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Challenges of Teaching Poetry at Secondary Level: Perspectives from Nepalese English Teachers

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Abstract

The current research has discussed the challenges associated with teaching poetry in secondary school in Nepal among English teachers. The study utilized a qualitative research design and employed a narrative inquiry as the method of data collection, involving interviews, recordings,

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and diary notes. Ten community secondary schools in Kathmandu Metropolitan City were selected through purposive sampling, and one English teacher of each school was interviewed. Data were interpreted using thematic analysis. The results showed that the teachers have faced major linguistic problems, such as problems with archaic words, lexical and semantic complexities, figurative language, and odd syntactic structures. Cultural issues also came up as they reflected barriers to do with societal norms, traditions and values, and the cognitive issues were associated with understanding and interpretation of poetic forms. The respondents emphasized that it is especially challenging to teach poetry in the classroom, and the most common approach to teaching poetry in community schools is translation. The paper highlights the importance of contextually sensitive pedagogical approaches, teacher development, and curriculum-scaffolding to mitigate such factors and improve student engagement and comprehension of poetry.

Keywords: teaching poetry, Nepalese english teachers, challenges, secondary level

Introduction

The literary genre of poetry exhibits symbolism, ambiguity, irony, and stylistics that allow a variety of interpretations (Strachan & Terry, 2001). It is creative and a teaching instrument that promotes language and culture, as well as independent learning (Mulatsih, 2018). Poetry may take various forms in the classroom; sonnets, stories, poems, poems with lyrics, or describing poems, and provides students with possibilities to interact intelligently and emotionally through language. It is sometimes one of the trickiest genres to teach, particularly in certain contexts, due to the complexities involved, and where the English language is foreign (Eliot, 1923).

English is no longer taught in Nepal as a foreign language, but as a second language skill, and the topic of scholarly and career necessities (Bista, 2011). The Ministry of Education takes care of high school education, in grades nine to twelve, which includes standardized tests like SEE at grade 10. The English curriculum includes poetry in grades 9 and 10 as a component of the curriculum and linguistic as well as cultural uses. It is considered to be a discourse that builds multicultural awareness and the valuing of diversity (Hanauer, 2003). But there is a tendency among teachers to fall back on it and conventional lectures, where the students are passive listeners and not active participants, and/or meaning interpreters (Salehi et al., 2013).

Poetry in Secondary Level (Grades 9 and 10) English Curriculum

The English textbooks that are being taught in Grades 9 and 10 consist of different literary genres, including poetry. Mostly, poems from foreign poets are prescribed for study. Table 1 provides the complete list of these poems included in the curriculum.

Table 1*Poems of Grade 9 and 10*

SN	Poems	Poets	Grades
1	Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening	Robert Frost	9
2	Crossing the Bar	Alfred Lord Tennyson	9
3	Leisure	W.H. Davies	9
4	Madam and Her Madam	Langston Hughes	9
5	Rickshaw Ride	John Hill	9
6	Leave this Chanting and Singing	Rabindranath Tagore	10
7	The Voice of the Rain	Walt Whitman	10
8	Climbing	Amy Lowell	10
9	Composed upon Westminster Bridge	William Wordsworth	10
10	Weather	Thomas Hardy	10
11	IF	Rudyard Kipling	10
12	The Country Mouse and City Mouse	Richard Scafton Sharpe	10

English teachers in Nepal play a crucial role in connecting the world's communication and the classroom challenges (Phyak, 2016). But, they encounter numerous challenges such as huge class sizes, lack of resources, poor teaching methods, and exam-oriented teaching, which encourage emphasis on rote learning (Giri, 2010). In particular, poetry requires high levels of cultural and language skills, which can be difficult for teachers and students to develop (Syed & Wahas, 2020). The complexities of figurative language, archaic words, and syntax compound these difficulties.

Although research in Nepal has focused on broader aspects of English teaching, there has been little work on the difficulties of teaching secondary-level poetry (grades 9–10). Current methods are commonly based on the Grammar-Translation and Direct Methods, but neglect the aspects of interpretation and participation in learning poetry. This study, thus explores the linguistic and non-linguistic issues encountered by the poetry teachers in public secondary schools of Kathmandu Metropolitan City.

