

Original Research Article

Challenges and perceptions in learning poetry in two Leribe high schools in Lesotho

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This study investigates the challenges learners face in studying and engaging with poetry. Learners from two high schools in Leribe were purposefully selected, and focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. The findings reveal the challenges to be the teacher-centred approach dominated by the teacher-narration, poetry lessons being predominated by teacher-talk and the learners listening and sometimes taking down notes instead of actively participating in free discussions throughout the lessons. Additionally, it was found out that these teacher-centred methodologies led to learners who are passive and cannot analyse, interpret and provide their personal responses. Furthermore, learners had linguistic challenges including inability to read lines as opposed to sentences (inappropriate poetry reading skills) and unfamiliar vocabulary. Other factors included lack of access to underlying meaning, cultural differences and learners' attitudes towards poetry. The study therefore concludes that the transactional approach should be implemented as part of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) poetry education and that good poetry teaching requires a praxis best suited to the nature and stature of this varied and wide literary genre. It is recommended that a facilitation of more unfettered personal writing should be practised for self-expression and for the encouragement of a learner's voice.

Keywords: Challenges, Learners' perceptions, Lesotho, Literature in English, Poetry learning.

INTRODUCTION

The Literature in English curriculum is instrumentalised to connect with and appreciate others. Interpersonal connections can help learners improve their social and additional interpersonal skills with the objective of accepting and learning to live in relationship or harmony with others (Amuta, 2014). According to Amuta, the Nigerian philosophy of education avers that Literature in English has facilitated people to live in unanimity and synchronisation as one blended, enduring, self-governing and supreme nation instituted on the ideologies of liberty and even-handedness and it has similarly helped to endorse inter-African camaraderie and world armistice through being empathetic and sympathetic (Amuta, 2014). Amuta further posits that Literature in English supports the

comprehension of human nature and character. That is, through drama, a learner actor is at the opportunity of manifestation and purgation of innermost yearnings over the perseverance of internal struggle and torment. Likewise, performers recurrently find it stress-free to prompt their interior and half-understood experiences when wearing a disguise like an animal costume or clown costume or just a hat sometimes (Korb and Akolo, 2017). Literature in English is allied to the intellectual domain of an individual through its augmentation of the aptitude to tell apart, critique and make decisions (Aiyede, 2015). It affords learner the chance to respond to literature and cultivate their personal sentiments about the topic. Crippen (2012) asserts that quality literary texts (be it prose-

fiction, drama or poetry) do not tell the reader the whole shebang they need to know; it leaves for readers to develop various opinions. One reader may take something entirely in a different way from the piece of literature than the subsequent reader, constructed on two personal viewpoints and experiences (Dada and Olaniyan, 2020). Learners can learn to gauge and analyse literary texts, as well as recapitulate and theorise about the topic. Thus, Literature in English aids in building learners' characters morally and intellectually because that instruction in the subject is a means of entertainment and a way of conserving customs, belief systems, dogmas and societal values. While literature finds its nourishment from the society, the society also draws inspiration and motivation from literature. A literary work is a form of a person's ideas through views of the social environment around him using beautiful language (Meirysa and Ratu, 2021). Literature exists as an author's reflection on existing phenomena.

Unawareness of prevalence of poetry

In most cases, high school learners hear poetry every day yet unaware of it. Poetry is an art form that has timelessly survived around learners and they in turn survived with it since their infancy nursery rhymes, and it has followed them, a language silhouette, into their adolescence (Young, 2016). It co-exists with and in the music they listen to through their gadgets as they stroll to a shop; it is in the language they use to chat on various social media platforms and in their peer groups; it is heard in their school shouts and inscribed in lavatory stalls (ibid, 6). Poetry is a significant literary form of personal expression, one that has been present almost as long as humanity; it is a communicative art that reveals to us the various ways which prove that we are all identical underneath the skin and that the most central common denominator is the human heart (Grimes, 2005). This says that the existence of poetry is as old as time itself and it is the prehistoric and most widespread of literary forms; rich in the oral and literary tradition of almost every culture.

