

CHAPTER II

OBJECTIVES OF TEACHING POETRY AND SELECTION CRITERIA

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Introduction

The teacher of English knows that it is not an easy task to teach English poetry to Indian students. Paradoxically, however, poetry has always had a great importance in the teaching and learning of English in India. It is included in the syllabuses of almost all the universities at the undergraduate stage, both for compulsory English and for optional/special English courses.

Many difficulties arise before the teacher of English while teaching poetry. There is a general feeling that all is not well with the teaching of poetry to the students of English as a Second language. Some of the reasons suggested are:

- (I) A lack of clear objectives.
- (II) The unsuitability of poems prescribed for the study.
- (III) Inadequacies of teaching techniques and strategies.
- (IV) A lack of motivation on the part of students.

The object of this chapter is to explore the first two of these aspects of the problem and attempt to specify some criteria for the selection of poems.

This is expected to help to evolve some teaching strategies which might help to improve the situation. We shall focus on the undergraduate stage of ELT in India.

Generally the syllabuses at the college level include a study of fiction, essay, drama and poetry. Perhaps the intention behind this is to expose the students to the samples of best writings in English. With the help of these the student is expected to improve and enrich his ability to use the language. Such exposure to language is of greatest value, because the patterns of language like sentences, phrases and words which he reads may remain in his memory and he may use these patterns of language creatively. Poetry is included in the syllabuses in almost all the universities in India. But the purpose of teaching English poetry to the students is nowhere made clear.

In the absence of any such specific statement of objectives it may be useful to consider the possible value of teaching poetry to students.

The Possible Value of Poetry

The Newsam Report¹ (Dec. 1963) describes poetry as 'a major channel of experience'.

Arguing for the value of Poetry Thomas Blackburn² states,

If it is the duty of education at home and school to see to it that children use and develop their powers of language and their knowledge of literature,

so that they may grow and become maturer persons, then it is also its duty and privilege to see to it that poetry is presented to them, for in poetry language is seen at its best and strongest.

According to Tucker,³

... Poetry refines sensibility - a rather lofty phrase for saying that poetry can help us come to terms with our feelings, our emotions, our thoughts, our experiences and find ways of expressing them.

Brian Tomlinson⁴ in his article, 'Using Poetry with Mixed Ability Language Classes' states that the positive gains of poetry are as follows:

(1) Educational Value

As language teachers we are fundamentally educationalists and not just instructors and it is our duty to contribute to the emotional, imaginative and intellectual development of our learners. "It has been my experience" he says, "that poetry if chosen well and carefully and used intellectually can open and enrich the content of language lessons, can provide useful opportunities for gaining experience of the world and can contribute to the development of the 'whole person' as well as the learner of a language.

(2) Affective Value

Average language learners are most motivated, most open to language intake and most eager to use language when their emotions, feelings and attitudes are engaged. One way of achieving this is to stage the learner's encounter with a poem in such a way as to maximize its impact and thus to involve learners actively in response to the poem and the language activities built around it.

(3) Achievement Value

Most language learners are initially daunted by poetry in a foreign language and would certainly put up barriers if told, they were going to 'do' poetry. If poems are met as parts of larger communication activities and if the teacher helps to make them accessible through pre-reading activities focussed on content rather than language, then, many learners are able to give valid response to poems and thus to gain a considerable sense of achievement.

(4) Individual Value

Poems have the great potential value of appealing to each individual reader in different ways and of being accessible on many different levels of meaning. The weakest can achieve at least a superficial but satisfying global response to the poem whereas the 'middle' learners can get further into the poem and the brightest can gain great satisfaction of imaginative and individual insights into the potential meanings of a poem.

(5) Stimulus Value

Poems which achieve effective responses from learners can stimulate them to unusually intelligent and creative use of language in follow-up activities.

(6) Skill Developments

Poems, more than any other type of text, can give valuable opportunity to learners to use and develop such important skills as deduction of meaning from linguistic and situational context, prediction, relating text to knowledge and experience of the world, reading creatively and the recognition and interpretation of assumptions and inferences. In order to achieve some of the values listed above it is important that the focus is not on difficult bits of language but on responses to what has been understood.

Objectives of Teaching Poetry

From the above discussion of the potential value of using poetry it is clear that if poems are chosen carefully, there are certain positive gains and these gains can be achieved only if a proper methodology is employed in teaching them. But there is a popular misunderstanding about poetry. Most students think that poetry is a mysterious thing and only a chosen few have an access to it. Some of them have even an aversion for poetry. Some of the reasons seem to be that:

- (1) They are taught poetry badly.
- (2) Their teacher himself/herself might not like poetry, and thus is unable to take his/her students into the glorious kingdom of poesy.

