

Use of Poems in Grade V English Classes in Itahari

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Abstract:- Major focus of English classes in primary school-level is to develop children's interest in English through reading and exercises they like. Fun is what the children like the most. Games are fun; so are poems for children. The English course for grade V used in the schools in Itahari, Nepal is designed keeping the same idea at heart. But the real practice in classroom was not found so. Thus, this research was conducted to explore the existing relation between the principles of teaching poems and the real situation in the classrooms; and to suggest how this situation can be improved. Based on the data collected through questionnaire, class observation, distribution of poems in different textbooks of that class and international practices of using poem in this level, this article concludes that teaching poems in primary schools in Itahari needs improvements in a large scale.

Keywords:- Poem, Game, Fun, Language Learning, Activities.

I. INTRODUCTION

One day, seven years ago, our 10 year old child complained that she did not know how to answer her homework question related to a poem. When I asked her for the book, she presented her grade V textbook, turned page no. 203, and alongside showed her homework question that her teacher had provided for the day. The poem was entitled "Mary Had a Little Lamb". The question was, "Why did Mary love the lamb?" Our child knew Mary had a lamb; she loved it; she took it to school; Mary's teacher did not allow the lamb to be in the class; Mary took the lamb in her arm; and they sat outside the class. But she did not know why Mary loved the lamb because it was not mentioned in the poem and her teacher had not explained it in the class that day.

Instead of solving her problem, I asked her how her teacher dealt with the poem in the class. I was surprised when she reported that the teacher came to the class; took the book from her hand; told her to look at her friend's book; and began to describe what the poem was about. The teacher used Nepali most of the time because her friends demanded it; then he asked whether they understood the poem or not. They answered that they did because it was their teacher asking and generally they answer in 'yes'. At last, he wrote four questions on the white-board and asked the students to answer them as their homework for the day. I was more surprised when I found that the poem was in "Fun Reading" section and no question followed it in the textbook. The most shocking aspect of the incident was that the poem was for students' reading and enjoyment; but

their teacher never allowed them for that. When I asked our child to recite the poem, she did it as if she was reading an essay or a story. It made me thoughtful about the way poems are used in English classrooms in her level in our context. So, I wanted to know the reality and it ultimately led to this research.

II. METHODOLOGY

This research is based on interviews of students learning English in grade V in schools from Itahari and poetry class observations there. Twenty-five students of 5 privately funded English medium schools were interviewed. They were asked how their teachers dealt with poems in their classes in academic session 2068BS (2011-2012). Six poetry classes given by different teachers in this grade were observed. To find the way poems are presented in grade V English course, text-books used in Itahari were scanned through. Established methods of using poetry in primary level classes were found surfing the Internet and going through some renowned books on language teaching methodology.

III. CURRENT PRACTICES

A. Models of Dealing with Poems in Classroom

After classroom observations and interviews with students, the following models of dealing with a poem were found in practice in the schools in Itahari. Since every teacher had slightly different models, they can be ordered in the ones mentioned below.

➤ Model no. 1

This is the model practiced at the maximum in which the teacher

- tells the students about the poet. Some teachers even tell the students the trend of poetic creation the poet belongs to;
- explains the poem mostly using Nepali;
- gives exercises as homework;
- the next class is for dictating/giving answers to the exercises; and
- students memorize all the answers as the part of exam preparation.

➤ Model no. 2

It is another popular model. But the researcher found it is less in use than the previous model. In this model, the teacher

- lets the students read the poem;
- reads the poem line by line and explains the poem using both Nepali and English;

- solves all the questions that follow the poem. Dictation or black/white-board writing is used; and
- Students memorize the answers copied and prepare for the examination.

➤ *Model no. 3*

- Teacher recites the poem aloud and students follow it.
- Students recite the poem aloud.
- Teacher explains the poem in both languages i.e. Nepali and English.
- Teacher tells the students to do activities related to words. At last, the teacher helps the students in it.
- Question-answer is homework.
- If there is no question-answer, the teacher prepares the subject matter related questions and gives them as homework.
- The next class is for dictating/giving answers to the questions.

- The students memorize the answers they get and thus prepare for the examinations.

Only 2 teachers used this process.

➤ *Other practices*

- Poems included in fun reading sections were also dealt with like the poems in reading section of the book.
- Recitations of both the teachers and students were interestingly odd.
- Most of the students felt poems very difficult to understand and answer the questions related to them.
- Most of the teachers also felt poems very difficult to understand and answer the questions related to them.

B. Place of Poems in the Course

To find out the place of poems in the course, the following textbooks prescribed in grade V English classes in schools in Itahari were scanned through.

