Understanding English Poetry by EFL Arab Learners: The case study of Taibah University/Ula Branch

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Abstract

The goal of this study is to determine how EFL students at the university level understand English poetry. The participants in this study are 46 students from Taibah University Alula Campos' Languages and Translation Department for the 2019-2020 academic year. To collect data about the study, the researchers used quizzes and written exams. This paper examines a number of challenges that students confront when taking quizzes or assessments on English poetry comprehension. The study shows that the students do not know how to define literature or classify its major genres using complete sentences. Neither do they distinguish the definition of poetry or a poem from the characteristics of a poem or the basic elements of a poem. Another common error students make when submitting their coursework is failing to employ proper formatting and literary language. Thus, this paper investigates these problems and analyzes the data acquired from their answers and assignments and finally, the researchers will give recommendations to correct students' problems and avoid them as soon as possible.

Key words:

Poetry; EFL; Arab learners; University Level; Literary Genres.

Introduction

As a general common fact that literature is a type of human expression that employs the finest written methods to express the whole range of human emotions, thoughts, and obsessions, ranging from prose to structured prose to harmonized poetry, to open the doors of human ability to express what cannot be expressed in any other way. Language and literature are inextricably linked. The genuine product of written language

and written culture is preserved in the various forms of literature and their expressions, which vary in different areas and eras and are always subject to changes and developments over time.

On the other hand, a literary work is a written work that can be poetry, prose, a thought, or something else, in which the poet, writer, or playwright conveys a picture of an idea, an experience he had, or a specific emotion he felt, in the hopes of conveying it to the reader in a clear and understandable way, so that the reader can live the same experience or idea that the writer did. There are a number of different components that are normally present in a literary work and are used to analyze and judge it.

This paper is supposed to tackle the understanding of English Poetry by EFL Arab Learners: the case study of Taibah University/Ula Branch. It is worth mentioning that the participants of the study have come across a course in English Literature. This course familiarizes students with English Literature, its main concepts in literature, and its genres. The course proposes a short review of periods of English literature. Then it introduces the three main literary genres, which are poetry, fiction, and drama, and brings together students to the technical and analytical tools connected to these genres; students study nominated examples of each genre and acquire the skills of reading and analyzing them.

Research Problem

The research problem of this study is basically built upon learners' performance when completing an English Literature course. The main issue is EFL Learners understanding English poetry by investigating whether learners will be able to: increase familiarity with the meaning of literature, its different genres, terminology, and history; identify the literary fundamentals in a given text, such as plot, setting, description, dialogue,

and characterization; and write brief critical analyses of key texts in error-free prose.

Methodology

This study is based on a test to measure students' problems in understanding literature required as a course terminology and application as also required by course objectives to be carried out in tests and class meetings. Thus students have always been asked specific questions about the definition of literature, its main genres, the definition of poetry and its basic elements, the history of English poetry covering the old English poetry, paraphrasing a poem and giving proper analysis, and comparing and contrasting between two or more poems. There are certain problems expected to emerge from the participants' papers, whether in tests or assignments. The number of participants is 46 students.

Literature Review

Syamsia & Hamid Ismail. (2021), believe that "Poetry is a genre of literature in which the words and expressions are the focal point and intervene together in an aesthetic, vigorous, and unique way to convey feelings and thoughts". Also, they think that "Poetry is a literary work that gives a deep understanding of poets' feelings and other cultures rhythmically". Mittal (2014) defines poetry as "a piece of writing in which words are arranged beautifully and rhythmically" (p. 21). "Poetry is embellished with rhythm, beautiful diction, and elevated grammatical features" (Ahmad, 2014, p. 123). Wordsworth defined poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (1989, p. 57). Poetry is a way of sharing experiences, telling a story, expressing feelings or ideas. Poetry appeals to the imagination through the form, rhythm, and word choice that can create vivid visual images for the audience. (Antika, 2016, p.27).

Allameh, (2011) who writes about "A New Approach to Teaching English Poetry to EFL Students" thinks that "Poetry like other literary genres exists to be enjoyed and appreciated. The difficult task facing any instructor is to develop this sense of appreciation and enjoyment in students who are not interested in poetry. For a long time, literature in general and poetry, in particular, was purged from the teaching programmes on the ground that it made no contribution to learning a foreign language for practical purposes".

