

## Seeing the Light: How Students Read Poetry

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### ABSTRAK

*Kertaskerja ini membincangkan masalah-masalah yang dihadapi oleh pelajar-pelajar ESL (Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa kedua) dalam membaca dan memahami puisi Bahasa Inggeris. Satu kajilidikan telah dijalankan ke atas sekumpulan 51 pelajar tahun 3 di UKM untuk mendapatkan maklumat mengenai strategi yang mereka gunakan apabila membaca puisi. Antara masalah yang mereka suarakan adalah kesukaran memahami penggunaan perkataan yang simbolik dan mempunyai pelbagai interpretasi. Penemuan daripada kajian ini digunakan untuk mencadangkan beberapa pendekatan dalam mempermudah pengajaran dan pembelajaran puisi dalam konteks bahasa kedua.*

### ABSTRACT

*Robert Frost once said that a poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom. To a lot of students, however, trying to read a poem can often begin in irritation and end in confusion. A reason frequently given for this is that reading poetry involves trying to make sense of unfamiliar discourse patterns, puzzling word usage and finding 'hidden' meanings. This paper discusses the results of a survey that sought to investigate strategies students employ in reading poetry. The findings of this study would assist in formulating approaches to facilitate the teaching of poetry in the Malaysian context.*

### INTRODUCTION

It is no big secret that the teaching of poetry is the most difficult of all the literary genres both to native as well as non-native speakers of English. Having taught literature to ESL learners for a number of years, we have yet to meet students who empathize with the above quote from Frost. We find that most of our literature students are motivated to read novels and plays and even persevered with difficult and lengthy texts. The same kind of perseverance, however, is not seen when they confront poems, even

seemingly easier ones. Research into how students read poetry have tended to focus on native speakers of English and the processes they go through in understanding poetry. For instance, Kintgen (1985) tape recorded a group of native readers as they voice out their thoughts while trying to make sense of a given poem. Medway (1978) worked with a group of ten year olds and transcribed their discussions of two poems. Findings of research such as these have then been adapted to formulate approaches and teaching strategies for the ESL learners. This is not necessarily unsuitable, but further research focusing on ESL learners themselves must be carried out.

### METHODOLOGY

Due to the lack of research on ESL learners' strategies in trying to understand poetry we decided to carry out an experiment on our group of students. Unlike the research mentioned above, we were not interested in looking at the mental or psychological processes that these students go through in comprehending poetry. Firstly, we wanted to find out how students read poetry, that is what they did when given a piece of poetry on paper. What reading strategies do they employ when reading poetry? Secondly, we sought to find out how much of the reading skills that they have acquired in the reading courses helped them in their reading of poetry. Do they apply the general reading skills at all to the reading of poetry and does the application of these skills help or hinder them in reading poetry?

Our participants were 51 second and third year students at the university who are majoring in English. They had not had any formal instruction on poetry at the university. They, however, have gone through at least six hours a week of English proficiency courses and two reading courses in which they were taught specific reading skills through a variety of texts which are mainly in prose form. As such, these students can be categorized as intermediate to highly proficient in the language. We chose this group of students on the assumption that their reading of poetry would not have been influenced by any method of teaching done at the university.

The experiment consisted of a questionnaire that sought to gain information on the following: (1) The respondents' backgrounds (2) their experience with poetry (3) their responses to two poems that were printed out on one page with the question 'What do you think this poem means?' after each poem. The students were also asked to write down how they arrived at the meaning. As we wanted to find out if the form of poetry influenced their reading, we also typed out the two poems into

conventional prose form and had the question 'What do you think this passage means?' after each paragraph. The two poems chosen were 'Dance' by Fadzilah Amin and 'Domination of Black' by Wallace Stevens. Students were asked to read one poem which was relatively easy while the other one was longer and more difficult. 'Dance' was chosen for the familiarity of the subject it was describing and although the poem was working at an allegorical level, the language was easy to understand. 'Domination of Black' gave us the option of a more difficult subject matter and language use. It opened up the door to literary response and interpretation that we hoped to get from the students.

