

Using a Unique and Long Forgotten Authentic Material in the EFL/ESL Classroom: Poetry

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Abstract—No doubt one of the everlasting concerns of EFL/ESL teachers is to re-examine and improve teaching tools and practices to meet the needs of their students. This article portrays how poetry, a very genuine and authentic text, can enrich students' language experience. My own teaching observations and students' positive feedback, all proved that poetry can enrich emotional response, imaginative power and creativity in the language learners. Thus it increases their engagement and involvement. There are over hundred original ideas for working with poetry in the language classroom. These highly motivational activities and exercises encourage students to express their inner thoughts and feelings in English. No doubt these classroom activities and practices can improve students' language skills. This article provides a sample of a poem worksheet that includes four skills activities: reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Index Terms—authentic materials, literature, poetry, EFL/ESL

I. INTRODUCTION

The use of authentic materials in an EFL classroom has generated a great deal of discussion and debate in recent years (Berardo, 2006; Breen, 1985; Guariento & Morley, 2001; Kilickaya, 2004; Peacock, 1997; Rogers & Medley, 1988; Taylor, 1994). Most of the language researchers and scholars agree that authentic materials can be very advantageous to EFL classrooms. They believe that authentic materials increase learner motivation because as many teachers claim they are "intrinsically more interesting or stimulating" than artificial materials that are designed for mere teaching purposes (Peacock, 1997, p. 144). Since authentic materials bring learners into meaningful contact with the language used in the real world, they make the learning process "more enjoyable and therefore more motivating" (Peacock, p.144). As McGarry (1995) points out, "There is now a general recognition of the valuable role which authentic texts can play in helping to create a language-rich environment in the classroom, and in providing students with bridges to the real world of the target language community" (p.3). Again as Berardo (2006) puts it, "One of the main reason for using authentic materials in the classroom is once outside the 'safe', controlled language learning environment, the learner will not encounter the artificial language of the classroom but the real world and language how it is really used" (p.60). We can summarize the advantages of using authentic materials in the following manner (Allwright, 1979; Bacon & Finnemann, 1990; Clarke, 1989; Freeman & Holden, 1986; King, 1990; Little, Devitt, & Singleton, 1989; Little & Singleton, 1991; Richards, 2001; Swaffar, 1985; Wilkins, 1976):

- Authentic materials motivate learners because they are more interesting and stimulating.
- Authentic materials help learners to gain a more thorough understanding of the target language culture, so they make learning more stimulating and enjoyable and motivating.
- Authentic materials bring the real world language into the classroom, so they create a more natural and pleasant learning environment.
- Authentic materials provide a link between the classroom and students' needs in the actual real world.
- In using authentic materials teachers can be more creative and develop activities that better match both their own teaching styles and their students' learning styles.

II. AUTHENTIC MATERIALS

Authentic materials have been defined as "materials produced to fulfill some social purpose in the language community" (Peacock, 1997, p.146) that is, these materials are not produced for language teaching purposes (Jordan, 1997; Nunan, 1989). As Richard (2001) puts it, "authentic materials refers to the use in teaching of texts, photographs, video selections, and other teaching resources that were not specially prepared for pedagogical purposes" (p. 252). As Harmer (1983) points out, "Authentic texts (either written or spoken) are those which are designed for native speakers: they are real texts designed not for language students, but for the speakers of the language in question" (p. 146). One of the most clear and concise definitions so far written for authentic materials is the one given by Wallace (1992) who defines these materials as "real-life texts, not written for pedagogic purposes" (p.145). Actually, authentic materials

which are not designed for language students are ironically more beneficial for them because they provide exposure to the real language spoken by native speakers.

