

Aspects of Teaching Poetry at the Secondary Level

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the aspects focused on while teaching poems from the Compulsory English textbook in the current Secondary level. The objectives of the study were to determine how the basic components of language are presented to students in their poetry learning class. It also aims to gather information on whether the poetic qualities are addressed or not. The aspects of pronunciation, vocabulary, and meaning of the poem were tested in the form of multiple-choice and 'yes' or 'no' items. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to interpret the collected data. The data was collected by supplying a set of questionnaires to one hundred students studying in grade nine from a number of schools in Kathmandu Valley. These participants were from public and private schools. Based on the degree of occurrence of the selected items, the results were illustrated and broadly analyzed. The data shows that about one-fifth of the students have focused on pronunciation. Similarly, a larger number of students have shown their emphasis on the aspect of meaning of the poem, whereas the remaining majority of the students have shown their interest in the vocabulary aspect of the poem.

Keywords: aspect, meaning, poetry, pronunciation, secondary level, and vocabulary

Introduction

As an important genre of literature, poetry reflects the spheres of society, which consist of aspects like politics, education, religion, culture, economics, geography, sociology, anthropology, and others. Poetry has its essence to create a sense of meditation, presenting a combination of various prosodic features: rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, assonance, and metaphorical language of imagery and allusion. Teaching poetry involves the process of guiding the learners with various linguistic features and literary elements. This paper primarily concerns imparting linguistic features of the English language to Nepali students studying at the Secondary level through the teaching of poetry as designed by the curriculum.

Coleridge (1997) defines poetry as “the species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by promising for its immediate object pleasure, not truth, and from all other species it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole and a distinct gratification from each part.” In his words, poetry indicates the emotive parts of

human life, having the objective of pleasure. Similarly, for Shelley (1997), “Poetry is something divine...poetry is not like reasoning power to be extended according to the determination of the will. Poetry arises from within like a color of a flower...poetry is record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds.” He also described poetry as something that is detached from logical and rational power. It is the product of human will as the decoration of a flower. Thus, poetry means the work of art which is presented in verse form by using some poetic qualities like rhyme, rhythm to express the qualities of human feeling, emotion, and imagination along with aesthetic or emotional pleasure.

As this paper aims to discuss various aspects of teaching poems in English language to secondary level students under the curriculum designed and developed by the Curriculum Development Center, the researcher attempts to explore those qualities of the poems that the students need to develop. Those qualities involve the language content and meaning of poetry, along with its poetic features, to expose the social aspects. In another sense, teaching poetry includes dealing with varieties of societal aspects, poetic qualities, linguistic qualities, along with the content.

In our context, English language teaching gained its popularity when it first began in Nepal about one and a half centuries ago. Nepal’s educational policy incorporated English language literature in its curriculum. Our education system adopted English language and literature as a compulsory subject in school from primary to secondary level, and up to higher education in the university level.

Teaching poetry is an important aspect of teaching English language and literature since it enlivens the language learning activities of our students. This article especially focuses on the aspects of teaching poetry in the course of compulsory English at the Secondary level. The objectives of the study were to find out the aspects focused on while teaching poetry and to obtain information on whether the poetic qualities are addressed or not. This study, basically, is dedicated to finding out the answers to the following research questions: which aspects of language should be focused on while teaching poetry, and which aspects do the students intend to focus on while learning poems?

Methodology

This study uses a survey as a tool to carry out the research work. It uses both the qualitative and quantitative research methods to calculate, interpret, and analyse the collected numerical data. For this, the interviewees, comprising 100 grade nine students, were taken as the sample of the study from the schools randomly selected from Kathmandu district. Among those four randomly selected schools, two are from inside the ring road, whereas the other two are from outside the ring road. Twenty-five students were selected from each of them.

To obtain the data, the schools of the sample were visited to seek consent from the school administration, and the required numbers of students were selected randomly. The collected data were interpreted and analyzed exploiting quantitative and statistical tools.

Similarly, qualitative methods were applied to explain and analyze the numerical information gathered from the quantitative methods.

