Teaching of Poetry to Nigeria ESL Learners: Stylistics Approach

by

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Abstract
The present study investigated how stylistics approach can be used as a powerful teaching resource to enrich grammar, vocabulary and integrated language skills of Nigeria ESL learners. Four statistical surveys were conducted on some selected students and teachers of English from Kwara state college of Arabic and Islamic legal studies, Ilorin to elicit their impression and performance in the area of teaching and learning of poetry. Statements pertinent to different aspects of poetry teaching and study were used for major data collection. The findings showed that there exists a significant difference in the performance of stylistics based learners and traditional based learners in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and integrated language skills. The stylistics approach for teaching poetry was found very exciting, because it was learners centered and based on repertoire of interactive language exercises. The findings from the four surveys conducted in this study further revealed that the stylistics approach for teaching poetry in ESL classroom was perceived by both the teachers and students as an enjoyable means to enrich and energize the learning environment of an ESL classroom. Furthermore, the study recommends that the stylistic approach if properly implemented will aid teaching and learning of poetry in our schools
Keywords
Poetry, motivation, resource, language skills, literary expression, rhythmic tone, stylistic approach

Introduction

A mere mention of the word "poetry" to a group of students evokes in them, at best, cool indifference, and at worst, plain hostility. There is no doubt that poetry is perceived by many people, including teachers as something highbrow, difficult and obscure. It is common prejudice among many teachers in secondary school that poetry is difficult, and they are therefore reluctant to teach it.

This paper aims to explore how the various tools of linguistic analysis can be used to teach poetry to ESL learners in order to improve their proficiency in grammar, vocabulary, accent, intonation and integrated language skills. The chunks of language used in poetry are full of emotional and linguistic melody. They can give readers not only a strong feel about language but can also serve as a rich linguistic tool to improve language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. Poetry has musical effect so it can provide motivational buzz to classroom activity. Learners can acquire correct study in pronunciation, intonation and rhyming patterns by reading through or listening to poems by the competent and well trained teachers of English. Poetry can add vigor to the process of learning new thoughts and beautiful diction because the poet deliberately chooses words and their sound effects while composing poetry.

These poetic words create a charm of their own. The learners can really enjoy the linguistic beauty of these sentences. The poet communicates from heart to heart by figurative and poetic expression. Poetry can nurture in learners' robust sensibility and strong feel about choice of words, syntactical formulation, rhetorical and aesthetic beauty of language. It makes learners learn beautiful similes, metaphors and paradox that express unique thoughts and emotions of a poet. So by reading poetry learners can rejoice in intrinsic beauty of poetic words, their sound, meanings and their profound poetic effect. They not only learn symbolic and literary language used in the poem but they also feel inspired to add the same literary and rhetorical flavor in their own writing. Most of the tried and tested activities such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary and grammar can also be effectively taught by introducing stylistics based instructional approach to poetry.

Stylistic approach according to Shuaib (2006) deals with investigating how the resources of a language code can be put to use in the production of the actual messages. This approach considers literature primarily as discourse, a communicative discourse. It also deals with how the use of language patterns in a text which creates a form of communication that covey its particular messages. According to Niazir (2010) stylistic provides a way of integrating two subjects. English language and literature in English. It is systemic teaching of literature and it helps in deepening the process of understanding. Fisher-Stake (2010) in his view describes stylistic as a study of language in literature and that it is a part of linguistic. By analyzing the linguistic pattern of a text, it gives answers to questions such as how a literary effect is encoded in language. The goal of this approach is to decode meaning and structural features of literary texts by identifying linguistic pattern in the texts (Weber, 1996).

Stylistic is the only linguistic discipline which allows the analyses of a literary texts and their literary meaning by way of linguistic techniques. In this approach, the teaching of literature and poetry in particular emphasizes the writer's choice of words and their functions, the structure and the deviation from the norms, the use of foregrounding and parallelism, and other figure of speech, the lexical cohesion and coherence in the texts and the grammatical patterns, and how all these bring out the message or meaning in the texts (Makinde, 2004); Timucin, (2010).

Textual or stylistics based approach means close reading of the poem without any biographical and sociological details about the poet. The major focus is on the poem itself

which means discussion on key individual words and beautiful structure prior to reading of poetry. Such a deep textual analysis propounded by Cleanth Brooks will open a fresh perspective on new ideas and language and sensitizes students to unusual and interesting lexical and syntactical components of poetic language. Stylistics approach for teaching poetry will encourage students to learn syntactic, semantic, rhythmic and lexical components.

