Some Problems Students Face in English Poetry in Jordan: A Corpus-Driven Study of Students’ Responses

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[Abstract] Many students in Jordan who join the course on English poetry come to it with the conviction that it does not differ much from poetry written in Arabic, and that the knowledge acquired at school can help them with this course. This research presents the problems confronting Jordanian 3rd and 4th-year students at the Hashemite University majoring in English language and literature when studying English poetry, based on their own viewpoint. The research also offers some possible solutions to those problems.

[Keywords] teaching; learning; Jordanian students; university students; literature; poetry; English language; foreign languages, Jordan

Introduction
Poetry is one of the core courses of any faculty that teaches literature, and, therefore, it is important for instructors of literature to attempt to find the major problems students confront in studying this particular literary form. It is assumed that students in general, regardless of their language and culture, experience some dread of approaching poetry. For instance, Steinley (1982) asserts that when many students are confronted with a poem, they feel that reading it will involve some “mystical activity” (p.53) to which they are not privy. This observation, of course, applies to native speakers, as well as to those who study English as a foreign language. Young (2007) remarks that "cultural attitudes are often dismissive of poetry" (p.50) and cites a survey carried out by the National Education Association (NEA) which revealed that roughly only 12% of society ever chooses to read poetry. Young describes the bias that a majority of students feel and express in their comments, such as “poetry is deep,” “mysterious,” or "all poets are depressed and wear black" (p.50).

In addition to the faulty assumptions many people hold on poetry, Peskin, Allen, and Wells-Jopling (2010) point out that mistaken beliefs and perceptions about teaching poetry may partly create negative attitudes in teachers and students alike. According to Peskin et al., some teachers misperceive the idea that poetry has a quite subjective and personal nature. This perspective, if taken to an extreme, means students can only acquire an understanding of poetry through their own silent and unexpressed perceptions (p. 498). Such a view can undermine the whole educational process and reduce it to a futile endeavor to teach an unteachable subject.

The study of poetry usually comprises the basic tools that help students understand, appreciate, and evaluate poems; thus, the process involves several areas that relate to criticism and the means by which poems can be analyzed in order to be appreciated and comprehended. Moreover, because poetry manipulates various rhetorical devices, figurative language, symbolism and syntactical tricks, the subject requires from the learners the basic knowledge of all these components in order to handle effectively the material they study. As Linaberger (2004) observes, poetry can be daunting to some students (and some teachers, too). The concepts and complex language in poems may be difficult for students to grasp or it can be confusing, at best (p.366).

In diagnosing the problems Jordanian students confront when enrolling in the English departments at different universities in Jordan, it appears that many factors hamper their progress towards the achievement of their objectives, in spite of their great enthusiasm to specialize in English literature. Many students who join the department of English language and literature at the Hashemite University, opt to take poetry courses on the assumption that their earlier study of Arabic poetry may help them understand English poetry, as well. The first problem that confronts them arises from their limited knowledge of the
language itself. Most of the students have a limited knowledge of English language and in many cases, know little of its literature, or literary terms. In the public schools in Jordan, the curriculum concentrates basically on teaching some skills in writing and reading the everyday English language. At the university level, however, the focus of the courses differs much, and students find themselves confronting a more complex form of English which deals with theories of language, literature, and culture. This sudden leap may cause to many students a sense of frustration. As an instructor of English literature at the Hashemite university, I usually start my poetry courses with some basic information about meter, rhyme, rhythm, and form; I teach finding the theme, differentiating between theme and subject, and a limited examination of figures of speech. The core of the course centers on examining poems and giving my students some hints about the poems they study, and require them to submit their readings of the assigned poems. This paper presents the problems a group of students faced in a poetry course at the Hashemite University, and it discusses the attempts made to overcome them.

