The Role of Poetry in the Teaching of English to Social Work Undergraduates: An Exploratory Study in Macao Polytechnic Institute

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Abstract:
This research investigated the significance of poetry in the acquisition of English as a second language for social work students at the undergraduate level. The study highlights the fact that poetry can expand the teaching options of the teacher of EFL, as reflected in the overall satisfaction of the students with this mode of language acquisition and the quantitative and qualitative effects resulting from its use. These effects include an improvement in writing skills and vocabulary, and the enhancement of students’ use of imagination and expression of feelings as applied to social problems. While challenges to the achievement of English language competence were disclosed by the students, these were found to be ameliorated by the enjoyment students had in sharing and listening to others’ poems and experiencing a deeper class dynamic as a result. Implications and recommendations are made for English language teachers intending to use poetry in the achievement of their course aims.

Keywords
Second-language acquisition, content-based instruction, literature-based instruction

Introduction
The identification of the research problem discussed here emerged from the question: How is competence in English as a second language best achieved? While a role can be granted to the study of linguistics and grammar, could there also be a role for literature - particularly poetry - in the attaining of competence? If so, what is the rationale behind this approach? In the light of this research problem, my plan for this paper is as follows: I shall present the aims of my investigation, followed by the definition of three key terms and...
concepts, namely, second-language acquisition, content-based instruction, and literature-based instruction, after which I explain the context of the research setting. The process of second language acquisition itself is investigated in the theoretical framework section. I then present the methodology and procedures utilized in my research, explaining the research design, my role in it, the ethical considerations that were addressed, the sampling approach used, the data collection instruments that were employed, and the quality controls that were adhered to in ensuring validity and reliability. The data analysis and results are then presented, prior to the final discussion section where the findings are reviewed, implications drawn, recommendations made, and limitations pointed out.

Aims

The initial aim of this applied research is to explore the effectiveness of the use of poetry in the acquisition of English as a second language with students in Macao Polytechnic Institute. As a corollary, I also asked myself in my particular work setting in Macao, ‘How should English literature be taught to EFL learners in a Chinese context?’ (Du, 1986). In other words, how could my students, as Asian learners of English, best benefit from such a course of study? The central research question thus became the following: ‘Does poetry have a role to play in promoting second language acquisition amongst Chinese learners of English on Macao Polytechnic Institute’s Social Work Diploma programme? If so, how?’ To help answer the above questions I carried out a small-scale study in order to explore the potential advantages and efficacy of the use of poetry with two classes of tertiary level social work students.

My motivation for this research was based upon my own enjoyment of reading various forms of literature. Inspired by this reason I wondered whether appropriately-chosen poems could be used as a resource and motivator to enrich, enliven and enhance my teaching of English as a foreign language for Chinese undergraduates majoring in social work. Of course, there are other genres spanning the fiction and non-fiction divide of English literature, such as novels and plays, but it was poetry that was my focus of study here.

Rationale and theoretical framework

My research focused on a constructionist or interpretive paradigm, leading to the adoption of a qualitative approach to methodology within the natural and specific setting of my own classroom teaching at Macao Polytechnic Institute. Within this point of view, any study of language acquisition must consider the theoretical framework of language learning. Theories of such acquisition can be divided into first (FLA) and second language acquisition (SLA). Lightbown and Spada (1993) delineate the theories of FLA, including behaviourism, innatism (Chomsky, 1957), and interactionism, while theories of SLA are informed by
behaviourism, cognitivism, as well as by Krashen’s contributions (1982) in creative construction theory.

Lightbown and Spada (1993) explain that the differing FLA theories can be reconciled by realizing that each theory describes different aspects of language learning, with behaviourism explaining routine and habitual modes of learning, innatism explaining the acquisition of complex grammar, and interactionism leading to appropriate language use.

