

Teaching poetry in a ‘banking system’: problems and solutions in London, England

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ABSTRACT

In my previous school, Key Stage 3 (KS3) pupils (ages 11–14) became increasingly tentative in their readings of poetry. They often regurgitated their teacher’s interpretations until their work became thoughtless. To solve this problem, I tested a fundamentally Freirean approach, from September to December 2015. I sought to avoid the ‘banking-system’ culture that had seeped into our department. I found, however, that in fact, certain elements of this culture nurtured the formulation of analytical and imaginative ideas, partly because on some level, the students associated poetry with bilingualism. They noticed that poetry is composed of literal and figurative phrases, and likened the figurative words to a foreign language. Eventually, highly experimental interpretations were proffered not when the students were either lectured at length or given much time to analyse the figurative language at their own pace, but when they were lectured briefly on the literal features and then worked unaided on the figurative components.

KEYWORDS

POETRY

PERSONAL GROWTH

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

NEW CRITICISM

THRESHOLD HYPOTHESIS

INTRODUCTION

In response to the above problem, my aim is to encourage ‘personal growth’ as it is defined in The Cox Report (DES 1989), by avoiding the ‘oppressive’ teaching strategies that are criticised in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1996: 33). I want my students to be brave, inventive and analytical whenever they read poetry. They should value their own opinions as much as they value the teacher’s. This ‘personal growth’ approach – hereafter known as PGA for short – requires an ‘imaginative and aesthetic’

reading of the ‘relationship between language and learning’ (DES 1989). In other words, learners must engage imaginatively with a text’s language. Their own emotions and fantasies should shape their readings of a text’s major themes (Dowson & Davison 2009: 4).

Moving English Forward (DFE 2012) – the most comprehensive, recent study of its type in England – states that in the current educational climate, more poetry teachers should adopt PGA, an approach that was essentially phased out or pushed out of ‘focus’ in England

in the 1970s (Kidd & Czerniawski 2010: 19). Ofsted – (a group of governmental inspectors whose job it is to inspect schools regularly for the sake of quality control) found that across 268 maintained schools, from 2008 to 2011, secondary schools seldom encouraged their students to read poetry imaginatively. Learners were usually ‘nervous about taking risks and being inventive’, largely because they saw poetry as a means of being tested, not as a source of enjoyment. In this ‘prescriptive’ culture, students coldly propounded poetic interpretations that they thought the teacher sought,

rather than the ones wherein they truly believed (DFE 2012: 42). In short, they could not share freely their true insights on poetry. This culture echoes a banking system's, given that Paulo Freire (1996), the father of critical pedagogy, once theorised that in the latter, pupils cannot proffer truly passionate, individual responses. Freire claims that a 'banking' culture removes 'authentic' cognition, that is, creative and critical thinking (Freire 1996: 52–65). Classes become teacher-centric rather than child-centred, as well as monologic rather than dialogic. The act of transmission becomes king, meaning that a teacher's information is transmitted to and banked by the students. Teachers lecture their students until the lectures are readily accepted and regurgitated without any form of discussion.

Freire's theories remain pertinent: Robin Alexander (2000) and Neil Mercer (1995) have shown more recently that schools in England tend to transmit information adversely. In a comparative international study in which several primary schools in Russia, France, England, India and America were observed between 1994 and 1998, Alexander (2000) found that 'oral' transmissions were easily employed most regularly in England (p. 555). In a separate case study analysing English, American and Indian behaviour, furthermore, Mercer (1995) concluded that in each country, students were less likely to voice their own opinions whenever their teacher was their only source of information. Episodes of transmission regularly undermined a learner's 'confidence in their own answers and abilities' (p. 56).

My plans for teaching, which are outlined in the next section, do not include banking sessions of any kind. I shall avoid delivering lengthy monologues which transmit large amounts of information, for I predict that my students shall think critically and creatively when they are made to formulate their own ideas on poetry without receiving much instruction. The outcome should be the emergence of 'divergent' thinkers, who provide interpretations that are different

from, but are just as thoughtful as, the teacher's (Baker 2011: 148). Should my students become more inventive and analytical in their thinking as my research continues, then they have made progress.

LITERATURE REVIEW

I expect to face two major obstacles, having read Patrick Dias & Michael Hayhoe (1988), Michael Fleming (1992), William Empson (1953) and Terry Eagleton (2007). One is the general ambiguity of words; the other is poetry's figurative language. I am aware that every word's meaning is open to interpretation, and that specifically, figurative language encourages as well as discourages readerly interpretations. To overcome these barriers, my students shall be 'New Critics', rather than 'background historians' or 'new historicists' (Bennett & Royle 2004: 113–14). Rather than fixate on why a poem was written by its author (as background historians would) or how the poem responds to the circumstances wherein it was created (like new historicists), my learners shall judge what is in front of them using their own knowledge. They can thus extricate themselves from the author's original plans and circumstances, or rather, from the oppressor's 'shadow' (Freire 1996: 28). Pupils may think beyond the 'external indexes of the author's intention' (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946: 1386–7).

