

BRINGING THE REAL WORLD INTO THE ESL CLASSROOM THROUGH POETRY

Ramesh Nair

Universiti Teknologi Mara

ABSTRACT

A language lesson most likely provides the best forum for discussing real world issues. However, getting ESL learners to share their views can be a very challenging task. My group of students comprising young adult learners in university, tend to be unpredictable during classroom discussions. More often than not, they have very little to say and I find myself getting more practice in speaking than they do. However, in using poetry, I have discovered a stimulus that encourages greater student participation. This paper aims to discuss the use of poetry as a viable teaching material for an integrated ESL lesson that accommodates the sharing of views on a wide variety of themes that are related to real world issues. Sample lesson plans that include student input during discussions are discussed with the hope of giving instructors a glimpse into the potential that literary material can have in an ESL lesson.

Introduction

I find that getting my students to speak is one of the most challenging tasks I face in the ESL classroom. My students are made up predominantly of Malay learners of English between the ages of 18 and 21. They are university students who have had at least 10 years of exposure to the English language. Yet, many of them lack the confidence to communicate in the language.

In talking with my students, I have discovered that their lack of confidence in speaking English has its roots in their lack of opportunity to use the language outside the classroom. Even in university, they admit that they rarely or never communicate with friends in English even though their courses require them to be proficient in the language. Therefore, I strongly feel that language lessons should serve as a platform for confidence building. Despite being uncomfortable with speaking in English, when asked which classroom activity would benefit them most, the majority of my students indicated that they want more conversation practice.

Lesson Objectives

Outside the classroom, real conversation time in English is severely limited. With a group of students who lack the confidence to communicate in English, language

instructors need to define the aim of their lesson realistically. Taylor (1987:52) suggests that it is important to create a structured, yet supportive, non-judgmental atmosphere in order to allow students to feel free to take risks inherent in classroom activities and therefore the performance should be evaluated not in terms of language, but rather in terms of success or failure in completing a task. This is especially true for a language lesson that aims to build student confidence in communicating in English.

The use of poetry is especially useful in allowing students more freedom to express themselves without constantly having to worry about being wrong. One reason is because poetry provides students with themes that are often universal, allowing students to connect with the texts and with one another in powerful ways (Peyton and Rigg, 1999:3). A poem can allow for differing opinions, views and interpretations. Unlike some other forms of reading, there are no clear lines between right and wrong when discussing poetry. Therefore, poetry allows for the creation of an atmosphere for students to take risks. When the probability of being wrong is less, students are willing to participate more.

Poetry as a Resource

Poetry is rarely a popular choice as an ESL teaching material. Poetry is universally conceded to be the loftiest of the verbal arts (Hayakawa and Hayakawa, 1990:162). Stephen (1991: 55) notes that poetry is often thought of as the most 'difficult' of the three literary modes or genres (prose and drama being the remaining two). A likely reason for such views is because literature in general involves considerable baggage of critical concepts, literary conventions and meta language and the requirement is often that students should show an ability to use such terms and concepts in talking and writing about literature (Carter and Long, 1991:3). Imagine introducing concepts such as imagery, personification and allegory to ESL students in a language proficiency class! But does poetry necessarily have to remain in the domain of literature students?

Poetry, used as a resource, offers considerable opportunities for encouraging language use in an ESL classroom. In selecting appropriate material for use in an ESL classroom, the common trend appears to be in exploiting authentic material such as news clippings, posters and advertisements. The reason behind the popularity of such material is that it helps learners to practice with language in real use (Koo, 1992: 140). There is no denying the truth to this. However, in focusing our attention on such authentic materials, many ESL instructors have not allowed for more experimentation with literary materials such as poems as a language resource with enormous potential. Literary material can be a special resource for personal development and growth, an aim being to encourage greater sensitivity and self-

awareness and greater understanding of the world around us (Carter and Long, 1991: 3).

I have found poetry to be an especially effective stimulus for a lesson that integrates the reading and speaking skills. An integrated lesson involving the use of poetry allows for the application of deductive and projective reading skills. Grant (1994:61) defines deductive reading as the ability to read between the lines and draw inferences while projective reading is defined as the ability to relate the reading to real life while sharing the reader's own opinions, knowledge, imagination and experience. Though the potential of poetry in a reading lesson may seem more obvious, there is also enormous potential for the use of poetry as a tool that encourages ESL learners to speak.

A carefully selected poem can act as a platform for activities that include discussions on a wide range of issues. Masuhara (2000: 107) refers to the processing of real life experiences as multi-sensory processing. It is the linking of what one reads to one's own real life experiences that should be the focus if we are to get ESL learners to participate in discussions. If ESL learners cannot relate to what they are reading, how can we expect them to say anything? Masuhara (2000: 107) suggests the experiential approach where students connect what they read to their experiences rather than remain focused on linguistic explanations.

