Strategies for the use of Poetry in the Language Classroom

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Eve Merriam in *How to eat a poem* says

Bite in,
Pick it up with your fingers and lick
the juice that may run down your chin,
It is ready and ripe now, whenever you are.

The ESL classroom is finally 'ready' to 'bite in' into the fruit of poetry. In recent years, there has been an uneasy relationship between language and literature. Literature, in particular poetry, was not considered appropriate material for second language learning. The structuralist approach, for example, focussed on the acquisition of grammatical structures while the more utilitarian communicative approach aimed at a functional command of the language so that students would be able to use the four skills of language in a variety of situations requiring English. In language classrooms adopting these approaches, literature only featured through the use of simplified readers.

Present-day English language syllabuses like the KBSM, however, reflect the changed swing of the language teaching pendulum by advocating the infusion of literary elements in the programme. Novels, short stories, fables, poems and plays are to be used for language teaching, as a literary experience is also a language experience (Arthur, 1968). The advantages of using literature in a language programme are explained by Willmot (1973):-

> Literature demonstrates language at work ... it also helps the pupils and stimulates linguistic responses of various kinds. English teachers not only present literature,they also exploit it, because it can generate language as well as exemplify it. (p.57)

Poetry, like the other genres, therefore, serves not only as a model of language but as a springboard for teaching the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. In dealing with poetry, students engage in both the receiving and the expressing aspects of language. The receptive process involves the skills students use to assign meaning to what is read or heard while the productive process involves expressing ideas or feelings which are evoked in response to poetry. Poetry, therefore, can serve as a catalyst in developing language skills.

One of the reasons poetry is an effective language teaching resource is because it establishes patterns through rhyme, rhythm, line length and sentence structure. This repetition enables students to pick up language patterns such as structure and speech rhythms. The repetition of lines, for example, provides language practice without the accompanying boredom of a drill. Chain poems like "In A Dark, Dark Wood" can be used to teach the simple present tense form and the use of prepositions. Structures are also repeated and new phrases gradually introduced in accumulative poems like "There Was An Old Woman Who Swallowed A Fly" and "This Is The House That Jack Built."

Further, constant exposure to poetry sensitises students to the use of words as poems often convey their messages through unusual and interesting ways. Consider, for example, Wallace Stevens' description of light:-

> The light is
>   like a spider
> It crawls over
>   the water
> It crawls over
>   the edge of snow.
> It crawls under
>   your eyelids
> And spreads its
>   webs there –
> Its two webs.

A poem like 'Old Granny' by Bonus Zimunya can effectively be used to evoke the sympathies of students through its unusual description of an old woman in a Harare market. She is:

'A little freezing spider

Legs and arms gathered in her chest'.

Words, the students realise, have connotations and associa-
tions as well as denotations, and can operate at many levels.
Exposure to poetry can lead students to view the world around
them with new eyes. Poems by Christina Rossetti, Walter de la
Mare, Eleanor Farjeon and Charles Causley, which are simply
written, are often thoughtful and sensitive.

While present syllabuses recognise poetry as a valuable
resource for language teaching, teachers of language are often
'uncomfortable' about its use in the classroom. The essence of
the problem seems to be 'what should be done with poetry.'
Teachers also worry about 'rightness',