Theoretical Framework

Teaching of Poetry plays an effective role in the learning process of the English language, especially to non-native speakers, as it helps to provide enough and authentic exposure to the learners. The teaching and learning activities of language require the development of four basic skills of language: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The teaching of poems aims to develop pronunciation and understanding of ideas through listening, reciting, and presenting the ideas graphically.

Regarding the language of poetry, different scholars define Poetry in different ways. In the words of Widdowson (1984), "Poetry has been characterized as deviating from the norms of language." The language of poetry is different from the language of any other texts. Similarly, as Raj (1990) defines Poetry "as a comprehensive term which can be taken to cover any kind of metrical composition." In common sense, the term 'poetry' refers to a work in verse which may be written in rhyme, or may be blank verse or a combination of the two. It is characterized by the qualities of imagination, emotion, significant meaning, and appropriate language. It aims to give aesthetic or emotional pleasure. Among the four major genres of literature, the poems/ poetry qualifies as a creative writing in verse expressing deep feelings in beautiful language to communicate emotion. It is pleasant to listen to, enjoyable to recite, and curious to compose. On the basis of its structure, there are different forms of poetry which are epic, lyric, ballad, ode, elegy, sonnet, and pastoral. Generally, written in verse, a real pleasure is derived from the fundamental response to rhythmic repetitions of various kinds: alliteration, assonance, rhymes, simile, metaphor, and other devices. It is not just a kind of music but a special combination of musical and linguistic qualities of sounds regarded both as pure sound and as meaningful speech.

Poetry recognizes syntax, invents its own vocabulary items, freely mixes registers and creates its own punctuation. It has been argued that poetry frequently breaks the rules of language, but it communicates more in a fresh and original way. The poet uses a special type of diction by selecting appropriate words to write a poem. The rhyming is an important aspect of poetry, which makes the poem standard and symmetrical. The rhythm, meter, tone, and music make the poem more systematic and sweeter.

Poetry plays a vital role in language teaching, though it is characterized as deviating from the norms of language. Teaching of poetry in the classroom provides students with a second language system to communicate in an original way. It encourages students to make use of the target language more creatively by making them aware of the fact that a rigid body of rules does not always govern language. Poetry expands the horizon of the language awareness and interpretative ability of the students. It provides an enjoyable way of reinforcing or revising the area of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

In the Secondary level, the specific objectives of teaching poems include: to determine the aspects focused on while teaching poetry; to get the information whether the

poetic qualities are addressed or not while teaching poetry; to point out some pedagogical implications of poetry; to enable the students to appreciate the simple poems of their level; and to make an English class fun. Its aesthetic quality makes language learning more effective as it helps to prevent the class from being monotonous. Poetic language is like dancing and a different form of walking, as dancing is another form of walking, and the audiences love to see it. The learners love to learn the decorated form of language in the poems. It not only helps the students to decode the literary terms but also encourages them to express their emotions, desires, and feelings. The students feel relaxed and more comfortable expressing their opinions through the poems. Moreover, they feel encouraged and enthusiastic to learn further knowledge and skills while reading the poems as they consist of figurative (like assonance, alliteration, metaphor, simile, and imagery) as well as literal language. They have to face challenges to decipher the meaning of figurative language. This makes them work hard to build their interpretative abilities. Thus, poetry is not redundant, but an inevitable source of language learning.

A number of researchers have carried out their research work on the teaching of poetry at the Secondary Level. Among them, Khadka (2003) studied the attitudes of different persons towards the inclusion of poems in the textbook of Secondary Level. According to his research, sixty percent of students like poetry in their course book. Nearly, 90% of them were found to be positive for the inclusion of poems in the textbook. Acharya (2007), researched to find out the comprehension ability of the students in reading poetry. He found that the reading comprehension of the students in Kathmandu and Kavre Palanchowk was satisfactory. Bhusal (2010) conducted his research to find out the desired techniques of the teachers while teaching poetry at the secondary level. He found that nearly 60% of the teachers found to teach vocabulary items before teaching the poems, whereas 40% of them were found to teach vocabulary after teaching the poems. Similarly, Gyawali (2004) explored the strategies and problems of teaching poetry in the secondary level. The data showed that the majority of the teachers had no idea about how to teach poems in the classroom. The problem of translating in Nepali was another problem of teaching poetry in the classroom. Despite these problems, he also found that teaching poetry at school helps in language teaching by bridging the gaps of the curriculum and motivating the students, and gives pleasure to the students. He concluded that the majority of the teachers were not acquainted with the learning strategies, which created a lot of problems in teaching poetry.