On the other hand, Tara McIlroy, (2019), in her study "EFL Learners Reading and Discussing Poems in English" comes to the conclusion that "the results suggest that speaking about poetry could be useful for the development of speaking skills such as elaborating, negotiating, and also practicing specific spoken language such as the use of discourse markers and conversation skills. The results also suggest that poetry discussions may help learners to express their feelings in English, which could develop their familiarity with conversational strategies when using their speaking skills in future situations".

It is essential to consider how poems construct their meaning in a broader sense before focusing on descriptions specifically.As a common known fact that poetry has been a central facilitator of humankind's spoken language. Beowulf, the oldest text in the English language, is written in the poetic form. Through this famous text, poetry has a solidified place in the English language, but the use of poetry in the classroom depends on the whims of the teacher (Sigvardsson, 2017; Weaven & Clark, 2013). Poetry is a genre that is underrepresented in the English classroom for a variety of reasons (Weaven & Clark, 2013). While it may not take center stage in the curriculum, there are significant benefits to using it as students who engage with poetry are more fluent readers and stronger analytical writers (Eva-

Wood, 2004; Stickling, Prasun, & Olsen, 2011; Weaven & Clark, 2013; Wilfong, 2008). As students age and move into upper-grade levels, the texts they interact with become lengthier and more syntactically complex, but a benefit of poetry is that it exposes students to a variety of language skills in a condensed format (Eva-Wood, 2004). Since poetry is a genre intended to be read aloud, this is often the first interaction that students have with it. As students actively read poetry in class, they find improvement in their phonetic awareness and fluency (Stickling, Prasun, & Olsen, 2011; Wilfong, 2008). The length and tempo characteristics of many poems allow for students to practice fluency in short bursts (Stefanie J. Fowler, 2019).

Analysis and Discussion

Before digging deep, and upon the completion of the test and having checked it by the researchers there have been observed that the participants do not know how to follow documentation conventions. In other words, they cannot perform simple research paper; they just lift things from web sources without documentation. Neither do they know the content of their assignments.

First, when asked to define literature, they have repeated what their instructor told them before – in class – giving word-for-word answers, phrases, illegible and blank ones. The question, on the test, reads: "So far we have discussed some basic definitions related to literature, poetry, poem, Beowulf poem for example. In this quiz, you are asked to define, first literature and its main genres, poetry, a poem and its basic elements, and the history of English poetry. Here are samples of their answers or data collection of their responses to the definition of literature:

*"Anything written by poets, novelists," "critis, **it is anything witten by poets**, "dramatists,   or critic, anything written by poets, dramatist,*

*novelist or critic, " "it is **written by poets, dramatists, novelists, or critics,** " "fictional form of writing inclods poetry, drama, novel," "is poetry drama, novel," "it is **anything written by poets**," "it is **anything written by poets**, dramatists, entoink, literature work, "anything written by novelists, poets, critics or dramatist," "have discussed some besic depiotions, forfxesple, Drama, poetry," "Is anything work done by literary men," "anything written by poets drama or novellest," "anything written by prose, dramaist," "anything written by poest," "study of language and poems," "anything written by literate," "what thin or write like poem and poetry," "it is what weort by writers contains literature work," "anything write by poest, or dramatist, novelist or short story," "prose and vrose," "frose and prose," "any Thing, wriTh with feelings and emotion," "<u>it is about Poetry</u>," "Any Thing wrote with feeling and motion," "poem arama poty", " study of the forme and frose", "anything writing by pross drama," "written be get and drmist a poeme, a play noelllotsshre, bu rather," "is literature is dramatic, aand crutrict," "Their water wart, literature ptry, novel, and the theng literature," "the production of literary work especially as an occupation," I"ts art and cab ne discripe something," "a written prose by drama," about a poety, anything literature like drama, poetry, novel, play," "is s, written anything poetry," **"literature is poetry and drama and characteristic**," "Anything literature work written by," "werse and prose," (four students have left the answer blank .*

The suggested answer to be produced by students for the question above mentioned is: literature is any literary work written by poets, dramatists, novelists, and critics.

