

Perceptions of Advanced Level Students and Teachers Towards the Learning of Poetry in Literature in English in the Zimbabwean Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a desktop review of the perceptions of advanced-level students and teachers towards learning poetry in English literature in the Zimbabwean classroom. English language is one of the core subjects in the Zimbabwean education curriculum. From early childhood development to the university level, students are taught and examined in English. In advanced level ('A' level) classes, particularly in Nkayi District, students even learn English and communication skills and write them as a fourth subject. Although it does not contribute towards an individual student's points, it is considered a desirable subject. English and communication skills are compulsory in almost all the schools in Nkayi District. The subject of Literature in English comprises three categories, which are prose, drama, and poetry. However, Poetry is the most complicated of the three. This paper examined perceptions of advanced-level students and teachers towards learning poetry in literature in English in the Zimbabwean classroom. The research objective was the perception of 'A' level students and teachers in Nkayi District, Zimbabwe, towards the learning of poetry in Literature in English. A desktop research methodology was utilized, along with a qualitative case study design, and a thorough evaluation of literature on the perceptions of advanced level students and teachers towards learning poetry in English literature, as emphasized in the literature review. Constructivism's theoretical perspective underpinned the study. Data were also collected using face-to-face interviews and focused group discussion instruments. The research findings revealed that the perceptions of 'A' level students and teachers in Zimbabwe, towards studying poetry in English were that the nature of poetry in English is very complicated and open to many interpretations. The findings also revealed that the historical context of the poems makes the learners understand, associate, and enjoy the history of the different poems. However, the poems taught at the 'A' level were too old and foreign to learners. The results also disclosed that the challenge in poetry emanates from sounds and vocabulary. The poetic devices and their level of difficulty may become a hindrance to effecting learning. Learners prefer constructivism and interactive methodologies, if teachers properly implement them in the teaching process, they will tend to get best results out of it. It emerged that failure of students to use the dictionaries may hamper in seeing the aesthetics in poetry in literature in English. This paper recommended that the strategies that can be recommended in order to change these perceptions are the learner centred methods of teaching, availability of resources and provision of functional fully stocked library for research purposes. This will foster the studying of poetry in Literature in English.

Keywords: comment and appreciation, learners, literature in English, unseen paper, perceptions:

INTRODUCTION

The importance of the study of Literature in English, in particular, poetry cannot be over emphasized. Poetry conveys pleasure and splendour and also transports one to a dwelling of ideas and fairy tales (Dhliwayo, 2015). An additional motive is that poetry, similar to further writings, is a printed record of a people, comprising wholly of its past, knowledge and policies (Long, 2015). Verse reflects desires and feelings, affection and hatred, delight and sadness, dread and assurance, thoughts and desires, which exist as an important portion of our mortal nature and survival. Further, poetry is common as it echoes humanity and events to preserve its past, thoughts and principles. Poetry has turned out to be a postscript, an addition, not somewhat to learn by itself (Simmons, 2014). This is one of the reasons that motivated the Zimbabwe

Examinations School Council (ZIMSEC) to make Literature in English Paper 1 compulsory. This was a good move as it forced teachers to teach poetry which is a habitually ignored fictional form that can assist students learn in methods which prose cannot (Simmons, 2014). The specifications of the 'A' level Literature in English Paper 1 ZIMSEC subject code 9153/1 are such that the paper is three hours long and has all the genres of Literature. It gives twenty-three and a third per cent of the complete mark from all the three categories, the other two papers also contribute the same percentage (ZIMSEC syllabus, 2015). The 'A' level Literature in English ZIMSEC syllabus demands means that educators have to teach the ability needed to be able to induce rational and intellectual answers to poetry from learners (ZIMSEC syllabus, 2015). Previously, the 'A' level Literature in English Paper 1 had been elective. The only paper that was compulsory was Shakespeare and other dramatists. The ZIMSEC council states that, literature is a vehicle through which Unhu/Ubuntu/Vumunhu (societal norms and values), and experiences of Zimbabweans, Africans and other peoples of the world are interrogated. A few schools in Nkayi District have the subject Literature in English at Ordinary Level ('O' Level), but it surfaces as one of the chosen options at 'A' level. Students who usually do the subject in Nkayi District have no background in Literature in English and especially poetry and some do not even have passes in English language. The few that soldier on, with the aid of their teachers end up concentrating on drama and prose shunning poetry. Poetry is the genre most English teachers seem least comfortable with (Toby, 2015). Students' frustration is due to their non-involvement because teaching poetry is a one-sided process in which the students are static participants and ineffective ways of teaching (Danesh & Shirkhani, 2015). Thus, the benefit of being adequately taught the subject; specifically, poetry is not being realized in secondary schools in Nkayi District. The ZIMSEC (2011-2016) national 'A' level result pass rates appear positive, with passes in Literature in English in Nkayi District as follows 85.20% in 2011, 80.8% in 2012, 86.02% in 2013, 95.45% in 2014, 96.43 in 2015 and 93.75 in 2016 (Nkayi district results 'A' level results analysis, 2016) and nationally the Literature in English results were as follows 85.2% in 2011, 82.9% in 2012, 86.12% in 2013, 96.55% in 2014, 93.3% in 2015 and 93.17 in 2016 (ZIMSEC, 2016). Despite this high pass rate in Literature in English, there is a lack of quality passes and students do not seem to be doing well in poetry (ZIMSEC, 2012). Evidence provided by examination analysis of the past 5 years of students' performance in poetry has shown a poor performance (ZIMSEC, 2016). Such performance reveals that students may have negative perceptions towards poetry. This has affected the quality of pass rates in Nkayi District. This research intends to identify the students' perceptions particularly in poetry so as to assist in bringing solutions to this that will raise learner performance in Literature in English in the Nkayi District. This paper therefore examined the perceptions of advanced-level students and teachers towards learning poetry in literature in English in the Zimbabwean classroom. Although this paper covers the literature about Zimbabwe a specific mention of the Nkayi district is made.