Lightbown and Spada (1993) devote much attention to creative construction theory, which asserts that learners ‘construct’ internal representations of the language being learned. In this regard they utilize Krashen’s work (1982) on SLA and its support of communicative language teaching. Among his five key hypotheses on SLA that are pertinent to my research, Krashen (1982) included the ‘input hypothesis’, which explains how a language acquirer develops competency via ‘comprehensible input’, that is, when a learner understands the messages given, which itself depends upon the learner’s current competence level in the target language, language begins to be acquired. Such comprehensible input should include suitable vocabulary, shorter sentences, and is not necessarily grammatically sequenced. Krashen also argued that the best methods to bring about language acquisition are ‘those that supply “comprehensible input” in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear’ (1982, p.6). Furthermore, Krashen’s work strongly suggests that language acquisition occurs as a by-product of a learner’s focus and enjoyment of some form of interaction, whether with a person or a text.

In regard to learner interest, an important aspect of second-language acquisition pertinent to my research is the affective factor of motivation. In this regard, Hadaway et al.’s work (2002) is a timely reminder to English language teachers that their educational goals should include the motivation of learners to take an active interest in the life-long reading and learning of English and not simply mastery via drills and exercises. They argue that the use of literature is one of the best - if not the best - ways to promote language acquisition. They note that while literature can so easily be neglected due to its perceived difficulty, it can in fact provide a rich and appealing source of vocabulary and syntax, thereby enhancing students’ motivation, especially in the areas of oral skills, reading and writing.

In reviewing the research literature on SLA it became clear that language competence went beyond a formal and grammatical approach. Thus John (1986) argues that the knowledge of linguistics does not prepare the student sufficiently for gaining mastery of vocabulary and its connotations, which rather involves the attitudes and emotions of the language user. Indeed, Widdowson has wryly remarked that: ‘The linguist would be the first to complain if everyone who talked about language claimed to be talking linguistics’ (1975, p.3).
For instance, the knowledge of idioms requires going beyond grammatical rules to an appreciation of ‘nuances’ of usage and meaning (John, 1986, p.19). Such awareness of idioms and vocabulary, John argues, is to be found in English literature, as he explains: ‘a student of linguistics learns about language, while a student of literature learns language as used in poetry, drama, fiction, or any other genre’ (1986, p.21). In fact, some researchers, like John (1986), have even assigned greater weight to literature courses over linguistics courses in achieving language competence, arguing that an emphasis on the latter could be counterproductive.

Furthermore, John (1986) has made a compelling case that language competency involves a qualitative understanding of the target language that only a study of its literature will provide because, Icoz points out, literature is ‘language in use’ (1992, p.10). Icoz argues that ‘literature can be used effectively to produce language consciousness’ (1992, p.10). Shang (2006) also argues that EFL teachers should use literature as a model of expert language use, in which language and literature go hand-in-hand. Likewise, for Du, language ‘is not separable from literature. Literature demonstrates language in use at its best. It is in literature that an English major finds an abundance of excellent examples of the subtle, elusive, and complex use of the grammar and vocabulary of English’ (1986, p.24). This helps to explain why, as Du (1986) points out, English major students in China are expected to acquire competency in the two areas of skills (listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing) and content (culture, literature, and history) of the target language.

As an example of such a literary emphasis, Yeh (2005) has reported how poetry was used as a topic of discussion and as the basis for task-based projects with undergraduate students in Taiwan. In effect, Yeh (2005) has found that poetry could be integrated successfully into language teaching, resulting in the development of students’ reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills, although he adds that such potential depends on the extent to which the imagination is stimulated. In terms of practical benefits, Krusl has also reported that the use of literature in the EFL / ESL context helps to provide a ‘rapid enlargement of the students’ vocabulary and comprehension’, followed by ‘a marked improvement in their analytical reading and comprehension, and an improvement in their writing skills’, although she thinks that speaking tends to be neglected (1986, p.9). Last but not least, Sagliano and Greenfield (1998) have argued that content-based literature teaching can improve EFL students’ motivation and comprehension.
Definitions of key terms and concepts

Three major terms need defining in this research paper, namely, second-language acquisition, content-based instruction, and literature-based instruction.

