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POETRY IN THE EFL CLASSROOM: MOVING BEYOND MEMORISATION AND MECHANICAL RECITATION

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Abstract: ***Drawing on a three-dimensional framework for teaching poetry in the EFL classroom, the study attempts to offer guidelines for devising a comprehensive set of activities that move beyond memorisation towards competence-oriented learning. The model integrates the lexical-thematic, visual, and rhythmic-acoustic dimensions of poetry as interconnected pedagogical resources operationalised through sequenced pre-, while-, and post-reading activities. The lexical-thematic dimension supports the selection of poems correlated with curricular topics and facilitates guided interpretation through attention to meaning and figurative language. The visual dimension exploits the formal layout and genre-specific features of poems to scaffold structured and creative writing in a supportive learning environment. The rhythmic-acoustic dimension enhances learners' phonological awareness and sensitivity to prosody, contributing to more accurate and expressive oral production. Aligning poetry activities with the CEFR communicative competences, the study emphasises poetry as a versatile resource for developing the linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competences.***

Keywords: *poetry-related activities, integrative strategy, communicative competences, EFL learning, lexical-thematic dimension, visual dimension, rhythmic-acoustic dimension.*

Poetry is an effective resource for teaching a foreign language, as it contains many aspects that can be used to explore language and cultural content and to foster learners' communicative competence. The main arguments formulated by EFL practitioners who support the use of poems in the EFL classroom highlight several key benefits.

Poetry offers authentic models of language in context. According to Tomlinson, it contributes more significantly to the development of language skills in real contexts than "a total concentration on the presentation and the practice of language items" [15, p.23]. It also enables students to enrich their vocabulary in a novel way by providing meaningful contexts for vocabulary use and, therefore, supports its effective retention [10, p.33]. At the same time, poems stimulate creativity while offering a welcome break from regular classroom routines, as Collie and Slater observe, "using poetry in the language classroom can lead naturally on to freer and creative written expression" [2, p.72; 11, p.532]. The affective dimension is equally significant, as poetry-based activities tend to generate strong emotional responses. In this respect, Hess emphasizes that "entering a literary text, under the guidance of appropriate teaching, brings about the kind of participation almost no other text can produce. When we read, understand, and interpret a poem we learn language through the expansion of our experience with a larger human reality" [8, p.20]. Such engagement further supports the development of cross-cultural awareness, an aspect highlighted by Lazar [10, p.75].

Poetry is one of the oldest genres in literary history. It is closely connected with the term "lyric", which derives etymologically from the Greek musical instrument "lyra" ("lyre" or "harp") and indicates an origin related to music. M. Klarer maintains that the term *poetry* goes back to the Greek word "poieo" ("to make", "to produce"), pointing out that the poet is the person who "makes" verse [9, p.27]. Any attempt to define poetry contrasts it to the notion of prose. The main characteristics defining poetry cover such aspects as verse, rhyme, and meter, traditionally regarded as the classical elements that distinguish poetry from prose.

Defining poetry is not an easy task as this genre encapsulates various aspects pertaining to the visual level, diction, the emotional level, and meaning. Even poets have written numerous poems about poetry, trying to reveal what a poem is by means of imagery or comparison. For example, in her famous poem "Poetry", Eleanor Farjeon suggests that poetry is not the actual rose, but the image or sense of the rose [6]:

What is Poetry? Who knows?
Not a rose, but the scent of the rose;
Not the sky, but the light in the sky;
Not the fly, but the gleam of the fly;
Not the sea, but the sound of the sea;
Not myself, but what makes me
See, hear, and feel something that prose
Cannot: and what it is, who knows.

The poet William Stafford has written, "A poem is anything said in such a way as to invite from the hearer or reader a certain kind of attention" [13]. This idea of inviting readers to pay attention is important as poetry guides us to notice the small things, natural acts, and kindnesses readers usually tend to overlook. Barbara Chatton in her publication "Using Poetry across the Curriculum" considers that "poems ask us to pay attention to love, to grief, and to events around us" [1 p.3]. She defines poetry as "the act of paying thoughtful attention to language and using that language to carefully express thoughts, feelings, and observations" [*Ibidem*, p.5]. Ralph Fletcher expresses the power of poetry to tell important truths in his poem "Poetry Stands": "Poetry must wound/ or heal those wounds./ When everyone sits,/ poetry stands" [7]. Therefore, poetry appeals not only to the verbal side of human activity but to the emotional side as well.

