



A STUDY OF CHALLENGES FACED BY ENGLISH TEACHERS WHEN TEACHING POETRY AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL IN DELHI GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Poetry, as a component of literature, provides for rich resource for language learning. As a part of the school curriculum, poetry teaching serves an academic purpose enhancing expression in language use, introducing to poetic devices, enabling abstract thinking. But, apart from serving this academic purpose, poetry can purge, offer emotional relief, sensitise to harmony and beauty in life's lived experiences of joy and pain. This, however, is only possible if the students are provided with an opportunity to engage with poetry at a more personal level letting them explore the power of poetry.

To realise fully the value of teaching poetry as a potent resource for language teaching and personal growth of students, it is imperative that it be taught in a way that allows for engaging deeply with the poem. This implies that the teacher plays a crucial role in the poetry classroom from which students can extract the maximum. However, any teacher who seeks to realise the efficacy of teaching poetry in a language classroom is likely to face challenges in the classroom situation. At the middle school level the learners are at a stage when they are still in the process of familiarising themselves with the English language. Poetry deviates from the regularities of language use, allowing for poetic licence to the poet. This can make poetry difficult to be understood by young learners for whom English is a second language.

The purpose of this research was to study the nature of challenges faced by English teachers while teaching poetry at the middle school level in Delhi government schools. The sample for this study comprised teachers from three Sarvodaya Vidyalayas, three Pratibha Vikas Vidyalayas and three Government Senior Secondary Schools. Three different types of government schools run by Delhi Government were studied because these schools typify a cross section of Delhi school system providing a gradient in terms of the differential in learners.

Questionnaire and interview were the tools used to collect data about how teachers teach poetry, their purpose of teaching poetry and the challenges they face while teaching poetry.

The findings of the research suggest that poetry is taught essentially through the traditional method. Teachers in all the three kinds of government schools follow the exam centric approach to teach poetry. The challenges that impede effective poetry teaching are the lack of infrastructural facilities in schools, lack of in-service workshops on how to teach poetry, non-academic work load on teachers, and no exposure of English language to the learners beyond classroom. For certain challenges to be resolved, changes at the systemic level would be required.

The study has implications for teachers and their classroom pedagogy, school Principals and policy makers. The research indicates that teachers also need to upgrade their ways of teaching poetry in order to make it more effective for their learners.

Key Terms

Poetry: For the present study, this means the poems prescribed in the English language textbooks for the middle school stage in the government schools in Delhi, along with English poetry other than the prescribed poetry, which is appropriate for middle school level.

Middle School Level

This comprises the grades VI, VII, VIII in the Indian school system.

Government Schools

For the present study, this means the three types of government schools i.e. PratibhaVikasVidyalayas, SarvodayaVidyalayas, and Government Senior Secondary Schools.

Background and Rationale

Literature constitutes a significant component of language teaching in schools. Its purposes in a language classroom are manifold. Literature illustrates language usage in different styles and registers in authentic situations as presented in literary texts. Literature texts are open to interpretation and offer ample opportunities for students' interaction and discussion in a language classroom. In addition to the above, literature provides emotional relief, helps in achieving aesthetic and efferent purpose and develops creative thinking.



Among many facets of teaching literature, teaching of poetry occupies an important place since it provides for rich resource for language learning.

From early childhood children are introduced to the rhythm and mellifluous quality of poetry through nursery rhymes. It is so because poetry has a natural appeal to humans and little children intuitively respond to it without even being aware of it.

In poetry emotion is conveyed through beautification of words. The expression becomes primary and even the sound of words becomes important, however the meaning does not become non-essential.

The sound is tied to the rhythm and the two hold the thought. The beauty of the sound intensifies that which is sought to be conveyed through poetry by employing alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia. All these lend a musical quality to poetry that yields itself to aesthetic reading. Poetry satisfies human need for harmony and rhythm.

National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 emphasises the development of aesthetic abilities as one of the goals of education:

“Appreciation of beauty and art forms an integral part of human life. Creativity in arts, literature and other domains of knowledge is closely linked. Education must provide the means and opportunities to enhance the child’s creative expression and the capacity for aesthetic appreciation. Education for aesthetic appreciation and creativity is even more important today when aesthetic gullibility allows for opinion and taste to be manufactured and manipulated by market forces. The effort should be to enable the learner to appreciate beauty in its several forms.”

As a part of the school curriculum, poetry teaching serves an academic purpose enhancing expression in language use, introducing to poetic devices, enabling abstract thinking. But, apart from serving this academic purpose, poetry can purge, offer emotional relief, sensitise to harmony and beauty in life’s lived experiences of joy and pain. This however is only possible if students are provided with an opportunity to engage with poetry at a more personal level letting them explore the power of poetry.