Nonetheless, with that timelessness of poetry so obvious, fewer high school learners ever catch it coming from the mouths of their teachers of English and Literature or are even encouraged to discuss, analyse, write or study it critically in their English classes (Young, 2016). Educators, academics, critics, and poets themselves, far and wide, state publicly that poetry possesses great virtues as an art form, however it is the literary genre that is least taught in high schools today (Dressman and Faust, 2014; Xerri, 2014; Young, 2016). The phenomenon of the current poetry pedagogy in the high school classroom therefore, is necessary to investigate. Matter-of-factly, while many practising high school teachers of English may bring to light the constructive attitudes toward it, and involvements and understandings with poetry in their classrooms, there are many other teachers who may suggest that the genre is facing extinction. Enquiry into the phenomenon of poetry teaching and learning, as a consequence, would seek to understand the existing experiences of currently practising

high school teachers of English and Literature as well as learners regarding the values of poetry, and teachers' and learners' perceptions, successes and opportunities they discovered including pedagogic failures and challenges in the poetry classroom (Moea, 2021). This research seeks to gain better awareness and understanding of the problems encountered during the poetry lesson through the lens of learners.

Some pedagogical discourse around Literature and English Language

The pedagogy of poetry has long been renowned as a facet of English Language and Literature curricula, which presents clear-cut pedagogical challenges for teachers in many settings (Myhill and Wilson, 2013). Although studies have shown that teaching poetry is advantageous for learners (Iida 2012, Hanauer, 2010), poetry teaching can be pronounced as negligible in the arena of teaching English (Wilson, 2010). With regard to the prominence of teaching poetry, Hanauer (2003) avows that teaching poetry stimulates understanding and tolerance because its discourse encourages empathy for and comprehension of individual experience and thus can play an integral role in advancing concepts of human diversity.

Teachers have an undertaking to live up to; to open the door leading their learners to knowledge uncensored. Then comes another step as a requisite; igniting the learners' interest in learning poetry; allowing learners to, like rite of passage, enter through the 'poetry door' (Moea, 2021). This could be said to be all-embracing for all fundamentals in second language teaching (SLT) but then again when looking at the poetry door, it could be highly labour intensive and complicated to make the learners step over that starting point. In this regard, therefore, the strategic way is and would be for all stakeholders (teachers and curriculum developers and designers) to take part in ensuring smooth passage of learners through the poetry door, by building bridges leading to such a starting point in order to reach all those learners that will pass through one's classroom (Moea, 2021).

Notwithstanding the fact that poetry writing instruction is known to be of assistance in language classrooms, Hanauer (2012) suggests that many learners and teachers in English as a Second Language (ESL)/English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts are sceptical about using poetry in their writing class. The reason why many teachers seem to avoid teaching poetry writing is that they think poetry is more likely to be taught as part of the reading curriculum rather than as part of the writing curriculum. As well, the teachers believe that poetry writing is 'difficult.' The dearth of desire to give grounding in poetry writing could be triggered by educational experiences that teachers have had, such as the level of exposure and experience in writing poetry in both their personal and academic lives. At schools (in both the international and Lesotho contexts) poetry is not accorded bounteous space in the curriculum and teaching time-table. Worse still, both learners and teachers seem to fear it, thus a grossly sidelined discipline. Also, its starring role to grow

human know-how and generate language awareness has not been well apprehended. This study therefore sets out to investigate some of the pedagogic challenges of poetry in the classroom to better understand how teachers and learners could be helped to lessen the fear factor regarding poetry.

Methodology

This study is qualitative and was done through both focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews with Grade 10 and 11 learners from two purposively selected schools in the district of Leribe, Lesotho. This qualitative approach was deemed suitable to the questions in this study. The researchers wanted to understand the poetry teaching and learning processes by interacting with respondents in their contexts (Akhtar, 2016). The participants in this case were learners who were interviewed in their respective schools.

The focus group interview was a semi-structured interview with nine open questions for learners. There were two groups of learners in Khetha High School and two from Letsema High School which comprised of eight participants each. The selected participants were believed to be an accurate source of data because they were all studying poetry. To manage and reduce biasness, the participants were afforded enough chance and hence true reflection came to the surface because the fundamental data produced by this technique are the transcripts of the group discussions and the moderator's reflections and annotations (Mishra, 2016).