Even when students have problems with understanding a given poem in its totality, they can still contribute effectively in discussions. Such discussions can take place if the focus of the lesson is not on mastering linguistic items (i.e. vocabulary items) in the poem, but rather on giving students an opportunity to form a general picture of what the poem is about. Phillips and Shettlesworth (1987:107) contend that when using a written text, it must be accepted that total comprehension (of the text) has often to be abandoned as a lesson aim. Again, the aim of the lesson has to be clearly defined.

Sample Lessons

In the following section, I have reproduced parts of discussions that ensued in two lessons where poetry was used as a stimulus to get students to speak. Parts that I have reproduced are a result of my noting down some of the responses that my students gave during the lessons. I have, however, for the purpose of clarity, edited students' responses in terms of grammatical accuracy. The content of what transpired in class remains unchanged.

Lesson 1

Number of Students: 26

Duration: 1 hour

The poem used in this lesson was

Okasan/Mother by Sakae S. Roberson:

twenty-five years she's been here
and still
 a-me-ri-ka makes her mouth sour tight
 sticks in her mind like spit-wet thread
 caught in the eye of a needle.

twenty-five years of doing christmas
and still
 she saves generation-old
bamboo mats for wrapping new year osushi/
 rice cakes
 hums songs of japan
in the quiet dark of christmas mornings.
every year
for twenty-five years she plans new year

every year
for twenty-five years she plans new year
and still
 one more dress to sew, one more bill to pay.
 one more year passes.
 She celebrates
sewing silk gowns for rich ladies.

twenty-five years
and still
 she tells no stories of a war to a daughter
 she saves marriage lace and
 satin baby kimonos in a cedar chest for
 a daughter who denies her conversation
 watches her sew her life designs
 into someone else's wedding day

twenty-five years of city living
people calling her oriental or chinese

sometimes jap
and still
her eyes, like teardrops turned sideways,
say nothing,
with pride, she writes from right to left
of the greatness of a-me-ri-ka to her people.

twenty-five years
alone.
still
she cries in japanese.

Pre-Reading Activity. The word “Okasan” is written on the board and the students are asked if anyone knows what the word means. They can attempt to guess if it is an English word or of another language. The class is told that it is a Japanese word that means mother. Students are asked what comes to their mind when they hear the word “mother”. In pairs, students talk a little bit about their mother.

Reading Activity. Copies of the poem are distributed. The poem is read out aloud by the instructor. Students are then divided into groups to discuss answers to questions that are put up on transparencies:

1. What can you say about the mother in the poem?
2. Why do you think “America” is wrongly spelt in the poem?
3. Does she like living in America?
4. What kind of relationship does she have with her daughter?

The poem is then discussed as a class:

- Instructor: What do you know about the mother in this poem?
Students: She's Japanese. She's living in America.
Instructor: What do you notice about the way America is spelt?
Students: It's wrong. It's like the way we spell it in Malay.
Instructor: Why do you think it's spelt that way?
Students: It shows the way the woman in the poem says it.... Japanese speak like that.
Instructor: She's been in America for 25 years, why can't she pronounce the word correctly?
Student A: Maybe she's like us, she doesn't speak in English to anyone.
Instructor: Has she adjusted to life in America?
Student A: A little bit. She celebrates Christmas.
Student B: But she sings Japanese songs and makes osushi.
Instructor: Why does she still do that in America?
Students: She is still Japanese. People cannot forget their culture. Like if Malay students go overseas to study, they still eat rice, wear *tudung* (headscarves).
Instructor: Does she have any children?
Student C: Yes a daughter.
Student D: But I think she is dead.
Student C: No, she is not. Why do you say that?
Student D: Line 24, she cannot talk to her daughter, also line 27... denies her conversation.
Instructor: Is it possible that her daughter doesn't live with her, maybe lives too far?
Student E: Yes, maybe they quarreled.
Instructor: Let us assume that her daughter is alive and that she doesn't keep in touch with her mother, why do you think it may be so?
Students: Communication breakdown. Generation gap. She is modern, but her mother is old fashioned. She feels shy because her mother can't speak English.
I think her mother wants her to get married and have babies but she doesn't want to.
Instructor: Does the mother have a husband?
Student F: I think he is dead. Maybe divorced.

