Using poems to develop the higher-level English language Skills of the Junior-Secondary Students in Sri Lanka

E.S. Neranjani

Faculty of Education, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

This paper presents how poetry can be used in the English language classroom in Sri Lanka to develop the higher-level language skills of the junior secondary students. The study applied the qualitative dominant mixed method design to collect data from a sample of 250 Grade Eight students and 61 teachers by using questionnaires, classroom observations, interviews, and text analysis. The key findings of the study were that a majority of the teachers considered that the poems were not suitable to develop the higher-level language skills of the students because they were unfamiliar with using poems for language development. Poems were used in the classroom for loud reading and meanings were explained in the Mother Tongue. When the teachers were provided with strategies as a scaffold, students were actively engaged in the poems and higher-level language skills were developed. Therefore, by applying appropriate strategies poems can be used successfully to develop the higher-level language skills of the students.

Key-words: Higher-level language skills, poems, strategies

INTRODUCTION AND THE BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In the twenty-first century global society, development of higher-level (HL) English language skills will be advantageous to an individual in the professional and educational success. Poetry is a strong mode that presents the language skills of an individual. In-fact the earliest literary work in the world, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was a poem. Since poetry has been successfully used by the pre-colonial Sri Lankans to express complex ideas, feelings and thoughts in the Mother Tongue, this study aimed to investigate how poetry can be used today in the development of HL English language skills of the students in the secondary schools in Sri Lanka.

According to Ihejirika (2014) and Hismanoglu (2005), literature and language complement each other. Language is the vehicle to approach literature and a person develops the language skills through the active engagement with the literary texts.

Syed and Wahas (2020) describe poetry as an effective source for language learning because it deals with universal themes and human concerns that give opportunity for the students to express their feelings and emotions. Mittal (2016) has identified many advantages of using poetry in the development of language and some of those are an advanced rapture of vocabulary to express feelings of emotional aspects of life; the development of self-confidence by reciting the poems aloud; development of the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

What are the HL language skills?

Basic language skills are listening, speaking, reading, and writing and every individual in the society is expected to have the ability of these four skills at varied levels. Victoria State Government (2019) consider it important to develop the HL language skills apart from the basic language skills. HL language skills are the awareness of how language and communication work, inferencing and interpreting figurative language.

Language used to convey deeper meaning through simile, metaphor, imagery, personification and so on is called figurative language.

According to the study of Mogan et.al (2011) a person must go beyond the basic language skills of understanding the words, sentences, and texts in-order to acquire HL language skills, . He or she should be able to create a mental representation of the meaning by creating a mental model. S/He should be able to understand a situation by using the prior knowledge and through inference. The lower-level language skills support in the development of the HL language skills. Thus, the HL language skills have been listed as; *inferencing, comprehension monitoring and text structure knowledge (p.3).*

Similarly, Hogan, Bridges, Justice and Cain (2011) have identified inferencing, comprehension monitoring, and text structure knowledge as HL language skills.

Relationship between Poetry and Language

Language has been used in the poetic expression of feelings, emotions, and ideas from the beginning of civilization. History of poetry can be traced back to the time even before the print media came into existence. This has a long tradition in Sri Lanka where the people had been communicating ideas in the form of poems and these ideas had been transferred orally from generation to generation. These poems popularly known in Sri Lanka as *'Jana Kavi' (Folk Poems)* had been composed on various themes for various occasions such as farming, harvesting, long journeys in carts or by foot as well as on feelings such as loneliness, deep desires, longings and so on. These poems are rich in language and effective in the expression of feelings and ideas. However, few studies have been carried out to investigate how the poems can be used to develop the language skills of the students.

According to Gonen (2018), poetry is not considered to have elements to enrich language in the classroom and it has been rejected as part of language learning methodology. However, by citing the studies of many researchers he highlights the effectiveness of using poetry in the development of language skills. For example, Syed & Wahas (2020), consider poetry to be very effective in developing the four language skills listening, speaking, reading and writing. It also helps in the development of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation.

Hismanoglu (2005) states that poetry paves way to develop the language skills because by studying poetry the students learn to appreciate the composition process of the writer. They develop sensitivity that lays the foundation to greater analytical ability. They are exposed to various styles of language use by going beyond the accepted rules of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. Poems evoke feelings and thoughts in the minds of the learners. Poems expose the students to figures of speech such as similes, metaphor, personification, irony, and imagery.

Further, critical thinking and creative thinking are two essential twenty-first century skill that should be addressed in the language classroom. Aisyah and the team (2019) identified poems as an effective tool to develop critical thinking of the students. Critical thinking facilitates in the creative thinking through predictions, questioning and discussion of activities. Students with critical thinking ability pose questions and express ideas clearly and precisely by communicating effectively. Critical reading involves both literal and interpretative reading and the abilities of the student for the explicit as well as implicit reading are developed through critical reading. Thus, poems are effective learning materials to be used in the development of the critical reading skills of the students. When the aspects presented in the poems are discussed using English, students develop their ability to see the existing situations in a new way by exploring the ideas in the poem (Aisyah et.al., 2019).