The key elements that combine to create the overall effect of a poem can be found on the following levels [9, p.30]:

- The lexical-thematic dimension: diction, rhetorical figures, theme, poetic voice.
- The visual dimension: stanza, concrete poems, acrostic poems, etc.
- The rhythmic-acoustic dimension: rhythm, rhyme, meter, onomatopoeia, alliteration, etc.

The lexical-thematic dimension of the poem is tightly related to *the content* and *the poetic voice.* The content of the poem is what it is all about – the ideas, themes, and the storyline that the poem contains. This aspect can also be referred to as the surface meaning of the poetic text. Grasping an initial idea or impression of what the poem is about is an important step towards a fuller and more solid understanding of the text [5, p.50]. The second element, the poetic voice, refers to the speaker of the poem. Often the poetic voice may coincide to that of the poet himself, but it may happen that the poet has created a character or a narrator figure who speaks the words of the poem. Determining the poetic voice may help to identify a number of other aspects, amongst which the tone, mood, and the overall intention behind the poem [*Ibidem*].

The poetic language is another essential aspect of the lexical-thematic dimension, which distinguishes poetry from other literary genres. It includes concrete nouns and scenes that convey themes through vivid imagery and rhetorical figures, most commonly simile, metaphor, personification, and epithet.

The visual dimension of the text concerns the poem's shape or the form. The different ways in which a poem can be conceived, in Croft's view, have a definite connection with the intention of the author and, consequently, influences the meaning of the poem [*Ibidem*, p.65]. A *concrete* poem, or shape poem, is written to represent objects that it describes. The following concrete poem by e.e. cummings combines the pictorial aspects of language and the graphic one:

l(a
le
af
fa
ll
s)
one
l

M. Klarer states that the text of the poem can be read as follows: "a leaf falls loneliness" or " l(a leaf falls)oneliness." The poet renders the theme of loneliness using the image of a single leaf falling from a tree. This is graphically achieved through the arrangement of the letters vertically instead of horizontally in order to represent visually the leaf's movement. In the act of reading, the eye can follow the course of the leaf from top to bottom and also from left to right and back. In one instance, this movement is underlined by an arrangement in the form of a cross. The technical term for this cross-like placement of words or letters is *chiasmus*, which derives from the Greek letter "chi" ("X"). Here, the chiasmus is formed by a cross-like arrangement of letters in two consecutive lines:

af
fa

The double "l" of the word "falls" at the center of the poem can be read as two "I"s for the first person singular, thus underlining the fall from "two-someness" to loneliness. In "l-one-liness" only one "l" remains, or, as cummings expresses it [9, p.37]:

one
l

Thus, poetry often works with the pictorial aspects of language and writing or combines both these aspects. As a result, the thematic level expressed through the use of concrete nouns or scenes, is strengthened on the visual level through a particular layout of letters, words, or stanzas.

Limericks are five-line verses in which generally the first, second and fifth lines rhyme, and the second and third lines rhyme. The lines are usually anapaestic (two unstressed syllables, followed by a stressed) with three feet in the first, the third and the fifth lines, and two feet in the second and the third.

There was a young lady named Wright
Who could travel much faster than light
She started one day
In the ordinary way
And came back the previous night [14, p.35]

Acrostic, concrete, and limerick poems represent an effective resource for developing students' writing skills in a stress-free friendly atmosphere.

The rhythmic-acoustic dimension distinguishes poetry from other types of texts. The basic elements making up this facet are rhyme, rhythm, onomatopoeia, alliteration, and assonance. Stephen Croft considers that rhyme brings an important contribution to the musical quality of the poem, affecting the sound and the general impact of the literary piece [5, pp.58-59]. The rhyme scheme contributes to this effect in many ways: it can exert a unifying influence that draws the poem together; it may emphasize certain elements of vocabulary or give the poem a musical quality, thus producing an aesthetic pleasure – the reason for which children in particular are very fond of verse, according to Joanna Thornborrow [14, p.36].