Many teachers are inclined to avoid it as long as they can because teaching of poetry presents difficulties.

John C. Maher⁵ in his article, "Poetry For Instructional Purposes: Authenticity and Aspects of Performance" states that among language teachers today the specific charge lies in the area of relevance to immediate needs. He quotes the remarks by a teacher at a recent international conference: "I am not against poetry. Don't get me wrong. It is just that when the purpose of most courses is communicative competence - as fast as possible - poetry is just not relevant. Let's face it. It's a luxury". These statements point out the dilemma faced by many teachers when teaching poetry. According to him a poem with all its obscurities and sometimes archaic expression and spelling, has a harder time defending itself as valid instructional material rather than mere decoration.

Even some of the thinkers⁶ have expressed their views against the inclusion of poetry in the syllabuses. Their arguments are as follows:

- (1) Generally in poems we find that similes metaphors and deviations are used. The poem cannot be enjoyed and appreciated without understanding these features of the poem.

- (2) The teaching of poetry does not help in acquiring mastery over the different skills of language.
- (3) Poetry does not help the learners in the expression of vocabulary.
- (4) The social background of English poems is quite different from Indian atmosphere.
- (5) Teaching of poetry is not everybody's cup of tea. There are very few teachers who have real love for poetry. Only good teachers who love poetry can do full justice in its teaching. All other English teachers just finish the syllabus as far as possible.

Ghosh, Sastri and Das⁷ state,

Poetry can mean nothing to a student who has only a rudimentary understanding of language and therefore, exposure to poetry leads only to incomprehension, bewilderment and frustration. Alternatively, since the student is compelled to accept whatever interpretation of a poem his teacher chooses to thrust on him. Exposure of poetry can only encourage mental laziness and habits of uncritical acceptance or rejection. In either case, the results are pedagogically unhealthy; there can be no benefits from such an exercise. Since poetry frequently employs words and syntax in a manner that would not be considered normal or acceptable in ordinary communication, exposure to such usage before

the student has mastered normal usage can lead to the formaton of wrong language habits.

From the above views it is clear that poetry should not be exposed to students who have only rudimentary understanding of language and who have not mastered the normal usage of language. But the arguments put forward by the thinkers who are against the inclusion of poetry in the syllabuses suggest that all is not well with the teaching of poetry because it represents a different kind of language use from the one commonly associated with communicative functions. Since the student does not generally encounter such use of language there is not much point in giving them practice.

These are obviously extreme views. But it seems that there is no harm including poetry at the undergraduate stage, subject to certain conditions. Some of the problems raised above might not arise if poems are selected carefully and if they are taught methodically. But not to include poetry at all may not be a wise decision.

Maher⁸ is of the opinion that like any other activity, the study of poetry must justify its right to inclusion in the curriculum. This it can do by making itself a practical supplier of the pupils' needs and an effective source of motivation when other learning has become stale". However, there are certain thinkers⁹ who are of the opinion that poetry should be included in syllabuses. Their arguments are as follows:

- (1) Teaching of poetry creates love for language learning. Without poetry students will be doing language work without putting their heart and soul into it.
- (2) By studying poems, students can develop their power of imagination. They also feel aesthetic satisfaction.
- (3) In the whole of language work we find that poetry attracts the students. It gladdens their hearts and they feel all the more attracted towards it. They feel the pleasure and appreciate the reality behind the poem.
- (4) It is English poetry which makes the whole syllabus loveable and attractive. It also adds to the variety in English course.
- (5) For a student who has to memorise a good deal of language material, poetry makes his work easier and simpler to a great extent. The reason is that poems can be memorised easily and quickly as compared to prose.
- (6) Pattern practice is also possible with the help of poetry. In poetry very often we find that there is repetition of certain patterns or sentences. The readers get a chance of going over them.
- (7) Another important reason for teaching poetry is that it illustrates the rhythm of English more clearly than regular prose. Stress patterns are regularly repeated. Thus the students can really begin to see the importance of stress and rhythm in

English.

From these and several others like Maher it appears that there is a case for including poetry in the syllabuses. "Poetry", as Maher points out, "deserves to be an integral and unblushing member of ELT curriculum. The poem is that ready-made capsule of language that gives the student a manageable form with which to negotiate the expression of that feeling system".

Once it is decided to prescribe/include poems in syllabus, the questions before us would be:

- (1) Poems - for what?
- (2) What types of poems?

To deal with these problems it is necessary to look into the objectives of teaching poetry. If we are clear about the objectives of teaching poetry then selection criteria of poems may be evolved accordingly.

