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A Six-Step Approach to Teaching Poetry Incorporating the Four Skills

V. Vasanthi, Ph.D.

Introduction

Teaching poetry has been always a difficult task. Teaching has to be subtle in the sense that there is no touchstone to evaluate the discourse of the lecture or the comprehension of the student. The process of comprehension is latent on the part of the students and therefore the results are not conspicuous for the teacher.

Two Methods of Teaching Poetry

There are, on a broader scale, two methods of teaching poetry. The commonly used technique is the traditional method in which a poem is introduced with a paraphrase and extraneous details are furnished as and when the poem is read aloud in the class. This method is wrought with many disadvantages and some can be acknowledged as under:

1. The learning is artificial and induced where in it stops with the paraphrase and other details provided by the teacher, as the student responds mechanically.
2. Sometimes there are multifarious allusions, which lead to the disruption of a coherent acquisition.
3. If the author and the context of the poem are introduced before the poem, the student's notion becomes pre-set closing the doors for manifestation and analysis.

Furthermore, the traditional method can be compared to the dissection of a living organism wherein the species is "murdered", as Wordsworth says in his poem titled *Tables Turned*, 'We murder to dissect'. (Merchant, ed. 124).

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A Six-Step Approach to Teaching Poetry Incorporating the Four Skills

According to Ted Hughes, a renowned poet of the post-modern age, a poem is “an assembly of living parts moved by a single spirit. The living parts are the words, the images, the rhythms” (Scammel 12).

A poem is an experience retold, which can be relived any number of times. Allen Tate, a famous critic of Emily Dickinson, remarks that the poet “speaks wholly to the individual experience” (Sewall 27). Ted Hughes speaks about his poem, *The Thought-Fox* thus: “As it is every time I read the poem the fox comes up again out of the darkness and steps into my head” (Scammel 20).

The Second Strategy

Hence it can be inferred that the teaching of poetry needs special attention, a new strategy in which the students are made to live the poem and experience it, and are given the freedom of thought and imagination to form personal views about it.

This research paper discusses a modern, thematic six-step approach to poetry teaching, which also develops the four skills, viz., reading, and writing, listening and speaking.

Prerequisites

There are a few pre-requisites which are vital to this approach, as the temperature setting is to a chemical experiment. They are:

1. Handouts of the poem without the name of the author and the title of the poem.
2. Circular seating arrangement.
3. A pocket dictionary

With these, the teacher can embark on the six stages of teaching, which are enlisted as under:

1. Motivation
2. Introduction
3. Interaction
4. Comparison
5. Instruction and
6. Improvisation

Motivation

It is evidently important that a student’s mind is tuned to the poetry class, which demands a special expertise, the discussion of which, if taken up, would lead to a broad area of study.

David Capella and Baron Wormser put forth their fears in their book, *Teaching the Art of poetry: The Moves* thus:

Poetry Frightens. Over the years when it has come up in conversation that we write poems, dozens of people from all walks of life have paused and

then diffidently or straightforwardly confided that poetry means nothing to them (xii).

This problem is one of the foremost and is one of the causes for an unsuccessful poetry class.

As a remedy, 'The objective non-egotistical pleasure' [and an aesthetic feeling which convinces the student to say] 'I like the effect...!' (Singh 15) can be induced in the minds of the student, only as one of the several ways to succeed. The poem can also be presented as a puzzle or the teacher can think of a play-way method to introduce the poem.

Teaching Strategy: Six Steps

When the student is oriented to the class, it is important to reassure him of his capabilities, which would be discovered by the student himself, during the same process. It is needless to say that the beginning classes need to be simple. The modern and post-modern poems written in free verse or children's poetry can be used at the primary stage.

Introduction

Under the given conditions, the poem should be presented as an entity in itself, a raw experience, or a mathematical puzzle to be solved. The students can be allowed to interact with the poem on their own, using the aid of the dictionary. On reading the poem for more than two or three times, the words of the poem will have a magical effect on the student.

Ted Hughes says about the usage of words thus: "In a way, words are continually trying to displace our experience. And in so far as they are stronger than the raw life of our experience, and full of themselves and all the dictionaries they have digested they do displace it." (Poetry in the making 120).

Application

Let us apply the technique with the following post-modern poem:

We had a motorbike all through the war
In an outhouse-thunder, flight, disruption
Cramped in rust, under washing, abashed, out classed
By the Brens, the Bombs, the Bazookas elsewhere.

The war ended, the explosions stopped
The men surrenderd their weapons
And hung around limply.
Peace took them all prisoner.
They were herded into their home towns.