Many researchers found literary works to be effective tools to develop the language skills of the students

(Stan, 2015; Ihejirika, 2014). However, few studies have been conducted to investigate the extent to which literary works such as poetry or prose have been explored in the language classroom to achieve the above skills. According to Norling (2009), it is believed that by studying literary works student gains insight, develops a sense of understanding and toleration and experiences new perceptions. Including literature in the curriculum benefits language learning because "*reading of literature provides an opportunity for the language to be internalized whereby grammar rules, phrases and vocabulary already learnt can be reinforced ...* (Norling, 2009, p. 34)

Accordingly, the problem addressed in this paper is stated below.

Problem Statement

Although literature has been identified as a successful tool to develop the language skills, few research have been conducted in Sri Lanka to examine how literary works have been used in the classroom to develop the higher-level language skills of the students. As per Fowler (2019), very few research studies have been conducted on empowering the students to analyze poetry which is beneficial to develop their critical thinking skills (p,2). The study of Sigvardsson (2017) reveals that very few studies had been conducted on pedagogy of teaching poetry mainly for the secondary students. Hence, the teachers need guidance on how to teach poetry to students in meaningful and transformative ways.

Although a few poems have been included in the English language syllabi from the Primary Grades up to the senior secondary Grades of the state schools in Sri Lanka, no attention has been given to investigate how these poems have been used in the classroom to develop the HL language skills of the students. Students in the state schools of Sri Lanka learn English as a second language from Grade Three and their level of English skills is assessed when they are in Grade Eleven at the General Certificate of Education, Ordinary Level examination. However, according to the statistics of the Examination Department, many students had not developed adequate English language skills at this juncture. This may be due to various reasons related to teaching and learning methods as well as the attitudes of the teachers and the students.

Thus, the objectives of this study are to;

1. Examine the attitudes of the teachers to using poems to develop the English language skills of the students.
2. Examine the perception of the students to the poems in the English language Textbook.
3. Investigate the learning-teaching process of the poems in the junior secondary English as a second language classroom.
4. Examine suitable strategies to develop the higher-level (HL) language skills of junior secondary students by using poems.

Focusing on the above objectives, Literature review was carried out to un-earth suitable theories and the findings of the previous research that would lay a foundation to develop this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Useful theories to develop higher level language skills through poems.

Response of the learner to poems is very important to the success of both teaching and learning poems. How a student approaches a text and his or her attitude towards reading are major determining factors whether the reading would be meaningful (Norling, 2009). Thus, the Reader Response Criticism is a suitable theory to analyze how poems have been used in the English language teaching-learning process.

Reader Response Criticism Theory

This is the term used for a collection of critical theories that focus on the response of the reader to the text rather than the text itself. Reader creates his or her meaning of the text by using his or her experiences, knowledge, feelings, and thoughts. Interpretation is influenced by the knowledge of conventions and codes (Norling, 2009). In 1938, Rosenblatt had identified two approaches that can be used to teach literature: *the efferent mode* and the *aesthetic mode*. Efferent mode is when the focus of reading literature is to gain information by giving attention to the content. Aesthetic mode is the experiences gained by the reader while reading the text and both these modes can be applied to the same text.

This paper investigated the extent to which the above-mentioned modes were practiced in the English language classroom in Sri Lanka.

Suitable methods and models to develop higher level language skills by using poems.

Agee (2000) investigated the definition of high school English teachers on *effective literature instruction* and found that when the students' level of learning in the classroom varies, flexible student-centered models were more suitable to address the varying differences of the students than the inflexible teacher centered models.

Poetry Teaching (POT) Framework by Gonen (2018) was designed to develop language by using poetry in six steps. A concise description of each step is given below.

Step 1 – Tune in – to give a background knowledge by activating the schema of the student.

Step 2 – Basic comprehension – – Understand the overall meaning of the poem.

Step 3 – Detailed analysis – engage in literary appreciation, interpretation and linguistic analysis.

Step 4 – Cultivation – Personalize the poem with their own lives.

Step 5 – Bridge – Use poems in language teaching

Step 6 – Reflection – Find out the suitability of the methodologies of using poetry in language development by reflecting on own practices.

This study revealed that poems could be used for emotional engagement which leads to thought provoking discussions and language awareness. It promoted the expressive abilities of the learner.

Challenges and issues of using poems in the development of HL language skills.

Agee (2000) has identified that teachers preferred to teach literature to mature, academically talented learners than the low ability level learners. While some teachers were concerned about the needs and interests of the students, the others continued with their own methods without considering the student needs. Some teachers used innovative and interesting methods to teach the higher ability level students, but they used conventional methods for those who were not academically talented. Teachers felt that teaching the young learners were very tiresome because *cultural constraints worked against teachers who encouraged adolescents to be independent learners (2000, p. 324)*

In 1987, Colie and Slater have identified many drawbacks in following the traditional methods of teaching Literature. In the Traditional methods of teaching, the teacher gives information about the author of the

literary piece of work. Then the teacher explains the literary work to the students mainly by translating the content into the Mother Tongue of the student. The teacher asks questions based on the literary work from the students with linguistic ability and receives oral answers. The students are restricted to think only on the questions of the teacher, and they are not engaged with the texts. Deeper understanding of the students of the literary work is not considered.