We may approach the problem by first considering what poetry does.

Schiller¹⁰ says, "All art is dedicated to joy and there is no higher or more serious problem than how to make man happy".

Robert Frost¹¹ says, "Poetry begins in delight and ends in wisdom". Michael Roberts who was a poet, a teacher and teacher of teachers remarks "Poetry may be intended to amuse, or to ridicule or to persuade or to produce an effect which we feel to be more valuable

than amusement". It seems, therefore, that poetry should be taught in order to enable the students to understand the beauty of thought and imagination and make them capable of appreciating the poem by awakening in them the aesthetic qualities of appreciation.

Tomlinson¹² also points out that language teachers are fundamentally educationalists and it is their duty to contribute to the emotional, imaginative and intellectual development of learners. He further states that the content of language lessons can provide useful opportunities for gaining experience of the world and can contribute to the development of the 'whole person' as well as the learner of a language.

Alexander Baird¹³ in his article, "The treatment of Poetry" points out that our obligations as teachers are two:

- (1) Intellectual development of the student,
- (2) Emotional development of the student.

From the above views it appears that according to some thinkers poetry should be used for liberal education which can inculcate certain values like humanism, patriotism, love, truth, devotion and so on in the minds of students. Even those who doubt the wisdom of teaching poetry to our students seem to find some value in it.

Ghosh, Sastri and Das¹⁴ also say that,

Basically we teach poetry because it provides the students with a kind of linguistic experience that is not otherwise available: an experience of a different kind of language use, which is creative and imaginative and can achieve more total communication through a fuller utilization of some of the resources of language such as ambiguities and overtones of words.

Tomlinson¹⁵ states that,

We are aiming to increase the communicative competence of our learners not to produce poets. The main objectives of using poetry in language lessons is not to teach the learners to write or even appreciate poetry, but to find a means of involving the learners in using their language skills in an active and creative way and thus to contribute to the development of their communicative competence.

As Michael Roberts¹⁶ puts it,

Poetry is an exploration of the possibilities of language. It does not aim directly at consolation or moral exhortation, nor at the expression of exquisite moments but an extension of significance.

Both Tomlinson and Michael Roberts are of the opinion that poetry can be used for educational purposes alongwith the purpose of language teaching. To say that the object of teaching poetry is only teaching language skills or only giving liberal education would be taking extreme points of view for the popular notion that the language of literature is very different from the 'ordinary language' is no

longer tenable. Actually language of literature has its roots in ordinary language.

Ordinary Language and the Language of Literature

According to Widdowson,¹⁷ "The study of literature is primarily the study of language and as such it is not a separate activity from language learning but an aspect of the same activity". He points out that not only poets but all language users create figurative or metaphorical meanings and when these meanings become accepted they become part of common usage. Widdowson distinguishes between what he calls 'signification' to describe common usage and 'value' to describe metaphorical or new meanings language items come to have in figurative discourse. As time passes and new uses enter into common custom; particular values become part of signification. Further he points out that, "The ability to create new values in discourse is part of what we call a person's knowledge of his language and it is not restricted to writers of literature. The wide-spread 'non-literal' use of language is a fact of considerable importance to the teacher of literature since it points to the possibility of representing literary works not as totally different ways of using language but as extensions of the way language is used, in 'everyday' discourse. Therefore, the difference between language of literature and ordinary language is not one of kind but of degree.

If poets only do what everybody else does, then what is distinctive about literary discourse? Essentially the distinction is that

non-literal expressions occur randomly in ordinary discourse whereas in literature they figure as part of a pattern which characterizes the literary work as a separate and self-contained whole. What is distinctive about a poem, for example, is that the language is organized into a pattern of recurring sounds, structures and meanings which are not determined by the phonology, syntax or semantics of the language code which provides it with its basic resources. Further he points out the unfortunate consequences of such a separation of English language and English literature. It is not unusual to find literature teachers in L₁ and L₂ situations attempting to teach literary classics to learners whose knowledge of the system and use of English is so limited as to make the work being presented to them almost totally incomprehensible. Very often the teacher resorts to translation and paraphrase to overcome linguistic difficulties. Such a procedure not only has the effect of misrepresenting the nature of literature but also of creating a resistance to it in the learner's mind. Therefore, if literature is to be taught as a form of discourse then on the one hand its textual features must be such as to relate what the learner knows of English grammar and vocabulary and on the other hand he must be introduced to other forms of discourse, of a conventional type, with which literary discourse can be compared. The uniqueness of literary discourse is revealed by relating it to conventional forms of language use and this in turn involves the study of how language is used conventionally in other forms of discourse. Thus the learning of the language system is extended into the learning of language use.