Conducted conversationally, Adams (2015) states that with one respondent at a time, the semi-structured interview employs a blend of closed and open-ended questions, often accompanied by follow-up why or how questions. Adams goes on to add that the conversation can meander around the issue on the agenda, rather than adhering slavishly to verbatim questions as in a standardised survey—and may delve into totally unforeseen issues. Datko (2015) adds that a semi-structured interview is a qualitative research method that is a combination of a pre-determined set of open questions (questions that prompt discussion) together with the opportunity for the interviewer to explore particular themes or responses further. These aspects made these interview methods appropriate for this study because both used open-ended questions for ease of probing in order to get true data from the participants.

Results and discussion

The difficulty with poetry teaching at the introductory level with second language learners is that a number of hitches happen simultaneously. The fact that the demands of the Examination bodies' literature syllabus have obligated teachers and learners to study poetry does not seem to have made it as acceptable as it should be (Umar and Iyere, 2021). Kennedy (2009) observes that learners' discontentment for poetry every so often is caused by inauspicious experiences with it, unskilled teachers, the print and the very nature of its presentation in books, the

unacquainted diction, conventions, and peculiar associations to things that are worlds apart and the string of mind boggling questions that follow the poem. Below are the challenges that surfaced from the learners in the context of this study.

Absence of ICT tools

The absence of ICT tools in teaching English literary texts appears to demotivate learners. Data revealed that due to the fact that poetry demands 'a lot of research,' it necessitates the use of technology; internet and gadgets. Unfortunately, according to data, learners have no access to phones nor the internet as manifestation of the digital divide that often exists even as technology becomes more prevalent. Using classroom technologies chiefly depends on affordability and availability (Mahao and Gennrich, 2022) while the physical location of learners and teachers also contributes to unequal opportunities to accessing technology (Janks, Dixon, Ferreira, Granville and Newfield, 2014; Lembani, Gunter, Breines, Tapiwa and Dalu, 2020). As a result, it becomes an arduous task for learners to access information and consequently they find the study of poetry boring. Also, data reveals that this problem compels learners to depend solely on what the teacher provides. Research has proved that the use of ICT in the classroom ignites the interest of the learner in learning (Umar and Iyere, 2021). Therefore, for ease of research on learners and reducing their burden of learning, the use of technology in class is advised. ICT offers novel vicissitudes and solutions in literature teaching methodologies from traditional text-based learning to text. Thus, it as well boosts learners' morale. Therefore it is a paramount way to help alleviate learners' problems in learning.

Use of teacher-centred methods

The data revealed that teachers are using teacher-centred methods to teach poetry to learners. Group B stated that their teacher explains poetry, line by line for them. In addition, group C declared that their teacher explains the whole poem to them and even gives them some summary notes including the general analysis of the poem. Group A stated that their teacher prepares notes for them and gives them questions for assessment. Similarly, the same responses surfaced from the semi-structured interviews. Clauses like, 'he explains the whole poem,' 'he elaborates poems,' 'he reads the poems,' 'he leaves no stone unturned by clearly explicating...,' surfaced in the individual learners' responses. One learner even stated: "one would call feeding learners with information." Based on this information, it is clear that learners are passive in these classes while the teachers do everything for them. This denies learners direct interaction with the poem. Dutta (2001), in a study conducted in Bangladesh, states that there is no attempt to involve learners in considerable close-reading of the poem, let alone loud reading. Teachers only hand down their own personal interpretation of a poem. This interpretation, according to Tuvuzimpundu (2013), in a study conducted in Rwanda, basically revolves around denotation rather than

the connotation sense. It thus sounds like language comprehension lessons, not literature.