Strategies to use poems effectively to develop the higher order English language skills.

According to Agee (2000), the teachers must try to develop literature instruction to provide meaningful experiences with literature to the students of varying ability levels and age. The student can be successful when the student is provided with appropriate texts and ways of reading that encourages intellectual growth.

Showalter (2006) describes three teaching methods in the classroom; *subject-centred, teacher-centred and student-centred*. The *subject-Centred* method focuses on the subject content and the teacher is the active informant who passes the knowledge to the student. Teacher plays the dominant role in the *teacher-centred* method. Teacher is active in the class while the students are mostly passive participants. Focus of the third method is on how the student learns and what can be done to improve their learning. Students are active participants in the classroom.

Study of Beach et.al. (2016) highlight the effectiveness of pair work in learning poetry. This provides opportunity for the student to think aloud together and share ideas on complex areas in the poem that they may not understand.

Accordingly, the methodology of the study was planned by considering the above theoretical and empirical findings.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study applied qualitative dominant mixed method research design to collect and analyze data for this study. The sample of the study was selected from the population of teachers who taught English as a second language to the junior secondary classes in the state schools in Sri Lanka. Selection of the sample is described below.

Sample of the Study

The study sample consisted of 61 teachers who taught English for the junior secondary Grades in Sri Lanka and 250 students who studied in Grade Eight of six state schools in Sri Lanka by using the purposive sampling method.

Selection of the teacher sample

A purposive sample of 61 teachers of English who were enrolled in a postgraduate teacher development programme were selected to administer the questionnaire with the objective of examining their attitudes and views on teaching poetry in the English language classroom. The sample consisted of teachers from the provinces of Western, Southern, Northern, Eastern, Central, North-Western, North-Eastern, Uva and Sabaragamuwa.

Selection of the student sample

Grades Six to Grade Nine have been categorized as the Junior Secondary Grades in Sri Lanka. The National Education Research and Evaluation Centre (NEREC) in the Faculty of Education, University of Colombo

has been conducting National Assessments on Grade Eight students in collaboration with the World bank and the Ministry of Education since 2005 to evaluate the achievement of learning outcomes in the subjects of English language and Mathematics. The report in 2016 highlights the low achievement in the English language of majority of the students in Sri Lanka. However, the reasons for the low achievement have not been presented.

Therefore, this study selected the students from Grade Eight in the state schools by using the purposive sampling method with the objective of obtaining in-depth data on English language teaching and learning in the Grade Eight classroom.

A questionnaire was administered to 250 Grade Eight students in six schools in Sri Lanka. A purposive sample of schools were selected from Western, Northern, Southern and Central Provinces in Sri Lanka. Three schools were selected from the Western province because it was convenient for the researcher to collect data from the schools in the Western province and one school each was selected from the other three provinces. Distribution of students in the schools is presented in the Table 1 below.

Table 1: Student Sample

School Code	School Type	Gender	Number of Students
WP/C/TS1	1AB	Male	48
WP/C/GS2	1AB	Female	50
WP/C/MS3	1C	Mixed	27
NP/J/SS4	1AB	Mixed	48
SP/G/CS5	1C	Female	35
CP/K/BS6	1C	Male	42
Total			**250**

Data Collecting Tools

Data were collected by administering questionnaires to the teachers and students, by conducting classroom observations and through unstructured interviews with six teachers and six Grade Eight students. Further, the Grade Eight English textbook was examined to identify the nature of poetry and related activities included in the textbook. Development of the data collecting tools is explained below.

Teacher Questionnaire

Teacher questionnaire was developed to examine the attitudes and the perceptions of the teachers to teaching poetry and to identify the challenges and issues they encounter in teaching poetry in the English language classroom. Questionnaire consisted of 14 structured items and two open-ended questions. The items were prepared by considering the theoretical and empirical research related to this study. The questionnaire was validated by administering it to a set of English teachers who were not of the sample and no ambiguity was found in it.

Student Questionnaire

Student questionnaire was developed to identify the attitudes and the perceptions of the students to learning poetry in the English language classroom. Initially it was prepared by including ten structured items and two open-ended items. The first five items were to select the student's choice from four choices given under each item. The second part used the Likert scale. The student was given five statements and requested to mark whether they *"strongly agree", "agree", "somewhat agree", "disagree" or "strongly disagree"* to the statements.

However, when the questionnaire was administered to 25 students outside the sample, they could not respond to the last five statements even after explanations in the Mother Tongue and neither they could respond to the two open-ended questions that requested them to write the challenges and problems they faced in learning poetry in the classroom.

Therefore, the questionnaire was revised by removing the open-ended items and also by changing the Likert scale to three choices; *"yes", "no" and "don't know"*

Observations

A check list was prepared using the theories and research mentioned above to examine the teaching and learning process of poetry in the Grade Eight English language classroom. The checklist consisted of 15 items to collect data on the methods, techniques and strategies used by the teacher and the responses of the students during the lesson. In-addition, field notes were taken for more information. Observations were conducted by the researcher in the three schools of the Western province given in the sample.

