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Poetry's Unique Aesthetico-Pedagogical Advantages

Poetry offers some unique aesthetico-pedagogical advantages while studying English in high and higher educational establishments.

Poetry as a form of language use is universal among all human beings. The themes which poetry deals with are common to all cultures, although the way they are treated differs. The conventions governing the language of poetry are likewise familiar; rhythm, rhyme, metre, alliteration, assonance, unusual collocations, elliptic expressions, figurative usage, refrain. So, no foreign language learner will be ignorant of what poetry is. To deal with important experiences (love, children, despair, and death) is in the nature of poetry. It heightens our perception not only of such experiences, but also of the seemingly trivial or unimportant. The immortal lines written by Emily Dickinson are a good example;

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,
One clover, and a bee,
And revery.
The revery alone will do,
If bees are few.

So poetry provides a content which will appeal to learn because they are able to respond to it in their own way. The fact itself that the students can make a personal response is in itself a motivating factor, and each individual student can feel that he or she has a valid contribution to make.

At first sight poetry in any foreign language may appear impenetrable, but, as we have said, our readers are already familiar from the mother tongue with the conventions of poetry. This makes poetry more readily accessible to them, and the realisation that they can appreciate what is thought to be "a difficult use of language", that is poetry, is a real moral-booster.

One of the most important conditions for learning a foreign language is the opportunity "to play with it, to pull it this way or that, to test its elasticity, to test and explore its limits". (A.Maley, A.Duff). Poetry is the medium in which this can be done.

All poets stretch the language by coining new words, creating new collocations,

experimenting with sounds, using old words in new ways, and so on. Students can not only observe and share this experience, but through interactive writing tasks they can also try to reach out of the limits of the possible themselves. The student is transformed from a spectator into a participant.

Poems offer both a public and a personal face as it may suggest a core of meaning about which most people would agree, and it may suggest individual interpretations which are not necessarily shared by all readers.

Poems convey different messages to different people because they are highly suggestive, colourful, associative. This is true even to nursery-rhymes, and the associations called up by them will be different for different readers as well as the mental image formed by them.

This is an enormous advantage in teaching, that means that each student's personal interpretation is valid and may cause an interactive discussion. It can be stimulated, of course, in other ways (use of pictures, drama techniques, comprehension texts, etc.), but poetry has its peculiar power to stimulate.

There exist some different points of views on the problem of spoken language uses. They divide them into "interactional" and "transactional" (Brown and Yule), and "reactional" (Maley and Duff). In interactive language use, people are mainly concerned with making speakers feel comfortable with each other. In transactional language, the major concern is with communicating a utilitarian message (instructions, opinions, descriptions, and etc.). In reactional use, the main purpose is to make people react personally to other people's ways of seeing and understanding things. Poetry offers access to a third type of spoken language alongside with prose, doing it very economically. It contributes to the development of a personal reaction to texts engaging not only the intellect but also the feelings. This process we consider to be a very important part of language learning.

Two more unique advantages of poetry are memorability and rhythm. Poems tend to stick in our minds because certain phrases are particularly striking or colourful, or they are impressed upon our minds with a marked rhyme or an emphatic rhythm. This is true either of the mother tongue or foreign languages. They appear to form a loosely co-ordinated system of unconscious or conscious memories. The system enables the learner to restore grammatical and lexical information, that is to learn languages through poetry.

The rhythmic appeal of poetry is one of the reasons for relatively easy learning of it. Rhythm is the guide to the structure of information and so it is the valuable resource poetry offers. Stress and rhythm may be taught not only through the

imitation of model sentences but through exposure to poetry, helping developing a sensitivity towards it.

Poetry offers a ready-made opportunity for choral repetition aloud by groups and this does not to be unnatural. In addition group performance masks individual imperfections and contributes to self-confidence. The essential features of fluent speech – clarity of diction, phrasing, stress and rhythm, etc. – develop from the reading of poetry aloud.

A poem is a self-contained unit which offers a complete context. The meanings conveyed in poems are expressed very economically. The vocabulary of poetry is highly associative and at the same time concentrated. So it can be used for a wide range of exercises to develop sensitivity to association linking words to each other, to the weight and quality of words, to differentiation of their use in everyday speech and in poems.

A. Maley and A. Duff in their book "The Inward Ear" consider some questions which may arise when discussing the value and practicability of using poetry as one of the elements in language teaching. One of them deals with the "speciality" of the language of poetry. In many people's minds, "poetry" is equivalent to a special register of English. It is characterised by archaism, inversions, heightened vocabulary, etc. They think some care needs to be taken in selecting poems. It is no use to choose poetry which embodies these features. Modern poetry, they suppose, does not necessarily use special language features but foregrounds ideas by putting them in a poetic frame. They advise to choose this kind of poetry in order to avoid "too special" language complications. The function of the poem is to become an integral part of texts studied while learning foreign languages.

The second problem is the "use" of poetry and its place in a series of language activities. To favour the "use" of poetry in the process of language teaching is to determine the aims of it. If we do not want our students to become poets themselves, but to learn through the experience of learning new words and new meanings, the poem may be used not as an end in itself but as one part of a process. The learner's immediate and progressively unfolding needs may not be the same as his or her terminal objectives, their learning process can be stimulated by a great variety of means, so there is no reason why not to include an element of poetry even in ESP courses.

One more problem to be discussed is the level of difficulty of the poem. Difficulty is a relative concept. What is difficult for one is not perceived as difficult by another. At the same time some poems are obviously more difficult than others.

So in order to offer learners this or that poem to be studied we should 'bear in mind the level of their competence. These two statements allow us to come to the conclusion that the best way to find the way out of this intricate situation is to choose carefully preparation activities and tasks to facilitate comprehension and to select tasks of an appropriate level of difficulty for the group irrespective of the difficulty of the poem itself.

As we see poetry offers unique aesthetico-pedagogical possibilities for language learning and is as valid as the use of drama techniques, pictures, problem solving, authentic texts, comprehension passages, sound sequences, etc.