Engaging with poetry also enhances creativity and imagination among young learners since poetry not only exposes them to a range of ideas and experiences but also acquaints them with how poetic language allows for creative ways of self-expression. NCF mentions “Literature can also be a spur to children’s own creativity. After hearing a story, poem or song, children can be encouraged to write something of their own. They can also be encouraged to integrate various forms of creative expression.”

To realise fully the value of teaching poetry as a potent resource for language teaching and personal growth of students, it is imperative that it be taught in a way that allows for engaging deeply with the poem. This implies that the teacher plays a crucial role in the poetry classroom from which students can extract the maximum. However, any teacher who seeks to realise the efficacy of teaching poetry in a language classroom, is likely to face challenges in the classroom situation.

The purpose of this research is to study the nature of challenges faced by the English teachers in teaching of poetry at the middle school level. At the middle school level the learners are at a stage when they are still in the process of familiarising themselves with the English language. The NCF mentions the role of language learning at the initial stages as “attainment of basic proficiency and development of language as an instrument of basic interpersonal communication.”

Also the NCERT syllabus for classes six to eight describes the main goals of language learning at this stage to be “vocabulary development through reading extensively with comprehension and interest and writing activities of a higher order than hitherto developed”.

The challenges that could emerge while teaching poetry at the middle school level could be owing to the nature of language of poetry. Poetry deviates from the regularities of language use, allowing for poetic licence to the poet. This can make poetry difficult to be understood by young learners of English poetry for whom English is a second language. The figurative use of language, the connotative meanings of the words, obscurity of language can cause difficulty in understanding the thought or sentiments expressed. The challenge in allowing students to interpret and experience the poem on their own could be that they might not get the spirit of the poem if they are unable to deal with the complexities of the poetic language.

For the present study, the researcher developed a theoretical framework that looked into the shift in pedagogy of poetry owing to the advent of Rosenblatt’s Reader Response Theory which was a moving away from I.A Richards’ New Criticism. Such a framework situates the present research in the contemporary thought about classroom pedagogy that gives importance to the process of reading and responding, that facilitate the development of comprehension abilities.



The researcher also studied literature that broadly focused on teaching of poetry, the role of a poetry teacher, problems faced in teaching of poetry, and research papers on various factors influencing teaching of poetry.

Objectives

The following were the main objectives of the study:

- To understand the process of teaching poetry undertaken by teachers of poetry.
- To identify the challenges faced by the teachers of English while teaching poetry.
- To identify some measures that will result in a positive response to poetry in schools.

Methods

The following section elaborates on the research methodology, population and sample, and the tools used to conduct the study.

Research Methodology

This study is a qualitative study, keeping in mind the research questions and the objectives of the study. This approach enabled the researcher to obtain information such as the processes adopted by teachers to teach poetry, their views on the purpose of teaching poetry at the middle school level, the challenges they faced while teaching poetry, their suggestions on how teaching poetry could be improved. Hence, the study was conducted qualitatively i.e. without the use of any rigorous statistical techniques.

Population

Population for this study consisted of English language teachers teaching at the middle school level in Delhi Government schools.

Sample

The present study was conducted in the government schools in Delhi region. Delhi has a large number of government schools that could provide researcher access to the teachers. The sample of this study comprised English teachers teaching at the middle school level in the government schools. The selection of the schools was based on convenience sampling and intended to maximise the use of limited time scheduled for data collection. The sample for this study comprised teachers from nine government schools in Delhi. The researcher selected three Sarvodaya Vidyalayas, three Pratibha Vikas Vidyalayas and three Government Senior Secondary Schools.

For the present study three different types of government schools run by Delhi Government, were studied because these schools typify a cross section of Delhi school system providing a gradient in terms of the differential in learners. The three kinds of schools are described below:

Government Senior Secondary Schools

These comprise of middle, secondary and senior secondary levels.

Sarvodaya Vidyalayas

These are also called composite schools, as they have classes from primary up to senior secondary level, with the objective to provide quality education to the children from class I to XII under one roof, as is being provided in the private public schools.

Pratibha Vikas Vidyalayas

These are schools for gifted students in Delhi by Delhi government. In these schools meritorious students from government schools are admitted through a planned achievement-cum-aptitude test. These schools are Government institutions so as to provide facilities and teaching faculty at par with the private schools in the Capital; such as excellent teachers, good laboratories, libraries and other equipment. The idea is to provide avenues of development and realisation of full potential for deserving children, with restriction in the number of students per class.

