ACTIVE READING IN TEACHING POETRY IN EFL CLASS

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Abstract

Poetry at large does not have the liberty of prose in describing experience to its fullest details. Its nature is to compress experience into compact and condensed language thus reading poetry for the uninitiated can be very challenging. For students of EFL, reading poetry in English can be a very demanding task because they have to get through double barriers, namely: the nature of poetry and English, the language it is written in, to enjoy the experience it tries to convey. Teachers of poetry are also riddled with dillemma as to make their students understand the text they are teaching. The practice of authoritatively telling students what it means will turn poetry class into a uninspiring session where students will listen to another dreary sermon each time they attend the class and leave them marvelling whether the teacher's explanation is within their reach or beyond them. Moreoever, it will do them injustice because this practive will cripple them of the ability in discovering the meaning of the text they are reading on their own. For this reason, this paper proposes active reading as a strategy to help both teachers and students to prevail over challenges posed by poetry in English. Active reading involves a lot of annotating task which will help students to crack open the compact language of poetry and extend it to the extent of students discovering that poetry is just another way to communicate experience through language.

Key words*: teaching poetry, EFL.*

Some People Like Poetry
Wislawa Szymborska

> *Some people--*
> *that is not everybody*
> *Not even the majority but the minority.*
> *Not counting the schools where one must,*
> *and the poets themselves,*
> *there will be perhaps two in a thousand.*
>
> *Like--*
> *but we also like chicken noodle soup,*
> *we like compliments and the color blue,*
> *we like our old scarves,*
> *we like to have our own way,*
> *we like to pet dogs.*
>
> *Poetry--*
> *but what is poetry.*
> *More than one flimsy answer*
> *has been given to that question.*
> *And I don't know, and don't know, and I*
> *cling to it as to a life line.*

-translated by Walter Whipple

INTRODUCTION

It is a common practice in English departments across Indonesia to have two concentrations named after the great divide of linguistics and literature. But, the students of English are not that divided until the time has come for them to choose literature or linguistics as their research field. Before that time arrives they are obliged to pass all classes offered by the department despite some classes are of little help or relevance in their chosen path for their final project or thesis. Amongst the required courses they must take are literature classes which are commonly styled after the three major literary genres, namely, poetry, prose and drama. Nevertheless, unlike drama and prose with their clear language, poetry has this reputation of being challenging and

intellectually demanding, especially for EFL students.

Regarding EFL students' attitude toward the learning of poetry, Khatib (2011) after reading some surveys on the situation of English literature in EFL/ESL situation laments that all surveys show students' negative attitude towards learning poetry (p. 165). Hirvela and Boyle (in Khatib, 2011) even come up with statistics that will send chill to the spine of poetry teachers that only 6% of Hongkong Chinese students involved in the survey prefer poetry than other literary form; and 73% of students surveyed confessed that poetry is the most difficult and intimidating literary form (p. 165). They also finds out for adult learners surveyed prose is the most enjoyable literary form, while poetry is feared the most (in Yilmaz, 2011, p. 88). Hence Szymborska is right when she beautifully describes in her poem that only… "some people--that is not everybody/ Not even the majority but the minority/ Not counting the school one must,/ and the poet themselves, /there will be perhaps two in a thousand—like poetry."

Interestingly, amidst the general lack of interest toward poetry, this genre is a great help in the student's odysseys in achieving their ultimate goal in studying English, the acquisition of the language. Quoting Hanauer along with Maley and Duff, Kellem (2009) contends that EFL classroom is benefited from the inclusion of poetry-based activities (p.12). Kellem believes that poetry is (1) a source of content-rich reading material; (2) it is a model of creative language in use; (3) it is a way to introduce vocabulary in context; (4) poetry is a way to focus student's attention on English pronunciation, rhythm and stress (p.12).

