

Challenges English teachers and students face in teaching and learning poetry in Class VI of Rangaytung Primary School, Chhukha Dzongkhag

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Abstract

The poetry question of class VI is marked out of 8 both in the mid-term as well as in the annual examination according to the English Curriculum Framework, Classes PP-XII, of which the poem should be from outside Reading & Literature, Class VI. After studying the marks scored by 14 students of class VI of Rangaytung Primary School, Chhukha in the mid-term examination, 2023, more than 75% of the students on average scored below 4. Therefore, the study found out what reasons students had for not fully understanding the poems taught in the classroom. The study also touched on the perceptions English teachers of class VI had on the partial understanding of poetry taught in the classroom by the students. The participants for the study were selected based on purposive sampling. The study adopted qualitative research design to collect data from the students and teachers. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to interpret the collected data. The findings of this study include difficulty in understanding the meaning of words because of the use of linguistics and taking the teaching and learning of poetry lightly by both the teacher and the students in the first place. As a consequence of this, students took less interest in learning poetry than other genres of literature. Teaching strategies used by the English teacher also played a vital role in making poetry learning interesting to the learners. Understanding of poetry was better when the teacher used simple sentences with appropriate examples to explain the poem. Moreover, poetry lessons were rarely repeated, which was actually necessary. Keeping all difficulties aside, the teacher played a crucial role in making poetry learning interesting to the children. Recommendations to English teachers of class VI are discussed separately towards the end of the study.

Keywords— Poetry learning, Class VI, Qualitative research, Teaching strategies, English Curriculum Framework

I. INTRODUCTION

It is a well-known fact that poetry is an integral part of the English curriculum, be it at the primary, middle or secondary level. However, teaching and learning of poetry, unlike other literary genres, do not receive as much attention as other genres do. Thus, the understanding of poetry in the classroom is subject to the limited time English teachers have in teaching poetry to the fullest or repeating poetry lessons whenever necessary.

The poetry syllabus for class VI needs timely reformation to remove poems, which are redundant, repetitive, irrelevant and difficult to understand. Applebee (1993) states that poems are usually force-fed to school children to fulfil curriculum needs. In order to facilitate quality learning for the 21st century, Royal Education Council (REC) has also “initiated major curriculum reform in all subjects” (REC, 2019, p.1).

This research basically deals with the perception of teachers and students of class VI of Rangaytung Primary School of Chhukha Dzongkhag in not fully understanding the poem taught in the classroom. Though, it is not difficult to get teaching learning materials online, some poems in *Reading & Literature, Class VI* are difficult for students to understand. In relation to this, some class VI students from the school claim that some poems in the English textbook are unfriendly and difficult to comprehend. Upon verbally inquiring, the English teacher of class VI states that the only way to make students learn poetry well is to make them study poems of their choice. Hence, the meaning of poetry becomes interesting to comprehend, for both the teacher as well as the student. For example, the poem *Celebration* by Alonzo Lopez in *Reading & Literature, Class VI* “passes vague information as the name of the particular celebration is not disclosed” (REC, 2021, p.3), which may be challenging for students to digest in the first learning. The

poem *Courage* by Robert William Service too “talks about abstract ideas such as courage, which students may not pick up instantly in the first classroom teaching” (REC, 2021, P.48). Thus, there is a compelling need to examine why teaching and understanding of poetry is challenging for teachers and students in schools.

1.1 Problem Statement

Written examination for class VI comprises of essay and letter writing, grammar, short story, essay and poetry both in the mid-term as well as the annual examination. According to the *Instructional Guide for English, classes IV-VI*, poetry questions are marked out of 8, of which the poem should be from outside the prescribed English textbook.

Careful analysis of the marks scored by 16 students in English in the mid-term examination, 2023 indicated that the mean marks in poetry was below 4. On average, 12 out of 16 students in class VI scored 4 and below out of 8 in the poetry question. Students needed the comprehension skills learned in the classroom to answer the poetry question in the examination correctly. Therefore, it was essential to find out what challenges class VI students of Rangaytung Primary School faced in understanding the poem taught by the teacher. It was also equally essential to find out what challenges teachers faced in teaching poetry in the classroom.

1.2 Research objectives

The study attempts to achieve the following objectives:

- i. To find out why understanding of poetry is challenging for class VI students of Rangaytung Primary School of Chhukha Dzongkhag.
- ii. To find out why teaching of poetry is challenging for English teachers of Rangaytung Primary School of Chhukha Dzongkhag?

