The Impact of Poetry on Developing Grammatical Competence of English as Second Language Learners

Shaukat Ali[1], Tariq[2], andWaheed Khan[3]
Assistant Professor, University of Malakand
Lecturer, University of Malakand
Assistant Professor, University of Haripur

ABSTRACT

It has been observed that Pakistani university students struggle in developing their grammatical competence which is one of the important sub-skills ofthe overall English speaking skill. It refers to correct use of grammar, appropriate vocabulary and acceptable pronunciation. The researchers over the years have attributed the problem to teaching methodology, classroom environment, learners' attitude towards English language, anxiety and lack of motivation. However, there has been little research on teaching materials used in classrooms to develop grammatical competence of the students. This study exploited English poetry as language teaching materials to develop students' grammatical competence. The study was a quasi-experimental one having a control and an experimental group. The respondents of the study were second semester non-English-majored university students. The experimental group was taught through poems whereas in the control group traditional teaching materials were utilized. Pre-test and post-test were employed as tools of data collection. Besides, observation field notes were also employed as a supporting tool of data collection to understand the effect of both kinds of teaching materials on the students of both the groups inside their respective classrooms. The data collected through pre-test and post-test were analyzed through independent samples t-tests, whereas observation field notes were used to support the statistical results of the analysis. The results of the study showed that the students of the experimental group performed significantly better than students of control group on the post-test with regard to grammar rules and vocabulary. However, there was no significant improvement in the pronunciation of the students of the experimental group. The observation field notes indicated that the students of EG were more interactive, participated actively in the group activities and were more collaborative and cooperative in the language learning process. The study recommends that poetry shall be utilized as teaching materials in English language classroom at university level.

Key Words: Grammatical competence, teaching materials, speaking skill

Introduction

Texts of grammar, magazines and cuttings from newspaper are utilized as teaching materials in an ESL classroom. These teaching materials in their own way carry validity for ESL classroom, however, at times they fail to motivate and involve the learner emotionally in the language learning process due to lack of emotional content. Moreover, the aforesaid teaching materials every so often do not have potential for being easily exploited in group activities.Additionally, the language learners are rarely provided opportunity to interact with one another in the target language due to the objective nature of the text. Likewise, learners are not often provided autonomy of expression inside the classroom due to the nature of the aforementioned teaching materials (Laba, 2014). Consequently, it is the teacher who frequently acts as a controlling agency inside the classroom. Contrary to the above teaching materials, poetry can be motivating due to the presence of emotional content in it. It gets the learners involved in the language learning process due to its relevance to the personal lives of learners (Khatib, 2011; Nasr, 2001). Moreover, it encourages the learners to interact in the target language with a fair degree of autonomyowing to subjectivity in the text of poetry(Kellem, 2009; Maley & Duff, 1989; Nasr, 2001).Thus, this study is an attempt to utilizetheresearcher's own developed language teaching model called poetry guided speaking (PGS) for teaching students grammar rules, vocabulary and pronunciation collectively called grammatical competence. It is noteworthy to mention that this model used poetry as language teaching materials, so poems were exploited as teaching materials inside the classroom.

2.   Literature Review

Language teaching materials should fulfill the four major criteria as suggested by (Maley & Duff, 1989; Carter & Long, 1991). The criteria include linguistic richness, cultural richness, personal relevance and methodological flexibility. However, the teaching materials as mentioned in the introduction section above rarely fulfill these four criteria. The teaching materials used in the language classroom at university level in Pakistan oftentimes do not possess cultural elements of the target language. Furthermore, these teaching materials hardly ever have relevance to the personal lives of learners. Moreover, the teaching materials oftentimesare objective by nature and hence cannot be exploited for group activities and interactive sessions in a language classroom. On the contrary, poetry passes the test of the above mentioned four criteria. It has elements of the culture of the target language (khatib, 2011). It has relevance to the personal the lives of learners due to the presence of emotional and cultural contents in its text. Moreover, the text of poetry is based on authentic language materials and has a variety in the use of words, grammar rules and sentence structure and construction. Additionally, poetry covers almost all aspects of human life. Due to theusefulness of poetry, it can somehow be related to social, cultural and personal lives of the learners. Ambiguity in the text of poetry encourageslearners to freely arrive at their own interpretation of the same text based on their own life experiences. Moreover, learners are

encouraged to use their previous knowledge and life-experience and develop an insight into the text of poetry (Maley and Duff, 1989; Carter and Long, 1991; Nasr, 2001; Khatib& Rahimi, 2012).

