Teachers' and Students' Perception of Poetry Teaching and Learning in Class VI of Rangaytung Primary School, Chhukha *Dzongkhag*

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

Original Research Article

ABSTRACT

The poetry question of class VI is marked out of 8 both in the mid-term as well as in the annual examination according to the *Instructional Guide for English, classes IV-VI*, of which the poem should be from outside the prescribed English textbook. After studying the marks scored by 14 students of class VI of Rangaytung Primary School, Chhukha in the annual examination, 2022, more than 75% of the students on average scored below 4 out of 8 in poetry. Therefore, this study found the perception of teachers and students in terms of lack of appropriate content in the selection of poems in the prescribed class VI English textbook. The study also touched on the difficulties faced by teachers and students in the teaching and learning of poetry in the classroom. The participants for the study were selected based on purposive sampling. The study adopted qualitative research design to collect data from the field. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to interpret the collected data. The findings of this study include lack of appropriate content in the selection of poems in the prescribed class VI English textbook. One of the major difficulties that the

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teachers faced was students' lack of comprehension skills in poetry because of the lack of poetry reading at school as well as at home. The students also found it difficult to understand the meaning of new words and pronounce difficult words from the poems because of various reasons. Keeping all difficulties aside, the teacher played a crucial role in making poetry learning interesting to the children. Recommendations to subject specialists, curriculum developers and English teachers of class VI are discussed separately towards the end of the fifth chapter.

1. INTRODUCTION

The poetry syllabus for upper primary classes needs timely reformation to remove poems, which are redundant, repetitive and irrelevant to the learning needs of the young learners. Applebee [1] states that poems are usually force-fed to school children to fulfil curriculum needs. In order to facilitate quality learning for the 21st century, Royal Education Council (REC) has also "initiated major curriculum reform in all subjects" [2]. In relation to this, a few class VI students from the school verbally claimed that some poems in the class VI English textbook are unfriendly and difficult to understand. Upon verbally inquiring, one of the English teachers from the same school revealed that the only way to make students learn poetry well is to make them study poems with rich content. Hence, the meaning of poetry becomes interesting to comprehend, for both the teacher as well as the student.

It is a well-known fact that poetry is an integral part of the English curriculum, be it at the primary, middle or secondary level. However, teaching and learning of poetry, unlike other literary genres, do not receive as much attention as other genres do. Therefore, the researcher wanted to investigate the area.

1.1 Problem Statement

Careful analysis of the marks obtained by 14 class VI students of Rangaytung Primary School, Chhukha in the annual examination, 2022 indicated that the mean mark scored by each student in the poetry question was below 4 out of 8. This clearly indicated that learners understood only 50% of the poetry lesson taught in the classroom before the annual examination. This succinctly pointed out that there were some problems in the teaching and learning of poetry. Therefore, it was essential to find out the perceptions of class VI English teachers and students of Rangaytung Primary School in terms of lack of appropriate content in the selection of poems in the prescribed class VI English textbook and difficulties faced in the teaching and learning of poetry.

1.2 Research Questions

How do class VI English teachers and students of Rangaytung Primary School, Chhukha perceive teaching and learning of poetry?

1.2.1 Sub questions

1. How do class VI English teachers and students perceive poetry teaching and learning in terms of lack of appropriate content in the selection of poems in the prescribed class VI English textbook?
2. What difficulties do teachers face in the teaching of poetry in class VI?
3. What difficulties do students face in the learning of poetry in class VI?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

1. To find out the perceptions of class VI English teachers and students of Rangaytung Primary School, Chhukha on the lack of appropriate content in the selection of poems in the prescribed class VI English textbook.
2. To find out the difficulties that teachers face in the teaching of poetry.
3. To find out the difficulties that students face in the learning of poetry

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have demonstrated that the lack of appropriate content in the selection of poems in the English curriculum is a major element in the teaching and learning of poetry in the classroom. Consequently, Savvidou [3] further suggests that the teacher should be given the liberty to choose and teach poems from other sources as well, which are suitable to the needs and interest of the learners. Poetry is the text type, "which seems to present the most people with the most challenges" [4].

but at the same time it seems to be widely acknowledged that "positive experiences at school are important in laying the foundation for lifetime engagement with poetry" [5].

