



## TEACHING ENGLISH POETRY IN FACULTIES OF EDUCATION, HODEIDAH UNIVERSITY, YEMEN: OUT DATED SYLLABI AND METHODS

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### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the way of teaching-learning English poetry in Hodeidah University. Like other subjects, English Poetry is taught to the learners of English in Departments of English, Faculties of Education, Hodeidah University. The problem is that, teachers still follow the old traditional approaches in their teaching and the old prescribed syllabus of the English Department. To explore the way of teaching-learning English Poetry courses and the learning needs of the learners, the study used three different tools: materials evaluation, classroom observation and student's questionnaire. The results showed that all the poems are difficult to be comprehended, classroom teaching is mostly teacher-centred, the students use memorization as the main strategy for learning. To identify the learning needs while learning English poetry, the last factor of the questionnaire indicated that learners mostly agreed that they really need poems which help them develop their language and literary skills. So, this can be done only through selecting simple and modern poems or at least poems which are related to most of the learners' environment.

**Keywords:** traditional approach; British poems; low-proficient learners

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

English language is taught in Yemen as a foreign language. In the English departments, poetry is one of the subjects which is taught to the undergraduate students. The English Poetry syllabus is full of old English poems which were prescribed by some Indian experts at the beginning of establishing the English Department in Faculty of Education, Hodeidah. These poems belong to the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The language is archaic and difficult. The themes are culturally not familiar to the students. The methods of teaching these poems are teacher-centered and lecture-oriented. The teacher spends most of the classroom time lecturing, discussing the life and the works of the poet, explaining the elements of the poem. The students have to listen passively without being active in any discussion inside the classroom.

This kind of teaching materials and teaching methods do not help the learners use or practice the

target language. They do not find any chance to use their minds, think, share opinions and discuss/practice. According to Slater and Collie "teacher-centered approaches may foster detailed comprehension but students will probably not have made the text their own. Nor will the classroom process have encouraged them share their own views with each other, and they may not have used the target language very much (p.8)".

In fact, most of the Yemeni learners are low-proficient in English. They, therefore, have problems with handwriting spellings of words, punctuation marks and about 80% are incapable of writing a correct simple sentence in English. But teachers never take into account the low-proficiency of students neither in their teaching nor in selecting teaching materials. So, learners really find the current poems difficult to comprehend. They tend to memorize whatever teachers give in their notes to pass the exam. Hence, teaching English through England's poems with long-established ways of teaching neither help learners to learn and develop their English skills nor help them to appreciate and develop their literary skills.

## **2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The study aims at finding answer to the following questions:

1. What kind of poems are used in the English departments, Hodeidah University?
2. What are the methods used to teach English poetry courses?
3. What are the learning strategies?
4. What are the needs of the students studying the English poetry courses 1, 2 and 3?

## **3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

As stated above, teaching English literature in Yemen is still dominated by old traditional methods. This problem is not only in the Yemeni context but in all the Third World Countries as well. Through this teaching approach, the Yemeni learners can only learn about the English culture and society but not the English language. Furthermore, they have to follow whatever teacher gives or explains and memorize her/his notes at home to get ready for the exam. According to Al-Mansoob, teaching English through Western literature texts does not help the Yemeni learners to learn English because, literature-

oriented and lecture-oriented approaches are still dominating the classroom by some features such as biography, history or moral values (46). This way of teaching poetry in Hodeidah University, helps the learners of the English department to develop neither the linguistic nor the literary skills. The teachers use difficult poems, and adopt the teacher-centered approach which promotes memorization (Al-Refa'ae 59).

In the traditional approach of poetry teaching, teachers teach about the plot, characterization, setting, point of view, motivation, value, psychology, etc. To study this way, the students should be both competent enough in the language, and familiar with the literary skills. In the case of students, whose competency is below the required level, they should find it difficult to cope with such approach of language teaching. Then, the result of this approach as it is called by Maley 1989 a "pseudo-competence" in which students memorize technical critical terms without deep understanding and merely repeat the opinions they had been exposed to in exam by rote (cited in Khatib and Rahimi 35). Brumfit (90) and Khatib (64) see that using a traditional approach to teaching poetry in the EFL classroom forces many instructors spend most of the time to "extrinsic" properties of literary texts talking about biographical, historical, aesthetic and philosophical information to the students. So, through this approach a large number of students manage to pass the final exams by memorizing the critical reviews of the poems but after they graduate many of them regard their literature classes as boring, monotonous and uninteresting.

