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Enhancing Poetry Teaching Practices in the EFL Classrooms: An Exploratory Action Research

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Abstract

Teaching poetry is an influential tool for developing language proficiency and emotional excellence among learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Nepal. However, poetry teaching plays a crucial role in language learning in EFL classrooms; it remains teacher-centred, resulting in low student participation. This exploratory action research (EAR) was designed and carried out to find out why secondary-level students remain inactive during poem teaching and how the interaction between the teacher and students can increase participation of the students. The study was carried out in a Grade 10 English classroom with 32 students aged 15 to 16, over a period of six weeks. The researcher used the questionnaires as a tool to collect data. The study found that students were passive in the poetry classroom because of language difficulties, unfamiliar cultural content, and teacher-centred teaching strategies. To solve this, two action cycles were used with activities like predicting before reading, explaining the context and figures of speech used in the poem, reading in pairs with rhyme and rhythm, and allowing students to make critical interpretations and write summaries on their own. As a result of this intervention, students became more confident and motivated, developed a better understanding of poems, and showed increased participation in classroom activities. The study shows that using learner-centred and reflective strategies can make poetry lessons more active, interesting, and engaging for students. It also shows that exploratory action research helps teachers improve their teaching skills, especially in an EFL setting.

Keywords: Exploratory action research, learner-centred strategies, poetry teaching, student participation



Introduction

Poetry is a very essential part of English language teaching because it helps students develop language skills, understand culture, and express creativity. Teachers have found that poetry supports learning sounds, new words, and emotions through rhythm and feeling (Tütünis & Çetinavcı, 2019; Addinna, 2011). The students who are learning English as a foreign or second language, poetry allows them to use language beyond grammar and helps them identify tone, pictures in words, and comparisons (Bidari, 2021). This means that poetry provides learners with an excellent opportunity to be exposed to authentic language structures that do not always appear in normal texts. By engaging with poetic language, students understand how English works creatively and develop an ability to interpret the meaning in multiple ways. Therefore, poetry teaching is an effective medium for strengthening both the linguistic competence and interpretive skills in EFL classrooms.

Understanding all these advantages of teaching poetry in EFL classrooms, the strategies remain very traditional, which do not meet the learners' needs and context. Teachers spend most of the time explaining difficult words, interpreting each line, and translating the poem into the students' mother tongue (Karki, 2016; Regmi, 2022). Most of the time, students listen to the teacher quietly and passively, without thinking deeply or engaging with the text in the classroom. As a result, poetry classes fail to develop students' creativity and critical thinking. Students emphasise the memorisation of the stanza explanations and the summary given by the teachers. This traditional approach blocks the potential of poetry teaching to make language learning enjoyable, communicative, and meaningful.

Studies on English teaching in Nepal show that classrooms are mostly teacher-centred, with many students and a strong focus on exams (Phyak, Negi, & Acharya, 2024; Nepal, 2023). Teachers give due focus to the exams for increased and improved achievement rather than students' understanding. The exam-oriented activities in the classroom make it difficult for students to learn through interaction and participation. To address this situation, teachers need to use reflective and research-informed methods that help them bring students into active participation and improve their teaching. Exploratory Action Research (EAR) offers a good way to do this because it allows teachers to study their own classroom problems and try out practical solutions (Burns, 2010; Shrestha, Laudari, & Gnawali, 2023).

This study largely contributes to the growing practice of teacher-initiated classroom research in Nepalese ELT classrooms by emphasising the significance of small, cyclic, context-sensitive, and learner-centred pedagogical interventions in improving poetry teaching and making it more meaningful for learners (Shrestha, Gnawali, & Laudari, 2021). The findings are useful for teachers, trainers, and policymakers who work to enhance student participation in language learning through poems (Bidari, 2021). The study also highlights Exploratory Action Research (EAR) as a practical tool for teachers' professional development that includes reflective inquiry with the practical action in a real classroom (Pandey, 2023).

