

**Developing Poetry Writing through Selective Teaching:
The case of a Longitudinal Study of EFL LMD Msila University
Students.**

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates Arabic speaking university students' perceptions and experiences of second language with poetry writing in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) English stream LMD system, Algeria. This study, which reflects students' observations and experiences in a variety of classroom poetry writing activities and through a longitudinal study, attempts to reveal the difficulties and attitudes students experience in poetry reading and writing and to suggest selective teaching material that facilitate students' enhancement to poetry writing. The findings of this study reveal that lecturers have a significant role to play in helping students overcome barriers to understanding, interpreting and creatively write poetry. Students were subjected to different tests and observations. Analysis of this study revealed positive attitudes about students attempting to produce good poetry writing through ABC, acrostic, free verse, quatrain and cinquain, concrete and colour poetry. Samples of good poetry were selected. Recommendations for improving comprehension and enjoyment in L2 literature studies include selective teaching and modelling of appropriate reading and writing strategies that improve critical and analytical thinking skills, teaching and learning within a collaborative learning environment which fosters the development and exploration of peer ideas, and improving students' background knowledge relevant to the understanding of poetry types.

Keywords: *selective teaching, modelling, enhancing students write poetry*

ملخص

تهتم هذه الدراسة بعرض تصورات طلبة لسنة أولى انجليزي وتجاربهم حول الكتابة الشعرية في مختلف الاقسام وكذا العوائق التي اعترضتهم أثناء قراءة الشعر ومحاولة كتابة على المدى الطويل. وقد أبدت النتائج الأولية أن دور الأستاذ مهم جدا في اختيار النصوص والقصائد الشعرية كنماذج للدراسة في القسم مع مراعاة تسهيل وتوصيل المفاهيم للطلبة أثناء ترجمة وفهم محتوياتها. وقد أبدت نتائج ايجابية في محاولة الطلبة على فهم النصوص المقدمة كما أظهرت النتائج أن دور الأستاذ راند في مساعدة الطلبة على ازالة العوائق التي حالت دون فهمهم للقصائد والترجمة وكتابة الشعر. وقد أجريت اختبارات في المعارف من خلال مشاركة الطلبة في القسم وأثناء كتابة بعض الأبيات وفقا للأنماط المعروفة كالشعر الحر , والرباعي والخماسي , والشعر الملون وقد خلصت الدراسة بجملة من التوصيات تتمثل في ضرورة اختبار أحسن النماذج وتدريبها مراعاة في ذلك التحليل النقدي البناء وتشجيع الطلبة في مجال تبادل التجارب والخبرات فيما يخص تحليل القصائد الشعرية وتشجيع الابداعات الفردية.

Introduction

What makes the study of literature important and the development of poetry writing special? As Maley & Duff (1989) have noted: "*One of the most important conditions for learning a foreign language ... is the opportunity to play with it, to pull it this way and that, to test its elasticity, to test and explore its limits. Poetry is par excellence the medium in which this can be done*"(p.9). Certainly, we read literature to understand human experience across time and place.

Students read it because they haven't yet learned strategies for reading a variety of poems and enjoying the sweetness they may derive from. So, what is there to learn about? We believe students may think of identifying themes, settings, poetic devices and so on... And as it has been confirmed by Collie and Slater (1987 p.226) "using poetry in the language classroom can lead naturally on to freer and creative written expression"

As Tomlinson (1986, p. 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”. Readers need strategies that help them read not only the words on the page but also read between and beyond the lines.

Activating readers’ prior knowledge of a topic before they begin to read may help students’ comprehension (Carrell and Eisterhold (1983); Grabe (1991); Ur (1996).

Students need to know the specialized language of literary texts, get familiar with versification, symbolism, structure and forms of poetry to develop later on into poetry writers.

Tomlinson (1986(b) states:

"Poetry ... can open and enrich the content of language lessons, can provide useful opportunities for gaining experience of the world, and can contribute to the development of the 'whole person' as well as the 'learner of a language' (p 34)

Poems provide a stimulus and can serve as a good model for creative writing (Maher, 1986). Collie and Slater (1987: 226) that “using poetry in the language classroom can lead naturally on to freer and creative written expression”. Nicole Baart, (2002) fits this description, with the idea being to use students' sense of smell and taste as a jumping off point for poetry writing. They are an outgrowth of her own attempts to inspire ninth-graders to write more intensely by removing the artificial environment that normally accompanies poetry writing instruction (P .99)

