

USING POETRY AS A MODEL FOR CREATING ENGLISH POEMS

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Abstract

This article describes how poems can effectively be used in English language classes to reinforce students' knowledge of the English language - vocabulary and grammar- and foster their creative writing. A careful selection of poems appropriate to students' language requirements was incorporated into the curriculum of English Language Teaching. Employing the Writing-using models technique, a three-step guided writing was developed to consolidate students' language knowledge and creative writing skills. Feedback obtained from the students through student journals and interviews demonstrated that the use of poetry has contributed to students' practicing effectively and meaningfully their knowledge of grammar; it offered them opportunities for vocabulary enrichment; it broadened their imagination, and freed them from the routine procedures in the classroom. Sample writings of poems produced by learners are included in the article to demonstrate how the efficient exploitation of this literary genre can maximize learner involvement and creativity.

Key words: poem, creative writing, language classes, writing-using models technique

Özet

Bu çalışmada şiirin dil sınıflarında öğrencilerin İngilizce bilgilerini -kelime ve dilbilgisi olarak- nasıl daha etkili bir biçimde kullanacakları ve yaratıcı yazımlarını nasıl daha etkili olarak geliştirebilecekleri incelenmiştir. Öğrencilerin dil gereksinimlerine uygun olarak seçilen şiirler, İngilizce dil öğretimi müfredatına yerleştirilmiştir. Öğrencilerin İngilizce bilgilerini ve yaratıcı yazım becerilerini geliştirmek amacıyla, üç aşamalı yönlendirici yazımdan oluşan *örnek-kullanarak yazım tekniği (Writing-using models technique)* geliştirilmiştir. Öğrencilerden, günlük ve görüşme yoluyla elde edilen dönütler şiir kullanımının öğrencilerin dilbilgisini etkili ve anlamlı bir şekilde geliştirmesinde önemli bir rol oynadığını; kelime bilgilerini zenginleştirmelerinde fırsatlar sunduğunu, öğrencilerin hayal gücünü geliştirerek sınıf içinde kullanılan basmakalıp yöntemlerden kurtulmalarına rahatlık sağladığını göstermektedir. Bu edebi türün etkili kullanımının öğrencilerin katılımlarını ve

yaratıcılıklarını en üst düzeye nasıl çıkarabildiğini göstermek için, öğrenciler tarafından yazılan örnek şiirler bu makaleye eklenmiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler: şiir, yaratıcı yazım, dil sınıfları, örnek-kullanarak yazım tekniği

1. INTRODUCTION

In many EFL/ESL classes, textbooks play a prominent role in learning as a basic teaching material. Teachers generally tend to create supplementary grammar and vocabulary items by traditional structured-based exercises. Such supplementary traditional mechanical drills may fail to provide adequate support for students to become creative producers of language, turning them into passive recipients (Kırkgöz, 2003). In searching for methods that would help students to reinforce their knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, and foster their creative writing skills, poems can be used as a useful tool to supplement textbooks.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate how poems can be put to work in language classroom and to show how, through the *Writing-using models* technique, even low-intermediate and intermediate level students can not only reinforce their knowledge of vocabulary and grammar but also foster their creative writing skills by composing English poems in parallel with the poems that they have studied with their teacher.

1.1. Rationale for the Use of Poetry

The benefits of using poetry in second and foreign language teaching have been highlighted by many ESL/EFL practitioners. A brief summary of their argument is offered here.

First, poems can be used in language classes as a valuable resource to introduce and practice language items by exposing students to “authentic models – real language in context” (Brumfit and Carter, 1987: 15), rather than teacher-developed examples. As Tomlinson (1986: 42) has pointed out using poetry contributes far more to the development of language skills in real contexts than “a total concentration on the presentation and the practice of language items”.

Second, poems provide EFL/ESL students with opportunities to enrich their vocabulary by presenting words not included in L2 textbooks. In many language classes, students are generally asked to learn vocabulary through mere memorization and translation. Poems, however, has an important role in supplementing the inevitably restricted input of the classroom by offering a meaningful context, in which they could be used and hence be remembered more effectively (Lazar, 1996; Norström, 2000).

Another reason for using poems in L2 classroom is the contribution it makes to student creativity while providing a break from regular classroom routines (McKay, 1982). Poems provide a stimulus and can serve as a good model for creative writing (Maher, 1986). Producing a poem is more than a mechanical exercise; it demands a personal response from learners and encourages them to draw on their own experiences. As students explore poems, each can discover useful ideas for creative writing. It has been confirmed by Collie and Slater (1987, 226) that “using poetry in the language classroom can lead naturally on to freer and creative written expression”.

