

EXPERIENCING POETRY: UNLEARNING AND RELEARNING LITERATURE TO DEVELOP READING INTERESTS IN LITERARY WORKS

Bachrudin Musthafa

Indonesia University of Education

Abstract

Building on results of a classroom-based survey on students' literacy habits, this article reports on how an exploratory study on experiencing poetry can change EFL students' "ways with literature." First problems from past experiences with literature are discussed and theoretical insights proposed which will bring to fore the need for a change in pedagogical orientations. Next the idea of "experiencing poetry" is flashed out by addressing the knotty problems literature teaching has been faced with. Step-by-step instructional procedures are discussed together with their corresponding pedagogical considerations. Some guiding pedagogical principles are then proposed and discussed to complete the workshop. From this exploratory study, it is evident that students learned from one another in the context of sharing of literary experiences and from observing how the literature instructor as a more knowledgeable member of the culture demonstrated the way he experienced the poem he was reading. More specifically, from experiencing poetry and sharing about what they like from what they experience and enjoy, students learn to reflect critically on what they get from reading.

Keywords: experiencing poetry; EFL literature-learning; literature for empowerment

Introduction

In the professional literature many concerns have been voiced related to reading interest of both adolescent and adult readers in literary texts in general and poetry in particular. For example, a survey by U.S. Census Bureau in 2002 involving 17,000 adult readers from various SES and ethnic backgrounds in the United States of America has noted that fewer than half (46%) of those who responded to the 2002 survey reported reading literature of any kind, compared to 59% who reported reading literature in 1982. Further, the researchers found that the rate of decline is accelerating (Wright, Coryell, Martinez, Harmon, Henkin, and Keehn, 2010). In their repeated informal polling across different semesters, Wright *et al.* (2010) found that a great number of their students expressed disinterest in poetry—some of the students have even developed an active dislike of the genre.

In the context of the teaching of literature in foreign-language courses in European countries, Parkinson & Thomas

(2000) observed that many students find difficulties learning literature subjects, especially poetry. Reported reasons include students' feeling helpless (because they lack experience studying literature), feeling less confident in talking and writing about literature because they feel they know nothing about literature.

Similarly, Mahayana (2012) of the University of Indonesia has recently lamented that many teachers of the Indonesian Language in senior high schools would avoid teaching Indonesian literature and focus their teaching activities exclusively on the linguistic aspect of the subject because they do not feel comfortable teaching literature. Many of these teachers consider "poetry as a frightening alien creature" (p.12).

Why does not interest in literature develop as expected? Why is it that what both students and teachers have learned in literature courses does not promote a sense of capability in "handling" literature—especially poetry?

The purpose of this article is to discuss why the commonly used techniques to teach literature have failed to develop learners' love for literature (or poetry in particular), and argue for an alternative way of approaching literature—and how this unique genre of poetry can be packaged to allure learners' engagement-- so that literature can invite learners' participation in the virtual world of experiences this genre can offer. To this end, first, theoretical perspectives will be discussed which relate to what literature teaching means and what it means when we talk about literature as experience. Second, what we did in our *ELT and Literature* class and how we framed our “ways with literature” are presented to highlight

Literature Review

In the professional literature it is commonplace to characterize teaching as a theoretical act, and theories—whether they are explicitly proclaimed or only implicitly held—powerfully impact on what teachers do, how they do it, and how they determine if the teaching-learning activities are successful. Beach, Appleman, Hynds, and Wilhelm (2006) for example have identified three distinctive learning theories: transmission model, learner-centered learning theory, and socio-cultural perspectives. As the term “transmission” suggests, *transmission model* treats literature as information, and teaching literature means “transmitting” the information or knowledge (e.g., about literary facts, literary history, literary elements, etc) to the learners—whose position is always at the receiving end. Commentators of literature and its teaching have voiced some serious reservations over the use of this learning theory for at least two interrelated reasons: one is that this theory—which relies on the assumption of singular interpretation of text-- is no longer defensible because in reality literary texts, especially poetry, invite multiple interpretations (i.e., polyvalent text) (Rosenblatt, 1978). The second reason is empirical: students who are

regularly taught using this transmission model find serious difficulties in interpreting literary texts independently (Wright et. al [2010]).

Unlike transmission model which leaves no room for students' personal significance and feelings, *learner-centered learning theory* argues that students should be able to make their own choices for what they would learn and how they would learn it. If students have choices in what they would learn and the way they learn it, the students would become more motivated to want to learn. While this learning theory has a great intuitive appeal, some critics have voiced some concerns because of two reasons: one is that this theory leaves the responsibility of learning almost exclusively on the students-- so if the students are not successful in their learning it is then their own fault. The second cause of concern is that the theory fails to recognize that learning is inherently social--that is, students learn through participation in social contexts (Beach et al. [2006]).

