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Literary Text and Language Learning Behaviour of ESL Learners

* Shaukat Ali, Assistant Professor (Corresponding Author)

** Saddam Hussain, Lecturer

*** Iftikhar Ali, MPhil Scholar

Abstract

This study exploits John Milton's poems "On His Blindness, and "Methought I Saw My Late Espoused Saint" for teaching speaking skills to ESL learners. The study utilized a quasi-experimental design consisting of a treatment group (TG) and a comparison group (CG). CG was taught through conventional language text whereas TG was treated with the aforementioned poems. The main focus of the study was to observe the language learning behavior of the students of both TG and CG during language learning activities. The study therefore employed observation field notes beside the speaking type pretest and posttest as tools of data collection. The thematic analysis of the observation field notes indicated that the students of TG were confident, motivated, involved in, and excited about the language learning activities. On the contrary, the students of the CG were found to be hesitant, passive, and demotivated during the language learning venture. Consequently, the students of TG performed significantly better than that of CG on the posttest. The study recommends that poetry should be utilized for teaching the English language in general and speaking skills in particular.

Keywords: Speaking Skill, Conventional Language Text, Motivation, Passive, Hesitant

Introduction

Poetry deals with themes that are common almost among all humans. People from different cultural and social backgrounds could find their reflection in the text of poetry (Brumfit & Carter, 1986; Carter & Burton, 1982; Collie & Slater, 1987; Khatib & Rahimi, 2012; Maley & Moulding, 1985). Besides, poetry deeply interacts with the subjective life of the readers as well. It discusses love, hatred, jealousy, ambition and so on which are essential and personal feelings to all humans. Moreover, Ghosn (2002) and Van (2009) argue that authenticity and meaningfulness grant motivating power to literary texts as an input for the learners in the language classes. On the contrary, the conventional language texts in vogue in educational institutions are often found lacking in the aforementioned elements, due to which the language learners could hardly be involved in the language learning activities. The lack of personal feelings and emotions in the conventional language texts render them often time uninteresting for the language learners. It is this proposition that the researchers use the text poems and compares its effect with the conventional language texts on the students' language learning behavior. Consequently, this study has the following objectives and research questions.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the effect of literary text on the English speaking skill of ESL learners in comparison with the conventional language texts
2. To find out the effect of literary text and conventional language texts on the language learning behavior of ESL learners.

Research Questions

1. What is the effect of literary text on the English speaking skill of ESL learners in comparison with the conventional language texts?
2. How do literary text and conventional language texts affect the language learning behavior of ESL learners?

*   Department of English, University of Malakand, Pakistan Email: shaukat1443all@gmail.com
** Department of English, University of Malakand, Pakistan Email: sadam.khan10022@gmail.com
***Qurtuba University of Science & Information Technology, Peshawar, Pakistan Email: khan034319@gmail.com

Literature Review

The language of poetry is concise and accurate (Lazar, 1993; Tayebipour, 2009; Van, 2009). It has a different syntactical structure, uses a specific kind of vocabulary, mixes different registers freely, and sometimes makes its pronunciation. Besides, uses archaic words, different dialects, it creates its metaphors, and exploits different sounds and patterns of words with different rhythms (Lazar, 1993). According to Maley and Moulding (1985), poetry also uses some typical linguistic devices which are also used in common daily conversation but not as frequently as in poetry. They include rhymes, alliteration, consonance, assonance, inversion of grammatical patterns, and so on. Poetry also makes use of figurative and symbolic language through various poetic devices including similes, metaphors, personification, apostrophe, hyperbole, synecdoche, metonymy, and antithesis. Similarly, poetry also exploits semantic ellipsis, uncommon collocations, and juxtaposition of uncommon elements and different conventions about the shapes and styles of writing poems in word form. These features of poetry purify and heighten the implications and meaning of the poet's central message. They also increase the keenness of the learners to share their own experiences. Besides, the learners are encouraged by the subjectivity of the poetry text to express their personal feelings with confidence (Belcher & Hirvela, 2000; Nasr, 2001; Takahashi, 2015).

The length of a poem most of the time allows the teacher to finish it in one class, which gives a holistic and complete language experience to the students. When a lesson is divided into more than one class, it also divides the message which leads to boredom and lack of interest on the part of the learners. The second linguistic device is the rhythm of poetry which reflects the personality of the poet. Besides, most of the imagery of a poem is embedded in its rhythm. Poets sometimes use different rhythmic patterns in different stanzas of their poems to reflect different thoughts going on in their minds (Maley & Moulding, 1985).

