CHAPTER III
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Introduction

In order to achieve the objectives of teaching poetry outlined in the second chapter, it is necessary to think of certain new strategies. It is assumed that the current practices have not proved to be effective as noted again at the beginning of the second chapter. In this chapter I am going to outline some of the strategies of teaching poetry in ESL situation suggested by various authorities.

Linguistics-Based Approaches

(A) Analytical Approach

Isin Bengi and Petek Kurtboke[1] remark in this context that,

> The study of poetry as a unique form of language used for communication develops in the students "a sharper awareness of the communicative resources of the language being learned". However, it should be stressed that the purpose of such study should not be to over-burden the heavily loaded foreign-language programme with poetry, nor should it be to sacrifice poetry for the sake of language teaching.

They are of the opinion that in order to guide the students on the right track to the target, the teacher himself should first

develop an analytical strategy to poetry, which is not possible without a study of the characteristic features of the language used in poetry. The purpose of such a study should be to investigate "how the resources of a language code are put to use in the production of messages" because such an approach presupposes that poetrty is a form of discourse through which the poet communicates with the reader. Their approach to teaching poetry is a linguistics-based analytical approach and the direction of analysis is from the foregrounded linguistic pattern to the interpretation of the meaning of the poem.

They are of the opinion that for a linguistics-based analytical approach we should familiarize ourselves with such fundamental principles like 'foregrounding' and 'cohesion'. Poetry derives its communicative value both from the foregrounded deviations and regularities that stand against the background of ordinary language and from their intratextual relations which function to knit the parts into a meaningful whole. What is meant by the background language of poetry is the ordinary language which can be anatomized in terms of phonology (production of speech sounds), graphology (writing, including shape, paragraphing, stanzaic form, spelling and punctuation), syntax (arrangement of words in a sentence), lexis (vocabulary) and semantics (meaning).

In his article on "Polysemy and Association in Poetry" John Haynes[2] takes as fundamental the need to teach a student to be able to make sense of a poem without reliance on a ready made interpretation. He deals only with Polysemy and association which he takes as fundamental to that ability. According to him,

"To read poetry adequately a student must not only have command of lexis in the sense that he knows how to use a number of words he must be able to construe not only the normal syntactical structures but also associational interrelationship. These two requirements:

(a) grasp of polysemy

(b) grasp of association

might be regarded as the additional elements which distinguish literary reading from the literal reading which the language learner necessarily masters first. The process of reading requires:

(1)   Simultaneous awareness of the possible senses of the lexical items involved.

(2)   The ability to follow non-linear patterns of interconnections which make for artistic coherence. He suggests that in teaching the foreign speakers the problem is one of providing new information. The student is being asked to refer to dictionary and is being asked to discover a range of possible senses to lexical items in a text. He is also aware of the difficulty which arises here that is of selection. At the outset the teacher can make his own selection and linguistic simplification of the language of these entries or simply provide them from his own experience.

Further he states that having amassed the relevant lexical information the student must be able to manipulate it so as to show the non-linear associational interrelationships. Let the student first

learn to manipulate the sort of information provided and later, once he has become accustomed to looking for associational connections, the knowledge can be used to help him in his own lexical selections for some other text.

He is of the opinion that in the teaching of literary reading we have two fundamental problems:

(1) increasing polysemantic information,

(2) manipulating that information suitably.

The first requires a research type of skill and is bound closely to the particular second language being learnt. The second requires conceptual skill and is not bound to a particular language.

Strategically, as he points out, "the teacher has first to undermine the tendency both by social factors and the necessities of language learning to confirmist ways of thought of the 'one word one meaning attitude'. He has first to show that poetry cannot be read in this way".

According to him at the outset the teacher might introduce students to the sort of discourse used in discussing literature merely by holding tutorials in which his role will be partly demonstrative, but mainly that of asking questions which focus attention on Polysemy and association and the explication of this in acceptable spoken English. The same thing can be done by writing, with the teacher giving his questions at the base of a text. These can be gradually withdrawn first by

asking the students to run their answers together so as to make a continuous essay based on questions, then by omitting them altogether, implying in the instruction to criticise a passage that polysemy and association are to be analysed.