1.3 Research questions

The study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- i. What reasons do students give for not understanding the poem taught in the classroom?
- ii. What reasons do teachers give for students not learning poetry as expected?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Benton (1992) reveals poetry to be that part of the curriculum where the teacher feels most uncertain about one's own knowledge, most uncomfortable about one's own teaching strategies and most guilty about both. The teacher's anxiety then spreads to the students and the classroom ambience becomes unhealthy for poetry learning.

The teacher's efficacy in instructional decisions ultimately shapes the learner's performance in poetry (Soodak & Podell, 1997). Teacher efficacy is defined as a link between teaching practices and learning outcomes. The teacher's sense of efficacy can potentially influence the learning environment as well as instructional practices in the classroom (Bandura, 1977). Consequently, teachers with a high sense of self-efficacy put more effort to even reach to the most difficult learners in the class. This is especially important in the teaching of poetry where some teachers resist change.

Irrespective of the difficulties faced in the teaching and learning of poetry everyday in the classroom, some teachers are of the view that poetry can be used in teaching across the curriculum. Januchowski-Hartley et al (2018) reports that poetry can be used to teach conservation. It can also be used to teach multiplication table and the number of days in a month to mention a few. Likewise, many teachers believe that poetry can be useful in opening the minds of those students who struggle with learning.

Teachers have misconceptions about what is making the teaching of poetry challenging. The rhyming pattern, meter and use of complex words make poetry appear quite distinct from other forms of literature. As a consequence of this, teachers think that teaching poetry is beyond their ability, though the benefits of learning poetry are many. Firstly, poetry gives opportunities to students to be active in classroom activities. Secondly, students can learn how to express feelings through words by reading poetry in front of the class. Thirdly, children can acquire more vocabulary in poetry than other genres of literature (Mittal, 2014). Students can read more, imagine more, think more and discuss more by learning poetry. Therefore, there is no reason for teachers to find the teaching of poetry challenging:

It nurtures love and appreciation for the sound and power of language. Poetry can help us see differently, understand others, and ourselves more and validate our human experience. It enhances thinking skills, and promotes personal connections. Such attributes deserve a closer look (Perfect, 1999, p. 728).

The most common challenge that teachers face when teaching poetry is related to the fact that poetry is one form of literature whose meaning is very difficult to comprehend in the first instance. Certain definitions of poetry's nature underscore its “superiority over other forms of expression and have perhaps done the genre no favours by placing it on so high a pedestal” (Dymoke, 2009, p. 76). The idea that poetry is a difficult medium can “lead potential readers to reject its advances” (Dymoke, 2009, p. 78). The

composition of poetry itself is confusing with components such as stanzas, rhyme, rhythm and prosody. In addition to this, Olilla and Jantas (2006) state that poetry is a kind of written language that is structured rhythmically to tell a story, express an emotion, idea, or state of being.

Paran (2008) claims that poetry learning should be structured as “language learning is not only about language, it is about learning” (p. 469) and the focus should be on the “holistic perspectives that look at the whole person and the whole culture in which the poem is a part” (p. 469). According to Hanauer (2001) the most unique thing about studying poetry is that the learning process is directly related to the way language is used in the poem. Learning involves the acquisition of a number of skills that should be interlinked to guide the learners to interact with poetry. In addition to this, Nasr (2001) states that since language acquisition is derived from poetry, the components are no longer isolated stanzas but “become thematically coherent in addition to their linguistic cohesion” (p. 351). It will be evident from the time taken and methodology used by the teacher whether the poetry lesson was effective or unsatisfactory. Poetry teaching and learning is still a difficult profession for many teachers:

The problem has been analyzed in many different ways as a product of inadequate teacher-subject knowledge and pedagogical fear; as an inherent problem with perception of its methods of meaning making and as a problem of curriculum development, predicated on an inadequate selection of poems in relation to different ideas about relevance (Blake, 2010, p. 2).

Assessment forces teachers to adopt teaching methods that lead students to pass in the examination successfully rather than enjoy poetry. According to Harlen (2006) assessment in the literal term refers to the process of deciding, collecting and making judgements about the goals of the learning to be assessed. The distinct purposes of assessment are “to help learning and to summarise what has been learned” (p. 103). The point of discussion here is about summative assessment. However, Dymoke (2003) reports that the problem of accommodating poetry to a school system ultimately measures a student’s success in summative assessment at the end of the particular grade.

