USING POETRY TO ENHANCE LEARNERS' COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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Abstract

This study investigated the impact of poetry in a language classroom. It aimed to 1) develop creative classroom activities through poetry writing, and 2) find out if poetry writing can enhance learners' communication skills. The population in this study consisted of 20 personnel support staff of Southeast Bangkok College. There were 14 females and 6 males. Their ages ranged between 23 to 38. The project started on April 20, and ended on April 30, 2015 with 40 hours intensive English. It was learner-centered with task- based activities. The participants in this study were selected by the director of each division across campus. Research tools were selected classical and modern poems as models for the participants to study and write their own poems. The qualitative research method was employed to analyze the data, consisting of the participants' communication skills reflected in their poems, and their responses to the questionnaire. The findings revealed that all the participants enjoyed learning English through poetry reading and writing. They understood the power of figurative language, and were able to communicate their ideas or feelings effectively. In conclusion, poetry writing is one of the most practical ways to inspire creativity in a language classroom and develop learners' communication skills.

Keywords: impact of poetry, learners' communication skills, task-based approach, learner-centered

Introduction

Rationale and Significance of the Study

Teaching English to Thai students still pose a lot of problems to Thai teachers and it is considered challenging for professional teachers to seek new approaches to develop students' English competence. Vygotsky (1994:36) remarkably stated that:

a straightforward learning of concepts always proves

impossible and educationally fruitless. Unless, any

teacher setting out on this road achieves nothing

except a meaningless acquisition of words, mere

verbalization in children, which in nothing more

than simulation and imitation of corresponding

concepts which, in reality, are conceal in a vacuum.

The citation above clearly reveals the limitation of traditional teaching and learning that focuses on the cognitive domain of education with text-based, and examinations. Little attention is put on how students learn and what motivates them to learn and become engaged in their learning to make it meaningful. With reference to The Newbolt report (Atkinson & Protherough (1994:7) on teaching English in England seeking to change the way English was taught at schools and bring together:

Under the title of English, 'taught as a fine art', four separate

concepts: the universal need for literacy as the core of the

curriculum, the developmental importance of children's

self-expression, a belief in the power of English literature for

moral and social improvement, and a concern for the full

development of mind and character.

The Newbolt report cited above is appealing to me and it should be the main reason in Thailand to require all students to learn English to develop their self-expression and moral concern of the society through literature. In other words, learning English should be part of education for youths to develop self-esteem, and intellectual growth through literary study. That is why the researcher for this study was interested in using poems to develop learners' communication skills in English. In addition, poetry was employed as a means for learners to develop self-expression and feeling in imaginative and creative ways.

Advantages of Integration of Literary Resources as Teaching Materials

There are many advantages in using literature as motivating materials for language teaching since literature can expose students to complex themes and fresh unexpected use of language. A good novel, play or poem can take student to foreign countries or fantastic world and bring up powerful emotional responses, which can be transported to their real lives. In addition, literature can provide students with access to the culture of the people whose language they are studying. Obviously, at lower levels, students may be unable to cope on their own with an authentic materials, so they depend on their instructor to encourage them to use the language naturally in the real world. Another reason to use literature in the language classroom is that it can expand students' language awareness. Using literature with students can help them to become more sensitive to some of the overall features of English. Consequently, it will enhance their interpretative abilities.

Literary texts are often rich in multiple levels of meaning, and demand that the reader/learner is actively involved in the understated implications and assumptions of the text. Thus by encouraging students to understand the materials with multiples ambiguities of the literary texts, we are helping to develop their overall capability to infer the meaning, which can be applied in real life.

Language Acquisition through Poetry

Aguilar (2016) states that poetry promotes literacy, builds community, and foster emotional resilience. It can cross boundaries that little else can. She concludes that poetry can allow kids to paint sketches of their lives, using metaphor, imagery and symbolic language to describe painful experiences, or parts of themselves that they are not ready to share. Poetry allows kids to put language to use – to make it serve a deep internal purpose, to break rules along the way (grammar, punctuation, capitalization). Poetry, when read aloud, is rhythm and music and sounds consequently, babies and preschoolers, become curious about what the sounds mean and perhaps want to create their own. Contrary to popular belief amongst children, boys get really into poetry when brought in through rhythm and rhyme. It is the most kinesthetic of all literature, its physical and full- bodied which activates your heart and soul and sometimes by pass the traps of our minds and the outcome is that poetry moves us. Another important value is that poetry opens venues for speaking and listening, much

neglected domains of a robust English Language Arts curriculum. Poetry also has space for English language learners, and they can find ways of expressing their voices while being limited in their vocabulary. Furthermore, poetry is universal. Learners can learn about or read poetry in their primary language, helping them bridge the gap between languages.