Moreover, the study attempts to minimise the gap between traditional teacher-

centred poetry teaching and research-informed interactive strategies in Nepalese EFL classrooms. Limited teacher confidence and a lack of context-sensitive strategies create difficulties in effective poetry teaching (Adhikari, 2020). By applying EAR, teachers can respond to learners' needs, enhance linguistic and cultural understanding, and foster creativity and emotional engagement (Tütünis & Çetinavcı, 2019; Burns, 2010). Eventually, the classroom research promotes a reflective and evidence-based teaching that supports teachers' continuous professional growth and enriches the growing ELT practices in Nepal.

I have been teaching English at the secondary level for more than ten years, and I have often noticed that students are less engaged in poetry classes than in other lessons. Even after trying new techniques, their expectations were not met, and even the active learners tended to wait for my explanations instead of interpreting or discussing poems on their own. This raised several questions and highlighted the need for research-based intervention. To understand the issue, I designed an Exploratory Action Research project guided by two questions: why students remain passive during poetry lessons, and what classroom strategies could make poem learning more interactive and meaningful. The study aimed to identify the reasons behind student passivity, introduce learner-centred strategies to increase participation, and evaluate changes in their engagement, motivation, and understanding.

Literature Review

Poetry in EFL Pedagogy

It is an accepted fact that poetry is a useful tool for learning a second language. Addinna (2011) emphasises that poetry promotes creativity and fosters emotional understanding, connecting with language. Likewise, Samanik (2018) states that poetry teaching improves students' pronunciation, cultural understanding, poetic devices and awareness of language. By engaging with rhythm, sounds, and figurative language, students' grammar, vocabulary, and learn pronunciation naturally, developing an improved understanding of how the language works (Tütünis & Çetinavcı, 2019).

The humanistic view emphasises that poetry teaching helps make language learning more personal, engaging, and meaningful. According to Bidari (2021), poetry encourages emotional connection and imagination, turning the classroom into a place for self-expression, imagination, and reflection. Poems can be understood and interpreted in multiple ways, which helps students think deeply and creatively, share ideas, and build understanding with the help of teachers and classmates, which is different from prose. However, Wahyuni (2024) warns that this openness can sometimes create confusion among students, especially those who are not familiar with literary texts and devices, if teachers do not provide them enough guidance and support. Poetry class requires additional support and explanation from the teachers to enhance the understanding of the students. Therefore, teaching poetry in EFL classes should equally value the open and multiple interpretation with a clear structure so that students feel both supported and confident while exploring poetic language. This ultimately exposes the learners to the

varieties of language structures.

Poetry exposes learners to language and culture, helping them discover real emotions, ideas, and values based on a particular setting. Poems help learners experience different ways of thinking, expressions, and symbolic meanings that build their cultural understanding and respect for diverse and deviant language use. This experience not only improves learners' vocabulary and interpretation skills but also develops empathy and critical awareness, which are important for communication. In the classroom, when students recite the poem with rhyme and rhythm, rewrite, or summarise poems, the classroom becomes an active, creative, and lively space for sharing and collaboration. Therefore, using poetry in EFL teaching supports current communicative methods that see language learning as both a psychological and emotional entity.

The Reader-response theory focuses that meaning emerges through the exchange between the text and the reader (Rosenblatt, 1978). In EFL classrooms, passive participation of the students can be transformed into active engagement when teachers encourage students to critically respond to the poems through discussion, rewriting, or summarising (Lazar, 1993; Paran, 2008). Reader-response theory gives additional focus to the subjective and multiple interpretations of the poem, which is meaningful to empower EFL learners who initially feel limited by linguistic properties (Maley & Duff, 2016).

Neupane (2010) carried out a study entitled 'A Study on Teaching Poetry of Grade Eight'. The main aim of the study was to find out and analyse the activities and challenges related to poetry teaching in grade eight. The researcher used questionnaires to collect data from ten English teachers and thirty students. The study found that teachers simply tried to keep a positive attitude towards students during poetry lessons, but they still faced various practical issues in the teaching process. The research emphasised the importance of poetry teaching in Nepalese EFL classrooms to enhance the language learning of the students.

Khadka (2023) conducted a study titled 'Strategies for Teaching Poetry in English Language Classrooms at Secondary Level' to analyse effective strategies for teaching poetry and suggest some pedagogical implications to enhance language learning. The researcher collected data from forty English teachers of twenty secondary schools in Kathmandu District by using questionnaires. The researcher also did the observation to collect more information. The study concluded that teachers mainly used strategies such as discussing the poet and poem background, describing poems line by line, and reading aloud. These approaches were found to help enhance students' vocabulary, interpretive skills, critical thinking, and overall language proficiency. The study concluded that poetry teaching is not only limited to developing linguistic competence, but it also improves intercultural awareness of the students.