Tools

In a qualitative study relying only on one source of data may not reveal the true picture of events. Therefore, the researcher used two tools for data collection: Questionnaire and Interview.

The questionnaire was prepared keeping in mind the objectives of the research. It comprised forty seven questions that focused on the process of teaching poetry that was being carried out by the teachers, what infrastructural facilities are available to them to plan and assist in poetry teaching, and what teachers do for their professional development to upgrade and improve the process of teaching poetry. The questionnaire consisted of closed questions. Most of the questions were to



be rated on a 4-point scale, some were dichotomous and multiple choice questions. These were used to provide specific information based on a prescribed range of responses. Questions constructed in this form act as reliable and efficient method of data collection due to the uniformity of data they provide. Closed questions prescribe the range of responses from which the respondent may choose.

The questionnaire paved way for an in depth analysis, through interview. Structured interviews were employed by the researcher to gain a more comprehensive view into the perceptions of teachers regarding the purpose of teaching poetry at the middle school level and the challenges that they face while teaching poetry. A structured interview is one in which the content and procedures are organised in advance. The sequence and wording of the questions is determined by means of a schedule. Since, in a structured interview, the respondents answer the same questions, it increases the comparability of responses. Such interviews also facilitate organisation and analysis of data.

Procedure of Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher went out to each school, explained the purpose of the research and to maintain clarity and transparency, explained the purpose of the study to the teachers, before administering the questionnaire to them. The researcher was present with the respondents at the time they filled up the questionnaire. After the respondents filled up the questionnaire, the researcher interviewed them. The researcher transcribed the interview through audio recording and written notes. The permission for audio recording the interview was taken from the teachers prior to conducting it.

Results

The questionnaire responses were converted into percentages, tabulated and descriptively analysed. The interview responses were also tabulated and descriptively analysed.

The objective wise findings of the study are as follows:

Objective 1

To understand the process of teaching poetry undertaken by teachers of poetry.

After analyzing the responses of teachers collected through questionnaires and interviews, the researcher found that poetry was taught essentially through the traditional method. Teachers in all the three kinds of schools were following the exam centric approach to teach poetry, wherein they focused more on making students answer exercises at the end of each poem in the textbook. Students were not given enough opportunity to discuss and share their ideas with one another while reading poetry.

Teachers did not frequently bring poems, other than those in the textbook, to share with the students. There was not much impetus given to students in any of the schools to encourage them to recite poetry in class. Teachers also did not take up interesting follow up activities in class after teaching a particular poem. Teachers preferred to ask students to revise the poem at home as a 'follow up' activity.

Most teachers from all three kinds of schools did not prepare poetry anthologies for their students. They also did not consult published poetry anthologies to teach poetry, nor did they undertake poetry reading activities.

Mostly, teachers did not use any audio recordings, video clippings or self-prepared presentations as teaching aids to teach poetry.

The researcher also observed that most of the teachers while filling up the questionnaire gave answers, which they later contradicted in the interview. For instance a certain percentage of teachers in all schools answered in the questionnaire that they asked students to prepare a poetry anthology wherein all the students contributed poems. But during the interview sessions with teachers, it was found that teachers largely did not engage learners actively in the processes involved in teaching of poetry.

Teachers of PratibhaVikas School did come across as teachers who engaged students slightly more than teachers of Sarvodaya or Govt. Senior Secondary Schools. They tried to relate poetry to the lives of the children, or asked them to draw pictures based on the poems read. However, they also confessed to be doing these occasionally. One of the teachers from a PratibhaVikas School in his closing remarks to the interview said, "Poetry is only for ten marks in the exams, wherein Students get one stanza for reference to context and are also given internal choice. Therefore, we don't give much importance and time to poetry."

Teachers in Sarvodaya School felt that they were doing their best, by giving word meanings in Hindi and giving translations.



Teachers in Govt. Senior Secondary School felt that using Hindi was indispensable in class. Some of the teachers gave written translations of poems and words to their learners.

The researcher therefore found that poetry was not being taught in a way that engaged students or involved them in the process of comprehension. The researcher was also told by the teachers from all the three kinds of schools that English teachers did not accompany the students to the library. It was the class teacher who took students to the library. The English teachers, therefore, were not aware if their learners read any poetry in the library.

Objective 2

To identify the challenges faced by the teachers of English while teaching poetry.

Teachers in all three kinds of schools were facing challenges while teaching poetry. The researcher found that most of the challenges faced were common to all three kinds of government schools. All schools lacked infrastructural facilities such as language labs, audio video facilities, audio recordings of poetry. Teachers in all schools expressed disappointment at the fact that audio video aids were not available to them in their schools. There were no projectors in any classroom in any of the government schools. Lack of audio video facilities meant that students couldn't listen to poetry recordings, neither could they be shown visuals, videos relating to the poetry content they were being taught.