Definition of Term

1. Participants in this study referred 20 support staff of Southeast Bangkok College

2. Selected poems in this study were based on modern and classical English and American poems.

Objectives of the Study

1. To develop creative classroom activities through poetry writing

2, To find out if poetry writing can enhance learners' communication skills.

Research Questions

1. What are impacting factors derived from using poetry in a language classroom?

2. Is poetry writing an effective way to develop learners' communication skills?

Review of Related Literature

Literature and Language Learning

Manja Krsteva (2014:3605-8) confirms that literature plays essential role in foreign language acquisition. Each level of foreign language study requires inclusion of literary texts. Together with factual facts, it develops a deeper awareness of the language use. They also explain that in early school years children get familiar with associations from role-plays, drama, poetry and short stories that help them acquire idioms, colloquialisms, and syntax adding to their general cognitive development. This method acquires enormous proportion of linguistic and literary information through higher

education. At university, schools other than School of Philosophy, learning English focuses not so much on the literary work from artistic point of view as to the text conveying ideas that students familiarize with and build vocabulary. In upper levels of foreign language acquisition students increase their competence and confidence to speak and present ideas in the foreign language. At advanced levels foreign learners put their imagination and research at work and many of them accomplish verbal advantage close to native speakers.

Tomlinson (2003b) states that learning best occurs when things are seen as part of recognized patterns, when learners' imaginations are activated, or when the information appeals to our senses. The use of literature in an EFL classroom can stimulate multidimensional mental activity during language learning. He explains this only works if the learners are helped and encouraged to experience the literature rather than studying it for a particular purpose. One way of achieving literary experience is to use poems which are linguistically simple but cognitively and emotionally complex. This makes learners become engaged with the text personally.

Khatib & Daftarifard (2013: 191-200) state that poetry when read aloud can motivate learners. Their research findings revealed that the brevity and comprehensiveness of poems give English learners enriched data and provided them with opportunity to express and process the multivocality of language. In other words, learning language through literature is an exciting approach to language arts learning. Best of all, it has been proven highly effective. This can make them more motivated as far as different language skills are concerned. They also found that literature has been an effective way to enhance learners' cognitive growth as well as their psychological development in EFL situations. As reading motivation proves to be essential for learners' academic achievement, it is important what factor might affect or ameliorate learners' reading motivation.

Poetry and English Language Learners (ELL):

Robertson (2013) states that writing poetry is a great exercise for English language learners. It gives them a chance to experiment with language and vocabulary, and to freely share their ideas without the confinement of perfect grammar or firm structures. Many ELLs have also had rich life experiences that range from memories of their home culture to saying good-bye to loved ones and adjusting to a new life in the U.S. They may very well welcome this opportunity to create heartfelt poems to share

with their classmates and family. Most importantly, poetry can spark imagination. It may help get those creative juices flowing by doing some activities such as that involve students imagining that they are something else such as a "drop of rain, the color blue, a school bus, or a stalk of wheat." There are many other activities the teacher can do to make students enjoy learning through poetry writing.

Reilly (2014) describes the role of poetry in teaching a second language as follows:

> Poetry helps students learn in many ways.
>
> It helps them notice sounds – phonetics and
>
> phonology – of a foreign language; it is
>
> important because to learn something students
>
> have to notice this particular "something".

Other studies support the assumption that poetry reading tasks enhance students' awareness in phonetic/linguistic items. Thus according to Akyel (1995), poetry reading tasks encourage students to employ their knowledge of all linguistic forms, including the knowledge of phonetics and phonology, to make meaning of poetic texts. Also Hanauer (2001) states that poetry reading is primarily a construction process of close reading- of noticing and interpreting the poetic meaning based on all noticed linguistic elements.

Melin (2010) considers teaching poetry as reading- response aesthetic task hear sounds play the leading role in conveying the atmosphere of poetic meaning, so without noticing the sounds the full meaning of poetic texts cannot be derived.

Woore (2007) conducted a study using poetry as one of the possible ways for foreign/second language learners to improve their ability to utilize the foreign language sound relationships. His study consisted of the "referring back" strategy sequence when pupils had to 1) identify the target word with an unknown grapheme; 2) use poems as a source of analogy; 3) search the poems for the target grapheme; 4) recall the pronunciation of the familiar word containing the same grapheme; 5) apply the pronunciation to the new grapheme.. To conclude, poetry reading in the second language classroom is especially important because in the language classroom

authentic speaking activities focus on meaning while quite often ignoring the form.

Lazar (1996) notes that reading poetry can increase learners' awareness of different language registers, and it will be easier for them to express themselves and to understand the meaning of native speakers' discourses. Moreover, poetry has the particular value of the unique in terms of representing avoided in textbooks multileveled human experience touching the themes of death, treachery, and passion.