We can impose no limitation to the type of material that we know as authentic. As Berardo (2006) mentioned there are infinite sources of authentic materials that can be used in the language classroom. The most commonly cited examples of authentic materials are newspaper and magazine articles, advertisements, radio and TV programs, interviews, debates, pamphlets of sightseeing and tourist information, travel brochures, city plans, catalogs, movies, cooking recipes (Collie & Slater, 1987; Kelly, Kelly, Offner & Vorland, 2002; Kilickaya, 2004; Richard, 2001). However, the classic three literary genres (fiction, poetry and drama) that can be highly motivating and inspirational for language learners seem to be forgotten or ignored. Even Berardo (2006) who mentions literature in his list of authentic materials prefers the Internet to other choices because it is "continuously updated, more visually stimulating" (p.62). The aim of this paper will be to discuss the advantages of using literature as a very effective motivational teaching strategy in the EFL/ESL classroom.

III. LITERATURE

There have been various attempts to give a proper definition of literature. Perhaps the best way is to see what great writers said about literature and how literature has affected them.

- *"Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become."* (C.S. Lewis)
- *"That is part of the beauty of all literature. You discover that your longings are universal longings, that you're not lonely and isolated from anyone. You belong."* (F. Scott Fitzgerald)
- *"I know nothing in the world that has as much power as a word. Sometimes I write one, and I look at it, until it begins to shine."* (Emily Dickinson)
- *"I had found my religion: nothing seemed more important to me than a book. I saw the library as a temple."* (Jean-Paul Sartre)
- *"In great literature, I become a thousand different men but still remain myself."* (C.S. Lewis)
- *"The purpose of literature is to turn blood into ink."* (T.S. Eliot)
- *"The decline of literature indicates the decline of a nation."* (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)

IV. LITERATURE A VERY VALUABLE AUTHENTIC MATERIAL

Literature as a motivational teaching tool has been neglected for a long period of time. Fortunately, however, some language experts, researchers and scholars (Bassnett & Grundy, 1993; Carter & Long, 1991; Carter, Walker, & Brumfit, 1989; Lazar, 1993; Maley & Duff, 1989; Maley & Moulding, 1985) have emphasized its potential educational value. Collie & Slater (1987) have given four reasons for integrating literature into language curriculum:

- *Valuable authentic material.* When students read a literary text, they have to "cope with language indented for native speakers and thus they gain additional familiarity with many different linguistic uses, forms and conventions of the written mode...." (p. 4).
- *Cultural enrichment.* The fictional world of a literary work can portray a "full and vivid context in which characters from many social backgrounds can be depicted.... This vivid imagined world can quickly give the foreign reader a feel for the codes and preoccupations that structure a real society" (p.4).
- *Language enrichment.* Reading literary works can increase a "learner's receptive vocabulary and facilitates transfer to a more active form of knowledge....Literature provides a rich context in which individual lexical or syntactical items are made more memorable" (pp.4-5).
- *Personal involvement.* Literature can be very beneficial in the language learning process because of the personal involvement it fosters on the learners. "Engaging imaginatively with literature enables the learners to shift the focus of their attention beyond the more mechanical aspects of foreign language system" (p.5).

Lazar (1993) lists the advantages of using literature in language teaching in the following manner:

- *Motivating material.* Literature can be highly motivating. Literature exposes English language learners to "complex themes and fresh, unexpected uses of language". A literary work can arouse "a powerful emotional response" from the learners. If we choose literary works that suit the levels of the learners' English language proficiency, "students will feel that what they do in the classroom is relevant and meaningful to their own lives"(P. 18).
- *Access to cultural background.* Literature is part of the culture heritage of each society, so it can unlock the depth of the culture and give the learners greater and deeper insight into it. Literature can "provide a way of contextualising how a member of a particular society might behave or react in a specific situation" (P.19).
- *Encouraging language acquisition.* Literature can stimulate foreign language acquisition and improve language learning. A simple short story or poem can provide "meaningful and memorable contexts for

processing and interpreting new language" (pp. 19-20). Reading literature can make learners to feel more empowered and comfortable enough to express and share their thoughts and feelings.