Identifying Problems in Learning Poetry

In order to discover what problems face them, I gave my students a question right from the beginning of the second month of the course to answer by e-mail or on the blackboard within two days: What are the problems you face in studying English poetry? The two-day period was meant to give students adequate time to think about the problems they faced in reading poetry individually, to write in acceptable and clear English their thoughts and ideas, either by consulting with people who knew English better than themselves or by consulting grammar books or any other references that may be useful. As for the means of communicating with me, I chose the e-mail or the blackboard, making the communication private to offer them greater freedom in expressing their views. The number of participants in this course was 140, and upon receiving their answers, I classified the problems into several categories, viz., language, rhetoric, figures of speech, culture, analysis, comprehension, class environment, or a combination of two or more of these problems. It is necessary to indicate that the large class environment aggravated the problem, as the 60-minute lecture could not offer adequate time for the participation of such a large number.

The Nature of Problems

About ninety percent of the students found language as a major problem that hindered their comprehension of the meanings of the poems they studied in class or the assigned ones for their own examination. Some students even considered the language used in the poems to be “Old English,” as seen in samples 2, 33, 50, and 99. This misunderstanding of the nature of English arose, perhaps, from two main factors. The first related to their study of classical Arabic poetry at school concentrating on pre-Islamic poetry that employs diction no longer in use in modern Arabic and requiring the use of specialized lexicons. This perhaps led many students to think of English poetry in a similar manner. The second factor was the students’ limited acquaintance with the English language in general and the literary language in particular. My syllabus contained a few poems by William Blake, and poetry from the Romantic movement, particularly William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge, John Keats, Percy Shelley, and Lord Gordon Byron. In addition, it contained poems by Rudyard Kipling, W. B. Yeats, Robert Frost and T. S. Eliot. The poems had, on the whole, simple, almost conversational diction. The errors that occur in the samples (and are left uncorrected) reveal the level of their language acquisition, particularly in Sample 33 where one can notice the inability of the student to write himself/herself anything cogently, and so resorted to some material plagiarized from either a commentary on the internet, or a comment in some article. I include this sample fully to show how this student dealt with the question about the difficulties faced in the poetry course:

Actually, I have big problem in studying English poetry especially examining Old English is an adventure in language. In addition to Old English being twice-removed from Modern English in terms of lexicon, syntax, and
pronunciation and figure of speech. Also there are differences between noun and adjective declensions, verb conjugations, and noun and adjective gender agreement, among many others. However, even when scholars seem to be in complete concord with one another on the basics of reading and translating Old English to Modern English, problems still can and do occur—problems that affect the very meaning of the work under examination. Also I face the problem of comparing classical and modern poetry could be approached in various way (Sample 33; my italics).

Another problem which the respondents identified relates to rhetorical devices and figures of speech. About forty percent of the respondents mentioned the issue of identifying figurative language as their second problem and the new terms they had to learn. This problem was regarded by some respondents the outcome of the difference in culture. For the sake of brevity, I will give one sample of these responses:

The main difficulty that I faced while studying is the terms, they are uneasy to understand and to memorize. Another difficulty is to appoint many of the terms of figurative language in the poems (Sample 27).

In the absence of a relatively good command of English, a third problem was referred to by the respondents, that is, the inability to interpret the poems in a meaningful way, to comprehend the meaning of a poem, its theme, or even its subject. Moreover, some of the respondents expected poems to teach a moral lesson, an idea which probably came from their school days where the selection from Arabic poetry usually emphasized a didactic purpose. The percentage of respondents who emphasized this problem was approximately 33. One sample of these responses may be enough in this paper:

The main difficulties which I face when I study English poetry are: firstly, I cannot understand exactly the hidden meaning which the poet tries to convey to us, when I read any poem I understand the meaning of words, but then I say to myself where the hidden meaning, where the theme behind this, so sometime I can not understand what the poet wants to say. And the symbols some time seem ambiguous, I cannot determine to which they stand. Another difficulty is that I know that the poetry means to evoke emotional or sensual responses but sometime when I read a poem. I do not feel that it affects me in any way. And I have difficulties in understanding the classical allusion. The ambiguity of structure makes misunderstanding to me. When I read any poem I search on the messages which I can use in my life, can give me wisdom, experience, so when I read poems not provide me with this I feel that I do not want to study them (Sample 3).