Students perceive poetry learning to be difficult, irrelevant and something they should not be studying in the 21st century. There are reasons for students’ unfamiliarity with poetry:

In many cases, students expect the meaning of a text to be constructed automatically and as directly as possible. In some ways, constructing meaning from poetry runs counter to this expectation. To

find the meaning of a poem requires effort and analysis. Rather than constructing meaning automatically, the reader of a poem may experience the frustration that comes with the lack of understanding. This explains to a certain extent why students dislike reading poetry (Hanauer, 2004, p. 41).

While keeping the difficulties in teaching and learning of poetry aside, some teachers use it as a tool to increase and develop students’ vocabulary and expressions. Jabrohim (1994) confirms that one of the advantages of reading poetry is the acquisition of vocabulary. Students will have to read more poetry to acquire more vocabulary. It is at times “encouraging to see teachers using poetry to teach vocabulary by reading between the lines and interpreting metaphors, identifying allusions or drawing conclusions from the texts” (Haraldsson, 2011, p. 17). No matter how challenging it is to teach poems in the classroom, teachers must influence the students to enjoy poetry learning through the study of culture.

To sum up, poetry transmits cultural knowledge of different nations. It not only reflects the reality of the society, but also mirrors its culture. Poetry helps students to explore the world and understand different cultures, ideologies and social behaviours. According to Lazar (1996) poems provide insights into appreciating cross-cultural connections and this, in turn helps children acquire fluency at the target language. Poetry makes human beings to think and imagine. Learning a new poem means learning about a new culture and its beliefs and social structure. Understanding a culture well allows learners to work with issues from the perspective of the poet as well as their own linguistic knowledge.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Methodology

The study used qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research approach suited the nature of this study as it produced a rich description of the experiences of teachers and students who taught and learnt poetry in the classroom on daily basis. In addition to this, qualitative research lays emphasis “on the concept and perception of people on events of the world” (Meyer, 2008, p. 18). Furthermore, qualitative research method allowed the researcher a degree of flexibility in the conduct of the study.

The research design that was used in this study was narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is defined as a specific type of qualitative design in which “the narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of a series of events which are chronologically connected” (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 17).

Narrative inquiry was chosen to allow the participants to share experiences without undue direction from the researcher. Creswell (2012) points out that narrative design supports the participants to tell stories and reveal self truthfully. Thus, one of the reasons behind using narrative inquiry in this study was to provide insights and experiences to teachers and students who would teach and learn poetry in class VI in future through the findings.

3.2 Research Design

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3.3 Sampling

Purposive sampling strategy was used in this study. Bartram (2010) argues that sampling is all about choosing the right participants, place or behaviour to get the right responses. Rajashi (2019) further states that selecting a sampling strategy is essential for authenticating information and capturing the phase of the data journey.

The sampling used in this study comprised of two English teachers and six class VI students of Rangaytung Primary School under Chhukha *dzongkhag*. The teachers had experience of teaching poetry for the last three years and the students participants have been learning poetry since pre primary. The learners started solving comprehension questions in poetry from class IV onwards through block tests and home examinations.

The overall sampling size for the study was 8 as Ruthellen (2012) believes that narrative researchers can still work with small samples of participants to obtain rich and free-ranging discourse keeping the emphasis on stored experience. In addition to this, “in homogenous studies using purposeful sampling, like many qualitative studies, 8 interviews should be sufficient to achieve data saturation” (Guest, 2006, p. 60).

3.4 Data Collection Tools

“There are a variety of methods of data collection in qualitative research, including observations, textual or visual analysis and interviews. However, Gill et al. (2008)

believe that the most common methods used, particularly in qualitative research are interviews and focus groups for convenience in data validation. In this study, semi-structured interview was used to determine the perception of teachers and students in not understanding poetry taught in class VI of Rangaytung Primary School of Chhukha *dzongkhag*. The objective behind using semi-structured interview was to give opportunity to the participants to clarify, elaborate or rephrase questions if need be.

In the simplest term “an interview is a two-way conversation in which the interviewer asks the participants questions to generate data and to learn about the ideas, beliefs, views, opinions and behaviours of the participants” (Nieuwenhuis, 2007, p. 87). Furthermore, Cohen et al. (2011) confirms that a semi-structured interview is a good data collection tool to find out what a person knows, likes and thinks.

The conduct of semi-structured interview allowed the interviewer to listen to the records repeatedly to reflect and analyse data correctly. Semi-structured interview kept the focus of the participants on the interview while asking open-ended questions. Using semi-structured interview helped the interviewer to gather data because of its flexibility to add new questions according to the responses of the participants.