Statement of the Problem

As one of the subjects offered in secondary schools, literature has been very beneficial to the students. It is however disheartening that the performance of students in this subject has been very poor. This has been attributed to poor teaching of the subject especially poetry which is an important genre of literature. Researchers, in an attempt to find solution to the trend of poor performance in the subject have experimented with various instructional strategies which were found very effective for the teaching of literature especially poetry. The significant contribution of these strategies, not withstanding, performance of students in literature and poetry in particular continues to decline. Scholars have advocated the adoption of students centered strategies that make for active involvement of learners in the teaching and learning process of poetry. Two of such strategies are thematic and stylistic.

Studies have attested to the effectiveness of these strategies but in the teaching of other areas of literature such as prose and drama. The effect of these strategies in the teaching of poetry has not enjoyed much research attention. Therefore, this study examined effect of stylistic approaches on students' achievement in poetic literature.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this approach is to encourage the learners to be more active in the classroom activities. As learner proceeds through the texts, they are encouraged to pay attention to the way language is used. They come to grips with the meaning and increased their general awareness of English language. With this model of studying literature, the teacher can choose to focus on general grammar and vocabulary.

It also encourages the students to engage in the close study of the linguistic features of the text to enable them make meaningful interpretation of a text independently. The aim is to help learners read and study literature more competently.

Significance of the Study

It is expected that the finding from this study would lead to effective strategies for the teaching of poetry. It is also expected that the results would lead to improve teaching and

learning in poetry with the use of stylistic approach. It is also hoped that the study would lead to improvement of students' achievement and make poetry a pleasant pursuit. It is also possible that the result of the study could be of use to curriculum designers and text books writers.

Hypothesis

The research hypotheses formulated for the current study are as follows:

i   Poetry if chosen carefully may be an immense source of motivation for ESL learners.

ii   Using poetry to teach English will increase learners' exciting learning experience.

iii   Teaching of poetry with linguistic devices and communicative approach will be extremely exciting for both teachers and the students.

iv   Carefully chosen poems may provide deep insight into literary expression.

v   Learners' efforts to analyze poems will increase their creative talents.

vi   There will be a significant difference between the performance of traditional learners and Stylistics based learners in learning accent, grammar, vocabulary and integrated language skills.

Methodology

Four surveys were explored to determine the effectiveness of the stylistics approach in learning pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and integrated language skills. First and foremost a Shakespearean sonnet '*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?'* was selected. Then a stylistics based model was built on repertoire of language exercises such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary. This model was introduced to selected teachers who were teaching English literature and linguistics at different Colleges. The model was explained to the teachers and they were asked to adopt it in their ESL classes. Five statements about poetry were prepared to elicit the impression of the teachers after they experiment the given model. The teachers were asked to check *Agree, Disagree, I can't say,* against the above mentioned five statements.

The purpose of the second survey was to determine the relative effectiveness of traditional method (Group A) and stylistics based approach (Group B) for teaching poetry in learning pronunciation. 100 students (50 for each group) from Kwara state College of Arabic and Islamic legal studies, Ilorin were selected for this experiment. Under the traditional method teachers just explained and paraphrased the background information and the theme of the poem. On the contrary, stylistics based model incorporate observation, marking difference, drill practice and individual practice followed by evaluation. Through this model the teachers

were first assigned to listen and observe how well the students were able to produce accurate accent, intonation and rhythm of the poem. Afterwards the students were asked to read aloud so that they could explore their own levels of performance in pronunciation. While performing the drill the students were asked to read the poem first in chorus and then individually for ten minutes. After one week a similar test was given to both the groups to evaluate the performance of each student of both groups. Each student of both groups was asked to read the poem aloud with good accentual and intonation patterns. This test was aimed just to explore the effectiveness of linguistic based approach in learning correct pronunciation and rhythm of the poem. The third survey was aimed to investigate the performance of both the groups in learning grammar, vocabulary, speaking and writing skills. The stylistics based approach included vocabulary exercises based on matching words with meaning. It was aimed to sharpen students' ability to guess the meaning through context. Grammar exercise was based on the formation of comparative adjectives and formation of nouns. This grammar exercise was relevant to the understanding of the poem. The test of Speaking skill was based on Group discussion about the theme, form, style, similes, metaphors and rhyming scheme of the poem. The students participated in the group discussion. This was a golden opportunity for them to speak without hesitation and to improve their speaking skill. The test for writing skill was focused on writing small sentences concerning different aspects of the poem such as theme, figure of speech, similes, metaphors and rhythm of the poem. After one week similar stylistics based test was given to the students of both the groups. The time given was one hour and the correct answer to each item received one point. There was no penalty for false responses. The students of both groups were initially told that they would take part in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and vocabulary and grammar activities. The fourth survey was carried to explore what the students of stylistics based group really thought about different aspects of poetry. It was necessary to elicit students' attitude towards poetry after they experienced stylistics based model for teaching poetry. To find out whether the learners really enjoyed these stylistics based approach was the major thrust of this survey. This was the first time the students were exposed to English poetry with such an effective model in ESL classroom. In this survey the students were asked to check *Agree, strongly agree and Disagree* against four statements on different aspects of poetry.