Teachers have misconceptions about what is making the teaching of poetry challenging. The rhyming pattern, meter and use of complex words make poetry appear quite distinct from other forms of literature. As a consequence of this, teachers think that teaching poetry is beyond their ability, though the benefits of learning poetry are many. Firstly, poetry gives opportunities to students to be active in classroom activities. Secondly, students can learn how to express feelings through words by reading poetry in front of the class. Thirdly, children can acquire more vocabulary in poetry than other genres of literature (Mittal, 2014). Therefore, there is no reason for teachers to find the teaching of poetry challenging:

> It nurtures a love and appreciation for the sound and power of language. Poetry can help us see differently, understand others, and ourselves more and validate our human experience. It enhances thinking skills, and promotes personal connections. Such attributes deserve a closer look (Perfect, 1999, p. 728).

The most common challenge that teachers face when teaching poetry is related to the fact that poetry is one form of literature whose meaning is very difficult to comprehend in the first instance. Certain definitions of poetry's nature underscore its "superiority over other forms of expression and have perhaps done the genre no favours by placing it on so high a pedestal" [4]. The idea that poetry is a difficult medium can "lead potential readers to reject its advances" [4]. The composition of poetry itself is confusing with components such as stanzas, rhyme, rhythm and prosody. In addition to this, Olilla and Jantas [6] state that poetry is a kind of written language that is structured rhythmically to tell a story, express an emotion, idea, or state of being.

On the other hand, students perceive poetry learning to be difficult, irrelevant and something they should not be studying in the 21[st]century. There are reasons for children's unfamiliarity with poetry:

> In many cases, students expect the meaning of a text to be constructed automatically and as directly as possible. In some ways, constructing meaning from poetry runs counter to this expectation. To find the meaning of a poem requires effort and analysis. Rather than constructing meaning automatically, the reader of a poem may experience the frustration that comes with the lack of understanding. This explains to a certain extent why students dislike reading poetry [7].

Finally, Haraldsson [8] believes that the difficulty level of the poem depends on the choice of the teacher to give it more room or still consider it inferior to other forms of literature.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Methodology

The study used qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research approach suited the nature of this study as it produced a rich description of the experiences of teachers and students who taught and learnt poetry in the classroom on daily basis. In addition to this, qualitative research lays emphasis "on the concept and perception of people on events of the world" [9]. Furthermore, qualitative research method allowed the researcher a degree of flexibility in the conduct of the study.

3.2 Research Design

The research design that was used in this study was narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry was chosen to allow the participants to share experiences without undue direction from the researcher and provide insights to teachers and students who would teach and learn poetry in class VI in future through the findings. Therefore, Creswell [10] points out that narrative design supports the participants to tell stories and reveal self truthfully.

3.3 Sampling

Purposive sampling strategy was used in this study as Bartram [11] argues that sampling is all about choosing the right participants, place or behaviour to get the right responses. Rajashi [12] further states that selecting a sampling strategy is essential for authenticating information and capturing the phase of the data journey.

The sampling used in this study comprised of two English teachers and six students from class

VI of Rangaytung Primary School, Chhukha who had been teaching and learning poetry for the last three years. The overall sampling size for this study was 8 as Ruthellen [13] believes that narrative researchers can still work with small samples of participants to obtain rich and free-ranging discourse keeping the emphasis on stored experience.

3.4 Data Collection Tools

According to Gill et al. [14] there are a variety of methods of data collection in qualitative research, including observations, textual or visual analysis and interviews. However, the most common methods used, particularly in qualitative research are interviews and focus groups for convenience in data validation. In this study, semi-structured interview was used to determine the perception of class VI English teachers and students of Rangaytung Primary School, Chhukha in teaching and learning poetry in the classroom.