Many learners feel scared when interpreting poetry and paraphrasing what they have been asked to. This is may be due to the uncertainty they face in understanding the poems. Learners are not aware enough to consider that interpretation includes a number of different things where they as readers have to discover

about what the author really means by this or that. Christison, (1982) stipulates that writing poetry in a second language creates self-confidence and "positive feelings about the language learning experience" (p 17)

Theoretical framework: Selective teaching

According to Langer (1997), literature allows students to reflect on their lives, learning, and language. Literature can open "horizons of possibility, allowing students to question, interpret, connect, and explore" (p. 607). Lazar (1993) in his turn believes this provides learners with "meaningful and memorable contexts for processing and interpreting new language" (p. 17)

Consequently, when a reader writes out his interpretation of a piece of literature, he will certainly create another piece which has its own world and quite different from the original. Hence, one may presume that for each student, success in literary writing should be measured in the amount of time given for every individual to prove his capacity to understand poetry, in addition to his knowledge about how the writer creates his or her art through style, theme, poetic devices , setting, and tone and how to respond and think critically about the implications of the work for his future creative writing

Russell (2005) added that "Lovers of poetry are not born, but made through patient and careful nurturing."
(p. 188) Blanton (1992) remarked:

"With all language skills brought to bear on a topic--as students listen to others, discuss their ideas, read various texts, and write about various aspects of the topic--their command of English grows, as does their sophistication in working with ideas and texts. Their confidence grow as well".(P.289)

In this respect, the whole process begins with persuading learners to write in a tone that is plain, serious and straightforward besides being respectful toward their audience and the literary genre they are writing under-the type of register to select the poetic devices they choose as well as the degree of interest they create in their readership.

The practice under way is often teachers' oriented where most of the learners are left to abundance namely when they are confronted with difficult poetry types. In addition, learners of different and heterogeneous levels, their cultural backgrounds, their limited sources, the absence of extra-curricular activities and extensive reading tasks have rendered learners' roles more complex and have decreased their initiatives in taking risks as writing and producing poems of different shapes or increasing and adding to their lot through personal endeavours.

Consequently, this has negatively limited their effort in devising their proper strategies, in independently treating their own reading and writing material. As a teacher of a literature credit, I believe from my own experience that , in fact, learners face many differences at the level of reading and writing skills; for this purpose, I strongly believe that the teacher himself can be the source of poetry writing development within the learners' initiatives to produce fine poetry through selective teaching. And it is at this level that the nature of the problem posed deserves some insight and deep research.

To make the intended contribution as outlined above a possibility, a clear problem statement needed to be formulated to direct the research. The problem statement is formulated as follows:

Can teachers enhance and develop learner's potential to write poetry through selective classroom material poetry study?

Inherent to the above research question, the following sub-questions may be formulated:

- What is particular with teaching literature?
- What is the importance of reading in a literature course?
- What Strategic reading techniques could teachers devise to help learners tackle any piece of poetry?
- What effect does literary strategic reading have on poetry writing process?
- Why are learners scared and afraid of reading literary material?
- How to help learners engage metacognitively in an active reading process outside the classroom with the intention of internalizing models that effect positively on their creative writing to poetry?

The questions raised above directly and indirectly led the researcher to speculate about the problem question. The research serves to establish guiding principles regarding the design of a set of teaching procedures and strategies that teachers have to adopt all along their accompaniment to their learners' poetry writing development within classroom initiatives or as extra-curricular activities.

The research suggests pinpointing learners' poetic weaknesses and constraints in writing at a university level. The overall contribution of the study lies in the support it proposes to enhance poetry learners to understand the literary principles and the reading strategies they better adopt when facing literary issues especially what relates to poetry interpretation, analysis and writing.

This field investigative research places a strong emphasis on the need to selectively teaching learners how to develop their poetry writing skills. The research then is limited to both skills reading and writing and projects the accomplishment of good creative achievement of learners at the university level by using a longitudinal perspective study. Learners are supposed to be totally

immersed in internalizing the rationale related to poetry formation, structure and texture. The intention laid behind this is to raise learners' consciousness to the understanding of the notion of becoming strategic readers to enable them to write and create poems of their own through modelling and imitating the great poetry writers under the teachers' guidance.

Poetry Reading-a Pre-requisite to poetry writing

Duke, Charles R. (1984) said that

“Learning to read poetry is an on-going process, requiring regular and frequent use of strategies. Writing poetry requires skills and is likely to result in a product.” This unit (and the Short Story Unit) integrates strategy and skills lessons to help teachers give all students' access to the Core Content for literary reading and writing. (p.3)

For a good evaluation of poetry, the reader is expected first to appreciate it and to be able to find faults with it. The reader has to detect how the poet makes his thrill, his mysterious power, how he gives us pleasure, charm, wonder and delight. So, the true poetry is embalmed with great qualities-

Research Design, context, population and sampling procedure

The targeted population was First Year English Stream students, Department of English, University of Msila. The sampling was drawn from that population randomly after the distribution of the questionnaires. The sampling was chosen both from male and female students.

