Selection Criteria for prescribing poetry to the students of
English as a Second Language

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I. Abstract:

In almost all universities at undergraduate level poetry is prescribed. Poems are selected from American, Australian, African, British, etc. anthologies. Many poems are felt obscure by the students in India, due to the improper selection criteria. Students should be taken at the centre of ‘teaching – learning process’. The authorities involved in the selection of poems should think about the level of students, their background etc. before prescribing the poems.

In view of the above circumstances, an effort is made to suggest a selection criteria for poems considering E.L.T. in India.

[Keywords: linguistic criteria, difficulty level, background, subject matter potential]

Teaching poetry is an inevitable part of curriculum in almost all universities in India. But instead of taking joy and feeling pleasure, poetry becomes a tedious job on the part of both the teachers and students. To avoid such confusion care should be taken in prescribing poems for the Indian students of English as a second language.

Many scholars have expressed their views in this regard.
3. Selection Criteria:

J. A. Bright and G. P. McGregor in *Teaching English As A Second Language* have proposed some general selection criteria. They are as follows:

1] Linguistic Criteria:

a) The vocabulary level must be appropriate. A poem containing many new words is unreadable. Difficult poems can be toiled painfully through with innumerable explanations by the teacher or references to the dictionary but the process is dreary.

b) The complexity of the grammatical structure should not be too great.

c) A high density of idiom and special registers like scientific and technological vocabulary should not be too great.

d) An archaic or old fashioned style, a heavy load of local dialect or marked eccentricity would count against the poem.

2] Background:

a) If the background is familiar to the student because it is local or refers to his social background, then there will be no problem in understanding the poem by the students.

b) If the text supplies an adequate background there may be little difficulty. This sometimes happens when the author is writing for readers who cannot be assumed to know the background of his history.

c) The background must be within the students’ imaginative grasp.
a] The poem must interest the student, rather than the teacher. ‘Literature is caught not taught’. The teacher should not infect the classes with boredom.

b] The student must be able to see some relevance to his own situation, so that he gets drawn into the book.

c] The subject matter must be suitable for classroom teaching and it must be worth re-reading.

d] The subject matter (content) must be appropriate to the age of the students.

Alexander Baird² points out that selection of poems should be made by taking into consideration the following things:

1] The poem should be about something which is within the experience of the class or which at least can be brought within their experience.

2] The poem should not contain unfamiliar constructions or archaic language.

3] The teacher should make as certain as he can that the poem he chooses is one which he himself can make vivid to the class. This is most important.

According to him, “to choose a poem as a text on which to base a grammar lesson is to abuse it so is to use as the material for oral or written comprehension”.

Ryburn W.M.³ in his article “The Teaching of Poetry” suggests that:

1] The poetry we teach must be easy, very easy to understand. It would seem that such poems would be hard to find. The poem must be straightforward and easy to follow. The easier it is for the students to follow, the more enjoyment they will get out of it.
In the middle stage, therefore only narrative poem should be taught. In the High stage poems should be mainly narrative with a few easy ones of a non-narrative character. Right through schools poems with unusual archaic difficult language and thought should be avoided. It is all to the good if poems can be found which deal with Indian scenes, stories, etc.

2] Poetry should be a part of cursory reading and should not form part of intensive work. An experienced teacher offered the following caution: "Poetry and literary prose which has much English that is not for the pupil’s daily use, never treat intensively".

3] Poetry should not be an examination subject. No surer method of defeating our object of giving pupil’s enjoyment through reading can be found than to make poetry an examination subject.

According to Bernard Tucker poems for children about nature ought to concern themselves with nature in a concrete rather than in general sense. Poems about animals are popular, and often traps for the unwary. Of course there is also the tendency to write poems which deal with incidents of childhood. The teacher needs to tread warily with poems which philosophize or point a moral. Perhaps the most popular poems with students are character studies especially if they are humorous. The students will enjoy Philip Booth’s (1965) “Uncle Fitzgerald”. An example of the kind of simple, uncomplicated poem which can be read to the students for their enjoyment. According to him it is most important to introduce poetry dealing with contemporary issues. Students are aware of the world around them. They need a balance of the magical, the enchanted and the mythical with poetry which relates immediately to their lives and experiences. Ballads, according to
him can be successfully used with children. But as he says, "by their nature ballads can sometimes be monotonous and so can narrative poems. But later on he adds that children are great traditionalists and preservers of rhymes – nursery rhymes for younger children and ballads and folk songs for older children should be retained and promoted.

L.A.G. Strong in his article "Poetry in schools", says,

The whole secret is to choose a subject in which a child is interested. The poem must deal with something the child cares about and in a way which he can understand. Then the fact that it is in verse will be no hindrance to his appreciation. On the contrary it will be a help.

Brian Tomlinson in his article, "Using poetry with Mixed Ability Language classes" has proposed the following selection criteria for exploiting the potential value of poetry to the full.

1] Universal appeal -

Very special topics might have great appeal for a few members of a group but are unlikely to attract the majority. However, such universal topics as youth, old age, marriage, birth, love, education and friendship have great potential as most learners have close experiences of both.

2] Surface simplicity –

It is especially important for a mixed ability group that the poems used are linguistically accessible to the weakest member of the group and that there is nothing in the title or opening lines which might frighten off such members of the group.

3] Potential depth –
It is also very important that poems used with mixed ability groups have potential depth of meanings and can thus challenge the brighter members of the group who have no problems in responding to the linguistic surface of the poems.

4] **Affective potential** –

Poems which express strong emotions, attitudes, feelings, opinions or ideas are usually more productive than those which are gentle, descriptive or neutral.

5] **Contemporary language** –

For most 'non-literate' learners it is important that the language of the poems they are asked to read resemble the language they are being asked to learn. Most foreign language learners are daunted and alienated by poems which language is remote in time and style from the variety they are learning.

6] **Brevity** -

Some members of every class will be capable of enjoying long poems, but it is safer to use, short poems with a mixed ability class, so as to minimize the risk of 'losing' people.

7] **Potential for illustration** -

The ideal poem for the mixed ability EFL/ESL class is one which satisfies the criteria outlined above and which lends itself to visual, auditory or tactile illustration through the use of media (e.g. slides, films, objects, photography, music) or specially designed aids (e.g., drawings, sound effects, mime).

**Conclusion:**
The selection criteria outlined by Bright and McGregor as well as by Brian Tomlinson are likely to be most useful in the Indian context, as they have taken into consideration two important features of the Indian situation:

1] English as a second language,

2] Mixed ability group so typical of the Indian system.

Taking into consideration the present situation of English in India, the following selection criteria may be suggested:

1] Poems containing too many archaic words are unsuitable to the students of English as a second language. Many a time poems containing learned vocabulary become a hindrance in the enjoyment of a poem. So the poems which contain archaic as well as erudite vocabulary should be avoided.

2] Poems having very complex grammatical structures, idioms and special registers should be avoided.

3] Poems containing too many local details of social life and nature may be avoided.

4] Poems with remote allusions should be avoided.

5] Easy, simple and small but meaningful poem using contemporary language may be selected.

6] The background and the subject matter of the poem should be within the reach of the student and appropriate to their age.

7] Poems about nature, childhood and about characters especially humorous and dealing with contemporary issues may prove useful.

8] Poems dealing with universal themes like youth, marriage, love, friendship, birth etc. appeal to the students so they might be suitable.
9] Indo-English poems may be nearer home to our students but care should be taken to keep the other eight criteria mentioned above in mind.

10] It is not important that a poem is Indo-Anglian, British or African so long as it satisfies the criterion of universal appeal and appropriate linguistic level.

References


