

Poems as Alternative Media in Teaching Grammar

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Abstract

This article discusses how poems as literary texts can be used for teaching grammar in an interactive and communicative atmosphere. Literary texts have long been proposed as alternative media in teaching grammar due to their complex use of language and grammatical patterns. However, not many teachers feel confident in exploiting literary texts. This article explores how language teachers can use poems interactively to present illustrations or provide contexts in which certain grammatical items are used. For example, teachers can use poems to illustrate how the simple past tense is used to describe past experience. The interactive tasks and activities suggested in this article aim to help teachers extend not only the students' grammatical knowledge but also their lexical knowledge.

Key words:

Literary texts, grammatical knowledge, lexical knowledge

Introduction

Poems as one form of literary texts are often taught in language classrooms as literary artifacts – only for the sake of studying literature. Rarely do language teachers use them as media to teach the grammar of the target language. This is probably due to the fact that the language of poems is often difficult and complex, which might require teachers to devote more time to explaining the meaning of the poems rather than teaching the grammar being presented through the poems. However, poems do present the use of grammatical points in a genuine context. They show how certain grammatical patterns are used to carry certain meanings. This article aims to show how language teachers can make use of poems to teach grammar communicatively without having to make their lessons more complicated.

Why poems?

Poems have a 'public' and a 'personal' meaning. In teaching, this is an enormous advantage. It means that, "within limits, each learner's personal interpretation has validity. It also means that, because each person's perception is different, an almost infinite fund of interactive discussion is possible." (Maley, 1987, pp.93-94) Besides, "they have a content (affective or cognitive) which really means something and is not simply cooked up for the supposedly fragile digestion of language learners." (Maley, 1987, pp.93-94)

Maley and Duff (1989) describe several advantages of using poems in teaching grammar:

1. Memorability
Poems are often able to penetrate our minds. They often "go on repeating themselves in our inward ears and even in our sleep without our consciously trying to recall them" (p.6)
2. Universality
Poems are one form of language use which is generally found in all cultures.

3. Playfulness.
Some poems bring a sense of pleasure, which arouses the readers' interest to read, enjoy and explore them.
4. Compactness.
Poems are able to convey meanings concisely through their context concisely.

Recommended criteria of the poems

According to Tomlinson (1986, pp.35-36), there are several important criteria to consider when selecting poems for use with a whole class.

1. Universal appeal
Universal topics such as youth, old age, marriage, birth, love, education, and friendship have great potential as most learners have close experience with them.
2. Surface simplicity
It is important for a mixed ability group that the poems used are linguistically accessible for the weakest members of the group, and that there is nothing in the title or opening lines which might scare off such members of the group.
3. Potential depth
The poems used with mixed ability groups should have potential depth of meaning so that they can challenge the brighter members of the group who have no problem in responding to the linguistic surface of the poems.
4. Affective potential
Poems which express strong emotions, attitudes, feelings, opinions, or ideas are usually more "productive" than those which are gentle, descriptive, or neutral.
5. Contemporary language
It is significant that the language of the poems they are asked to read resembles the language they are being asked to learn.
6. Brevity
Some members of every class will be capable of enjoying long poems, but it is safer to use short poems with a mixed ability class.
7. Potential for illustration
The ideal poem for the mixed ability EFL/ESL class is one which satisfies the criteria outlined above and which lends itself to visual, auditory, or tactile illustration through the use of realia (e.g. slides, films, music) or specially designed aids (e.g. drawings, sound effects, mime).

How to use poems in teaching grammar

These are some practical suggestions for using poems in teaching grammar.

- I. Teaching point: Simple Past Tense
Function : Describing/Telling Past Events
EFL level : Upper Elementary and Lower Intermediate
Sample of Poem
One, two, three, four, five.
Once I caught a fish alive.
Six, seven, eight, nine, ten.
Then I let him go again.
Why did you let him go?
Because he bit my finger so.
Which finger did he bite?

This little finger on the right.

The above poem is suitable for teaching the Simple Past Tense as it presents how this tense is used to describe past events. The pattern S + Past Verb is repeated and presented in different sentence forms (affirmative and interrogative).

Sample Activities :

1. Media Transfer

Media Transfer requires students to transfer the poem into a different medium or format, such as newspaper articles, letters, prose and so on (Maley, 1995).

Students are asked to rewrite the poems as a letter for their classmates.
e.g. : Dear Sam

Yesterday I went fishing with my grandfather.....etc.

2. Reconstruction

Reconstruction requires students to restore the coherence or completeness of an incomplete or a defective poem. This includes inserting appropriate words or phrases in a poem, and reordering the jumbled words or lines of a poem, etc. (Maley, 1995).

The teacher jumbles the order of the lines in the poem and asks the students to reconstruct the poems.

II. Teaching point: Simple Present Tense

Function : Describing/talking about Daily Activities

EFL level : Upper Elementary and Lower Intermediate

Sample of Poem

The School Boy

I love to rise in a summer morn,
When the birds sing in every tree;
The distant huntsman winds his horn,
And the sky-lark sings with me.

O! what sweet company.

But to go to school in a summer morn,

O! it drives all the joy away;

Under a cruel eye outworn,
The little ones spend the day,

In sighing and dismay.

(William Blake)

The above poem is suitable for teaching the Simple Present Tense because it includes both first person and third person singular. It thus gives clear examples on the form patterns. Moreover, it shows one function of the Simple Present Tense, namely to express daily activities.