Difficulties in actual poems may be anticipated by using exercises and these too may be used to show the way in which the manoeuvres of the poet can be derived from ordinary language polysemy and association.

The method he has outlined above is aimed to promote an imaginative and flexibly minded approach to reading poetry, to allow scope for individual interpretation within the bounds of possible meanings. However, as he clarifies that emphasis on the imaginative practice of a skill is in no way meant to underestimate the importance of literary scholarship. Quite the reverse. For the simple research into dictionary or reference books suggested for the unearthing of polysemy has merely to be extended in the direction of historical sources or literary comparisons to verge on academic scholarship and here too the qualitites of imaginative insight are required.

(B) Contrastive Approach

Alex Rodger[3] in his article, "Language For Literature" points out that poetry being a foregrounded discourse the students need gradual and systematic training:

(1)   They should be taught how to recognize the special conventions within the domain of literary communication in general. These are more often implicit than explicit.

(2)   They should be taught how to go about making sense of the ways in which poets exploit the possibilities available in the established system of language. This should be done in order to create and convey the poet's own uniquely personal kinds of meaning.

The first way of training or teaching enables the students to interpret the communicative effects of literary works. Thereby the students can understand the difference or similarity of communicative conventions between literary and non-literary varieties of discourse.

The second way suggests an explicit recognition of the need to look at literary language in order to discover its fullest meaning. By making the sense of the ways that the poet uses he can understand the use of language in literary and non-literary discourse.

He states that:

(1)   The study of literature demands that these habits of <u>comparison</u> <u>and contrast</u> be first raised to the level of full consciousness in students and then practised regularly in such a way as to make them habitual once more but still conscious and explicit.

(2)   The students should be exposed to the styles of a wide range

of non-literary types of discourse spoken as well as written because they have little socio-linguistic sense as they are the students of ESL.

(3)   The whole communicative framework always has to be considered: who is addressing whom, in what circumstantial setting, on what topic, in what manner and to what purpose. These are the questions which students must be trained to ask themselves in relation to works in all the various kinds, genres and forms. It is all a matter of seeing the family resemblances sometimes glaring, sometimes almost imperceptible between the functional, public styles of everyday discourse and the highly personal style of creative writers. Above all it is a matter of being able to describe both as accurately and as objectively as possible.

(4)   The same general principle of comparison and contrast applies to the smaller units of communication that make up the whole discourse - sentences, Noun phrases, Verb phrases, adverbial and prepositional phrases. If students are to be able to interpret for themselves a creative writer's unusually effective uses of language, especially those which subtly or violently break the grammatical and semantic rules governing normal intelligibility, then they have to be made language conscious through constant practice in the explicit comparison and contrast of unusual and unpredictable combinations of words

with normal and predictable ones.

The precise contextual value of every word, phrase, clause and sentence of a poem can be inferred only from its interaction with all the others in the text.

(5)   In the end what matters most about the linguistic oddities of any literary text is the student's perception of how they cohere to form an overall pattern or set of patterns, which is self-profoundly meaningful.

Poets do not simply break the rules of grammar or repeat grammatical structures of grammar or repeat grammatical structures out of habit or carelessness and incompetence but on closer inspection we find it has a special communicative value. These deviations are not accidental but purposeful. Their function being to give oblique expression to the theme of work, the controlling notion or vision which the poet cannot express in the conventional language of everyday social necessity.

Classroom Procedures

Let us now consider what classroom procedures may be appropriate for using the approaches discussed in the previous section.

I)   Introducing a Poem

Ghosh, Shastri and Das[4] in their article, "The Teaching of Poetry" warn the teachers not to launch upon a lengthy

and scholarly introduction to the poem. They give us the following reasons:

(1)   In the first place it is a waste of classroom time to give the students factual information about a poem which they could also obtain from a book. It would be much better to give them the references to consult if they felt interested enough to do so after reading the poem.

(2)   The desire to know more about a poem should arise out of the experience of the poem itself. At the undergraduate level, at any rate, we should make it clear that it is the text which matters.

(3)   Furthermore, at this stage the teacher cannot, or should not, attempt to exhaust all the possibilities of a poem to squeeze out of it every drop of significance. The introduction should always be as economical as possible. The teacher should not appear to be telling the class directly what the poem is all about. If the students once know that their teacher will explain everything they will not read the poem themselves and discover anything.