Results and Discussion

The researcher deals with the test items, multiple-choice items, supplied to the students of the sample area, and the results obtained from their responses. Two different test items were supplied to the students and their teachers to achieve the desired objectives. The analysis and interpretation of the data includes a detailed investigation of every item of the test.

Meaning Oriented Items

The test items included a wide range of aspects of the poem, focusing on the students' interests and desires in a way that allowed them to answer the questions quickly. Questions 5, 6, 9, 13, and 14 were used to measure their focus on the semantic aspect, and their answers were properly analyzed. All were multiple-choice items except question no. 9, which expected the answer either 'yes' or 'no' regarding the understanding of the poems. The result showed that only 35% of the students answered the semantic related questions correctly.

Vocabulary Oriented Items

To measure the learners' focus on vocabulary, questions 5, 6, 9, 14, and 15 were used. All the items were multiple-choice items except question 9. Those who chose 'c' in question 5, 6, 14, 15, and 'a' in question 9 were considered to be focusing on the vocabulary while reading poetry. This aspect was measured by asking the students about their interest, whether it is vocabulary or others. At the same time, items 5, 9, and 14 were asked to measure their expectation of the kind of support from their teacher, letting us know their focus on the vocabulary. In this aspect, only 45% of the total number of students gave their answers correctly. This reflects their focus on vocabulary.

Pronunciation Related Items

Items 1, 2, 3, 4, 7 and 8 were asked to measure their interest in the recitation of poetry. They were equally intended to bring the students to come to the point and not to divert from the concern of poetry. Questions 5, 6, 9, and 13 were asked to measure their focus on pronunciation. Among them, questions 5, 6, and 13 were for choosing any one item out of three items, whereas questions 9 and 10 were for selecting either 'yes' or 'no'. In items 5 and 13, the answer (a) was for pronunciation, whereas for question 6, answer 'b' was for pronunciation. Similarly, choosing the answer 'yes' focuses on pronunciation in items 9 and 10. In the pronunciation aspect, only 20% of the total number of students responded correctly.

Broad-Based Analysis of the Items

Test items and the students' responses have been discussed below in detail to make the study more precise.

About Enjoying Reading a Poem

Question Number 1 asked whether the students enjoyed reading the poem or not. For this, the students had to choose either 'yes' or 'no'. The questionnaire used this item with the assumption that enthusiastic learners learn more effectively than those who stay passive in the process of learning. To this question, 87% of the total students responded that they enjoy reading the poems, whereas only 13% were found not to enjoy reading the poems. This shows that a large number of students have a keen interest in reading poetry.

Selection of the Poems out of the Text Books

To find out the range of students' preferences in selecting the poems from their textbook, question number 2 was asked. For this, the students were given only two options:

‘yes’ or ‘no’. In response to this question, 62 % of them were found to be reading poems only from their textbook, whereas the rest of them (38%) were found to be searching for the poems from outside the textbook. It shows that most of the students enjoy reading the poem only from the textbook or the course book.

Frequency of Reading the Poems

Question number 3 was asked to know how often the students read the poems in their books. The researcher chose this item to measure the level of their interest in reading the poems. For this, the students had to choose either ‘daily’ or ‘sometimes’, or ‘never’. In response to this question, 55% of the examinees chose 'daily', 45% of them chose 'sometimes', and nobody chose the option 'never'. This suggests that no students are there without having an interest in reading the poems.

About the Objective of the Poems in the Secondary Level

Question 4 was asked to find out the students’ opinions about the use of poems in the secondary level. The researcher used this item to elicit the purpose of reading the poems in the textbooks. In response to this question, only 15% of the students were found to take poetry, which makes the course interesting. Similarly, 45% of them opined poetry as the authentic source of the English language, whereas the rest of them viewed that poetry makes it easier to comprehend literature.