In addition to the approach to literature teaching, another important thing impactful of literature learning is the relationship between reader and text. According to Rosenblatt as cited in Lehman (2007), *literature as lived-through experience* between reader and literary text involves several considerations about that literary transaction, including aesthetic and efferent reading. This has to do with reading stance.

A reading act is called aesthetic reading when the reader's primary concern is what happens *during* the actual reading event. During aesthetic reading the reader's focus of attention might be on her/his thoughts, feelings, and sensations that s/he experiences in that very moment. In contrast, when one's attention during the reading act is on what can be carried away from the text—e.g., what can be learned from this reading event—then the activity is called efferent reading.

Rosenblatt argues that it is this aesthetic evocation of literary texts that is called *literary experience* (Lehman, 2007). It is this kind of *aesthetic experience* that should

be emphasized when teaching literature (or poetry for that matter) if we want our students to develop love for reading literary texts

Undergirded by Vygotskian (1978) perspective which posits that learning is primarily social, *sociocultural learning theory* emphasizes the importance of creating social community that supports learning literature. Based on this sociocultural perspective, the primary job of literature teachers is to socialize students into what is called a literary community of practice whereby, as a more knowledgeable member of the culture, teachers of literature provide models for students to observe and learn from.

As already suggested in the preceding paragraphs, the students (N=20) participating in this study brought to class less than positive attitudes to literature. This less-than-positive starting point posed to the teacher a great deal of problems to overcome before the literature instruction can be expected to positively impact on students' perspective towards literature. Data for this study were collected informally across several weeks in 2012 in three phases: first using oral, informal survey in the first session to assess students' likes and dislikes about literature; second, using quick jottings during the sharing sessions-- the times when students are experiencing poems and commenting on their experiences; and third, using a simple written survey to enquire about what students have learned from the past few weeks of enjoying poems and sharing of literary experiences in the class.

Method

Using these three theoretical lenses as a basis to examine results of my informal survey on graduate students' previous literacy practices they brought to our English Education Program of the School of Postgraduate Studies (SPs) at UPI Bandung, clear patterns emerged within the first few sessions of the *Literature and English Language Teaching* (ELT) course where an exploratory study was being initiated.

- The majority of my students were “afraid of literature”, especially poetry, because they do not know what to do with it and they feel uncertain about what to say about what they “gain” from the reading.
- Majority of the students tended to restlessly wait for my interpretation of the work we read because they think that instructor's opinion is the correct understanding of the literary text.
- Majority of the students had the tendency to see their own feelings as having no legitimate place in their talk about literature. To them literature discussion meant thinking only, and only thinking (without feeling).

Trying to build on where students have been in their literature-learning experiences in order to establish a point of departure for a better pedagogical orientation, I became very much aware of the challenges lying ahead. I should “demystify” literature for them (Sloan, 2003)—to free them to enjoy literary works. The students should be given ample opportunities to unlearn what has been wrongly learned by engaging with literary experiences in ways that preserve delight and destroy drudgery. This joyful literary experiences should be powerful enough to challenge what the students have wrongly considered as a truth about learning literature.

One possible route to take is using the kind of phenomenon that every member of the class has presumably experienced: love. We used love poems as a starting point. This choice was made following the ideas proposed by Perrine (1987):

Poetry takes all life as its province. It's primary concern is ...with experience. ... [P]oetry as a whole is concerned with all kinds of experience—beautiful or ugly, strange or common, noble or ignoble, actual or imaginary. One of the paradoxes of human existence is that all experience—even the painful experience—is, for the good reader, enjoyable when transmitted through the medium of art (p.9).

So, a first big decision was made: both students and myself as an instructor would each bring in to the class a piece of love poem of our own respective choice to read and share. We use this collection of students-selected poems as learning materials to try to understand “poetry as a way of saying”.

Given the fact that my students came into my *Literature & ELT* course with lengthy exposure to transmission model of learning, the first thing to do was to change the theoretical guide and its instructional practice. That is, I changed the way we learn literature (in this case: poetry): that is, progressing from experience to personal theorizing (rather than from theory to practice as commonly practiced in the transmission model). This was done first by experiencing the poetry and then we share our personal responses. From this sharing of feelings and personal “ways with literature” we as a collective then tried to formulate a theory or theories based on our literary experiences.