Second-language acquisition ‘refers both to the study of individuals and groups who are learning a language subsequent to learning their first one as young children, and to the process of learning that language’ (Saville-Troike, 2006, p.2).

Content-based instruction is one of the approaches to foreign language teaching. Brinton et al. (1989, p.2) define it as ‘the integration of a particular content [e.g. math, science, social studies] with second language aims …. It refers to the concurrent teaching of academic subject matter and second language skills’, the latter including vocabulary, grammar, paragraph structure, interactive communication skills, and types and styles of writing.

Thirdly, literature-based instruction is teaching in which various authors’ narrative and expository works are used as core learning experiences to support learners in developing literacy.

Based then on the above theoretical framework of SLA, how do the principles of second language acquisition support a literature-based instructional approach? In other words, why use poetry with English language learners, particularly for students on a Social Work Programme? What I find particularly relevant here is Krashen’s ‘input hypothesis’, which asserts that language acquisition depends upon ‘comprehensible input’. For instance, based upon Krashen’s theory, was the poetry instruction received by my students sufficiently comprehensible to lead to language skills improvement? Such questions may be answered by a survey of my students.

Context of the research

Throughout their school careers, my language learners have been drilled in a structural / formal and skill-based approach to learning English, in which the absorption of the rules of grammar takes precedence. This approach tends to be maintained in Macao Polytechnic Institute, although the formal aims of the Year 1 English course are general in nature:

This First Year Level course aims at improving students’ English language skills within an academic framework at the Intermediate Level to enable them to cope better with their other Social Work Studies subjects. All four macro-skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening, are covered in this course.
However, the aim for the Year 2 English course changes to a more specific goal, being tailored towards academic reading skills, as follows:

The course aims to develop students’ academic reading skills. Substantial emphasis is placed on reading selected passages for academic/vocational purposes, and on students’ acquisition of vocabulary related to the social work field of study.

Such courses are, however, just one amongst several others. The overall curriculum for ‘the social work field of study’ that my Years 1 and 2 students experienced in Macao Polytechnic Institute can be seen in Appendix 1.

I now had a comprehensive picture of what the students had to experience in their programme of studies; but how could a content-based and literature-based approach to English language teaching be integrated with such a curriculum? As Icoz asks, where should one start in teaching literature? (1992, p.11) For instance, how do teachers match books or literature-based materials to their English language learners? Krashen and Terrell (1998) suggest that EFL teachers must choose reading texts that are sufficiently complex and of interest to the student, thus providing the necessary motivation for learning. How then did I plan the literature content of my syllabus in the hope of motivating my students to learn English? Why my choice of poems?

The use of literature can be viewed as a whole-language approach in which adult learners are seen as whole persons, not just ESL learners, involving affective and humanistic dimensions of human nature. Such a view is supported by Goodman (1986) and Smith (1971) who have asserted that language is not learned from the part to the whole, but from the whole to the part, and that all language functions interrelate. In other words, students have to learn a foreign language holistically in order to increase their language ability. As part of the above holistic approach in my English classes I see my students as future social workers. In this regard, I also selected literature that social work students could get involved with, according to their interests and programme of study.

Initially, I examined the course descriptions for each of the subjects above, looking for themes that would lend themselves to the poetic imagination including various social issues such as poverty and injustice.

Based upon my own knowledge of world literature, I selected poems that had both Western and Eastern cultural origins and which signified, despite their varied sources from recent history to well into the past, universal themes and perspectives pertaining to one of the courses in the Social Work Programme curriculum for Years 1 and 2; this matching thus required an examination of the actual syllabus of each course. In addition, apart from Kahlil Gibran’s poem on love and romance (Year 2, semester 1), I wanted to use poems that had