The students were divided into two groups. Group 1, which consisted of 24 participants were given the two poems in their original forms. Another 27 respondents which were put in Group 2 were given the version typed out as prose. They were given one hour to work individually on the assignment after which their answers were collected and the process reversed. Group 1 was given the prose version while Group 2 had the poems in their original forms. After both groups had answered the questions they were given another questionnaire that required them to select which of the two versions was more difficult to read and also to state the reasons. Lastly they were asked whether they thought that the texts they had read were originally poems or prose.

## FINDINGS

An analysis of the questionnaire revealed that about 21% of the respondents read texts in English very often, 70% of them often read English texts while 9% seldom read in English. The data also revealed that 64% of the respondents have never had any formal instruction on poetry before coming to the university but have read poems. Also, 92% of those who had poetry classes before mostly read poems because of class assignments while 80% of those who have not had poetry classes read out of curiosity. This shows that students very rarely read poetry for pleasure or do not find poetry a pleasure but more as an obligation or an object which is probably best placed in the Curiosity Shop.

The results also showed that all the subjects graded the importance of reading skills in English high on the scale, which indicates that the two reading courses were beneficial and important. The importance of English in academic as well as non-academic fields were graded consistently high. They all felt that English is still very much an indispensable language in the pursuit of knowledge in the Malaysian context. These responses show that the students do not have a negative attitude towards the use of English. In general, they enjoy learning and acquiring the language.

The questionnaire also sought to find out what students thought of poetry. Interestingly enough, almost all the subjects, regardless of whether or not they have been taught poetry formally at primary and secondary levels have stereotyped poetry as something beyond their reach. For example, 63% of the subjects thought that poetry is 'heavy stuff and tough-going', 'very abstract', 'very difficult and high class', 'ambiguous and not easy to understand', while the other 37% thought that 'poetry is difficult because the symbolic words carry double meaning', 'it is tough because it has hidden meanings', 'poetry has aesthetic value to convey hidden meanings'. Therefore, their responses show that they have a preconceived notion that poetry is obscure, symbolic, mysterious and the work of the writers who have set out to deliberately make life difficult for the ESL learner.

Analysis of the answers obtained from the experiment with the poems revealed other interesting facts. The group of students who worked with the original versions of the poems first gave general answers. The poem 'Dance', revealed answers such as 'this poem is about life', 'the poet is fed-up with life', and 'it is about two people and their love-life'. The longer and the more difficult poem, 'Domination Black', was not attempted by many of the respondents. Most of them stated 'I don't understand the poem', 'the poem is too difficult' or simply 'I don't know'. Those who responded indicated the following: 'the narrator is afraid of dying', 'Night is the symbol of death', 'the peacock and the hemlock are symbols of things that the narrator are concerned about'. In addition, they always qualify their responses with phrases such as 'I am not sure but I think...', 'There is probably a deeper meaning...', or 'Maybe the meaning is...' Nonetheless, when they were given the prose version their responses to the question became considerably longer for both the poems. In the case of the poem 'Dance', the students elaborated on the poet's love life and how it was meaningless and gave reasons to why she was fed-up with it. Those who wrote that they did not understand the poem form of 'Domination of Black' attempted to find the meaning and although their responses were general, their attempts showed that they now saw connections in what was being discussed in the passage. It is also interesting to note that some participants in Group 1, when given the prose version of the poems, smiled to themselves and articulated 'ohs' and 'ahs' as if they had finally figured out what had seemed incomprehensible before.

The same pattern is observed on group 2 which worked with the prose version first. Their answers for this part were longer and more direct. Two students, for example, discussed at length why the narrator was comparing her love-life to the ronggeng. The students' responses for 'Domination of Black' indicated they were not so concerned with the

symbolic meaning of words such as 'night', 'hemlock' and 'peacock' but were reading them at their literal value and responded in this manner: 'The narrator is sitting in a room at night and telling us his experiences...'. 'The narrator tells us the beauty of the peacock when seen at night'. Again, the students' responses to the poem demonstrated their concern for the 'hidden meaning' between the lines. The qualifying phrases such as the ones the other group used in their answers were also present in some of the answers for this group.