Interviews

Unstructured interviews were conducted with the six teachers who administered the questionnaire to the students in the six schools of the sample and with two students each from the three schools in which the observations were conducted.

DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

Data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods and the analysis and the interpretation of data are discussed in the next section.

Data Analysis, Interpretation and Findings

Although the questionnaire was administered to 61 teachers of English only 54 returned the completed questionnaires.

Attitudes of the Teachers to using the materials in the textbook for language development

Responses of the teachers to the items in the questionnaire on the suitability of various types of text in the English language textbook is presented in the Graph 1 below. The items given were;

Poetry, Short stories, Roleplay and Descriptive texts and *NR* is *Not responded.*
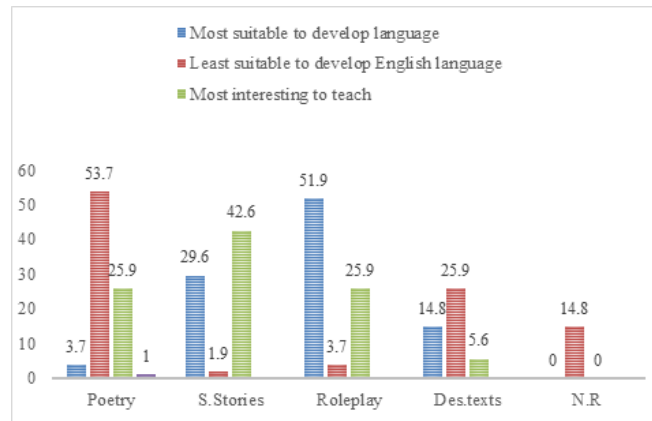
Graph 1: Attitudes of the teachers to the materials in the English textbook

Majority of the teachers (53.7%) considered poetry to be the least suitable to develop the English language skills and nearly 52 percent considered roleplay to be the most suitable to develop the language skills. Interviews with some of the teachers revealed that they considered the language in the poetry to be unrealistic and the language in the roleplays to be more realistic. Some of their responses are given below.

"Poetry is for enjoyment not to develop language. We don't use poetic language in our day-to-day conversation"

"Poetry is confusing. No proper sentences. Only lines. Some words are difficult to understand. If we try to teach this in the class students will hate English. Roleplays are good. Easy for the students"

"Role plays are meaningful. Useful too. Students get knowledge on language to communicate. Most of them can't speak English. How can they understand poems?"

Aim of majority of the teachers was to develop the basic communicative competence of the students. They seemed to believe that the students were not capable to acquire more than the basic competencies of the English language.

Responses of the teachers to the items in the questionnaire to identify their perception on developing higher order language skills in the English language classroom is presented in the Graph 2.
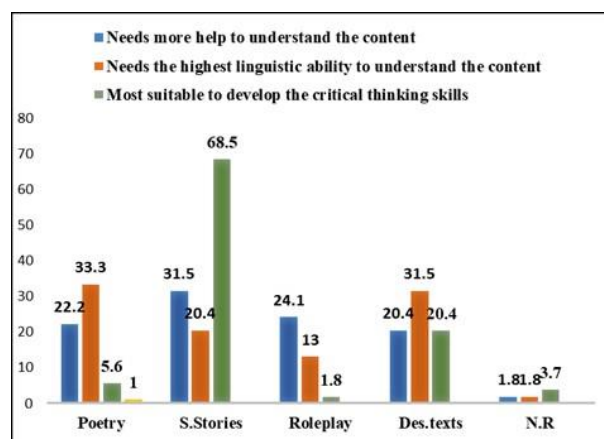
Graph 2: Perception of the teachers on the suitability of texts to develop the higher English language skills
Majority of the teachers (68.5%) considered short stories to be the most suitable texts to develop the HL critical thinking skills of the students. However, interviews with the teachers and the students revealed that

the short stories had not been used to develop the critical thinking skills of the students because the teachers were only adhering to the activities in the textbook, and they also believed that the students were not ready to critically approach the short stories. One such response was;

"We find it difficult even to get the students to answer the questions in the textbook. How can we get them to think critically?"

And another said;

"They don't have knowledge to think critically. They can't even understand the basic meaning of the story. First they have to develop their language"

Moreover, the highest number of teachers (31%) considered that the students needed more help to understand the short stories than the other texts. Further, 33 percent believed that higher linguistic ability is required to understand poems than the other texts.

Classroom observations revealed that some teachers were inclined to explain the poems verbatim in the Mother Tongue to the students. This practice was similar to the practice identified by Colie & Slater (1987) as a drawback.

The Table 1 below presents the responses of the teachers to the items 7 to 12 in the questionnaire that assessed the perception of the teachers on using the poems to develop the English language skills of the students.

Table 1: Teacher perception on using poems to develop language skills.