Problems relating to language, rhythm, meter, form, symbolism, enjoyment, appreciation, and culture appeared in a relatively small number of the respondents. This group, in fact, can be considered the true representation of the majority of the class, although the number of students who gave expression to most of these problems represented a small number of the respondents (22.3%). The reason that makes me give such an evaluation is that all these problems are linked together through the weakness in comprehending English; thus, the inability to understand the meaning leads to a complication in grasping the theme or the subject of the poem, and the inability to pronounce the words correctly leads to inability to determine the rhyme rhythm and meter. Moreover, the limited knowledge of the culture and the cultural allusions contained in the poem significantly complicates the understanding of the text. It seems that this group had a real awareness of the problem and was able to give it voice in a more pertinent way than the rest of the respondents. I shall only present two samples of this group:
Poetry is as simple as it is complex. Comparing poetry in particular to other literary genres, it seems to create more problems some of which are directly related to the special language the poet employs to convey a message. The words a poet uses are both denotative and connotative. That is, on the surface they denote the literal or dictionary meaning, while at the same time suggesting one or more added meanings. So we need to guess the meaning from the context. This is really a serious difficulty in understanding poems. I also find it difficult to recognize the measures and the rhythm of English poetry. From my point of view, the most important difficulty I face is with the long and intensive glossary of literary and poetic terms which I really find difficult to understand and memorize (Sample 28).

It has always been known that studying any art, which concern a particular country, is important, because it gives us an idea about their culture. Because we are Arab student, so it is naturally to find some difficulties when studying English poetry. First, as a student I face the difficulty of the language. I find that the language of poetry is not easy. Its word, its expression need more effort to understand it. Second, that knowing the meaning of every word did not mean always understanding the actual meaning for the poem. I mean that the word does not always give us the implied meaning (Sample 10).

Finally, 35% of the respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with studying poetry as a subject. According to what they believe, poetry is something that you either have the talent to enjoy and appreciate, or there is no way to make it accessible. This view is, perhaps, based on certain social or cultural bias against poetry which might have been the result of the students’ contact with Arabic poetry at school through teachers who themselves had a bias against poetry. Thus, it is possible to identify their problem as purely psychological, apart from their lack of competence in the language itself. I shall only give one example of this group:

Poetry have always been difficult for me to understand since I am not a big fan of English Poetry so I think this is the major problem along with the cultural and the social differences between the English poets and I. An English poet may have different point of view about emotions and feelings mine so sometimes I have to be in his or her shoes in order to figure out the message of the poem and this is extremely difficult (Sample 73).

**Attempted Remedies**

After examining the problems my students referred to in their answers, I adopted several new methods in teaching them poetry. The first one was to give them some background material related to the composition of the poem and some biographical details about the poet himself. In addition, I made them look up the meanings associated with the words of the poem under examination and asked them to try and present different readings of the same poem. This method helped my students contextualize the poem and link it to certain events and situations, and in certain instances, they were able to present more than one reading of a poem.

A second method was to divide my classes into smaller units, (groups of sixes), and present them with propositions about the poem that can be argued for or against; then I requested every 5th groups to present its argument against the other 5 or 6 groups. This last experiment proved a total failure due to two factors: first, the number of students involved in this operation was too large to establish harmony between them; second, the limited time of the class made such a discussion impossible to complete. This made me attempt a proposal of moving the discussion to the blackboard, where the students carried out their discussion under my supervision. However, the number of participants on the blackboard drastically
fell to a minimum, since some students did not have the internet facility at their homes, while others simply opted not to take part in the discussion. The total number of participants was thus reduced to 20 out of the total 140, a percentage not exceeding 14%. It is worth noting that this experiment proved very rewarding, since, out of those twenty students, new ideas were developed and their performance in class was noticeably improved. One of the students of this group posted the following remark, revealing a poetic gift, and a powerful imagination:

Being evolved in such an amazing course is just an extraordinary privilege that I’m seeking to take advantage of to feel such great huddle of emotions when reading an amusing poem which floats through the veins to fill your heart with excitement is a gigantic sensation. To digest every single detail in a poem needs an open mind, which makes it hard for some students not to enjoy poetry just because they couldn't see what's beyond these thorny lines. Also when it's new for us as students to comprehend all of the poetic terms at once create a diversion to absorb the poetic patterns & what lies beneath every rhythmical line.

