Research Article

Teaching and Learning Poetry in Primary Schools: A Pragma-semiotic Study of the Use of Pictures and Classroom Exercises

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Abstract

Teaching and learning of poetry is done at different levels of formal education: primary, secondary and tertiary levels. However, the contents and approaches can diverge. This study is pedagogical as it examines the instrumentality of pictorial representations and classroom exercises in the teaching and learning of a basic genre of literature (poetry). Besides being a semiotics-related investigation, this study is pragmatics-related; it deploys insights not just from the literature of creative writing, but also from the literature of pragmatics in generating and analyzing the exercises as well as the pictures. Samuel Akintola's (2020) The Greatest Mistake is the source of the selected pictures. The study hinges on the Critical Theory as a theoretical anchorage, and concludes that the use of pictures and classroom exercises in teaching primary school poetry makes the lessons interesting, addresses the difficulties that learners encounter, and results in effective teaching and learning of discrete skills in poetry.

Keywords: picture, classroom exercise, poetry, pragmatics, semiotics, Critical Theory

INTRODUCTION

This study examines the pedagogical instrumentality of pictures and classroom exercises in primary schools poetry lessons. Writing is a convention-based activity. This explains why it is taught in a formal instructional setting (classroom). The teaching of poetry in primary school is also rule-governed as the learners are taught discrete skill from existing body of knowledge (the literature). Writing is a mechanical task. This implies that poems taught and learnt in primary schools is systematic, procedural and goal-driven. Poetry is one of the aspects of the English studies curriculum. In spite of the difficulties poetry lessons pose to young learners, they are expected to understand poetry lessons and be able to write good poems. Poetry is creative writing, and this is why it is immersed in literature, like the other two basic genres of literature: drama and prose. Literary writings are used to communicate writers themes to different categories of audience, and this justifies the use of insights from pragmatics in the elucidation of the instrumentality of pictures and classroom exercises in teaching and learning poetry in primary schools.

2. Literature Review

This section of the paper examines writing, creative writing, poetry, pragmatics and semiotics.

2.1 Writing

Freeman (1967), cited in Acheoah (2019) defines writing as "the ability to select the strongest words, the most useful facts since it is the appropriate selection of these facts that engrave the image of a work in the reader's mind." Writing is a productive language skill that involves graphical and conventional communication of ideas. Hayes and Flower (1980), cited in Gokhan Cetinkaya (2015, p. 111) identify four major writing processes:

i. Planning takes the writing assignment and long-term memory as input, which then produces a conceptual plan, for the document output. Planning incudes sub-activities of generating (coming up with ideas), organizing (arranging those ideas logically in one's head), and goal setting (determining what effects one wants to achieve and modifying one's generating and organizing activities to achieve local or global goals).
ii. Translating takes the conceptual plan for the document and produces text expressing the planned content.
iii. In reviewing, the text produced so far is read, with modifications to improve it (revise) or correct errors (proof read).
iv. Monitoring includes metacognitive processes that link and coordinate planning, translating, and reviewing ...

Olson (1999), cited in Gokhan Cetinkaya (2015), gives ten essential characteristics of the process approach to writing:
i. Writing is an activity, an act composed of a variety of activities;
ii. The activities in writing are typically recursive rather than linear;
iii. Writing is, first and foremost, a social activity;
iv. The act of writing can be a means of learning and discovery;
v. Experienced writers are often aware of audience, purpose and context;
vi. Experienced writers spend considerable time on invention and revision;
vii. Effective writing instruction allows students to practice these activities;
viii. Such instruction includes ample opportunities for peer review;
ix. Effective instructors grade student work not only on the finished product but also on the efforts involved in the writing process; and
x. Successful composition instruction entails finding appropriate occasions to intervene in each student's writing process …

Tompkins (2000) suggests seven reasons for writing:
i. To entertain;
ii. To foster artistic expression;
iii. To explore the functions and values of writing;
iv. To stimulate the imagination;
v. To clarify thinking;
vi. To search for identity; and
vii. To learn to read and write.

