
Poetry in the ESL Classroom: Focusing on Learner Objectives

Mary Ann Christison, Snow College

Within the ESL/EFL teaching profession, there are many teachers who integrate poetry in their lesson planning and classroom activities. This is evidenced by the increased number of papers on poetry at TESL conferences as well as the recent popularity of teacher resource books written on the subject. The stimulus for this article is based on concern for why teachers choose to include poetry in their lessons as well as what methods and techniques they use to present poetry in the classroom.

Arguments for Poetry Use

There are several arguments teachers can use to justify the inclusion of poetry in the ESL class. Two of the most prominent arguments can be summarized in terms of either literary elitism or practical strategy.

The literary elitist view of poetry in the language classroom has been that good poetry is part of a vast body of literature that represents the best the English language has to offer. The prestigious position that such literature occupies in our society and the implied relationship between literature and the TESL profession seem to be justification enough for including poetry in the ESL curriculum. This argument centers on the value and importance of the poetry itself.

Supporters of this argument have usually been trained in the literary

tradition—they have mastered the terms and techniques of literary criticism.

The second argument represents the practical side. It states that poetry is a useful tool for second language acquisition, providing the learner with opportunities for discussion and language development. This point of view seems to focus more on the learner than on the poetry itself.

Adherence to one point of view over another can lead teachers to value poetry in the ESL classroom in two very different ways. This is true regardless of the method or technique being used. Let me give an illustration.

Two Examples

These two points of view were clearly, yet unknowingly, demonstrated by two presenters at a recent ESL conference. The presenters shall remain anonymous. (My intention in providing a brief overview of the two presentations is not to criticize or praise either presenter, but rather to demonstrate how the two points of view characterized above ultimately affect the way the poetry is presented in the classroom.)

Both presenters used a cloze technique. The first presenter used a short poem about a visitor. She began by explaining that she had selected the poem not only because it was a favorite of hers, but also

because her students had been talking about visitors. Some of them had had out-of-town guests or were expecting family from home countries to visit them in the future. As the subject was of high interest to her students, the poetry activity naturally complemented their previous discussions. The presenter gave us a cloze version of the poem, leaving out certain key words. We were told to discuss what words we thought would best fit in the blanks. There could be more than one correct answer and many different answers were expected. The discussion with our colleagues and the reasons for selecting the words were most important. After the small group discussion, we shared responses with the large group. The presenter stated that she had been delighted with the response to the poem in her class: three students subsequently, wrote unsolicited poems in English to share with the class.

The second presenter also used a cloze procedure, but in a slightly different manner. To begin with, this presenter did not provide us with any rationale for the selection of the poem aside from the fact that it was considered a great poem. Certain key words had again been left out of the passage. We were asked to decide which word to place in each blank. There was only one specific word for each blank, the correct choice being based on elements of literary criticism. We were not asked to work in small, cooperative groups to share possibilities, but instead were asked to offer our individual ideas to the presenter in the large group. As a group, we were not very successful in supplying the correct word: we failed to pay attention to alliteration, cadence, rhyme, scheme, meter, etc. After a few minutes, the presenter stopped asking for our ideas and

simply lectured and explained why the words the author had used were the best ones according to the methods of literary criticism. Each choice was carefully examined. The presenter did not comment on how his students had responded to this activity.

An Analysis of Differences

After the presentations were over, I attempted to analyze where they had differed. There was, of course, the obvious difference in the fundamental point of view regarding poetry in the language classroom. One cloze activity had supported the literary elitist viewpoint. I do not remember the content of the poem he used, but I do remember explanations about alliteration, meter, rhyme, scheme, etc. That was, I am sure, what he had intended. The other presenter held to the practical strategist viewpoint with the cloze activity, using the poem to draw out the language and gather personal opinions and ideas. I remember almost everything about the content of this poem. This was also what she had wanted me to gain from the activity.

We could say that both teachers had set very definite teaching goals and had also apparently met them. However, teaching objectives are only one-half of the teaching/learning paradigm and only one side of successful teaching. If good teaching is also characterized by helping learners progress toward their own objectives as quickly and efficiently as possible, then there are other questions that good teachers must ask themselves: What are the learners' objectives? Are the teaching objectives consistent with the learners' objectives? If they are not, what options do I give the learner in the

classroom situation to control the content to be learned? The answers to these questions provide the crux of the difference between these two approaches: the difference was a focus on the learner. Is the use of poetry in the classroom with the chief objective being to teach literary criticism limited from the learner's perspective? If we look at learners' objectives, we will find, most likely, that there are few students in ESL for whom literary criticism is a primary goal. Because the presenter mentioned nothing about his students with regard to either the selection of the poem or their reaction to the poem, we were led to believe that we were participating on the teacher's terms. Our task was to follow the teacher's directives. The learning adjusted to the teaching.

The approach of the first speaker was much broader in scope. She focused on presenting and using poetry in the ESL classroom as a means of building comprehension and developing oral and written skills by relating the poetry to the students. Building comprehension and developing oral and/or written skills are goals for all language learners. Because the learners were considered in both the selection and reaction in this activity and were also given freedom to control and content, we were participating on our own terms. The teacher only facilitated the learning process. Teaching adjusted to the learning.

Literary criticism in the ESL classroom can also be limiting in content. Choosing poetry on the basis of its literary worth often entails a preference for the obscure and highly-symbolic, and can exclude the literature many teachers have found most effective in the ESL classroom. This

includes the works of those who are not literary critics and who are not members of the literary elite, such as the working-class writer, and contemporary poetry of women or blacks and other ethnic groups.

Conclusions

Because ESL is such a diverse profession with students from different language groups and teachers in different teaching environments, it is impossible to mandate for everyone what is correct or incorrect classroom procedure or choice of content. However, one point remains clear in my mind: As good teachers, we must continue to ask ourselves questions that involve the learners' needs and goals if we are to strike a more careful balance between teaching and learning, between teacher objectives and learner objectives, between teacher control and learner control, i.e.,

1. Are the students interested in the subject matter of the poem? How can I use the poem to tie in with a previous discussion?
2. Does my work with the poem help to build comprehension? Does it develop oral or written skills that my students will need?
3. Will the learners value the concepts I am addressing in the poem, e.g., discussion on visitors vs. a lecture on various elements of literary analysis?
4. How can the poem be related to the students' lives, past experiences, and personal values?
5. Are the needs of my students being met? How do I know?

6. How can my students share in selecting content for their lessons?

Our choice of poetry is only justified if it meets in some way the needs and goals of our students. Of the two arguments presented in this paper as justification for including poetry in the ESL classroom, only the argument for practical strategy considers the learners' objectives in a major way. Literary criticism can only be an acceptable ESL classroom activity when it, too, considers the learners' expressed needs and objectives. In other words, it must be an expressed need of the learners.

ESL students enjoy poetry and can benefit from the inclusion of poetry in the

classroom. When teachers select poetry and choose methods of implementation with their learners' world in mind, they not only give students the best the English language has to offer, but also utilize one of the most valuable tools we have for language acquisition.

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About the Author

Mary Ann Christison is an associate professor and director of the ESL program at Snow College in Ephraim, Utah.