Table 1:   Teachers' impression about poetry

	Statement	Agree	Disagree	I can't say
1.	Poetry if chosen carefully may be an Immense source motivation for ESL learners.	0%	5%	5%
2.	Using poetry for learning English will increase Learners' exciting learning experience	95%	0%	5%
3.	Teaching poetry will improve Language skills.	90%	5%	5%
4.	Carefully chosen poems may provide deep insight into literary expression.	80%	5%	15%
5.	Learners' efforts to analyze poems will increase their creative talents.	90%	5%	5%

The first survey in table 1 was conducted on teachers who were teaching English to students at different colleges. First, the teachers were introduced to the stylistics based model for teaching poetry in ESL class. The teachers experiment this model in their ESL classes and later on gave their responses to different statements pertinent to the use of poetry in ESL classes. The overwhelming majority of the teachers found these stylistics based model for teaching poetry very exciting and productive. In response to the first statement 90% of the teachers agreed that poetry if chosen carefully would be an immense source of motivation to learners. They opined that poetry containing current theme with rich linguistic elements would really give pleasure and inspire learners. It was a new idea to use stylistics approach for teaching poetry. Interestingly, many of the teachers expressed that using linguistic tools for teaching poetry will equip learners with language skills. In response to the second statement 95% of the teachers were of the view that poetry would provide learners with exciting learning experience. In response to the third statement 90% of the teachers agreed that teaching of poetry based on language activities would improve language skills. The model for teaching poetry which was provided to the teachers was skills oriented. So, the teachers while applying the same model in the classroom perceived that the model as an important resource for teaching language skills. In response to the fourth statement 80% of the teachers strongly supported the idea that carefully chosen poems might provide deep insight into literary expression. In

response to the fifth statement 90 % of the learners agreed that the learners' efforts to analyze the poem linguistically would increase their creative potential.

Table 2: **Traditional Approach (T-Approach) vs. Stylistics Approach (S-Approach)**

Percentage of Marks	Traditional Approach	Stylistic Approach
0 to 10	10%	0%
11 to 20	20%	0%
21 to 30	20%	0%
31 to 40	30%	0%
41 to 50	10%	0%
51 to 60	10%	20%
61 to 70	10%	30%
71 to 80	0%	20%
81 to 90	0%	20%
91 to 100	0%	10%

The table 2 investigated the performances of both groups. The performance of the students of traditional approach was very poor. The majority of the students were unable to read the poem with proper accentual and intonation patterns. None of the students of traditional approach obtained 100% correct in pronunciation. The performance of only 10% students was 60% correct. The overall performance of the students of traditional approach was below the average. On the contrary, the performance of the students of stylistics approach improved. In stylistics approach the improvement was possible after the students listened to their teachers when they were reading the poem aloud with correct accent, intonation and rhythm. At this point the teacher explained the accentual patterns of difficult words, intonation and rhythm of the poem. Traditional learners were given no opportunity to practice pronunciation, so they pronounced wrongly the following words:(1) winds /wɪnds/ (2) bʌds /bʌds/ (3) lease /liːz/ (4) brag /breg/ (5) breathe/briːθ/ (6) breath / briːθ / (7) May /maɪ/ (8) possession /peəzezʃ(ə)n/ (9) all /aːl/ (10) compare /ˈkəmpeə(r)/ (11) temperate /temˈp(ə)rət/ (12) short /ʃaː(r)t/ (13) haven /ˈhæv(ə)n/. Traditional learners do not have any idea about how to pronounce a plural like *winds and buds.* They pronounce /s/ sound instead of /z/. As per rule /s/ is pronounced /z/ when it comes after voiced sound like /d/. On the contrary, the learners of stylistics approach pronounced nearly all the aforesaid words correctly since they were given opportunity to listen to the teachers when they were reading the poem with correct pronunciation. They pronounce the words with proper stress and knew well how to pronounce a plural which ends with voiced sound. For example (1) winds/windz/ (2) buds/bʌdz/ (3) lease /liːs/ (4) brag /bræg/(5) breathe /briːð/ (6) breath /breθ/ (7) May /meɪ/ (8) possession /pəˈzeʃ(ə)n/ (9) all /ɔːl/(10) compare /kəmˈpeə(r)/ (11) temperate /ˈtemp(ə)rət/ (12) short /ʃɔː(r)t/ (13) heaven /ˈhev(ə)n/. The students of Stylistics approach also practiced reading through drill patterns. As a result, 10% of the students were found 100% correct while reading the poem correctly. 20% of the students