Another obvious pattern observed from the experiment is the similar way in which the subjects said they arrived at meaning in the poems. A high percentage of them said that they selected what seemed to them 'clues' or certain isolated words that would point to a meaning. A majority of them said that 'for "Domination of Black" they thought the meaning was the death of the speaker because of the word 'night' and 'hemlock' used in the poem. When responding to the prose version their answers focused more on what the narrator were telling them rather than what individual words indicated. This indicates that most of the students were not reading the poem as a complete discourse but as isolated lines, i.e. to look for meaning in each line or sometimes words. On the other hand, the participants read the prose form as a complete discourse and paid less attention to words and individual lines.

Another questionnaire which sought to find out the 'initial responses at receiving the texts confirmed our analysis that the different forms affect the respondent's attitudes. The participants in group 2 indicated that they read the paragraph over once or twice. Some said that they tried to find the main idea of the text by looking for the topic sentence. However, Group 1 did not indicate these answers. Instead, 89% of them said they looked for keywords that would give them clues to the meaning. The students were obviously applying the reading skills they learnt in the reading courses to the prose version but were not doing so with the poems.

Another interesting finding was that the prose version made the difficult text more accessible. All the subjects agreed that the prose version of 'Domination of Black' was more difficult than 'Dance' but the reasons given for the difficulty varied. 48% of the respondents said that the use of symbolic words made the text difficult, 26% indicated sentence structure, 16% blamed unclear punctuation and 10% said unfamiliar topic. Although the use of symbolic words still bothered some respondents, it did not bother all of them. However, in the poem version, 'Domination of Black' was still thought to be the more difficult of the two poems, but the reason that 73% gave for its difficulty was the use of symbolic words, 17% of the subjects indicated unfamiliar topic and 8% of them said length. What this pattern reveals is that the

participants' preconceived notions that poetry consist mainly of symbolic words hinders them from applying their reading skills.

The last part of the questionnaire endeavoured to find out which version of the texts the subjects thought was more difficult. About 88% of them said that the poems were more difficult to read, citing reasons like 'difficult to understand the symbols', 'unable to find the hidden meaning', 'language was too difficult'. The other 12%, however, thought that the prose version was more difficult because there wasn't any clear discourse markers in the prose version which can aid reading and understanding. It implies that this small percentage of subjects read poems as a whole discourse, not line by line as many of their colleagues did. Therefore, they saw each stanza as a complete 'paragraph' and tried to find meaning in that manner. However, in the prose version, the demarcation for each stanza is not clear, and they found the long sentences unclear.

Lastly, it is interesting to note that all the students said that the texts they had read were originally written as poems and not prose. When asked why, one student confidently remarked, "It's just typical of poetic language. It's the traditional way of writing poems".

These observations verified that students are very much influenced by what they perceive as the form of poetry. When words are arranged in stanzas or written in poetic form, the students think they acquire a different semantic value and have to be read from another dimension. More importantly, the students seem to abandon the reading skills they have acquired in their reading courses, such as looking for main ideas, cohesive devices, referencing and the likes, when they are confronted with poetry. Although it cannot be denied that a comprehensive reading of poetry does require more than basic reading skills, at the beginning level at least, these skills need to be utilized to get students over the first hurdle of experiencing poetry. It is when students start seeing things that are not there in the poems, when they are busy trying to peep too far in between the lines that poetry becomes obscure and out of reach.

### SOME PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The study revealed that our students, perhaps not unlike other students in other parts of the country, have misleading perceptions of poetry and its difficulty. Students seem to think the reading and understanding of poetry require a special knowledge reserved for scholars of literature. We, as literature teachers, need to demystify the language of poetry. We have to challenge these misconceptions and not perpetuate them. If we do not tackle these fears, students do not begin lessons with the right frame of mind.

