The Effects of Cultural and Poetic Language on Appreciating Poetry

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Abstract:

This paper aims at providing new interpretation of the effects of culture and poetic language on appreciating English poetry at tertiary education on the part of students of English language. A descriptive analytical research method was followed and a questionnaire was used to collect the data pertaining to teachers of English language at public run universities in Khartoum city. After analysing the data statistically using the SPSS, the researcher found out that appreciating poetry depends on absorbing the target language as it represents a genuine part of the English poetic context in a poem. Moreover, learners of English should be exposed to the English culture through authentic and non-authentic materials at the initial stages of learning English.

Keywords: Cultural, poetic language, literary competence.

أثر العوامل الثقافية في تذوق الشعر الإنجليزي

إسحق جعفر البدوي

جامعة السودان للعلوم والتكنولوجيا – كلية اللغات

مستخلص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة لإيجاد تفسير لأثر العوامل الثقافية في تذوق الشعر الإنجليزي لدى الطلاب الجامعيين الذين يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كتخصص. انتهج الباحث في هذه الدراسة منهج البحث الوصفي التحليلي مستخدما الاستبيان كأداة لجمع البيانات المتعلقة بأساتذة الجامعات المتخصصين في اللغة الإنجليزية بمدينة الخرطوم. بعد تحليل البيانات إحصائياً، خلص الباحث إلى أن تذوق الشعر بصفة عامة يعتمد على الإلمام بثقافة أهل اللغة المستهدفة كمدخل لفهم السياقات الشعرية المختلفة داخل النص الشعري إضافة إلى أنه ينبغي استخدام المادة التي تحتوي على سياقات غير مصممة لأغراض تعليمية بُغية تمليك المتعلم مظاهر الثقافة الإنجليزية في المراحل الأولى من تعلم اللغة.

كلمات مفتاحية : ثقافي، لغة الشعر، الكفاءة الادبية

Introduction

Probably, there might be pivotal intersections between poetry i.e. the art of writing poems and culture which was defined as "the total set of beliefs, attitudes, customs, behavior, social habits, etc. of the members of a particular society." (Richards, 1987: 179)

However, the current polemic of cultural effects on appreciating poetry taking into account cultural pluralism is summarized by Maley (1985:135): "carefully selected poems can open us themes which are common to us whatever our cultural background, and can thus act as powerful stimulus to the students' own reflective thinking ".

Furthermore, culture is obviously the key of understanding societies in terms of their beliefs, way of living and language. Hence, the most effective medium of cultural transmission is language as it is described as the mirror which reflects human thoughts and behavior. Moreover, language and culture are interdependent in such a way that being familiar with the culture of a certain community necessitates profound knowledge of the language used among its members.

The mutual understanding between two or more interlocutors pragmatically depends on their background knowledge and the context in which the language is used. (Hedge, 2000: 24) could succinctly pinpoint the constraints of cultural factors on learning natural languages explaining the obstacles that students undergo when learning a language non-natively.

Vocabulary items of a language might have lexical considerations which would totally be different in comparison to other ones and that is due to an assortment of cultural factors that would determine the discrepancies between these languages. So that learners should take these differences into account.

After highlighting the relationship between language and culture, it is crucial and vital to shed light on the connection and liaison between language and a paramount human art which is "poetry". It is an extraordinary way of contracting ideas, concepts and social perspectives in a few words. Therefore, it is a prosaic incisive means which is somewhat capable of moving humans sentimentally and affectionately. Nevertheless, it remains the lively and vigorous medium for conveying cultural metamorphosis among nations as well as their statuesque in a fairly economic, eloquent, and shrewd manner.

The significance of poetry as a popular literary genre could decisively allocate a good space for it at tertiary education as a genuine part of its curricula. However, the problems encountered by students when dealing with it (taking Sudanese students who study English literature as an instance), are definitely due to the alien cultural mismatch moreover to the environmental differences between the Sudanese culture "which is a mixture of Afro-Arab features) and European ones. Therefore, some ideas, objects, concepts, or any other regional considerations implied in the English poetry remain indecipherable for non-native speakers of English.

It could be said that culture is the camshaft which gives life to the body of poems. Stressing this claim which secures the relationship between poets and their cultures, (Brumfit and Carter, 1986) reported that, "poets introduce a fundamental structure of beliefs and

interests which reflect the particular culture or section of society into which they were born and in which they grew up".

As far as the researcher is concerned, this study will probably revolve around the tangible effect of cultural factors on appreciating English poetry at tertiary level, with special reference to the poems of the British poet Graham Burchell to confound these irksome factors, analyze them and state the expected correspondence between the postulated hypotheses and variables of this phenomenon in a convenient and relatively economic way reviewing what has been issued so far by the authors, critics and expertise of the field for more incisive interpretation and explorations. chapters.