Despite language mastery is not the main focus of poetry class syllabus at universities, it is difficult for other literary genres and other types of texts to beat poetry in its ability to train students of English's sense and sensibility vis-à-vis the language's language component namely, pronunciation, stress, and especially rhythm. Poetry, for its compact and condensed language, remains peerless in the league of rule bending texts that require its readers to have advanced knowledge on the language's system because in handling poetry one will see how, as McRae (in Nasr, 2001) puts it,… "rules are questioned, played around with, and put into different uses" (p.350). Moreover, poetry faces no serious contenders in terms of its capability in rousing mounting pleasure of discovery in readers given extra reading efforts it requires to get into its core. For this case, Nasr (2001) gladly says that… "students would be glad to find their imagination and creativity being challenged specially if they had been equipped with the norms against which to measure" Hence, it is safe to say the learning of poetry is highly useful whether it is for the sake of language learning or clever action of critical thinking.

Poetry: Common Complaints

At large poetry syllabus at universities is designed to train students in the mechanics of poetry. In other words, by the end of the semester, students are expected to be able to appreciate poetry. Usually students will be asked to write a several pages paper on their interpretation about a specific poem as one of major graded assignments to pass the course. Here where the problem commonly faced by EFL students lies: aside from English, the nature of poetry itself. Hillyer (1971) has claimed that poetry is… "undefinable ….[i]t is like life itself, which remains a mystery…" (p.22). Moreover, Kirszner & Mandel (2000) reminds us that although poetry has a special place in our lives, people— including the poet themselves-- find it difficult to define what poetry is (p.522). The best attempt to define what poetry is so far is to… "say that it uses language to condense experience into an intensely concentrated package, with each sound, each word, each image, and each line carrying great weight" (p.522). Even this one way to define poetry is laden with its own problem because this way sends message to readers, especially the

uninitiated ones or those who have preconception that poetry is difficult as well as worthless, that a poem is, in the words of Kennedy and Gioa (2010) … "a kind of puzzle written in secret code with a message slyly concealed" (p. 6). Thus, it is normal to expect students in EFL situations "fear" poetry, a "puzzle" written in a cryptic and foreign lingo which makes their lives miserable by having to bear with it until the end of the semester.

The next thing that is responsible in generating a poetry phobia in an EFL situation is the proficiency question. According to Nasr (2001), generally literary texts, especially poetry come forward with complex linguistic difficulties (p. 349). For this reason, Ganakumaran (in Radzuwan Ab. Rashid, 2010) asserts

> …"the reading of literary texts involves the development of complex skills and tools of inquiry and these skills and tools may be interpreted to include the gathering of information related to an issue or problem, an analysis of personal values as they relate to the issue or problem, reflecting upon various options for solutions, and selecting and applying the most appropriate option…" (p.87).

That's why, literary texts, particularly poetry, will not pose so much a challenge for students with high proficiency. Reading and understanding literary texts will bring them onto a new height in studying a foreign language. For these students, literary texts offer them endless thoughts to be explored when it comes to writing tasks. On the contrary, like in my case, students who struggle to learn the language will find literary texts, especially poetry, menacing. The problem for students with low proficiency does not stop in trying to tangle the seem-to-be-untangled-language of poetry but also in writing about it. It goes without saying the question of proficiency is important in an academic writing, thus, writing on poetry can be another additional burden for these disadvantaged students.

The way poetry instructors teach poetry in one way or another is the one to blame vis-à-vis student's negative attitude toward poetry. The problem starts with the teachers themselves who may, according to Povey (in Khatib, 2001), have unwrought happiness with poetry because of the experiences they have suffered (p.165). Then, what happened to them when they were students themselves? It is likely that their teacher used traditional approach in their poetry class. We can visualize that the teacher standing in front of the class acting as the omniscient one who showered students with the authorized interpretation of a particular poem which they probably had acquired from their fore teachers. Some of them notice that some students wore the expression of disagreement or disbelief. The show must go on, however, and there was no room for dissenting opinion for they were not ready with other interpretations that the students might come up with. In the class, we can also see students sit silently and passively processed the information they had received wondering why they could not connect to the poem just the way their teacher could. Sometimes, they tried to forward their own response to the poem being taught to no avail, however, because the teacher's interpretation was the official one and had been used for generations. Hence, it is easy to infer from the illustration above that a poetry class taught with such a teacher centered approach will doom poetry class into a monotonous session which results in students' aversion of poetry.