3.5 Reliability and Validity

Member checks and peer scrutiny was used to check the reliability and validity of the study. Reliability refers to the consistency of a measure whereas validity refers to the accuracy of a measure. Thus, it is evident that “qualitative research validity reflects the degree to which the qualitative data collected accurately gauge what the study is trying to measure” (Khan, 2006, p. 403). At the same time validity determines “whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher and the participants” (Creswell, 2007, p. 195).

Member checks is “the single most important provision that can be made to bolster a study’s credibility” (Lincoln, 2006, p. 68). It is further stated that member checking involves “allowing participants to read the transcription of the interview to confirm that responses have been accurately recorded” (Stake, 2006, p. 235). To ensure credibility of the study, the researcher gave back the interview transcripts to the participants for final verification. The participants were allowed to edit responses if seemed necessary. It was necessary for the researcher to go back with the transcripts to check if what had been transcribed was infact what the participants intended to convey. This allowed the participants to comment on the interpretations.

Peer scrutiny is the process of reviewing a researcher’s work by another researcher. UGC journals (2019) argues

that a publisher might use different ways to check the validity of a study, but peer scrutiny is by far the best process to authenticate a research paper. Open peer scrutiny was used to check the validity, reliability and authenticity of data. Feedback given by the reviewer was used to refine the methods, develop a greater explanation of the research design and strengthen the reliability of the study.

3.6 Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis refers to the process of reading transcriptions, looking for similarities and differences, and subsequently finding themes and developing categories. Creswell (2006) specifies that data analysis is a process of understanding, analysing, interpreting and finally presenting the findings.

Qualitative thematic data analysis technique was used in this study to analyse the perception of teachers and students in not understanding poetry in class VI. Thematic analysis is defined as a method of finding out people's views, opinions, experiences or values from a set of qualitative data such as interview transcripts and observation forms.

Familiarization of the data took place by taking notes and transcribing the audio. Transcript of each interview was looked thoroughly, highlighting everything that seemed potentially interesting. All data were put into groups identified by codes. The pattern of the codes was studied to determine different themes. After reviewing the themes in terms of accuracy, the study came up with a succinct and easily understandable name for each theme. Finally, the analysis of the data was written.

Similar themes emerging from the interview were grouped together using thematic data analysis approach in a flow chart. The themes were interpreted serially and accurately with the support of literature. The two teachers were referred to as T1 and T2 and the six students as S1 to S6 while quoting responses given by the participants.

3.7 Ethical Issues

Permission to collect data from the participants was sought before the start of the interview. The purpose and objectives of the study and dos and don'ts of the interview were oriented to the participants before the interview. The participants were made to sign the participant consent form before the conduct of the interview. They were also informed of their rights to withdraw from the study at any time at their convenience.

The participants were informed that their participation in the study is purely voluntary and that they can withdraw from the interview at any point of time. This catered to the principle of informed consent, i.e. "the right of the participant to be or not to be a part of the research project" (Ruane, 2005, p. 19). The participants were assured of the confidentiality of information gathered. The liberty to

decide the time and place of the interview was left to the participants. Mobile phones were used to audio record in consultation with the participants. Data analysis were done following all scientific procedures of conducting a research, and the findings from it were not fabricated or manipulated.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Majority of the student participants faced difficulty in understanding the meaning of new words from the poems in the prescribed class VI English textbook. Denman (1988) supports this viewpoint by stating that "all forms of poetry has to be heavy with some sort of deep, hidden word meaning that cannot be seen" (p. 87). S1 and S2 mentioned that words like 'scuffled', 'valour', 'plumage', and 'oath' from the poem *Courage* by Robert William Service were never seen before and "to remember the meaning of these words for long was difficult". S4 did not see a wheat before. Thus, it was difficult to understand the meaning of the word 'wheat' from the poem *Heads Bent Low* without knowing how wheat looked like. S6 convinced that the teacher had no time to teach word meaning separately. T2 stated that the use of figurative language, rhythm, syntax and structure technically made the understanding of poetry difficult for students. T1 at the same time argued that "students hated the first look of poetry itself as most of them were reluctant to read in the first instance. Those who took interest in poetry took time to read correctly without continued guidance from teachers and parents". As a result of this, both T1 and T2 were of the perspective that the lack of more poetry reading greatly affected comprehension levels of the students. Even though comprehension of poetry is challenging, Tang (2008) determines that as a result of daily poem reading activities in the classroom, students with low reading levels are willing to improve comprehension skills within a short span of time.