Test analysis for the first item or question shows that only five out of forty-six students have answered the question nearly correctly using

grammatical sentences. However, thirty-seven of the students produced phrases-like answers or illegible ones due to handwriting or weaknesses in sentence structures; only four of the participants in the quiz have left the first question unanswered.

Second, the second item on the test asks students to write down the major genres of literature. They have responded to the question as follows: *"Beowulf poetry", "poem, drama, potry," potery, drama, fiction, novels, short stories," "poetry, drama, fiction, novells, short story," " **epic Alltaritive, narrative, lyric**," "dramas, poetry, comedy," "novel, poetry, drama," "poetry, drama, novel," "is major genres literature," "the subject," "poetre," "Speech, Poetry, Drama, Fantacy, Hunor, Fable," "silins, and, Novel, sTory short," "Germany," "drm, novl, play. Drm, pome," " anything written by pett according convention,(then he deleted the answer by drawing a line across the answer), "prose and poetry," "woras reading disaip feeling," "poetry and drama fiction," "short story, nove, fection," "poetry, short story, nofel, fiction, crtsictme," "Dram, Story, novel, poetry, eltcs," "Poem, Drama, Potry," "Poetry, Poem, Drama, Epic, heroic," "Germoony," "**Poetry, drama, fiction and critisins**," Prose and verso, crtics, novel," drama, poetry, novel," "Drama, Prose," "Drama,poetry," "discussed some basic," "Short story, drama, novel, novella, poetry, critisitm," "petty, drema, fiction novels.nerellas," "petry, drama, fiction, nowwls, novellas, short stories and criticism," " poetry, drama, novel," "Berfy, drama fiction novelos short stories and criticism," "potry, drama, fiction and critisins,".* Nine students have left the answer to the question blank).

Test analysis for the second question shows that almost none of the students has answered the question in a complete answer; they produced phrases- like answers or providing illegible answers due to lack of sentence

structure and spelling mistakes; nine of the students have not answered the question; one of them deleted the answer by drawing a line through the answer. They mix poetry genres with other genres; they describe fiction as a different genre and they add to it novels and short stories, which in fact they are subcategories of fiction; they mix characteristics of a poem like Beowulf with the major genres of literature. The model answer for students to provide is: **There are four major genres of literature: poetry, drama, fiction (novels and short stories), and criticism.**

Third question: when students were required to define poetry, and according to the data collected from their responses to the question, they have come with the following definitions

"any Thing written about poetry," "Any Thing wrote about poetry,"
*"Art that   a poetry," "English poetry Short," "any literary work written or orally trastfact from generation another," " **Anything written by poets**," Any literary works written erally," "the same answer," "any literary work or orally transfer culture," "Illegible answer," "is written The riter feelings," "**Poetry is words written with rythem**," "Any thing written by poets," **Any thing written by poets according conventions**," "<u>Anything written by poem,</u>" "describe the writer emotional or feels about something," "it nade to be sang," words recognizing diction feelings and what in your mind," "<u>It is written by literature men such as poem etc.,</u>" "by anything of writing," "any thing writing by poyds," "It is about for drama or fiction any lyric," "something can you write," "what poets written," "**Anything written by Poets according**," "Any literature work from verss," "illegible answer," illegible answer," "**some vovablry in one system**," "is **about sat drama or fiction,"** "any literature work from verss," "**written anything**," "Poetry is some word about like story," "anything written by poets according to the conventions of history English,"Stamazu, rhyme, meter, simiemettaphs,"*

"any lierary work written erally transferred from generation to another," "words reading disciple feeling," "the text taiking about something by writer," .(Eight students their answers are blank).

Test analysis for the third question shows that four categories of answers: acceptable definitions of poetry only six students have provided the right answer but it lacks sentence structure, funny sentences or irrelevant to the question, illegible answers due to serious spelling mistakes which give no sign of meaning, just letters put on paper and blank answers. The model answer reads: Poetry is a verse written by poets.

