EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS EMPLOY TO TEACH POETRY

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Concept of Poetry

Poetry refers to literary works written in verse with great beauty due to its metre, rhythm, rhyme and images like the ebb and flow of an ocean. The best poetry is a clever arrangement of words written with emotional intensity and profound insight, usually mysterious and aesthetic in nature and may have different meanings, depending on the readers perspective.

Encarta Dictionaries (2008) defined poetry as a form of literature that emphasises rhythm, other intricate patterns of sound, imagery, symbols and many other possible ways that words can suggest meaning. Finally, poetry according to Holman (1983) is characterised by imagination, emotion, truth, sense impressions and concrete language expressed rhythmically with orderly arrangement of parts possessing within itself a unity and written with the dominant purpose of giving aesthetic and emotional pleasure. The features of poetry are lines, stanza, rhythm, verse metre, rhyme, imagery, symbols, figures of speech and sound. The major types of poems studied in secondary schools are ballad, elegy, lyrical poetry, sonnets, free verse, narrative, epic, ode, satires and didactic poems. A poet can write about any subject he chooses, which could be himself, animals, love, hate, death, corruption, leadership, revenge, God, marriage or societal evils.

The objective of teaching poetry is to give pleasure and lay foundations for adequate appreciation of what is beautiful in life (Patel & Jain, 2008). Poetry has

the capacity of shaping an individual's taste, developing sympathy, empathy, imagination, judgment, improving language skills and providing an avenue

dramatisation, demonstration and active participation in class. Poetry helps to develop a sense of rhythm, rhyme, correct use of stress and intonation and it helps in the control and balance of lines. Poetry is valuable in the sense that it is used in questioning and gauging every facet of life, such as aesthetics, social, political, religious, cultural, moral, economic and physical values. The other objectives of teaching poetry are:

it can help students to become aware of the possibilities of language and of the implications of various styles and ways of using words; it equips readers to develop the capacity for independent thought, imaginative, judgmental and critical abilities; it gives students a rich and well rounded humanistic education through broadening their cultural horizon and experience; it can provide insight into the nature and potential of man and can make learners more aware of their true self as a result of comparisons with the characters they have read about; it can help students to become discriminating both in their reading and in their assessment of real life situations.

Teaching is a deliberate and planned activity; the poetry teacher must therefore think about what to teach, who to teach and how to teach the selected content and evaluate what is taught. The practice of reading poems in class and answering questions at the end of the reading does not encourage the students to figure out the ideas being objectified. Secondly it does not encourage the secondary school students to identify sound devices, figures of speech, or express their feelings about any poem they studied. Besides it does not make for a purposeful and meaningful treatment of different aspects such as form, theme, emotions, images, symbols, sound and structure. It also makes it impossible for students to enjoy poetry, write poetry or apply the experiences acquired in poetry class to solve other life issues. It is not surprising that such students especially those from ESL/EFL environments do not gain the language skills needed to react to poems at the cognitive, affective and aesthetic levels of appreciation. The poetry teacher must

study the poet's point of view and styles, keep his/her class alert and engaged and encourage the students to enjoy and participate in the poetry class. There are some identified strategies for effectively teaching poetry among which is the integrated and interactive approach

Collie and Slatter (1987:8) stated that "student centered activities add fresh momentum into the teaching of poetry by stimulating students' desire to read and encouraging their responses". In an integrated approach, a teacher ceases to teach; instead he becomes a participant and a guide who works with his/her students. Here the classroom activities may be divided into three categories — pre—reading activities, while — reading activities and post-reading activities. According to Panavellil, prereading activities are kind of warming up activities which can provide a forum to elicit from students their feelings and responses to ideas and issues on prescribed text. While reading activities aim at helping students experience the text holistically by developing a fruitful interaction between the text and the reader. Post-reading activities encourage students to reflect upon what they have read and generate thoughtful discussion on themes, images, emotions, sound and structure (Panavellil, 2011). Shoben in Dietz (1978) stated that such disciplines as literary history and .linguistics can be taught but poetry can only be participated in. He further stated that while using the interactive method the teacher should:

i. present the students with a broad outline for the term - literary appreciation skills, period, theme, events, literary movement, style and form; ii. give an introductory lecture providing biographical, historical and poetic devices information before each poem is read; iii. give the students extensive list of questions to be considered as they read the poems, ask specific questions about theme, content, narrative techniques, poetic devices, language, meaning, form and structure.

iv.ask each student to present his interpretation and concept of the poem based on the theme, content, poetics, sound and form in class discussion; v. ask students to write papers on the poems or on comparative aspects of two or more of the poems.