After reviewing the studies done by different researchers, I found there is a lack of research on practical, context-sensitive, and exploratory research on learner-centred strategies that actively engage students in poetry teaching classes. Most studies have focused only on descriptive findings and teacher practices without implementing and reflecting on systematic and cyclic interventions to address the students' passive participation in poetry classes. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by using Exploratory Action Research (EAR) to investigate the causes of students' passivity and

apply research-informed, interactive, and student-centred techniques to enhance their comprehension, participation, and motivation in Nepalese EFL poetry classrooms.

Challenges in Nepali EFL Poetry Teaching

In the ELT context in Nepal, several studies show the limited student participation in poetry classes due to traditional pedagogies. Karki (2016) explored that teachers primarily depend on and largely follow translation and explanation, while students rarely read or discuss poems. Regmi (2022) explored that cultural unfamiliarity with Western imagery makes comprehension difficult. Sharma (2025) found that exam-oriented teaching mainly focuses students on memorize texts instead of enjoying their beauty and meaning. In other words, such instruction values remembering facts more than experiencing the creative and emotional side of literature.

Exploratory Action Research in ELT

Exploratory Action Research (EAR) is a way to explore, understand and improve our practice as teachers. EAR bridges the gap between research findings and teaching practice. According to Burns (2010), EAR enables teachers to identify practical classroom problems, plan for improvement, implement the designed strategies and reflect on outcomes systematically within the framework of it. Exploratory action research focuses on practical classroom change that differs from traditional research (Shrestha et al., 2023). In Nepal, EAR has been expanded and strengthened through NELTA, leading to documented improvements in classroom interaction, motivation, and learner autonomy (Shrestha, Gnawali, & Laudari, 2021). Pandey (2023) and Phyak et al. (2024) argue that EAR fosters reflective professionalism among Nepali teachers, encouraging them to become “teacher-researchers.” This approach aligns with post-method pedagogy (Nepal, 2023), which values contextual adaptation over imported models. This study used EAR to investigate the causes of students' low and passive participation and test participatory strategies for improved poetry teaching.

Methods and Procedures

This study used an Exploratory Action Research (EAR) framework consisting of three phases: exploration, action, and reflection. The research was conducted with 32 students of grade 10 (17 boys and 15 girls), aged 15–16. Researchers used close-ended questionnaires to identify students' challenges, preferences, and engagement during poetry classes. The collected data were systematically and descriptively analysed using frequency and percentages to summarise students' responses. These analyses provided the researcher with the insights to design and implement the learner-centred interventions in the action phase. The reflection phase helped the researcher to evaluate the effectiveness of the research-informed strategies.