Research Methods and Materials

This research was conducted using a qualitative method (narrative inquiry), which seeks to understand people's interpretations of their experiences of teaching poetry. As described in (Clandinin & Caine, 2013), narrative inquiry highlights temporal, spatial, and social aspects, allowing the researcher to focus on the stories of people in relation to cultural and institutional contexts. Narrative inquiry provides many lenses in relation to how we

generate the stories, how we re-story the stories, ethical considerations, and narrative genres (Neupane & Gnawali, 2023).

Ten English teachers working in the community secondary schools of Kathmandu Metropolitan City were selected as participants using purposive sampling. Inclusion of teachers was confirmed by observing who had faced challenges in teaching poetry at 9 and 10. The data collection included in-depth, open-ended interviews, diary notes, and recordings. Corbin and Morse (2003) say the interactive interview process allowed teachers to express their experiences in their own words, allowing dialogic and meaning-making process. Data collection included visits to schools, obtaining permission from the head teachers, and carrying out face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions. Ethical principles were rigorously maintained, such as voluntary informed consent, the autonomy of the participants, and respect for privacy and confidentiality (Okorie et al., 2024). The selected participants were given codes (T1 to T10) for privacy and confidentiality. They were informed that their input would be observed and handled with care, and would not interfere with their teaching routines. Data analysis involved thematic analysis, following Attride-Stirling (2001) approach, which requires identifying and classifying repeated patterns in the data. This approach allowed the researcher to interpret the group experiences while also being sensitive to the particular issues of teaching poetry as the teachers described them.

Results and Discussion

Based on the data, the findings of the study were categorized into five themes: linguistic challenges, cultural challenges, cognitive challenges, challenges with archaic words in teaching poetry, and challenges with paraphrasing while teaching, following the “thematic network” Attride-Stirling (2001) used in qualitative research.

Linguistic Challenges

Linguistic challenges in poetry can be lexical, syntactic, or semantic. Lexical challenges are related to understanding specific words or phrases, while semantic problems are concerned with the meaning level or sentence level. Poetry in English Language Teaching (ELT) offers many advantages, including enhancing vocabulary and phonemic awareness as well as providing aesthetic, cultural, and creative enrichment. But many teachers find it challenging due to a lack of training, confidence and materials. Poems with complex words may be challenging for students (Salameh, 2012), and poems that are too complex or abstract can be demotivating. This was recognised as a significant issue in the teaching of secondary level poetry (grades 9 and 10).

Teachers reported challenges with poems. T1 explained that "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost led to confusion because the word "wood" was taken to mean “piece of timber” rather than "forest". Likewise, T2 pointed out problems with "Whitman's

Voice of the Rain", wondering if "the rain" can speak. T3 emphasized the challenge of reading Western words like wood and frozen lake, and T4, T6 and T7 illustrated archaic words in Tagore's "Leave This Chanting and Singing", such as "thou, thee and thy", and metaphors such as "tiller" and "path-maker". T5 and T7 described mixing up "Tennyson's Crossing the Bar", bar as a disco or fence rather than a metaphor for the barrier between life and death, and "pilot" as a "plane driver" rather than a pilot. T8 discussed imagery problems in Tagore's poetry, such as the "path-maker is breaking stones". T9 and T10 also added to the challenges, emphasizing that words such as "Wood and Snowy Evening" were confusing because of their ambiguity. The interviews reveal that teachers experience a lot of linguistic difficulties in poetry, particularly relating to lexical, semantic, and archaic words. Figurative language and imagery add complexity to make them hard to comprehend. As Syed and Wahas (2020) explain, poetry often uses complex linguistic structures that differ from conventions and can be challenging for learners with low language proficiency. Balci (2023) also recommends that teachers choose poems suitable to students' language levels to promote engagement and comprehension. According to the feedback of ten teachers from Kathmandu Metropolitan City community schools, it is clear that language difficulties, especially lexical and semantic forms, are a common challenge while teaching poetry at the secondary level.