Short poems can be utilized in the span of one period, which makes it easy for the learners to remember vocabulary used in a poem. Besides, being taught in one period, makes it one single learning experience which leaves a composite impression on mind of learnersFaver (2008). Rhythm is another vital element of poetry which helps in arresting the attention of the learners inside a language classroom. Rhythm imparts musicality to a poem which makes it pleasing to the ears of the language students and hence interest of the learners in language learning is enhanced (Collins, 2008; Any, 2008). Besides, learners take pleasure in reading a poem aloud due to its verbal music. The practice of reading aloud enables learners to retain important expressions and vocabulary of a poem. Besides, reading aloud helps improve learners' pronunciation(Akram & Qureshi, 2012; Edo Marzá, 2014; Kelly, 2000). Poetry is said to be carrying a universal appeal. It cannot be confined to a specific culture and time. It belongs to all cultures, times and people. A poet is said to be child of all ages and nationalities. Poets oftentimes depict fundamental human emotions in their poetry. These aspects and emotions have been and are common among all humans (Khastib, 2015). This aspect of poetry turns poetry into a common asset of all humans. For example, poetry often deals with love, hatred, anger, jealousy, death, bravery, beauty and so on, which are similar across the world and ages. Hence, language learners find it relevant to their own lives and cultures(Mittal, 2016; Ainy, 2008; Lazar, 1993; Duff& Maley, 1990).

Thus, keeping in view the aforementioned characteristics of poetry, this study attempted to use poetry as language teaching materials.

2.1   What is PGS?

ESL classroom in Pakistani universities exploit either grammar based books (High School Grammar by Wren and Martin) or texts based on phonetics and phonology (Phonetics and Phonology by Peter Roach) or texts based on both grammar and dialogue (Grammar in Use by Raymond Murphy). The main focus of these teaching materials is on writing skill. Reading and listening skills are given comparatively less attention. However, speaking skill is even further ignored. Consequently, Pakistani graduates have oftentimes poor speaking proficiency (Raza, 2008). The aforementioned teaching materials hardly engage language learners due to lack of cultural elements in them. Moreover, these texts do not discuss basic human feelings and emotions, hence not making any personal appeal to learners. Additionally, the topics in these texts are limited and leave out several important aspects of learners' social lives. Besides, the objective nature of the aforesaid teaching materials limits the creative use of language on the part of the language learners.

Thus, as mentioned in Section 1.2, this study has utilized poetry as language teaching materials to teach students grammatical competence (grammar rules, vocabulary and pronunciation). The researcher has developed a language teaching model called Poetry Guided Speaking (PGS). This model uses poetry as teaching materials focusing specially on its cultural richness, linguistic richness, personal relevance, ambiguity and universality. Moreover, the models exploits Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as main teaching methodology supported by O' Brien's (1999) six stages of language teaching including; a)Preparation and anticipation, b) Focusing, c) Preliminary response, d) Working on text (level I), e) Working on text (level II), and f) Interpretation and personal response. The model has been indicated through Figure 1.1 as given below.
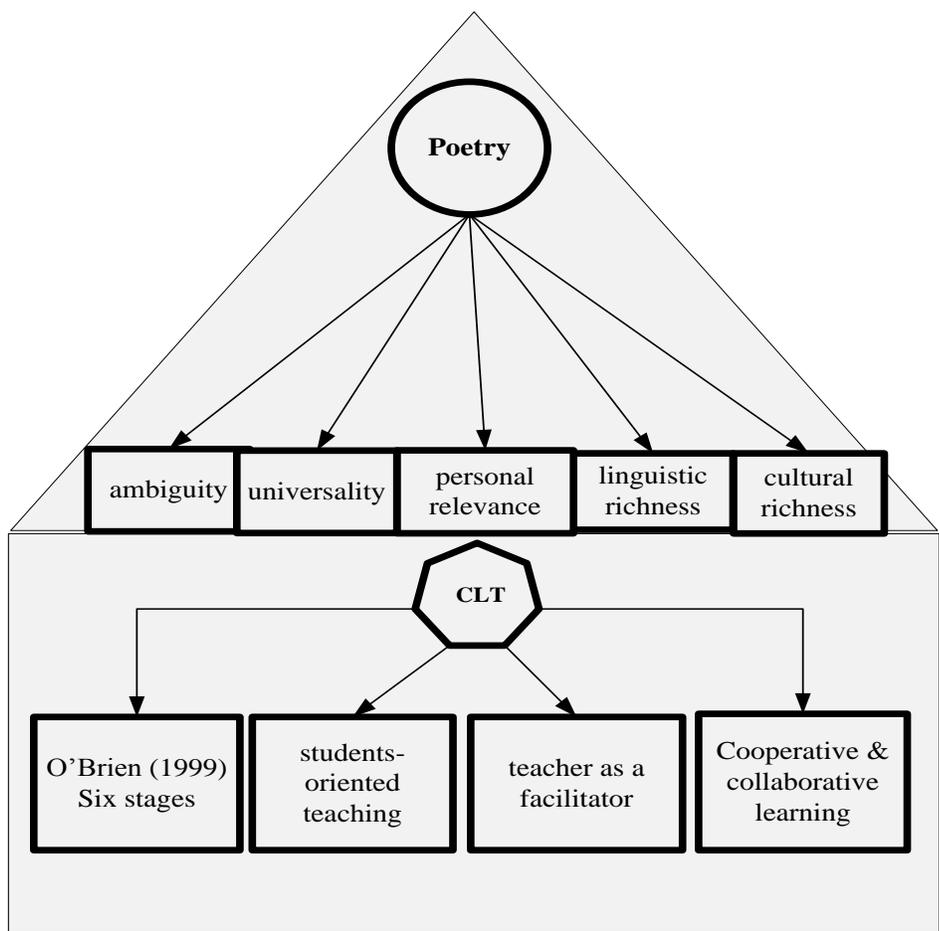