- *Expanding students' language awareness.* Literature can be used in language classes to improve students' knowledge of English. By analyzing and discussing wonderfully bizarre and unconventional uses of language in literary texts, paradoxically students are encouraged to be more conscious of the models of language that are accurate and grammatically correct.
- *Developing students' interpretative abilities.* Literature in the classroom can promote students' critical thinking and reflection skills. Discussing multiple layers of meaning in a literary text encourages students to make their own judgments.
- *Educating the whole person.* Creative emotional involvement is one of the benefits of using literature with the language learners. "If we ask students to respond personally to the texts we give them, they will become increasingly confident about expressing their own ideas and emotions in English" (p.21).

V. MY OWN PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

As it has been discussed a remarkable number of language instructors, researchers and scholars have proposed the use of literature as a powerful teaching tool in the EFL/ESL classrooms. However, they have been less eager to consider poetry as a teaching resource that has the potential to help language learners to improve their skills. Research and observations show that most of the students prefer prose fiction because of the wrong assumption that reading and digesting poetry requires a special kind of knowledge reserved for highly competent and professional readers. There has been a long-standing debate over whether poetry should be integrated into EFL/ESL curriculum. As Hanauer (2010) points out it seems that "the objection to poetry as a form of knowledge has deep historical root in the western world" (p. 131). Perhaps it is rooted in the old quarrel between philosophy and poetry. Plato "fiercely criticizes poetry as a whole, and professes to banish the tribe of poets from his commonwealth; they are perverters of morality, mere imitators and deceivers, and their art is concerned with the world of appearance, not of reality" (Greene, 1918, p.1). In Plato's *Ion*, Socrates portrays the poet as "a light and winged and holy creature" who cannot compose unless he is inspired by the Muse and at the moment of creation he is "out of his senses and his reason"; he is vain, fruitless and "incapable" in any other field (Green, p.16). Plato draws a sharp line between poetry and reality; one belongs to the realm of imagination, imitation, inspiration, and illusion while the other to the realm of sense, reason, knowledge and truth. No wonder, now there are still some language instructors and researchers who are determined to exclude poetry from their classrooms. They tried to justify the former judgment of exile passed against poetry. The proponents of this view argue that poetry raise serious difficulties for EFL/ESL students. They believe that "the greatest barrier to understanding poetry... is its elliptical, metaphorical, and highly allusive language" (Brindley, 1980). To them the language of poetry "deviates from the conventions and rules which govern standard, non-literary discourse" and the "meaning is detached from the reader's immediate social context" (Savvidou, 2004). Even Boccaccio in his definition of poetry argues that poetry "brings forth strange and unheard-of creations of the mind" that demands "unusual interweaving of words and thoughts". The other common argument against poetry as a teaching material is that, due to its "structural complexity and its unique use of language", poetry cannot help students to improve their own knowledge and understanding of grammar (McKay, 1982, p. 529). The other typical objection against using poetry in language classroom is that poetry cannot help students "to communicate in contemporary colloquial English" and it does not help to "the development of their communicative competence" (Tomlinson, 1986, p. 33).

My own first experience of using literature in the classroom with EFL learners was when I was teaching a reading course for university students, majoring in English Translation at Islamic Azad University (Rasht, Iran). The title of the course was *Reading Comprehension (I)*. It was a four-hour per week course and it was to last 15 weeks for a total of 60 hours teaching time. Most of the students were either upper intermediate or intermediate level. According to the syllabus, students were to be exposed to a wide variety of text types and genres that could help them to master reading strategies and techniques such as skimming, scanning, and guessing from the context. In spite of the fact that our textbook was published by a well-known university press, there was no active engagement, no classroom participation and no learning satisfaction. It was very disappointing. I was well aware that part of students' demotivation was due to the fact that the textbook was not very stimulating. Literature, this highly motivating source, was completely excluded from extensive reading materials. I decided to try poetry, this unique and long-forgotten authentic material. I selected approximately thirty poems to be discussed in the class, two for each week of the term.