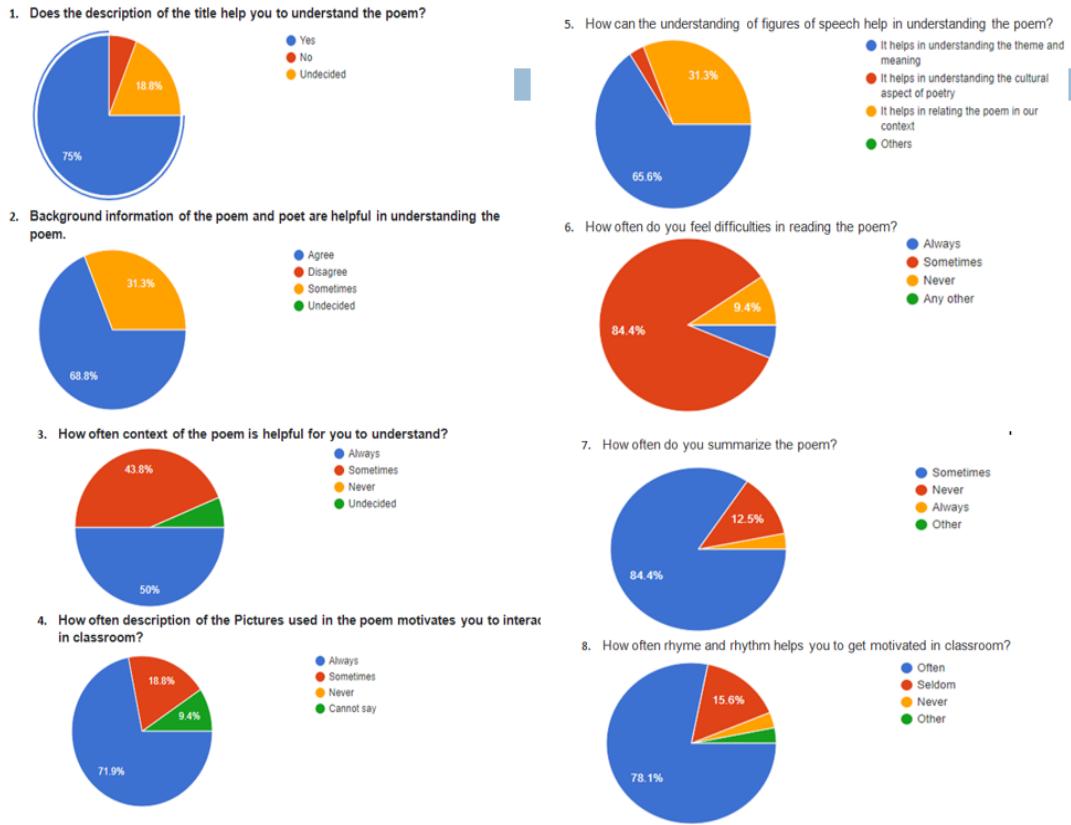
Results and Discussions

The results and discussion section presents the key findings of the study and

connects them with classroom realities and relevant insights from poetry teaching in the EFL context. The responses from students highlight what supports their understanding, what challenges they face, and which strategies help them participate more actively. The discussion interprets these results to show how different elements of poetry instruction influence engagement, motivation, and comprehension.

Figure 1

Students' Views on Context and Interactive Teaching Strategies for Poetry Teaching



Title Description Helps in Understanding the Poem

The results indicate that 75% of students feel that the description of the poem's title helps them understand the poem, while 12.5% do not find it helpful, and another 12.5% remain undecided in this regard. Most of the students responded that the title of a poem provides them with meaningful guidelines that help them understand the central idea or theme. This shows that the explanation of the title has an important place in enhancing learners' understanding during poetry teaching in the EFL classroom.

Background Information about the Poem and Poet

A large portion, 68.8% of the respondents, agree whereas whereas 31.3% strongly agree that background information about the poem and the poet helps them in understanding the poem. The majority of the students responded that knowing the poet's background and historical context enhances their comprehension. This shows that the teacher must give time to elaborate on the background information of the poet and, most importantly, the poem.

Explanation of Context for Better Understanding

When asked how often the context of the poem is helpful, 37.5% of respondents said always, 50% said sometimes, while none responded that it is never helpful. Similarly, 12.5% were undecided in this regard. This result reveals that elaboration of the context of the poem and relating it to that of the learners is essential to understanding the meaning of the poem. It also highlights the need to provide students with situational or cultural context when teaching poetry, helping students connect language with meaning.

Picture Description of Classroom Interaction

The description of pictures used in poems is found to be a strong aspect for students' motivation. 71.9% students stated that pictures always motivate them to interact in the classroom. Similarly, 9.4% said sometimes, 6.3% seldom, and 12.5% could not say anything in this regard. These results conclude that the images used in the poems are unavoidable to initiate active classroom interaction and fine engagement.

Explanation of Figures of Speech

Understanding figures of speech is reported to be helpful by a majority of students. Here, 65.6% stated that it helps them understand the theme and meaning of the poem. Similarly, 31.3% responded that it helps them understand the cultural aspects of poetry, and 3.1% believed it helps relate the poem to their personal life. The result shows that an explanation of the figures of speech used in the poem helps with better comprehension.

Difficulties in Reading Poems

Regarding reading difficulties, 84.4% of students replied that they sometimes struggle while reading poems, 9.4% said they always face difficulties, and 6.3% said to have never experienced such issues. The responses reveal that students face challenges in dealing with poetry due to unfamiliar vocabulary, structure, or rhythm. The findings concluded that poetry is engaging, but it still needs guided support and feedback from teachers.