The concept of ambiguity drives my planning. As Dias & Hayhoe (1988) highlight, poetry is probably the most ambiguous genre in English, for many poems are relatively short and fictitious. Typically, we are told, poems are shorter than novels and more fantastical than non-fiction; ipso facto, readers can easily link different 'schematics' to a poem (p. 32). It is easier to revisit a short, fictitious poem alongside a new set of ideas than it is to revisit a novel or a literal text. Not only can many poems be reread more quickly than novels but poems also insinuate very much, unlike non-fiction.

The crux, I feel, is that such an ambiguity

carries a serious tension, namely, that students can say either very much or very little about a poem's content when confronting this openness. Empson (1953) conjectures famously, for instance, that when facing equivocal words, students may exploit this condition or waste it entirely. They might offer interpretations that are shallow or none at all. A poem's equivocality is both easy and difficult to navigate, because poetry 'is very independent of the mental habits of the reader', but, paradoxically, 'a word can have several distinct meanings ... several meanings which need one another to complete their meaning' (pp. 22–4). To paraphrase, the reader loses a poem's core ideas when he does not approach them with an open mind about what they might communicate: presupposed ideas about the poem obstruct an understanding of it. Nonetheless, once the reader actually reads the poem, its words are decoded in countless ways, since the message of one word is always defined by the messages that are created by other 'surrounding' words. These other words can reside elsewhere, like in another book or the reader's mind.

Like Fleming (1992), I shall study the impact of this paradox on teaching poetry. He found that a poem's ambiguous language can force the reader to shut down their most creative, analytical faculties, especially when the words are 'obscure' (p. 3). By 'obscure', Fleming meant allegorical in its broadest sense: he noticed that when the words communicate one thesis directly but at once seem to convey another argument indirectly – where the second claim appears to be more philosophical and wide-ranging than the first – the reader becomes overwhelmed by this ambiguity either consciously or unconsciously. In the end, the reader loses interest in the whole poem. (Allegorical poems present stories that not only make sense within the text's actual narrative but which also have a 'second, correlated order of significance' that is essentially a commentary on real life. That 'second order' usually surfaces

when the behaviours of a protagonist allude to or 'represent' a real situation (Abrams 2009: 7).)

Fleming's work, first of all, is sound. He initially asked 'one hundred mixed ability [Year 9 pupils] from three city comprehensive schools' to examine one poem and then to compose another, as his major aim was to observe how children react when facing poetic tasks. At first blush, his findings are limited. They reveal nothing about how different age groups receive a poem's sentiments: he did not question any other year group except Year 9 (ages 13–14). On closer inspection, however, his investigation involved a large number of students who were of 'mixed ability' and of different schools, meaning that he guarded against being hugely reductive in his approach. He did not engage, say, with just a few students who were of a similar intellectual ability.

His data shows that student feedback was especially shallow when the students encountered symbolism. Most of the pupils could not recognise a message existing 'beyond the apparent simplicity of [the poem's] content': their natural inclination was to believe that a poem about butterflies was simply 'factual' (Fleming 1992: 6). They overlooked any 'implications' in the poem, failing to fathom out that the butterfly could represent humanity.

So that my students can examine allegories critically and creatively, they will spend much of their time considering 'form', viz. the literary techniques of which a poem is composed (Eagleton 2007: 65). I understand that, according to the National Curriculum (that is, a shared programme of study that exists between the state schools in England), 'making inferences' is a key skill in English: students are assessed on their ability to know 'how language, including figurative language ... presents meaning' (DfE 2013). Eagleton (2007: 65–142) dissects this skill. He demonstrates through the use of hypotactic narratives that a poem's deepest views on life can be extracted

from its structural composition. He spends most of the book 'grasping the semantic (meaning) in terms of the non-semantic (sound, rhythm, structure, typography and so on)', concluding that one must scrutinise the literary techniques wherein a word exists, should one seek to make sense of that word in a way that is true to the poem's overall character. For Eagleton, non-semantic analyses unearth the most fundamental 'contexts' in which a poem places its words. These contexts reveal the poem's most fundamental theories.

Led by Fleming's and Eagleton's work, I shall regularly present my students with allegorical poetry, so as to help them construct deep views on a poem, even when they are faced with a figurative type of language that, traditionally, learners have struggled to recognise and decipher (Fleming 1992). They shall consider the literary techniques by which a poem's allegory is communicated, since an examination of these techniques should lead to an examination of the poem's most essential ideas about its subject matter (Eagleton 2007).