Poems also increase learner motivation by eliciting emotional involvement. As acknowledged by Lazar (1996), poetry-based activities can prove motivating for learners, and elicit strong emotional reactions. In a similar vein, Hess (2003) notes that

Entering a literary text, under the guidance of appropriate teaching, brings about the kind of participation almost no other text can produce. When we read, understand, and interpret a poem we learn language through the expansion of our experience with a larger human reality (pp. 20).

Since poems deal with universal themes and human concerns, they offer opportunities for students to project their feelings and emotions, thus fostering personal involvement in learners (Heath, 1996).

Another advantage of using poems in the classroom is that they provide students with insight into developing cross-cultural awareness (Lazar, 1996). Poems create a context for enhancing learner’s understanding of the cultural values of English-speaking people, which is part of gaining true fluency in L2.

1.2. Guidelines for the Selection of Poems

The first decision to make involves the selection of appropriate poems for a particular level of students. Below are some practical selection guidelines:

- 1 Poems need to be consistent with the language level of the students and the objectives of the course to facilitate the contribution of this literary genre to English language learning (McKay, 1982).

- 2 Poems should be relevant to students' age and interests. Themes appealing to adult learners may include problems of personal identity and such concepts as friendship and love.
- 3 Poems should be chosen from contemporary works in which the syntax is more likely to be similar to that found in language textbooks students may be familiar with.
- 4 The cultural background of the poem need to be studied, and poems which are culturally relevant to students be chosen so that the students may relate the poem to their life experiences.

2. WRITING-USING MODELS

The *Writing-using models* is a useful method, which can be used to help consolidate grammar and vocabulary and improve creative writing skills. It involves students' writing their own poem following a format similar to the original one. Here, the poem is used as a starting point, and it also serves as a model and inspiration for language awareness as well as for some parallel writing. The model involves three main stages: presentation, exploration, and follow-up (Bouman, 1983), requiring appropriate teacher guidance, and creating student-participatory language learning experiences.

2.1. Presentation, Exploration and Follow-up Activities

Presentation activities are used to make the poem comprehensible to learners by building up of schemata through various activities, such as brainstorming, predicting the content of the poem from the title, and using visuals. The creation of a 'mental set' at this stage facilitates access to the poem to be studied, stimulates learners' imaginations, and aids in comprehension of the poem (Maley and Duff, 1987).

Exploration is the stage where students work with content and the language. The teacher reads the poem aloud. The students are first encouraged to grasp the meaning of the poem, then, to concentrate on the grammatical structure, the use of vocabulary, verbs, and figurative language, such as metaphor, symbolism, and personification. This is also the stage of close reading of the poem and conscious learning in preparation for more creative work to follow (Ibsen, 1990).

Whereas presentation and exploring activities centre on understanding the model poem, follow-up activities focus on output practice. The aim of this stage is to consolidate the students' language knowledge and improve their creative writing skills. Hess (2003), who

calls such activities “spin-off activities”, points out that at this stage, “we take something from the poem and evolve a real world activity from it” (pp. 24). At this stage, students are encouraged to produce a poem following a format similar to the original poem based on the structures highlighted by the model poem, but they are challenged to go much further. They are encouraged to produce a poem from their own point of view, and create something new from the input they receive.

When writing is completed, students work in groups of two or three to help each other in improving their poems. Before writing is completed, the teacher gives feedback. Each student then reads aloud his or her own written poem so that class members can explore differences of interpretation at a ‘poetry reading’ (Ibsen, 1990).

3. THE STUDY

On the basis of the previously-presented criteria, poems were selected from the British and American literature, for example, *Prayer* by Brenna Farrell. Since the poem had a crucial role to play as a *reinforcement device*, each poem was chosen with specific learning points in mind, and matched the instructional objectives in the on-going syllabus to enable students to practice the language and write creatively.

3.1. Participants

The study involved 28 Turkish university students of EFL who major in subjects other than literature, and it was conducted one semester over a 15-week period. 16 of the 28 students were female, 18-year-old on average, receiving an English language programme.. The students were at the low intermediate level at the beginning of the study and moved up to intermediate level during the course of their English language programme. In an informal interview held with the participants prior to the study, I elicited their opinions as to whether they would like to study poem along with learning English. The response was very encouraging. All students stated that studying poem in English would be a challenging and a pleasant experience for them. Encouraged by the students’ overwhelming interest, poems were incorporated into the ELT curriculum while following the regular syllabus in order to consolidate language items, both grammar and lexis, and promote students’ creative writing skills by having students compose a poem based on the model poem studied. The second objective was to promote students’ *interest* and *motivation* towards learning English, and add *enjoyment* to the everyday classroom environment. The students agreed to maintain journals

in which they reflected on their perceptions of using poems on a weekly basis, and at the end of the year, an informal feedback session was held with the students.

