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Article : Strategies of Teaching Poetry

Poetry is not merely the study of joy, grief, wonder or amusement; it is all these disciplined and made accessible by the most sensitive use of the subtlest medium.

How can the teaching of poetry be made inspiring interesting and influence the students to a greater extent to study and comprehend poetry? Literary texts alone cannot form the basis for teaching of a poem. Something more should be there than the simple elementary method. There are diverse opinions regarding the teaching of poetry, the complexities involved in the same and its place in the second language teaching programme.

The commonly stated arguments are as follows :

1. Poetry can mean nothing to a student who has only a rudimentary understanding of language, and therefore exposure to poetry leads to incomprehension, bewilderment and frustration.
2. Since Poetry frequently employs words and syntax; not normally used or accepted in ordinary communication, exposure to such usage may lead to the formation of wrong language habits.

The substance of the above arguments focus on the fact that poetry represent a very different kind of language from the one commonly used. The lack of exposure to such language and the teaching time being very limited, adequate attention is not paid to the teaching and learning of poetry.

Inspite of all the arguments and the considerable force associated with it the fact remains that prose and poetry are poles apart and the teaching of poetry should be given due significance in the curriculum.

The teaching of poetry exposes the students to a kind of linguistic experience, an experience of a different kind of language both creative and imaginative.

The basic opposition to poetry stems from the manner in which it is taught. Very often the study of a poem is prefaced with introductory remarks about the poet, his life and the period in which he lived, his literary contribution and much more. It is very important to remember “Teach the poem, not the poet”. A lengthy talk about the poet is not absolutely necessary, unless of course the poem demands these references. A brief information about the poet or the tradition the poem relates to undoubtedly adds to the understanding of the poem. A desire to know more about the poem should be aroused out of the experience of the poem itself.

“Teaching a poem should not consist in paraphrasing each line, glossing each word, analysing each image and finally wrapping the poem up neatly into a central idea or message”.

Teaching poetry should provide an enjoyable experience of language, which means that the language of the poem, is as important as the ‘content’ which it presumably conveys. The poem should be an experience not to be merely talked about, but felt and finally the experience should be enjoyed.

Many of the poems prescribed for study actually contain a heavy dose of moral teaching. The tendency to emphasize the content begins here and very often the teacher’s interpretation about the poem actually serves as substitute for the poem actual. The students should be made to go to the poem and discover its mystery, pleasure, awe and much more by themselves. The poem should be apprehended through several channels: the visual, the auditory, the intellectual and the emotional.

Although some teaching is necessary to monitor, too much of teaching destroys or dilutes the experience. The various hurdles that a student experience can pertain to the linguistic, cultural or even the intellectual. New words, patterns, ideas or cultural elements, unfamiliar and complex create hurdles in the easy understanding of the poem. Here the teacher should familiarize the students with what he judges to be essential for a proper understanding and enjoyment of the poem as a whole.

The aspect of economy should be maintained while introducing the poem. From the beginning if the students are given to the understanding that the teacher will ‘explain all’, then no efforts will be made from their side.

Some teachers begin teaching of the poem by isolating all the complex words and glossing them. Although occasional glossing is useful, it should be remembered that every single word should not be torn apart, from its contents. A suitable 'frame work' should be adopted by the teacher in which all that he / she wants to say about the poem be incorporated. The introduction being interesting, the students will automatically probe deeper the find out what the poem holds in store for them.

Reading the poem aloud is another essential element for the purpose of comprehension. "Poetry is meant primarily to be heard, and even when, it is being read visually, the echo of the sounds which it contains is present with the reader". The most striking effects of a poem is achieved through sound. Effective reading of English poetry requires a familiarity with the rhythm and tone of the language. "Poetry is meant to be recited or chanted" which involves the rise and fall of voice and a good deal of variation in pitch.

It is a good practice to read the poem aloud in the class asking the students merely to listen to it. The first impact which is purely auditory has great benefits.

The first impression that he gets of the poem is of a 'whole'. However, there is also a danger involved in this practice. By merely listening to a poem, there is a likelihood that the student will receive only the most striking elements, whereas other elements are filtered out. This 'filtering out' of details is not possible if the student is asked to follow the poem in the text book as it is being read out. His eyes take in too much of details which is otherwise left out. To confirm what the students have received from this initial reading, a few questions can be put up. This helps to probe their reaction to the poem.

A second reading greatly helps because by the end of it the students would have succeeded in forming a fairly good impression of what the poem is all about. After an over-all understanding of the poem, all the significant details will fall in place. Very often, the poem registers in the mind as a picture. Visual elements present in the poem are easily grasped. Therefore a very useful way of stimulating response is to start with what is most visual and concrete in the poem. Shaping rather than merely dictating is of great importance here. Attention should also be drawn to the way in which sounds contribute to the picture. Very often there are indirect or oblique statements, or patterns of contrasts created by the use of words and phrases used symbolically to evoke certain associations. The students should be led to the discovery of these patterns through questions.

It is important to make the students go back again to the poem through a series of questions which can be answered through a 'careful scrutiny'. The questions asked should not test merely whether the student has understood the poem superficially, but his understanding should include also an awareness of how the poet is able to say what he wants to say. There has to be "a tangible meaning which the students can use to build up the more subtle kinds of understanding". The students should be helped by the teacher to arrive at this meaning by integrating the answers to the various questions asked.

One should keep away from the mechanical method of teaching as it does immense harm by killing all interest in poetry, the students may have. Every new lecture or explanation must be preceded by a fresh look at the subject. If there is no growth or improvement (on the part of the teacher) then there is a fear of degeneration. There has to be a living changing relationship with the material and this is not wholly a question of the teacher's intelligence and scholarship but also of his personal attitudes and values, which are of foremost priority.

The teacher should provide the students with facts and elementary ideas needed so that a necessary foundation is created for the understanding and appreciation of the poem. The worst way to begin teaching is to start with critical opinions, or provide a paraphrase and then explain everything in minute detail (a practice still extensively followed by many teachers). Nothing destroys the experience in the poem than too much of explanation. Poetry works not on the explicitness of language but through its suggestiveness. Too much of emphasis on meanings, on exhaustive understanding and grasp of details should be avoided.

Although the teachers should be concerned with the language of the poem as with its content, the students should not be overburdened with technical information concerning metrics, prosody, rhetorics etc. What the teacher should aim at achieving is to make his students feel something of the 'poetry' in the poem.

Even in discussing the logical structure of a poem, the teacher should suggest only how words are used to build up an idea and how 'keywords' can function in setting up a theme. The theme of the poem or the poet's message can be focused upon, and its relevance in the present times can also be discussed.

Finally, the summing up of a poem should serve to bring into focus all the elements in the poem, which he has been trying to identify and highlight. Above all the teachers must appear to be enjoying the poem, or else he will never be able

to induce enjoyment in the students. The best teacher is a person who manages to infect the students with something of their own enthusiasm. It is because the enjoyment of poetry can be infectious that we wish to teach it.

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