Michael H. Short and Christopher N. Candlin¹⁸ in their article, "Teaching Study Skills for English Literature" point out that literature and language teaching should be linked and made mutually reinforcing. Further they remark that early in this century the teaching of English literature to non-native students involved, in large measure, a concentration on the classics of English literature. The assumption was that if the students were continually exposed to the best uses of English language, it would in some sense 'rub off' on their own performance in the language. The difficulty with this position was that many literary texts of a high calibre were difficult and inaccessible to these non-native English speaking students. Much, after all, of what is best in English literature derives from ages linguistically very distinct from modern English and even modern writers present problems of comprehension, as they often break both writing conventions and the rules of English in the service of literary artifice. As a consequence, literature teaching began to disappear from the language classroom, to be replaced by a surrogate literature, commonly in the form of textbook dialogues and short tales where learners were presented with the appearance of literature in the form of text devised to carry structure but with none of its literary effects. The significant complementarity of patterning in both form and function, characteristic of genuine text, whether literary or non-literary was replaced by a patterning of form only, free from any significance. "This move is in our views", they say, "unfortunate for reasons other than that of the interest intrinsic in studying literature:

- (a) Contrary to much received opinion, it is difficult to make a linguistic distinction between literature and other kind of language. If this is the case, there is no a priori reason for banishing literature from the language curriculum.
- (b) Although language and literature may appear to be distinct from the point of view of the teacher, they do not, necessarily, appear so to the learner, for whom literature is language.
- (c) Many students enjoy literature. As enjoyment plays an important factor in any learning process, literature is a potentially useful aid to the language teacher.
- (d) Literary texts often contain within them a number of different varieties of English. They can thus be extremely useful in sensitizing more advanced learners of English to linguistic variation and the values associated with different varieties.
- (e) If a student is taught language and literature by the same person, it is possible for the lessons to be mutually reinforcing.

It appears from the foregoing discussion that there is some truth in both sides. Poetry has, no doubt, a humanizing or liberalizing effect on the learner and at the same time it can promote language learning; but both with a proviso.

The proviso is "suitability". Let us now look at what the

various criteria proposed by different scholars in determining suitability of poems for prescription for second language learners.

Selection Criteria

J.A. Bright and G.P. McGregor¹⁹ in Teaching English As A Second Language have proposed some general selection criteria. They are as follows:

(1) Linguistic Criteria

(a) The vocabulary level must be appropriate. A poem containing many new words is unreadable. Difficult poems can be toiled painfully through with innumerable explanations by the teacher or references to the dictionary but the process is dreary.

(b) The complexity of the grammatical structure should not be too great.

(c) A high density of idiom and special registers like scientific and technological vocabulary should not be too great.

(d) An archaic or old fashioned style, a heavy load of local dialect or marked eccentricity would count against the poem.

(2) Background

(a) If the background is familiar to the student because it is local or refers to his social background, then there will be

no problem in understanding the poem by the students.

(b) If the text supplies an adequate background there may be little difficulty. This sometimes happens when the author is writing for readers who cannot be assumed to know the background of his history.

(c) The background must be within the students' imaginative grasp.

(3) Subject Matter

(a) The poem must interest the student, rather than the teacher. 'Literature is caught not taught'. The teacher should not infect the classes with boredom.

(b) The student must be able to see some relevance to his own situation, so that he gets drawn into the book.

(c) The subject matter must be suitable for classroom teaching and it must be worth re-reading.

(d) The subject matter (content) must be appropriate to the age of the students.

Alexander Baird²⁰ points out that selection of poems should be made by taking into consideration the following things:

(1) The poem should be about something which is within the experience of the class or which at least can be brought within their experience.

- (2) The poem should not contain unfamiliar constructions or archaic language.
- (3) The teacher should make as certain as he can that the poem he chooses is one which he himself can make vivid to the class. This is most important.

According to him, "to choose a poem as a text on which to base a grammar lesson is to abuse it. So is to use as the material for oral or written comprehension".

Ryburn W.M.²¹ in his article "The Teaching of Poetry" suggests that:

- (1) The poetry we teach must be easy, very easy to understand. It would seem that such poems would be hard to find. The poem must be straightforward and easy to follow. The easier it is for the students to follow, the more enjoyment they will get out of it.

In the Middle Stage, therefore only narrative poems should be taught. In the High Stage poems should be mainly narrative with a few easy ones of a non-narrative character. Right through schools poems with unusual archaic difficult language and thought should be avoided. It is all to the good if poems can be found which deal with Indian scenes, stories, etc.