This study aims at:

1- Providing new interpretations of the effect of culture and poetic language on appreciating English poetry.
2- Shedding light on the importance of poetry as a literary genre that might aid SLA and FLA.

Questions of the Study

- To what extent do culture and poetic language affect appreciating poetry?
- Do Sudanese students of English face difficulties in appreciating English poetry?
- What makes English poetry difficult to appreciate?

Statement of the Problem

Culture is considered to be an essential component of appreciating foreign literature, for it is the melting pot of arts or the shared background between poets and their readers and listeners. However, the problems which face students of English at Sudanese universities when dealing with English poetry are not only attributed to their mental capacity, literary competence or lack of connoisseurity, but that might relatively have something to do with some cultural variations which would widen the distance between the students' minds and some poetic contexts resulting in an imperfect appreciation of English poetry. So, appropriate analyses, syntheses, analogies and contrasts focusing on the poems of Graham Burchell will be done in the upcoming

Methods

The study seeks to understand and document the relationship between culture and appreciating poetry. The researcher followed the descriptive analytical method and a questionnaire was used as a data gathering tool. The context being investigated is the Sudanese tertiary students specialized in English Language at the public run universities in Khartoum city. English language instructors in the same context were given the questionnaire to provide authentic data on the basis of which the results can be generalized. The questionnaire was rectified by three arbitrators who were associate professors in English language at different universities in Khartoum to check its validity. Then fifty copies of it were distributed among instructors of English language at public run universities in Khartoum city.

After using Alpha Cronbach and Spearman-Brown Formula, to test the questionnaire reliability, it proved that it was reliable. Hence, the data were processed statistically as the methodology of the study is based on describing the problem and analyzing the data statistically.

Previous Studies

This part reviews some of the previous studies related to the literature of the field being surveyed. These studies are verily matched with the present one in terms of similarities and difference to find out the points of intersections for more consolidation and explorations in the field.

Waleed Abd Elwahad (2016) at Sudan University of Science and Technology handled, Utilizing Translation to Boost Understanding Among English language Learners. The study aimed at investigating the effect of learning the culture of the target language on developing English language skills. Hence, He assumes that the awareness of cultural variation, grammatical structure and authentic exercises in translation skills are useful items that a syllabus should include when teaching English. The findings proved that English as a foreign language students should be trained exclusively on the cultural mismatches between English and Arabic in terms of sentence structure, grammatical rules and idiomatic expressions to overcome cultural problems as barriers to language acquisition. Similarly, the present study sheds light on the essentiality of culture as an obstacle that would render learners of English fail to appreciate English poetry properly and easily.

Relevantly, Ibrahim Al Sabateen (2008) at Sudan University of Science and Technology conducted a thesis on the effect of lexical, grammatical and cultural background knowledge on reading comprehension. He postulated a hypothesis that there is no significant difference in reading comprehension between subjects who have cultural background knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge. Eventually, he came up with the findings that there are statistical significant differences in performance in reading comprehension between subjects who have cultural knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge. Thus, the previous study in question provided good evidence that culture is verily the backbone of understanding written and spoken language in almost all contexts. Simultaneously, the present study endorses the role of culture as a factor which should be taught alongside with the other aspects of language as long as it plays a major role in understanding both written and spoken forms of language including poetry as a distinctive literary genre whose language is based on the various components of culture in most cases.

Accordingly, Ian Bulter (2006) at University of South Africa investigated integrating language and literature in English studies. He hypothesized that the integration of literature and language studies can do as much for the language development of the student as for the development of capacities for literary understanding and appreciation. The researcher used a questionnaire and interviews to come up with many findings some of which can be couched as follows: language learning and literary studies are interdependent and in a specialist context, should be seen as complementary at all stages in the educational process. The researcher displayed the effect of cultural factors on language learning and their impact on literary understanding and appreciation of literary texts in general.

The same context has been handled by the present study as the effect of cultural factors on appreciating English poetry is one of its variables which were given a good space across the pages of the chapter in question.

Eventually, both of the studies elaborate the predictable relationship between literature, language and culture as different areas which have points of intersection and the language learner has to deal with them properly to explore their dimensions and master them one after another.

Within the same context, Dorothea Meihuizen (2001) at the University of Zululand, conducted a thesis for the fulfillment of PhD requirements entitled "The Reading of Poetry: Appreciation and Evaluation". The study aimed at formulating an evaluative content which would shed light on the connection between reading and appreciating poetry with a special reference to various poetic experience.

