International Conference on Current Trends in ELT

Teaching Poetry in Autonomous ELT Classes

Pushpa VK\textsuperscript{a, *}, Seyed Yousef Savaedi\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz branch, Ahvaz, Iran
\textsuperscript{b}Farhangian University, Rasoul-e-akram branch, Ahvaz, Iran

Abstract

This study evaluates the effect of poetry in autonomous ELT classes. Poetry is opted to teach English since it is considered as a valuable authentic material for cultural enrichment, language enrichment, literary enjoyment and personal involvement (Collie & Slater, 1990). Autonomous classes may help students improve their logical thinking and reasoning abilities. And it may also provide a favorite atmosphere for language learning. The participants were 60 students from Azad University, Ahvaz, Iran. The final results proved significant differences in the students’ general intake and final output.

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under CC BY-NC-ND license.
Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Urmia University, Iran.

Keywords: autonomy, cultural enrichment, language enrichment, personal involvement.

1. Introduction

Poetry has been often taught using the traditional approaches in various ELT settings. Therefore, the abundant potentialities of this particular genre of literature are seldom exploited in many ELT classes. The normal norm of teaching poetry is for using it as a means to prepare the students for some final exams as they do with some other textbook lessons. A critical approach to poetry teaching with the aim of eliciting curiosity, interest, participation, reflection, enjoyment, creativity and involvement is rarely encouraged in ELT classes since instructors themselves had been taught poetry using the traditional approaches where students just listen to the teachers; memorize certain words or grammatical points to get high grades instead of teaching students independent thoughts and rational

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +98-916-605-9589; fax: +98-611-336-7762.
E-mail address: pushpaz@yahoo.co.in
expressions. As the Roman poet Horace says, literature ‘delights’ and ‘instructs’ us. This is very true of many genres of literature, especially the genre poetry. Poetry entails a direct communication between the reader and the poem for it directly touches the fundamental feelings and emotions of all human beings.

The emotional contents of a poem evoke interests and thereby motivation which ensures that if poetry is taught using right approaches, students can communicate effectively about things they are familiar with or care about and this ultimately leads to better language learning. Teachers can guide students to read poetry in an active way by shifting from traditional approaches to more autonomous classes. Innovative teaching methods ensure analytical and reflective abilities in students.

Our suggestion is that if students are given opportunities for pre-preparation, class discussion in small groups, reflection on the ideas they gathered along with proper guidance to make individual presentations, teaching/learning poetry in ELT classes may become a gateway to language enrichment, cultural enrichment, literary enjoyment, and personal involvement. This research intended to answer the following question: Do autonomous classes and task based activities influence the learners’ language enrichment, cultural enrichment, literary enjoyment and personal involvement?

2. Review of literature

Scholars seeking new resources to trigger interesting ELT class environments and decrease the monotony of topics to eliminate many de-motivating factors find poetry a suitable material (Povey, 1979) for such situations and resources (Brumfit & Carter, 1987) to develop language skills in real contexts (Tomlinson, 1989). The universal element of human passions, feelings and emotions inherent in poetry generate strong emotional reactions and interest even in unmotivated language students. According to Hess (2003) poetry generates students’ interest and their participation which no other text can produce. Learners learn language by identifying and expanding their personal experiences with the rest of humanity. Poetry fosters personal involvement (Heath, 1996) since poetry provides an unfathomable reservoir of materials that offer students opportunities to identify and assimilate their personal feelings with universal themes of human concerns and express them spontaneously.

2.1. Cultural enrichment

Poetry introduces different cultural patterns and traditional forms of life which aids students to expand their knowledge about other cultures and this cultural awareness can ultimately strike sparks of critical response as well as affinity towards one’s own culture and life as a whole. According to Lazar (1996) poems provide a cross-cultural awareness which in turn assists learners to acquire fluency in the target language.

2.2. Language enrichment

Sarac (2003) explains the educational benefits of poetry are (a) providing readers with a different viewpoint towards language use by going beyond the uses and rules of grammar and syntax, (b) stimulating unmotivated readers to speak out owing to being so open to explorations and interpretations, and (c) making students familiar with figures of speech (Khansir, 2012). Poetry as a potential source for new vocabulary and memorable expressions is an unquestioned fact. Poetry provides abundant opportunity for students to enrich their vocabulary. The meaningful contexts help students to learn, use and remember the vocabulary more effectively (Lazar, 1996).

2.3. Literary enjoyment and creativity

Poetry can promote creativity and a more positive learning environment (Khansir, 2012). Unlike the typical classroom topics, poems encourage students in developing their creativity (McKay, 1982). McKay (1982) pointed out that poetry serves as a good model for creative writing and can stimulate interesting ideas for creative writing or at
least it can help learners enjoy ELT classrooms. According to Collie and Slater (1987) poetry leads to natural “creative written expression”.