SN	Course Title	Publisher	Editor/Writer
01	<i>Symphony: An English Course</i>	Ekta Books	Shreedhar Lohani
02	<i>Spark English Reader</i>	Shubharambha	Tirth Raj Khaniya
03	<i>New Nepal English Reader</i>	Aatharai	Hriseekesh Upadhyaya
04	<i>Paragon English Reader</i>	Sangam	Jiblal Sapkota et al
05	<i>Chrysanthemum: An English Reader</i>	Allied	Taramani Rai et al
06	<i>Young Learners' Delights</i>	KEDC	Charlayne Gomes
07	<i>Learning English</i>	United	Chandrika Bhatta et al
08	<i>Sajha English</i>	Sajha	Shreedhar Lohani et al

Table 1:- English textbooks for grade V prescribed in schools in Itahari

The editors of most of the books mentioned above are among the top-ranking scholars of English in Nepal. *Symphony: An English Course* is the most popular among all throughout the nation.

The following is the place of poems in the above mentioned textbooks.

SN	Course Title	No. of poems in general reading section ¹	No. of poems in fun reading section ²
01	<i>Symphony: An English Course</i>	1	12
02	<i>Spark English Reader</i>	11	12
03	<i>New Nepal English Reader</i>	6	4
04	<i>Paragon English Reader</i>	0	7
05	<i>Chrysanthemum: An English Reader</i>	1	10
06	<i>Young Learners' Delights</i>	7	3
07	<i>Learning English</i>	5	0
08	<i>Sajha English</i>	0	12
	Total	31	60

Table 2:- Place of poems in the course

¹ Reading section includes different exercises that follow the poem for reading.

² The warming up section that begins the lesson in some books is also taken to be fun reading section. It does not have any exercise that follows the poems.

This table shows that some textbooks exclude reading poems for comprehension. Only one textbook viz. *Learning English* published by United does not include fun reading section and so has no poem like other books for fun. Thus, fun reading is preferred to reading poems for comprehension in grade V.

C. Exercises Related to Poems

In language learning different types of exercises and activities are given to learners after they read a text. According to Gillian Lazar, in the teaching of poems in lower level, generally the following activities are used:

- sentence completion
- matching words to definitions
- predictive writing
- ordering sentences in the correct sequence
- writing your own poem
- gap-fill/cloze
- matching words to pictures
- checking word meaning in a dictionary
- organizing words according to lexical relationship (115)

In grade V textbooks mentioned above and prescribed for grade V in the schools in Itahari, the condition of the design and distribution of exercises that follow a poem are the following:

SN	Types of Exercises	A ³	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	Total
01	Question-answer ('wh' and 'yes/no')	01	15	06	00	01	07	03	00	33
02	Choice of alternatives	01	04	00	00	01	00	01	00	07
03	Rearranging the order	01	00	00	00	00	00	00	00	01
04	Preparing a flow chart	00	01	00	00	00	00	00	00	01
05	Assimilation of ideas (discussion)	00	12	02	05	00	10	03	00	32
06	Matching words	00	02	00	00	00	00	00	00	02
07	Completing sentences	00	01	00	00	00	00	01	00	02
08	Filling blanks with words in summary	00	02	00	00	00	00	00	00	02
09	Completing words	00	01	00	00	00	00	00	00	01
10	Poetry writing	00	01	00	00	00	01	00	00	02
11	Stating True/False	00	01	00	00	00	00	00	00	01
12	Rhyming words	00	01	01	00	00	01	00	00	03
13	Making sentences	00	00	01	00	03	01	00	00	05
14	Writing the main idea	00	00	00	00	00	03	00	00	03
15	Elements of poetry	00	00	00	00	00	01	00	00	01
16	Finding 'who' said?	00	00	00	00	00	01	00	00	01
17	Finding meaning	00	00	00	00	00	01	00	00	01
18	Correcting statements	00	00	00	01	00	00	00	00	01
19	Reciting a poem	00	00	00	00	00	01	00	00	01

Table 3:- Distribution of exercises⁴

³ A, B, C, D, E, F, G and H in this table coincide with the serial no. of books mentioned in table no. 1 and 2 above. Thus, 1=A, 2=B, 3=C, 4=D, 5=E, 6=F, 7=G and 8=H.

⁴ Poems in Fun Reading section have no exercises designed to follow.