Student G: No, she is very traditional. Japanese, not American.
 Instructor: Japanese people don't get divorced?
 Students: Yes, maybe now but old people are too old fashioned.
 Instructor: So you all agree that mother is an old woman.
 Students: Yes. She has baby kimonos for her daughter's baby.
 Instructor: Does she like living in America?
 Students: No, she cries.
 Instructor: Why does she cry?
 Student G: People call her Jap.
 Instructor: What does Jap mean?
 Student H: It's short for Japanese.
 Instructor: Is that wrong?
 Student I: Yes. People should call her by her name, not refer to her race. If someone says "Hey Melayu!" when I am walking down a street, I don't think I will like that.
 Instructor: Why do people do that, call someone Oriental or Chinese or Jap?
 Student J: They are racist.
 Instructor: Who is a racist?
 Students: People who don't like other races. People who only look at skin colour. Like in South Africa...
 Instructor: Are you referring to Apartheid?
 Students: Yes.
 Instructor: What happened there?
 Students: Blacks are second class citizens...

Comments. The discussion above was partly what transpired in one of my classes. Some responses did vary from class to class. Some students saw aspects of the poem that others did not see. The questions I provided as prompts depended a lot on the responses that the students gave. In essence, the students were in control of the discussion.

During my lesson, the students' collective interpretation of the poem was that it was a story of an old Japanese woman who had migrated to America 25 years ago. She has tried to adjust to life in America but she still holds on proudly to her Japanese heritage. She has a daughter but their relationship is not good, probably because her daughter doesn't relate to her Japanese culture. Americans too don't accept the old Japanese woman. Some of them are racist.

By the end of the discussion, the poem had allowed for discussions on a wide range of real world issues relating to family relationships, culture, language, old age and racism.

Post-Reading Activity. Having discussed the poem and having determined that all the students had understood the poem in general, questions were then formulated for the students to discuss in groups:

1. If you had to live in America, would you be able to adapt? What kind of problems would you face? What type of changes would you be willing to make? What are changes that you would not make?
2. Do you think the daughter in the poem should have got married and made her mother happy? Would you do things in the future just to please your parents?
3. Why do you think people judge others by the colour of their skin and the way they look? What comes to your mind when you hear someone say that they are Japanese? American? Malay? Chinese? etc. Do you label people? Does that make you a racist?

Comments. The post-reading activity questions were designed in such a way as to allow students to provide answers based on their own experiences. They need not have gone to America to foresee problems they may face if they were to live there. Question three forces the students to question themselves on whether they stereotype people and to decide what qualifies as a racist act. Such issues are global issues and are also very close to home for these students living in a multiracial community. An English language lesson can become a forum of sorts for students to have healthy debates on issues that they may otherwise avoid addressing.

Lesson 2

Number of Students: 31

Duration: 1 hour

The poem used in this lesson was *Alone* by Maya Angelou:

Lying, thinking
Last night
How to find my soul a home
Where water is not thirsty
And bread loaf is not stone
I came up with one thing
And I don't believe I'm wrong
That nobody,
But nobody
Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone
Nobody, but nobody
Can make it out here alone.
There are some millionaires
With money they can't use
Their wives run round like banshees
Their children sing the blues
They've got expensive doctors
To cure their hearts of stone.
But nobody
No, nobody
Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone
Nobody, but nobody
Can make it out here alone.

Now if you listen closely
I'll tell you what I know
Storm clouds are gathering
The wind is gonna blow
The race of man is suffering
And I can hear the moan,
'Cause nobody,
But nobody
Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone
Nobody, but nobody
Can make it out here alone.

Pre-Reading Activity. Students are asked the following questions:

1. If you had to live alone on an island somewhere, how long do you think you could survive on your own?
2. Is it possible for anyone to survive alone in this world?

Reading Activity. Copies of the poem are distributed. The poem is then read out aloud by the instructor. Students are then divided into groups to discuss answers to questions that are put up on transparencies:

1. What is the main message in this poem?
2. What do you think the poet means when she says that “water is not thirsty” and “bread loaf is not stone”?
3. What does the poet say about rich people?
4. What do you think she means by “Storm clouds are gathering”?

The poem is then discussed as a class:

Instructor: What do you think is the main message in this story?

Students: Nobody can make it out here alone.

Instructor: Where is “here”?

Students: Anywhere. Earth. This planet.

Instructor: What do you think the writer means when she says “water is not thirsty”?

Student A: If you have water, you cannot be thirsty...

Student B: Maybe if you are at sea....there is water, but you cannot drink it.

Instructor: What about “bread loaf is not stone”?

Student C: Hard bread...somewhere cold... bread can become very hard.

Instructor: Why does she refer to places like the sea and places that are cold?

Student D: It is terrible to be there...you need help...you cannot make it alone.

Instructor: Can you think of examples of such places?

Student E: Like in Bosnia. It’s very cold and people have no food...they get free food from the UN...I’ve seen it on TV...they get bread but it is not enough.

