

Poetry in motion: Developing reading enthusiasm in university students

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT		
Keywords: <i>poetry; EFL literature-learning; literature for empowerment.</i>	<i>This study aims to examine students' literacy habits and explore how an exploratory study on experiencing poetry can impact EFL learners' approaches to literature. It identifies common challenges students face due to their past experiences with literature. It will also introduce theoretical insights that stress the importance of revising existing pedagogical methods to better address these challenges and enhance student engagement with literary texts. This study focuses on engaging with poetry, a pedagogical approach that emphasizes active, personal engagement with poetry to foster deeper understanding and appreciation. The discussion will tackle common problems in literature teaching, such as student disengagement and the limitations of traditional, text-focused instruction. It uses step-by-step guide to instructional procedures that promote the experience. In terms of pedagogical considerations, poetry ensures these methods are effectively applied in diverse classroom settings.</i>		
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1. Introduction

Recent research has increasingly drawn attention to the declining interest in literary texts, particularly poetry, among both adolescent and adult readers. Studies have shown a consistent decrease in literary engagement over the past decades. A 2019 study by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) revealed that only 19.5% of U.S. adults read poetry, a significant decline from previous years (NEA, 2019). Similarly, research by Baumer and Seifried (2021) found that many young adults in Europe, particularly in non-native English-speaking countries, report a lack of interest in poetry, largely due to difficulties with comprehension and perceived irrelevance. This disinterest has been particularly noticeable in educational contexts, where poetry is often marginalized.

This trend is also evident in European foreign-language literature courses, where learners often express frustration and disengagement when confronted with literary texts. Recent studies (e.g., Friman & Parviainen, 2020; Salama, 2021) report that foreign language

learners frequently feel overwhelmed and inadequately prepared to engage with poetry. Parkinson and Thomas (2000) initially noted that students often feel helpless due to a lack of experience in literary studies, but more recent studies indicate that the issue has persisted despite efforts to integrate more student-centred methods. Furthermore, teachers also report feeling unprepared to teach poetry, citing discomfort with the genre as a barrier to effective instruction (Mahayana, 2012; Boudreau & Rittenhouse, 2022). As Boudreau and Rittenhouse (2022) emphasize, many educators still struggle with how to make poetry accessible to students, resulting in a lack of engagement and avoidance of the genre altogether.

Given these challenges, why do traditional pedagogical approaches fail to foster a lasting interest in literature, particularly poetry? Why do students and educators alike view poetry as an intimidating and difficult genre, despite its potential to enrich students' understanding of language and culture?

This article aims to explore these gaps by examining why traditional teaching methods often fall short in engaging students with poetry. Drawing on more recent research in the field (Friman & Parviainen, 2020; Salama, 2021), the session will propose an alternative approach to teaching poetry that focuses on experiential learning and active engagement. By reimagining how poetry can be presented and experienced in the classroom, this article will offer practical strategies to inspire greater student participation and interest in literary texts, ultimately fostering a deeper connection to literature.

2. Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative data to explore how students engage with literature, particularly poetry, in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. The research is designed to examine the effectiveness of different theoretical approaches to literature teaching and their impact on students' engagement and interpretation of literary texts. The study follows a quasi-experimental design, with a pre-and post-test format, to assess students' attitudes and engagement with poetry before and after an intervention. The intervention involves a series of instructional activities grounded in sociocultural learning theory, focusing on experiential and interactive methods to encourage students to connect with poetry. The study also includes a control group that receives traditional, transmission-based instruction in literature.

Participants

The participants are graduate students enrolled in the English Education Program at the School of Postgraduate Studies (SPs), UPI Bandung. A total of 60 students will be divided into two groups: an experimental group that engages with poetry through student-centered, sociocultural approaches and a control group that receives more traditional, lecture-based instruction.

Instruments

The first instrument was Literature Attitude Questionnaire (LAQ): A pre-and post-test questionnaire that assesses students' attitudes toward poetry and literature, measuring interest, perceived difficulty, and enjoyment. Student Reflection Journals was used to collect

qualitative data about students' experiences with the poetry-based intervention, focusing on their thoughts, challenges, and growth. Classroom Observations was conducted to capture students' participation and engagement during poetry lessons, especially noting social interactions, collaborative work, and engagement with peers. Meanwhile, after the completion of the instructional phase, a focus group interview will be held with a subset of students to gather deeper insights into their learning experiences and perceptions of the approach. Lastly, students in both groups will be asked to analyze and interpret a poem before and after the intervention to measure the development of their analytical skills and engagement with literary texts.