obtained 90% of marks and another 20% of the students obtained 80% marks. 30% of the students of Stylistics approach obtained 70% marks. None of the students of this group obtained less than 50% marks. Whereas none of the students of traditional approach had obtained more than 60 % marks. Based on the performance of the students of Stylistics Approach, it can be deduced that Stylistics approach for teaching poetry was quite successful. With Stylistics approach the students were asked to repeat the words chorally and individually. So through group drill exercise the students of S-approach were able to read the poem with more accuracy. The third survey was designed to measure the efficiency of the students of both groups in grammar, vocabulary, speaking and writing.

Table 3: Figure 3:   Traditional Appproach Vs Stylistics Approach

	Grammar	Vocabulary	Speaking	Writing
Traditional approach	60%	60%	40%	30%
Stylistic approach	95%	90%	95%	88%

Table 3 illustrated the relative performance of both groups. The Stylistics approach motivated the students to analyze the poem with linguistic tools. This was a holistic approach which helped learners learn vocabulary, grammar and integrated language skills. They actively participated in learning language skills through language activities. The performance of the students of Stylistics model was found remarkably better than those of traditional approach. 95 % of the students of Stylistics approach made correct responses in grammar. In the area of vocabulary 90% of the students made correct responses. In speaking skill, the performance of S-approach was found outstanding. 90 % of the students of this group communicated their answer properly. In writing skill also 90% of the students of Stylistics approach were able to produce grammatically correct sentences. Whereas, the score of the students of traditional groups was found abysmally bad. Their performance was not satisfactory. Only 60% students of traditional approach made correct responses in grammar and vocabulary. The performance of only 40% of the students of T-Approach was found satisfactory in speaking and only 30% in writing skill. A significant difference was found between the performances of both groups. This survey was also an eye opener. The performance of students of T-approach in speaking and writing skills was poor but the students of S-approach significantly improved. Traditional approach for teaching poetry did not encourage students to build up the habit for speaking and writing skills. Since most Nigeria students started learning English at the later stage, they often found speaking and writing very difficult. So traditional approach for teaching poetry did not

break much ice whereas, the application of Stylistics approach for teaching poetry was found better in improving learners' accent, vocabulary, grammar and integrated language skills. The interpretation of any poem depends on reader's own perception. It's possible that the poem means different thing to different people. It's difficult to find what exactly happened to poet's mind but it is not impossible to explore the possible meaning of poem through linguistic analysis. When the sonnet *"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?* Was introduced to the students, they read it and posed many thematic and conceptual questions. For example, :(i) Why does the poet compare his friend with summer's day? (ii) How does the poet make his friend eternal? (iii) Does the poet glorify his own verse? (iv) What grammatical and lexical devices the poet has used in his poem to convey his message strongly?

These questions encouraged ESL learners to make deeper stylistics analysis of the poem. On the basis of this analysis the students came to know that the poet had used interrogative form as one of the rhetorical devices such as "*Shall I compare thee to a summer's* day? in the first line. The poet appreciated moderate trait of his friend and wanted to convey that summer's day might be excessively hot or humid but his friend is consistently balanced. Students appreciated such a nice poetic diction that expressed a unique style of appreciating beauty. Four meanings of the word *'lease'* were derived from dictionary, such as (i) A contract by which property is conveyed to a person for a specified period, usually for rent. (ii) The instrument by which such property is conveyed. (iii) Duration or the period of time for which it is conveyed. (iv) A prospect of renewed health, happiness, etc. a new lease of life. The students considered '*duration or the period of time* 'the most befitting meaning of the word *'lease'*. Such lexical analysis was enjoyed by the whole class. The poet further says that for every beautiful person or thing, there is a certain time at which it loses its beauty but his friend's beauty will be eternal in his verse. The ESL learners found the last two lines the most beautiful expression that glorifies both the poet's love and his verse. *So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, So long lives this and this gives life to thee.* The poet expressed hope that his verses will last until the end of humanity – "*so long as men can breathe."* When Shakespeare penned these lines, it might have seemed quite arrogant to presume such endurance for a poem. Yet, now as we read this poem about four hundred years since its origin, it seems unthinkable that this poem would be lost. The poet used simple words in the last two lines but the way he glorifies his love and his verse is really superb. The fourth survey was aimed to elicit the impression of the students about stylistics approach for teaching poetry. It was necessary to

find out what the students really thought about this approach for teaching poetry. This stylistics approach was totally learners centered. The students underwent intensive reading, guessing and active learning process.