The table shows that the order of preference in exercises is: idea, word, sentence and recitation. The textbook entitled *Young Learners' Delight* edited by Charlayne Gomes presents more varieties of exercises than any other textbooks in the list above. This indicates that poems are not used for serious study in this level. Reading and teaching poem for general understanding and 'with fun' seems to be the basic principle of this course. Thus, the following section deals with why poems are used for fun reading and how this can be done in grade V.

IV. USING POEMS IN GRADE V ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASS

A. Importance of a Poem

Scholars and researchers have found many benefits of using poems in classroom in primary level. Gillian Lazar states that "Using poetry in the classroom" can be "a basis for expanding the student's language awareness and interpretative abilities" (100). Similarly, Jo Budden concludes his research and writes that poetry helps students to be exposed to "any authentic material to some 'real English' and can be very motivating for students, provided they are supported throughout the task [...]. The great thing about poems is ... for students to have the opportunity to see the language work creatively and freely" (www.teachingenglish.org.uk). Similarly, Barbara Abromitis writes: "Teachers can reinforce letter-sound relationships, develop reading skills, and provide essential practice with oral language skills through the use of a poetry workshop." Talking about the value of poetry performance she further writes,

Children can use poetry to enhance their memory skills, as well as their oral language skills, by participating in a Poetry Show. [...] Performers can practice fluency, voice clarity and volume, eye contact, and presentation skills, while the audience practices active listening and appreciation [...]. Primary teachers who use a poetry workshop to infuse poetry into daily routines and content area instruction, as well, find that it is an instructional tool that students really love. (<http://barbara-abromitis.suite101.com>)

In the same way, talking about the value of introducing poetry in lower level Shellie Braeuner writes, "Introducing kindergarten children to poetry gives them a life-long love of literature" and "sets them on a life-long road to the love of literature" (<http://www.ehow.com/teach-poetry>). Similarly, Lisa Porter in her article entitled "The Value of Teaching Poetry in School" lists the following benefits of poetry education: it helps developing language skills; it provides enjoyment to children; it helps developing the power of memorization, patience, attention and best of all the power of creativity (<http://www.ehow.com/teach-poetry>). It is said that "Through colorful words, vivid imagery and sensory descriptions, a lot of meaning and words can be packed into a couple of lines of verse. This allows kids to focus on

specific lessons and ease into reading comfortably, not being intimidated by pages and pages of reading material" (<http://www.ehow.com/teach-poetry/>). We can conclude this discussion with Terry Moore and Guy Gardner's sayings. Moore says, "Teaching students about the art of poetry will enhance their oral language, reading and writing skills. It will also help them to visualize the material and gain a deeper understanding of the written content." and Gardner says,

Poetry can be used to teach structure, grammar and vocabulary. Aside from these benefits, using poetry to teach English can also promote creativity and a more positive learning environment. By encouraging students to write poetry, and to share it with the class in an atmosphere of respect and constructive criticism, you create a safe and free environment for the students to learn. This, in turn, will help the students to achieve greater progress as English language learners (<http://www.ehow.com/teach-poetry/>). Thus, using poetry in a language class is beneficial for both the teacher and the learner. It helps in learning three major skills of language: listening, speaking and reading. Among them, reading skill is helped the best.

B. Poems for Fun

Poetry is fun with language. When reading becomes fun, it will affect the readers and indirectly they learn what the reading can provide them with. Adrian Doff opines that "How to use a reading text depends on the *purpose* for which we want to use it" (56). Similarly, Jeremy Harmer says, "Reading is an exercise dominated by the eyes and the brain" (190). In reading of poems eyes, ears, brain and heart i.e. emotion all come together in a play. According to Barbara Abromitis, "Poetry is especially fun for [...] students because it fits with their beginning reading and writing instruction, as well as their natural love of language play" (<http://barbara-abromitis.suite101.com>). So through the reading of poetry, reading skills can be developed with fun. In this regard Sally Nash writes,

Many children enjoy reading poems and learning them by heart [...]. Young children generally enjoy listening to nursery rhymes and poems. Poems for children tend to be short and fun. Parents and their children can recite them together, or a child can "recite" a poem in the same way as a joke. Teachers and parents can use poetry to practice reading [...]. With poetry, children usually do not mind reading and repeating poems again and again (<http://www.ehow.com/teach-poetry>).