The next is the repetition of words, structures, and the use of refrains which enables the students to understand the theme of the poem and to carry on the drill of language learning with interest. The denotative and connotative use of words in the language of poetry is another feature that could be exploited in a language classroom. Words have different meanings and associations in poetry which allow the learners to openly discuss them and come up with their interpretations, hence developing their critical thinking and motivation. The learners are given a new and fresh meaning of life which develops a positive attitude in them towards language learning. All these features of poetry are of no use if the learners are not actively responding and sharing their experiences. Poetry leads to social interaction in the classroom which develops students' creative and imaginative faculty (Hurst, Wallace, & Nixon, 2013).

Poetry encourages students to look critically at the use and forms of the English language. The learners unlock the unusual structure of the lines in the text of poetry and convert them into normal conversational forms. Further, the learners come to know about both the poetic and normal implications and applications of the vocabulary used in a poem. Besides, poetry makes use of images that develop pictures in the minds of the learners leading to the development of visualizing power among the learners (Collie & Slater, 2004; Elting & Firkins, 2006; Sithamparam, 1991). Besides, poetry lends itself to group activities that facilitate the process of language learning. Group activities are vital for language learners. Group activities enable the learners to think critically and solve problems related to language learning on their own. Hence, effective learning behavior which is essentially needed for a learner to learn effectively in a setting of learning (Ellis & Todd, 2013) may be caused by literary text in an ESL classroom.

Keeping in mind the aforementioned advantages of poetry in an ESL classroom, the researchers utilize poems and compare their effect with the conventional language text on the speaking skill of the learners.

Methodology

The study attempts to find out the effect of conventional language text and the text of poetry on the language learning behavior of the students of CG and TG. So the main aim of the data collection through observation was to probe into the language learning behavior of the students taught two different language texts. To this effect, the researcher utilized observation field notes.

Observation is mainly applied to understand the perspectives of the population and respondents. This tool is used in a natural setting following the research questions of a study. The

researchers in this study adopted the role of a participant-as-observer. There are two types of participant observations; complete participant-observer and participant-as-observer. In complete participant observation, the observer has to hide his/her identity from the target population. According to Creswell, Fetters, and Ivankova (2004) complete participant-observers are faced with a few limitations. First, they at times, may get so conscious of hiding their identity that they lose the main motives of the research. Second, they cannot ask questions about the target area out of the fear of getting themselves revealed. Third, it is difficult for them to observe and record; hence, they postpone recording their observation which may lead to many missing links.

On the contrary, participant-as-observer from the beginning discloses their identity and purpose of the research. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2013), participant-as-observer observes and records concurrently. Concerning the recording of the observation, Merriam, (1998, p. 104) says, "This written account of the observation constitutes field notes". Consequently, the observers ought to note down the observations through the class time and should develop them afterward. The researchers need to make exhaustive and detailed field notes during and after the observation period. Moreover, the data ought to be gathered to the extent of saturation.

Keeping the limitations of complete participant-observer, the researcher in this study acted as a participant-as-observer, which is a type of direct observation method. The role of the researcher was overt and hence revealed his identity as an observer at the outset along with the motives of the research. So, the researcher himself jotted down the classroom observation on the language behavior of the students. However, as the researcher was teaching as well, so the field notes were sketchy and there was a risk of missing some information about the students during class. To address this issue, the researcher asked one of his expert colleagues to write down the field notes in as detail as possible. The other observer was a direct observer without making any interference inside the classroom.

Once the class would be finished, the researcher and his colleague observer would sit together to expand the field notes into a possible full record of the students' language learning behavior.

After the intervention, the observation field notes of both CG and TG were subjected to thematic analysis. The three steps process was followed including open codes, axial codes, and finally selective codes Forbes (2015).

Moreover, a speaking type pretest was administered among the students of both the groups prior to the experiment. After a month-long treatment, a posttest similar in nature to the pretest was again conducted and the scores of the students of both the groups in the tests were analyzed through independent samples t-test.