A. Pre-Reading Activities:

To ensure that the major objectives of poetry teaching are met, the poetry teacher may consider the following structure:

1. Reflect

A good first step in preparing to teach poetry to secondary school students is reflection. The teacher may pose the following questions to the students: Do you enjoy poetry? Do you read it for pleasure? Do you buy poetry books on your own and read? Do you visit the arts theatre and listen to live poetry performances? The teacher would need to pose such questions to his/her students to gain insight into the students attitudes towards poetry and to devise routes into poetry for the students. A teacher may gain understanding of the students attitude towards poetry by asking them to keep a reading log or a diary.

2. Familiarise students with different kinds of poems

Poetry can range from simple and fun to complicated and abstract, therefore a teacher should start by choosing simple poems that are not too abstract or complex. Teachers should make sure that the poems they present first must have simple and familiar language, images, symbols and themes so that they are accessible to all the students. One ESL teacher recommends using poetry with predictable language patterns, repeated words, phrases, lines and identifiable rhymes (Alpha, 2009). Depending on the environment the student is coming from, there are many ways to start bringing poetry into the classroom.

Point out the difference between stories, plays and poems. ,Providé the students with a copy of a short story, a play and a poem that they have read beforé. Ask the students to work in groups and make a list of the differences between the three genres of literature. They should note the characteristics such as length, style* language, poetic devices, literary techniques, form and structure

3. Teach poetic types, styles and forms

The most discussed types of poetry as stated earlier in the classroom are ballad, elegy, lyrical poetry, sonnets, free verse, narrative, epic, ode, satires, blank verse, negritude,

metaphysical and romantic poetry. The teacher would need to teach the, students the characteristics of the different poetic styles used across different cultures. Poetic form is used most often in reference to the structural characteristics of a work as it compares or differs from established modes of conventionalized arrangements. The form of a poem is therefore the physical arrangement of the words on a page. This includes the way lines are placed, their grouping and their length. The points to note as you pay attention to poetic forms are:

- Look at the poem long before you read it.
- Listen and determine the rhythm as you read the poem aloud.
- Examine whether the lines and stanzas form a regular rhythm, if not determine why.
- As you read, pause where punctuation marks appear, not where the lines end to help clarify meaning.

4. Activate prior knowledge

Secondary school students are most receptive to new learning when they can connect it with what they already know. The background may include the atmosphere of the environment, time, place, period, historical milieu as well as social, political, economic, cultural and perhaps spiritual realities. The teacher should note that if the poem is from a different background, the students should be made aware of the cultural norms in the poet's world to be able to identify the deviant use of language and their significance, especially in poetry. Ghazali, Setia, Muthusamy and Just off (1992) stated that the teacher should provide support materials that address cultural issues because the students may come across cultural reference that is totally alien to them or something familiar to them but which might represent something else in another culture. To draw on students' background knowledge the teacher may consider the following questions:

i. the students should mention some poems in their native language ii. the students should mention a poem from their heritage that they like iii. the students should mention some famous poets from their country iv.the teacher should find out if the students have written poems before?

When the students are made to think about the poems they are familiar with, it help

in the understanding of the new poem to be studied. It is only when a poem is properly read aloud that learners would reach full literal and figurative meaning. The activities that would make students to develop the right attitude to read and enjoy poetry involve making the students to use their life experiences, imagination and background knowledge to guess the situations in the poem. According to Dutta (2001), some properties of text which may be used for drawing inferences are the title of the poem, illustrations, warmers, pictures, keywords and language exercises. These are some of the tools that may be used in the classroom for generating inferences and they are discussed below:

Title:

The title of a poem is always important as it tends to indicate the subject/theme of the poem. The teacher will write the title of the poem about to be studied on the board and ask the students to infer and predict what is likely to happen in the text. After writing the title for instance, "The Politician's Two Mouths" by Professor Niyi Osundare, the teacher may ask a range of questions to elicit responses from the students.