Need for Support from the Teacher

Question number 5 was asked to find what kind of support they wanted from their teacher while doing a poem in their class. For this, they were given three options: a model reading, background information, and reading between the lines to find the meaning. Among these options 35% of the total students chose “a model reading”, 20% of them chose “background information”, and the rest of them, i.e. 45% students, made their choice to “reading between the lines to decipher the meaning”. This led the researcher to elicit that a large number of students seek support from their teacher while reading a poem.

Difficult Aspect of the Poem

The researcher used item number 6 to elicit the difficulty level for the learners in understanding the aspects of the poem, with the view that the teacher gets benefit while dealing with the poetry class. For this, three important aspects were given to them to choose: meaning, pronunciation, and vocabulary. In response to this question, only 20% of them chose “pronunciation aspect”, 35% of them selected the “meaning” aspect, and the other 45% chose “the vocabulary aspect” of the poem. The larger number of students places emphasis on the vocabulary aspect of the poem. This suggests that the vocabulary aspect remains more challenging for the learners while reading the poems.

Poems out of the Textbooks in the Examination

Item number 7 was asked to find out whether they wanted the poems to be included in their examinations out of the textbooks or inside them. For this, they had to choose either

‘yes’ or ‘no’. The researcher supplied this question, intending to find out their inclination to the poems in the textbooks. In response to this question, only 25% of them were found in favour of asking the poem out of the texts, whereas 75% of them were found to have chosen ‘No’. It shows that a large number of students want poems to be asked only from the textbooks in their examinations.

Type of Question to be Asked in the Examination

To assess their preference for the type of questions asked in the exam, question number 8 was provided with two options: “objective” and “subjective.” It was important to inquire about the students’ competence and performance levels. In response to this question, 65% of the students favored objective-type questions, while the rest preferred subjective-type questions. Therefore, the majority preferred objective-type questions.

Use of Pictures in Understanding the Poem

The researcher used question number 9 to find out if the picture description supports their understanding of the poem. This item expected the students to choose two options: either ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. It was necessary to know about their preference for teaching materials while gaining an understanding of the poem. In response to this question, the students were found to be in support of the picture by 87% whereas only 13% of them were against the use of the picture while learning poems. Thus, it shows that a large number of students preferred the use of pictures in learning poetry.

Testing of Listening and Speaking Skills through a Poem

Question number 10 was asked to assess their preference for using a poem to test their listening and speaking skills. This item expected the answer to whether the students had an interest in improving their pronunciation skills through the use of poetry. It gave the students two options to choose: ‘yes’ and ‘no’. In response to this question, about 67% of the students chose ‘yes’ whereas the other 33% of them favored ‘no’. This lets us understand that about two-thirds of the learners preferred poems to use in their examination to test their listening and speaking skills.

Adding weightage to the Questions from Poems

Question number 11 demanded the students express their desire whether to increase the marks for the questions asked about the poems in the examinations or not. It provided two options: ‘yes’ or ‘no’. It helped to find out their inclination towards the learning of poetry. In response to this question, 65% of the students responded ‘yes’, whereas 35% of the total number of students chose ‘No’. This indicates that a higher number of students prefer to add the marks to the questions related to the poems they have done in their classrooms.

Wish to Exclude Poems from the Textbook

Question number 12 was given to find out whether they wanted to exclude the poems from the textbook. The researcher used it to indicate how difficult they thought the poem was. It could also equally tell us if they were not interested in doing the poems. The question provided two options, ‘yes’ and ‘no’, to choose any one. In response to this

question, by selecting "yes", only 22% of them were found in favor of the exclusion of the poems from the textbook, whereas by choosing "no", 78% of them were found in favor of not excluding the poems from the textbook. It shows that a great number of them had an interest in reading the poems.

Use of the Poems

The researcher used Question number 13 to find out what they use the poem for. It could inform us about the utility of the poem they thought for them. For this, the students had to choose one of the three options: chanting, generating abstract ideas, or creating similar poems. In its response, we found that only 20% of the total students chose to chant; the other 60% wished to read it for understanding, whereas the rest 20% chose to create similar poems by reading from their textbooks.