METHODOLOGY AND INITIAL FINDINGS

My actions were 'technical' throughout the research: I sought to control the learning outcomes in class by directing my students towards authentic thinking (Wilson 2013: 235). As a result, 'formative evaluation' took place in every lesson: I monitored 'what students do, say, make, or write', keeping track of their strengths and weaknesses, and which methods they received warmly (Hattie 2012: 130). In the end, I revised my thoughts on the banking system. I found that in point of fact, acts of transmission habitually raised authentic thinking.

My initial observations, based on 'convenience sampling', were sobering (Winterbottom 2013: 174). Only able to teach poetry to four different classes until late October – all of which were Year 7 or 9 (ages 11–12 or 13–14) – I

found that overall, the students struggled when they were given the freedom to analyse a poem independently. Contrary to Freire's principles, most of the pupils failed to decipher a poem analytically and imaginatively when they were deprived of lectures. One class, as we shall see, were asked to examine a poem's form and then link it to real, current affairs, without receiving a talk on the poem's critical or social history. Asked to interpret the poem however they liked, most of the learners in every class could not decipher it at all, regardless of the poem that they had studied.

Class 7r, for example, struggled with 'Spell Chequer' (1991) by Martha Snow. Following Eagleton's advice, I asked the students to examine the poem's form before expounding its social allusions. They were taught about homophones and then they were required to use that knowledge to interpret the poem deeply. Somewhat like Fleming (1992), I found that zero students linked homophones to real-life concerns such as dialect or race. Eagleton's (2007) guidance had not prevented 7r from merely translating the poem into Standard English. His theory that 'non-semantic' readings beget 'semantic' ones proved to be false (p. 67). Critiques of form did not lead connaturally to broader interpretations.

A major reason for this outcome, I think, is that both Eagleton and I overlooked the psychological issues that impede learning. My literature review overlooked the likelihood that some of my students would disengage with a poem until I enthused them. I assumed wrongly that on entering my classroom, every student would be highly motivated to inspect a poem.

I spoke to a Lead Teacher about this oversight, in other words, a very senior practitioner, hoping to correct my mistake quickly. She explained that many of the students in School X possessed, in her view, 'fixed mindsets' – a concept that she had borrowed from Carol Dweck (2012). She explained that School X probably

had more 'fixed' students than any other secondary school in Borough Q, for it was a school for girls and their girls were very neurotic. The girls were said to struggle daily, finding it difficult to persist with an academic task that they could not master straightaway. Supposedly, they were constantly worried about failing their yearly exams and struggled to persevere with challenging topics.

SECOND SET OF FINDINGS

Dweck's theories informed my teaching from late October onwards. I countered the aforementioned anxieties of my students by scaffolding their work more tightly. I monitored their progress by accumulating 'purposive' samples: I purposely continued to monitor the progress of my earlier Year 9 classes, for I could ultimately judge their progress using 'diagnostic assessment' (Kidd & Czerniawski 2010: 128; Winterbottom. 2013: 175). I compared both their initial work in October and their Year 7 CAT scores (meaning, their general intelligence tests) with their work in November and December. I assessed Year 9's top set (9f) and its bottom (9g).

The changes reaped many rewards. By December, most of my students displayed greater cases of authentic thinking, where in toto, the students possessing the highest 'CAT Verbal' scores normally improved more noticeably than the ones holding the lowest. The students who had a history of commanding the English language the most deftly in tests were the fastest to adapt to my new teaching methods. In class discussions in particular, they were the first to present allegorical analyses. These improvements struck me just before half-term. About two-thirds of 9f began to evaluate form, rather than just focusing on the poem's storyline. Students were beginning to link metaphors, symbols and images to issues like cultural identity.

My most effective lessons were twofold. Lessons began with a YouTube video,

so that I could scaffold each student's learning immediately using information technology. Each video introduced the poem and stimulated above all my 'linguistic' and 'musical' learners, of which there were many in my KS3 classes (Gardner 1993: 8–13). Each video provided a reading of the poem, as well as an emotive soundtrack (for the musical learners) and stimulating captions (for the linguists).

Next, the students received background information on the author, whereafter they were normally put into groups of three. Here, I forwent my New Critical and Freirean principles, by lecturing on the author's intent or their personal history, anterior to asking the said groups to analyse the whole poem. The poems were initially 'disjointed', viz. the lines of the poem were ordered incorrectly. The students had to cut out the lines, imagine the original order and paste that order. This (kinaesthetic) activity required the students to consider each word and line carefully, as well as the poem's overall structure. They also enjoyed the novelty of using scissors.