Student F: In Afghanistan, people eat grass!

Instructor: Why do they need free food?

Students: The war... they have no jobs...they need the UN to help them. Even Malaysia sent soldiers and doctors.

Instructor: What does she say about rich people?

Student G: They are not happy.

Instructor: Would you be happy if you were a millionaire?

Students: Of course! Sure!

Student H: But not always.

Student I: The more money you have, the more problems you have.

Student J: Money doesn’t cause the problem...money can solve a lot of problems.

Instructor: Do you still need people around you if you are rich?

Student K: Yes, it's human nature. How can you build a big house and live alone?
 Instructor: Are there rich people who have money they can't use?
 Student L: Bill Gates! Billionaire...
 Student M: In the Philippines...(Imelda) Marcos...thousands of shoes...a waste of money.
 Instructor: What does she say about the wives and children of millionaires?
 Student N: What is a banshee?
 Instructor: Any guesses?
 Students: An animal. A dog.
 Instructor: A spirit...like a ghost.
 Students: The children are sad...parents are not around. Maids looking after them. No love. Wives are always running around for parties and functions.
 Instructor: What does she say about expensive doctors?
 Students: Even the best doctors cannot help you if you are unhappy. They (millionaires) don't have love, so they cannot be healthy. No love from wives or from the children. People pretend to like them because they are rich...but actually they are alone.
 Instructor: What does she mean by "Storm clouds are gathering"?
 Student O: It's a warning...something bad is going to happen...like a war.
 Instructor: Would you agree that man is suffering?
 Students: Yes.
 Instructor: Why are people suffering?
 Students: War. People being selfish...greedy.

Comments. At this point in the discussion, I wanted the students to focus more on the global issue of human suffering. In the post-reading activity, the students were asked to come up with examples of human suffering and were asked to think of reasons why these things occur. The most popular example given was that of the September 11th bombing of the World Trade Center in New York. Others included the on-going Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the suffering of the Afghan people. The students were asked to relate their examples to the main message of the poem that "nobody can make it out here alone". A wide range of connections were made, some were on a small scale while others were more far reaching. Among the examples provided were that of the victims of September 11th who needed the help of emergency workers, the Afghans who needed the help of Americans. The students also concluded that the Palestinians and Israelis should learn to live together because they cannot survive in isolation.

The responses given by the students clearly indicated that they had knowledge of the world around them. Poems, such as Angelou's, allowed them to voice their opinions. Prior to the first lesson in which poetry was used, students were asked to

write down what they thought of the use of poetry in an English language lesson. The responses were largely negative. The most common reason they gave for not preferring the use of poetry was that it simply was too difficult and took too much effort to understand. However, when asked for their opinions at the end of the lesson, the responses were largely positive. There was clearly a sense of accomplishment when students realised that they are able to relate to literary materials and communicate their thoughts in class.

Conclusion

Knowledge that an L2 learner of English has of the real world is not less than the knowledge that an L1 speaker would have. Given the right stimulus, L2 learners are indeed capable of expressing their thoughts. The opportunity the students had to relate what they had read to their own experiences led to their ability to contribute effectively in discussions using the English language.

References

- Carter, R. and Long, M.N. 1991. *Teaching Literature*. New York: Longman.
- Grant, N. 1994. *Making the Most of Your Textbook*. United Kingdom: Longman.
- Hayakawa, S.I. and Hayakawa, A.R. 1990. *Language in Thought and Action*. 5th ed. Florida: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc.
- Koo Y.L. 1992. Selecting and Exploiting Printed Authentic Materials in the E.S.L. Context for the Reading Classroom: A Malaysian Educator's Experience. In Jamaliah Mohd. Ali *et al.* eds. *Proceedings on Literacy in Asian Societies*. Malaysian Reading Association, Kuala Lumpur.
- Masuhara, H. 2000. Experiencing Literature Through Language. In Chan, S.H. *et al.* eds. *Diverse Voices: Readings in Languages, Literatures and Cultures*. Serdang: Universiti Putra Malaysia.
- Peyton, J.K. and Rigg, P. 1999. Poetry in the Adult ESL Classroom. Washington, DC: The National Center for ESL Literacy Education. (EDO-LE-99-05)
- Phillips, M. K. & Shettlesworth, C. C. 1987. How to arm your students: A consideration of two approaches to providing materials for ESP. In M. Long and J. Richards, (Eds.). *Methodology in TESOL: A Book of Readings* (pp. 105-111). Newbury House.
- Stephen, M. 1991. *English Literature: A Student Guide*. 2nd ed. New York: Longman.
- Taylor, B. P. 1983. Teaching ESL: Incorporating a communicative, student-centered component. *TESOL Quarterly*, 17 (1): 69-87.