3.5 Semi-structured Interview

In the simplest term "an interview is a two-way conversation in which the interviewer asks the participants questions to generate data and to learn about the ideas, beliefs, views, opinions and behaviours of the participants" (Nieuwenhuis, 2007, p. 87). Furthermore, Cohen et al. (2011) confirms that a semi-structured interview is a good data collection tool to find out what a person knows, likes and thinks.

The conduct of semi-structured interview allowed the interviewer to listen to the records repeatedly to reflect and analyse data correctly. Semi-structured interview kept the focus of the participants on the interview while asking open-ended questions. Using semi-structured interview helped the interviewer to gather data because of its flexibility to add new questions according to the responses of the participants.

3.6 Data Analysis Procedures

Creswell [15] specifies that data analysis is a process of understanding, analysing, interpreting and finally presenting the findings. Qualitative thematic data analysis technique was used in this study to analyse the perception of teachers and students in teaching and learning poetry. Thematic analysis is defined as a method of finding out people's views, opinions, experiences or values from a set of qualitative data such as interview transcripts and observation forms.

Familiarization of the data took place by taking notes and transcribing the audio. Transcript of each interview was looked thoroughly, highlighting everything that seemed potentially interesting. All data were put into groups identified by codes. The pattern of the codes was studied to determine different themes. After reviewing the themes in terms of accuracy, the study came up with a succinct and easily understandable name for each theme. Finally, the analysis of the data was written.

Similar themes emerging from the interview were grouped together using thematic data analysis approach in a flow chart. The themes were interpreted serially and accurately with the support of literature.

The two teachers were referred to as English Teacher 1 (ET1) and English Teacher 2 (ET2) where as the six students as Student 1 to Student 6 (S1 to S6) while quoting responses given by the participants in the data analysis chapter.

3.6.1 Pre-data collection

The purpose of the study and dos and don'ts of the interview were oriented to the participants before the interview. The participants were made to sign the participant consent form before the conduct of the interview. They were also informed of their rights to withdraw from the study at any time of the study.

3.6.2 During data collection

The participants were informed that their participation in the study is purely voluntary and that they can withdraw from the interview at any point of time. This catered to the principle of informed consent, i,e "the right of the participant is to be or not to be a part of the research project" [16]. The participants were assured of the confidentiality of information gathered. The liberty to decide the time and place of the interview was left to the participants. Mobile phones were used to audio record in consultation with the participants.

3.6.3 Post-data collection

Data analysis were done following all scientific procedures of conducting a research, and the findings from it were not fabricated or manipulated. All audio records and transcribed data were stored in the laptop for five years as oriented before the interview.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Perception of teachers and students on the lack of appropriate content in the selection of poems in the prescribed class VI English textbook

There were 10 poems to be taught in class VI, of which 5 were compulsory, excluding poems like limerick and haiku which were not reflected in the prescribed class VI English textbook but mentioned in the *Instructional Guide* (IG).

Riverol [17] asserts that teachers should select poems which are suited to the learners' interests, language and maturity levels. Choice provides the learners with examples of many features of the language such as structure of sentences, variety of forms and different ways of connecting ideas. Teachers often need to "supplement, adapt, develop and choose poems that suit the levels and teaching purposes" [18].

Both ET1 and ET2 claimed that "the word 'courage' in the poem *Courage* by Robert William Service itself was abstract and easily confused the students with its meaning. The title and the content of the poem simply did not match". On the other hand, S1, S3, S4 and S6 condemned that the poem *Courage* was about killing and it was not a good thing to learn. In addition to this, both the teacher participants convinced that the poems *Celebration* by Alonzo Lopez and *Oh, Please* by Rowena Sommerville from the textbook were simple and easy for students to gasp its meaning. As a consequence, both the teacher participants strongly felt the need to replace the poems mentioned above with other poems on the same theme for better content delivery.

4.2 Perception of teachers on the lack of comprehension skills in students

It was found from the study that all the six student participants lacked comprehension skills in poetry. ET2 commented that the comprehension level of the students were low because of the lack of more poetry reading at school as well as at home. ET1 argued that "students hated the first look of poetry itself as most of the learners were reluctant to read in the first instance. Those who took interest in poetry took time to read correctly without continued guidance from teachers and parents".