Figure 1.1

This study in the light of relevant research in the past has developed the following research hypotheses.

HI$_1$. Poetry Guided Speaking (PGS) has statistically significant effect on the overall grammar competence of ESL learners.

H0$_1$. Poetry Guided Speaking (PGS) has statistically no significant effect on the overall grammar competence of ESL learners.

HI$_2$. Poetry guided Speaking (PGS) has statistically significant effect on the sub-skills of grammatical competence namely grammar rules, vocabulary and pronunciation.

H0$_2$. Poetry guided Speaking (PGS) has statistically no significant effect on the sub-skills of grammatical competence namely grammar rules, vocabulary and pronunciation.

3.   Methodology

This is a quasi-experimental study having two intact groups; a control group and an experimental group. The group were not exactly similar but were almost similar in their baseline features. The students of both groups were from biological sciences, University of Malakand, Pakistan Moreover, they were in their second semester and English was taught to them as a minor subject. The number of students was 40 in each group, hence 80 in all as shown in Table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1   Number of Students in CG and EG

Control Group (CG)	No of Students	40
Experimental Group (EG)	No of Students	40
Total No of Students	80	

The data was collected through a pre-test and a post-test and observation field notes. Before commencing the treatment, a pre-test was given to the students from control and experimental groups. It was a speaking test. Students from both groups were asked questions about the same topics. The questions asked were slightly changed as to prevent the students copying from each other. The test was conducted by researcher himself and one of his expert colleagues. The test was marked according to the rubrics used by (Torky, 2006) in his study. After the pre-test, the control group was taught through traditional teaching materials, whereas poetry was utilized as teaching materials for experimental group. Moreover, poetry in the experimental group was utilized under PGS model.The poems used in the experiment included *Sick Rose by Robert Frost, Hope by Emily Dickinson, Crossing the Bar by Alfred Lord Tennyson, No Man is an Island by John Donne*. Methodology of teaching for both groups was mainly CLT.

Moreover, the researcher himself was teacher; however, he was assisted by his colleague in documenting observation field notes. The experiment was conducted for a month. At the end of the experiment, students of both groups were put to post-test similar to the pre-test. However, the questions asked to the students were slightly changed so as to allow the students to make creative use of language. The test was marked according to the same rubrics. The scores of the students of both groups on pre-test and post-test were analyzed through SPSS, whereas observation field notes were analyzed thematically.

4. Results of the Study

The scores of the students of the two groups on the pre-test were subjected to independent samples t-test, the results indicated that there was a significant difference in their performance. The difference was in favour of Control group. The results are shown in the table as under.

