"Theme-Title-Stanza" Approach to Poetry Reading in a Malaysian Preuniversity Class

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the efficacy of the "theme-title-stanza" approach in teaching poetry analysis to Malaysian preuniversity students. Traditional methods of poetry interpretation often focus on analysing individual elements such as rhyme, meter, and literary devices or otherwise known as the bottom-up approach. However, the "theme-title-stanza" approach, a literary specific top-down approach, emphasizes understanding a poem through its overarching theme, the significance of its title, and the analysis of individual stanzas first, before focusing on the parts and details. Utilizing a survey questionnaire, this research investigates the impact of this teaching strategy on students' comprehension, appreciation, and engagement with poetry in a preuniversity classroom setting, and on their ability to transfer the skills obtained through the "theme-title-stanza" approach into reading other poems. The finding indicates the "theme-title-stanza" approach to teaching poetry is effective and would be utilised by students to read, understand and appreciate poetry in future. This research provides valuable insights into the potential benefits of incorporating this approach into preuniversity literature curricula, shedding light on effective methods to foster a deeper understanding and passion for poetry among students.

Keywords: – Analysing poetry, Engaging students, Innovative approach, Literature, Top-down approach

INTRODUCTION

Second language learners shy away from attempting to read, understand and appreciate poetry. For many, they have never had any experience in reading this work of art be it in their first language or in English. Beach et al. (2011) place students' apprehension against learning poetry to lack of exposure to it, poetry's challenging and complex features and the students' unfamiliarity to the genre's "conventions". Poetry often uses figurative language, cultural references, and specific forms that can be difficult for beginners. However, there are several strategies educators can employ to help second language learners overcome their apprehension and develop an appreciation for poetry; approaches that can be likened to Widdowson's (1991) student "teasing out meanings for himself and where such alternative interpretations represent his own informed response" (p. 124). This study, focuses on one such strategy for "teasing out meaning" of poetry, which is using the "theme-title-stanza" approach and the students' reception to learning and understanding poetry using this approach.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Built-in challenges of Poetry

Poetry as a work of art, uses complex language in the form of vocabulary, figurative language, and

unconventional sentence structures. Numerous arguments point out that poetry is a personal and ambiguous expression of art that has both "grammatically and lexically" intricate structure for non-native students of English (Amatul Hafeez Alvi, 2019). ESL learners, especially those in the early stages of language acquisition, may find it challenging to decipher these linguistic and literary intricacies, leading to frustration and avoidance. Liao (2018) reveals that the embedded structures that exist within poetry cause difficulty during in-depth reading and comprehension of the works. This view corresponds with Marius Nica (2011) and Amatul Hafeez Alvi's (2019) opinions that assert the point that reading poetry is an "intimidating and scary" experience, when the students find themselves unable to delve into and make sense of the meaning from the intricate play of language. The intricacies are also a mystery too complex for them to unravel. Augustan (2023) reiterates these views, with the focus on the imaginative and emotional nature of poetry as the cause of ambiguity, which in turn causes complexities in the reading of this genre of artistic work. For preuniversity students, although they have moved beyond the early stages of learning English, this does not mean that they are familiar with the strategies for identifying and understanding the intricacies of literariness due to the lack of exposure to literary texts. Without prior exposure, it can be challenging to develop an understanding and appreciation for the art form.

Poetry is also often considered the most complex of all genres of literature due to its multifaceted socio-cultural and historical content. The works often reflect cultural nuances, historical references, and social contexts specific to the language in which it is written. ESL learners may struggle to grasp these cultural references, making it difficult to fully understand the intended meaning of the poem. Levi (2002) cited in Alonge et al (2022) explains that for students, learning poetry is a way of comparing and negotiating their own experience with that of others, uniting diverse worlds to attain a newer understanding of their own world. If students are not familiar with the socio-cultural and historical background against which a poem was written, they might struggle to connect with its themes and meanings, leading to a lack of confidence in their interpretation (Zeyuan Hu, 2010). They might fear misinterpreting the poem, leading to a lack of confidence in their comprehension abilities. This fear of misunderstanding or misinterpreting the content can discourage them from engaging with poetry (Amatul Hafeez Alvi & Rahma Alvi, 2019).