This decision was made for two reasons: firstly, adults come to our program with a larger fund of experience and enjoy greater independence of thought and action than adolescents and children (Burns, 2002:219); secondly, poetic and imaginative thinking is critical not only for the appreciation and understanding of art but also of the realities we are confronted with; poetry can help facilitate intellectual as well as emotional growth of our students (Beach & Marshall, 1991).

The reorientation of theory and practice was made at various levels, including learning theories (that is, from transmission model to socio-cultural perspective), reading stances (from efferent to aesthetic reading [Rosenblatt, 1978]), and ways of experiencing and talking about the poems (that is from text-based singular perspective to reader- response-based multiple interpretations)

One very useful concept proposed by socio-cultural perspective is the notion of ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) which refers to the difference between the individual’s

current level and the potential level that can be reached with assistance from a more knowledgeable member of the community of practice (Vygotsky, 1978). As already known from the first few sessions in the semester that the majority of students are not familiar with ways of reading and talking about literature (in this case, poetry), my first job as an instructor of literature is to provide students with an example—direct modeling. This modeling can take many different forms including behavioral (or actional) model, process (or procedural) model and also attitudinal model. To this end, I usually demonstrated how I read a poem, and I did “walk the talk”—demonstrating how I “experience” the poem by thinking aloud along the process of transactions with the literary piece.

To make this pedagogical practice clear to the readers of this journal, in what follows a three-part procedural demonstration has been described to serve as an example: (1) collecting authentic texts by asking students to bring to class poetry of their choice; (2) developing task designs to initiate students into poetry-based literary experiences and discussions; and (3) encouraging students to formulate theoretical propositions as a way to develop insights into “ways with literature”—especially understanding poetry as a way of saying.

Collecting Authentic Texts by Asking Students to Bring to Class Poems of Their Choice

Rather than using standard anthologies which were usually developed using values considerations most likely unfamiliar to students, in this class the “anthologies” were developed collectively by members of the class. That is, students and their instructor each brought to class a love poem—a topic the community of literary experiencers have agreed collectively. In this way, it is expected that everybody finds the poem interesting.

Developing Task Designs to Initiate Students into Poetry-based Literary Experiences and Discussions

In order to provide a consistent structure to govern our literary talks and discussion, a set of guiding questions (i.e., tasks) were developed, including these simple questions:

- What did you feel when you found this poem the first time?
- What did the poem make you feel in the first reading?
- Is there any part of the poem you find most interesting?
- Is there anything changing after you read it several times?
- What image does the poem give you most clearly?
- What is the poem about?

Using relatively constant guiding questions, members of the class as a collective are encouraged to “transact” with poems of their choice in a similar fashion. After about four or five sessions, it was later observed that the students were able to internalize the procedure of experiencing and talking about poems. Everybody was later observed to have been able to talk about the poem they have enjoyed in a relaxed and convincing way.

Encouraging Students to Formulate Theoretical Propositions

In the professional literature, it is very well recognized that adult learners bring to class a great deal of experiences (Burns, 2002). The adult learners’ rich knowledge-base is evidenced when they are talking about poems of their own choice. For example, some students once made a statement of generalization that some poems tell a story. Some other learners say that some other poems invite readers to ponder. Still some other learners observed that some poems they have read make them smile.

With proper encouragement learners can come up with insightful theoretical propositions.

INSERT POEM#1 ABOUT HERE
INSERT POEM#2 ABOUT HERE
INSERT POEM#3 ABOUT HERE
INSERT POEM#4 ABOUT HERE
INSERT POEM#5 ABOUT HERE
INSERT POEM#6 ABOUT HERE

Results and discussion

Following the ideas proposed by Parkinson & Thomas (2000), every student in my *Literature & ELT* class was invited to share poems of their personal choice with the whole class. As a guide for this sharing, I provided the class with a set of three questions: (1) Why did you choose this particular poem?; (2) Is there any particular part of the poem which you find particularly interesting and/or powerful?; and (3) What and how does this poem make you feel?

Everybody in the class got opportunities to read out the poem of their respective choice. Their responses to the guiding questions, however, are widely varied from one person to another. Some students described elaborately their literary experiences with specific reference to reasons for choosing the poem. The following are representative key words drawn from students’ reasons for selecting the poems they ended up choosing.