"The Politician 's Two Mouths " (Niyi Osundare)

The politicians mouth has two edges
Like Esimuda's sword
It is murder both ways

Is it not the politican
Who sees a snake And
hails an earthworm?
He prostrates for a vote
But his mind squats like a hungry dog
Alas a thin membrane covers the belly
We cannot see the inside of a lying wolf
When the man of power
Tells you his tale
Ask him to wait till
You bring a sieve

Whoever believes what the politician s ays
His ear is blocked by the carcass of truth

A politician tells you to wait
And you heed his words
Ah! Friend
Your sole will tell you
The biting pains of folly

The politician has two mouths
Both sharp like the whiteman's razor.

Questions that may be asked include:

i. Is the title of the poem a sentence, phrase or clause? ii. What do you understand by "Politician's two mouths"?

iii. Can you predict from the title what is likely to happen in the poem?

iv. What is the difference between a snake and an earthworm?

v. Is the poem likely to describe what happens in your country? vi. What does "Esimuda's Sword" mean?

Panavellil (2011) stated that at this juncture students can be asked to work in groups, pairs or individually. The teacher or group leaders may collect the different responses from the students and share the ideas with all the students.

Illustration:

The teacher may now give a pictorial presentation of the poem. Such an activity can provide important clues for predicting the context/messages of the poem. Some poetry texts have front-cover illustrations and pictorial representations of the contents. Alternatively, the teacher can draw the pictures based on the poem or employ the help of an artist. The teacher can present the picture of a rich politician addressing a group of poor looking people to vote for him during the election. The picture of a snake and an earthworm could be shown to the students. The picture of a thin, hungry and angry dog and a fierce looking wolf could also be shown to the students. The picture of a two edged sword could also be shown to the students and finally the picture of a sieve is also necessary. The teacher instructs the students to derive as much information as possible about the background/setting of the poem. The pictures will help develop the students thinking abilities as they examine the details. While this is going on, the teacher may ask the following questions:

i. Why does the politician's sword have two edges?

ii. Who is a politician and what does he do for a vote?

iii. What do the hungry dog and the lying wolf signify in the poem?

iv. What is the significance of the politician's two mouths?

v. Explain the meaning of "Is it not the politician who sees a snake and hails an earthworm"?

These questions will prompt further involvement and responses and also bring the students closer to being able to figure out the theme(s) of the poem.

Warmers

Pre-reading activities can also be carried out by the help of warmers that may be chosen from the poem, maxims, proverbs and quotations that are closely related to some aspects of the theme or content of the poem. But in this case, the teacher should chose a poem that has already been treated in class but that is closely related to the present poem to help facilitate open discussion and also to help elicit inferences about the theme and content of the poem under study.

Building the Nation

Today I did my share
In building the nation
I drove a permanent Secretary
To an important urgent function
In fact to a luncheon at the Vic.

The menu reflected its importance
Cold Bell beer with small talk,
Then fried chicken with niceties
Wine to fill the hollowness of the laughs
Ice-cream to cover the stereotype jokes.
Coffee to keep the PS awake on return journey.

I drove the permanent Secretary back.
He yawned many times at the back of the car
Then to keep awake, he suddenly asked,
Did you have any lunch friend?
I replied looking straight ahead
And secretly smiling at his belated concern
That I had not, but was slimming

Upon which he said with a seriousness
That amused more than annoyed me,
Mwananchi, I too had none'
I attended to matters of State,
Highly delicate diplomatic duties you know,
And friend, it goes against my grain,
Causes me stomach ulcers and wind.

Ah, he continued, yawning again,
The pains we suffer in building the nation'

So the PS had ulcers too'
My ulcers I think are equally painful
Only they are caused by hunger,
Not sumptuous lunches'
So two nation builders
Arrived home this evening
With terrible stomach pains
The result of building the nation —
-Different ways.

Henry Barlow

The students may discuss the above poem in groups or in pairs. The teacher can ask them to write out the theme(s) and message(s) of"Building the Nation". The second poem will help the students to formulate ideas on a more concentrated level about the possible meaning of the first poem through the vocabulary used. The poem "Building the Nation" satirises the activities of corrupt politicians under the following themes — the hypocrisy of public officers, wrongful use of public fund, corruption among public officers, abuse of duty by public officers and the plight of the suffering poor masses. As the poem tends to point to corrupt public officers, students are likely to form the impression that the second poem is going to describe the activities of insincere and corrupt politicians.