A couple of teachers from all schools mentioned that there was a dearth of seminars or workshops that dealt directly with teaching of poetry. The researcher also felt that there was a dire need for such in-service programmes / workshops for the English teachers so that they could acquaint themselves with ways in which poetry teaching could be made effective and meaningful for learners. Teachers in all schools felt that their learners had very poor basic skills in English. All teachers said that children had no exposure to the English language beyond the classrooms. Teachers felt that their learners' low level in English was one of the biggest challenges that impeded teaching of poetry. Poetry that had literal and figurative meaning was particularly found difficult to teach by teachers in all three kinds of schools since learners did not understand simple English. Teachers in all three kinds of schools also acknowledged that the level of poetry was not commensurate to the level of their learners. They felt that since their learners found it difficult to follow the English language, they ought to be taught simpler poetry which they could understand and relate to. Though in the questionnaire more than half the respondents from Govt. Senior Secondary Schools indicated that they were satisfied with the themes of the poems in the prescribed textbook, in the interview they confessed that the students found prescribed poetry difficult to understand.

Another major challenge that the teachers of Sarvodaya and Govt. Senior Secondary Schools were facing, was the large class size. With about seventy to eighty students in every class they found it difficult to interact with each and every child in their class. These schools had skewed student teacher ratio which impede effective teaching. If poetry teaching had to include sharing of ideas, experiences, responses, then having a huge class size could impede effective teaching of poetry. PratibhaVikas School teachers did not face this challenge because they had about forty to forty five students in their class.

All teachers also confessed that due to paucity of time, they were unable to dwell too much on a poem. They had a fixed syllabus to be covered every week due to which they had no time to go beyond the poems prescribed in the textbook. In addition to that, the teachers in all three kinds of government schools said that they were engaged in non-academic work due to which much of their time was taken up in duties assigned to them. This also left them with very less time to discuss pedagogical issues with their colleagues.

Some of the teachers also mentioned that heads of the institutes were geared more towards results of the students and were not particularly interested in teaching / learning of English.

Some teachers in Govt. Senior Secondary and Sarvodaya Schools also mentioned that due to the No Detention Policy students had developed a non-serious attitude towards studies which had made it harder for them to garner interest from students. They also said that due to this policy the teachers had to pass the students in the English exams even if they made spelling mistakes or wrote incorrect English in exams. Teachers said that it was a challenge to develop students' interest in the language and encourage them to perform better, since students knew they would pass their exams anyhow.

The researcher found that most of these challenges that teachers faced while teaching poetry were those that emerged due to factors over which teachers had no direct control. Factors such as lack of infrastructural facilities (poetry recordings, projectors in school, language labs, computers), large class size, educational policies (NDP i.e. No Detention Policy), selection of poetry content in textbooks were those which involved decision makers other than the teachers themselves.



The family background of learners in government schools which offered them no stimulus to improve upon their English language skills was also another factor that teachers could not manipulate.

These were all the factors that did not lie under the direct control of the teachers, but had a direct bearing on the classroom processes while teaching poetry. The researcher felt that the nature of the challenges was such that the teachers by themselves could not resolve them. For such challenges to be resolved changes at the systemic level would be required.

The researcher also felt that effective teaching of poetry was also challenged by teacher's own lack of awareness on the latest methods of teaching English poetry.

Moreover, the teachers in Govt. Senior Secondary and Sarvodaya Schools were incompetent in English speaking skills which could also be a handicap to teaching the English language and its poetic content.

Objective 3

To identify some measures that will result in a positive response to poetry in schools.

An analysis of the teachers' responses helped the researcher to identify some measures that can result in a positive response to poetry in schools. Infrastructural facilities such as separate language labs with computers and audio recordings of poetry could provide for input rich poetry classes for learners. Attractive and interesting stimulus related to poems could help in garnering young learners' interest in poetry. Along with it, teachers also need to provide more poetic stimulus by setting up class libraries and bringing in interesting poems to share with their learners.

Smaller class size could also help teachers give more attention to specific needs of their learners, organize more poetry reading activities that encourage learners' responses. The researcher felt that the schools should organize literary festivals that encourage students' participation and expose them to a literary environment. Such literary stimulus could make up for the lack of exposure to English language and literature that the students face at their homes.

Conclusion and Implications of the Study

The analysis of questionnaire and the interview responses of teachers have several significant implications for teachers and their classroom pedagogy, school principals and policy makers.