Results and Analysis

This study also exploited observation field notes to verify the results of the observation checklist and also to triangulate with the results of the research questions 1 and 2 of this study. Besides, the observation field notes also assisted the semi-structured interview to answer the research question 2 of this study. As mentioned, the researcher himself and one of his colleagues jotted down the observation field notes, which were later elaborated. During the analysis process, the researcher and another expert, who is doing his Ph.D. from Language Academy, UTM, on short story and writing skills, went over the field notes to explore different themes. The themes were compared afterward and were found similar. The process of themes finding included open themes, axial themes, and selective themes

Table 1.   Themes from Field Notes

S. No:	CG	TG
1	Hesitance	Confidence
2	Passivity	Involvement
3	Boredom	Excitement
4	Demotivation	Motivation

The themes are discussed one by one in the following. Moreover, the themes of the CG and TG expatiate side by side. Further, it should be noted that in this study FCG stands for field notes about the comparison group, whereas FTG stands for field notes about the treatment group.

Hesitance versus Confidence

Confidence is one of the important factors for developing speaking proficiency among ESL learners. Language teaching materials should, therefore, increase the confidence level of the language learners and should keep their anxiety level as low as possible. The learners should be provided with the opportunities to express themselves freely without any fear of being wrong (Nasr, 2001). The field

notes of the CG indicate that the learners were not bold enough to present and answer the question properly. They were not keen on doing the group activities and were found discussing other matters than the given topics. Some of the students played with their cell phones and some were busy memorizing the given topics. The presenter hesitated when asked to present the topic. The relevant excerpt from the field notes is given as below:

FCG Excerpt 1 (FCG=field notes about control group)

> Some of the students did not actively participate in the activities. They were either silent or discussing any other matters than the topic. The members of one group forced each other to present the topic, whereas one presenter complained to the teacher that his group members were not cooperating with him. The teacher asked the time and again the learners to ask questions, but the learners were hesitant to pose any question. The teacher then asked them that it was compulsory for each group to at least ask two questions from the presenter (Day 3rd).
>
> One of the presenters said that she could not present that day. She said that she would present the next day. The teacher asked the reason and she replied that she was not helped by her group members. The teacher tried to make her present the topic, but she was reluctant to present. Probably, she had not memorized the topic well (Day 5th).

On the contrary, the students of the TG were observed as excited about the whole class. They actively participated in the group activities. They freely shared their ideas and posed questions to the presenters. They were not afraid of presenting. They were found scaffolding each other during group activities. The excerpt from the field notes is presented as under:

FTG Excerpt 1 (FTG=field notes about experimental group)

> The learners were excited about the activities. Most of the learners eagerly participated in the activities. The presenters confidently and eagerly presented the topic and the members of other groups actively participated in asking questions. The presenters were assisted by their co-members in answering the questions (Day 2nd).
>
> One member of a group asked the presenter if he would present if he (presenter) could not present and the presenter replied that he should not worry about the presentation. He added that it would be a nice presentation (Day 4th).

Passivity versus Involvement

Teaching materials should be interesting and entertaining for language learners. The learners should be fully involved in the language learning process. They should be excited about the activities going on during class However, the field notes about the CG indicate that the learners were not interested in the language learning process. They did not keenly participate in the group activities nor did they readily come up for the presentation. They tried to avoid the presentation activity and were not eager to pose questions to the presenter. The field notes about CG read as follows.

FCG Excerpt 2

> The learners were not active. They were not fully involved in the activities. They were shirking the presentation activity. Members of a group were whispering to one another about some matter other than the given topic. Some other students looked lost. Probably they were thinking about some matters related to their social or personal life. One of the students was found yawing and the teacher had to remind him that he was in the classroom for language learning (Day 2nd).

On the other hand, the students of TG were fully involved in the language learning process. They took an interest in the group activities. They actively scaffolded each other during the group activities. They tried to excel in other groups in presentation activities. They supported their presenters during the question-answer session. They were found daring enough to discuss their personal and social experiences. They came to the class in time, which showed their interest in the language learning process. In this regard the researcher penned his observation as below:

FTG Excerpt 2

> All the students were busy with the activities. They were keen to present and pose questions. The majority of the students narrated their personal relevant experiences in the form of stories, which increased their interest in the learning process (Day 6th).
>
> One of the students narrated his personal experience of love. He told that nowadays true love could not be found. All the people were after money and position (Day 7th).