#	Item	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		No Response		Total	
		No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
7	Students can understand the poems in the syllabus without the teacher's help	0	0	2	3.7	38	70.4	13	24.1	1	1.8	54	100
8	Students are interested in learning the poems in the textbook	0	0	23	42.6	27	50	4	7.4	0	0	54	100
9	Poems help develop the listening skills of the students	3	5.5	25	46.3	24	44.4	0	0	2	3.7	54	100
10	Poems help develop the vocabulary of the students	3	5.5	29	53.8	18	33.3	4	7.4	0	0	54	100
11	Poems help develop the speaking skills of the students	3	5.5	32	59.3	17	31.5	2	3.7	0	0	54	100
12	Poems help develop the reading skills of the students	3	5.5	36	66.8	12	22.2	2	3.7	1	1.8	54	100
13	Poems help develop the writing skills of the students.	1	1.8	6	11.2	42	77.8	2	3.7	3	5.5	54	100
14	Poems are not suitable to develop the language skills of the students	12	22.2	26	48.2	11	20.4	2	3.7	3	5.5	54	100

Above data reveal that nearly 95 percent of teachers were of the view that the students were not able to understand the poems in the English textbooks without the help of the teacher and 57 percent believed that the students were not interested in learning the poems in the textbook.

Although majority of the teachers were of the view that the poems were suitable to develop the listening, speaking, and reading skills as well as the vocabulary, their response to the item 14 was contradictory. Over 70 percent agreed that the poems were not suitable to develop the language skills of the students.

Classroom observations revealed that the teachers used poems for loud reading, mainly to develop the pronunciation of the students. These readings were mostly choral and the students who had adequate English competence dominated the reading. Thus, there was no opportunity for individual development of those who needed actual development of English language pronunciation. This confirms the finding of Agee (2000) that the teachers neglected the low-ability level students.

Observations revealed that the classrooms were mostly teacher-centered where the teacher was actively reading and explaining the poems while the students were passively listening. The students were mainly choral reading after the teacher. However, none of the teachers explored the poem beyond the activities given in the textbook. The skills that were developed by using the poems were vocabulary and pronunciation. Answers to the simple multiple-choice questions too were provided mostly by the teacher through the explanation of the poem.

Responses of the Grade Eight students to the poems in the English textbook are discussed in the next section.

Perceptions of Grade Eight students on developing HL language skills.

Although the questionnaire was administered to 250 Grade Eight students, only 211 students completed and submitted it. Their responses to the items 1 to 5 in the questionnaire are presented in the Table 2 below.

Table 2: Attitudes of the students to the items in the English textbook

#	Item	Poems		Short Stories		Role Play		Descip. Texts		No Response		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	Most difficult to understand	23	10.9	19	9	27	12.8	137	64.9	5	2.4	211	100
2	Easiest to understand	170	80.6	5	2.4	16	7.6	07	3.3	13	6.1	211	100
3	Favourite section in the English Textbook	62	29.4	24	11.4	112	53.1	0	0	13	6.1	211	100
4	Needs the teachers help most to understand	17	8.1	27	12.8	20	9.4	135	64	12	5.7	211	100
5	Language is difficult to understand	12	5.7	24	11.4	31	14.7	132	62.5	12	5.7	211	100

Over 80 percent of the students considered poems to be the easiest to understand which is contradictory to

the views of the teachers. They found descriptive texts to be the most difficult to understand. 64 percent stated that they needed the help of the teacher to understand the descriptive texts and majority considered the language in the descriptive texts was more difficult to understand than the language of the other texts. Moreover, the majority liked role play more than the other texts. Since some students were confused with what the 'D*escriptive Texts'* were, the concept was explained to them before they responded to the questionnaire. Views of some students at the interviews are given below.

" *Poems are easy. Short no …"*

"Poem exercises are easy."

"I like poems. We can read loud more. We can sing"

"I Like poems. I like role play more. We can read. We can act"

"Descriptive texts are boring".

"Descriptive texts are difficult. Not interesting"

Responses of the students indicate that they preferred activities that they could be actively involved in rather than just desk work. Citing Agee (2000), it can be said that the teachers had not given attention to the needs and interests of the students when they planned their teaching.

Responses of the students to the poems in the English Textbook

Perceptions of the students to the items 6 to 10 in the questionnaire on using the poems in the language classroom are presented in the Graph 3 below. The scales are as follows;