Rhythm, in S. Croft's view, "is one of the features that set poetry apart from other kinds of writing." [5, p.61] Like rhyme, rhythm can also exert a great influence on the overall effect of the poem conveying a sense of movement and life. Besides, it might emphasize certain elements of the poem, contribute to tone and atmosphere and create the "musical quality" of the poem [*Ibidem*].

The elements of the rhythmic-acoustic dimension play an important role in the process of teaching the English language through poems as they contribute to strengthening students' overall phonological control. Respecting the rhythmical arrangement of verses while reading or reciting poems enhances their ability to effectively use prosodic features to convey meaning in a fairly precise manner. Onomatopoeia, alliteration, and assonance may help learners attain a degree of clarity and precision in the articulation of English sounds.

Selecting adequate literary materials that are suitable for use with the students is a challenging task as it depends on a number of criteria. These belong mainly to three areas in G. Lazar's view: the type of course the educator is teaching, the types of students who are doing the course, and the nature of the text [10, p.48]. In deciding whether certain texts are appropriate for use with EFL students, G. Lazar suggests the following criteria as reasonable to follow: students' cultural background, students' level of language proficiency, students' age and emotional maturity, students' literary background [*Ibidem*, pp.51-55].

An Integrative Strategy of Exploiting Poems in the Classroom

Researchers generally recommend that teachers approach poetry through a three-staged procedure:

1. *Preparing students to cope with the text* using preparation activities, *i.e.* brainstorming, engaging them with a passage and eliciting ideas and language items.
2. *Engaging students in understanding the text* – during this stage the teacher may extract key phrases and get learners to match them with words expressing learners' feelings.
3. *Engaging students in activities which extend the theme and allow learners to express their own opinions, feelings and thoughts,* e.g. through a role-play learners can ask characters about their motives for action.

These stages roughly coincide to the integrated approach to poems during which learners are plenary involved in poetry-based activities. The methodology offers the framework for developing the language skills in an integrated way, incorporating a varied set of text-based, student-centred activities. Gillian Lazar suggests the following types of activities useful in designing poetry-based materials [10, pp.129-131]:

Pre-reading Activities

These types of activities are similar to warming up, aimed at stimulating student interest in the text and eliciting their feelings and responses to ideas and issues in a prescribed text.

- Students predict the theme of the poem from its title or a few key words or phrases in the poem.
- Students or groups of students are given different lines from the poem and asked to suggest the subject or theme of the poem.
- Students discuss or describe pictures or photographs relevant to the theme of the poem.
- Students are asked what they would do, and how they would respond, if they were in a situation similar to the one in the poem.

At this stage, teachers may as well include activities meant to help students cope with the language of the poem, such as comparing deviant language in the poem to more normative uses of language and guiding students towards an understanding of metaphorical or symbolic meanings through free associations round some of those words that carry powerful symbolic connotations.

While-reading Activities

Activities at this stage aim to help students to experience the text holistically by developing a productive interaction between the text and the reader.

- Students are given a jumbled version of the poem and asked to put them together again. This works particularly well for poems with a nuanced narrative line.
- Certain words are removed from the poem, and students have to fill in the gaps – by themselves or using a list of words provided.
- Students read only one verse at a time and then try to predict what is coming next - this works well with narrative poems.
- Students role-play the poem if it contains dialogue.
- Students underline all the words connected with a particular lexical set and then discuss their metaphorical or symbolic meaning.
- Students decide which definitions of a particular word in the dictionary is the one that best fits the meaning of the word in the poem.
- Students answer comprehension questions about the meaning of certain words or phrases in the poem.

Post-reading Activities

The activities presented below are meant to encourage students to reflect upon what they have read and generate thoughtful discussion on different issues related to both language and literature arising from the text:

- Students are given a series of statements about the possible underlying meanings of the poem, and they decide which ones are true or false.
- Students are given two or three brief interpretations of a poem (possibly from critics) and they decide which one they think is the most plausible or appropriate.
- Students imagine they are filming the poem. They have to decide what visual image they would provide for each line or verse of the poem as it is recited.
- Students practice reading the poem aloud and decide what mime or gestures would accompany a choral reading.