Table 4: **Impression of Students on Poetry Statements Agree Strongly Agree Disagree**

Statement	Agree	Strongly Agree	Disagree
Poetry with musical tone creates excitement for learning	5%	90%	5%
Teaching poetry with linguistic inputs encourages learners learn vocabulary and grammar besides the theme of the poem.	10%	85%	5%
Open discussion on theme, form, style and metaphors was found very useful to improve speaking skills.	5%	90%	5%
The task for writing small sentence was found interesting.	0%	95%	5%

The result of table 4 was found very interesting and encouraging. The overwhelming majority of the students strongly agreed that poetry could be used for teaching integrated language skills. In response to the first statement 90 % of the students agreed that poetry with musical tone creates enough excitement for learning. In response to the second statement, 85% of the students strongly supported the idea that teaching of poetry with linguistic inputs would encourage learners to learn not only the theme of the poem but vocabulary and grammar as well. In response to the third statement 90 % of the students strongly supported open discussion on various intrinsic beauties of the poem. 95 % of the students found writing small sentences on theme, form, style, similes and metaphors very exciting and productive.

Result & Discussion

To introduce poetry in ESL classes in Nigeria schools has always been considered as a taboo. It has never been tried and incorporated in ESL curriculum. But the findings of these surveys showed that students who were taught poetry with stylistics-technique achieved and retained better than students taught with traditional method. The old fashioned methodology for teaching poetry was lecture oriented. To explain the meaning of the poem and to explain background information about the poet were just the thrust of the focus in the past. But now the paradigm has changed. With the dawn of the applied linguistics, linguistic tools for teaching poetry were introduced and they were found very exciting for the learners. The result of each survey was found really interesting and worth noticing. Teaching of poetry with linguistic and

communicative devices was found very exciting and productive for Nigeria learners. The overwhelming response of both teachers and students were really encouraging. The students and teachers both enjoyed stylistics and communicative based approaches for teaching poetry in classroom.

Conclusion

The four surveys conducted in this study revealed that the stylistics approach for teaching poetry which was based on a wide variety of linguistic activities was found very useful for both teachers and students'. This model unlike paraphrasing poem was learners centered. Learners were encouraged to analyze the poem linguistically such as grammatical features, lexical features, phonological features, and graphological features. This model created enough motivation and opportunity for learners to delve deep in learning process. To promote learners centered instruction, such a thought provoking, enjoyable and meaningful language activities were planned. The surveys proved that stylistics approach for teaching poetry will be an important resource for teaching integrated Language skills. Students developed a favorable response to poetry by practicing linguistic exercises on grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing and speaking activities. 95 % of the students strongly supported stylistics model for teaching poetry in ESL classes, because this was found learners centered and skills oriented. The learners became active participants expressing their own views, writing small sentences and doing language exercises. This new approach to teaching poetry yielded significantly better results in motivating the students to read the poem meticulously and improve language skills.

The performance of 90% of the students of Stylistics approach was found better and satisfactory in grammar, vocabulary, speaking and writing skills. In fact, they were given ample chance to improve their skills. Whereas, the score of the students of traditional group needs special attention. Their performance wasn't satisfactory. Only 60% students of traditional approach made correct responses in grammar and vocabulary. The performance of only 40% of students of T-Approach was found satisfactory in speaking and only 30% in writing skill. T-Approach was teacher centered and it was found very boring and hence abysmally failed due to lack of language activities, wrong selection of poem and ineffective teaching methodology. On the contrary, teachers of English who used Stylistics approach in ESL classes were found convinced and satisfied with stylistics approach. Around 95% of the teachers strongly supported the use of Stylistics approach in ESL classes. They agreed that teaching of poetry based on language activities would improve language skills. They applied the same model in

the classroom and perceived that model as an important resource for teaching language skills. 80% of the teachers strongly supported the idea that carefully chosen poems might provide deep insight into literary expression. Based on the findings of four surveys conducted in this study it can be deduced that poetry can be used as a great tool to improve language skills if language based activities are incorporated and teaching of poetry turns into learners centered. The present study has certain limitation with regard to the statistical surveys. The surveys of this study were conducted only on teachers and students. There is a need to conduct such surveys on primary, secondary and higher secondary students. This may lead to some more profound results which may be useful for researchers and curriculum designers to rethink and incorporate poetry in ESL classes.

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