Data Analysis Procedure

The quantitative data from the Literature Attitude Questionnaire (LAQ) will be analyzed using paired-sample t-tests to assess differences in students' attitudes toward poetry before and after the intervention, comparing the experimental group to the control group. This analysis will help determine if the sociocultural, student-centred approach leads to more positive attitudes toward poetry compared to traditional methods. Qualitative data from student reflection journals, classroom observations, and focus group interviews will be analysed thematically. Thematic analysis will be used to identify patterns in students' experiences, focusing on how they engage with poetry, the challenges they face, and the ways in which their understanding and appreciation of poetry develop over time. Key themes will be coded and categorized to uncover deeper insights into the role of social learning environments in promoting engagement with poetry. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative data, the study will provide a comprehensive understanding of how different pedagogical approaches to teaching poetry impact students' engagement, attitudes, and analytical skills.

3. Findings

Findings

The data collected from this study highlighted some clear and, at times, unexpected patterns in the way students approach poetry and literature in general. These findings reveal not only students' initial struggles with literature but also their underlying perceptions, which can inform future teaching strategies.

Fear and Uncertainty Towards Literature

A significant majority of students expressed a deep sense of fear when it came to engaging with literature, particularly poetry. This fear stemmed from the uncertainty they felt about how to approach and interpret the texts. Many students reported that they had no clear idea of what to do with the poem they were reading or how to extract meaning from it. They felt lost in the ambiguity of literary works, unsure of how to articulate their understanding or discuss their emotional responses. This observation aligns with Wright et al. (2010), who found that students often struggle with interpreting literary texts independently, particularly when they feel they lack the "correct" understanding. The fear of being "wrong" when discussing poetry was prevalent, with students frequently expressing hesitation in their analysis, unsure whether their personal interpretations were valid.

Dependence on Instructor's Interpretation

A recurring theme that emerged was students' reliance on the instructor's interpretation of the text. The majority of students reported a tendency to wait restlessly for the teacher's analysis after reading a poem. This finding suggests that students view the teacher as the ultimate authority on literary interpretation, placing less value on their own readings or emotional responses to the text. This aligns with the "transmission model" of teaching, in which knowledge is passed from the instructor to the students, leaving little room for student agency or independent thought (Beach et al., 2006). The passivity of waiting for the instructor's opinion further highlights the need for a shift towards more learner-centered approaches, where students actively participate in constructing meaning rather than passively receiving it.

Separation of Thought and Feeling in Literature

Another striking observation was students' tendency to compartmentalize their emotional and intellectual responses to literature. The majority of students felt that their personal feelings had no legitimate place in literature discussions. They believed that literature discussions should focus solely on rational analysis, relegating feelings to the periphery. This reflects a broader cultural tendency to view literature as a subject requiring objective analysis, rather than a space where personal emotional responses are valued. This disconnect between intellectual and emotional engagement with poetry can be traced to traditional pedagogical approaches that prioritize analytical reading and devalue subjective interpretations.

Reflections on Pedagogical Challenges

These findings underscore the deep challenges faced in shifting students' perspectives and engaging them meaningfully with poetry. The fear of literature, the dependence on instructor authority, and the separation of thinking from feeling all point to ingrained attitudes and practices that limit students' ability to engage with poetry as a personal, transformative experience. However, these challenges also reveal important opportunities for change. As an instructor, I became increasingly aware that to address these issues, students must be given the chance to unlearn what they have wrongly internalized about literature and, more specifically, poetry.

To move forward, it became clear that engaging students in literary experiences that speak to their own lives—experiences that are meaningful and relatable—could serve as an important starting point. I decided to focus on love poems, a genre that is universally familiar and emotionally resonant. This choice was informed by Perrine's (1987) assertion that poetry is "concerned with all kinds of experience—beautiful or ugly, strange or common, noble or ignoble, actual or imaginary." By choosing love poems, I hoped to create a bridge between students' personal experiences and the art of poetry, allowing them to see poetry not as an intimidating academic subject but as a way of expressing universal human experiences. Perrine's (1987) argument that all experiences—whether painful or joyful—become enjoyable when transmitted through art was central to this decision.