2.2 Creative Writing

Adéle Ramet (2007) cites the Chambers Dictionary which defines creative writing as "… having the power to create, that creates, showing, pertaining to, imagination, originality and 'writing' as 'The act of one who writes, that which is written, literary production or composition." McLoughlin (2008, p. 89) opines that "creative Writing is about teaching the writer methodologies and practices that enable them to criticize and edit themselves." Gokhan Cetinkaya (2015, p. 115) lists some practices and activities implemented by the teachers with the Creative Writing Method: story completion; writing stories, tales, plays, essays, poems, diaries; free writing technique; writing about a concept or a proverb, the activities in the teacher's or student's books; composition, picture interpretation; concept pool activity; direct writing method; proverb and idiom box activity; and writing club. Given the fact that creative writing is imaginative and enchanting, the language used is inflated and appealing. This makes poetry unique. In conveying themes writers deploy explored language to communicate their personal emotions, likes, aversions and experiences. The emergence and prominence of creative writing as a school subject is traceable to the 1920s. Theories evolved to promote the art. Even though higher education was the major concern then, creative writing is prominent in contemporary primary school education across the world, to explore the latent talents of young learners.

2.3 Poetry

Sean O' Brien's (2007, p. 186) definition of poetry is instructive:
It is in the nature of poetry that the attempt to define a poem remains unfinished. The place to begin is by reading Aristotle's Poetics (cf. 350 B.C.), after which there is a vast body of description and analysis from which a number of phrases have entered common usage, including 'emotion recollected in tranquility', 'memorable speech', 'objective correlative', 'what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed' and 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them'[1].

As a basic genre of literature, poetry is written in verses and stanzas.

2.4 Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a field of language study. The Encyclopedia Americana (1994) defines pragmatics as "the subfield of the study of language that investigates the techniques by which language is processed for communication purposes." According to Crystal and Varley (1993), "pragmatics is the study of the factors that govern our choice of language (sounds, construction, words) in social interaction, and the effects of our choice upon others. The subject includes the cooperation in our speaking behavior and it thus involves using language to convey politeness, intimacy, playfulness, rudeness, awkwardness and a range of other social attributes. Austin (1962) submits that crucial concepts in pragmatics include:

- participants (users of language in context);
- speech acts (**locutionary act** which is an utterance with determinate sense and reference; **illocutionary act** which is the making of a statement, offer, promise, etc. in uttering a sentence by virtue of the conventional force associated with it; and **perlocutionary act** which is the bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence);
- context (the relevant aspects of the physical or social setting of an utterance or discourse);
- non-verbal communication (extra-linguistic communication);
- inference (the process of making logical conclusions from all that a particular context provides to arrive at what a speaker means);
- presupposition (facts that the participants of discourse take for granted in a particular context of communication); and
- shared knowledge (common background information shared by the participants of discourse).

For more insights on pragmatics, see Levinson (1983), Adegbija (1982), Adegbija (1999), Mey (2001), Grice (1975) and Searle (1969).

2.5 Semiotics

Semiotics is the study of symbols, signs and icons which have socio-cultural relevance and significations. Terence Hawkes (1977) notes tha social practices signify different phenomena. According to Terrence Hawkes (ibid.) "every speech act includes the transmission of message through the languages of gesture, posture, clothing, hairstyle, perfume, accent, social context, etc. over and above, under and beneath, even at cross purposes with what words actually say." Semiotics is studied through semiosis, which is "the process of making and using signs" – cf. Sless (1986). Theoretical concepts in semiotics are the "signifier" and the "signified".

Central to the study of signs is the idea of relation; all signs stand in relation to something else. In other words, the signs stand for the object either as an icon, a symbol or as qualisigns (sinsigns or legisigns) which are terms used in advanced studies in semiotics (cf. Alabi (1995). Textual analysis examines different categories of texts in terms of the process by which they signify since reading (a semiotic term for all manner of perceiving, including, hearing, sensing, feeling, seeing, analyzing, etc.) is a subjective act. Textual analysis explains the codes through which signification takes place as perceived by the investigation.

3. Theoretical Framework

This hinges on the Critical Theory. According to Mary Swander et al. (2007), the theory teaches learners the necessity of reflecting on the process, aims, content and style of writing as they interpret the social, philosophical, cognitive and diachronic contexts of already published literary works. This practice helps creative writers to produce novel literature that establishes the link between the past and present.

4. Methodology

In this study, three samples of pictures are taken from Samuel Akintola's (2020) *The Greatest Mistake*. The pictures are used to generate poems and exercises. Pragmatic comments are made in terms of the pedagogical relevance of the pictures and exercises.