Several views have been stated about the reasons why poetry is seen as an affective part of the EFL contexts. Poetry is a way for teaching and learning basic skills. It can be used as an enjoyable and a rewarding tool with the properties of rhyming and rhythm. It helps students easily learn with the "supra-segmental" aspect of the target language, such as stress, pitch, and intonation (Lazar 15). Widdowson views that poetry has been characterized as deviating from the norms of language. So, poetry can easily communicate with learners with a fresh and original way (146).

Using poetry in the language classroom enables “student to succeed at learning—daily”. Exposing the students to poetry helps them enhances their academic skills including reading, writing and critical thinking (Burkhardt 3-4, Hişmanoğlu 54). Poetry is seen as a perfect tool for language skills development because of its imagery, shortness, vocabulary and multiplicity. Using poetry in the language classroom engages learners in creative and critical thinking, enhances their language acquisition, develops their writing expression, polishes their speaking skills, and helps them learn tools of genre (imagery, alliteration, rhyme, rhythm, etc.), interact with the text and become familiar with the other culture.

Teaching poetry offers the teacher of English countless chances to involve the learners emotionally, intellectually and physically in activities which leading to good learning (Raghavan 40). Collie and Slater point out that poems are rich teaching materials. They offer both teacher and learners a different enjoyment source. They enable the learners to experience the power of language. So, using poems in the classroom especially with those who learn English language as foreign language will help learners produce strong response and motivate them for further poetry reading (226). Bower states that poetry has some advantages because, most of the poems can be read and enjoyed in one setting. They can also effectively create pictures in the mind of the readers in which they can describe a setting, characters or emotions as better than novel or short stories (260). Kellem argues that “poetry is a source of content-rich reading material, a model of creative language in use, a way to introduce vocabulary in context; and a way to focus students’ attention on English pronunciation, rhythm, and stress (12). According to Llach poems become favourite tools for language teachers. They have some unusual ways of ordering words, imaginative meaning of words, combines sounds in a musical etc. (5).

Many teachers agree that poetry promotes language acquisition but the poetic concepts and cultural norms are usually too difficult for EFL learners to take on. Finch explores that the use of poetry in the writing class can provide an effective and collaborative means of language learning and of

personal expression and that through poems learners can express ideas that are meaningful to them (1). Hess considers a poem a vehicle which can be used for thought and as an instruments for shaping language (1). Hedge believes that the poems are authentic materials. They can be used to develop especially the receptive skills of reading (cited in Çetinavcı and Tütüniş 67).

#### 4. METHOD

The present study utilized both the qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. The qualitative research is the research that aims to study a phenomenon in its natural and social context. It aims to collect the non-numerical data. Miles and Huberman state that “qualitative data provide thick descriptions that are vivid, nested in a real context, and have a ring of truth that have a strong impact on the reader” (10). This type of research is used for collecting data through the materials evaluation, and the classroom observations. On the other hand, the quantitative research is another research type used in this study. Bogdan and Biklen note the meaning of quantitative research as “Charts and graphs illustrate the results of the research, and commentators employ words such as ‘variables’, ‘populations’ and ‘result’ as part of their daily vocabulary (4). So, in this concept, the study aims at collecting measureable numerical data for the purpose of the study. The advantages of this type of research are that it is deductive, objective, statistical and economic.

##### 4.1. Participants

The subjects of this study were level three and level four of English Departments, Faculties of Education, Hodeidah University, Yemen. The total number of the participants were 394 students, 262 (66.5%) students were females, whereas 132 (33.5%) students were males. They were from Faculties of Education; Zabid, Hodeidah, Bajil and Rimah. 101 (25.63%) students were from Faculty of Education, Zabid, 139 (35.3%) students were from Faculty of Education, Hodeidah, 114 (28.9%) students were from Faculty of Education, Bajil, and 40 (10.2%) students were from Faculty of Education, Rimah.

##### 5. Research Instruments

The research instruments are the tools or mechanical devices which the researchers used to fulfill her/his study with the purposeful data. In order

to answer the hypothesis of the study the researchers made use of different types of instruments to fulfill his study successfully. These instruments are materials evaluation, classroom observation and students' questionnaire. More details about each tools are in the following sections.

**a) Materials Evaluation**

Materials evaluation is the systematic collection and analysis of relevant information that promotes the improvement of the curriculum and assesses its effectiveness within the context of a particular institution (Brown24). Materials evaluation focuses on collecting data about different types of a language program. It helps for understanding how the program works successfully and how it responds to the learners' need (Richards286). The purpose of using materials evaluation in the study was to answer the first question, "What kind of poems are used to teach English poetry courses in Hodeidah University?", and to prove that the materials currently in use are out of date, difficult and follow the old traditional methods. The researchers collected the poetry teaching materials currently in use and samples of the learners' answer scripts to be analysed.

