

Book Review

Poems and Short Stories: Authentic Resources for English Language Learning

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Teaching is always influenced by many factors such as cultural and linguistic frames, culture practices, educational contexts and systems and different norms, values and beliefs. Content development and its proper delivery in education is an inevitable process. Teaching in a context cannot be appropriate for another. Many scholars have argued that the content developed in one context may have an adverse effect when delivered in another context. They still firmly believe that contextual difference between content development and the delivery of knowledge and skills brings imbalance.

Particularly in the case of language teaching, local contexts are even more indispensable component. Despite its importance, use of the local contexts is yet to be exploited across Asia, where English is taught as a second or foreign language. The prescribed contents included in the

textbooks hardly have something to do with social and cultural setting. Sowden argues that the teachers should not just be aware of the cultures of their students and their environment, but also of the cultures that they themselves bring to the classroom. (Sowden, 2007, p.305). It is high time concerned stakeholders especially teachers, textbook writers and curriculum designers realised the fact and considered local settings while carrying out their respective responsibilities.

The recent publication of the book entitled **Poems and Short Stories: Authentic Resources for English Language Learning** by the Asian English Language Teachers' Creative Writing Group is a welcome move. It is a collection of poems and stories written by Asian teachers, as a continuation of the work of the writing group in existence since 2003.

This is a book of writing – poems and stories – which came out of a short workshop held in association of NELTA (Nepal English Language Teachers' Association) in Birgunj in 2013. All the

writers, who are also teachers were mostly from Asian countries including Nepal, China, Pakistan, Thailand and Malaysia. Some of them had been a part of the creative writing group. The writers from the Asian countries and also from the USA and the UK in the workshop held in Nepal took contextual diversity as an opportunity to unleash creativity in the teaching of English as second or foreign language. Following the workshop, the creative pieces – poems and stories – that the participants wrote during the event have been compiled together in a book form along with conceptual bases and suggested activities for generating creative writing by students.

The book, contributed by fourteen teachers and edited by three ELT experts Alan Maley, Jayakaran Mukundan and Handoyo Puji Widodo, consists of nine different chapters starting from creative writing concept generally, further being specific to writing poems and stories preceded by their conceptual bases to suggested activities for generating creative writing by students and concluding with remarks on the use of this publication.

The first chapter 'Introduction' argues that there is no hard and fast line between creative writing and expository or factual writing. However, it draws a few lines of creative writing that exhibits creativity generally. It includes a high degree of self-discipline, a playful engagement with language, close and accurate observation, use of imagination, memories, experiences and visualization, learning how to use figurative language, such as metaphor, and becoming sensitive to patterns of sound in language such as rhyme, rhythm, repetition. The chapter, at the end, suggests some important things to do while using the contents included in the book.

The second chapter 'Poems: Conceptual Base' provides a definition of poetry followed by benefits of writing poetry for the students. It presents some objections to writing poems that teachers or those dealing with poetry must consider.

The third chapter 'Pre- and While-Workshop Poems' illustrates with a representative selection of the poems brought by participants to the workshop based on a well-established picture by the American artist, Edward Hopper, entitled *Nighthawks* (see this website <http://www.edwardhopper.net>) and the poems that the participants produced under the leadership of the creative writing group.

Chapter five, 'notes on organizing a writing field trip', mentions taking students outside the classroom on a writing trip as one of the best ideas of unleashing their creativity in writing. It makes a list of notes and guidelines teachers and students should follow before the trip, during the trip and after the trip.

Chapter six, similar to chapter two, establishes a conceptual base about stories and the different types (or genres), importance of stories for language teaching and benefits of writing stories to the students from a creative lens.

Following the conceptual bases, nine different stories, written by contributors and editors, included in the chapter seven are 'Coincidence: Believe or Not' by Praveen Kumar Yadav, 'That Pink Sari' by Sarita Dewan, 'Why Did Makhhan Steal a Mango?' by Vishnu S. Rai and 'Living a Nightmare' by Motikala Subba Dewan from Nepal, 'A Secret' Ivy Sultana from Bangladesh, 'Can I buy your time' by Kanokon Opasmong Konchai from

Thailand, 'My Cousin Rathi' by Mallika Vasugi Gobindarajoo and 'The Train' by Jayakaran Mukundan from Malaysia, and 'Mr Rushtoo' by Alan Maley, U.K.

Ten different classroom activities suggested and designed to promote creative writing by students are included in Chapter eight. Such activities are conveniently arranged with a uniform format: Preparation, Procedure, and Comments. The readers will be encouraged in their own classes, and to develop some activities of their own as they gain confidence.

The surge of pride and motivation when one sees one's own work on display should never be underestimated. Knowing that their work will be read by others is a powerful stimulus for students to produce the best possible material. Hence, the last chapter argues that at least some of the work related to creative writing should be made public through publication in some form in order to encourage those writers and motivate them to write further. It also offers some of the options for making students' writing or those involved in writing available publicly in any form or publication.

English language teachers and facilitators can mainly use the contents of the book, especially poems and stories, in two different ways: firstly, as raw or authentic materials for use in class – for reading, performance, and discussion; and secondly, as examples and stimuli for creative writing activities in their own classes. In addition, they can also delve their students

into creative writing through a section of suggested activities included in the book.

Strengths of this book are contextual contents, collection of authentic resources, practical tips for creative writing, especially poems and stories, and conceptual base and pragmatic activities on real-life situations. The book accentuates the creation of poems and stories based on lived experience. It also demonstrates practical ways to create poems and short stories based on life encounters.

A few weaknesses I see in the book are with examples or samples of writings – poems and stories – included in the book. I would suggest that the tips and techniques that the writers have followed to write those literary texts could have been mentioned. The editors simply claim the book to be useful for English teachers across Asia, but it does not specify the target audience or learners to use the book. Despite these limitations, I consider that the book published by LINCOM GmbH 2014, is an authentic resource of English language learning for the Asian teachers.

About the Reviewer

The author is communication coordinator of King's College, Kathmandu, where he also teaches English composition and business communication to BBA students. Besides, he is a news and feature writer for Republica national English daily. His professional interests include writing, communication, and research and use of new media tools for English language teaching.