

Effects of a Multimodal Approach on ESL/EFL University Students' Attitudes towards Poetry

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Abstract

Poetry is a specific genre of literature that has been long argued as being too difficult for ESL/EFL learners. However, poetry is considered a valuable and authentic material for teaching language learners and teaching poetry in the language classroom can lead to a meaningful language learning experience. This study examined the implementation of a multimodal teaching approach to teaching poetry in an ESL/EFL university classroom in Ecuador and whether this approach would improve students' attitude towards learning English.

Keywords: language teaching, poetry, learner attitudes, multimodal teaching

1. Review of the Literature

1.1 Introduction

Literature once played a prominent role in language study, but it is now often excluded from ESL/EFL programs (Spack, 1985). Poetry is a specific genre of literature that has been argued to be too difficult for ESL/EFL learners to take on. Many teachers agree that poetic concepts and cultural assumptions are too challenging for language learners (Finch, 2003). McKay (1982) examined the common arguments against the use of literature in the ESL/EFL classroom. One of the arguments is that due to the structural complexity and its unique use of language, literature does little to contribute to the goal of teaching grammar (McKay, 1982, p. 529). Others argue that many ESL/EFL teachers consider literature a work of art and beyond the proficiency level of their students and ignore it as an appropriate source of learning and teaching (Bassnett & Grundy, 1993). One more argument is the specific cultural viewpoints that are found in literature may be too difficult for ESL/EFL students to make sense of (McKay, 1982).

However, in recent years, many educators and researchers have again recognized the academic, linguistic, and cultural benefits of the study of literature (Spack, 1985). This acknowledgment from educators and scholars can be seen from the publication of many textbooks on the role literature plays in language classes (Collie & Slater, 1987; Brumfit & Carter, 1986; Hill, 1986; Lazar, 1993; McRae, 1991). Literature is once again seen as a rich source for language learning. Literature can help students to develop personal enrichment, language development, and cultural enrichment (Collie & Slater, 1987, Lazar, 1993, Carter & Brumfit, 2000). Literature in the language classroom can also be very motivating for language acquisition, help students to understand another culture, develop their interpretative abilities, and encourage students to talk about their opinions and feelings (Lazar, 1993).

1.2 Poetry in the ESL/EFL Classroom

Poetry is considered a valuable and authentic material for teaching language learners. Using the right teaching strategies, poetry can evoke interests and motivation, therefore leading students to communicate about things they care about and this ultimately leads to better language learning (Pushpa, V.K. & Savaedi, S.Y., 2014). Poetry enriches language. It provides students with a different perspective towards language- one without rules of grammar and syntax, and one with vigorous figures of speech. Poetry also provides plentiful opportunity for students to enrich their vocabulary. The meaningful contexts can help students learn, use, and remember vocabulary more effectively (Lazar, 1996). Poetry encourages creativity and inspiration. Poetry can serve as a good model for creative writing (McKay, 1982). Teaching poetry in the language classroom can lead to a meaningful language learning experience.

Despite the numerous benefits, poetry is not often utilized in the ESL/EFL classroom. It is the literary genre that usually receives the most groans from students. It is usually assumed that English poetry is too difficult for ESL/EFL students to cope with (Khatib, 2011). Students' attitudes towards poetry are generally negative. Hirvela and Boyle (1988) found that only 6% of the Chinese students surveyed liked poetry more than other literary genres and 73% of the students reported poetry as the most difficult and intimidating literary form. Ghazali, Setia, Murhusamy, and Jusoff (2009) conducted a similar study in Malaysia and found that poetry was not popular among students. The study by Akyel and Yalcin (1990) showed that students view poetry as not having much effect on language skills. The importance of studying students' attitudes lies in the fact that attitudes are not static (Ghazali, 2008). Khatib (2011) concluded that students fail to appreciate poetry mainly because of inappropriate selection of materials and ineffective teaching methods. Negative attitudes about poetry can change with better teaching strategies. Traditionally, poetry has been taught from a teacher-centered process;

however, to meaningfully engage students with poetry, a learner-centered, multimodal approach should be utilized. This includes creativity in teaching with applications of new media that build on the literacies have already developed through their immersion in digital technologies (Hughes, 2007).

1.3 Multimodal Approach

The New London Group (1996) coined the term “multimodality” when they discussed the changing ways of communication due to new technologies. They argued for a much broader view of literacy than the traditional printed text and advocated for a new approach to engage students and use all available resources, especially multimedia technologies (New London Group, 1996). Kress (2003) claimed that very soon the screen will govern all of our communication practices. Jewitt (2006) defined modalities as different modes of expression—aural, visual, gestural, spatial, and linguistic. These different modalities come together in a digital environment in ways that reshape the printed word and image or sound (Jewitt, 2006). This combination allows for creativity, meaning making, and can enhance the learning environment. Through technology induced interactions, multimodality provides resources and opportunities that challenge the traditional forms of communication and teaching.

1.4 A Multimodal Approach to Teaching Poetry

“Poetry is meant to be lifted from the printed page and explored in multimodal ways (visually, gesturally, aurally)” (Hughes, 2007, p. 3). The very nature of poetry offers a perfect opportunity to develop awareness in students about the role of multimedia in meaning making (McVerry, 2007). A multimodal approach to teaching poetry has the potential to boost students’ engagement (Xerri, 2012) and according to Blake (2009) a multimodal approach helps teachers to develop an appreciation of poetry as well as creative and critical thinking. New technologies have “performative potential that encourages students to get inside a poem and play with it” (Hughes, 2007, p. 3).