Tin (2011) explains that poetry writing with high formal constraints (acrostics, cinquains, haikus) is an advantageous activity in comparison with writing free-style poems of looser formal constraint(similes) because the highly form-oriented task forces students to stretch and transform their L2 linguistic and conceptual world at a higher level of knowledge and to search for new vocabulary, new more elaborate syntax, and new more complex conceptual world; while a free-style poetry writing task lets students use familiar vocabulary and simple syntax.

Methodology

This study was based on a case study of 20 participants who are supportive staff of Southeast Bangkok College. They were selected by their directors to participate in an English intensive workshop starting from April20 to 30, 2016. They studied intensively for 40 hours practicing their English. Since all the participants had poor background in English, they were encouraged to write a diary at home so that they had a chance to use English own their own after class. In class they were motivated to improve their English through poetry study with a combination of the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Then were engaged in writing their poems freely to express their feelings or imagination or other personal experiences. The selected poems studied in class consisted of Emily Dickinson's 'There Was No Frigate Like a Book', Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' A.E. Housman's 'Loveliest of Trees the Cherry Now', and Frost's' Stopping by Woods' including some Japanese Haikus

The Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 14 females and 6 males aged between23 to 38. There were two participants who earned a Master

degree, and the rest of the participants had Bachelor degrees in different fields.

Procedures for the Participants' Language Learning Activities

On the first day of the workshop, all the participants were given a course syllabus about what they would be doing during the workshop, and then they were invited to introduce themselves in English. The researcher explained to them that the focus of the workshop was to develop their communication skills. To acquaint them with poetry writing, the researcher introduced them to some lyrics from modern popular songs, and then explained to them the direct and implied meanings of the selected songs. Then the researcher explained to them that originally songs derived from classical lyrics that were communicated orally and in writing. Lyrics are classified in the same category of literary genre called poetry. The participants were later given examples of simple poems to read aloud. They were divided into small groups to read and discuss the selected poems mentioned earlier. They gradually learned about both the direct and implied meanings of the poems through their discussion of connotations and denotations of the words used. They had a role play practicing reading the given poems aloud individually using their body language and tone of voice to create deep feelings and emotion to convey the meanings of the poems. The researcher also explained to them the power of figurative language embodied in the poem, and later asked all the participants to write their own *Haikus*. After practicing their English: using the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing a summary of the meaning of each selected poem, the participants became more relaxed and confident in using English to communicate their ideas by writing their own short poems imitating the selected poems as models for their writing or using free verses as they liked. They began by writing *Haikus* to express their feelings or any deep experience they had and read their poems aloud for their peers to give feedbacks. The researcher was acting like a motivator or a coach to help them improve their English, but not underpinning their weaknesses. In this way, they enjoyed learning and were not ashamed of making mistakes. That was resulted in their productive outputs, which will be presented later.

Data Collection

The research data was based on the participants 'oral presentations, their poems submitted to the researcher at the end of every session, and the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed based on the improvement of each participant's oral presentation and their written poems, including their responses to the questionnaire. The findings answered the research questions as follows:

Research Question I. What are the impacting factors derived from using poetry in a language classroom?

The findings revealed that there are many impacting factors deriving from using poetry in the classroom. The participants were motivated and had positive attitudes toward learning English as reflected in their responses to the questionnaire in Tables I & 2 below:

TableI. Participants' Attitudes towards Learning English through Poetry

Question	Strongly Agree	Moderately Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I.Did you enjoy studying the selected poems?	N = 20, = 100%				
2.Do you think that reading poems aloud have developed your pronunciation?	N =20, = 100%				
3.Do you find poetry study a good way to improve your communication skills?	N =20, =100%				
4.Are there a lot of benefits for you to learn how to read and write your poems?	N =20, =100%				
5.Have the poems studied in class made you become more positive toward learning English?	N =20, =100%				

Data from Table1. above apparently shows that all the participants enjoyed studying the selected poems reflecting in their positive attitudes towards learning English during the workshop. They also revealed that reading poems aloud in class helped correct their pronunciation, and it was a good way to develop their communication skills. In addition, their responses to the questionnaire also show that reading and writing poems are beneficial for them and had made them become more enthusiastic toward learning English.

Table 2. Learning Motivation through Poetry Writing

Question	Strongly Agree	Moderately Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.I become more motivated to learn English through poetry.	N=20, = 100%				
2.I was bored and thought it was useless to study poetry in class.					N=20. 100%
3.Poetry writing developed my self-esteem.	N=16, =80%	N=4, = 20%			
4. Poetry writing made me become more creative and proud to communicate my ideas in English.	N=20, =100%				
5. Poetry writing inspired me to express my personal deep feelings openly.	N=16, = 80%	N=4, = 20%			

Data from Table 2. clearly reveals that all the participants were motivated to learn English through poetry reading and writing. This is relevant to the findings of previous studies discussed earlier. The fact that none of the participants was bored, nor thought that poetry study in class was useless reconfirms the impact and benefits of using poems in a language classroom as 80% of the participants showed that poetry writing developed their self-esteem, whereas 20% of the participants also moderately agreed. The most important facts from the participants' responses to questions 4 & 5 crucially explain the fruitful impacts of using poetry to develop their communication skills and to be connected with others.