Bored versus Excited

Language teaching materials should be entertaining and should be flexible enough to accept any dynamic methodology suiting the language learning process. The learners should feel excited about the whole process of language learning. They should be keen on executing the group activities. However, the learners of the CG were observed as bored and passive during the class. They did not participate actively in the group activities. It seemed as if they were not wholeheartedly present in the classroom. They were found memorizing the given topic and did not interact properly with one another. The presenters were to be forced to present. The field notes read as below:

FCG Excerpt 3

> Some of the students were busy memorizing the given topic, particularly the presenters. Some other students were heard talking about a cricket match between Pakistan and India (Day 5th).
>
> Some members of a group were found yawning. They looked lethargic. The presenter of two groups complained that they were not helped by their respective group members (Day 8th).

Unlike the CG, the students of TG were excited about the language learning process. They wholeheartedly participated in all the activities. They were observed scaffolding one another during group activities. Besides, they supported their respective presenters during question-answer sessions. Each tried to excel other groups during the presentation activity. They would not let any question go unanswered. They liked to talk in the English language during group activities. The field notes in this regard are presented as below:

FTG Excerpt 3

> The students were keen and excited. One of the students sought the permission of the teacher if she could answer the question when the presenter was unable to answer the question. She got the permission and answered the question satisfactorily. The members of her group clapped for her (Day 7th).
>
> Two students asked permission from the teacher for reciting their Pashto poems. They were given permission and after reciting their poems, the teacher and all the students appreciated them. Some students asked questions from the teacher about the nature of English poets and poetry (Day 8th)

Demotivation versus Motivation

Teaching materials should be motivating and should arouse interest in the language learners. They should appeal to the emotions of the learners. Besides, teaching materials should decrease the anxiety level of the learners. Nonetheless, the learners of the CG were observed as less motivated and not interested in the language learning process. They were found as passive and less willing to participate in the group activities. The presenters were most of the time reluctant to present. They would push each other to present. They were found afraid of making mistakes in presenting the topic, which decreased their level of confidence and motivation. The field notes in this regard are as follows:

FCG Excerpt 4

> The learners were not actively participating in the language learning process. They were hesitant to present and were found less eager to participate in the activities (Day 6th).
>
> The learners were busy in rote learning. They were worried about making mistakes during the presentation. They also were not excited about group activities (Day 7th).
>
> Most of the students would look at the wall clock to know how much time was left in the class. They would leave the class immediately after the class time finished (Day 8th).

On the other hand, the learners of TG were observed as excited and interested during the class. They were motivated due to the emotional content in the text of the poetry. They shared their grief and delight with the whole class. They tried to compete with each other in the learning activities. The presenters were always found ready to present. They were not afraid of making any mistakes because they enjoyed the autonomy of speaking due to the ambiguity and universality in the text of poetry. The field notes about them are as under:

FTG Excerpt 4

The learners were busy in group activities. They were talking in the English language according to the instruction of the teacher. One member of a group reminded his co-member of speaking in English when the other spoke in his native language (Pashto) (Day 7th).

One presenter took a bit longer while presenting the topic, the presenters from other group shouted that he was taking too long and in that case they would not find time to present. One of the girls told the teacher that she had a personal story but she could not tell it in front of the boys. It was due to the cultural barriers that she could not share her story (Day 8th).

The field notes and their analysis above corroborate the results of the observation checklist. It is clear from the field notes that the TG learners actively participated in the language learning activities. Besides, the field notes also indicate that the learners of TG were confident and cognitively agile as compared to the learners of CG. Furthermore, the learners of TG were fully involved in the group activities and they were eager to exploit any language learning opportunity. Moreover, they were excited and took great interest in the whole language learning process. It was due to the aforementioned reasons that the learners of the EG were more motivated than the learners of the CG. Thus, the results of the observation field notes show a considerable enhancement in the motivation and interest level of students of TG. The tables below show how the two different sets of language learning behavior of the students of both the groups affected their performance of the English speaking skill.

Table 5 T-test Results of CG and TG in Pretest regarding Speaking skill

Groups	N	M	SD	ST. Error M	T-value	P-Value
Control	42	20.6234	2.3211	.36423	2.6611	.007
Experimental	43	18.8541	2.3121	.38532		

Note: p-value$\leq$ 0.05=significant, p-value>.05=not significant

The results of the table indicate that the mean score of the CG was higher than the students of TG. On inquiry from the students of TG, it was found that they were complaining about the teaching methodology of their teacher in the previous semester. However, the students of TG performed significantly better than the students of CG on the post-test after the experiment (see Table 6 below). The results prove that teaching speaking skills through poetry was more effective than the conventional language text.