It was like magic. It generated much enthusiasm in the class and enthusiasm generated creativity. Students eagerly participated in the classroom discussions. For the first time in that semester they started to enjoy reading, discussing, and even composing poems in English. Poetry by nature stimulates imagination and evokes emotion. Students wrote positive and enthusiastic responses which were wonderfully unique and personal. Those highly motivating poems stimulated students to share their impressions and interpretations which led to hot discussions. Interestingly, they didn't interpret the poems in the same way. Each of them viewed the poems from her/his own unique perspective. Students' responses reflected their culture, social background, past experiences and philosophy of life. They automatically became literary critics as they interpreted the poems. There were no right or wrong answers.

VI. CRITERIA FOR SELECTING POEMS

If the instructors do not select the poems carefully, they may have a class full of confused, frustrated, and demotivated students. A long poem with textual complexity, bizarre structure, and complex figures of speech that deals with local and regional issues can make the beginners too shocked to dare to read another piece of poem. Poems should be appropriate in terms of language complexity, content familiarity, figures of speech and length.

1) Language complexity. The first thing to consider when one is selecting a poem for the class is the level of language. A good selection of poems that are appropriate for EFL/ESL students makes the process of teaching smoother and the class more motivated.

2) Content familiarity. Another important criterion that language instructors should consider when they are selecting poems is the universality of themes. Poems that are related to the learners' experiences have more potential to enhance the process of language learning. I tried to choose poems that have a universal appeal. I mean the poems that deal with basic human concerns, regardless of cultural differences or geographical regions. Poems that touch the human spirit and evoke human emotion can engage the language learners more thoroughly. This closer and keener engagement increases motivation and creativity. Since these themes recall everyday life and situations, most of the readers can participate in the poets' experiences imaginatively. Some of the common universal themes in poetry are family and parent-child relationship; love and hatred; freedom and justice; honesty and hypocrisy; innocence and sin; pride and vanity; war and death; and discovering the world around us. These familiar themes stimulate the learners to remember their own personal experiences. I never forget the day that I asked my students to write their own impressions of the poem *Those Winter Sundays* by Robert Hayden. One of the students volunteered to read her comments. She found every homely and concrete details of the poem so real and lifelike. The poet's portrait of a father's love for his child reminded her of her own dead father. She became so agitated that she couldn't even finish reading what she had written. No doubt my students were engaged both intellectually and emotionally in the literary world in the poems. Reading, analyzing and discussing poems enabled them to express their inner thoughts and emotions in new and unique ways. As Robert Frost said, "*Poetry begins in delight and ends in wisdom.*"

3) Figures of speech. Avoid teaching a difficult poem that is highly figurative and allusive. No doubt there are some basic figures of speech that are so common in poetry that we cannot ignore them such as: simile, metaphor, personification, apostrophe, hyperbole, symbol and irony. Thus the instructor should use appropriate teaching strategies to help the learners to recognize and understand them. I recommend comparative method. Making linkages between learners' prior knowledge and new knowledge can facilitate the process of language learning (Marzano, 2007). By integrating the new English figures of speech into learners' existing knowledge of their own native literary terms, they can compare, contrast and finally identify what they have in common and where they differ. For example, when we teach simile and metaphor, it is very helpful for students to learn how to recognize and break down the comparisons into minor parts: tenor (the literal term), vehicle (the figurative term), the comparative term, and the grounds. It speeds up the process of language learning whenever I write the right equivalents in Persian on the board: tenor (مشبه), vehicle (مشبه به), the comparative term (ادات تشبيه), and the grounds (وجه شبه). This method quickens learning process wonderfully; they get native-like fluency.

4) The length of the poems. I preferred short poems for several reasons. For almost all the class, it was their first experience of reading poetry in English, so they might have found it much more challenging than the reading assignments and exercises in their own textbooks. I decided to reduce the load for them. No doubt, digesting and analyzing short poems is more manageable for EFL/ESL students. The shorter, the more digestible it looks. They will have enough time to read and evaluate every single word of a short poem.