Students are asked to define a poem and write its main elements, data collection from their answers show the following:

"something can you write by your feeling," "Stanza rhyme meter alltbration," "title, lines, stanza, theme, meter, rhyme, rhythm, figurative of language," "epic or lyric," "poem elements is The poetre and sTory in The poetry," of literature," "Titles, lines rhymes, rythem, Persons, theme, sheza,"do English Beowulf," "epic and lyric," "taitle literaare," "titale, letter, rythme, stanzas," "short story, dram, novel," something can you wrote it by your feelings," "Rhythm, couplet,"Group of lines wrotten by the poetry," "erased answer," "title, lines, ryhem, rythem, persona, theme, stanza," "rithmy, cuples," "are rhyme, imagery, lyrics," "is short one when a poem is bask elements," "Beowulf poem," "stanza rhym, them, cracters,"illegible answer,"Any literary works written orally," "writtin in stunza," "staza, mgat, meter simile metaphor maegery,"draman novel poetry,"drama, short story- novel, Verse-porse," "The same answer," (seventeen students left their answers blank).

Fourth, as regards, True or False questions, most of the good students did very well on this part of the test, as a factual test which depends on the

knowledge of the poem studied during the course. However, some of them scored the right answer by chance; the category of these students falls as the weak ones; they do not answer the question based on understanding it; it is only good students who understood the question and answered it right. Thus, weak students scored fewer marks on true and false questions whereas good ones have scored most of the questions.

Fifth, when participants were asked to paraphrase part of a poem very few answered the question. Some left the answer space blank while others produced irrelevant answers.

Sixth, when a question asked for analysis of a small portion of a poem, based on the elements of poetry, again very small portion of them answered the question.

Seventh, when participants were questioned to give a short paragraph of a few lines, to describe the development of English poetry, a few number of students answered this question.

Eighth, when they were asked to give characteristics of, for example, Beowulf poem, half of them confused characteristics with the main struggles Beowulf underwent during the poem. Some unable to answer, and left it blank.

Ninth, written part of the exam shows that a few sentences give complete answers. However, the majority of them tend to give answers in notes rather than complete sentences. When unable to produce an answer they leave it blank.

Finally, at the end of the test most of weak students ask for more time to answer the test. They tend to focus on difficult questions and by doing so they run out of time to answer all the questions. Students are reluctant to

study literature because it is a major element in their study; it is only a course requirement.

Research Outcomes

In their study, Syamsia & Hamid Ismail. (2021),(Teaching English Poetry in EFL Classroom through Classroom Presentation), indicate that "The analysis showed that classroom presentation can enhance the students' achievement in learning poetry". Looking at the analysis and discussion researchers have come across certain outcomes that reflect the poor performance of understanding English poetry. The weakness of the participants can be clearly seen in the following types of faults:

1. producing phrases-like answers or illegible ones due to handwriting, weaknesses in sentence structures, and spelling mistakes;

2. mixing poetry genres with other genres; mixing characteristics of a poem like Beowulf with the major genres of literature;

3. describing fiction as a different genre and they add to it novels and short stories, which in fact they are subcategories of fiction;

4. in defining poetry, participants 'definitions lack sentence structure, funny sentences or irrelevant to the question, illegible answers due to serious spelling mistakes which give no sign of meaning, just letters put on paper;

5. responding to True or False questions, mostly is not based on the knowledge of the poem studied during the course;

6. doing paraphrasing represents a real problem that indicates participants poor vocabulary and understanding of the key text regardless of its type;

7. though the hard effort introduced by learning outcomes of the course the participants tend to be weak at analyzing a small portion of a poem, based on the elements of poetry;

8. participants are unable to write a short paragraph of a few lines, to describe the development of English poetry; however, the majority of them tend to give answers in notes rather than complete sentences; and

9. finally, most of the participants lack testing time management. They tend to focus on difficult questions and by doing so they run out of time to answer all the questions.

Results and recommendations

At the end of this study, the researchers would like to reflect on the main results and recommendations. In order to get a good understanding of English poetry by EFL Learners we need to consider the following points:

Implementation of simple poetic analysis and appreciation.

Knowledge of how to read a poem critically.

Recognition of the main poetic techniques in terms of imageries, themes, languages and forms.

Distinguish different poetic schools and forms

Extract and appreciate poetic imageries

Practicing simple poetic analysis.

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