6 – 		Most o the poems in the Textbook are difficult to understand

7 – 		Most of the poems in the Text Book are interesting

8 – 		Poems should not be in the English Text Book

9 – 		Poems help me to develop English language

10 – 		I cannot understand most of the poems without the help of the teacher
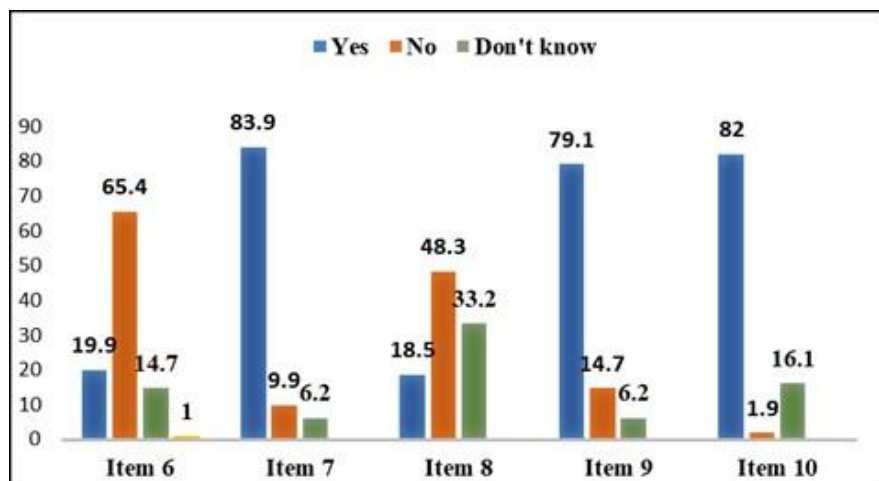
Graph 3: Responses of the students to the poems in the textbook

Type of poems in the Grade Eight textbook

There were eight poems in the Grade Eight English language textbook of the state schools in Sri Lanka (introduced in 2016).

Poem in the Unit One is a short poem of ten lines by Robert Frost, titled *"A Time to Talk"*. The poem is about the value of friendship which is suitable for Grade Eight students who are in the age range of 12 to 13. The poet tries to highlight that the company with one's friend is more important than the other work or activities. The first activity in the textbook was for basic comprehension of the poem tested through multiple choice questions to understand the structure of the poem and the rhyming words in the poem. The second activity was to draw a picture to depict the idea of the poem, and this was to test the overall understanding of the content of the poem.

The poem in the Unit Two had no title or author but was written in simple language with an illustration to make it easy for the students to understand the poem. The poem was about a poet who paints the walls, and the activity was to develop the vocabulary of the students.

Activities for the poem *"My Shadow"* by R.L. Stevenson in Unit Three was more challenging than the activities in the previous two units. Poem is written in simple language that makes understanding the content easier. The poem is about how a child was fascinated by the continuous change of his own shadow and how he tries to figure out the shadow. The activity directs the student to think why the speaker called his shadow *"an arrant sleepyhead"* . Student is required to use his or her experiences in the world to interpret the idea.

"A Nurse's Poem" by William Blake in Unit Four was about a nurse who looks after a group of children. She is happy when the children are happy, and she allows the children to play till late to keep them happy. Although the language and the structure of the poem was more difficult than the poems in the previous units, the content was interesting to the students who enjoyed playing with their friends. However, the activity in the poem was multiple choice questions to test the explicit understanding of the content.

Other than the above poem, Unit Four has another long poem by P.J. Grand Band titled *"Mother Nature"*. This poem is on the value of preserving nature by planting trees and by not polluting the environment. This would have been an effective tool to develop the love and appreciation of the student towards nature. However, this poem had been included only for reading and there were no activities based on the poem.

Poem in the Unit Five titled *"If all the Seas were One Sea"* has no author. It is a 12-line poem on unrealistic wishes. The activities given for the poem requires active student engagement and explores the creativity of the student. In-addition, part of a famous song *"Hey Brother"* has been included in this unit with no activities.

Similarly, Poem in the Unit Six too had no activities and no poems had been included in the Units Seven, Eight, Nine and Ten.

Thus, it can be said that the poems in the Grade Eight English syllabus intended mainly to provide pleasure through reading. There were a few activities to develop basic comprehension. No poems have been included in the latter units when the students would be more ready to address the poems. Thus, it can be considered that the curriculum developers of Grade Eight did not consider poems to be suitable for HL language development. Few activities had been designed to develop the critical thinking, creativity, or positive attitudes of the students.

Learning-Teaching Process of Poems in the English language classroom

Learning-teaching process of poems in the English language classroom was examined through classroom observations. Further students and teachers of selected Grade Eight classrooms were interviewed.

Methods Used in the Language Classroom to Teach Poetry

In all the classes that were observed, the teachers first read the poem aloud while the students listened. Then all of them gave opportunity for the students to read after the teacher. One teacher read the poem line by line and got the students to repeat after her.

One teacher explained the poem word to word in the Mother Tongue, while the other two teachers explained only the vocabulary and the ideas what they perceived to be difficult to the students. However, none of the teachers gave opportunity for the students to read on their own and understand the poem. The poems that were observed were *"A Time to Talk"* and *"Nurse's Song"*. At the interviews the teachers said;

"The poem is difficult. Students can't read on their own"

"It's useless asking them to read. They will not read."

Teachers adhered only to the activities given in the textbook. The students were given time to be engaged in the activities in the textbook and the answers were discussed. However, there was no challenge to the students because the answers were already discussed during the recitation of the poem. In the activity of which the students were expected to draw a picture for the poem, the teacher first explained the theme in the Mother Tongue and students were assigned to draw the picture in groups. All the groups drew the two friends talking while the horse was being tied to a tree. All the teachers were of the view that the poems were suitable only to break the monotony of learning and to develop the pronunciation of the students. They did not consider poems to be suitable to develop higher language skills such as critical thinking and creativity. Some of their views were;

"Poems are good only for the Literature students because their language is good"

"These students can't even read the poem on their own. How can they understand the deep meaning"

It was evident that the teachers did not know the strategies to use poems to develop higher language skills.