Material design and instruments

All forty eight students were asked to complete an identity survey card designed to assess students' likeness and familiarity with

poetry reading and writing. They were also subjected to sit for a diagnosis test, pre-tests, progressive tests and post-tests.

The experimental treatment consisted of a series of lessons addressed to students to enable them write and experiment with poetry writing. Before this, the students were exposed to various types of poetry including the Acrostic, the free verse, the ABC poetry the concrete, the colour poem and the quatrain/cinquain; in addition to Haiku and other types .After studying excerpts, students were asked to produce poems of the same type through modelling and within different workshops.

Results

According to students' reactions and via the analysis of the various data collection tools, students reported a positive attitude with regard to their writing enjoyment and appreciation to poetry writing and the chance they were given to express themselves. A qualitative research approach was selected to determine, examine and analyse L2 literature studies students' reading experiences to identify the barriers and challenges experienced in reading and comprehending L2 texts.

A qualitative approach was chosen since it is by nature exploratory, interpretative and descriptive and is an attempt to understand multiple realities (Babbie & Mouton 2001,pp (270-271); Leedy & Ormrod 2001. p 102). Qualitative studies furthermore have the potential to provide rich, detailed data (Carr 2008,p 716). The research findings would be used to establish appropriate strategies to support L2 students in their reading, interpretation and comprehension of foreign language literature.

Measures to ensure research validity and reliability

To ensure validity and reliability, the research process was designed and conducted in accordance with established research principles as stated by Byrne (2001); Carr (2008); Trochim (2006). Ethical principles were followed. Students were informed of the researcher' intention to undertake the research. The purpose of the

research was explained and students were asked to indicate whether they were willing to engage in the research and, if they objected, they were assured that their contributions to the class interaction and discussions would not be taken into account.

During the analysis and interpretation of the data, the deductions were constantly evaluated against the background of the literature. The researcher tried to establish a holistic view of the different causes and factors that impeded students' ability to read and comprehend L2 literature.

Research process and data collection

The selected research methods in this study are descriptive and interpretative and could be categorised as qualitative. Such an approach enables the researcher to interact with the students and describe the phenomena he observes naturally while embracing a holistic perspective with the intention to gather relevant information and rich data. Such data will certainly enable the researcher to gain a thorough understanding of the learners' situation and assists them in making research decisions that are contextually relevant and meaningful to their situation, level and orientation.

So, the choice of a qualitative research approach would give the researcher more freedom in the type of work he undertakes because it is not entirely prescriptive but provides research guidelines. Data is collected through learners' background identification questionnaire, through verbal descriptions, field work experimentation, and classroom observation and through longitudinal field study tests.

In this research study, the selection of a descriptive and interpretative method involved the researcher in the description of natural classroom setting where learners interact directly with the teacher and with their classmates, in varying group work. The research is a case study oriented and envisages the study of groups formed in their natural contexts as divided into control and experimental. Data analysis tends to be essentially interpretative –

interpreting the findings within the context in which the study took place.

The research was conducted primarily with a review of selected literature on the issue. The principles of adult education were explored in the different thinkings about the way literature should be taught to adults. The data was gathered from both primary and secondary sources. Important documents that were consulted included the ones related to literary genres namely poetry rationale, principles and writing, poetry analysis and the way this could be approached. The research process and findings were reported in logically sequenced chapters.

The study was undertaken between January and December 2011. Data were obtained in the classroom setting through participant observation, students' productions and feedback and interaction with students. Sample of students' written responses to a specific literature studies assignment entered in their learning logs served as an additional data source.

Participant observation

As part of regular teaching sessions, the primary researcher assigned reading tasks and observed how learners approached these assignments. Participant observation is integral to understanding the breadth and complexities of research participants' experiences.

Data analysis of class work and tests

An in-depth analysis of students' written reports on their appraisal and reflections of a specific reading task formed a third component of the data-collection process.

Research findings

The findings in relation to the conditions under which students study, how students engaged with their tuition material, and

students' interaction with others in the learning environment, are discussed below. What was noted was that learners were very ambitious to write something that itched in their hearts, to see their latent feelings unveiled: they talked together, checked dictionaries or twittered like amateur writers, stealing a word from here and placing it there- to eventually satisfy their anxious teacher.