Here are some of the poems that were read and discussed in the class: *Cross* (Langston Hughes); *Meeting at Night & Parting at Morning* (Robert Browning); *Mirror* (Sylvia Plath); *Ozymandias* (P. B. Shelley); *Richard Cory* (Edwin Arlington Robinson); *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* (Robert Frost); *The Chimney Sweeper* (William Blake); *The Eagle* (Alfred, Lord Tennyson); *The Man he killed* (Thomas Hardy); *The Road Not Taken* (Robert Frost); *The Sick Rose* (William Blake); *There is no Frigate Like a Book* (Emily Dickinson); *Warning* (Jenny Joseph); *Winter* (Shakespeare). There are varieties of in-class activities that the instructor can use in the class. Some poems may be used for summarizing or paraphrasing, some others may be suitable for fill in the blanks activities or for reading comprehension questions. One of students' favorite exercises was to compose one word-per-line poems. They became so excited that they were given a chance to practice their English writing skills and vocabulary freely without being worried about violating English grammatical rules. Here are some examples of the poems written by my students (their names come at the end of each poem):

TABLE I.
EXAMPLES OF 10 WORD POEMS COMPOSED BY EFL STUDENTS

<i>Mirror</i>	<i>Snowman</i>	<i>To My Mum</i>	<i>love</i>	<i>Sunflower</i>
My old mirror, shall I call you cruel or truthful?	Little snowman, who has given you that warm red scarf?	How patient, lovely and strong you were; sleep in peace.	Lost in dreams, lonely and cold, can't you see me?	Oh sunflower, don't forget to put on your glittering sunglasses.
(sample)	(sample)	(Rahimi)	(Akbar)	(Mirzakhani)

TABLE II.
EXAMPLES OF 12-14 WORD POEMS COMPOSED BY EFL STUDENTS

<i>The White Rose</i>	<i>Life</i>	<i>Autumn</i>	<i>To The Trees</i>	<i>The White Rose</i>
Surrounding with dark red roses, the white rose feels so lonely in the yard. (Mehdipoor)	People change, friends leave, love hurts, things go wrong, but cruel life goes on. (Shiri)	Tears are streaming down the sad face of the dark azure sky. (Zare)	How patient you are when your leaves leave you in the fall! (Golchin)	The passionate red rose lost its blood and now is a pure white rose (Mosayebi)

My own teaching observations and research studies, linking with students' feedback have proved that poetry, this valuable authentic material, could enhance language development process. These rich, deeply meaningful and genuine lines motivated students to be engaged thoroughly in the process of learning. My students showed more genuine enthusiasm and higher levels of concentration while doing their assignments. Unconsciously they improved their language skills when they got involved in a process that demanded creativity and all the knowledge that they had acquired hitherto. They were eager and highly motivated. Gardner (1985) defines motivation as "the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favourable attitudes toward learning the language" (p.10). Poetry inspires both desire and energy in language learners to improve their language skills. They seemed happy, satisfied and grateful. Fortunately, there is an endless list of poems that provides authentic contexts for incorporating into the EFL/ESL language curriculum. There are numerous sources which provide hundreds of novel and creative ideas, and activities for using poetry in the language classes

VII. SAMPLES OF POETRY WORKSHEETS FOR EFL/ESL STUDENTS

Direction: Read the following poem, "*Richard Cory*" by Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869–1935) and answer the questions below.

Richard Cory
Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

*So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.*

A. Developing Listening Comprehension Skills

Direction: Students compare Robinson's poem "*Richard Cory*" (1897) with the song of the same title that was written by Simon in 1965 and recorded by Simon and Garfunkel for their second studio album, *Sounds of Silence*.

Procedure:

- Warm up activities at the beginning of the class can be very helpful. Students are asked to describe the appearance and manner of a classic gentleman.
- The teacher plays the audio recording. Students listen and then write down what they hear on the recordings.
- Students are given the transcription and the recording is played again and this time they can compare the transcription with the recording.
- Students compare the lyric of the song written by Simon with the poem composed by Robinson.