> ... both of a poem's meaning and of our teaching methods, and
> the worry is conveyed to the children so that the classroom
> ambience of poetry becomes one of anxiety at a difficult prob-
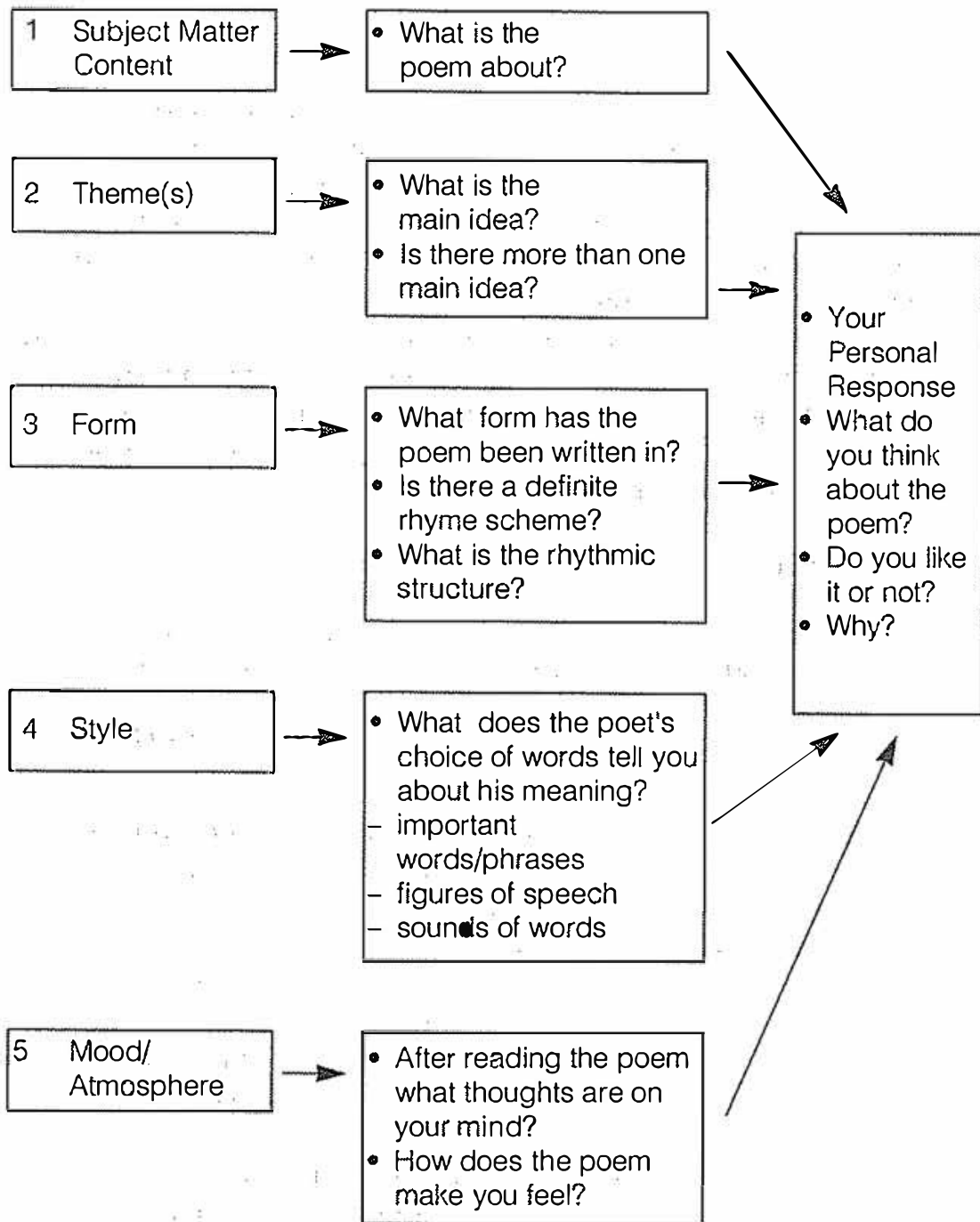> lem with hidden rules rather than one of enjoyment of a well
> wrought object.
>
> (Benton 1978: in Hall 1989: 5)

Often, he continues, technical matters are given prominence
and the teaching of poetry is reduced to 'metaphor hunts'
and 'simile chases'. While an analysis of the poem may be useful,
what is important is the student's response to it.

The strategies used to teach a poem should allow the student
to 'engage' with the poem personally. A structured overview of
the concepts involved in teaching a poem would, perhaps, be
useful in providing a framework for developing strategies to teach
poetry.

The five elements of a poem as indicated in the following con-
ceptual map may be used to help students get to grips with the
poem. Strategies could include activities which focus on the con-
tent or style of the poem, for example. What must be borne in
mind is that students must be given the opportunity to 'bite' into
the poem; to interact with the text and to form a personal response
to it. Strategies for using poetry must encourage the students' explo-
rations of their own experiences in relation to the poem taught.

Strategies for the teaching of poetry can operate at three
stages – the warming-up stage; while listening to or reading a

| 1 Subject Matter Content | → | • What is the poem about? |

| 2 Theme(s) | → | • What is the main idea?
• Is there more than one main idea? |

| 3 Form | → | • What form has the poem been written in?
• Is there a definite rhyme scheme?
• What is the rhythmic structure? |

| 4 Style | → | • What does the poet's choice of words tell you about his meaning?
– important words/phrases
– figures of speech
– sounds of words |

| 5 Mood/ Atmosphere | → | • After reading the poem what thoughts are on your mind?
• How does the poem make you feel? |

• Your Personal Response
• What do you think about the poem?
• Do you like it or not?
• Why?

poem and at the follow-up stage. In devising language teaching activities using poetry it is useful to bear in mind the following guidelines. There should be ample scope for student participation. Paired activities and groupwork have the advantage of allowing students to express their views and exchange ideas in a non-threatening atmosphere. Further, the activities should be within the capabilities of the students and be varied enough so as to appeal to their interests. Finally, the aim of these strategies in the language classroom is to give practice in the use of language – students should be involved in listening, reading, speaking or writing.

The warming-up stage is useful as it helps to make students more receptive to the poem. Maley and Duff (1989) suggest six possible channels for establishing a mental set which will facilitate access to the poem. These are 'through pictures, through the personal reactions of students, their memories, through recordings, through texts, through drama and role-play and through writing.' In preparing students for Kitching's 'T.V. News', for example, students can be shown a picture of a scene during a battle and asked to describe their reactions to it. A tape-recording of the sounds during a battle, a newspaper report of a similar incident as well as students' recollections of the reactions of others while viewing or listening to a report of news from the battle-front can serve as springboards for discussion which will prepare them for the poem. The teacher can devise a brief series of questions to help focus thinking on the stimuli presented.