The following aspects make reading a poem fun for children:

- rhyming words
- sense words
- singing opportunity
- short comics in a poem
- possibility of choral reading
- poetry recitation competition

Sally Nash further provides a guideline for teachers on how they can make teaching and reading of poetry a fun. She says,

- Select poems, initially at least, that are short and amusing, as young children enjoy rhymes and poems that are comical.
- Use an overhead projector to display the poem, and then read it aloud to the children. One idea is to ask for volunteers to read the poem with you.
- Practice choral reading with the poem. Ask groups to read out certain sections of the poem.
- Ask the children to read the poem silently to themselves first. Ask some simple comprehension questions, such as "What do you think the poem is about?" to test the children's reading and comprehension.
- Divide the class into pairs for "buddy reading." Each child in the pair should read the poem to his buddy and then listens while his buddy reads it.
- Use the poem as a basis for phonic practice. Phonemes are the building blocks when learning to read. For example, ask the children to circle all of the nouns in the poem and go through them, breaking the words down into phonemes. Teachers and parents can also use poems to develop vocabulary. If children do not know what a word means, they can guess the meaning from the context. A dictionary should also be available for this type of work. Other language work includes identifying verbs and looking at the punctuation in a poem.
- Announce a competition where the children have to learn a poem by heart and then read or perform it in front of their classmates. To do this confidently, the children will have to read the poem carefully over and over again. (<http://www.ehow.com/teach-poetry>)

She even provides the following tips and warning:

- Have plenty of poetry books available for the children to dip into. These should be suitable for their age and reading level.
- Ask a local children's poet to come into the class and read to the children. Get the children to "perform" one of the poet's poems. (<http://www.ehow.com/teach-poetry>)

C. Poems for Language Learning

Karen Hollowell in the article "How to Teach English through Poetry" writes:

For students in grades four through eight, poems can be used effectively to teach skills that move beyond the basic concepts of English. Middle school English emphasizes phrasing, assuming that the student has mastered the parts of speech and general grammar and usage. When teaching prepositional phrases or noun clauses, choose poems that have examples of these and display them on the overhead projector. You can have selected students come up to highlight the targeted phrase. By the time students advance to these grades, they may not want to get up in front of peers, so it is also acceptable to call on volunteers to just tell you the answer. It is beneficial to have copies of the poem to give to each student and have

them circle or underline the phrases because the children who may be poor readers will probably never volunteer to give an oral answer. This way, you can check papers later to be sure everyone understands what you taught." (<http://www.ehow.com/teach-poetry>)

The same article recommends the following steps for teaching a poem in grade V:

- Teach vocabulary by selecting vivid words.
- Read the poem over again and emphasize the pronunciation of certain words.
- Ask simple questions to test comprehension. After reading a piece a couple of times, you will get an idea of what the poem is about. After reading each line, explain what is happening in a particular moment or situation. After reading the poem, ask simple questions that require more than a yes or no answer, such as the name of the character in the poem or what he or she was wearing as stated in certain stanzas.
- Teach grammar line by line. It is useful for a child to understand words and concepts first before embarking on grammar, since grammar involve the rules of the language that cannot be applied without first having learned words. Ask questions and engage in dialogue that requires complete sentences to be used. It is easier to tackle each line of the poem one by one because it makes the reading more manageable than attacking the whole piece right away.
- Use punctuation in poetry to help understand grammar. Through various words and formation of sentences, poetry emphasizes punctuation. This helps not only reading but also speaking. Reading poetry aloud with emphasis on punctuation whether a period, a comma or a dash helps increase reading skills. (<http://www.ehow.com/teach-poetry>)

Thus, a poem in grade V can be used both for fun and language learning. Even in fun reading language is unconsciously learnt. In conscious learning of language through a poem many aspects of language from pronunciation to use of punctuation can be handled in a class.

V. CONCLUSION

Use of poems in grade V for English teaching is not satisfactory in schools in Itahari. The research conducted in privately funded schools, which the society considers to be quality ones, shows that teachers are not aware of the value and processes of using poems to boost up language learning. English language textbooks prescribed in this grade have given preference to use of poems for fun reading to their use for serious comprehension by children. But the teachers have done the opposite. As a result students have not got the opportunity to realize the beauty of language. Consequently, the students think poems as tough stuffs in their courses. Activities that follow each poem are not actively conducted for students. Only memorization of question-answer for the examinations has ruled everything out of students' minds. There are many established and internationally acclaimed methods and

processes of using poetry for language teaching in this level. But they all are hidden treasures for Itahari schools. The picture is very dismal.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is necessary and essentially possible to improve the situation of the use of poetry in English classes in Itahari. For this, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Schools should prescribe such textbooks in which poems are used for both comprehensive and fun readings.
- Teachers should be introduced to basic process of using poems in a language class.
- Methods of using poems for fun reading are to be known to teachers.
- Schools should organize training programmes for their teachers so that they can be updated with latest trends in teaching language through poetry, and
- Inter-school interactions on current practices of teaching are to be organized.

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