- The poem is “most representative of own life” (S1)
- The poem is “representing my life” (S2)
- The poem talks about “similar experiences to what I have experienced.” (S3)
- The poem is “representing my own feeling at the moment.” (S4)
- The poem has a powerful theme—“dignity of human being” (S5)
- The poem contains powerful ideas—“ it impacts on my feelings; it is inspirational” (S6)
- The poem is “very simple yet it is very powerful” (S7)
- The pattern is interesting:” the repetition has made the poem so beautiful” (S8)
- The sound is beautiful: “it rhymes” (S9)

- The pattern of discourse is interesting: “do this...otherwise you will...” (S10)

From the sample statements presented above, some clear patterns can be identified in students’ responses. For instance, the first four statements use “self” as a reference; they are “ego-centric” responses. The statements made by students number five (S5) to student number seven (S7) clearly use life to connect with poems. These students—in other words—have made life-to-text connections. The other three comments from the student number seven (S7) to the student number ten (S10) focus on the literary work itself. The students have observed the patterns contained in the poems, including repetition, rhymes, and discursal patterns.

From this exploratory study, it is evident that students learned from one another in the context of sharing of literary experiences and from observing how the literature instructor as a more knowledgeable member of the culture demonstrated the way he experienced the poem he was reading. More specifically, from experiencing poetry and sharing about what they like from what they experience and enjoy, students learn to reflect critically on what they get from reading. This will likely enlarge students’ reading repertoire and promote the love for literary reading—especially poetry.

Building on what I have experienced with (post)graduate students in the English Education Program of SPs-UPI Bandung, the following principles can be used as a guide for productive practice in line with sociocultural perspectives.

- (1) As a more knowledgeable member of the literary community of practice in the literature class, the instructor should serve as an example. S/he provides models in various forms including ways of how to read, enjoy, and respond to poetry.
- (2) Aside from her/his role as a model for students to observe and learn from, the instructor should serve as a guide at least for the first few sessions of literary encounters. This is done to illustrate to

the students the boundaries commonly observed in literary discussion.

- (3) Selection of materials should be negotiated with students. To the extent possible ask students to bring to class literary works they think are interesting and important to share in the class. To provide a structure to this collective “materials development” activity, decide on a certain topic of general interest such as poems on love.
- (4) A relatively structured set of activities in reading, enjoying, and responding to poetry should be established to provide opportunities for students to internalize so that they develop useful habits of mind with poetry. Building on what has proven effective, the following three-part strategy borrowed from Parkinson & Thomas (2000) can be used as a structured activity-set in reading, enjoying, and responding to poetry in the classroom: *paraphrasable meaning, regularities and patterns*, and then *personal reactions*. Ask students to read out the poem they have chosen and comment on what they think the piece is about. Invite the students to comment on patterns they might notice in the poem (e.g., repeated words, rhymes, and patterns of discourse), and encourage them to share their personal responses to the poem.
- (5) Efforts should be made to train students to formulate their own theory as a crystallization of their experiences with poetry and their understanding of poetry as a way of saying. For instance, my students at the SPs-UPI have made statements of generalization such as these: Some poems tell a story; some other poems make you smile; still some other poems invite you to wonder...
- (6) Enthusiasm is contagious—bring in to class your favorite poetry to read out and share with the members of the community of literary interpreters. Take every session as an opportunity to demonstrate how you as an instructor of literature experience

literary works and invite your students to do the same.

- (7) Your greatest role as a teacher of literature is this set of three services: to serve as a model for your students to observe and learn from; to design activities so that your students experience first-hand what you have been modeling; and to provide continual systematic support to ensure that what students have learned becomes part of their personal (and personality) development.

References

- Beach, R., Appleman, D., Hynds, S., and Wilhelm, J. (2006). *Teaching Literature to Adolescents*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Beach, R., & Marshall, J. (1991). *Teaching Literature in the Secondary School*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers.
- Burns, R. (2002). *The Adult Learners at Work*. Crows Nest, NSW2065: Allen & Unwin.
- Lehman, B.A. (2007). *Children's Literature and Learning. Literary Study Across the Curriculum*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Mahayana, M.S. (2012). Model Kritik Puisi Apresiasi. In Soni Farid Maulana (2012: 5-16). *Apresiasi & Proses Kreatif Menulis Puisi*. Bandung: Nuansa
- Parkinson, B., & Thomas, H.R. (2000). *Teaching Literature in a Second Language*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, Ltd.
- Perrine, L. (1987). *Sound and Sense*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers.
- Rosenblatt, L.M. (1978). *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Sloan, G. (2003). *Give Them Poetry!* New York: Teachers College Press.
- Wright, R.R., Coryell, J.E., Martinez, M., Harmon, J., Henkin, R., and Keehn, S. (2010). Rhyme, Response, and Reflection: An Investigation of the Possibilities for Critical Transformative Learning Through Adult Poetry Reading. *Journal of Transformative Education* 8(2).
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bachrudin Musthafa is a professor of English language and early childhood education at School of Postgraduate Studies, Indonesia University of Education.