B. Developing Reading Comprehension Skills

Direction: All the following questions are based on the poem "*Richard Cory*" by Edwin Arlington Robinson. Students are to choose the best answer for each question.

1. The name "Richard" by connotation suggests -----
 - a. members of the upper class in American society
 - b. middle class which is often the dominant group to shape society
 - c. lower class society which is typified by unemployment, poverty and homelessness
2. What was people's first impression of Richard Cory?
 - a. He was the most miserable man in the town.
 - b. He was the happiest man in the world who had everything that one could wish for.
 - c. He was a lonely man with no friend, no family and no love.
3. The unusual phrase "*from sole to crown*" is similar to the common expression -----
 - a. fall on one's feet
 - b. from head to foot
 - c. have the world at feet
4. Which line suggests that the common people think of Richard Cory as a divine and heavenly creature ineffably above them all?
 - a. "*And he was always human when he talked*"
 - b. "*But still he fluttered pulses when he said*"
 - c. "*'Good-morning,' and he glittered when he walked*"
5. Which of the following statements is the best paraphrase of the line "*Clean favored, and imperially slim*"?
 - a. Richard Cory was a very handsome and slender gentleman who moved gracefully.
 - b. Richard Cory favored the grand imperial style of the aristocratic society.
 - c. Richard Cory was very clean and tidy but he was too narrow, giving an impression of weakness.
6. Which of the following statements states the theme of this poem?
 - a. This is the story of an isolated man who is guilty of pride and prejudice.
 - b. "*Richard Cory*" exposes the inhumanity of violence.
 - c. This poem portrays the sharp contrast between appearance and reality.

C. Developing Writing Skills

Procedure: The instructor starts the class with a warm up activity. The old American proverb "*It takes three generations to make a gentleman*" is written on the board or overhead projector. Then students are asked to list the characteristics of a typical gentleman. Below are samples of essay questions and topics that can inspire students to write about the poem, "*Richard Cory*".

- Write a brief summary of the poem.
- Discuss the connotations of the name "*Richard Cory*".
- Why does the poet prefer the unusual phrase "from sole to crown" to the common "from head to foot"?
- Discuss the point of view of the poem.
- Try to formulate a theme for the poem.
- "Appearance is not always the reality." Justify this statement by giving examples from the poem "*Richard Cory*."

D. Developing Speaking Skills

Role play: Students are divided into equal groups. Each group forms a circle and discusses a topic or does a role play. One can play the role of Richard Cory and the other ones play the roles of the people of downtown. They can take turn to play roles.

Discussion: Students are divided into groups of equal size. They are to answer the following discussion questions and topics:

- Who is the speaker in "Richard Cory"?
- What assumptions do the people of downtown make about Cory?
- Discuss the use of irony in this poem.
- Try to formulate a theme for the poem.
- "Things are not always what they seem." Justify this statement on the basis of this poem.

VIII. CONCLUSION

A typical language textbook contains various types of practice activities and drills that language learners carry out within a somewhat controlled area. These typical English exercises impose artificiality on the classroom. By introducing authentic materials especially literature to our language learners, we can make the teaching environment as close to the real world as possible. Comparing with other literary genres, because of its brevity, poetry proves to be an ideal literary source in the EFL/ESL classroom. Poetry takes students from mechanical practice to more meaningful and conscious practice. The multidimensional language of poetry conquers learners' whole being. It appeals not only to their intellect but also to their senses, emotions, and imagination. When language learners are emotionally involved, they become more eager to participate in class activities. A good poem is written by a sensitive observer with serious artistic intentions who intends to bestow on the readers new insight into life and refine their thoughts. Thus the language learners find the teaching materials meaningful and relevant to their own lives outside the classroom. No wonder they eagerly employ a wide range of strategies and skills to evaluate and interpret the texts. Poetry, this very authentic and genuine text, can increase learner motivation. It brings joy, engagement and involvement all together to the classroom. In order to achieve good results, poems need to be appropriate in terms of language complexity, content familiarity, figurative language and the length.

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