As for the learners, they bring to the literature learning situation their personal confidence issues and learning limitations specifically related to the written forms of art (El-Hindi, 2008 cited in Mlungisi, 2020). These include the built-in issues of poetry such as the complexity of language, figurative language and its ambiguity as well as the unfamiliarity of the cultural, historical and contemporary contexts of the works of poetry (Creely, 2018). Besides, their lack of exposure to the genre leading to a lack in poetry reading strategies, self-doubt and fear of judgement; characteristics of many learners of English as a second language observable even at preuniversity level are added challenges to the learners familiarizing themselves with works of poetry. Ambiguity and multiple interpretations are prominent features of poetry and these features alone cause students to stay away from attempting to read and comprehend these artistic creations, an attempt which takes up much effort (El-Hindi, 2008). Those with limited proficiency in English, might lack the confidence to tackle the challenges posed by poetry. Low confidence in language skills can significantly impact their willingness to engage with complex cultural, historical and social literary forms. For many ESL learners the perception that poetry as irrelevant to their daily lives and language needs would pose as the challenge in their learning of poetry. If they do not see the practical application of understanding poetry, they may not see the value in investing time and effort into learning it.

For first time learners of literature, particularly poetry, the subject is considered alien, intimidating and stressful stemming from the fact that the subject involves in-depth study of the text; recognizing, understanding and internalising the effects of the intricate play of language in conveying the theme(s) or the content. In-depth reading encompasses the use of analytical and critical thinking skills together with linguistic skills. Despite the obvious efforts being put in to help students develop analytical and critical thinking skills, at preuniversity level, these skills are still found to be wanting among the students. The

figurative language, metaphors, symbolism, and other literary devices used in poetry can be challenging for students to grasp, especially if they haven't encountered them before. The complexity of poetic language can intimidate students and make them feel unsure about their understanding. Some students might find it difficult to deal with the open-ended nature of poems, fearing that there's a "right" and a "wrong" interpretation. This uncertainty can erode their confidence.

If students have not been exposed to poetry in their earlier education, they might find it an intimidating experience. Exposure to different styles and forms of poetry collected under familiar themes can help students become more comfortable with the genre. Poetry is often seen as a poet's deeply personal and expressive form of writing. While a shared cultural and historical background to the poetry may help the students to understand and appreciate the work, unfamiliar cultural and historical setting might drive the students away from reading and appreciating the poems. The one positive aspect of introducing poetry and taking the learners through it is the choice teachers have in terms of the approach to teaching it. While the bottom-up approach may appear to be a good choice, where the aesthetic features of both language and content are to be dealt first, for first time learners of literature, presenting them with familiar features first would help them build their confidence in learning and understanding it. The themes on which poetry is composed, for instance, are universal by nature, hence, presenting the students with ideas which form the basis for the understanding of the poems being studied. Providing the themes, presents the learners with a one-step access to the subject matter of the poems that are to be studied. Ciardi & William (1975, p. 2) cited in Mlungisi (2020) adds that "for poetry, the concern is not to arrive at a definition and to close the book, but to arrive at an experience". This statement emphasizes the most significant aspect of teaching poetry, that it is not about arriving at the correct meaning of the poem, rather, how they bring to the poem, their own experience and link it to the poem and shape it into a personalized poetry reading experience. Some students might feel confined by the structure and rules of certain poetic forms. The unfamiliar linguistic complexity could also stifle the students' ability to discern a familiar content. These limitations can hinder their creativity and make them hesitant to explore and experiment with poetry. These problems are further heightened if students, especially those who struggle with self-confidence in general, doubt their abilities to understand or appreciate poetry. Overcoming this self-doubt is crucial for building confidence in learning poetry. This is the point where the teacher plays her facilitator role efficiently with a carefully designed strategy to alleviate, as much as possible, the students' built-in limitations.

Selecting Suitable Approach to Teaching Poetry

The teaching approach that is selected plays a crucial role in alleviating the pessimistic view of poetry. Positive reinforcement and constructive support are essential. The top-down approach in teaching poetry involves starting with an overview of the entire poem before delving into specific details. This structural approach to analysing poetry, focuses on the general idea moving down to the specifics, which, in other words, is the one variant of top-down approach applicable to reading poetry. Truong (2009) lists this as one of his 6 approaches to literary analysis. "Structuralism, in this approach, the text is scientifically discussed by focusing on processes, themes, structures, and mechanical formal relationships into a meaningful hierarchical system", an approach that focuses first on the theme which is general and usually universal, proceeding to more specific and smaller parts of the poem. Combining this approach to Truong's (2009) fourth approach which denotes bringing together students' "personal experiences, opinions, and feeling and the text" or 'schemata' underscores the "theme-title- stanza" approach in reading and analysing poetry. This method can be particularly helpful for students who lack confidence in reading poetry for the first time. Here's how the top-down approach can assist students in managing their lack of confidence.