In the same way, ET2 was of the perspective that the most appropriate way to improve comprehension skills of students in poetry was to read. In support of this, Tang [19] states that as a result of daily poem reading activities in the classroom, students with low reading levels are willing to improve comprehension skills within a short span of time.

Both ETI and ET2 claimed that despite teaching poetry reading using different strategies before the start of the lesson, students continued to be quite weak in comprehension. Rosenblatt [20] assures that reading a poem for meaning can help students in building relations between the poem and word meaning. Such a stance may help learners get the pleasure of reading and sharing their personal experiences.

4.3 Teachers' and students' perceptions on not fully understanding the poem taught in the classroom

Majority of the student participants faced difficulty in fully understanding the poem taught in the class. Denman [21] supports this viewpoint by stating that "all forms of poetry has to be heavy with some sort of deep, hidden meaning that cannot be seen" (p. 87).

S1, S2 and S5 mentioned that words like 'scuffled', 'valour', 'plumage', and 'oath' from the poem *Courage* by Robert William Service were never seen before and "to remember the meaning of these words for long was difficult". S4 and S6 for instance did not see a wheat before. Thus, it was difficult to understand the meaning of the word 'wheat' from the poem *Heads Bent Low* without knowing how a wheat looked like.

ET1 stated that the use of figurative language, rhythm, syntax and structure technically made the understanding of poetry difficult for students. Zelenkova [22] highlights that the conviction that learners might have difficulties in understanding poetry may be due to its linguistic and cultural vagueness and affects the teaching process directly. "The use of rhymes and sound made poetry difficult to understand, though the titles were interesting", S5 remarked.

The study revealed that teaching strategies used by the English teacher played a vital role in making poetry learning worthwhile in the classroom. Poetry was at times difficult for the teacher to understand too. S2, S4 and S6 felt

that the understanding of poetry was better when the teacher used gestures to explain the poem. On the other hand S1, S3 and S5 reported that learning poetry was interesting when the teacher explained the poem using simples sentences with examples.

"The teacher made the students to read the poem in groups and do presentation to the whole class. The lesson was not repeated the next day", S2 added.

"The teacher explained the poem and gave questions on the chalkboard. The teacher taught all poems in the same way", S3 exclaimed.

4.4 Teachers' and students' perceptions on the inability to pronounce difficult words from the poem

The study revealed that most of the student participants faced problems in pronouncing difficult words from the poem due to the lack of consistent reading. The students mostly found it difficult to pronounce words which were long and new. S1, S2 and S6 believed that most words from the poem *Heads Bent Low* from the textbook were new whereas S3, S4 and S5 argued that poetry reading at home was impossible as books were kept in the school. Most of the parents were uneducated and could not guide the children in the reading of poetry at home.

ET2 commented that teaching of pronunciation in poetry separately was not possible because of time constraint though it is important. ET1 highlighted that there was no mention of teaching pronunciation in the *Instructional Guide, Class VI*. Dalton [23] emphasises that pronunciation has no position in the curriculum. That doesn't mean pronunciation is not important. The fact is that the curriculum designers have not noticed its importance. Morley [24] further argues that the question is not about whether pronunciation should be taught, but it is about what and how pronunciation in poetry should be taught.

It was important for students to read to improve pronunciation in poetry. Both ET1 and ET2 specified that students who read more pronounced words more correctly and gasped the meaning of poetry faster than the rest of the friends in the class. As a result of this, Robertson [25] asserts that reading poetry daily is a great way to practice pronunciation and fluency as well

as a chance for students to play with rhymes and language.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Lack of appropriate content in the selection of poems in the prescribed class VI English textbook

The key findings that emerged from the first sub question of the research study was that there was lack of appropriate content in the selection of poems in the prescribed class VI English textbook. The key viewpoint that the two teacher participants had was that there was the need to teach poems from outside the prescribed class VI English curriculum for appropriate content delivery. Ainy [26] further confirms that when the poem the teacher teaches is enjoyable, learners are made to make use of experience and knowledge of the world.