Summarisation of the Poem

Most of the students (84.4%) responded that they sometimes summarise poems,

while 12.5% seldom do it, and 3.1% never write summaries of the poems. These findings show that the teacher should let the students write a summary themselves by providing necessary support and guidance. Summary writing with the guidance of teachers helps students to increase their understanding of poetic content effectively in poetry classes.

Rhyme and Rhythm on Motivation

78.1% said that rhyme and rhythm often help them stay motivated in the classroom. At the same time, 15.6% responded that they are seldom motivated by rhythm, and 6.3% said never in this regard. This highlights that the musical qualities of poetry significantly improve their engagement and interest, enhancing the level of motivation and language development.

Overall, the responses show that students view poetry as both an engaging and intellectually motivating element of language learning, with the support of context and interactive teaching strategies. They responded that the title, background information, and context of a poem as the main factors that greatly support their active engagement and comprehension. Pictures are considered to enhance classroom participation and emotional expression. Students also stated the importance of figures of speech for understanding meanings deeply and the cultural components of poetry. Many students responded that the difficulties due to the strange vocabulary, poetic devices, and rhythm need the assistance of the teacher in the classroom. Classroom activities such as summarising poems by the students themselves were practised rarely, which disconnected students emotionally from the poem being taught or practised. Summarising a poem is taken as the best way for students to enrich their understanding. Finally, rhyme and rhythm are taken as strong motivational elements, making poetry lessons more enjoyable, engaging, and memorable. Concluding, the results suggest that poetry teaching in the EFL classroom becomes more effective when it equally utilises linguistic and cultural guidance, contextual elaboration and connection, and creative and emotional participation of the students.

Plan for Action

To enhance understanding of my students, I started talking with my colleagues about the way we could make poetry classes more effective and engaging. We discussed our shared goals and shaping the way towards them, and also discussed new techniques and methods to make poetry classes more interesting and student-centred. I also surfed websites and online resources for better ideas on teaching to find simple and practical techniques that would be suitable in my real classroom. After collecting these ideas from the above-mentioned sources, I decided to use activities that focus on students' understanding, creativity, and active participation.

In my action plan, I started to teach a poem by giving some background information about the poet and the poem. Then, I explained the context so that students could connect the context of the poem to their real-life situations. I used pictures to help students visualise and discuss the ideas presented implicitly. I also taught them the figures of speech used in the poems, like metaphors and similes, to enhance their understanding and make it long-lasting.

To make teaching-learning more active, I asked students to read the poem aloud in pairs, focusing on rhyme and rhythm. Then they summarised the poem in their own words, and I explained the main ideas sometimes in their mother tongue as well, for better understanding. These steps helped me to make poetry classes easier, more enjoyable, and more meaningful for my students.

I started my class by asking the students to predict the theme of the poem from the title and the pictures given. I began by involving students with their intense curiosity and motivating them to use their prior knowledge about the poem. I encouraged the activation of critical thinking ability and made them more participatory in the lesson by asking them to guess the theme on the basis of the title and pictures.

Next, I taught them the difficult vocabulary used in the poem. Introducing students to the strange words before discussing the poem can help connect the students with the lesson well. Students could easily understand the text without confusion because of the words. This helped the students improve their level of confidence and comprehension. Ultimately, this technique developed students' language skills.

In this step, I provided the students with the background information on the poet and the poem. Elaboration of the context in the poem is important in poetry class. Giving information about the poet and the historical, cultural, or social background helped students understand the poem's meaning, tone, and purpose deeply. It also created a learning environment more engaging.

After that, I tried to connect the context of the poem to its real-life context. By connecting the poem to students' own experiences and context, they found the lesson to be more meaningful. Students got to know how literature reflects real-life situations.

I also elaborated on the figures of speech (literary devices) used in the poem. Figures of speech like metaphors, similes, personification, etc., create barriers in students' understanding, but they really add beauty to poetry. Discussing them in detail with examples helped students appreciate the deviant use of language.