There are several strategies that teachers can use to break down that wall of dislike for poetry. One tried and tested strategy would be to gather as much information from the students about the poems which they like or dislike. Too often the teacher makes the arbitrary selection that she likes or deliberately find difficult poems to test the syndrome that the teacher knows all. Begin from where the students are. The KBSM syllabus, for example, has included many difficult poems which require a lot of prior knowledge before the poems make sense to students. Teachers might think they are doing students a great favour by giving information about allusions etc. but such background knowledge, important as they are, might actually put students off poetry or prove right the students preconceived notion of the difficulty of poetry. Although teachers in schools do not have a choice over the selection of poems, they need not start with the selection given straight-away. Students could first be introduced to some contemporary poems and perhaps themes such as bravery, choice, dedication would appeal to them. If we plunge straight into Keats "Ode to Autumn" for example, there are so many alien things that a student has to grapple with such that the experience is very likely going to be a frustrating one. Once the preconceived notions that poetry is difficult and boring are dismantled, the students will be better prepared to tackle older poems. But if we keep to the conventional tradition of teacher explaining every facet of the poem, the lesson will be a boring and tedious task, for both teacher and student.

There are several strategies to clear students of misleading perception that poetry is difficult, high-class and only meant for those who could decipher symbolic words. We could make use of newspaper headings, advertisements or any other authentic materials to highlight that the language that poets use are not very far removed from these materials. A newspaper heading like 'Travel: Reel Good Time with Fishing', taken from a local English daily, shows the use of pun, for instance, 'reel' and 'real' and 'fishing'. Other newspaper headings, collected by the writers, include 'Thick as a Brick', an excellent example of rhyme and simile and 'Dangerously Dashing Daniel' which exemplifies the use of alliteration. These examples can be easily found in our local dailies. More importantly, these examples show that ordinary language can be poetic. A poem can also be created from a few headlines. This is what we call 'collage poems'. The example below is an interesting one and can catalyze students into creating others:

Headline History (William Plomer)

Grave Charge In Mayfair Bathroom Case.  
 Roman Remains For Middle West.  
 Golfing Bishop Calls For Prayers.  
 How Murdered Bridge Was Dressed.

Boxer Insures His Joie-De-Vivre.  
 Duchess Denies That Vamps Are Vain.  
 Do Women Make Good Wives?  
 Giant Airship Over Spain.

Soprano Sings For Forty Hours.  
 Cocktail, Bar On Mooring Mast.  
 'Noise, More Noise! Poets Last Words.  
 Compulsory Wireless Bill Is Passed.

Alleged Last Trump Blown Yesterday.  
 Traffic Drowns Call To Quick And Dead.  
 Cup Tie Crown Sees Heavens Open.  
 'Not End Of World', Says Well-Known Red.

(Peter Abbs and John Richardson, 1990:133)

Teachers can collect their own examples and show them to students. Students can be motivated to collect headlines from the local dailies and later produce their own collage poems. This approach makes students realize that poetry makes patterns out of language to express and to dramatize our understanding of life. As such, the fear that the language of poetry is symbolic, archaic, remote or inaccessible can be slowly overcome.

From the findings, we saw that students have some kind of a mental block when they confront poetry. They would try to answer questions about a difficult prose but would easily give up when given a difficult, lengthy poem. What we need to stress in class is that the reading of poetry does not require a new set of reading skills, formulated just for poetry. Their general reading skills can be applied to these texts. A poem should not be read line by line in order to derive the meaning. That method might be used later, but getting the main idea by reading it as a whole discourse is primarily important. Finding the main idea is what students have learnt in the reading class. It is a matter of extending the same concept when reading poetry. A poem also has the elements of a prose, for example 'Dance' is chronologically ordered - how the narrator's life is at present, how it has been and how she would like it to be. The connectors such as 'and', 'but', 'if' highlight the change of

expressions. These are some similar elements. Teachers could also show students some 'found' poems which have been created from paragraphs and newspaper and magazine articles:

Mollusca

Are naked.  
furnished with tentacula  
or arms; for the most part  
inhabitants of the sea;  
and, by their phosphorus quality,  
illuminate  
the dark abyss of waters, reflecting  
their lights to the firmament. Thus  
what is beneath the water  
corresponds  
with that which is above.

That poem is actually derived entirely from the following prose found in a science book:

Molusca are naked, furnished with tentacula or arms; for the most part inhabitants of the sea ; and by their phosphorous quality illuminate the dark abyss of water, reflecting their lights to the firmament. Thus what is beneath the water corresponds with what is above.

(Peter Abbs and John Richardson, 1990:134)

A newspaper article can also be made to look or read as a poem:

Silky Surprise  
It is soft  
delicate, caressing  
Its fluidity takes on a sensuous sheen

It is luxurious  
silk.