A model lesson was prepared by the researcher for the teachers to use as a scaffold in using poems to develop HL language skills. This scaffold was based on the Poetry Teaching (POT) Framework of Gonen (2018) and the lesson was prepared for the poem *"Nurses Song"* because it was perceived by the teachers to be the most challenging poem for the students.

Model Lesson to Teach poetry in the English Language Classroom

One issue that was identified when the poem was introduced was that the students could not relate to the idea of *"Nurse"* who looks after children because this is alien to the modern Sri Lankan culture. Therefore, the background knowledge was required to understand the poem. Students were given the background knowledge by activating their schema at the Step 1. Mother Tongue too was used when necessary to elicit answers from the students.

Step 1 – Tune-in (Give background knowledge by activating the schema of the students)

Teacher asks *"Who looks after you when you go home after school?"*

Some of the student responses were;

"Mother", "Grandmother", "Servant (the domestic helper)" "Grandfather"

A few students said nobody looked after them. One student said that his parents worked till late, and he had to look after his brother and the sister until the parents returned home.

Teacher says; *"Like your mother or grandmother or grandfather, in some countries there is a lady to look after the children when parents go to work. She is called the Nurse. She is given a salary like the domestic helpers in Sri Lanka."*

Step 2 – Basic Comprehension (Understand the overall meaning of the poem)

Teacher does not read the poem but forms the students into small groups of 5 to 6 and asks them to read it in their group and find answers to the following questions in 5 to 8 minutes.

1. *Who are laughing?*
2. *Where are they?*
3. *What are they doing?*
4. *Why is the nurse calling them to come home?*
5. *Do the children listen to the nurse?*

Majority of the students found the answers to all the questions without the help of the teacher.

Step 3 – Detailed Analysis (engage in literary appreciation, interpretation and linguistic analysis

Teacher gives the following activity to the students to develop their vocabulary. Students are assigned five minutes for the activity.

1. *Write 3 nouns for the adjective "green"*
2. *Write 2 words to describe the heart of the nurse; eg. restful heart*
3. *Write 3 words to describe the children.*

Many students could complete this task as well without the help of the teacher. Some of their answers were;

1. *green hills, green grass, green trees, green field, green bird*
2. *kind heart, good heart, happy heart, big heart, peaceful heart, merry heart*
3. Many wrote similar answers; *happy, joyful, playing*

As the second activity, the teacher gives a pair of rhyming words from the poem and asks the students to find out the other rhyming words from the poem in three minutes.

hill – still

This was assigned as group work and the students could find answers without the interference of the teacher.

Then the students are asked to write a dialogue between the nurse and the children and present the dialogue to the class. Each group is requested to assign a nurse and for the others in the group to take the role of the children.

Fifteen minutes was allocated for the activity and the students were actively involved in this. Teacher helped the students wherever necessary by giving them the required words and the structures. The students enjoyed

presenting the dialogue. One dialogue prepared and presented by a group of students is given below.

Nurse: *Children, Stop playing and come. It is late*

Children: *We can't come. We want to play. It is not late.*

Nurse: *Your Father and Mother are coming. They will be angry.*

Children: *We want to play more.*

Nurse: *You have to come in now. You have to do your homework.*

Children: *Yes. We have to do homework. We will come now.*

Nurse: *You can watch TV after that.*

Children: *Yes. We will watch TV after we finish the homework.*

Many dialogues presented by the students were not exactly the content taken from the poem but their own experiences and imagination. This shows the creative ability of the students when the opportunities are made available to them.

Step 4: Cultivation (Personalize the poems with their own lives)

This is done through discussion. Students are given the freedom to express their ideas in the Mother Tongue if needed. The teacher elicits the thoughts of the students by asking following questions.

"How often do you play with your friends? Do you play with them daily?"

Very few students played daily with their friends. Those who had siblings closer to their age played with them but mostly indoors. Many students did not have an area outside their homes to play outdoors. Some boys played a few outdoor games with their friends during the interval. Both girls and boys mostly played with their friends only in the school premises. Many of them were mostly engaged in the computer games.

The teacher asked; *"Do you like the nurse in the poem?"*

One dialogue between the teacher and a student is given below ;

Student: She is good and bad

Teacher: *Why is she bad?*

Student   *She lets the children play*

Teacher: *Why is it bad?*

Student   *Then they can't do their school work. They have no time*

Teacher: *But it is after school. Why can't they play?*

Student: Then they will fail the exam.

Many students thought that the children were stubborn. They did not like the children insisting on playing.

They also thought that the nurse should not have given in to the children who wanted to continue to play. They thought that both the children and the nurse should have been more responsible because their parents would not be happy with the conduct of the children and the nurse too would get into trouble because of this.

This is the mindset of the Grade Eight student in the exam centered system of Education in the country. They felt guilty to express that it was more enjoyable to play than to be engaged in academic work.