3.2. Illustration of the Methodology

This section illustrates how the the *writing-using models* technique was used. To make the described activities easier to follow, at the beginning of the activity the original poem is included. At the end, two students' poems inspired by the same poem, written after the process described below, are included.

3.2.1. An Example

The model poem chosen for this demonstration is 'Identity' by Julio Noboa, Jr. This poem can be found in Farrell, Cohen, and Christensen (1983: 18). It is short, the language in it is contemporary and it deals with a common human situation that many adults will be able to relate to. The grammar focus is on *I'd rather* and the *passive*. In this poem, the poet uses symbols: a nice smelling flower symbolizing other people, which she distinguishes from a tall, ugly weed clinging on cliffs, living in the wilderness like an eagle to represent the kind of identity she longs for. This particular poem works best in lower-intermediate EFL/ESL classes, but the formula works well for all kinds of poems in classes across all levels.

Here is the original poem:

Identity

Let them be as flowers,
always watered, fed, guarded, admired,
but harnesses to a pot of dirt.
I'd rather be a tall, ugly weed,
clinging on cliffs, like an eagle
wind-wavering above high, jagged rocks.

To have broken through the surface of stone,
to live, to feel exposed to the madness
of the vast, eternal sky.

To be swayed by the breezes of an ancient sea,
carrying my soul, my seed, beyond the mountains
of time
or into the abyss of the bizarre.

I'd rather be unseen, and if
then shunned by everyone,
than to be a pleasant-smelling flower,
growing in clusters in the fertile valley,
where they're praised, handled, and plucked
by greedy, human hands.

I'd rather smell of musty, green stench
Than of sweet, fragrant lilac.
If I could stand alone, strong and free,
I'd rather be a tall, ugly weed.
(Julio Noboa, Jr.)

Stage One- Presentation

The researcher introduce the poem by showing the class a picture of a nice flower in a pot, and a weed clinging on jagged rocks in order to help students familiarize themselves with the new vocabulary and form a mental picture. Questions she has used with this poem include:

- How can you describe the first picture and the second one?
- What are the differences between these two pictures?
- What does the title suggest about the content of the poem?

This kind of introductory activity invokes thinking along the lines of the poem that students are going to explore and facilitates comprehension.

Stage Two – Exploration

In the exploration stage, the poem is read aloud by the teacher/researcher to explore its theme and language structure with the students. In this phase, the students try to understand the content of the poem, and study it closely to be able to find facts/information that they can use to compose their identity. The students are asked a list of questions aimed at helping to focus on critical aspects of the piece and draw their attention to the use of grammar items. An introduction might read like this:

Read the text through, then read it again and underline all adjectives the poet uses to describe her own identity. Read it a third time and underline 'strong lines,' that is, words, images, phrases that made you think this way.

The students are again asked to look at the original poem and to study it once more in order to find the poet's choice of linguistic items (tenses) and the use of vocabulary in expressing her identity so as to transfer those features to their own life. This activity is supposed to function as a lead-into the writing task that follows. Questions that are asked about the content include:

Is the poem a wish, a hope or a prayer? Why would the poet rather be a weed?.

Stage Three - Follow-Up

Finally, in the follow-up stage, students are asked to write their own poem reflecting the type of identity they long for. They are to use the grammar structures in the original poem and adapt all the elements to writing about their own identity, thus creating a new poem.

Two student poems inspired by the original poem printed above and the process outlined, are included.

Student poem 1

Freedom

I'd rather be a lion,
To kill dangerous people,
Because people always worry me,
I'd rather live alone than live with my family,
Alone in the far away mountains,
I want to be free,
I want to be myself.

Student poem 2

Wild Life

I'd rather be an eagle,
I want to have sharp eyes,
I want to fly on the summit of mountains,
Alone and away from enemies,
I'd rather be unseen by anyone.

With freedom and quietness in the eternal sky,
I want to have a nest on the jagged rocks,

I want to have only the sun,
Because, I don't want to kill anyone.
I'd rather race myself, 'cos there is only I,
I can't trust anyone in the wild life,
One day, when I die I'd rather be stuffed by a hunter,
I'm goanna understand life, which is meaningless.