**b) Classroom Observation**

Observation is a research instrument used to gather data by watching behavior, events, or noting physical characteristics in their natural setting. It can be defined as a research data collection instrument in which the researchers watch and listens carefully to the sample being studied to write down or record certain behaviour (Alnaqeeb 101). The main purpose of this tool was to discover what really happens in the classroom. So, the researchers used different observational techniques such as video and audio recording, and taking photos to document the teachers and the students' behaviour in the classroom. They observed the poetry classes in four colleges: Zabid, Hodeidah, Bajil and Rimah.

**c) Student's Questionnaire**

Based on the materials evaluation and classroom observation about teaching/learning poetry, the researchers prepared a questionnaire and served it to 394 students. The researchers made use of a close ended questionnaire as a tool for obtaining the responses of the students about the

teaching/learning strategies and learners' needs. The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> level of English learners at Zabid, Hodeidah, Bajil and Rimah Colleges have been subjected for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire was designed, checked and finally validated by five ELT experts. Four of them were from Hodeidah University, Yemen and one from KIIT University, India.

**6. DATA ANALYSIS**

As stated above, the teaching materials have been collected and analysed to serve the purpose of the study. The researchers found it difficult to prepare a checklist for learning materials evaluation because all the materials of the four colleges have the same syllabi, the same old traditional methods and teaching/ learning strategies. So, the use of any systematic checklist for the evaluation process was not possible to be used. Then, the researchers found the descriptive methods to evaluate the collected materials. The researchers selected randomly enough samples of the teaching/learning materials and analysed them as in the giving sample which has been evaluated below:

"*EASTER*" is a poem by an English poet, *Yeats*. This poem was taken from handout poetry 3. It was published in 1916. It consists of 80 lines. The poem is about the Irish nationalists' revolution against the British Rule in 1916. The poet expresses his reaction to the sacrifice made by his fellow Irishmen to get the freedom. The language is old and difficult. The cultural background, themes and ideas are not familiar to the Yemeni learners. So, undoubtedly it would be difficult for the learners to be comprehended or understood. Because, they do not have any background about themes or actions which are expressed in the poem. As it is observed through the text, the teacher could not teach the whole poem. She/he, therefore, selected a few lines to be read/explained in the class and gave her/his ready-made notes about the poem to be memorized by the learners and started teaching them before teaching the poem. So, this kind of teaching strategies encouraged mostly memorisation as most of the learners did to get ready for the exam.

Based on the observation analysis, the researchers found that all the teachers in these four colleges used the same method which is literature-

oriented and the same materials. Almost all of them started with brief introduction about the life and works of the poet, then continued explaining the poems. Some of them explained the poems line by line or stanza by stanza and either write the explanation in the board or orally whereas, some of them only explained few lines which contained the theme or the main idea/s of the poem and asked questions about them. As we observed, the teaching/learning strategies mostly neglected by both teachers and learners. We also found that there was no interaction neither between students and their teachers nor between students themselves but they were listening silently even if the teachers ask question they would answer wrongly or keeping silent.

Based on the questionnaire analysis, it was clear that the **TS** (teaching strategies) is still teacher-centered and literature-oriented. Teachers teach and explain everything for the students and never help to practice in the class. For instance, when the participants were asked to give their opinion about the way of teaching poem, 63% of them reported (38.1% always and 24.9% often) that teachers explain the lines of each stanza. This high proportion indicates that the majority of responses shows that the **TS** (teaching strategies) were still teacher-centered and literature-oriented in which the learners listened to their teachers passively. So this kind of strategies used in the class would not help

students develop their language and literary skills. (See Figure 1).

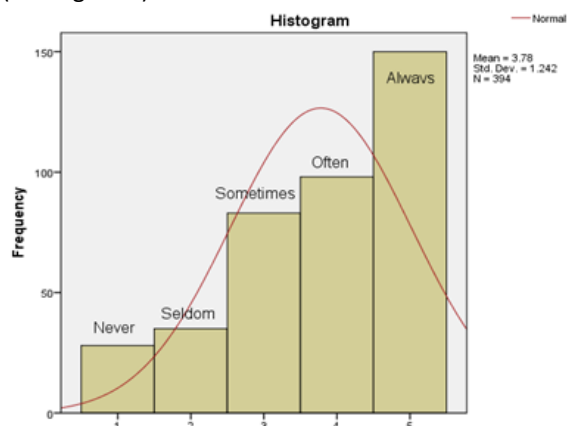


Figure 1. (TS) The Teachers' Explanation.