Further Follow-up Activities

- Students rewrite the poem as a different form of discourse.
- Students write their own poem, using the original as a model.
- Students do some language work based around any unusual language in the poem, for example, punctuating a poem with unconventional punctuation, creating words using affixes the poet may have used in an unusual way and then checking them in the dictionary, “correcting” unusual syntax, etc.

The selection of activities belonging to each stage presented above depends on the level of language proficiency the students possess, the skills that the teacher plans to develop, as well as the curriculum flexibility that allows educators to cluster poems around one subject or theme included in the studied units.

Poetry Activities Aimed at Developing Learners' Communicative Competence

The rationale of this study is based on the assumption that poems can be grouped around specific topics or domains, required by the curriculum, and explored to design integrated activities aimed at developing communicative competence, which, in its narrower sense, according to the CEFR, comprises linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competences [4, p.108].

The linguistic competences "include lexical, phonological, syntactical knowledge and skills and other dimensions of language as a system" [4, p.13]. In this context, poetry is of paramount importance in fostering learners' phonological control as it is also music; it helps students tune in to the rhythm of English, the rhymes and the sounds of the language, enhancing their phonological awareness and building a foundation for correct pronunciation and intonation required for proficiency in reading and listening. The poem "**Wayne the Stegosaurus",** by Kenn Nesbitt, can be used to develop pronunciation skills at A1 level by working with rhyme [12]*:*

Pre-reading Activities

1. The teacher highlights some of the difficult spelling patterns, for example, Wayne, brain; tries, eyes; white, night, etc. while emphasizing the pronunciation of each of the sounds.

While-reading Activities

2. The teacher groups the students into pairs and gives each pair the lines of a stanza, cut up into strips, and asks them to identify and group the lines that end in rhyming pairs. Students may be reminded that rhyming pairs are two words that end in the same sound, for example *Wayne* and *brain, tall* and *small*.
3. The students are asked to create a rhyming chain. They are instructed to choose four rhyming pairs from the poem and write down as many other words that rhyme as they can. The teacher may have some volunteers write their rhyming words on the board to check answers as a whole class.
4. Students listen to the recorded version of the poem and order the lines of the poem. The teacher asks volunteers to read the poem aloud to check answers as a whole class.

Post-reading Activity

5. Students are given a handout with a poem containing some words missing. It could be the same poem students were working with before, or a different poem. The teacher groups the students into pairs to brainstorm words to complete the gaps. They are encouraged to include rhymes, changing the initial rhyme scheme if they wish.

Meet the *Stegosaurus*, _____.
He doesn't have the biggest _____.
He's _____ and _____, _____ and _____,
But has a _____ that's extra _____.

In the CEFR, the lexical competence is defined as "knowledge of, and ability to use, the vocabulary of a language, consists of lexical elements and grammatical elements" [4, p.110], while the grammatical competence is defined as "knowledge of, and ability to use, the grammatical resources of a language" [4, p.112]. The poem "Transportation Vacation"

by Kenn Nesbitt can be efficiently used to teach students the past simple tense with a specific focus on irregular verbs and on building thematic vocabulary.

Pre-reading Activities

1. The teacher provides students with a list of key words from the poem (e.g., *airplane, bus, taxi, boat, train*) and asks them to predict the content of the poem by answering guiding questions such as: *What kind of vacation is described?* and *In what order might these means of transport appear?* Students justify their predictions before reading.

While-reading Activities

2. After students read the poem in class, the teacher may ask them to select from the text all the verbs in the past simple tense and provide their infinitive form.
3. Students group these verbs in two columns: regular verbs and irregular verbs.

Post-reading Activities

4. The teacher asks the students to split into five groups (according to the number of stanzas in the poem) and gives each group a stanza to rewrite using the present simple tense.
5. The teacher asks the students to transform the poem into a narrative in which they describe how they spent the vacation. Students may be supported in this task by being offered a list of sequencing signals to be used: *on the first day, on the second day, next, then, after that, later, three days later, last, finally, etc.* Although the poem is short, it is a rich resource for reinforcing students' vocabulary on the topic "Holidays" or "Means of Transport".