Cultural Challenges

Cultural challenges are differences in norms, rules, and values that interfere with communication and collaboration. Autobiographical poetry helps pre-service teachers to identify and link personal and professional learning (Cibils & Marlatt, 2019). Good poems have historical accuracy, authenticity, and are developmentally appropriate. They frequently address racism, sexism, classism or diversity, celebrate marginalized groups, and denounce prejudice (al-Gharbi, 2019). Culturally responsive teaching helps teachers respond to the students' strengths and culture, taking into account students' cultural identities (Vavrus & Vavrus, 2008). This poses particular difficulties for teaching secondary school poetry.

Teachers articulated that most grade 9 and 10 poems come from Western poets, embedding unfamiliar cultural references. T1 noted challenges in Richard Scafton Sharpe's *The Country Mouse and the City Mouse* and Wordsworth's *Composed upon Westminster Bridge*, both grounded in Western imagery inaccessible to Nepali learners. T2 similarly pinpointed to Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, with terms like "snowy evening" and "miles." T3 stressed culturally specific diction in Whitman's *Voice of the Rain*, while T4 emphasized the Western symbolism of London's Westminster Bridge.

Other examples included John Hill's *Rickshaw Ride*, which mixes Chinese settings with Western references like "Dollar" and "Victoria," confusing cultural authenticity (T5, T8). T6 noted the same issue in Sharpe's poem, where foods like "custard" and "cheesecake" reflect foreign diets. T7 and T9 reiterated that London-centric descriptions alienate students lacking

such experiences. T10 added that Hughes' *Madam and Her Madam*, dealing with racial dynamics, may be difficult for students outside that cultural context.

In general, teachers concurred that the Western dominance in prescribed poems alienates students from the texts. Cultural references and idioms can be obscure and hinder understanding and engagement. As Syed and Wahas (2020) emphasise, a poem with numerous unfamiliar allusions to teach and learn. Addressing these challenges needs to involve the careful choice of poems that are culturally diverse and accessible, allowing students to connect to literature.

Cognitive Challenges

Cognitive challenges are difficulties that impact the abilities of memory and comprehension. Cognitive processes are analysed from several points of view, including linguistics, musicology, neuroscience, psychiatry, psychology, education, philosophy, and anthropology. Osgood-Campbell (2015) points out that these perspectives (along with new approaches such as embodied cognition) are integrated in the interdisciplinary field of cognitive science, which has developed into a progressively autonomous discipline. Teachers also recognised cognitive difficulties in teaching poetry. T5 said she found the title *Crossing the Bar* difficult to understand. First, read it as crossing a fence or barrier, but in the poem, it is passing from life to death across the sea. These figurative and multiple meanings make it difficult for learners to understand the intended metaphor. Likewise, T1 reported cognitive and semantic difficulties with words like *wood/woods*, *farm and house/farmhouse*, *freeze/frozen*, and *down/downy*. She questioned the duality of "wood": as *wood or woods? / timber or forest?* Such ambiguities illustrate how students may misinterpret words and metaphors, especially when words have different or context-specific meanings.

Challenging with Archaic Words in Teaching Poetry

Archaic words are those words that were once used but are no longer in common English. They were often used in the Middle Ages and are found mostly in Shakespeare's plays. In linguistics, an archaism is a word, meaning, or usage that is historically old-fashioned but that has survived only by limited usage. Lexical archaisms are terms used in certain areas, such as religion or law, whereas literary archaisms are the survival of old forms in traditional literature or the conscious imitation of older forms, like John Barth's use of the 18th-century style in *The Sot-Weed Factor* (Traxel, 2012). Examples include the words such as *dost* (do), *thou* (you), *thine* (yours), and *thy* (your). This was identified as the third difficulty faced by English teachers in teaching poetry at grades 9 and 10. T1 said archaic words are confusing; for instance, *thou and thy* confuse students, who can associate them with *throw and they*. T2 felt that words like *thine* make it hard to understand the meaning, e.g., "Open *thine* eyes" in

Tagore's *Leave this Chanting and Singing*. T3 also observed that thou as having a distinct meaning, while T6 claimed that art thou?" in *Voice of the Rain* was very confusing.