Lack of the knowledge of teaching methodologies

Also, it is clear that teachers are not cognizant of other teaching methodologies which could be dynamically used exchangeably to demystify poetry as a problematic genre for learners. Tuvuzimpundu (2013) posits that such a non-participatory teacher-centred method of teaching pushes learners away from any attempt whatsoever of delving into poetry. Learners tend to view it as a teacher-handed down mystery. Consequently, they tend to look on waiting for the teacher to demystify all the ideas and poetic devices for them. What also surfaced is that teachers provide their analysis as the only correct analysis, denying learners a chance to explore with their responses. From both individual learners and groups, it appeared that teachers provide learners with analysis and interpretation of a poem under study; provide hand-outs of a prepared summary and notes. This obviously emphasises that the teacher's analysis is the only one that is correct and therefore learners will simply rehash what the teacher has said or written and not assimilate that information and blend it with their understanding. Therefore, poetry will remain foreign to learners.

Problem of cultural differences

Also surfacing from the data is that cultural differences pose a major challenge for learners to understand poetry as well as its analysis. Byars (2016) articulates that there are some poets from different generations and cultural backgrounds who use poetry to achieve different agendas. "Confronted with the different nature of these poems, readers require extra time and effort to understand the message in the poems by which some readers may not be willing to do so" (ibid, p.18). Poetry usually requires learners to be critical readers so that they will be able to read between the lines in order to understand the message that the poet is trying to convey. The historical and cultural distance of the poet from the learners appear to cause problems for learners for it becomes 'too demanding' and 'greatly hectic' to study the poems. Learners also state that, due to this historical distance, it becomes a laborious task to try to understand the content and context of poetry; both superficially and metaphorically and it becomes time-consuming for them to engage in multiple readings which, more often than not, appears like a futile exercise. The presence of the historical and cultural background to the analysis of poetry makes learners to dislike poetry thus making it labour-intensive and laborious to study. Lazar (1993) cited in Yusef (2017) also annotates in agreement with the learners that a dire strait for learners reading a poetry text is that its cultural background may seem inaccessible to them. As a result, teachers have to consider learners' unfamiliarity with the text's cultural background in order to scaffold learning and make it easier for them.

Language problem

Another finding of this research is that the language used in poetry is a problem. From both the individual and focus group interviews, learners revealed that poetry's use of unconventional grammar has a negative impact on their syntactical comprehension. This is because it may 'affect sentence construction.' Apart from that, data reveals yet again that the vocabulary used appears too 'complicated' because of the heightened language employed by poets in their writing. This becomes 'too tricky' to make sense of and 'very difficult' to interpret and even understand. The learners consider their emotions and feelings evoked by a poem as being too vague and hardly graspable and find it difficult to verbalise them due to language inaccessibility. Then they think they have failed, not realising the fact that poetry is actually, and very often, inherently the 'expression of the inexpressible', which is to be understood as the tension between what a poet intends communicating by his words and what the words in turn are able to arouse (partially) (Vala, Rechicova, Doubalova, and Sladova, 2012). This appears to challenge learners because it demands them to have a wide vocabulary which is already a problem with them as second language speakers of English. This, to a large extent, already restricts learners' use of English due to their limited exposure to the language beyond the classroom. Appropriate selection of poetry, according to learners' level of English, without pressure and preconceptions, can result in an enriching content-based experience and in a meaningfully transformative way. Daniel (2013) posits that 'competence in the language in which the poetry to be appreciated is written thus becomes crucial to unraveling the message of the poet.' The modus operandi to achieve this competence is consequently crucial to the task of appreciating poems by the secondary school learners.

Learners' attitude towards poetry

Other studies also report a recurring concern about pupils' resistance to poetry (Benton, 1986) and there has been an ongoing discussion about how literary theory, primarily from the new critics, contributes to the perception of poetry as something that is for an educated elite only and how this perception intimidates pupils (Dias and Hayhoe 1988; Xerri 2018; Young 2016). According to data, learners have an attitude towards poetry due to the fact that the language used is often rather far off from them and therefore incomprehensible. This is emphasised by one learner participant who claimed that sometimes poetry settings are just 'too elusive' and that the deep meanings are 'boring' because 'they cannot relate to them.' Three groups revealed that they 'don't enjoy poetry' because of its defiant use of language and 'unrelatable' settings and cultures. Six learners further added that due to its far off historical and cultural backgrounds, they end up 'having negative attitudes' towards it. This aligns with what research has revealed that the position of poetry within literature teaching is not easy – learners are susceptible to manifesting negative attitudes to it and regard it

impenetrable and aloof from today's world, and teachers are anxious of working with it (Benton, 2000).