B. While-Reading Activities

1. Reading of the Poem

The full meaning of a poem is much more than the literal meaning it is made of. Adewoye (1994) suggested reading poetry aloud because according to him, when we listen to our voices, we would discover the point at which one sentence stops and where another begins in poetry especially where there are no punctuation marks, commas, full stops and exclamation marks. The teacher he suggested should read the poem to the students in class, and then allow the students to read the poem silently on their own class. After that, the teacher should give the students a chance to read the poem out loud as a class and to each other. Reading poems out loud improves students' confidence, oral language skills as well as their reading fluency. Byram (2001) emphasised choral reading which involves the teacher recreating the feeling and intensity of the poet that will rival the music. Through listening to poems that are read aloud, students become aware of the sounds, symbols, images, movement of tone/ mood, the rhythm, rhymes and stress pattern. As the students read the poem, they should pay attention to sound devices because skilled poets use sound devices

to draw attention to major points. Some of the while-reading activities that the students can engage in are:

i. Read the poem aloud severally.

ii. Identify the sound devices and determine why the poets employed them alliteration, repetition, onomatopoeia, rhythm, assonance, consonance.

iii. Determine and write out the rhyme scheme.

iv. Determine the purpose of the sound.

v. Look for figurative language — discuss the meaning of each simile, metaphor, personification.

vi. Make connections and summarize the poem's meaning.

2. Keywords, Phrases and Expressions

The vocabulary employed in poetry may give clues for predicting the theme and content of the poem. The teacher is expected to bring out the difficult words and expressions used in the poem. These words and expressions when explained help the students to predict what the pervading atmosphere of the poem is going to be. It is also useful to pay attention to the structure, organization, selection and collocation of lexical items in a literary piece.

The teacher may write some words and expressions on the board and guide the students to explain the words/expressions. The list of words and expressions may suggest a positive or negative atmosphere. Dutta (2001) observed that the teacher presenting a list of lexical items from the poem can ask students to create a mental picture of the world of the text from the connotative implications of the listed lexical items. The students should discuss in groups or pairs the semantic implications of the words and try to reconstruct the fictional world in the text. The teacher can prompt the students at this stage with some questions and guide them to find answers. Predicting activities on the basis of the keywords helps create in

students the awareness of the content and gives an impression of the atmosphere of the poem.

3. Listening Activity

The students at this stage are expected to develop purposeful interaction between the text and its readers. The students are expected to listen to a good reading of the text and practice language exercise. The teacher will play the poem on a tape to help the students achieve a dramatic effect created by the sound and intonation. The teacher may ask the students to listen to the poem thrice without looking at the text. The students may be asked to write down the words occurring in the poem. The students can also list the difficult words employed in the poem. The teacher is expected to explain the meaning of the listed words and expressions, Playing the poem on a tape will help the students to 'feel' the language, its rhythm, rhyme, intonation and even the mood of the poem which may be that of sadness, joy, anger, disgust or hope. At this stage, students are glad to see that they have formed some clear ideas about the poem. The students at this stage can make a comparative study of Niyi Osundare's

"The Padlock and the Key" and Henry Barlow's "Building the Nation".

c. Post-Reading Activities

Post-reading activities are meant to create a suitable situation for the students to discriminate, interpret, evaluate and pass judgment on the poem they just studied. The teacher is not expected to force his opinion on the students but to allow them to express their reactions and interpret the poem on their own while the teacher guides them as they do so. Some of the post-reading activities are:

i. Discussion of comprehension questions ii.
Language exercise iii. Memorizing iv.
Role-playing

v. Re-writing exercise

These will be briefly discussed below

1. Comprehension Questions

Three questions are meant to assess how far the students have understood the poem.

The teacher may ask the following questions:

What type of poem is "The Politician's Two Mouths"?

i. What is the poem all about?

ii. What is the central idea or theme of the poem? iii. How is the poem structured?

iv. What are the effects produced by the images?

v. Do the sounds suggest pictures or arouse emotions in you? vi. Does the poem have a set rhyme scheme? vii. Is the rhythm of the poem slow, steady or fast?

viii. Describe the tone, mood and pervading atmosphere of the poem

ix. What feelings does the poem arouse in you?

x. Give your general impression of the poem.