The sociolinguistic competence refers to the sociolinguistic conditions of language use. Communication between representatives of different cultures is determined to a large degree by social conventions (rules of politeness, norms governing relations between generations, sexes, classes and social groups, etc.) [4, p.13]. The pragmatic competence is concerned with the user/learner's knowledge of the principles of language use according to which messages are: organised, structured and arranged (discourse competence); used to perform communicative functions (functional competence); sequenced according to interactional and transactional schemata (design competence) [*Ibidem*]. In what follows, the poem "maggie and milly and molly and may", by e.e. cummings, will be explored to highlight its potential for a variety of activities aimed at practising the pragmatic and sociolinguistic competences.

Pre-reading Activities

1. The teacher asks students to think about the word *sea*. They write down any associations the word has for them [10, p.94].
2. Students are shown the **title of the poem** "maggie and milly and molly and may" and discuss in pairs what kind of story could involve four characters, what might happen at the beach?
3. Students analyse selected expressions from the poem, such as *a shell that sang, a stranded star, a smooth round stone* and suggest possible meanings. They recognise figurative meaning within context and interpret metaphorical language.

While-reading Activities

4. The students receive the poem "maggie and milly and molly and may" with all its twelve lines jumbled. They try to reorder them into a complete poem and explain why they ordered the poem in the way they did. They name the devices and means they drew upon to restore the cohesion and coherence of this poem.

5. Students compare their version with the original poem, identify the differences, and decide which one they prefer and why.

Making decisions about the correct order of the lines in this poem, *i.e.* topic progression, draws on discourse competence, the ability to organise the lines into coherent sequences, and depends on more than just comprehension of meaning. It relies on students' knowledge and experience of the way poetry is structured. For example, if their ordering was the same or similar to the original, the verse would begin: "maggie and milly and molly and may went down to the beach (to play one day)" as it matches the typical way of beginning a story – by identifying the characters and the setting. However, students may be confused initially about choosing these lines as the beginning of the poem because they do not start with a capital letter – an example of cummings' punctuation unorthodoxies. Students may put lines 9 and 10 together because of the two rhyming words at the end of each line – stone and alone.

Thus, for an accurate reconstruction of the poem, students need to integrate several aspects of discourse competence:

- recognising that the poem follows a repetitive narrative structure, where each girl encounters different experiences;
- identifying cohesive devices that signal sentence connections, e.g. *coordination* (and maggie, and molly, and milly), *relative clauses* (which raced sideways… whose rays five languid fingers were); *cause/result relations* (so sweetly she couldn't remember her troubles);
- ordering the narrative progression that illustrates the macro-structures of discourse: introduction of characters, action (going to the beach), individual experiences, and the reflective conclusion.

Restoring the correct order of the poem lines raises learners' awareness of the overall discourse structure, knowledge transferable to other forms of discourse, for example, a collocational link like "sang so sweetly" might equally be used in a conversation or a newspaper article. Others will be more specific to poetry [*Ibidem*].

Post-reading Activities

6. Students discuss the final lines "*For whatever we lose (like a you or a me) / it's always ourselves we find in the sea".* They interpret the meaning of these lines, reflect on the symbolic value of the sea, and relate the message to broader experiences of loss and self-discovery.
7. Students discuss *what they might discover about themselves in nature, focusing on the* sociolinguistic competence, namely expressing **personal values and attitudes**.
8. As a creative extension, students write an additional stanza describing another girl discovering something at the beach. They maintain thematic and structural coherence with the original poem and use descriptive language to convey meaning, thus developing their discourse and functional competences.

Conclusions

1. Approaching poetry through the three-dimensional framework that integrates lexical-thematic, visual, and rhythmic-acoustic dimensions serves as an effective pedagogical resource for designing competence-based activities in the EFL classroom, as it provides clear directions for targeting specific aspects of the linguistic competence, *i.e.* lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, and orthographic components.

2. The structured use of pre-, while-, and post-reading activities enables a progressive, systematic development of learners' linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competences, in alignment with the CEFR model of communicative competence.

3. Due to its cognitive, affective, and creative potential for student engagement, poetry proves to be a versatile resource in the EFL classroom that fosters not only language development but also interpretative skills, cultural awareness, and learner agency, thus supporting a holistic approach to foreign language learning.

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