One poem from the five compulsory poems mentioned in the *Instructional Guide, Class VI* was vague. One poem on the theme 'courage' was about killing and was not wise to be taught to students. Two poems on the theme 'celebration' were short and simple and did not contain much content from which students can learn. One of the poems on celebration was about dancing, feasting, laughing, talking and playing games through the night, but what was the enjoyment about, it was not mentioned.

Both the teacher participants were of the view that selection of content rich poems was crucial for the effective teaching and learning of poetry in the classroom. Thus, Selecting poetry that meets the teaching objectives in the *Instructional Guide* was a challenge for the teachers.

5.2 Students' Lack of Comprehension Skills in Poetry

It was found out from the study that majority of the student participants lacked comprehension skills in poetry because of the lack of consistent reading at school as well as at home. Whatever the students read at school was not sufficient to make the learning of poetry any better. Moreover, most of the parents were illiterate and could not guide the children to read poetry at home. In the same way, English teachers had no time to teach poetry reading separately in the classroom.

One of the teacher participant was of the standpoint that students hated the look of poetry itself. Children who were good readers took long to comprehend the meaning of poetry by reading without the support of teachers, parents and peers. Doyin [27] reveals that the concept of poetry reading must be understood as an effort of understanding and feeling everything contained in the poem.

The students continued to be weak at comprehension despite the English teacher trying all means to teach reading at the beginning of the lesson. Knowing how to read was vital to gasp the meaning of poetry.

5.3 Students' Inability to Fully Understand the Poems Taught in the Classroom

Student participants were not able to fully understand the poem taught in the class because of various reasons. All the student participants faced difficulty in understanding the meaning of most words from the poems taught in the classroom. Data analysis indicated that teachers had no time to teach word meaning separately. Doyin [27] otherwise suggests that looking for word meaning in poetry with time must be understood as an effort to understand and feel everything that is in the poem.

One of the teacher participants was of the agreement that the use of unknown linguistics made it difficult for students to comprehend the meaning of poetry. Chemwei et al. [28] believe that poetry is taught in English to provide opportunities to children to explore the linguistic and conceptual aspect of written literature without necessarily concentrating on the mechanics of language. Reading a poem aloud helped students to elaborate word meaning and connect experiences with the outside world. Hence, Elting and Firkins [29] support that the ability of the learners to read poetry properly can develop a sense of meaning based on experience.

Student participants were of the view that understanding of poetry was better when the teacher used gestures and simple sentences to explain the poem, and majority of the students expected the poetry lesson to be repeated the next day.

5.4 Students' Inability to Pronounce Difficult Words from the Poem

Both the teacher participants were of the viewpoint that pronouncing words from the poems were difficult due to the lack of students' reading habits at school as well as at home. The teaching of pronunciation separately in poetry was not possible as teachers had to spare time for other subjects too.

Moreover, there was no mention of teaching pronunciation in the *Instructional Guide, Class VI.* The best way to improve pronunciation was to read aloud. Findings indicate that students who read more were able to pronounce words more correctly in poetry compared to those who did not. Wong [30] further supports that the importance of pronunciation in poetry is even more distinct when its connected with reading.

5.5 Recommendations

The study firstly recommends English curriculum specialists from Department of Curriculum and Professional Development (DCPD), Ministry of Education (MoE) to take the suggestions of teachers from the field while selecting contents for poems to be included in the prescribed class VI English textbook.

The study secondly recommends English curriculum developers to stress on the importance of teaching word meaning and pronunciation before the start of the poetry lesson in the *Instructional Guide, Class VI* separately.

The study finally recommends English teachers of class VI find time to teach word meaning and pronunciation separately to students who are not able to cope with other students in poetry class.

CONSENT

As per international or university standard, participants' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author.

share their experiences of poetry teaching from the field for the benefit of the children. I am also extremely grateful to the six student participants for their patience for sharing their perceptions of poetry learning in the classroom.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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