One of three outcomes normally followed. At its most effective, the disjointed poem inspired pupils to create their own poems about the bittersweet character of unrequited love, in which they employed numerous literary techniques including an extended metaphor. By creating highly ambiguous, critical and imaginative poetry themselves, the students not only began to consider how literary techniques shape meaning but they began employing each device personally. Alternatively, it encouraged the students to ponder on several philosophical topics such as the elusive character of our hopes and dreams, through the use of argumentative writing or annotations. At its least effective, it merely fed their 'fixed' neuroses. A minority of the learners focused more on finding the original order of the lines than on analysing the techniques. They never reached the techniques because they were preoccupied with the order.

They could not bear to misinterpret that order and then they struggled to make decisions.

Consequently, not all of my students were confident, authentic thinkers by Christmas. 9g admitted as much in early December, when, as a form of formative assessment, I asked them to display a 'thumbs up', 'thumbs down' or 'vertical thumb' about their studies. In a class that had been very honest in its feedback thus far, roughly 33% presented a 'thumbs down' – the consensus being that over the term, they were still unable to recognise figurative language when reading a poem independently. One articulate yet finicky pupil repeated an opinion that she had shared three weeks earlier: poetry will always be 'separate to normal speech', 'quite exotic' and 'not always English', she avowed.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

My lessons would have been more successful, I believe, if I had supposed that teaching poetry is like teaching foreign languages. The aforementioned girl – whose mother tongue was French, incidentally – drove me to consider the relations existing between poetry and bilingualism. I realised that akin to bilingualism, which deals with two languages, poetry presents at least two forms of English, namely, literal and figurative. On this score, I could have consulted the 'threshold hypothesis' – a leading principle in bilingual studies (Cummins 2000: 3). It proposes that bilingual English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners can improve their 'academic English' (their CALPEng) by improving not just their 'conversational English' (their BICSEng) but also their command of the mother tongue (hereafter known as L1, with English being L2). Simply put, their ability to write formally in English ought to improve so long as they keep refining their spoken English and their overall knowledge of their native language (pp. 106–10, 178–99).

The proviso, according to the hypothesis, is that EAL learners cannot be 'incipient' (Baker 2011: 3, 167–75). Their expertise in either L1 or L2 cannot easily surpass their expertise in the other. Otherwise, their CALPEng and their BICSEng will not benefit from the said bilingualism, as the learner cannot use one L to comprehend the other. If 'students have not developed sufficient access to academic registers in either of their languages', explains Jim Cummins (2000: 106), they cannot comprehend teacherly 'instructions' by listening publicly to that command in one language and then by reflecting privately on it in another. That is, they cannot 'switch' languages internally for the sake of their learning (Baker 2011: 3). Thus 'their academic, linguistic and cognitive development will not be stimulated through their classroom interactions': if students cannot use their L1 and L2 to understand a teacher's transmissions, questions or praise, they cannot advance in class (Cummins 2000: 106).

My version of the hypothesis is the 'poetry-threshold concept' (recognised as PTC for short). When a poem is written in English, L1 denotes its literal language whereas L2 denotes the figurative, given that literal language is more common in England. When native speakers learn to speak English for the first time, they tackle initially a word's literal or 'mainstream' properties (Datta 2007: 17).

By extension, PTC can explain why I could not transform all of my students into authentic thinkers. I originally sought to continue Fleming's and Eagleton's research, to ensure that my students could read a poem's figurative language critically; in the process, I neglected L1 while fixating on L2, assuming that my students could comprehend a poem's L1 straightaway. I did not balance my lessons. Each class seldom addressed directly a poem's storyline, because I always rushed towards their work on L2, wanting my students to have as much time as possible to evaluate allegories.

Subsequently, my students became pseudo-incipient learners: they could not use L1 to understand L2, since they lacked a sound awareness of L1.

PTC also explains why most of my students had become more critical and creative in their analyses since late October. Unbeknown to me at the time, the extra scaffolding allowed my students to examine a poem's L1 at greater length. My videos transmitted much literal information on the poem's narrative and its history, whereas the disjointed poetry forced them to appreciate the poem's storyline first. They had to process the storyline in their minds in order to rearrange the disjointed narrative.

Sadly, therefore, I had to sacrifice one Freirean goal in order to achieve another. I dismissed my desire to avoid lengthy spells of transmission, so as to encourage authentic cognition. The acts of transmission enabled my students to think authentically about a poem's L2.

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They could build a founding awareness of L1, an awareness that inspired the students to become more experimental with their critiques of L2. Having wrestled with the poem's literal ideas in the first instance, they had the confidence to seek and then decode creatively its figurative language in the second. ■

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