The major assumption was that: language and cultural studies are strongly connected with poetry reading and appreciation in addition to their unstultifiable contribution to these processes. On the basis of that the researcher arrived some essential findings some of which that teaching the target language culture is the building block on the basis of which students will find it easy to read and appreciate poetry overcoming the boundaries of linguistic and cultural barrier.

Comparatively, this study takes cultural barriers as its first variable which contributes to the process of poetry appreciation. Hence, it considers teaching the culture of the target language within the course of teaching and learning inside the language classroom is crucial and pivotal particularly at the initial phases of language learning and that is regarded as a well-grounded threshold which would fortify the ability of appreciating literary texts.

Results

After collecting the data using a questionnaire, the obtained data was analyzed statistically to arrive at the main results and findings illustrated in Table (1). The statistical results after testing the tool reliability could test the postulated hypothesis to generalize the results and interpret the variables of the phenomenon being investigated.

Hypothesis: There is a strong relationship between culture and appreciating poetry.

Table (1): The frequency distribution of the responses of the sample members of the study for the first hypothesis phrases

Sentences	Frequency and percentage %									
	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly agree	
	f	P (%)	f	P (%)	f	P (%)	f	P (%)	f	P (%)
There is a strong relationship between culture and appreciating poetry.	10	14.3	3	4.3	6	8.6	29	41.4	22	31.4
Poetry is a component of society cultural aspects.	17	24.3	5	7.1	9	12.9	22	31.4	17	24.3
Poetry would appropriately convey communities' cultural variables.	3	4.3	5	7.1	10	14.3	35	50	17	24.3
The language used in English poetry, mostly reflects the English culture.	0	0.0	6	8.6	9	12.9	30	42.9	25	35.7
Teaching culture to English as foreign language students will help them appreciate poetry.	8	11.4	11	15.7	5	7.1	28	40	18	25.7
Familiarizing students with the target language culture is a step towards appreciating poetry.	11	15.7	5	7.1	0	0.0	33	47.1	21	30

Source: prepared by researcher, based on field study's data, 2018.

From Table (1) which explains the ratios and frequencies of the hypothesis Expressions which states "There is a strong relationship between culture and appreciating poetry.

The researcher noticed the following:

The statement "there is a strong relationship between culture and appreciating poetry". It is noticeable that (51) out of the total number of the subjects agree at a rate of (72.8%) of the sample, whereas, (6) candidates are neutral and that represents (8.6%) of the subjects, while (13) of the subjects at the rate of (18.6%) disagree.

The second statement, which states "Poetry is a component of society cultural aspects." It is found that (39) agree, at the rate of (55.7%) of the sample, but (9) respondents are neutral, at the rate of (12.9%), while there are (22) candidates disagree at the rate of (31.4%) from the sample.

The third statement, which states "Poetry would appropriately convey communities' cultural variables". It is apparent that (52) candidates agree, at the rate of (74%) of the sample, while there are (10) neutral respondents, at the rate of (14.3%) of the sample, while there are (8) of the subjects disagree, at the rate of (11.4%) from the sample.

The fourth statement, which states "The language used in English poetry, mostly reflects the English culture". We find that (55) out of the total number agree, and at the rate of (78.6%) of the sample, while the neutrals are (9) candidates of the sample, and at the rate of (12.9%) Of the sample, while there are (6) people disagree, from the sample at the rate by (8.6%).

The fifth statement, which states "Teaching culture to English as foreign language students will help them appreciate poetry." It clarifies that (46) respondents agree, at the rate of (75.7%) of the sample, while the neutral ones are (5) of the sample, at the rate of (7.1%) Of the sample, While there are (19) of the subjects disagree, at the rate of (27.1%) from the sample.

The sixth statement, which states "Teaching culture to English as foreign language students will help them appreciate poetry." It is remarkable that (54) candidates agree, at the rate of (77.1%) of the sample, while the neutral candidates are (2) of the sample, at the rate of (2.9%) of the sample, while (14) out of the total number disagree, at the rate of (20%) from the sample.

Discussion

Having tested the hypothesis, it is obvious that students will face difficulties of appreciating poetry unless they are appropriately exposed to the target language culture and to ample cultural capsules that will enable them deal with poetry and develop their poetic competence. Hence, English poetry is a pivotal part of the English culture and one of its essential components. Thereby, poets base their verses on cultural aspects such as: popular food, folklore, religion, politics, and all the variables of their local culture and circumference environment which usually enrich their literary contexts.