Making a Case for Active Reading

Judging from the tenor of several issues that are guilty in engendering students' negative attitude toward poetry covered in the previous section, it is safe to say that students turn away from poetry because they do not have enough chances to get involved in it. Meanwhile, Silberstein (1994) confidently says that reading is the act of communication (p.9). Moreover Rosenblatt (in Kellem, 2009) describes that reading is an activity involving non-linear transaction between the readers and the texts in which meaning is not produced by a

predefined interpretation of the text but by an individual reader whose emotion, background and idea generate meaning in a specific time and setting (p. 14). Then it goes without saying that different readers will likely come up with different meanings because of their differing experiences. Moreover, Thorne (in Nasr, 2001), warns that it is the character of poetry to have more than one meanings (p.351). With this in mind, student's response must be welcome and in order for students to give sensible and defensible response, teacher must make them interact (read: involve) in the text.

Active reading which is generally understood as a reading strategy that gets readers engaged in the material can be of a great help in teaching poetry in EFL situation. This strategy will even more helpful in college level poetry class which involves writing task either as final projects or other graded assignments because as Kirszner and Mandel (2000) puts it… "active reading help [students] to interpret what [they] read and develop [their] ideas into logical paper" (p. 16). Moreoever, active reading will not just benefit students during poetry class, but will remain effective long after their poetry class has ended because it also develops their critical thinking skills. It is safe to say so because according to Hughley Jr. (Active Reading, slide 2) active reading is also a process is helpful in developing students critical thinking skill as it makes readers to analyze, synthesize and evaluate.

According to Kirszner and Mandel (2000) most readers are passive readers that hopes the texts will automatically tell them what they mean without significant contribution from the readers (p. 16). Whereas according to Hirsch (2006)… "poetry alerts us to what is deepest in ourselves--it arouses a spiritual desire which it also gratifies…[i]t attains what it avows…[b]ut it can only do so with the readers' imaginative collaboration even complicity" (It is Something of an Accident that You are the Reader and I the Writer, January 23rd). In other words, reader's

interaction with the text is essential because meaning in created through details or information given by the text and readers' response to it. Thus, for an effective interaction which will result in meaningful understanding on the part of the reader, as any interaction should be, readers must actively reflects on, questions, even challenges ideas presented in the text. To do so it is a smart move to employ active reading strategies particularly **previewing**, **highlighting** and **annotating**.

Previewing which also means surveying is very helpful in preparing students for the text. According to Kirszner and Mandel (2000) previewing is first useful in telling students the text's most obvious physical characteristics, such as the length of the poem or the number of stanzas it has, form and title. Then, the answers for questions arising from this textual physical distinctiveness will help readers to get insight into the work and raises questions to ask later when they read more closely (p.16-17). For example, notifying the poem's title like *The Eagle* by Lord Tennyson help student's in guessing what the poem is all about. Or, in other case, notifying repeated words in the poem may help readers to guess that that word may be the key to the understanding of the work.