Additionally, the overwhelming majority of the respondents (68%) were of the opinions that all the teachers give notes and summary of each poem. This provides that the current **TS** (teaching strategies) encouraged students for memorization. This provides a clear answer for why teachers tend to supply their notes and summary about every poem. Because, they know the difficulties of such poems and the low-proficiency of the learners in English. Hence, whatever they support showed that this kind of teaching will not help the learners obtaining neither the language skills nor the literary skills because, the students are spoon-fed by their teachers. Furthermore, they never use their mind to think/comprehend the text. The following table showed the participants' responses. (See Table 1)

Table 1. (TS) Given Notes and Summaries about the Poems

Opinion	Frequency	Percent
Never	29	7.4%
Seldom	27	6.9%
Sometimes	70	17.8%
Often	87	22.1%
Always	181	45.9%
Total	394	100.0

The majority of the respondents 62.1% (31.2% reported often and 30.7% reported always) were of the opinions that in order to pass in the final poetry exam, most of the learners have to memorise the teachers' notes and summary of the poems. This provides that the current **LS** (learning strategies) depended on memorization. This provides a clear

answer for how these low-proficient learners learn these difficult poems and pass in the exam. So, these kind of learning strategies effect the main purpose of learning the target language. The following figure shew the participants' responses.

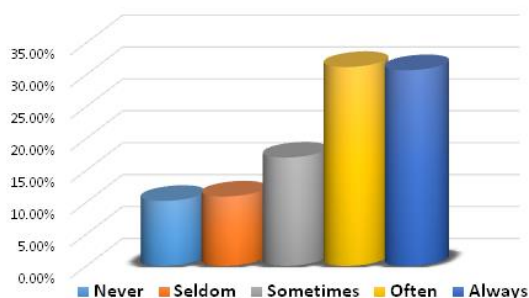


Figure 2. (LS) How the Learners Prepare for the Exam.

The result of the last factor which aims at collecting data about the LN (Learning Needs) shows that the overwhelming majority of the respondents 87.3% agreed (52.3% agree and 35% strongly agree) the opinions that they need poems that suit their proficiency and needs. This provides a clear answer for the questions; what the learner need to understand from these poems, what kind of poems will enable them to understand and develop their language skills. Furthermore, this provides a clear agreement of the respondents that they need some selected poems which suit their language proficiency and encourage them for better attitude toward the English poetry. The following figure showed the participants' responses.

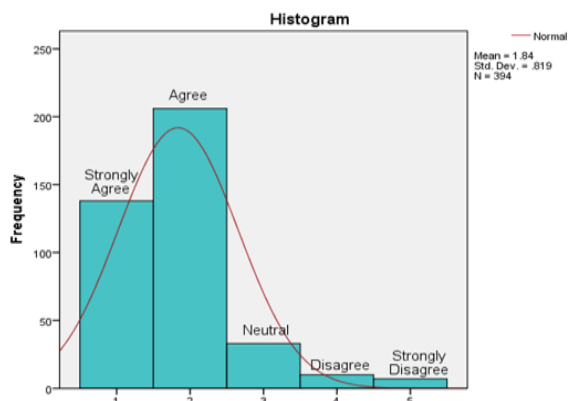


Figure 2. (LN) Learners Need Poems to Develop Their Language Skills

The quantitative analysis of data obtained from the questionnaire provided statistical support for the qualitative data through the use of triangulation to get a better understanding picture about the three factors (**teaching techniques**, **learning strategies** and **learning needs**) considered in this study. According to the results of the qualitative data, the first and second factors provided clear description about the teaching-

learning methods, whereas, the last factor LN (learning needs) was the most significant factor. Because it provided a clear description about the learners need which is the focus of the study. Table 2 gives a summary of the statistical values obtained from the SPSS analysis of the same constructs identified for the study.

Descriptive Statistics

Factors	N	Range	Mean	Std. Deviation
			Statistic	Std. Error
Teaching Techniques	394	4	2.92	0.036
Learning Strategies	394	4	3.47	0.038
Learning Needs	394	3	2.16	0.027

A look at the above Table 2, the range between 3 and 4 indicates that the participants mostly agreed that they need poems which help them to develop their language skills and change their negative attitudes to English poetry. It also provided that the gaps among the factors which are not that wide for example, the highest mean value (M) is (3.47) and the lowest is (2.16) – the gap is only (1.13). The same is true for the remaining statistical values which vary between (.758), the highest value, and (.534) the lowest in the case of SD, Std. Error Mean (.038 - .027) and the range (R) is only of (1-differential) gap (3 – 4). The questionnaire was considered reliable, where Cronbach's Alpha was at 0.721.

7. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

To answer the research questions, the current study revealed that the teaching of the English poetry was still colonized by the British poetry in the English Departments, Faculties of Education, Hodeidah University. All these British poems belong to the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The language is old and archaic. Theme, figures of speech and poems' construction are difficult and unfamiliar for the low-proficient learners of English to be appreciated. In fact, it is not easy for learners to understand the content/element of such poems that they study in level three and four. However, the study found that teachers still follow the old prescribed poems. They never ever thought of introducing simple and modern poems.

The way of teaching in the classroom was also occupied by the traditional methods which were literature-oriented and teacher-centred. As it was observed, most of the teachers did not use the right



reading materials and strategies which helped learners comprehend the content of these poems. They spent most of the time explaining the background of the poems and summarizing the important ideas ...etc. Besides, they never used suitable/simple poems which could be easily adopted by the low-proficient learners to develop their language and literary skills. On other words, suing poems according to the students' need were missing in the in the current teaching/learning materials.

In order to develop the learners' proficiency in English the teacher-centred should be replaced by learners-centred and the old and difficult poems should be also replaced by simple and modern poems not only by British poets but by others too. Teachers should aim at developing the learners' language skills firstly and give learners the chance to have the ability to understand the literary skills easily. In this context, selecting easy and modern poems will help learners develop both their language and literary skills.

The result of the last factor which aimed at collecting data about the LN (Learning Needs) showed that the overwhelming majority of the respondents 87.3% agreed (52.3% agree and 35% strongly agree) the opinions that they needed poems that suit their proficiency and needs. This provided a clear answer for the questions; what the learner need to understand from these poems, what kind of poems will enable them to understand and develop their language and literary skills. Furthermore, the result provided a clear agreement of the respondents that they needed some selected poems which suit their language proficiency and encourage them for better attitude toward learning English poetry and help them developing their language and literary skills as well.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**Descriptive Statistics**

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
The teacher reads the poem loudly more than once and the students repeat after her/him.	2.17	1.312
The teacher tells the students to read the poem silently.	2.73	1.440
The teacher explains the old and difficult words to students.	3.77	1.157
The teacher explains the lines of each stanza.	3.78	1.242
The teacher asks the students to read for general understanding.	2.99	1.402
The teacher asks the students to skim the stanzas to get the main idea of the poem.	2.76	1.380
The teacher asks the students to scan the poem to get a particular bit of information.	2.76	1.421
The teacher makes the students interact with each other in the class.	2.55	1.285
The teacher gives notes and summaries about the poem.	3.92	1.254
The teacher divides the students into groups and gives them some activities.	2.09	1.320
The teacher gives students enough time to discuss and express opinions.	2.61	1.381
I read the poem more than once to get the main idea of the poem.	3.36	1.391
I read the teacher's notes more than the poems.	3.42	1.341
To pass the poetry exam, I memorize my notes and analyses.	3.69	1.256
To pass the poetry exam, I memorize teacher's notes and comments.	3.61	1.297
To pass the exam, I read the pervious exam models.	3.25	1.364
I need poem which helps me to develop my English language skills.	1.71	.892
I need poem which helps me to develop my reading skills for general ideas.	1.84	.819
I need poem which helps me to develop my reading skills for specific information.	2.17	1.074
I need poem which helps me to develop my English pronunciation.	2.00	1.069
I need poem which helps me to expand my English vocabulary.	1.91	.969
I need poem which helps me to guess the meaning through the context.	2.05	1.022
I need poem which helps me to develop my ability to analyze a poem.	2.18	1.123
I need poem which helps me to develop my critical thinking.	2.42	1.346



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I need poem which helps me to develop my critical writing.	2.34	1.151
I need poem which helps me to develop my literary skills.	2.39	1.170
I need poem which helps me to understand the mood of the poet easily.	2.43	1.215
I need poem which helps me to understand the poet's message.	2.37	1.212
I need poem which helps me to understand the language construction.	2.10	1.087
I need poem which helps me to interact with the teacher in the classroom.	1.92	.986
I need poem which helps me to interact with the students in the classroom.	2.11	1.154
I need poem which helps me to share the poet's emotion.	2.55	1.309

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**Reliability Statistics**

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.721	32