

RESEARCH ARTICLE



SHIFTING FROM AN AURAL TRADITION TO A VISUAL PARADIGM IN TEACHING POETRY

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the feasibilities of transforming the process of teaching poetry in English language classrooms from an aural chore to a visual chore in which the text is being decomposed by exploiting the rich potential of verbal pictures like images and symbols that are deftly woven into the text in order to enhance the level of learner engagement, autonomy, motivation and interactivity. The potential benefits of using learner's or teachers' artistic creativity to project these images and introducing a variety of learner engaging activities in poetry classrooms are also discussed. The relative merits and limitations of the approach also find a share in the analysis.

Key words: Visual approach to poetry, verbal pictures, multimodal approach, instructional mode.

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INTRODUCTION

The verbal only paradigm with the teacher playing the role of a vibrant orator and the learner that of a passive and receptive audience can no longer be thought of as a preferred mode of instruction in the scenario of teaching and learning English language or literature. The advent of exponential research in applied linguistics, educational psychology, instructional technology and self access 'webucation' tools has triggered the emergence of Interactive Multimedia Instruction (IMI) necessitating a total restructuring in the conventional role(s) of

the learner and the teacher. This great shift from the verbosity of the teacher to an instructional strategy which makes use of a number of sophisticated methods to provide the learner a variety of sensory modalities is termed multimodal approach (Dressman, 2010). It implies a mode of instruction which dexterously caters to all the senses of learners by diligently exploiting the visual, auditory and kinaesthetic potential of the text. Though these revolutionary changes have had their immediate aftermaths on English Language Teaching (ELT) practices in terms of learner centricity, pedagogy,

methodology, curriculum, learner autonomy and learning experiences, the literature teaching practices both in ELT and major classrooms, remain reluctant to these shifts and are still clinging on to the chalk and talk method of towering teachers and inactive students.

Davidman (1981) observes that of the three models of learning –visual, auditory and kinaesthetic –65% of the population prefers the first while the second is opted by 30%. The much used traditional method depends solely on the auditory style. The statistics tell us that the much preferred and result yielding mode is visual but it is neglected in practice for no reasons. Researches on brain (Brown, 1974 & Carbo, 1984) have documented differences in functioning between the left and right hemispheres of brain. The left brain specializes in digital and deduction tasks that characterize oral and written media. The right brain specializes in iconic and intuitive tasks that characterize visual media –the visual and the sound. These differences in brain functioning strongly point to the use of multi-sensory approaches in teaching. So incorporating a visual approach to teaching helps learners use both sides of their brain.

Educational psychologists (Kress, 2003 & McBride, 2004) say that the sensory modality of learners is of varying nature. One learner may receive impressions better through the eyes than ears and another may do so the other way round. Since the traditional approach lays much emphasis on the auditory channel of learning, the more effective side of learning, the visual channel, is sidelined. While all of our senses are used to take in information, each seems to have preferences in their mode of learning. In order to help all students learn, teaching has to be customized in such a way that it appeals to as many sensory preferences as possible.

The article examines the feasibilities of revisiting the chore of teaching poetry to English language learners by exploiting the rich potential of verbal pictures like images and symbols that a poet meticulously weaves into the text in order to enhance the level of learner engagement, autonomy, motivation and interactivity. This concept is termed the Visual Approach to Poetry Teaching (VAPT) because the images and symbols in the poem act as a pivot for learners to explore the

semantic richness of the poem, to ensure multi-level of interaction between/among learners and learners/teacher, and to trigger flights of learners' creativity and imagination.

Visual Approach to Poetry Teaching

The conventionally practiced mode of teaching literature, especially poetry, by and large, is teacher centric lecturing, in which words are the only medium of conveying the signified concept or idea despite the fact that a concept rendered only in words can be vague and abstract, even fall into obscurity, if the listeners' linguistic competency is not up to the mark. This pedagogic method is largely criticized for the low level of learner motivation, passive involvement of learners and lack of opportunity for interaction and learners' communicative competency in English. The traditionally followed verbal approach, in this way, limited the comprehension of the text within the bounds of words. On the other hand, the VAPT incorporates all types of visual and auditory resources in teaching process to make it more appealing, well motivating and result oriented.

The VAPT includes constructive use of drawings, visuals, images, improvised collages and paintings from the verbal pictures given in the text (Hughes, 2009). It is, in other words, the method of converting the verbal pictures embedded in the text into concrete visual shapes. Thus, it gives the reader a divergently rich experience in the course of understanding a piece of poem. It is intent on projecting depiction of the major characters/concepts rendered in the poem seeking the help of learner's/teacher's artistic/digital literacy and imaginative capabilities.