Table 1.2   T-test Results of the Pre-test Comparing the CG and EG Mean Scores in the overall Grammatical Competence

Groups	N	M	SD	ST.Error M	T-value	P-Value
Control	40	20.5396	2.43394	.39484	2.882	.005
Experimental	40	18.9745	2.33099	.37326		

Note: p-value$\leq$0.05=significant, p-value>.05=not significant

Similarly, scores of the sub-skills of grammatical competence including grammar rules, vocabulary and pronunciation with regard to pre-test were also put to independent samples t-test. The results showed that the performance of both the groups was similar in respect of pronunciation and vocabulary, whereas students from control group performed significantly better than the students of experimental group on the sub-skill *grammar rules*. Table 1.3 below indicates the statistical results of both the groups.

Table 1.3   T-tests Results of the Pre-test Comparing the CG and EG in the sub-skills ofGrammatical Competence

Sub-skills of GC	Groups	N	M	SD	ST.Error. M	T-Value	P-Value
GR	CG	40	3.4343	.48172	.07815	.228	.822
	EG	40	3.4104	.44237	.07084		
V	CG	40	3.3027	.56401	.09150	2.786	.008

	EG	40	2.9873	.42127	.06747		
P	CG	40	2.7764	.47503	.07707	2.706	.009
	EG	40	2.4616	.54272	.08691		

Note. 1: GC: Grammatical Competence, GR: grammar rules, V: vocabulary, P: pronunciation,
Note. 2: p-value≤0.05=significant, p-value>.05=not significant

Immediately after the experiment, both the groups were subject to a post-test as mentioned in the methodology section. The scores of the students of both the groups were applied independent samples t-test. The results as given in Table 1.4 indicated that the students of experimental group performed significantly better than the students of control group in the overall skill of grammatical competence.

Table 1. 2   T-test Results of the Post-test Comparing the CG and EG MeanScores in Overall Grammatical Competence

Groups	N	M	SD	ST.Error. M	T-value	P-Value
Control	40	19.893	4.36533	.70814	2.515	.014
Experimental	40	22.4999	4.70860	.75397		

Likewise, scores of the students of both the groups with regard to the sub-skills including grammar rules, vocabulary and pronunciation were also subjected to independent samples t-test after the experiment. The results indicated that the students of the experimental group performed significantly better than students of the control group with regard to sub-skills *grammar rules* and *vocabulary,* whereas there was no significant change in the pronunciation of the students of experimental group. The Table 1.5 as given below shows the statistical results of both the groups.

Table 1.3   T-tests Results of the Post-test Comparing the CG and EG in Speaking Sub-skills

Sub-skills of GC	Groups	N	M	SD	ST.Error. M	T-Value	P-Value
GR	CG	40	3.5396	.61930	.10046	-3.281	.002
	EG	40	4.0386	.71068	.11380		

V	CG	40	2.6975	.65285	.10591	-2.231	.029
	EG	40	2.8334	.71941	.11520		
P	CG	40	3.1317	.73231	.11880		
	EG	40	3.5386	.86134	.13792	-.868	.388
	EG	40	2.4359	.58691	.09398		

Note.1: GC: Grammatical Competence, GR: grammar rules, V: vocabulary, P: pronunciation

Note. 2: p-value$\leq$0.05=significant, p-value>0.05=not significant

5. Discussion

This research study was an attempt to investigate the effect of poetry as teaching materials on the grammatical competence of ESL learners. Grammatical competence is a sub-skill of the overall speaking skill. Grammatical competence has further been divided into three sub-skills including grammar rules, vocabulary and pronunciation. The study was a quasi-experimental having a control group and an experimental group. Students in the control group were taught through traditional teaching materials, whereas experimental group was treated with poems as teaching materials. The results of the study indicated that students of experimental group performed significantly better with regard to sub-skills *grammar rules* and *vocabulary* on the post-test. The analysis of the observation field notes showed that students of experimental group actively participated in group activities. The learners scaffolded each other during group activities which led to cooperative and collaborative learning (Faver, 2008).They related the topics to their personal lives and made it a point of discussion inside the classroom. Hence, they felt motivated and encouraged (Khatib, 2011; Van, 2009; Ghosn, 2002; Lazar, 1993). The subjective nature of the poems led to an intensive interactionKern (2000)among the learners of the experimental group which practice lowered their anxiety level Eva- Wood (2008).Moreover, it was not difficult for them to interpret hope, love and death in the light of their own experiences.Due to the universality of poetry (Ghosn, 2002), learners found these topics as relevant to their lives as anyone from the poets' own cultures.They tried to exhaust various meanings of these terms in the light of their own social, cultural and personal contexts. Furthermore, the text of poetry has the characteristic of ambiguity which makes it open to personal interpretations and develops an interactional environment (Belcher & Hirvela, 2000; Erkaya, 2005; Nasr, 2001). Consequently, learners fromEG interacted heavily on different interpretations of certain expressions in the poems. Moreover, learners felt encouraged when they found their interpretations valid. Understanding of culture of the target language plays a vital role in learning a language and poetry carries elements of the culture of its language (Nasr, 2001; Khansir, 2000; Khatib, 2011). Hence, the students of the experimental group tried to develop an insight into the culture of the target