Truong (2009) also cites Rosenblatt's (1978) theory of literary reading in pointing out the "transactional relationship" that occur when readers tap on their personal "interests and experiences" to a poem. This according to Price and Driscoll (1997; Schwartz et al (1998) is the way in which top-down approach works;

learners utilize their preexisting knowledge to read, interpret and understand the work.

Özal and Eren (2012) opine that students should be assisted to recognize the rich literary and linguistic intricacies of poetry while noting their responses to it. The researchers emphasized on the importance of students' "feelings and personal interpretation" of the poem. In this, the teacher's role is crucial in motivating and facilitating learners' interaction with the text in order to build on the understanding by connecting it to their own experience.

Bañez (2018) advocates the use of top-down approach beginning from the pre-planning stage of a lesson. The teacher herself has to familiarise herself with the main or general idea/ theme and integrate this knowledge to design comprehension strategies that combine "activating background knowledge, using sensory images, questioning, making predictions and inferences, determining main ideas, using fix-up options, and synthesizing that can help them sense meaning out of the literary texts" (p.86).

METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

This study employed the quantitative study approach to assess the efficacy of the "theme-title-stanza" approach to reading poetry among a group of preuniversity students. The study utilized a survey questionnaire created on google form and the link distributed by a social media platform, Whats App. It provides direct access to the required number of respondents and in the context of this study, the specific respondents who had undergone learning poetry using the "theme-title-stanza" approach. There were 157 respondents of both genders aged between 17 and 18 years of age, selected using the purposive sampling method which is the students who learnt poetry analysis using the "theme-title-stanza" approach. The survey was developed for the sole purpose of fulfilling the study's objectives. The questionnaire consists of two sections of demographic information, and the students' opinion of the approach used for teaching and learning of poetry. The questions were close-ended, Yes/ No type.

The following questions were used to elicit the students' perception of the theme-title-stanza approach to reading and understanding poetry.

Table 1: Survey questions

Q1	It is easier to read and understand a poem if I know its theme.
Q2	The theme provides me with a broad meaning of the poem
Q3	The poem's title provides me with a more specific meaning for me to clearly understand the poem.
Q4	The stanzas of a poem provide me with the various ideas and details regarding the title and theme
Q5	Reading a poem using the "Theme – title – stanza" is a strategy that helps me understand the meaning of a poem as a whole.
Q6	The theme and title help me to bring my past experience and knowledge to understand the poem.
Q7	Connecting my past experience and knowledge to the poem I read provides me with a personalised poetry reading experience.

RESULTS

Cronbach's alpha measures how closely related a set of items are as a construct. The reliability measure of the survey indicates 0.706 which is a good score. Cronbach's alpha of more than 0.7 is considered good, 0.8 and above is considered better, and 0.9 and above is considered excellent (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013).

Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	157	100.0
	Excluded[a]	0	.0
	Total	157	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Reliability Statistics

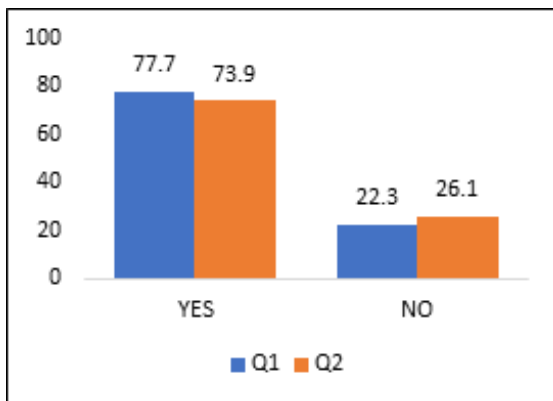| Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.706	7

