Table 3. From Simile to Metaphor

Similes	Metaphors
Love is like a forest	<i>Love is a forest</i>
Love looks like a tree	<i>Love is a tree</i>
Love acts as fire/Love is like fire	<i>Love is fire</i>
Love is like the ocean	<i>Love is an ocean</i>

6. Examples of Activities for Poem Composition Practice

The approach I have implemented, as you can notice it, is process-oriented and functions like a chain. The tasks assigned to the learners are interdependent and the phases are graded as far as the process goes on. We believe that an exposition of the poetic and figurative discourse patterns combined with

practical activities is necessary for learners to start struggling with poetic composition. Even here, the process-oriented approach should be privileged.

Step 1: Composing verses

In this phase, I ask students to choose a person they cherish a lot. The chosen person may be a family member, a friend, a lover or even a historical figure they would like to pay homage to by dedicating them a couple of verses (3 or 4 verses). Student will have the freedom and the challenge to compose verses using figurative language such as similes, hyperboles or metaphors. The teacher can try to list all the students who have chosen the same persons for the dedication. For example, those working on the mother will form a group. At this stage, students will have to work individually in order to compose their verses.

Step 2: Exposition and feedback

Learners will individually be asked to expose their verses on the chalkboard or by reading them aloud. The role of the teacher and the peers will consist in providing feedback related to grammar, word choice, spelling, etc.

Step 3: The collective poem

The collective poem is the gathering of all the verses composed by students working on the same person. Student will group their verses to form one poem dedicated to the mother, the friend, the lover or the historical figure. Teacher and students will work cooperatively to arrange verses in order to have a certain poetic harmony especially by paying heed to the rhymes that can go together. The teacher can help students propose titles depending on the person they chose. The collective poems may be exposed somewhere in the school or recited during English club activities.

Step 4: The individual poem

For more practice, the teacher, under the form of a home assignment, may ask students to complete the verses they composed in classes into full individual poems.

7. Conclusion

The paper has explored a relatively simple approach to the development of poetic writing skills in EFL contexts. We finally come up with the conclusion that teaching and learning have lots of chances to be successful when the appropriate approach is implemented in a comprehensive layout based upon well-organised steps. In the approach under consideration each phase is essential in the process. A reading of the article bears witness to the existence of a chain of phases that are interdependent and interrelated. Each phase in the process represents a foundation that clearly propels learners forward. They are all prerequisites whose combination forms a wide way out towards the achievement of the lesson's final objective. The approach is interesting in many ways. First, it takes off the belief that generally positions poetry as a reserved domain, and subsequently equips EFL learners with basic tools to produce verses and poems. Secondly, teaching the functioning of poetic language patterns enhances

EFL learners' cognitive reading abilities in general. Learners realise on the way that meaning is not only always sailing on the lines and surfaces. It can rather be hidden out of the lines. Third, learners are armed with "new" tools they can make use of for more expressiveness or rhetorical purposes in daily communication situations. Finally, the teaching of figures of speech boosts learners' communicative skills and literary sensitivity.

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