The students may be asked to answer the questions orally or in writing while the teacher will read through the answers to improve upon them. Other subsidiary questions may be asked to know whether the students understood the poem and the questions wholly:

i. Who is the narrator of the poem?

ii. What do you understand by "poetic personae"? iii. What is a satirical poem?

iv. Why did the poet use present tense all through in "The Politician's Two Mouths"?

v. Identify any word repeated in the poem and explain why. vi. Identify and explain any rhetorical question used in the poem. vii. Do you know what soliloquy/monologue is?

The exercise is to deepen the understanding of the poem and also to generate interest in the creative use of the language.

2. Language exercises

A variety of language exercises maybe carried out at this stage. These exercises may focus on any four skills of language learning such as:

The students may be asked to give antonyms of some selected words and phrases and change certain lines into the passive voice. They may also be asked to change the use of the present tense employed throughout in the poem to past tense. To study structural peculiarities in the poem, the students may be asked to put some selected lines from the poem in the usual prose order.

3. Memorizing

Memorizing is a useful pedagogical tool in poetry. It allows the students to "feel" and experience language. If the poem is lengthy, some lines and stanzas pointing to the message could be memorized. This is very necessary as students are always required to support their answer and claims with close reference to the poem and relevant quotations from the poem.

1. Rewriting exercises

Creative exercises like rewriting and role playing help students' understanding and appreciation of the poem. Creative exercises also improve students' expressive and

receptive skills. Rewriting activities may be "free" or "controlled". The students may be asked to summarize the poem in a fixed number of words or to rewrite the

poem with a different ending. Students may be encouraged and guided to write a parallel poem using the same theme but in a different background, may be a local one, thus creating a new poem. The teacher can apply the following steps to help the students write poetry:

i. Publish students' poetry in your school newspaper or magazine, or on your website.

ii. Publish a special anthology of student' poems.

iii. Create a school poem and ask each student to contribute one line.

iv. Give students a list of words and ask them to create a poem using those words.

v. Invite students to write poems in response to their favorite poems or to news stories, songs, TV shows, or artworks.

vi. Have your students discuss several works by a specific poet by comparing and contrasting his/her poems.

vii. Have students write a poem in the style of a particular poet.

viii. Challenge students to create a poetry notebook and write one poem per week.

2. Role-Playing

The students are usually asked to assume different roles in role-playing. Roleplaying enables students to explore the linguistic and conceptual aspects of the written word without focusing on the mechanics of language. They also get an opportunity to experiment non-verbal communicative language such as with gestures, body language and facial expression along with intonation, rhythm, stress, slang and idiomatic expressions. Role-playing helps students to gain self confidence and self

esteem. To dramatize the poem under study, one student plays the role of the poetic persona, another, the politician and others the audience being addressed.

CONCLUSION

There are so many strategies and techniques for teaching a poem in a classroom. A poetry teacher can apply as many as suit him and the poem he set out to teach. Schoch (2013) suggested other 10 ways for teaching poetry in the classroom. To teach poetry effectively in the classroom, she suggested that the teacher should activate prior knowledge, establish theme, explore language, focus on facts and set a scene. The other strategies she suggested are to ignite curiosity, see new perspectives, provide pleasure, capture character and inspire writing. The techniques discussed in this paper can also be applied in the teaching of the other genres — novels and drama. Whatever strategies a teacher adopts in class, the aim is to help students gain understanding of the text and to linguistically and conceptually prepare themselves to study the poem for interpretation, evaluation and judgment. Using the strategies discussed above, students will be able to make predictions, derive the meaning of a text, form semantic chains and key words. Other activities include describing a setting and background and transferring the text and reconstructing its literal and inferential meaning. Thus with awakened sensitivity to poetic language and improved literary insight, students will gain the ability to read and analyze any poem critically for aesthetic meaning. The teacher has to be careful not to force the students to accept his preconceived meaning, rather by class participation he should encourage the students to come up with their own interpretations. It is also advisable not to consider any of the interpretations as totally wrong. However, whatever claims the students are making, should be supported with close reference to the text.

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