So there came this quiet young man
And he bought our motorbike for twelve pounds.
And he got it going, with difficulty

He kicked it into life- It erupted
Out of the six-year sleep, and he was delighted

A week later, astride it, before dawn,
A misty frosty morning
He escaped

Into a telegraph pole
On the long Straight west of Swinton.

In the poem quoted above, a prosaic quality is found. The poet speaks about a motorbike, which was unused for a long time until a young man opted to buy it and happened to get killed, while riding it. This story is grasped by the student without much difficulty. The reading comprehension of the student is improved in a self-study of this kind, where he is bound to help himself out of the group of words, which interact with him. The words which are beyond his comprehension create a strong impulse in the student to refer to the dictionary, thereby acquiring vocabulary more effectively, as the words looked for match the context.

The setting of the poem is a post-war period as the lines, “The war ended, the explosions stopped/The men surrendered their weapons” indicate. The reader at the first reading senses the motorbike, as an agent of evil. At this stage, the reading practice can be wound up, as the students, who have comprehended the poem fully or only to an extent, could be found eager to know what the poem was exactly about. A student below average would also have interacted with the poem and would have had experience of some kind, which they might not reveal.

Interaction

This is a very important phase in learning poetry as N. Krishnaswamy remarks in his book *Teaching Poetry for Schools and Colleges* thus:

There are many ways of exploring a poem and verbal interaction between students and teachers is just one of them (46).

At this stage, the teacher would see for herself that many students are willing to talk. Effective and interested communicators come forward and the less effective, back out. The teacher can select those students whose speaking skill needs attention. Initially, if the student is found shy, he/she can be called out and made to speak only with the teacher in private.

Thus, this stage enables the development of speaking skills, which is natural and spontaneous and non-deliberate on the part of the student. This stage provides a comfortable platform for the teacher’s instruction as John Fanselow endorses:

Basing instruction on student needs by requiring materials-sets-that contain actual communications, by moving beyond the area of grammar, so central in much of language instruction, and by tying

language to tactivity, all imply a different role for the teacher of ESP. Not only the teacher must move off the center stage, but the teacher often needs to move out of the language classroom, first to collect the communications needed, and second, to teach setting where the communications are really to be used. (181).

Comparison

At this stage the student listens to various interpretations of the poem and is eager to know which of those would be right. At this stage, apart from developing the listening skill, a comparative study is carried out, which opens a new horizon in the learning of poetry.

The students can be asked to guess the title of the poem, the author and so on and in the process they grasp the central idea or thought of the poem.

At this stage, care should be taken to see that the lecturer does not deviate from the topic.

In this connection, George Brown's and Madeline Atkins' words can be remembered –

Comparing and contrasting is challenging for both lecturer and students. It is easy to confuse and be confused. Building up a summary on the blackboard or overhead transparency as your lecture helps to reduce the likelihood of confusion and keeps you on course (30).

Instruction

The poem can be taught at this stage and the difficult words can be explained and discussed.

It would be very interesting to see the students' perception about the poem at this stage. Such perception would have expanded owing to the multifarious analysis attempted thus far.

This particular poem 'Motorbike' written by Ted Hughes, during the post-war period can be interpreted in many ways.

The author connects the motorbike and the surrounding. The strong survival of the motorbike described in the first verse is contrasted with the adverse effects that the war produces in men. This to an extent indicates that the motorbike also plays a role in the inconvenience caused to men adding to the calamitous atmosphere of the post-war life and contributing to yet another disaster associated with a mystery.

The mystery is that, the young man who rode the motorbike meets his death.

Throughout the poem, the motorbike, a simple object, introduces a chain of thoughts, which leads to a universal thought, which is the fear of human beings who associate their

fate to the factors of the non-human world. Thus, the motorbike represents the non-human mechanical world, which is perceived hostile and the narrator represents the whole mankind in experiencing this moment. At this stage of instruction, the students' interpretation and efforts should be appreciated.

Improvisation

At this stage, the students can be asked to improvise on the given topic, 'Motorbike', which would develop the writing skill of the students. Complete freedom should be given to the students at this stage as writing cannot be developed under constraints. The students could write a story, an essay, a poem, a personal anecdote, or a joke suiting their interests. Thus, this activity results in a lively experience, involving the students, as Hughes points out in his *Poetry in the Making*, thus:

That one thing is, imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it. Do not think it up laboriously, as if you were working out mental arithmetic.. just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it. When you do this, the words look after themselves, like magic. (Poetry in the Making 121).

Conclusion

Thus, the research paper aims at teaching language through poetry in a literature class, thereby developing the four skills. However, this research paper aims only at the approach to the teaching of poetry and the acquisition process. Classroom constraints and other areas are beyond the scope of the study.

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