In spite of all these potentialities poetry is not fully utilized as a vehicle for language learning in the ELT classes. Povey (1979) believed that methods of teaching poetry were responsible for the less substantial output and the aversion to literature especially to poetry in ELT classes. Both teachers and students still view poetry with utmost skepticism.

Linguists like Topping (1968) argued about the non-conformity of poetry to standard grammatical rules as some worry about the vagueness and abstract nature of poetry. Povey (1979) the advocate of teaching poetry in ELT classes believed that instructors were responsible for making students think of poetry as the most difficult literary form.

2.4. How to teach poetry?

As Arthur (1968) believed “ways must be found to make literature both useful and enjoyable” (p. 200). It is a naked fact that ELT classes continue to be futile and less exciting unless instructors create vibrant situations providing students with standard materials and effective teaching methodology to tackle them. It is here that teachers should teach things not in a way they were taught in traditional ways or as they want to teach them but by using a methodology that demands the students’ involvement, reflection and output.

Poems selected properly according to the level and demands of the students can aid their language enrichment, cultural enrichment, literary enjoyment and personal involvement. By moving away from traditional approaches of poetry teaching to more autonomous classes, students are guided to experience, feel, think, create and share what they understand from poetry. Instead of being passive listeners, the learners are guided to learn and respond spontaneously. This approach emphasizes an interactive and collaborative attitude to teaching poetry which emphasizes vocabulary expansion, writing portfolios, diaries, parodies, and reading aloud. The primary aim of the approach was to foster better learning situations which demanded the participation and response of the learners. A critical theory approach was used to stimulate and elicit response from students. Overall this method aimed at identifying how far poetry helps students to increase language learning, vocabulary, cultural expansion and creativity in autonomous classes.

2.5. Autonomous classes

Unlike the traditional EFL classes, the learner centered approach to EFL teaching tried to fulfill the learner’s language needs (Pillay, 2002) by providing tasks and materials as motivating factors to see the progress of the demotivated students (Cheah, 2003). As autonomy is closely associated with motivational factors (Gracia & Pintrich, 1996) and introduces students to quality activities, it can make vast differences in students’ attitude towards leaning (Dörnyei, 2003).

Traditional teacher centered classes cater for a group without considering the individual differences or the contribution of the learners in the total learning process (Jacobs & Hall, 2002). In contrast to learner centered teaching methodologies which focused on EFL Learners’ experiences, background knowledge, potentialities, interests and needs, the traditional approaches were indifferent to individual learners’ differences. Learner motivation can be promoted by tracing the needs of the individuals in the learner centered classes. Providing innovative learning strategies to teach language effectively (Norman, 2002) is the responsibility of teachers. Teachers should support language learners to select the best strategies that meet the urgent needs of the language learners.

Learners seldom know how to learn English effectively despite many years of study (Numan, 2002). Learner centered approach, on the other hand, emphasizes on introducing suitable learning strategies to meet the needs of the learners.
learners. Meaningful interaction is an integral part of learner centered or autonomous classes. According to Breen (2001) the culture of class is collective and jointly constructed. Like a chain they work in individual groups having common culture and responsibility. This sense of responsibility in the learning of the students coincides with the EFL teachers’ duty to provide varieties of tasks and activities that accommodate different levels of classes (Hess, 2001) or motivate the individual learners as well as create opportunities for all learners to progress.

Collaborative learning helps students support each other and achieve more success (Lantolf, 2000). Collaboration (Adamson, 2004) and communicative tasks can motivate (Crandall, 1999) students and reduce their anxiety.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The subjects of this study were 60 students of AA (associated degree in arts) in applied linguistics at Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz. They were divided into two groups of thirty, a control group and an experimental group. They were given OPT (Oxford proficiency test) to measure their homogeneity.

3.2 Materials

12 poems were selected from samples of simple verse by Soheil (2008) and Perrine’s literature, structure, sound and sense by Thomas and Johnson (2005). They were used for the detailed study during the semester. Another 30 poems selected from these books were given to the participants to read on their own and present in the class as a part of their class activities. The poems were carefully selected to introduce them to the figurative use of language, culture, sublimity, vocabulary and also foster personal involvement. The poems dealt with a variety of themes, especially universal themes that were tangible for the Iranian readers.

3.3 Procedures

The control group and the experimental group were taught the same poems by the same teacher but the students of the experimental group were subjected to many task based activities. The control group was taught the same poems using the traditional way where the classes were more teacher centered. Students took part in the class activities on a voluntary basis. They were not given special task based activities but the control group was not deprived of any privileges comparing to the experimental group except the learner centered activities provided for the latter group.

The Experimental group was taught the same materials like that of the control group to assist the process of language learning. In order to measure the influence of task based teaching of poetry on EFL students, the experimental group was assigned with additional task based activities that stimulate their autonomous learning and language enrichment. These tasks were assigned to stimulate and measure the following four major categories, language enrichment, cultural enrichment, literary enjoyment and personal involvement.