II)   <u>Reading aloud of the poem by the teacher</u>

After the introduction the teacher should read the poem aloud once or twice to give an overall impression of the poem to the students.

III) Explaining Difficult Language Items

Alexander Baird[5] suggests that it is unreasonable to expect to teach new structures and vocabulary during the poetry lesson. If the poetic experience encourages the young adults to explore the unknown within himself, it is clearly unfair to confuse him with an external unknown too. Of course new words may occur in a poem and they must be dealt with before the poem is read, if their meaning is not immediately evident from their context. The amount of detailed explanation with which the teacher will indulge himself is governed by the importance of the new words within the pattern of the thought or feeling in the poem. It is better to err on the side of too little explanation than of too much.

In this respect Erika Donen[6] in her article, "Poetry as an Aspect of Foreign Language Teaching to Children" points out that the explanation of new words should take up very little time in the poetry lesson. There should not be many new words that is the temptation to resort to the mother tongue.

Ryburn[7] is also of the opinion that only as much as is necessary to a general understanding of the poem need be explained.

Some teachers teach a poem by isolating all difficult words and gloss them. Sastri, Ghosh and Das[8] are of the opinion that it is not desirable to tear every word out of its context. When we gloss the words we must provide some context.

Teaching a poem should not consist in paraphrasing each line, glossing each word, analysing each image and finally wrapping the poem up neatly into a 'central idea' or 'message'. According to them the main justification for teaching poetry at this level is that it provides enjoyable experience of language. If we are too analytical the delight cannot emerge suddenly. The students give negative response to poetry because it is approached from a purely analytical point of view. If they are burdened with too many technical terms they cannot experience what is beautiful. This means that the language of the poem is as important as its content. And if poetry supplies an enjoyable experience then a poem must be an experience to be felt and it should be enjoyed. So the poem should be kept as an intact experience. Too much explaining destroys the experience in the poem.

However, in the context of teaching poetry to E.S.L. students in the Indian context it would be necessary to draw students' attention to the difference between language of poetry and ordinary language as well as introduce them to various literary devices. Which particular aspects of difference between language of poetry and ordinary language need to be pointed out, depends upon the previous knowledge of the class in this respect. At the most elementary stages it would be necessary to point out even highly conventional diction of poetry like the use of archaic personal pronouns like 'thou', 'thee' etc. Similarly it may be necessary to point out occurrences of elementary figures of speech. As the students progress, more complex and significant devices such as imagery, symbolism etc. may be pointed out. The important thing

is that the students must be continually told of the contrast between language of literature and ordinary language.

All this has to be provided for through properly selected and graded poems for teaching at the given level.

IV)   Reading aloud by the teacher

The teacher should then read the poem aloud not for once but twice or thrice; because one reading is not enough as a good poem should be taught as a whole or complete unit. While reading, the teacher should try to bring out the feelings of the poet. Generally not everyone can read in this way but this would be the ideal.

Here the opinions of Alexander Baird[9] are noteworthy. He said

The teacher will begin by reading the poem aloud two or three times. With the minimum of questioning he will elicit from the class a simple statement of what the poem is about. Then with a view to getting the class to express themselves more freely he will talk about the poem in English. He will not talk about concepts in the abstract or about emotions as such. It is always useful to mark one's own copy of a poem for pauses and stresses before one ventures to read it aloud to a class. Where the poetry of his students is not based on the recurrence of stress but on some other principle such as counting of syllables it is often very difficult for a teacher to explain the nature of rhythm in English verse. But if explanations are difficult, demonstration is relatively easy because the rhythm of English verse is the natural rhythm of spoken language.

According to Sastri, Ghosh and Das[10] we can make use of silent reading for the purposes of comprehension. The most striking effects of poetry are achieved through sound. They observe rightly that when a speaker of an Indian language reads a poem in English he tends to make use of the patterns of reading poetry in his own language. As a result the poem tends to become unduly dramatized or exaggerated. English poetry is usually intended to be spoken rather than recited.