5. The Instrumentality of Pictures and Classroom Exercises in the Teaching and Learning of Poetry in Primary Schools

In this section of the paper, we present pictures (Pictures A, B and C), poems (Poem A, B and C) and exercises generated from the pictures. We make pedagogical comments in terms of pragma-semiotic features of the poems.

Yemi is being beaten on the assembly for altering her report card

Figure 1: Picture A

5.1 Poem A (A Failed Trick)

My name is Yemi
I desire what they get
I like what they make
I want their success
But success is not for fools
It is the dividend of hardwork
Now see me
Now look at me
Caught in the very act
What a woeful day!

5.1.1 Pragma-semiotic Underpinnings of Poem A

The picture (semiotics) aligns with the words (verbal communication) deployed in the poem. The pupil (Yemi) is being punished for committing an offence. This is why appropriate contextual object (whip) and non-verbal accompaniment (kneeling down with hands raised) are reflected in Poem A. The young learners of poetry can interpret the psychological underpinning of the poem, because some of these young learners are also guilty of the kind of offence that Yemi committed. To be able to write their own poems, the learners can simply modify the contextual objects and theme in Poem A. Austin (ibid.) posits that for felicitous acts to be performed in discourse, the participants, their linguistic inputs and the circumstance of the communicative event must be appropriate. This is what we see in the picture that generates Poem A. It will not be appropriate for the whip which symbolizes authority (superiority) to be held by a pupil instead of a school Principal or teacher – they are people who are in position to punish Yemi. In teaching primary school poetry, pictures should reflect realities in life, so that the young learners can use their low level of cognition to interpret the themes and setting. To unify the verbal and non-verbal elements, the picture shows: other students in the background, classroom, and school setting. These elements will suffice in helping the learners generate their own poems with originality. Temizkan (2010) holds the view that the major aim of creative writing is to make students demonstrate originality and ease in the expression of their feelings and opinions, rather than writing a boring text. However, students face some problems in any writing task. Some of the problems are: arrangement of ideas, mechanical accuracy-related problems and making writing suitable for audience and purpose. Teachers of poetry in primary schools have their weaknesses, and such weaknesses make them ill-prepared for effective teaching of poetry. Gohkan Cetinkaya's (2 ibid., p. 16) submission is instructive in terms of the possible challenges of young learners of poetry: "… not being able to use spelling rules; students not being able to express themselves; students not reading books; students not being willing to write; not wanting to force the burdens of imagination; students not having sufficient vocabulary; students' lack and insufficiency of knowledge; time constraints; students' lack of confidence; lack of resources; not having any problems; not liking handwriting; and difficulties in reaching aims.

The simple words used in Poem A are theme-driven: "caught" "success", "hard-work", "fools" and "woeful". The simplicity in language is pedagogical as it enhances comprehension on the part of the target audience (primary school pupils). According to Fowler (1981), "linguistic structure is not arbitrary. It is determined and motivated by the functions it performs. In a similar vein, Adegbija (1999) posits that "language use is not incidental. It is of credit."

5.1.2 Exercise One
Write a poem suitable for any of the following titles:
  i.   Success;
  ii. Hard-work;
  iii. A Foolish Pupil
  iv. On that Day
  v.   A Misconduct
  vi. The Teacher's Whip

Yemi's Father going through her report card

Figure 2: Picture B

5.2 Poem B (Rebirth)
Like the seeds springing up
In grandmother's farm
Just after rainfall
I have emerged
Glowing like a splint
Making my parents glad
Making my past unimportant
I am still Yemi
But not the one
Known for forgery
Altering teachers' grades
Changing the results
Now see mum and dad
They are happy
They are proud
Can you see them smiling?
Can you see my boastful hands? My boastful hands
Are on my chest

This time the results are real
This time it was not forgery
By an ambitious young fool
This time it is the product of rebirth
The rebirth of an ambitious wise daughter

5.2.1 Pragma-semiotic Underpinnings of Poem B

The words in Poem B and pictorial representations in the picture reveal affinity. Unlike Picture A which presents a tense psychological situation, Picture B is lax. The participants are appropriate for the setting. The learners are made to interpret the setting as a domestic one: the picture shows father, mother and daughter. The themes of joy, success and jubilation are captured by the non-verbal communication in the picture. This explains why scholars of pragmatics contend that the psychological setting of a communicative event is significant for meaningful interpretation of the communication.