Poetry syntax problem

Learners also revealed that they have a problem with poetry syntax. The unconventional lines in a poem, which deviate from conventional sentences, make it hard for them to read with ease, especially in the cases of enjambment. Groups A, B and C declared that the dearth of punctuation marks, especially in the cases where enjambment is applied, poses difficulty in reading with comprehension. All the individual learner interviews also revealed that the lofty language and vocabulary used in poetry becomes a huge challenge because many of the words used are unfamiliar to them and that makes it hard to understand or even read with ease in order to get meaning and understand the text. Reading focused purely on getting information is applied to poetry. Fleming, (1992) cited in Vala, Doubalova, Sladova and Rechicova (2012) postulates that 'while reading, learners tend to use the stereotypes used for reading prose texts and try to understand each line separately instead of trying to perceive the poetic text as a whole' hence becoming a dire challenge to their understanding and learning of poetry. It is also a case in this regard because learners seem to approach poetry reading as if it is a comprehension passage in a language classroom. Poetry provides an amusing, mottled collection and source of pleasure for learners (Brumfit and Carter, 2000 cited in Wai and Abidin, 2020). While prescribing poems may benefit learners with higher English proficiency, not all learners have a good command of the language as evidenced by this data. This lack of proficiency in the English language dampens learners' enthusiasm to explore more reading materials, particularly when the texts provided are above their level of language competency (Wai and Abidin, 2020). Most second-language learners who retain intermediate to inadequate language proficiency may come across complications and hitches, as is the case according to the findings of this study, in understanding the prescribed poems, resulting in negative attitudes towards the learning of poetry.

Teacher's analysis and interpretation

Findings also reveal that teachers provide learners with the analysis and interpretation prepared by the teacher alone. Groups A, B and D revealed that their teachers provide them with a lot of content and hardcopy material as the analysis of the poems in the syllabus. Eight learners revealed that their teachers read for them and explicate the poems for them. Group C added that their teacher analyses the poems in an intricate manner and their perspectives are 'not much regarded or even taken into consideration.' As a result, they only take what their teacher has said as the only correct information. This is a challenge because learners are not allowed to explore their interpretations. As a result, they are unable to provide personal responses as necessitated by the LGCSE Literature in English syllabus which provides that 'the study of literature... enables

learners to express not only facts but also speculations, deductions, opinions and feelings that will extend their communicative skills (NCDC and ECOL, 2018). This also hinders learner-centredness as the ideology promoted by the LGCSE Literature in English syllabus (Moea, 2022).

Over-analysis of a poem

Researchers highlight how overly analytical methodology disengages pupils and stress the need to emphasise feelings and the aesthetic experience of poetry (Rumbold and Simecek, 2016). Vala, Doubalova, Sladova and Rechicova (2012) add that the learners consider poetry to be difficult for them to understand due to their supposition that they obligatorily have to understand it in exactly the same semantic understanding and sense as others, as well as their teachers'. Competence is essentially about ability, a mastery of a particular task. Inability to perform this task could make the person ineffective. A learner who lacks understanding of the language used to write a poem will definitely find it an uphill task to appreciate such a poem.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study reflected on the teacher-centred approach dominated by the teacher-narration and how this affects the learning of poetry in three schools. What surfaced from the data is that most of the time poetry lessons are predominated by teacher-talk and the learners listening, and sometimes taking down notes instead of actively participating in free discussions throughout the lessons. Additionally, it was found out that these teacher-centred methodologies lead to learners who are passive and cannot analyse, interpret and provide their personal responses. Again, the key challenges that surfaced are linguistic in nature: inability to read lines as opposed to sentences (inappropriate poetry reading skills), unfamiliar vocabulary and lack of access to underlying meaning. Apart from that, cultural differences and learners' attitudes appear to pose barriers to understanding and following poetry lessons.