The Implementation of Love Poems as a Pedagogical Tool

The decision was made: both students and I would each bring in a love poem of our own choosing to share with the class. This approach had several purposes. First, it allowed

students to engage with a text that was personally meaningful to them, breaking away from the passive, "transmission model" approach. By choosing their own poems, students could see that their personal responses were not only valid but also essential to the process of interpreting the text. Second, by sharing poems in a group setting, students would have the opportunity to hear multiple interpretations, fostering a sense of community and collaboration. This was a conscious effort to encourage a more socio-culturally grounded, participatory approach to learning, aligning with Vygotskian principles of social learning and communal knowledge-building (Vygotsky, 1978).

Through this process, I hoped to challenge the students' perception that poetry is something "out there"—something to be deciphered through external authority—and instead help them see poetry as a medium through which they could express, explore, and understand their own experiences. The goal was not only to help students develop a deeper appreciation of poetry but also to build their confidence in approaching literature as something that belongs to them, not just to scholars or experts.

In the next stages of the course, we will continue to build on these foundations by deepening the engagement with more varied poetry and expanding our discussions to include different literary forms. However, the love poems served as a powerful starting point for both students and myself, setting the stage for a more meaningful, student-centered engagement with literature.

4. Discussion

Reorienting theory and practice

Given the fact that my students came into my Literature & ELT course with lengthy exposure to transmission model of learning, the first thing to do was to change the theoretical guide and its instructional practice. That is, I changed the way we learn literature (in this case: poetry): from experience to personal theorizing (rather than from theory to practice as commonly practiced in the transmission model). This was done first by experiencing the poetry and then we share our personal responses. From this sharing of feelings and personal "ways with literature" we as a collective then tried to formulate a theory or theories.

This decision was made for two reasons: firstly, adults come to our program with a larger fund of experience and enjoy greater independence of thought and action than adolescents and children (Burns, 2002:219); secondly, poetic and imaginative thinking is critical not only for the appreciation and understanding of art but also of the realities we are confronted with; poetry can help facilitate intellectual as well as emotional growth of our students (Beach & Marshall, 1991).

The reorientation of theory and practice was made on various levels, including learning theories (that is, from transmission model to sociocultural perspective), reading stances (from efferent to aesthetic reading (Rosenblatt, 1978]), and ways of experiencing and talking about the poems (that is from text-based singular perspective to reader- response-based multiple interpretations).

Experiencing poetry: A demonstration

One very useful concept proposed by sociocultural perspective is the notion of ZPD (Zone of Optimal Development) which refers to the difference between the individual's current level and

the potential level that can be reached with assistance from a more knowledgeable member of the community of practice (Vygotsky, 1978). As already known from the first few sessions in the semester that the majority of students are not familiar with ways of reading and talking about literature (in this case, poetry), my first job as an instructor of literature is to provide students with an example-direct modeling. This modeling can take many different forms including behavioral (or actional) model, process (or procedural) model and also attitudinal model. To this end, I usually demonstrated how

I read a poem, and I did "walk the talk"-demonstrating how I "experience" the poem by thinking

aloud along the process of transactions with the literary piece.

5. Conclusion

Building on what I have experienced with (post)graduate students in the English Education Program of SPs-UPI Bandung, the following principles can be used as a guide for productive practice in line with sociocultural perspectives. As a more knowledgeable member of the literary community of practice in the literature class, the instructor should serve as an example. S/he provides model in various forms including how to read, enjoy, and respond to poetry. Aside from her/his role as a model for students to observe and learn from, the instructor should serve as a guide at least for the first few sessions of literary encounters. This is done to illustrate to the students the boundaries commonly observed in literary discussion. Selection of materials should be negotiated with students. To the extent possibly ask students to bring to class literary works they think are interesting and important to share in the class. A relatively structured set of activities in reading, enjoying, and responding to poetry should be established to provide opportunities for students to internalize so that they develop useful habits of mind with poetry. Building on what has proven effective, the following three-part strategy can be used as a structured activity-set in reading, enjoying, and responding to poetry in the classroom. Efforts should be made to train students to formulate their own theory as a crystallization of their experiences with poetry and their understanding of poetry as a way of saying. Enthusiasm is contagious-bring in to class your favorite poetry to read out and share with the members of the community of literary interpreters.

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