A pragma-semiotic study of the use of pictures and classroom exercises in the teaching and learning of poetry in primary schools essentially examines the functional, communicative potency of verbal (language) and non-verbal (paralinguistics) elements of a creative writing task such as writing an elementary school poem. Therefore, the Critical Theory gives this study both theoretical and analytical footing. Seeing speaks to the minds of the young learners of poetry. For this reason, children poems are pictures-laden. In addition, the exercises align with the pictorial representations in terms of simplicity, realism and level of cognition involved. The pictures are products of real, familiar and environmental referents (things, animals, people, places and phenomena). Thus, they exemplify realism which is a crucial component of creative writing. The task before the teacher is therefore to be self-equipped to teach fun-filled poetry using the contents of the curriculum.

Pictures used for teaching poetry in primary schools may not be colourful, but they should be thought-provoking, and capture children-related themes: motherhood, love, care, nature, morality, etc.). The teacher of poetry in primary school can generate the exercises below from Picture B:

5.2.2 Exercise Two
   i.   Write ten words that can be used to describe Yemi's feeling as shown in Picture B;
   ii. Replace the title of Poem B with any other three titles[2].

Bose, Moni abd Yemi are coming from the market

Figure 3: Picture C

5.3 Poem C (Buying and Selling)
The cock crows at dawn
And the villagers begin the day's routine
We are rushing to the market
It is our age-long Agara Market
In the heart of the village
There is a lot of things to buy

But late-comers have little time for that
The market gate is closed as soon as it is 6 p.m.
And our beloved market becomes a ghost city.

5.3.1 Pragma-semiotic Underpinnings of Poem C

As the learners read the lines of the poem, they understand why Picture C shows a market that is almost desolate. The picture captures the pragma-semiotic relationship between the words and the extra-linguistic elements of the poem. The semiotic communication of the desolation is that the girls in the picture arrived late at the market; at a time when many traders and buyers had returned home.

5.3.2 Exercise Three

You were late to a wedding ceremony, and missed the fun you would have had if you had been punctual. Write a poem to express your sadness.

6. DISCUSSION

In children poetry, pictures and words have to be used creatively to enhance learning. Verbal artistry deployed in children poetry promotes the creativity of the young learners. The pictures should be appropriate for the learners' age. Children interpret pictures in literary texts by relating such pictures to environmental (societal) realities.

In Picture A, setting (physical context), participants and the physical objects are in tandem with the world knowledge (a concept in pragmatics) of the young learners of poetry. M. Sencer Bulut Ozsezer and H. Beyza Canbazoglu (2018, p. 205) cite Piaget who opines that "learning theories need contexts in which an individual can reason and make meaning in order to be able to develop cognitively … seeing is an active function of the mind whereas perception is a cognitive event; ultimately emphasizes that interpretation and meaning are integral parts of the act of seeing. This experience is much more efficient for the individual experiencing pictorial products. It needs to be stimulated both intuitively and cognitively in order for the mind to function fully. In this context, painting offers an excellent opportunity for education. This allows the individual to see not only the parts but also the whole."

To understand the teacher's poem, the learner asks critical questions regarding the words and pictures therein. The function of classroom exercises is mainly to "probe" the words and pictures that the poem contains:

i.   . What can you see in the pictures?
ii.   What are the things happening in the pictures?
iii.   Are there other inferences you can logically use the pragmatic and semiotic underpinnings to make from the illustrations?
iv.   What reasons can you give for your inferences?