Dylan Thomas, the Neo-Romantic poet of the 20th century, says a poem by him needs a host of images, because its center is a host of images. T S Eliot speaks of objective correlative in art and its significance in conveying art emotions. WB Yeats communicates primarily in images and symbols. Cleanth Brooks in his essay *The Language of Paradox* (Brooks, 1947) underlines the inevitable deviation of all great poets to a language of paradox, irony, metaphor, images and adds that a vital function of any metaphor is the expression of imagination and stimulating imaginative images in a reader or listener. The VAPT offers many

opportunities to create powerful metaphorical images of abstract concepts and profound truths.

The content of any poem is emotions shrouded in an elevated and magnificent form. Emotion, being an absolutely abstract thing, evades auditory mode, which leaves it grotesquely expressed when rendered not by the writer who has felt it. The poem being a verbal painting of either a noble idea that the poet has deduced from life or an object or experience that has struck deep in his mind and has emotionally gripped him can effectively and profoundly be communicated when presented in a combination of visual and auditory forms.

Thus, a comprehensive and radioscopic comprehension of the poem can be attempted effectively if the visual approach to teaching poetry is integrated to the traditional mode of instruction. The VAPT, thus, becomes a complementing and supplementing tool in understanding the poem in a better, wider and deeper perspective and also in elevating the passivity of lecturing to learner centric tasks in which opportunities for meaningful and authentic communication in the target language are generated.

From Theory to Practice

The visual approach to poetry teaching does not mean a complete negation of the traditional lecture centric exploration of the connotative and denotative meaning of the lines, rather a tool to supplement and enrich the old mode of verbal approach. It implies the use of visuals embedded in the text for pre-teaching activities to prepare the learners to understand the poems for study or to set the stage for realistic interaction in classrooms as a post-teaching task. To give practical sample of how it can bring about unexpected twist to the traditional mode, a few classic pieces from the annals of English poetry are examined in detail below.

My Last Duchess

While teaching this poem in a visual approach, the teacher initiates the learner to the poem with portraits of the Duchess and the Duke. The teacher may volunteer to draw them himself/herself or can seek the help of students in class. The portraits may be drawn in such a way that they reflect the characteristics of them as described in the poem. In this poem, the artist has to try to capture the depth

and intent of the Duchess's passionate glances, the spot of joy on her cheek and the half blush dying along the throat and her ever smiling face. In sharp contrast to this image, the Duke's portrait should reflect his possessive mentality, contempt for the pleasant and pleasing things and the authoritarian attitude. The teacher, once the portraits are ready, starts with a brainstorming activity by asking students to draw comparison and contrast from the portraits and encourages them to list their initial impressions of the personality of the two. The impressions of the learners about the portraits are compared with the poet's portrayal of them once the poem is done in the class. As a post-lesson task, the learners can be asked to prepare a collage to reflect the character traits of the Duke and the Duchess in the poem or to capture all the traits of the Duke and Duchess in any form of visual representation they like. A review/discussion on the creations of learners will open up plenty of chances for learner engagement and participation.

The advantage of this approach is that the images used in the poem are better conveyed through visuals and learners are encouraged to use their imaginative faculties to create their own impressions of the poem. It keeps them better motivated and more exposed to the semantic richness and pictorial complexity usually woven into the otherwise simple looking text of a poem

Ozymandias

The Visual Approach to Ozymandias by P.B. Shelley implies two contrastive paintings/images of the statue, either drawn live in the classroom by the teacher or the students with the help of instructions or created with the help of multimedia tools. The pathetic and compassion inviting present appearance of the statue, as given in the poem with all its vast and trunk-less lugs, half sunk and shattered visage, the wrinkled lips and the sense of strong contempt to everything, must fully be captured in the drawing. The other image should reflect its magnificent size, the proud gaze and blatant contempt for others when Ozymandias was at the zenith of his power and pelf.

The Circus Animals' Desertion

In *The Circus Animals' Desertion*, an oft-anthologized poem by W.B. Yeats, the complex task of communicating the emotion and disappearance of

the poetic genius can better and more efficaciously be communicated and a lot of learner interaction can be triggered, if the different dismantled images pictured in the poem are turned into a collage. Encouraging a healthy, but optional painting/collage competition among learners to depict the state can not only trigger a wide range of interest and imaginative power but also lead to a penetrative engagement and closer analysis of the poem itself. A post- class/competition discussion on the creative outpouring of learner, especially using the expression used in the poem, can be very fruitful for learners to catch and internalize many sharp use of the language in the poem.

CONCLUSION

The VAPT doesn't imply a complete a negation of the traditional verbal only paradigm rather advocates effective integration of visuals embedded in the text in such a way that the learners are provided with ample learning experiences catering to all senses and are well encouraged to play an active role by realistically interacting in the target language. It has limitations in the sense that it relies much on the artistic creativity of the learner/teacher and is much more demanding than the traditional mode. Nevertheless, it's potential to turn a learner passive poetry class into communicatively and imaginatively rich learning platform is great and unquestionable.

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