It is important to note that reading a poem may take once or twice or more times because of the compactness of its language. As readers read closely, some elements, sometimes subtle enough that it takes another reading to notice it, may be seen and beg for further examination. So, in order not to lose the momentum highlighting is employed. Highlighting is physically marking the text to identify important ideas and show relationships amongst ideas (Kirszner and Mandel (2000, p.18). From the highlighted part of the poem, readers can ask questions like why this particular word is repeated; or what these repeated words signify; or how a pattern of recurring images could proof that it is the subject of a poem. Although symbols used to highlight certain things in a poem may vary depending of the preference

of the highlighter, Kirszner and Mandel (2000) come forward with some insightful guidelines like:

1. Underline important ideas that you should read again.
2. Box or circle repeated words, phrases, or images.
3. Put question mark beside confusing passages, unfamiliar references, or words that need to be defined.
4. Draw lines or arrows to connect related ideas of images.
5. Number incidents that occur in sequence.
6. Set of a long portion of the text with a vertical line in the margin.
7. Place stars beside particularly important ideas.

Thus, with some marks on the paper, it is a lot easier to begin a quest to identify the idea in the text which the writer tries to convey because now readers have a kind of map which is equipped with important checkpoints as not to stray or lost altogether in the twists and knots of the poem's language, style and form.

Our response to a word, or a phrase or an image in a poem can be just a fleeting moment. So, it is important to annotate or record your reaction as a marginal note while highlighting specific part of a poem (Kirszner and Mandel, 2000, p. 19). In this activity, you may begin to answer questions arising from your previewing and highlighting activities. Moreover, in this phase of reading you can begin registering possible ideas or thoughts conveyed by the poem or the significance of certain images or words; or define words that you do not understand. All in all, annotation can be seen as a thorough reader's engagement with a poem. In this activity, readers interact with the text as to complete the circle in which the text is meaningful and the readers get the meaning.

As for those with low English language proficiency can pace a little bit slower by adding some more activities aside from previewing, highlighting and annotating the text. First, students must allocate extra time and shed some more energy to peruse their dictionary's pages to look for the meaning of difficult words. Even those who are advanced enough, sometimes, have to check their dictionary for certain words in the case of a new usage of them in a poem. This activity however time consuming is rewarding because in the end students would have overcome the initial barrier to understanding foreign language, vocabulary. Second, as proposed by Silberstein (1994) students must untangle the twisted syntaxes and convert them into a more standard English (p. 92). This activity will enable them to paraphrase the poem despite not all poem can be paraphrased. At least, as Kennedy & Gioia (2012) points out, paraphrasing can make certain things clear (p. 7) thus engaging with it become easier.

CONCLUSION

The question of language and teachers' approach in teaching poetry are the most culpable of reasons why students find poetry class very intimidating. English and poetry's compact language serve as the first barriers that deter them from engaging with poetry. Meanwhile, teacher centered approach in teaching poetry take the students even further away from the text. In this case, the teachers have made the meaning readily available at hand, so why bother reading the poem further, thus students' engagement with the text remain sparse. Therefore, it is very important to get students to involve in the process of meaning making.

Facing this fact, Muldoon (2005), in answering the question of how teacher could cultivate original thinking conducive to the creation and understanding of poetry, suggests that the teaching of poet…"be seen as a participatory experience .….. [t]eacher should not insist on one interpretation of poem, but allow students to have an active role in interpretation" (p. 5). To get to this point, active reading, which employs previewing, highlighting and annotating, is a plausible strategy to get students to engage with the text. Once engagement is proceeding, challenges

commonly related to poetry can be tackled. Nasr (2001) on the benefit of students taking part in meaning making contends that for students is encouraging to know that they may come up with their own rendition of the text that their teachers' response is not the authorized interpretation which has to be duly accepted (p. 350).

As a final note,…"but what is poetry/ more than one flimsy answer/ has been given to that question/ and I don't know, and don't know," laments the speaker in Symborska's *Some People Like Poetry.* Many have been said against poetry starting from it is difficult up to it is unbelievably nonsensical. These are, however, the reasons why poetry is still relevant in our today's world where everything is digitalized and uniformized. Life, indeed, is unpredictable and far from uniformity. Thus, it is a clever move to follow the speaker of Symborska's poem despite she is aware that poetry is tricky but she says… "and I/cling to it as to a life line."

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