Students provided different interpretations of the same poem reflecting their personal feelings and the kind of identity they long for. While composing poems, students are not required to obey the rhyming scheme, yet, finding an appropriate ending was quite a challenge for them as can be seen in the poems illustrated. It is obvious that the students who wrote the above poems are desperately in search of their true identity, which they express by using symbols in a similar way the poet does. In the first poem above, the student uses *lion* as a symbol to represent power and freedom to live freely away from her family, while in the second nicely written poem, *eagle* is used to represent how strong the student would like his character to be. The responses not only show the students' awareness of the structure of the poem, but also illustrate the role that studying poetry has played for them.

3.3. Students' Perception of Poem

In order to obtain students' opinion concerning the use of poems, each student was asked to keep journals in which to reflect their views following the study of each poem, and at the end of the year, an informal feedback session was held with the students.

The researcher collected student journals every two weeks, read and carried out content analysis to find out what their attitudes were towards using poem in English lessons. Journal entries of many students reflect five salient features emerging from the practice of poem. The first is the positive role of poems in practicing effectively and meaningfully students' knowledge of grammar, thereby reinforcing linguistic structures, which is expressed by a majority of the students. Here are two students' dairy excerpts: (slightly edited for grammatical correctness)

With the help of writing poems, we revise and consolidate our knowledge of grammar, for example, linking words, adverbs, adjectives and tenses. Doing grammar practice via poetry is much better and more useful than other

activities because we not only learn the subject better but also enjoy it a lot more.

I am very interested in reading poems and through it my knowledge of grammar is being improved. My classmates and I enjoy it more than doing fill -in- the -blank type of grammar exercises.

The second benefit of poems lies in the enhancement of their vocabulary knowledge. Using poem as a model to teaching new vocabulary offered excellent opportunities for vocabulary enrichment. In an entry later in the semester two students wrote:

- Poems enlarged my vocabulary repertoire.
- I have also learned how and where to use words accurately in sentences.

The third feature of using poem is that it contributed to meaningful learning and personalization: the students had plenty to say, and the communication became authentic because they reflected their own experiences or thoughts, thus gaining great emotional pleasure. Besides, students found the use of poems welcome, and often an inspirational change from a course book, a relief from the routine procedures in the classroom, as reflected in the following student journal entries:

- In many poems I felt as though the poet was telling my life story.
- While writing poems, I felt as though I was communicating in real life.
- We can find a better way of expressing our feelings via poetry.
- It is very entertaining to study poems. We can learn a lot from it, it brings knowledge and entertainment for us.

The next feature of using poem is its role in students' creative writing. Heath (1996) points out that when students move in their literary writing through a range of emotions that draw from their own memories, the L2 learning gets greatly facilitated. It is clear from the poems produced by the learners in the above-presented section that the writing task can be highly creative and constructive if emotional and personal involvement is maintained. This is illustrated in the journal entry of a student:

Writing has always been a problem for me before, because I was not very confident. However, writing poems has made me more creative than before. Since I started writing poems, I believe that I have made great progress in my writing.

The final feature of using poem is retention. One difficulty often encountered in language classes is to help students remember language items, particularly vocabulary. Journal entries indicated that students found poems memorable and motivated supplementing English lessons. Here is one student journal entry that is representative of most students' perceptions of poems:

Poems are easier to remember. The lines are short and many words and grammar structures are frequently repeated. This enables us to remember grammatical structures and vocabulary when we need to use them in writing, speaking and even in the exams.

Thus, the repetitive nature of the words and patterns can promote the learning of phrases and lexical items of the language that can be transferred to not only writing but also to everyday use.

The interview findings confirmed the findings obtained from dairies. At the end of the course, all students ($N=28$) I interviewed admitted that they found the use of poem as 'enriching their knowledge of the English language, motivating, enjoyable and relaxing'. Furthermore, students mentioned that poems 'developed their self-confidence and broadened their imagination'. With regard to writing, they were aware that they became more creative. The experience I had in my study was impressive and encouraging. Given the enthusiasm shown by students, it seems justifiable to suggest that there exists potential need in EFL/ESL classes for incorporating poems into the curriculum.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has discussed using poetry as a model in an EFL curriculum to reinforce students' grammatical and lexical knowledge, and promote their creative writing skills. An insightful statement on studying literature by Hill (1986:7) reads, "the study of literature begins in delight and ends in wisdom". One very effective way to combine these two

essential elements of educational and entertainment value is through the use of poem. Using poem in lower-intermediate or intermediate level second language classroom as a model is definitely beneficial for not only the variety and innovation it adds to traditional course-bound EFL teaching but also the improvement of learners' grammatical and lexical knowledge provided the objectives for its inclusion and the selection criteria are well established.

***Note:** All student journal excerpts maintain the original language.

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