Figure 1: Students' opinion of reading poetry

The survey revealed 77.7 % of the respondents like reading poetry while a 22.3% do not. This is despite the fact that 73.9% found poetry to be difficult to understand. Noteworthy is the 22.3 % who dislike reading poetry and the 26.1% of the respondents who do not find it difficult to understand poetry.
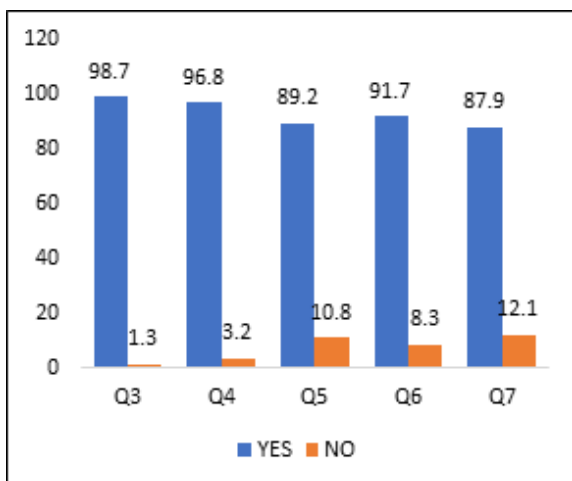

Figure 2: Students' Perception of the "theme-title-stanza" Approach to Reading and Understanding Poetry

Figure 2 represents the responses from the participants regarding the efficacy of the "theme-title-stanza" approach to reading and understanding poetry. The graph clearly indicates a positive trend in terms of the students' perception to the approach. The majority of the respondents (98.7%) agree that it is easier to read and understand a poem if they know the theme (Q3), 96.8% agree that the theme provides them with a broader meaning of the poem (Q4), 89.2% are of the opinion that the title provides them with a more specific meaning to understand the poem (Q5). 91.7% admit that the stanzas of a poem provide them with

important details and ideas relevant for building their understanding of the poem (Q6) and 87.9% of the respondents agree that the "theme-title-stanza" approach is a strategy that helps them to read and understand the meaning of a poem as a whole (Q7).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate the students' acceptance of the "theme-title-stanza" approach. The questions elicited positive responses from both the male and female students.

The theme provides a general idea of the subject matter, the title offers a more narrowed down scope of the subject matter and the stanzas provide details of the subject matter as it is dealt with in the context of the poem, hence helping students to build their understanding from general to specific, top-down approach which is less intimidating than the bottom-up approach which zones in on the literary elements, intricate linguistic and literary features.

The approach helps the students to connect the theme and title to their own past experience and knowledge which makes reading poetry a personal experience which enables them to understand the meaning of the poem using the details provided in each stanza. It is definitely less intimidating to approach poetry reading with the background knowledge and general idea readily equipped before venturing into the intricacies of poetry as a work of art.

RECOMMENDATION

Taking into consideration the possible ease with which the theme-title-stanza approach would enable learners to read and understand poetry, the teacher's role in facilitating learning in this context is being brought to the fore. Corresponding to Özal and Eren (2012) opinion, the teacher opens up the exploration and discussion of the poetry by providing the learners with the theme. Themes are generally universal and culturally shared by people around the world. The concepts that the themes encompass are usually familiar to the learners. Themes such as friendship, relationships, love, appreciating nature are ideas that exist within every culture and community. Hence, the mere mention of the theme would help the learners to tap on their existing knowledge of these concepts, laying the basis for their understanding. Knowing the theme would lead them to connect the title as a part of the idea and further understanding would occur with added discussion and exploration of the stanzas. Simply put, theme being a very broad concept is narrowed down to the idea that the title conveys and it is building understanding from general to specific. The teacher needs to constantly prompt, dropping words and hints that would help the learners connect the dots to the main idea of the poem. "Poetry is so complex and important in literature. "…and most poems are, indeed, not for passive consumption; they invite and require engagement" (Steinman, 2008, cited in Mlungisi, 2020). In other words, reading poetry in this way keeps both teacher and learners active in teaching, learning and building experience upon preexisting knowledge while eliminating fears and intimidation of built-in ambiguity within works of poetry.

CONCLUSION

The top-down, theme-title-stanza approach to reading poetry is not the end of the learning process. Having established the notion that poetry is readable, therefore understandable for learners, by offering the themes first, is a way into further exploration of the rich figurative language that it comes with. Besides, the confidence that is built would enable the learners to bring the knowledge of theme-title-stanza approach to reading poetry in future, a vision that will keep poetry and literature away from dark the recesses of unreadable archaic resources.

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