This study concludes that the transactional approach should be implemented as part and parcel of EFL and ESL poetry education so that learners can be involved in participatory and aesthetic activities during reading tasks. This approach is important because it can take them into analysing and interpreting meaning smoothly, along with deepening their joy and awareness of the aesthetic beauty of literature. EFL teachers should then take advantage of the power of language ambiguity in poetry so that they and learners mutually support each other to negotiate meaning as well as considering assorted interpretations grounded on logical thinking, reasoning and proof. Teachers should not simply regard learners as recipients of poetry instruction but, rather, as important collaborators in the process of learning both the simple and hidden aspects of poetry. In addition, learners often have great abilities to construct knowledge where opportunities to do so are availed to them by the teacher.

Sarasaphy and Marimutu (2007) assert that recurrently, learners only look at the word for word meanings and do

not look beyond. This also surfaced in the data of this study that learners struggle with reading and meaning making when studying poetry. For this reason, there is a tendency to conclude that all poems are boring, thus contributing to poetry being a disregarded genre by both teachers and learners. Unfortunately, this claim has some basis as well, particularly in relation to poems with unfamiliar vocabulary and social or cultural settings which require additional background search to be able to understand them. This can be a real challenge for learners. Therefore, the tasks of understanding the poetry would require a certain level of proficiency in the language; and not all learners have it. Some lack the literature background they could have received at primary school level.

In addition, a number of learners find it challenging to use English as a means of communication. Inclusion of poetry now becomes a mammoth challenge. On the other hand, according to critical theorists of language, there is hardly any difference between literary and ordinary language. In the same way, figures of speech are used in conveyance of layers of meanings equally in serious literary and idle talk sense (Bala, 2011). They simply transfer meanings and information. It is however important that the metaphor entails two terms: target and source.

Gönen (2018) suggests that poetry's role to grow human experience and generate language consciousness has not been fully realised. Using poetry in the language class is, to some extent, disregarded by many teachers. Poetic language encompasses manipulation of grammar and terminology (lexis) to suit orthographical and phonological congruence; and in consequence, deviation from standard norms of language may be considered out-of-the-way and slightly complex to EFL and ESL learners. Teachers' reluctance towards using poems may stem from considerations about following textbook materials which reserve little or no room for literary texts, and lack of time and motivation to include poetry and literature in general (McIlory, 2013). As a consequence, the potential of operationalising poetry to nurture language development has not been appreciated hitherto.

It should be stated that good poetry teaching requires a praxis (a powerful combination of practice with theory) best suited to the nature and stature of this varied and wide literary genre. This praxis takes into account the upgrade of learners as writers as well as readers of poetry, in concurrence with the teacher as a writing practitioner and pedagogue. It should be taken into consideration that the collaboration of piecing together of writing by way of reading and analysing poetry is very useful in developing learners' curiosity and engagement with poetry. As a consequence, there is potential to develop, hone and enhance substantial literacy capabilities among learners. It is argued therefore, that in writing poetry, the dissimilarities and sensibilities of published poetry are best understood and appreciated.

It is also worthy to note that poetry writing, performance and appreciation are equally significant and fundamental in learning to comprehend poetry and to appreciate its

potential as a system of personal and creative expression that has emancipative and transformative possibilities. Despite the fact that there might be strong emphasis on more functional or instrumental notions of literacy in literacy programmes in many Lesotho classrooms, poetry is pivotal for understanding the deeper meanings in the use of language, and its power to convey tone and emotion, as well as the possible rhythmic patterns between words and within word groups. It is also important for facilitating more unfettered personal writing that is important for self-expression and for the encouragement of a learner's voice. It is therefore important to note that poetry literacy is essentially fundamental for the comfort and welfare of society in one piece and for the capacity building of every person to function efficiently in that society. Poetry enables the democratic process, nurtures interconnection of members of a society as well as being an indispensable instrument for learning and appreciating the different nuances of language. That being the case, accommodating and assimilating the compelling potential of poetry for improving literacy in the ways the paper has pronounced is key.

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