Student participants also faced problems in linguistics and did not enjoy learning poetry in the first place. Lockward (1994) mentions that "poetry is the genre most students neither enjoy nor read as preparation for classroom learning" (p. 65). Zelenkova (2004) highlights that the conviction that learners might have difficulties in understanding poetry may be due to its linguistic and cultural vagueness and affects the teaching process directly. T1 agreed that students took poetry lightly and the use of linguistics made poetry difficult to understand not only for students but also for the teacher. "The use of rhymes and sound made poetry difficult to understand, though the titles were interesting", S5 remarked.

The study revealed that teaching strategies used by the English teacher played a vital role in making poetry learning worthwhile in the classroom. Poetry was at times difficult

for the teacher to understand too. Both T1 and T2 had negative attitude about poetry learning before and this prevented the two teachers from teaching poetry effectively in the classroom. Students in general, faced difficulty in understanding poetry according to the teaching methodology used in the lesson. This is what Wilson (1985) has to say regarding the problems of teaching poetry:

While, the teacher still uses conventional methods such as discussions, demonstrations, and questions and answers, it can be concluded that the low ability to read poetry is caused by the lack of interesting ways of teaching poetry. In order to overcome the problem of not understanding poetry, it is important to teach poetry in the way students like (p. 37).

S1, S3 and S6 felt that the understanding of poetry was better when the teacher used gestures to explain the poem. On the other hand S2, S4 and S5 reported that learning poetry was interesting when the teacher explained the poem using simple sentences with examples. Lazar (1993) suggests that the teacher's way of explaining plays a critical role in benefiting the students' construction of meaning from the poem taught in the classroom. "The teacher demonstrated the poem at the beginning of the lesson and gave questions as homework. The teacher did not check whether the students understood the poem taught or not", S1 remarked.

"The teacher made the students to read the poem in groups and do presentation to the whole class. The lesson was not repeated the next day", S4 added. "The teacher explained the poem and gave questions on the chalkboard. The teacher taught all poems in the same way", S3 exclaimed. Majority of the student participants wished that the poetry lesson was repeated the next day, but of course, the findings revealed that repetition of the lesson never happened.

Bex (1994) insists that the teaching style of the teacher should be appropriate to the level of the poem taught and competence of the learners. Therefore, the teacher need to ensure that the students are taught in a variety of ways to make the understanding of poetry better and the lesson be repeated if needed.

V. RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Conclusion

Both the teacher participants were of the view that the lack of further reading affected the comprehension of poetry. It was evident from the analysis that most student participants faced difficulty in understanding the meaning of new words from the poems taught in the classroom. Data analysis indicated that teachers had no time to teach word meaning separately. Doyin (2010) otherwise suggests that looking

for word meaning in poetry with time must be understood as an effort to understand and feel everything that is in the poem to face examinations confidently otherwise.

One teacher participant was of the agreement that the use of unknown linguistics made it difficult for students to comprehend the meaning of poetry. In contrast to what the teacher agreed, Collin (2008) believes that poetry can be a good way to help children understand linguistics in English while working with rhyming words. Chemwei et al (2013) believe that poetry is taught in English to provide opportunities to children to explore the linguistic and conceptual aspect of written literature without necessarily concentrating on the mechanics of language. The other teacher participant was of the revelation that reading a poem aloud in the class helped students to elaborate word meaning and connect experiences with the outside world. Hence, Elting and Firkins (2006) support that the ability of the learners to read poetry properly can develop a sense of meaning based on experience. As a result of this, poetry learning enabled students to explore linguistics and learned through experience.

While all the six student participants were of the view that teaching strategies used by the teacher played a vital role, the understanding of poetry was better when gestures and simple sentences were used to explain the poem. Majority of the students expected the poetry lesson to be repeated the next day when it was not fully understood. Poetry is a medium of human expression. The expression of poetry is done through words, symbols, gestures, feelings, emotions, thoughts, desires and needs. According to Heath (1996) poetry offers opportunities for children to showcase feelings and emotions to foster involvement in learning. The understanding of poetry depended on the way how the teacher taught.

5.2 Recommendations

Though it is time consuming to pay attention to individual learners, the study firstly recommends English teachers of class VI to find time to teach the meaning of new words first before teaching the actual poem. The study secondly recommends teachers of English to teach linguistics as a part of grammar and encourage learners to read more to enhance the understanding of word meaning while learning poetry. The study thirdly recommends teachers to use a variety of teaching strategies to teach poetry. Poetry is the expression of emotions, feelings, wants and desires and can be understood better through the use of symbols, gestures and actions. The study fourthly recommends English teachers to make students read more poetry to enhance comprehension skills. Finally, the study recommends English teachers to repeat the poetry lesson if need be,

especially for learners who have not understood in the first teaching.

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