Style of Teaching

Question 14 asked students to choose one of the three options: a detailed explanation, a summary, or the meaning of the difficult terms, only to elicit their preference for the style of teaching they hoped for from their teacher. It could help us to inquire about their choices of how their teachers should teach poetry to them. To this question, 30% of the total number of students responded that they prefer the detailed explanation of the poem. Similarly, another 30% of the students expressed their wish for the summary of the poem, while the other 40% students claimed that they preferred the meaning of the difficult words. Thus, it shows that a larger number of students felt difficulties with vocabulary and expected help for that from their teachers.

Wish for the type of Poem

The researcher asked the students the last question, aiming to explore what type of poem they preferred. For this, the options included three types: rhyming, blank verse, and a combination of the two to choose any one. They responded that 64% of them liked the poems having a rhyming pattern. Similarly, 28% of them preferred blank verse as their favorite form of poetry. The rest, only 8% chose the combination of the two. Thus, a large number of students liked the poems with a rhyming pattern.

Conclusion

The researcher administered a set of questionnaires as a tool for measuring the students' focus on the various aspects while learning poetry. The aspects of pronunciation, vocabulary, and meaning of the poem were tested using multiple-choice items and 'yes' or 'no' items, with the aim that the outcome would become more concrete and accurate as far as possible.

After analyzing the data, the researcher has found that the students at the secondary level enjoy reading poems. About 87% of the total students enjoy reading poems, while 13% of the learners never enjoy reading a poem. A few students, i.e., only 38% prefer to read poems even outside the textbook, whereas the other 62% of them want to read only from

inside the course books. Students at the secondary level are highly inquisitive about the poems, as 55% of them like to read the poems daily. Similarly, 45% read the poems sometimes, while nobody is found to have ever read the poem. Only 15% students regard poems as making the course more interesting. At the same time, 45% of them take poetry to provide an authentic source, while the other 40% take poems as the texts that enable the students to comprehend the literature. Regarding the need for the teachers' support while learning the poems, 35% of the students expect the model reading from the instructor. Similarly, 20% expect only the background information of the poem. Many students (45%) seek the support of going through the lines to decipher the meaning of the difficult vocabulary. In the same way, 35% of the students find it difficult to interpret the meaning, whereas reading in good rhyming is difficult for 20% of the students. Similarly, for 45% of the students, reading poetry is difficult due to the difficult vocabulary. The study shows that only 25% of the students of this level prefer the poems out of the textbooks to be asked in their examinations, while others prefer to use poems from their course for their exams. With regard to the type of questions, 65% students required objective-type questions while the other 35% required subjective-type questions from the poems to be asked in the exams.

A larger number of students at this level enjoy reading the poems presented with images and pictures. The data show that about 85% of the students are in favor of a picture description of the poem. In testing of listening and speaking skills through the poems, 67% of the students preferred poems to use in testing those skills, while the other 33% did not like poetry to be used to test their aforementioned skills. In the same way, 65% of the students are found to be in favor of adding marks to the questions asked from the poems in their examinations. Most interestingly, it has been found that some 22% of the students wished to exclude the poems from their textbook, while the rest 78% do not. It has been found that about 20% of the students want to use the poem for chanting, whereas about 60% students' interest is to take the poem to get some abstract ideas or knowledge, and the other 20% like to create similar poems. Regarding the style of teaching, the majority of the students, i.e., only 40% of them, want the meaning of the difficult terms only. The other 30% students prefer a detailed explanation of the poem from their instructors. And, for the next 30% summary is okay. A large number of students, i.e., 64% prefer the poems written in a rhyming pattern, while 28% prefer those written in blank verse, and only 8% show their preference in the combination of the two.

After analyzing the findings of the research, the researcher makes the following recommendations and suggestions for the effective implementation in teaching and learning of poems in the Secondary Level English language course.

1. The students of this level have been found to give more emphasis on the vocabulary items. Then the priority goes to meaning, and then to pronunciation. So, the teachers are expected to do so accordingly keeping their focus upon those aspects.
2. The students should be given ample opportunity to read the poems from the primary level to aware their interest upon the reading of poetry.