METHODOLOGY (DESKTOP REVIEW)

Although the literature about the use of the learners' mother tongue in the Zimbabwean classroom was reviewed, specific reference was made in the Nkayi District. The data was collected through the desktop data collection method. This means that this study was done by employing secondary research. Researchers reviewed the literature on perceptions of advanced-level students and teachers towards learning poetry in literature in English by other scholars. Policies for learning poetry in literature in English were also analyzed. The Constructivist theoretical perspective underpinned the study. Data were also collected using face-to-face interviews and focused group discussion instruments.

RESULTS

1.1 The perceptions of advanced level students and teachers towards the learning of poetry in literature in English in the Zimbabwean classroom.

The study sought to discover the perceptions of advanced-level students and teachers towards the learning of poetry in literature in English in the Zimbabwean classroom; findings of the current study revealed that the nature of poetry in Literature in English is very complicated and open to many interpretations. The historical context of the poems makes the learners understand, associate and enjoy the history of the different poems. However, the poems that are taught at the 'A' level were too old and foreign to learners. Challenges in poetry emanate from sounds and vocabulary. The study revealed that the failure of students to use the dictionaries

may hamper in seeing the aesthetics in poetry in literature in English. The poetic devices and their level of difficulty may become a hindrance to effecting learning. Learners prefer constructivism and interactive methodologies, if teachers properly implement them in the teaching process, they will tend to get the best results out of it. The strategies that can be recommended in order to change these perceptions are the learner-centred methods of teaching, availability of resources and provision of a functional fully stocked library for research purposes.

The research findings align with Dhliwayo (2015) in research carried out in Gweru, Zimbabwe that this nature of poetry in English has occasionally made educators cautious of it. The ambiguity of the nature of poetry continues with the relevance of poetry. Students and teachers who do not understand the nature of poetry find it irrelevant. Thus, they do not see the need of learning Literature in English especially poetry and end up dropping the subject or even choosing other subjects.

These results are in line with research by Dhliwayo (2015), who argued that the relevance of the nature of poetry tends to confuse both the student and teacher. Thus, with the confused participants in the classroom process, results will tend to be disastrous, hence the lack of quality of passes in Literature in English

This study's findings are consistent with other studies have consistently found the historical nature of poems taught at "A" level is problematic. The responses echo what was said by researchers in the literature review. This may pose as a challenge since students may not understand the different historical contexts of the poems (Irsan, 2016). Hence the need for teachers to properly teach the historical context of poems this can be effective if they understand the historical contexts themselves. This can be also reinforced through literature in English cluster workshops.

This is also seen in the literature review that states that the multiple categories are many as revealed by McGoodwin (2014) and these may be alien to the students who may not understand them. Multi-categories of poems lead to ambiguity, and this is compounded by the fact that words in poetry in Literature in English are economical and solid but connected (Irsan, 2016). This can help improve their writing skills and increase the quality of passes in Literature in English.

This is consistent with research carried out by Danesh and Shirkhani (2015) which reveals that lack of interest in poetry in Literature in English can be due to their problem in reading English. Also, the findings of the study by Quasem (2014) conducted in Bangladesh suggest that students' primary attitudes towards poetry in Literature in English are connected with and shaped by their proficiency level and the practical benefits of English language, but in the secondary level, there is a possibility of cultural alienation and ideological and moral mimicry among students learning Literature in English in Bangladesh. Quasem (2014) also highlights that a lack of resources negatively contributes towards poetry in Literature in English appreciation.

The literature reviewed also expressed that poetic devices are new words that are based on a different culture (Danesh & Shirkhani, 2015). Poetic devices and their level of difficulty may become a hindrance to effecting learning. Thus, poetic devices and their relevancy play an important role in the shaping of perceptions of learners towards the study of poetry in Literature in English. This is substantiated by Khatib (2011) who argues that students fail to understand and appreciate poetry mainly because of inappropriate selection of materials and ineffective ways of teaching. It can be then deduced that the constructivist and interactive methodology is ideal in teaching poetry in Literature in English

CONCLUSIONS

It can be noted from the above presentation in terms of the nature of poetry the study revealed that poetry in Literature in English is very complicated and open to many interpretations. The historical context of the poems that are being taught is essential. In terms of the nature of poetic devices the study revealed that poetic devices and their level of difficulty may become a hindrance to effecting learning. In terms of the nature of the methodology used in poetry the study revealed that learners preferred constructivism and interactive methodologies. In terms of the recommendations that can be implemented the study revealed that the lack of a functional fully stocked library for research purposes can cause problems. Although there has been a slight

improvement in English literature results, there are no A and B grades. The teachers need to undergo staff development on marking techniques. It emerged that the teacher's failure to teach poetry in Literature in English effectively was due to the ambiguous nature of poetry, poetic devices, methodology limited time allocated for the lessons and the lack of adequate resources also hindered the teaching of poetry in Literature in English. The study recommends a thorough teaching of the nature of poetry, poetic devices, and interactive methodologies to be used to teach poetry the researcher recommends that further studies be done on the effect of interactive methodologies in improving the quality of passes in Literature in English.

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