Research Question2: Is poetry writing an effective way to improve the participants' communication skills?

The findings presented in **Tables 1 & 2.** clearly answer the research question that all the participants considered poetry writing an effective way to improve their communication skills. They were happy to study English through poetry to develop their cognitive skills in language learning and felt satisfied with their English improvement.

Additional comments and opinions of the participants in their responses to the questionnaire included the following:

- They felt that they were able to learn a lot from the selected poems in terms of language use: grammar, lexical or discourses as well as aesthetic beauty of the language.
- They felt encouraged to express their ideas, personal experiences, feelings or opinions freely.
- They were motivated and stimulated to use their imagination and develop critical abilities as well as increase their emotional awareness.
- They were inspired to respond their feelings or personal ideas to interpret the poems without being afraid of being right or wrong, since it was just an opinion.
- They were encouraged to express themselves, and even with some mistakes, they were able to make themselves understood. In this way, they were inspired to learn from their mistakes, and hence improve their English.

The participants' poems presented at the end of the workshop demonstrated their inner interests as well as their ability to express themselves in English language art form as shown in the following:

Participant 1.   Dark Night

Dark night under the moon,

Everyone sleeps in their warm cover.

Why am I sitting alone?

Participant 2.   Our Choice

We either make ourselves
Miserable or happy and strong.
It is our choice.

Participant 3.   Your Destiny
You are in control of your
Destiny. Only you can make
Your dreams come true.

Participant 4.   Autumn
Autumn colors gone
Snow falls like giant sugar lumps
A white blanket.

Participant 5.   Guess?
I have long hair
I have prominent front teeth
Do you know who I am?

Participant 6.   He
He is in my mind.
Cute boy who has sweet brown eyes,
Love you my sunshine.

Participant 7.   Rainbow
Drops of falling rain,
Changing the bright rainbow
Now I am missing you!

Participant 8.   My Beauty
You have a bright face.
Your skin bright as moonlight,
You are beautiful.

Participant 9.   Beautiful Love
You're capable of loving
Until it hurts
You're doing it right.

Participant 10.   Simple Joy
A summer river being crossed
How pleasing
With sandals in my hands

Participant 11.   Dew
A drop of dew
Sits on a green leave.
Like a diamond

Participant 12.   Relaxation
The Sun shining on me
Relaxed on the hot sand
Enjoy an ice-cream.

Participant 13.   Smiles
Smiling face
Enjoying everything.

Who knows how I feel.

Participant 14.
My Love is Like a Tree

Care? It varies.

Sometimes a tree dies

if caring too much!

Participant 15.
Happy Time

Being with you

To eat, to walk, to sleep,

I can't imagine without you by my side.

Participant 16.
Sorrow

Although love is unrequired,

I love to torment one minute

To sleep with tears of regret.

Participant 17.
Friendship

There is a miracle called friendship,

Often occurs in my mind

You don't know how it happens.

Participant 18.
Falling Leaves

Falling to the ground,

Autumn leaves are colorful,

In a bed of brown.

Participant 19.
Butterflies

Flutter in the sky

On wings of many colors

Land upon flowers.

Participant 20.   Companion

Walk you home

Tonight, just the two of us,

So, forget the world for while.

Conclusion

As discussed earlier, literary works have great positive impacts on learners' learning English, especially poetry. It helps make language learning activities become more enjoyable, exciting as well as constructive. If carefully selected to suit the level of each group of students and their background, poetry study can become valuable teaching resources, especially for beginners or those who have weak background in English because the language of poetry can communicate even abstract or complicated ideas powerfully, and effectively without conforming to rigid system or form of the language conveyed. This study relatively corresponds to other previous research findings about the many advantages of using poetry in a language classroom beyond the limits of ages, genders, background, or races. The language of poetry is universal and unique. Therefore, it should be a vital part of language learning for both majors and non-major students to enhance their communication skills as well as develop their aesthetic taste and intellectual growth in language learning.

Limitations of the Study

This study was based on a group of supportive staff of Southeast Bangkok College with different ages and background. Therefore, they might not be representatives of all Thai learners. For those interested, it is recommended to apply this teach strategy to English major students, and make a comparison with non-English majors to find out if their learning outputs are significantly achieved through poetry study.

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