Teachers' reactions indicate that archaic words are difficult to comprehend in the classroom. These words are no longer in everyday use and can make modern learners incomprehensible. Even though archaic forms are present in English literature, Old and Middle English literature, their retention enhances expression and meaning for the reader (Munro, 2013). Yet, when read in school poetry, words such as *thou*, *thine* and *thy* confuse students to their archaic usage. Teachers, therefore, find it difficult to explain these forms, which pose problems in engaging the learner and restrict access to poetry in grades 9 and 10.

Challenges with Paraphrasing while Teaching Poetry

Paraphrasing or rephrasing is the repetition of the same text in other words without losing its meaning. A problem in English as a second language teaching is that students are often required to paraphrase texts about which they know little and are not interested. When the subject matter is one they have no interest in, it is even harder. Poetry paraphrasing involves all of these challenges. Poems resonate, evoke, and allow for individual interpretations, and paraphrasing is the most difficult academic writing skill (Clarín et al., 2023). Paraphrasing a poem, therefore, involves putting the author's ideas into simpler words without changing its meaning. It seeks to preserve unity and coherence in writing by putting language into different words while still maintaining its essence. This emerged as the fourth challenge experienced by English language teachers while teaching grades 9 and 10 poetry.

Teachers identified some difficulties with paraphrasing. T1 explained that the title of Alfred Lord Tennyson's *The Crossing of the Bar* is paraphrased and can be interpreted in different ways: river crossing, life's challenges, or failing to cross the bar (death). T3 and T5 mentioned Walt Whitman's *Voice of the Rain* in lines of free verse, with phrases such as "Reck'd or unreck'd," which are difficult to translate. And T7 and T10 cited Amy Lowell's *Climbing*, where climbing can be tree-climbing, adventure, or life climbing, making paraphrasing complex. These phrases demonstrate teachers' difficulties in breaking down complex language for their students. As Currie and Frascaroli (2021) discuss, paraphrase aims to narrow down meaning but is not effective with poetry because poems express not propositions but rich meanings that need pragmatic supplementation. While poems are made up of meaningful words, paraphrasing is not just about translating them but reinterpreting the poem in another way. This makes the task of poetry a challenging one in the classroom.

Conclusion

This research found that English teachers at secondary levels in Nepal face several linguistic, cultural, cognitive, and semantic poetry teaching challenges. Linguistic challenges included lexical and semantic challenges, figurative language, and the use of archaic language

like *thy*, *thine*, and *thou*, resulting in confusion and misunderstanding of comprehension. Teachers commented that in poetry, there are often multiple meanings in the lines and stanzas, sometimes creating inexplicable irony. Cultural challenges occurred when students were unable to relate to Western themes and settings, rendering paraphrasing more demanding. Likewise, cognitive issues were observed in grasping symbolism and abstract notions, as well as paraphrasing, being another challenge for learners. Despite the obstacles, the research adds to the knowledge of the way poetry can still be an entertaining way of learning if used properly.

Teachers were found to rely primarily on translation, ICTs, communicative, and student approaches, like before reading, during reading, and after reading. Some also used strategies of comparison and exploration. But students were often dispassionate and bored in poetry classes, viewing poetry as challenging rather than enjoyable. So, the study suggests that teachers need to adopt more interesting, engaging, and contextual approaches to make the learning of poetry more relevant at the secondary level. This study is not without limitations. It included a small sample of teachers in Kathmandu, which may not be representative of the broader issues and challenges in Nepal. But its findings are significant. Teacher training programs should provide training in how to deal with linguistic and cultural differences, and curriculum writers should include more culturally relevant poems, in addition to Western literature. Furthermore, using ICT, drama, and group work can improve learning and comprehension. In conclusion, poetry is a valuable teaching tool, but teaching can be improved through innovation, contextualisation and participation.

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