Culture as a Multidimensional Domain

Culture is a multidimensional domain which consists of various variables. As far as the researcher is concerned, it is worth mentioning that English as a cultural universe, few would disagree with the view expressed in Quirk *et al.* (1985: 2) that "English the world's most important language." It is certainly as David Crystal noted more than a decade ago in his encyclopedic Dictionary of language and languages (1992: 121), it is spoken by a large and ever-increasing number of people. It has official status in over sixty countries. English is also the language of international air traffic control, and the chief language of publishing and technology. Quirk *et al.* (1985: 16) emphasizes the cultural neutrality of English using the following words:

> *"English which we have referred to as a lingua*
>
> *franka, is pre-eminently the most international*
>
> *language. Though the mention of the language*
>
> *may at one remind us of England, on the one hand,*
>
> *or cause association of the might of United States*
>
> *on the other, it carries less implication of political*
>
> *or cultural specifity than any other living tongue."*

The above excerpt well describes English as a widely used language by people from various cultures and that makes the English poetry hard to appreciate as it implies different cultures covering a vast geographical area. Some English poems include cultural values belonging to the Euro zone. For instance, (Burchell, 2015.17) in his poem "daughter of Daedalus" uses a Greek legend which is mostly known by European people as it relates an imaginary story in their history. It talks about a king who imprisoned one of his servant in a tunnel on an island. Eventually, the servant made his son and himself wings of wax and flew with his son till they reached the sun where their wings melt and they fell down. Regarding this poetic context, students will never be able to appreciate it unless they are well aware of that legend

Poetic Language and Poetry

There are various deviations from the ordinary linguistic criteria which regulate language use and usage semantically, grammatically, and morphologically in poetry rather than prose.

Poetic language, at least in some theorization differs from the everyday ordinary language. In ordinary usage language is mostly automatic, and words are used in a way that does not attract attention, but in poetry the language is used in such a special way that the reader makes a distinction between poetic language and the daily or usual one. How is this differentiation made?

Before dealing with this question, the starting point could be the very notion of language as poetry cannot be imagined outside language. There have been many different definitions for the term. (Pie, 1966: 141) defines language as "a system of communication by sound, operating through the organs, among members of a given community, and using vocal symbols possessing arbitrary conventional meanings" As (Hall, 1968: 18) puts it "language is

the institution whereby humans communicates and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral- arbitrary systems" What is common in these definitions is that "language is a means of communication" However, language is not just a way of communicating daily needs. It also speaks about the cultural loads of centuries, beliefs, traditions and thoughts. To put it in different words, language performs different functions. (Jacobson, 1981: 25) assumes six basic functions for language: emotive, conative, phatic, metalanguage, referential and poetic. Among these functions, poetic function is related to the aesthetic and artistic aspects of language and is mainly used in literature and poetry.

Although Jacobson does not reduce the domain of poetic function to poetry, he considers it to be the dominant and determining function of verbal art, whereas in all other verbal activities, it acts as a subsidiary, accessory constituent.

In principle, the language of poetry comes into existence when some norms are broken or deviated from. According to (Kadkani, 1989: 240) "Poetry is nothing but breaking the norms of ordinary and logical language." Hence, there is almost no literary work that does not involve a sort of deviation from ordinary language.

Russian formalists considered literature as a special use of language which achieves its distinctness from deviating and distorting practical language (in Selden, Widdoson, and Brooker, 1997: 32). The proper study of literature, they declared, is literature itself. To study literature, they asserted is to study "poetics" which is an analysis of a work's constituent parts- its linguistic and structural features- or its "form" "in Bresseler, 2007: 51))

As they argued, form includes what they call "devices" which comprises the artfulness and literariness of any text.

The formalists' chief focus of literary analysis was the examination of a text's literariness and the language used in the text. They believe that literary language is different from everyday language. Unlike ordinary speech, literary language foregrounds itself. Through devices such as imagery, structure, paradox, rhyme, scheme, etc., literary language identifies itself as deviations from every day speech patterns and produces the defining features of literariness, i.e. defamiliarization. Introduce by the Russian formalist victor Shoklovsky, defamiliarization is the process of making strange the "familiar" art exists in order to recover for us the sensation of life which is diminished in the automatized routine of every day 'experience' (Baldick, 2004: 62) the result of this process of deformalization is that it enables us once again to see the world anew in its all splendor. Mukarovesky (1932), a member of Prague Linguistic Circle, developed the formalist concept of "defamiliarization" into the more systematic "foregrounding" which he defined as "the aesthetically international distortion of the linguistic components." In Widdoson (1997, 38) foregrounding causes the reader to draw attention from the putative paraphrasal meaning of message "what is said to focus on the message itself and how it is said" (Fowler, 1987: 98)

Leech (1969: 57) has applied the concept of foregrounding to poetry. He considered the foreground figure as "linguistic deviation while the background is the language itself" According to Leech; it is a very general principle of artistic communication that "work of art

in some way deviates from norms which we, as members of society have learned to expect in the medium used.

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