The critical thinking ability can be clearly identified in the responses of the students.

CONCLUSION

Teachers have been mostly using poems in the English language classroom to develop pronunciation. They considered poems as not suitable to develop the HL language skills. Students did not get adequate opportunity to explore poems in the language classroom other than just reciting the poem after the teacher.

However, above findings reveal that if the appropriate strategies are used in the classroom, higher level skills of the students can be developed by using poems in the English language classroom. When the teacher prepares the lesson carefully there would be more student involvement with less teacher interference to develop the language skills and thinking skills of the students.

Therefore, it can be concluded that poems can be used as an effective tool in the language classroom to develop the HL language skills such as critical thinking and creativity.

REFERENCES:

1. Agee, J. (2000). What is effective literature instruction?; A study of experienced high school teachers in differing grade – and ability level classes. J L R . 32(3) 303-348
2. Aisyah, S. Widodo, P. Mubarok, M.K. & Harumi, E.(2019). The role of poems in developing critical thinking skill of low achieving students.Magister Scientiae. 46. 238-260
3. Beach, R. Appleman, D., Fecho, B. & Simon, R. (2016). Teaching Literature to Adolocents. 3rd Ed. New York; Routledge.
4. Betti, M.J. (2021). Aims and Objectives of Teaching Language and Literature. Retrieved from AimsandObjectivesofTeachingLanguageandLiterature.pdf
5. Collie, J. & Slater, S. (1987). Literature in the Language Classroom; A Resource Book of Ideas and Activities. UK. Cambridge University Press.
6. Fowler, S.J. (2019). The Impact of Poetry Annotations on the Critical Thinking Skills of the High School Juniors and Seniors at a school in a Southeastern state. Retrieved from https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/5466
7. Goenen, S.I.K. (2018). Implementing poetry in the language class: A poetry-teaching framework for prospective English language teachers. Advances in Language and Literary Studies. 9(5) 28-42
8. Hall,G. (2020). A.B. Almeida, U. Bavendiek, and R. Biasini (Eds.). Literature in language learning: new approaches. Research-publishing.net. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2020.43.9782490057696
9. Hismanoglu, M. (2005). Teaching English through literature. Journal of Language and Lingustic studies. 1(1), 53-66
10. Hogan, T., Bridges, M. S., Justice, L. M.; and Cain, K. (2011). Increasing higher level language skills to improve reading comprehension. Special Education and Communication Disorders Faculty Publications. 79. Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/specedfacpub/79
11. Ihejirika, R.C. (2014). Literature and English language teaching and learning: A symbiotic Relationship. English Language Teaching, 7(3) 85-90
12. Jose, A. S. & Galang, J. (2015). Teaching strategies in teaching literature: Students in focus.

International Journal of Education and Research. 3(4), 41-50

13. Magulod jr., G.C. (2018). Innovative learning tasks in enhancing the literary appreciation skills of students. Sage Open. 1-11

14. Mantry, S. (2020). Chapter 4: Teaching of Poetry. Retrieved from CHAPTER:04 TEACHING OF POETRY

15. Mittal, R. (2016). Poetry is language at its most distilled and powerful: Bringing poetry in language classes can make language understanding and communication skill better. LInguistics and Literature Studies. 4(1). 52-56

16. Mogan, T. Bridges, M.S., Justice, L.M. and Cain, K. (2011). Increasing higher level language skills to improve reading comprehension. Special Education and Communication Disorders. Faculty Publications.79. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/specedfacpub/79

17. Mustakim, S.S., Mustapha, R. & Lebar, O. (2014). Teacher's approaches in teaching literature: Observations of ESL classroom. Malaysian Online Journal of Educational Science. 2(4) 35-44

18. National Institute of Education (2015). Appreciation of English literary texts GCE O/L new syllabus. Retrieved from English Literary Texts NIE.pdf

19. NEREC (2016). Paterns and trends in achievement: English language 2016. National Report.-National Assessment of Achievement of Students. SL. World Bank and Ministry of Education Assisted Publication.

20. Norling, T. (2009). Aims and Objectives in the Teaching of English literature at upper secondary. Retrieved from https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:292256/fulltext01

21. Rosenblatt, L.M. (1938). Literature as exploration. New York. D-Appleton Century Company, Incorporated

22. Showalter, E. (2006). Teaching Literature. UK. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

23. Sigvardsson, A. (2017). Teaching poetry reading in secondary education: Findings from a systematic literature review. Scandianvian Journal of Educational Research, 61(5) 584-599

24. Stan, R.V. (2015). The importance of literature in primary school pupils' development and personal growth. Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences 180 454–459 doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.02.144

25. Syed, A.J.A. & Wahas, Y.M.A. (2020). Chalanges and solutions in teaching English through poetry to EFL students at Hajjah university: A case study of William Wordsworth's Lucy and John Donne's death poems. Sola reflections. 27,2. 189-198

26. Victoria State Government. (2019). Higher order Language. Department of English. https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/professionals/learning/ecliteracy/interactingwithothers/Pages/hig