Table 6 T-test Results of CG and TG in Posttest regarding Speaking skill

Groups	N	M	SD	ST. Error. M	T-value	P-Value
Control	38	25.9853	5.2311	.72814	2.7156	.015
Experimental	39	27.4973	5.5624	.77397		

Note: p-value$\leq$ 0.05=significant, p-value>0.05=not significant

Discussion

As stated in the methodology section that the researcher himself and one of his colleagues scribbled the observation field notes, which were later elaborated. During the analysis process, the researcher and another expert who was doing his Ph.D. from Language Academy, UTM, on short story and writing skills, read over the field notes to explore different themes. The themes were compared afterward and were found identical. The process of themes finding comprised open themes, axial themes, and then selective themes. The themes included confidence, involvement, excitement, and motivation for the TG learners whereas hesitance, passivity, boredom, and demotivation for the CG learners. The aforementioned themes regarding the CG learners explain that they were hesitant, passive, and demotivated during the class. They did not participate actively in the group activities. Besides, they were hesitant while expressing their ideas about a topic. They mainly relied on their memory while sharing their ideas about a given topic. On the contrary, TG learners were motivated about the learning process. They actively participated in all language learning activities. They were found confident while expressing their ideas about a given topic. Thus, the increase in the motivation level of the EG learners may be attributed to the following factors.

The ambiguity and universality of the text of the poetry (Khatib, 2011; Van, 2009; Lazr, 1993) provided the TG learners with autonomy, due to which they felt free to tell their fellow-learners their personal stories. Moreover, the nature of the text allowed them to arrive at their interpretations. The practice increases their involvement in the learning process. Additionally, they were found highly motivated during language learning activities.

Authentic teaching materials (Duff & Maley, 1991) are of vital importance during the language teaching and learning process because authentic materials could be associated with personal and social life. This bond between the text and the students' personal and social life increases the interest of the students in learning the target language. But, conventional teaching materials could hardly be associated with personal or social life. The students, therefore, had little interest in the learning activities. They felt just instrumentally motivated which enabled them to be focussed preparations for examination only. However, the TG learners were found to be making interactions with each other, having lengthy discussions, and sharing their ideas. Besides, the topics were common and real. It was easy for them to express their ideas on the topics like unity, struggle, love, and beauty.

Every language has a culture that finds expressions through the language. So, any language of the world has cultural patterns consisting of specific expressions. Understanding these cultural patterns, formulas and contest are vital to the understating of the language. Understating the culture of the target language is one of the important tools in learning the target language. Hence, the language texts exploited in an ESL classroom should be rich in cultural elements of the language. (Carter & Burton, 1982). The text of poetry is frequently found to be having cultural elements and patterns which help the learners get a better grasp of the target language. The conventional texts used in the CG hardly had any cultural elements whereas, the text of the poems utilized in the TG bore elements of the culture of the English language. (Lazr, 1993; Khansir, 2012). Besides, they developed insight into their outlook on life.

Oral competence owes its existence and improvement to interaction among the learners. Getting students involved in the group activities is one of the strategies to build up an intensive interaction among the language learners. The text of poems used in this study lent itself easily to group activities. The learners found it easy and interesting to work on topics in groups. They helped and scaffolded each other during the tasks assigned to them in groups. The elements of ambiguity and universality afforded TG learners opportunities to openly discuss and share their personal understating of the texts. Nevertheless, the conventional language texts could hardly be used for group activities. The topics were uninteresting and academic, henceforth only worthwhile for examination. The themes could not be debated acquiescently and easily as the CG students had to be objective while arguing the topics.

Conclusion

This was a quasi-experimental study comprising a comparison group (CG) and a treatment group (TG) which were intact groups. Both the group were taught through different language texts; conventional language text to CG and poems to TG. Pretest and posttest were administered to compare the effect of the two different language materials on the speaking skill of the students of both groups. However, the main focus of the study was to observe t6he language learning behavior of the learners under two different teaching materials. The thematic analysis of the observations field notes showed that the students of TG were actively involved in the language learning process, we're excited about the group activities and were confidents in sharing their personal feelings and stories with their fellow learners. The students of CG on the other hand were observed to be passive, demotivated, and hesitant, and had a lack of interest inside the classroom. Consequently, the students of TG performed significantly better than the students of CG in favor of the posttest. Hence, this study recommends that poetry should be utilized for teaching language in general and speaking skills in particular.

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