Informal interaction and discussion

The informal discussions and unstructured interviews conducted with students focused primarily on asking them to elaborate on their experiences related to reading and interpreting literature studies text and writing poetry. Students' comments were noted in the researcher's journal for analysis and reflection. The themes that emerged from the analysis of the data related to students' individual reactions, perceptions and experiences in relation to literature studies; the reading strategies that were used; interaction and engagement with others; and the factors that inhibit or aid reading with comprehension. These categories linked directly to the envisaged purpose of the research.

The classroom atmosphere was generally relaxed and conducive to interaction between students and the lecturer, and between students and other students. The researcher encouraged the students – as a class, in groups and individually – to share their opinions about their reading and writing experiences and the strategies they used when dealing with a reading/writing assignment. From these discussions, students' perceptions of, and thoughts regarding literature studies were evidenced.

Students' perceptions of poetry writing

Students reported that they found reading poetry extremely difficult. The explanations were that poetry is very personal, symbolic, and full of imagery and difficult words and has a deep and hidden meaning that they are unable to probe. Students seemed to lack knowledge of the context or culture within which the text had

been framed – regardless of whether this was in their studies of American or British literature. A lack of understanding of the historical context, cultural practices, social conventions and idiomatic language used decidedly constrained students' ability to comprehend the literature being studied.

Some of Students' Productions through different sessions practice

1. *The Acrostic poetry*

Eyes

Everywhere you're with me, I walk
 You are in the verb to look
 Eyes with whom I walk
 Some people need you
 To give them a chance to walk (Mss Dahmoune Wafia)

2. *Free Verse Poetry*

The Rainbow

Let nature speaks
 About its beauty
 When the rain falls
 And the sun shines again
 It appears between the clouds
 Look at the sky
 You will see a real magic
 With seven fanciful colours By Miss Benmakhlouf Samah

3. *Creative Writing*

To my Mother

You are the sun, the moon in my life
 You are the mother, the friend and the housewife
 You are everything in this life.
 I can see all the soft feelings in your eyes
 I can feel all tenderness in your arms
 I can remark all the goodness in your smiles

From your smile, I learnt how to be cheerful
From your doing, I learnt how to be helpful
From your lessons, I learnt how to be responsible
Doctors forbade your pregnancy
But you decided to face your lament in leniency
And you did conceive me without complaint
So whatever I did, I do and I will do, I can never be akin to you
Just what I want is to ask God to bless and protect you.

By Miss Chikouche Hamina Sara

Constraints and opportunities

A summary of challenges experienced by students indicates the following:

Students' experience with poetry writing proved a little bit difficult because they lacked experience in poetry writing. They were not able to select the appropriate diction and they felt limited. The teacher's help was of paramount importance and bit by bit the students immersed in writing, modelled some good poets and tried their hands at different productions and though they were not up to the level, their teacher believes that with constant work and through longitudinal study and with intensive classroom hard work, the students will come up with good poetry productions in the future.

Recommendations

To improve students' enjoyment of, confidence and competence in their literature studies, it is necessary to deal with or reduce the impact of each of the constraining factors. However, each of these factors is multidimensional and consequently, to solve the problem, a holistic approach needs to be adopted. In addition Teachers should encourage collaborative learning through the use of the process approach. The process approach for Calkins, 1986: .5) is a means of getting students adeptly and personally involved in their writing.

Erkaya (2005) states that by integrating literature in the curricula, students can learn the four skills – listening, speaking,

reading, and writing – more effectively because of the literary, cultural, higher-order thinking, and motivational benefits. To achieve these benefits, EFL instructors should design the collaborative content-based literature class carefully to meet the needs of their students.

To engage students in poetry writing, teachers have to

- *Create a teaching-learning environment that supports cooperative learning*
- *Use teaching and learning approaches that foster critical reading and thinking*
- *Model and teach reading and text analysis skills and strategies*
- *Provide background knowledge relevant to the literary text*

Conclusion

Writing in its true sense implies a present wit, a certain know how regarding literary writing. It is a process that requires extended vocabulary, a mastery of English grammar and a common sense of logic and sound reasoning. In fact writing literary demands a lot of reading and a sane interpretation to the various literary genres. A writer needs to discover what is demanded from him to understand the questions well and be able to respond adequately. Interpreting poetry is sometimes difficult because every poet has his own world of imagination, of visualisation and the reader is left alone facing a multitude of ideas that he has to decode. He should look as a miner in front of his mine, ready to use his shovel and pickaxes. And so should the strategic reader be before attempting to immerse himself in exploiting the text.

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