Sample activities:

1. Interpretation

Interpretation refers to clarifying and extending the meaning(s) of the poem by using their own personal knowledge/experience (Maley, 1995, p.5).

Students are asked to make a list of what they do everyday. After that, they are divided in pairs in order to tell stories about their daily activities to their partner.

2. Analysis

Analysis deals with scrutinizing the poem in order to explore the structural pattern used in the poem (Maley, 1995, p.6).

The teacher asks students to find simple sentences in the poem. After finding the sentences, students are asked to analyze the pattern of each sentence. This activity will arouse students' language awareness of the Simple Present Tense. Then, each student makes one sentence in order to complete a story which the first line is given.

e.g. : Every day Sue fries some eggs for her family.

III. Teaching point: Adjective

Function : Describing People or Object

EFL level : Upper Elementary and Lower Intermediate

Sample of Poem

Ricky Martin

Ricky Martin is handsome

Ricky Martin is handsome, sexy...

Is handsome, sexy, popular:

Handsome, sexy, popular, Latino

Singer

The poem above is called an adjective poem. It consists of six lines developing a series of adjectives to describe a single topic or action. (Holmes, Vicky L and Margaret R. Moulton, 2001: 21). The pattern of the poem is composed as follows:

Line 1 : Noun

Line 2 : Same noun + is or are +adjective 1

Line 3 : Same noun + is or are +adjective 1, adjective 2

Line 4 : Is or are + adjective 1, adjective 2, adjective 3

Line 5 : Adjective 1, adjective 2, adjective 3, adjective 4

Line 6 : New related Noun

Such a poem can be used to teach adjectives. The pattern of this poem illustrates clearly how an adjective is used in sentences to modify a noun. Line 2 shows that the adjective is preceded by a linking verb to modify the noun. Line 3 and 4 demonstrate the same ideas but in a more varied way in which more adjectives are added to provide more examples.

Sample activities:

1. Expansion

Expansion refers to lengthening the poem in some way, by adding words, phrases, clauses or sentences. In this activity, the teacher should provide guidelines as to what kind of words, phrases, clauses or sentences should be added to the text (Maley, 1995, p.3). For example, the teacher may ask the students to add more adjectives or more verbs to the poem. The teacher can expand the pattern of the poem. The expansion can be started from the second line

Noun

Same noun, adjective 1, adjective 2

Same noun, adjective 1, adjective 2, adjective 3

Same noun, adjective 1, adjective 2, adjective 3, adjective 4

Same noun, adjective 1, adjective 2, adjective 3, adjective 4 and adjective 5

Related noun

e.g. : Ricky Martin

Ricky Martin is handsome and sexy.

Ricky Martin is handsome, sexy, and cute –

Is handsome, sexy, cute and outstanding

Handsome, sexy, cute, outstanding and a fantastic singer.

2. Creating text

Creating text means using the poem as "a springboard for the creation" (Maley, 1995, p.5) of poems. The teacher can ask the students to create their own poem based on the same pattern given. The teacher can provide a proper noun or a name, such as Britney Spears, George W. Bush, Grand palace, etc and ask them to generate some adjectives related to the Noun chosen. Those associated adjectives are then used to compose their poem.

e.g. : The Grand Palace-

The Grand place is marvelous.

The Grand palace is marvelous and sacred
is marvelous, sacred and historical.

Marvelous, sacred, historical and romantic
the place of our first date.

IV. Teaching point: Simple Present Tense and Simple Past Tense

Function : Describing past and present events

EFL level : Upper Intermediate and Advanced

Sample of Poem:

Version 1

Superman

I drive my car to supermarket,
The way I take is superhigh,
A superlot is where I park it,
And Super Suds are what I buy.
Supersalesmen sell me tonic –
Super-Tone-O, for Relief.
The planes I ride are supersonic.
In trains, I like the Super Chief.
(John Updike)

Version 2

Superman

I drove my car to supermarket,
The way I took was superhigh,
A superlot was where I parked it,
And Super Suds were what I bought.
Supersalesmen sold me tonic –
Super-Tone-O, for Relief.
The planes I rode were supersonic.
In trains, I liked the Super Chief.

The first version of the poem follows the common use of the simple present tense. It is the original version. The second version of the above poem expanded uses

of the simple past tense. Therefore, the two versions of the poems above are good for teaching grammar through contrasting the second version to the first one.

Sample activity:

1. Contrast

In such an activity, points of difference must be identified between two or more texts. (Maley, 1995, p. 4). Points to be identified can be words, expressions, grammatical patterns, tenses, etc. In this activity, the teacher can ask the students to identify the differences between the two poems. The teacher then leads the discussion about the use of the simple present tense compared with the simple past tense. The focus of the discussion is on the different meaning arising from the use of the two tenses.

2. Media transfer (use the original version of the poem)

The teacher can ask the students to write a short newspaper article about living in a 'super' world. When they finish writing the article, the teacher can ask them to do a pair or group discussion, depending on the class size, to compare their work. The comparison can be about the tense they use, the words they choose, the focus of their ideas, and many other aspects.

Conclusion

Teaching grammar does not need to be boring. It can also be communicative and fun as well. Poems can be one of the media for communicative grammar teaching. Poems show how sentences are put together so as to fit certain grammatical patterns, without losing their aesthetic meaning. Using poems in grammar teaching might therefore provide an alternative approach, encouraging an enjoyable atmosphere while learning grammar.

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