A multimodal approach to teaching poetry can be done in a number of innovative ways. One way is the use and creation of video/digital poems. Miller (2007) reported that the results of a digital video project showed how “students developed into more active readers and composers as they pursued their own understandings through digital video composing” (p. 71). Students can use MovieMaker, iMovie, or any other video editing software to create their own digital poem or to represent an existing poem through multimedia. Students can add their own voice, sound effects, music, and images and this approach represents the very nature of a multimodal approach to teaching. Other multimodal approaches to teaching poetry include audio and video recordings, the creation of hypertexts (a text that is linked to other texts with hyperlinks), the use of wikis and blogs, threaded online discussions (asynchronous chats), poetry slams, and collaborative poetry websites. Each of these activities shows how students can explore poetry through a multimodal approach. Students are already immersed in digital technology and the question is no longer whether a teacher uses technology in the classroom, but rather how the teacher integrates the technology into the curriculum (Hughes, 2007).

2. Research Purpose

This study aims at investigating the attitudes of Ecuadorean university students towards poetry using a multimodal approach in English language class.

2.1 Methodology

2.2 Participants

The participants of this study were 29 university students at a small private university in Quito, Ecuador in a B2 level English class. All students were undergraduate students with majors in business, mechatronics, engineering, biology, diplomacy, or tourism. There were 15 female students and 14 male students, ranging in age from 18 to 25 years. All of the students speak Spanish as their native language and had not taken poetry courses in English prior to this study.

2.3 Instrumentation

Two instruments were used to gather the data for this study. The first instrument was an attitude questionnaire designed by the researcher for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire consisted of twelve Likert Scale questions regarding the students’ attitudes toward the effectiveness of poetry in improving English skills (writing, grammar, reading, and listening). The questionnaire was first piloted with thirty students within the same age group and English level as the participants in the study. Data from the pilot test of the questionnaire using Cronbach alpha formula yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.88, which is above the 0.70 threshold for acceptable reliability.

The second instrument was an interview with open-ended questions with several students at the end of the research to better capture their perceptions and attitudes regarding the multimodal teaching approach to

poetry in English language class.

2.4 Procedures

Students were given the pre-assessment questionnaire to measure their attitudes towards poetry in the English language classroom. Over the next five weeks of lessons, the students studied twenty-three poems in varying multimodal approaches. The researcher redesigned the five week poetry curriculum from a traditional approach to a multimodal approach. In a traditional approach it is common to “bombard students with biographical information about the author, political, religious and philosophical ideas related to the text and explaining rhetorical devices and figures of speech” (Khatib, 2011, p. 165). During the five weeks of lessons, the following multimodal approaches were utilized: numerous video poem clips from Youtube.com, Nike television commercials that incorporate famous poems by Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou, choral reading activities, audio recording assignments, music videos, slam poetry videos, film video clips, and a final multimodal poetry project that involved students in writing their own poem while also producing a video of the poem. At the end of the poetry curriculum, the same questionnaire was administered to measure the students’ attitudes towards poetry.

2.5 Findings

An attitude scale questionnaire was administered before and after the poetry unit to assess the students’ attitude towards learning poetry in an English language class and to find out whether there had been any changes in their attitude. A paired-sample t-test indicated that there was significant differences in the students’ attitude. Using a sample of n=29, the result from a sample t-test showed that there was a mean difference in the attitude survey scores after the five week intervention ($M = -41$, $SD = .66$), $t_{(28)} = -3.31$, $p < .05$, 95% CI: $-.66 - -.16$. The null hypothesis is rejected. Cohen’s d of .62 indicates a medium difference in the attitude scores after the five week intervention.

2.6 Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

		M	N	SD	SEm
Pair 1	Pretest	3.8955	29	.53176	.09875
	Posttest	4.3021	29	.43094	.08002

2.7 Table 2: Results of Paired Samples T-Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	P
		M	SD	SEm	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pretest - Posttest	-0.40655	0.66112	0.12277	-0.65803	-0.15508	-3.312	28	0.003

The findings of this study indicate a significant difference in students’ attitudes towards learning poetry in English language class by using a multimodal teaching approach. In addition to the pre and post questionnaire, an interview with open-ended questions was conducted with several students at the end of the poetry unit. The interview questions were about the students’ likes and dislikes of the poetry unit, if the poetry unit changed the way they think about poetry, and if it improved their English skills. One student reported that the poetry unit was like “entering a new world” and studying poetry in English “forced me to think in English because poetry in English does not translate the same into Spanish”. Another student said, “We can see poetry in another way, with imagination,” while many students commented that the poetry unit helped them learn many new vocabulary words.

3. Conclusion

Poetry is a valuable and authentic genre of literature that can be taught successfully in an ESL/EFL classroom. Poetry can enrich language learning and promote creativity and inspiration. Traditionally, poetry has been taught from a teacher-centered process; however, to better engage students, a learner-centered, multimodal approach should be used. A multimodal approach to teaching poetry helps develop an appreciation of poetry as well as creative and critical thinking (Blake, 2009). This study confirms the use of a multimodal approach to teaching poetry will improve students’ attitudes towards poetry. Students reported that the poetry unit was fun, interactive, and they saw poetry in a new light as a tool to learn English.

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