The student can encounter the poem by either listening to an oral reading or recitation of the poem or by reading it himself. The first reading is important. If it is carried out effectively so that meaning is conveyed by tone and inflexion, explanation will become redundant and this initial encounter with the poem will be memorable for the student. It is therefore suggested that the teacher carry out the first oral reading of the poem having thought about it and perhaps practised her reading before presenting it to the class. In this shared reading with the students the class 'stays together' creating a common experience which may later be used as a basis for discussion. By allowing students to listen to a poem we help them develop what T.S.Eliot called the 'auditory imagination'. The patterns of words, the rhymes and the rhythms bring meaning to what is heard and allow the student to not only think about the poem but to feel it.

When a student reads a poem, the form it takes on the printed page can determine meaning. The ways in which the poet places

the words become significant. Words can be used to stop the eye and to move it along back and forth. A clear example of form reinforcing meaning is the `shape poem' where the shape of the poem reflects its subject matter. Allowing the student to read the poem on his own enables him to draw from his own experiences so that the poem means something to him personally. This personal response to text may lead to an appreciation of the poem.

Various strategies can also be employed to sustain the reading and exploration of a poem. Re-reading a poem is the simplest of strategies, but it too can help deepen appreciation. As Walter de La Mare explains

> `At every reading of a poem, though it may have been familiar
> from early childhood, some hitherto hidden
> delicacy of rhythm or intonation may be revealed.'
>
> (in Hall 1989: 68)

Another strategy which is part of the teacher's stock-in-trade is the use of questions. The elements of the poem as presented in the conceptual map may form the basis of questions. Benton and Fox (1987) suggest using questions of an open, general nature. A variety of questions requiring inferencing, analysis or comparison should be asked. However after `dissecting' the poem, it is essential for the poem to be re-read as a whole so that the students' last impression is not that of dissected fragments.

For features such as rhythm, rhyme, alliteration and assonance to come alive the students should read aloud the poem. In reading aloud poems individually or in chorus, students may be trained to read with expression using pitch, pace, volume and pause. The teacher can even orchestrate a choral reading using different `sets' of voices – light, clear voices, medium voices and deeper voices. However, the teacher has to work out beforehand exactly how he wants the poem read. Otherwise what may result will be a ragged mumble!

Strategies may include helping students see how ideas fit together in a poem. This could include jigsaw reading or listening exercises using the different stanzas or verses; prediction exercises or even cloze exercises. `Wrong' words could be included in a version of the poem and students can decide which they are and propose alternatives.

Finally, to help students come to grips with the language students can explore the connotations and associations of words, for

example, 'Which do you think are the 'happy' words in the poem?' or 'List all the words related to the sea in the poem.' Again, the questions pertaining to style listed in the diagram can help the teacher adopt strategies in dealing with the language of the poem.

At the follow-up stage, the aim of the activities is to enable the students to draw more from the poem. This can be done by extending the theme or relating it to their own experiences. One of the simplest follow-up strategies is for the student to compile his own anthology of poems. This could be based on themes which would interest him – for example war, growing up, nature. Further, getting students to memorise a poem gives them a permanent possession. Hall quotes Brierley (1988) as saying that it is 'an important source of enrichment and satisfaction'. Students could select a favourite poem from the anthologies they have compiled and commit it to memory. They can then re-experience their pleasure with the poems without having to turn to a poetry book or a teacher.

Poems can also be presented through mime and role play. Visuals and music can be incorporated and poems can be 'performed' before the class, at assemblies or in concerts. Art work can also be included at this stage. As students draw and paint characters or scenes from a poem, they are compelled to keep returning to it to check details such as dress or appearance. Some narrative poems are so full of interesting characters and incidents that they lend themselves to collage work and large scale wall friezes. However, the novelty of such strategies remains only if it is not a regular, often repeated feature.

Creative writing activities arising from the poem offer many opportunities for genuine student interaction as students discuss ideas, draft and edit materials. As the students become involved in the writing task, they begin to understand better the ideas and language of the poem. Writing activities could include rewriting the poem from a different point of view. A comic strip could be produced based on the poem. The poem could be used as a starting point for a story or an essay. Students could also create their own poems based on the form taught. Haikus, rhyming couplets, limericks, shape poems and cinquains could be written by students. The pieces of writing produced by students together with the products of other activities should be displayed and shared. What must always be maintained through all these activities is a sense of enjoyment. Only then will these strategies serve to develop an appreciation of poetry.

Finally, it is worth noting that poetry appeals to the senses. Like a piece of music it can conjure up many associations. Long after a drill or a reading passage has been forgotten, a poem will be remembered. Its peculiar use of language enables it to be easily remembered especially if it is associated with pleasant, happy memories. We sometimes remember poems because of the way it was read to us and the pleasure which lit our teacher's face was transmitted to us. For students to enjoy using poetry, the teacher has to enjoy it - poetry is not only taught but 'caught'.

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