Through the ages  
when silkworms were discovered  
men and women have  
draped themselves in  
this fine fabric,  
a testament  
to gracious living

This poem is derived from an article which appeared in a local newspaper:

*Silky surprise from Shanghai at Xin Cuisine*

It is soft, delicate, caressing. Its fluidity takes on almost a sensuous sheen. It is luxurious. It is silk.

Through the ages, ever since silkworms were discovered, men and women have draped themselves in this fine fabric, which is a testament to gracious living.

The local English dailies, magazines even greeting cards, are rich resources that can be utilized for the introduction of poetry and poetic language to the students. We would be surprised at how many poems can be 'found' when reading the texts. 'Found' poems can be introduced to the students to emphasize the fact that poetry is not that far removed from prose. Hidden meanings and symbolic words are not the 'norms' of poetry. More importantly, we need to encourage students to apply their reading skills to poetry, to look at a poem as a whole discourse, to find the main idea, supporting details and connectors.

Another way of injecting fun into a poetry class so that some positive learning can take place is to make students experience poetry. This approach is in line with process learning. Previously, we were only interested that our students memorize and spill out in exams what we have taught them. However, that is not effective teaching or learning, because students will forget whatever they have learnt by heart when the exams are over. By making learners experience poetry by writing it, they come close to having 'poetic experience'. The teacher and students could think of a topic, for example, 'Marriage', and then collaboratively come up with one liners that could later be re-arranged to make up a poem. If students find this difficult, the teacher could perhaps 'make' students re-create texts. For example, the teacher can present a list of words in alphabetical order to be reordered into a brief poem. For a haiku a list such as this can be used: 'Another, black, brief, cases, day, fingers, march, on, over, play, saxophone'. This produces the most interesting result when 'different' solutions are offered. Another interesting way would be to take a brief poem which can be categorized:

| <i>Pronouns</i> | <i>Nouns</i> | <i>Adjectives</i> | <i>Verbs</i> | <i>Prepositions</i> |
|-----------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|---------------------|
| You             | suns         | gold              | smiled       | over                |
| me              | moons        | silver            | rose         | in                  |
| I               | wealth       | warm              | flowed       |                     |
| streams         |              | melted            |              |                     |

After offering such a list and a title 'You Smiled', students can be asked to use all of the words, some of the words or even add some of their own words and re-create another poem which could later be compared to the original.

There are many different ways of making students write poems. Some teachers might be guilty of underestimating their students' writing abilities. We have tried these writing approaches in our poetry classes, and students really enjoyed creating their own poems.

There are other methods which have been suggested in other books on teaching poetry. For instance, the teacher can jumble up a poem and students can re-arrange it into the right order, she can delete certain key words in a poem and provide some alternatives so that students can be made to think of the best words to fit in the blank spaces or even leaving out the last line of a poem so that students can create their own concluding one liner. All these different exercises are thinking exercises which allow students to be active participants in the understanding of poetry. They are made to experience poetry at the personal level, use words, make choices, see patterns.

## CONCLUSION

What we attempted to find out in the study is by no means a scientific research into readers' response to poetry. It is also not the scope of this paper to look into the psychological processes that response to poetry can elicit. At most, it attempted to confirm answers to some of our question of how our students perceive poetry, whether or not the reading skills which have been taught are applied to their reading of poems and whether the different form of poetry can induce better response. Based on our findings, we have recommended some practical approaches to make poetry experiential, less tedious and mechanical. After all, poetry is basically experience, and the best way to define and understand it would be to experience it. Let the students themselves unravel the 'mystery' of poetry. Although we cannot expect all students to be enthusiastic about poetry, at least we could convince some that poetry is quite manageable and enjoyable.

We need to make students see that there is no clear-cut dividing line between poetic and everyday language. As such, the skills that are learnt in reading prose, be it expository, narrative or scientific must be considered when reading poetry. Poetry is not a secret, fenced-off area to which the second-language learner has no right of access. If this can be conveyed to our students, when they read poems and say they see the light at the end of the tunnel, they can be quite certain that it is not oncoming traffic.

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