- (2) Poetry should be a part of cursory reading and should not form part of intensive work. An experienced teacher offered the

following caution: "Poetry and literary prose which has much English that is not for the pupil's daily use, never treat intensively".

- (3) Poetry should not be an examination subject. No surer method of defeating our object of giving pupil's enjoyment through reading can be found than to make poetry an examination subject.

According to Bernard Tucker²² poems for children about nature ought to concern themselves with nature in a concrete rather than in general sense. Poems about animals are popular, and often traps for the unwary. Of course there is also the tendency to write poems about being child. It is perhaps best to have poems which deal with incidents of childhood. The teacher needs to tread warily with poems which philosophize or point a moral. Perhaps the most popular poems with students are character studies especially if they are humorous. The students will enjoy Philip Booth's (1965) "Uncle Fitzgerald". An example of the kind of simple, uncomplicated poem which can be read to the students for their enjoyment. According to him it is most important to introduce poetry dealing with contemporary issues. Students are aware of the world around them. They need a balance of the magical, the enchanted and the mythical with poetry which relates immediately to their lives and experiences. Ballads, according to him can be successfully used with children. But as he says, "by their nature ballads can sometimes be monotonous and so can narrative poems. But later on he adds that children are great traditionalists and preservers of rhymes - nursery

rhymes for younger children and ballads and folk songs for older children should be retained and promoted.

L.A.G. Strong²³ in his article "Poetry in schools", says,

The whole secret is to choose a subject in which a child is interested. The poem must deal with something the child cares about and in a way which he can understand. Then the fact that it is in verse will be no hindrance to his appreciation. On the contrary it will be a help.

Brian Tomlinson²⁴ in his article, "Using Poetry with Mixed Ability Language Classes" has proposed the following selection criteria for exploiting the potential value of poetry to the full.

(1) Universal appeal

Very special topics might have great appeal for a few members of a group but are unlikely to attract the majority. However, such universal topics as youth, old age, marriage, birth, love, education and friendship have great potential as most learners have close experiences of both.

(2) Surface simplicity

It is especially important for a mixed ability group that the poems used are linguistically accessible to the weakest member of the group and that there is nothing in the title or opening lines which might frighten off such members of the group.

(3) Potential depth

It is also very important that poems used with mixed ability groups have potential depth of meanings and can thus challenge the brighter members of the group who have no problems in responding to the linguistic surface of the poems.

(4) Affective potential

Poems which express strong emotions, attitudes, feelings, opinions or ideas are usually more productive than those which are gentle, descriptive or neutral.

(5) Contemporary language

For most 'non-literary' learners it is important that the language of the poems they are asked to read resembles the language they are being asked to learn. Most foreign language learners are daunted and alienated by poems whose language is remote in time and style from the variety they are learning.

(6) Brevity

Some members of every class will be capable of enjoying long poems, but it is safer to use short poems with a mixed ability class, so as to minimize the risk of 'losing' people.

(7) Potential for illustration

The ideal poem for the mixed ability EFL/ESL class is one which

satisfies the criteria outlined above and which lends itself to visual, auditory or tactile illustration through the use of realia (e.g., slides, films, objects, photography, music) or specially designed aids (e.g., drawings, sound effects, mime).

Conclusion

The selection criteria outlined by Bright and McGregor as well as by Brian Tomlinson are likely to be most useful in the Indian context, as they have taken into consideration two important features of the Indian situation:

- 1) English as a second language,
- 2) Mixed ability group so typical of the Indian system.

Taking into consideration the present situation of English in India, the following selection criteria may be suggested:

- (1) Poems containing too many archaic words are unsuitable to the students of English as a second language. Many a time poems containing learned vocabulary become a hindrance in the enjoyment of a poem. So the poems which contain archaic as well as erudite vocabulary should be avoided.
- (2) Poems having very complex grammatical structures, idioms and special registers should be avoided.
- (3) Poems containing too many local details of social life and

nature may be avoided.

- (4) Poems with remote allusions should be avoided.
- (5) Easy, simple and small but meaningful poems using contemporary language may be selected.
- (6) The background and the subject matter of the poem should be within the reach of the student and appropriate to their age.
- (7) Poems about Nature, childhood and about characters especially humorous and dealing with contemporary issues may prove useful.
- (8) Poems dealing with universal themes like youth, marriage, love, friendship, birth etc. appeal to the students so they might be suitable.
- (9) Indo-English poems may be nearer home to our students but care should be taken to keep the other eight criteria mentioned above in mind.
- (10) It is not important that a poem is Indo-Anglian, British or African so long as it satisfies the criterion of universal appeal and appropriate linguistic level.

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