3.4. Instrumentation

The instruments used in this research were (a) OPT test to trace the homogeneity of the subjects, (b) the final test consisting of two parts. (The first one consisted of 40 items based on the poems learned during the treatment sessions. The second test consisted of questions mostly based on the extra poems they read and practiced via task based activities in the autonomous ELT Class.) and (c) an attitude survey questionnaire was given to the experimental group to understand to what extent the autonomous classes and task based activities could influence their literary enjoyment.
4. Results

This study aimed to investigate if there was a difference between the performances shown by students in an autonomous poetry class and that of a traditional poetry class. The research questions were analyzed by means, standard deviations and independent samples T-test.

As can be seen in diagram 1 (Exam 1) the total average of the experimental group scores (M = 19.04) is higher than that of the control group (M = 15.79). It seems that the students of experimental group who had been under experiment had outperformed the students of the control group. In this case, experimental group students had a standard deviation of 1.29 whereas control group students achieved a standard deviation of 2.85 that shows the amount of variation within the control group is bigger than the experimental group.

For this first exam, the result of the independent samples T-test indicated a significant difference between the scores of these two groups. (P < 0.05, Sig = 0.00).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>19.043</td>
<td>1.291</td>
<td>.235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>15.793</td>
<td>2.846</td>
<td>.519</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>Std. Error Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.694</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>3.249</td>
<td>.570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.694</td>
<td>40.447</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>3.249</td>
<td>.570</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1. Comparison of experimental and control group performance in test 1
For the second test what immediately appears from the raw data in diagram 2 (Exam 2) is that the scores gained by experimental group (M=17.74) outnumbered the scores attained by the control group (15.39). In this case, experimental group students had a standard deviation of 2.95 and control group students had achieved a standard deviation of 2.96 that shows the amount of variation within the control group is bigger than that of the experimental group.

For this second exam, the result of the independent samples T-test indicated a significant difference between the scores of these two groups. (P<0.05, Sig=0.003).

Table 4.3 Statistics of test 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>17.741</td>
<td>2.959</td>
<td>.5403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>15.391</td>
<td>2.960</td>
<td>.5405</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.4 Independent samples T-test 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>Std. Error Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.075</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>.764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.075</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>.764</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Discussion

This study aimed at investigating the language enrichment, cultural enrichment, personal involvement and literary enjoyment after teaching students poetry using task based activities.

The findings of the research were completely in line with the previous findings of various researchers considering the importance of poetry in ELT classes (Sivakumar, 1987; Hismanoglu, 2005; Sarac, 2003; Khatib, 2011, and others). It also approved the claims of many researchers regarding the advantages of autonomous classes (Edward et al., 1981; Shapira, 1976; Breen, 2001; Lantolf, 2000; Adamson, 2004; Crandall, 1999, and others). It has been supported by various researchers that poetry based activities in the ELT classrooms (Hanauer, 2001; Maley, & Daff, 1989) are beneficial. The emotional content of poetry evokes the interest and thereby motivation (Hess, 2003) which ensures that if poetry is taught using innovative methods it will enhance the language learning and it will lead to more constructive ends. As psychological researches proved autonomy has generally been associated with more intrinsic motivation, greater interest, less pressure and tension, more creativity, more cognitive flexibility, better conceptual learning, a more positive emotional tone, higher self-esteem, more trust, greater persistence of behavior change, and better physical and psychological health. So by moving away from traditional approaches to more autonomous poetry classes we can stimulate the analytical and reflexive abilities of the learners.

Based on the findings of this research, if the students are given opportunities to talk about things they are familiar with (identifying themselves with the universal themes of human predicaments inherent in poetry) they can communicate effectively. If they are guided for pre-preparation, class discussion in small groups, reflection on ideas they have already gathered from the poems, creativity of the students can be promoted. Also, it was noticed that appropriate context based activates in autonomous classes can foster the hidden potentialities of the students and elevate their proficiency level. Besides, for the psychological aspects of autonomous classes, it has been noticed that in such classes students enjoyed more freedom to express themselves in the absence of the teacher as the superior power and knowledge in the class. It has also been noticed that students of autonomous classes had improved their affinity towards poetry and were delighted to participate in creative writing and other literary activities. Even the
setting and arrangement of the classroom gave the learners a feeling of sharing and collaboration and it enhanced face to face discussion.

The findings of the research may yield further insights for the researchers and educators to implement programs which can be based upon learner-centered methodologies and approaches in non-English speaking countries like Iran.

References


Povey, J. F. (1979). The teaching of literature in advanced ESL classes In M. Celce-Murcia & L. McIntosh (Eds.), Teaching English as a second or foreign language (pp. 162-186). Rowley: MA: Newbury House.