3. Teaching of poetry is a more authentic source for the students to get ample exposure to the language. So, teaching and learning activities regarding poetry should be increased at this secondary level.
4. Along with the increase in the inclusion of the varieties of texts of poetry, the questions, as well as their marks, should be increased in the examinations at this level. At least 25% marks should be covered by poetry in the examinations at this level.
5. A small number of the students, about 22% of them, want to exclude the poems from the textbooks. However, poetry is the authentic source of exposure for the learners. So, to make the textbook interesting and rich with authentic materials for the learners at this level, the poems should be included in the textbook according to the interests and demands of the learners in this age group.
6. To make the teaching more interesting and purposeful, the teachers and instructors should be provided with time-to-time training on teaching poetry from the concerned authority. This will energize them to make their teaching of poetry more effective.
7. Teachers should use pictures more, as the appropriate use of pictures helps to make teaching and learning activities more effective. The students feel pleased to learn with the use of pictures. Through the use of pictures, ideas can be more effectively and easily taught
8. Students should be made aware of the meaning of the difficult words first while teaching the poems. Then only, the teacher can tell the summary or the background information of the poems.
9. Students of this level take the poems to get abstract ideas, so the teacher should focus on their teaching and learning activities to make the meaning clear, either by telling the meaning of the vocabulary or the meaning as a whole.
10. Though some of the students want to exclude the poems from the course because of their difficulty in understanding the ideas more clearly, it is necessary to use the poems in the course more interestingly to meet their desires and demands, knowing their value in learning the language. The teacher should select appropriate teaching styles with supportive teaching materials to get effective results.
11. While selecting the poems for the course book, it is necessary to survey the types of poems the learners like. Only the tested and approved poems should be included in the textbooks.
12. The learners should be made familiar with various aspects of the poems, like foot, meter, rhyme, rhythm, and so on. Similarly, they will also need to be more familiar with the physical aspects of the poem. This helps them to interpret and analyze the poems easily.
13. Some unseen poems can also be asked to test different language skills according to their level. The questions should be both objective and subjective as well.

Teaching poetry proves itself to be a significant medium for the effective teaching of the English language and literature, especially for non-native speakers. This study has explored the techniques for minutely handling the aspects related to language use. Even though these factors play an important role in language learning, much attention has not been paid yet by

language instructors. In such a scenario, this study, obviously, remains a seminal document in the field of language instruction through poetry.

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Appendix I

Test Items

Name of School:

Grade:

Student's name:

sex:

Roll No:

Date:

Please put a tick () mark in the box for the best one.

Q.N.1. Do you enjoy reading a poem?

- a) Yes b) No

Q.N.2. Have you ever chosen the poems out of your book for reading?

- a) Yes b) No

Q.N.3. How often do you read the poems of your books?

- a) Daily b) sometimes c) never

Q. N. 4. What do you think is the objective of using the poems in the secondary level course of the English language ?

- a) To make the course more interesting
- b) To provide the students with more authentic sources of English language
- c) To enable the students to comprehend literature

Q.N.5.What kind of support do you want from your teacher while teaching a poem in your class?

- a) A model reading
- b) Background information
- c) Reading between the lines and deciphering the meaning

Q.N.6 Which aspect of reading a poem do you think is difficult for you?

- a. Interpret the meaning
- b. Reading with a good rhyming pattern
- c. Odd vocabulary

Q.N.7.Do you expect the poems to be asked in the examination outside the textbook?

- a. Yes
- b. No

Q.N. 8. What kinds of questions do you want to be asked in your examination?

- a. Objective question
- b. Subjective question

Q.N.9.Do you think the use of picture description supports your understanding of the poem?

- a. Yes
- b. No

Q.N.10. Do you also expect to test your listening and speaking skills through the poems ?

- a. Yes
- b. No

Q.N.11.Do you think the marks should be added to the questions from the poem in the examination?

- a. Yes
- b. No

Q.N.12 Do you wish that the poems should be excluded from the textbook?

- a. Yes
- b. No

Q.N.13. What do you use the poems for?

- a. To chant
- b. To get the abstract ideas
- c. To create a similar poem

Q.N.14. What kind of teaching do you hope for from your teacher?

- a. Detailed explanation of the poem
- b. The summary of the poem
- c. The meaning of the difficult terms only

Q.N.15 What types of poems do you like?

- a. Written in rhyme
- b. Written in blank verse
- c. A combination of the two