Conclusion

As a result of this corpus of students’ responses and my teaching methods applied to overcome their problems, I found out that many factors contributed to the creation of a barrier between students who desired to study poetry and the expected end-result sought after by both teachers and learners alike. The first is probably an institutional one where large numbers of students are enrolled in a course that requires small group discussions. This problem seems to be the result of economic goals where the financial revenues are expected to be maximized while cutting down the expenses. This design led to achievement by increasing the number of participants in every course to the utmost possible limit while restricting the number of instructors to the minimum. This policy led to a situation where the class became a lecture hall, rather than an interactive group of learners and an instructor. Under such circumstances, the only available option for an instructor is to dispense with the discussion by students and substitute it with a formal lecture, where the role of learners is reduced to receiving information to handle on their own outside the classroom. Otherwise, the instructor may spend the whole semester arranging and rearranging the teaching methods and attempting to force the participation of an amorphous class with little hope of ever reaching the desired goals.

A possible solution for this problem lies in creating a sort of online teaching approach, where all the class material, including the lectures are digitized, and the meeting of the class becomes exclusively for exchanging views on certain topics two or three times a week. The problem remains present, however, due to the inability of many students to use the online teaching methods, either because the whole process is unknown to them, and in this case, there must be teaching courses for students to acquaint them with these techniques or to counteract the absence of the means for some students, who, for different economic factors or cultural ideas, find the introduction of the internet to their homes unacceptable. Nevertheless, and even with the employment of e-learning methods, discussion in class remains a privilege to a few who have the courage to confront the whole class and not be afraid of making mistakes.

A second problem, which is the result of government educational policy, favors a more democratic proliferation of education based on the assumption that studying in any area should be open to the largest possible number of candidates with restrictions eased if not removed from the admission procedure. This policy filled departments of foreign languages with students who lacked the command of these languages, consequently placing the whole burden over the shoulders of instructors who find themselves between two options: 1) being able to carry on doing their work as though they are dealing with students who have full command of the language and addressing an alienated large audience; 2) substituting their classes of literature with classes of language skills teaching and ending up performing a totally different job than the
one they are expected to. In the first instance, instructors risk following the “teacher-dominated and vertically oriented (top-down) classroom discussions, and relative student passivity” (Langer, 1992, 1995; Probst, 1992). In the second instance, the objectives of teaching poetry or any other literary genre retreat and are replaced by totally irrelevant discussions that are meant to improve skills that instructors of literature assume to have been already internalized by their students. It is possible to partially solve this problem by dividing the departments of language and literature into two departments, where students who desire to study language only are given courses of language, and a separate department for literature and culture, restricting the admission to those who have a good command of language, so as to provide the learner’s with the tools and skills of literary appreciation. Taking the above-mentioned causes of the problem, this solution seems to be unattainable, and, therefore, one seems to be locked into a vicious circle.

A viable alternative is to increase the poetry courses into two or more, beginning with a course where enjoyment and not appreciation becomes the goal of teaching. During this first course, students can learn something about rhyme, rhythm, meter, and acquire skills in identifying the subject of the poem, and differentiate it from the theme. In the second and third courses, more relevant material can be introduced to the learners concerning the analysis and interpretation of poetry, with concentration on appreciation. Building upon the genuine desire of the majority of my students to acquire poetic skills, I considered my class to be students of the first level and dealt with them accordingly. In order to avoid experiencing frustration, I resorted to a more practical way of raising my students’ morale, through assigning short, modern poems, establishing a link between poetry and everyday enjoyment of lyrics with their music, and trying to strike a balance between the music of the songs, the words, and the enjoyment of exploring rhythm, rhyme, meaning, and themes. The result was total enjoyment, but very little appreciation. It is hoped that this experiment can provide a greater desire on the part of the learners themselves to explore the possibilities of analysis and appreciation in the future by pursuing their own interest in poetry and seeking to acquire the tools necessary for such an activity.

References