Implications for Teachers

The questionnaire responses of the teachers from three kinds of government schools pointed out that the state of poetry teaching in all of the schools is poor. Teachers need to be more sensitive to the potential of poetry and teach it accordingly. The current pedagogy being followed by the teachers does not indicate reflective teaching.

Some of the challenges that teachers faced such as lack of interest in students, paraphrasing poetry, finding prescribed poetry difficult to teach, lack of students' exposure to English and poetry outside the classroom, can be resolved by teachers, if they shift the focus of their pedagogical practices from being exam centric and teacher centric to being student centric.

Teachers need to adopt a pedagogy that paves ground for students to be able to appreciate poetry. Currently, there is emphasis on paraphrasing and translation of poetry. Current pedagogical practices in these schools are not geared towards letting students actively engage with the poem and comprehending it. Poems with different figurative and literal meaning are found challenging by the teachers to teach. However, having different figurative and literal meanings are distinguishing qualities of poetry, and open up possibilities of interpretations. Such poems with multiple or 'hidden' meanings should be looked at by the teachers as offering an opportunity to let students discuss and share ideas and experiences. Teachers, especially of the Govt. Senior Secondary School and Sarvodaya Schools also find paraphrasing challenging. However, such poems can be made meaningful by initiating discussions to let students discover meanings for themselves. Paraphrasing poems line wise runs the danger of limiting the poem to its literal meaning. An effective pedagogy of poetry would give equal importance to introducing the poem, reading and reciting the poem, making meaning or comprehending the poem and going beyond the poem, whereas, currently the teachers focus their pedagogical practices on teaching a poem for exam purposes. Though, preparing students for exams will always remain an important concern for the teachers, the scope of teaching should not limit itself to just that. Teachers should realize that pedagogical practices should enhance the ability of learners to bring in their subjective experiences while comprehending poetry. This can only be achieved if more stimulus is given to students while teaching of poetry, to which the students can respond to.



Currently, teachers, on the one hand found prescribed poetry not suitable for the level of learners, yet they did not have their own poetry anthologies for learners, nor did they ask students to choose poetry and compile their own anthologies. Teachers in all three kinds of government schools could not name any poetry anthology that could be found in their school library.

Teachers need to be more sensitive to the importance of exposing students to more poetry so that they can develop an interest in poetry. This will help teachers to make connections between poems and students' lives and experiences, between one poem and another. This would also help students go beyond the poems that have been prescribed in the textbooks. The idea of going beyond the poem is to let the students explore what all can be done with a poem once it is read. Role play activities based on a poem, collecting pictures, decorating boards illustrating the theme of the poem read in class, collecting more such poems and writing a short poem on a similar theme are some of the ways to help students go beyond the poem.

Some suggestions are:

- The learners should be provided with enough opportunity to explore and involve themselves with words and poems. The learners' active roles should be acknowledged and strengthened through supportive activities.
- Over emphasis and reliance on the textbook and the teacher should give way to creating an environment where the teacher is the facilitator and provides the learners opportunities to develop as readers who bring in their experiences while reading poetry.
- English teachers should accompany students to the library so that they can encourage students to read and suggest them good books on poetry.
- Teachers should keep themselves abreast with what anthologies are available in the library. They should also suggest anthologies and ensure that their suggestions are followed up.
- Class libraries should be made.
- Time should be assigned to the children to read poetry for enjoyment in class and not be subjected to any formal assessment.
- Small and large group discussions should be part of the poetry class.
- Regular activities such as decorating boards based on the themes of the poems, writing responses to poems, celebrating special occasions with poetry recitations should be incorporated in the classroom processes.
- Teachers should also read poetry to keep alive their own interest to make teaching of poetry more meaningful.

Implications for Principals

The researcher felt that teachers in all the three kinds of government schools need to attend more in-service training programmes and workshops that deal directly with teaching of poetry. The teachers themselves seem to have recognized this need. However, not much is done on this front by the teachers and for the teachers. The teachers and the principals of the schools need to come together and collaboratively work towards getting such in-service workshops and training programmes organized for the teachers. They should also ensure that journals on teaching of English and pedagogy of poetry be provided to the teachers.

Implications for Policy Makers

The implications for policy makers are that required infrastructure be provided in schools that can foster effective teaching learning of languages. Government schools lack language labs and computer resources. Teachers also need to be provided with adequate resource material on pedagogy of English and English poetry. Government schools also need reforms that regulate the skewed student teacher ratio. The impact of the NDP was said to be detrimental by teachers on students' attitude and seriousness towards their studies and they believe that it has led to poor standards of teaching learning English. The researcher felt that there should be provision for teachers to give their feedbacks on current policies that should reach policy makers.

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