V)   First Silent Reading by All and Then

      Reading Aloud by Some Students

The poem should be read silently by the class and then read aloud by some pupils. F.L. Billows[11] in his article, "The Teaching of Poetry" mentions that, "if the student has heard the poem clearly,rhythm- ically and impressively read, often enough he will come to his own silent reading of it with the sounds of the poem so ringing in his ears that his reading is hardly more than a recalling of what he has heard. This ensures that the poem runs nimbly through his mind with the correct rhythm and sounds". The teacher should help the students to understand pronunciation, rise and fall of the voice while reading the poem aloud. At this stage the students should follow the text visually, while the poem is read aloud a second time. They should have have formed at the end of this reading quite a good impression of what the poem is about and what it is trying to say.

VI)   Discussion Through Dialogue

      When the students finish reading the poem, the teacher should

come to the study of the poem by discussion through dialogue.

According to Ghosh, Sastri and Das,[12]

> *In discussing the logical structure of the poem the*
> *teacher should only suggest to the student how words*
> *are used to build up an idea and how key words can*
> *function in setting up a theme even if it is not*
> *explicitly stated. Poetry consists in indirect or*
> *oblique statements or patterns of contrasts created*
> *by the use of words and phrases used symbolically to*
> *evoke certain associations. The student has to be led*
> *to the discovery of these patterns (of words, images,*
> *sounds, etc.) through questions which suggest the*
> *answers that he is expected to arrive at. The important*
> *thing is to make the student go back again and again*
> *to thepoem by asking him questions which can be answer-*
> *ed only through a scrutiny of the text - (1) In which*
> *line? (2) Which words? etc."*

Then the students should be allowed to ask any questions. The teacher should confirm if students have received an initial impression by asking certain questions about the theme and tone of the poem.

According to Jean Forrester,[13] "Elucidation by questioning creates a more effective contact between the poem and the student than explanation and paraphrase".

In this context Erika Donen[14] said,

... that young people can very often give very good reasons for liking a poem if the teacher assists them by asking challenging questions. Their answers are mainly based on intuition. Yet it is just this intuition which has to be stimulated and eventually rationalized. The process will help the students later to express their appreciation of poetry.

According to Ghosh, Sastri and Das[15]

To stimulate response the teacher should start with what is most visual and concrete in the poem. The teacher's activity should consist in shaping rather than dictating response - in suggesting rather than telling. By inviting students to form mental pictures, the teacher can draw attention to the way in which sounds contribute to the picture. Here the teacher should not invite responses by the 'hands up' method. He should try to draw the class one by one into a discussion of the idea expressed in the poem.

Conclusion

We have seen in this chapter that our aim of teaching poetry is to give pleasure which is possible when the students understand it. Poetry being foregrounded discourse, the students should understand the deviant nature of language in it. This would be done by creating in them communication awareness and language consciousness by telling them to compare and contrast the literary discourse with non-literary one. This can be done by drawing their attention to the creative/figurative use of words, phrases and sentences and the entire discourse at

the level of form and imaginative ideas, images and so on at the level of content. This should give them a grounding in the conventions of poetry as contrasted with those of ordinary discourse.

If, in this way, the students are to be made linguistically competent then the following steps/strategies should be followed:

(1)   Introduction should be brief and it should prepare the back-ground for the poem in the class.

(2)   Reading aloud of the poem by the teacher.

(3)   Explaining difficult language items if students are unable to follow their meanings, and introducing them to various poet-ic/literary conventions which they may not be familiar with already.

(4)   Reading aloud again by the teacher.

(5)   Discussion is very essential and important. Linguistic under-standing and literary appreciation should take place through discussions of how the resources of language code are put to use in the production of messages. Linguistic features along with the literary qualities of the poem should be done through 'question-answer method'.

We may conclude this chapter with Alex Rodger's[16] remarks which are very relevant to literary studies in our context:

I take it as axiomatic that our task as teachers of literature is not to hand over pre-digested meanings, but to teach our students how to read and interpret for themselves ... not to indocrinate them with an academically hall-marked and guaranteed set of received opinion ... but to be reasonably skilled and sensitive readers, able to feel and judge for themselves, with fidelity of the textual facts, in response to any work of literature they may choose to read.

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