The learners use their cognitive stimuli to infer that in Picture C, the topic of discourse could vary: while the sellers and buyers may be discussing prices of commodities and daily turnover, the students (Bose, Moni and Yemi as mentioned in the literature text) may be talking about academic matters and their future. Two of the girls hold shopping bags and the readers can therefore infer that these girls are not traders. One of the girls is folding her hands (not carrying a bag). This implies that she simply accompanied the other two girls to the market rather than being there to buy something. The picture shows that the traders' products are not displayed on tables as expected by the readers. Poem 3 captures these facts via selected words: "closed", "late-comers" and "ghost-city". Considering the way the products are arranged on tables, it can be inferred that the traders are set for departure as the day's business comes to an end. The semiotics of "time" is communicated – the discourse occurs in the evening. In children literature, pictures are used with subtle scientific inclinations in the sense that such pictures logically, systematically and pragmatically foreground the "romance" between textual and extra-textual elements of communication. Interestingly, M. Sencer Bulut Ozsezer and H. Beyza Canbozoglu (ibid.) note that there is "… a strong connection between visual-special reasoning and academic achievement in children aged eight to twelve years …" Radik Sahaja and Endri Endri (2021) posit that "pictures in children literature must match the theme, setting, characterization and plot in the story … provide children with fun/entertainment and aesthetic experiences …" Fang (1996) contends that illustrations in children literature interact with text. We align with this view because the low cognitive ability of learners of primary school poetry necessitates the use of illustrations to amplify and simplify the verbal elements in the poems. According to Zainab Zendana Shafii (2015), "the level of individual understanding is highly dependent on the mental picture from any object or particular thing to serve as a visible (visual) sample. Thus, it is not in doubt that the child's art or literary form is inevitable of pictorial criteria, which in all ways pronounces the textual inscriptions from page to page. Though the textual and photographic literature can be independently used in the literary field, the blend of the two and especially the illustrative pictures makes up a unique whole. However, the level of literary taste, anticipation and expectation of children literature differs as far as the reader's brain, which is not fully developed like that of adult. To this extent therefore, the relationship between illustration and text becomes inevitable in the art of children literature." Readers and learners of poetry equate the value of a literary text not only with the standard of the diction used, but also with the quality of illustrations. Interestingly, the

strong interaction between text and illustration in the mental process of children readers makes it necessary for the visual artists to use quality and skill-driven illustrations in children literature. Zainab Zendana Shafii (ibid.) reports Voight who opines that "literature in itself is an art form. Carefully chosen words point visuals upon a page for the theatre of the mind. This has often inspired other more visually oriented artists to create tangible objects based on these mental images. Not only can this create a more fully realized piece of art, it also allows these artists to produce content based on other interpretations …"

This study reveals the interaction between meaning and pictures used for teaching and learning poetry in primary schools. In the field semantics, the Meaning as Mental Image Theory views the meaning of a word as the mental image that such a word conjures in the hearer's mind when it is uttered. This shows the crucial role of pictures in the teaching and learning of poetry in primary schools.

7. CONCLUSION

Learners of poetry in primary schools are indeed young children whose cognitive maturity – the ability to process information conveyed in a text – is not comparable to that of adult learners of poetry. These young learners relate words, objects and actions in poetry pictures with their environment as they process text and illustrations for meaning. Indeed, pictures and classroom exercises contribute to language learning in children, depending on their different stages of cognitive development. Pictorial illustrations in children's poems are interpreted via intuitive and cognitive prowess. This presupposes pragma-semiotic inference-making. Illustrations task the learners and spur them to improve in the discrete skills such as imagination and vocabulary building. The poems presented in this study are short due to space constraints. However, they treat the thrust of the study. Conclusively, this study reveals that pictures and exercises are helpful not only in making pupils understand the content of poems, but also in equipping them with the ability to write acceptable poems.

Notes

[1.] Sean O' Brien (ibid., p. 187) states that "the Greek root of the word poem – poiesia – means making, an act dependent on artistry, skill, practice and let it be said – a capacity not merely for taking endless pains but for enduring perpetual dissatisfaction."

[2.] The two tasks in Exercise Two are for vocabulary building. Young learners of poetry require mastery of descriptive words (adjectives and adverbs) to be able to "flow in the flavor of words" when they are to write poems. The adjectives describe (qualify) persons, objects, animal, places and societal phenomena. On the other hand, the adverbs describe actions. Adequate description of referents and phenomena is crucial in primary school poems, and this is facilitated by good knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of the language being used to convey the poems. For example, a young writer's mastery of language helps him/her to use appropriate emotive language to describe a scene in which mourners gather. The teacher is expected to give learners sufficient classroom exercises on vocabulary drills during poetry lessons. Since primary school poems address societal vices like poems thought at tertiary level, appropriate vocabulary should be used to convey the writer' thematic concerns. Diction is indispensible in articulating the five senses of: touch, sound, sight, smell and taste in primary school poems.

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