language thereby developing a thorough understating of certain cultural related expressions of the target language. Further, the juxtaposition of some of the elements of the target language with that of their own generally increased their knowledge of the target language.

Language materials should be authentic and related to the practical life of a learner (Khatib, 2011; Ghosn, 2002). Moreover, teaching materials should be linguistically rich having a variety of vocabulary and sentence construction. The text of poetry is authentic in the sense that it is written for native speakers and its language is rich in terms of vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure(Khatib, 2011; Eva-Wood, 2008). Due to this characteristic of poetry, students of experimental group worked hard on the vocabulary of poems, put different words to different meanings and used them in different expressions. This practice helped them improve their vocabulary. Moreover, the learners found the poetic construction of different lines interesting and tried to convert them into normal subject, verb and object construction. Moreover, the learners worked on the types of speech used in the poems and tried to identify them. Additionally, learners also gave enough attention to different types of tenses used in the poems. This practice provided learners with an opportunity to improve their knowledge of grammar rules.Contrary to this, the observation field notes indicated that learners of CG did not participate actively in the group activities. They could not easily relate the topics to their personal life. Moreover, they were reluctant to discuss and interact freely due to the objective nature of the teaching materials. Furthermore, they could not interpret the text in various ways due to the insufficiency of ambiguity in the traditional teaching materials.

However, it is worth mentioning here that there was no significant improvement in the pronunciation of students from experimental group. Though the poems were properly read out in the class with a good focus on the pronunciation of different words, the statistical results indicate that the students of EG did not perform significantly better than the students of CG. The reason maybe as pointed out byNair, Krishnasamy, and De Mello (2017) in his study that pronunciation is one of the difficult parts of language learning. Secondly, this study was spanned on a month-long experiment which is as long a period as to improve students' pronunciation. A study for a longer period of time shall be conducted to see the effect of poetry as teaching materials on the learners' pronunciation. Nonetheless, the students of EG did improve their pronunciation as shown by the mean score (see Table 1.5) of the groups though not significantly.

6   Conclusion

This study was conducted in order to find out the effect of poetry as language teaching materials on the grammatical competence of ESL learners. Grammatical competence is a sub-skill of overall speaking skills. Grammatical competence has been further divided into three sub-skills namely grammar rules, vocabulary and pronunciation. This was a quasi-experimental study consisting of a control group and an experimental group. There 40 students in each group, hence 80 students in all. The respondents of the study were students of biological sciences, University

of Malakand, Pakistan. Moreover, they were in their second semester and took English as a minor course. The students of the control group were taught through traditional teaching materials, whereas poems were exploited to teach students of the experimental group. A speaking kind of pre-test and post-test were conducted to determine the effect of both types of teaching materials on the grammatical competence of students from CG and EG. Bedsides, observation field notes were also utilized to understand the effect of teaching materials on the students inside their respective classrooms. The statistical analysis of the data indicated that the students of EG performed significantly better on post-test with regard to *grammar rules* and *vocabulary,* whereas there was no significant difference in the performance levels of CG and EG in respect of *pronunciation.* The observation field notes showed that students of EG were more interactive inside the classroom. Moreover, they related the topics to their social, cultural and personal life. Additionally, they actively participated in group activities and acted as the main stakeholders of the learning process.On the contrary, students of CG were found to be reluctant in speaking the target language. They did not wholeheartedly participate in group activities. The reasons of the better performance of the students of EG could be attributed to the cultural and linguistic richness, personal relevance, universality and ambiguity in the text of poetry (Mittal, 2016; Ainy, 2008; Lazar, 1993; Maley & Duff, 1990).

7.   References

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