Then, I asked the students to read the poem aloud in pairs with rhyme and rhythm. Reading aloud helped them to practice pronunciation, intonation, and fluency. Giving due focus to the rhyme and rhythm assisted students in enjoying the poetry, improving their speaking skills.

I also made the judicious use of their mother tongue during the explanation of the poem. Translating the main ideas into the students' mother tongue ensured understanding. This technique really motivated the students as they proudly found their mother tongue in the language classroom.

At the end, I asked them to summarise the poem themselves, giving no importance to the language and the structure, but to the meaning. Asking students to summarise motivated them to reflect on the poem, synthesise the main ideas presented, and express their understanding in their own words.

Results after Successful Intervention of the Plans

The strategies used during poetry teaching highly contributed to students' understanding, involvement, and active interaction with teachers and their friends.

Describing and elaborating on the figures of speech like metaphors, similes, and personification motivated students to actively participate in discussions, enhancing their comprehension of the poem's theme, meaning, and cultural context. Clarification on unfamiliar vocabulary at the beginning of the poetry lesson motivated them to interact with the teacher and ask questions frankly in an open way.

Encouraging and supporting students to predict the theme from the title deepened their interpretive skills and critical thinking. Using fun and humour in the classroom makes poetry lessons more enjoyable, increasing students' willingness to participate in interactive activities. Explaining the poem in their mother tongue helped students' better understanding of poetic ideas. Students were encouraged to initiate meaningful discussions in the poetry classroom. Moreover, reading the poem aloud in pairs with rhyme and rhythm not only improved students' pronunciation and fluency but also maintained the collaborative practice with confidence. Allowing students to write summaries on their own encouraged their reflective writing, critical thinking, and interaction with the teacher.

It is found that interactive and research-informed student-centred techniques, including the explanation of vocabulary, predicting theme from title and pictures, contextualization of the poem and content, judicious use of mother-tongue, creative writing, and pair reading effectively promote comprehension, engagement, and meaningful interaction in poetry teaching. These strategies largely contributed to making poetry learning more comprehensible, enjoyable, and meaningful in EFL classrooms.

During the study, the researcher used the fundamentals of Reader-response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978). This theory emphasises that the meaning of the text is derived through an active interaction between the reader and the text. Here, students are actively engaged in reading and related activities for their better understanding. The research-informed strategies were aligned with the theory. The strategies were predicting themes from titles and pictures, explaining of contextual background, establishing connections between the poems with students' real-life experiences, encouraging pair reading, and allowing students to write their own summaries, enabling learners to construct meaning individually and collaboratively. To make students more engaged, confident, and motivated, it is a must to provide them with the opportunity to respond to the poem personally. This is reflected in the results, where students showed increased participation, better comprehension, improved interpretive skills, and a stronger emotional connection to the poems. Thus, the shift from teacher-centred explanation to student-centred meaning-making approaches directly supports the theme of Reader-response Theory and explains the successful improvements observed after the successful intervention.

Reflection

Teaching poems using well-planned and student-centred techniques helped me understand the effectiveness of using multiple strategies in poetry class. By starting the class, allowing students to predict the theme based on the title and pictures presented, I was able to draw students' curiosity and activate prior knowledge, which made them more attentive and engaged. Elaborating on the difficult vocabulary with examples before the explanation of the poem made it sure that students could have easy access to the poem

with full confidence and an improved level of comprehension. Providing students with the background information about the poet and the poem, as well as discussing its context in relation to their real-life experiences, helped students relate the content meaningfully with an increased level of critical thinking.

Elaboration of the figures of speech (literary devices) and pictures used in the poem motivated students to actively engage in the poetry classroom. Reading the poem aloud in pairs, with a concentration on rhyme and rhythm, improved their pronunciation, fluency, and peer collaboration. Elaborating on difficult ideas in their mother tongue helped the students understand the poem in a better way. Writing summaries on their own encouraged students' active engagement, reflection, and organisation of ideas.

Conclusions

After the exploration, I came to know that the students were highly interested in learning poems, but I had to apply some different techniques than I have been using for a long time. Exploration helped me to find out the techniques they prefer, how a teacher can be supportive while teaching poetry, the areas of difficulty that students have regarding poetry teaching and so on. I applied the activities suggested by the students. In such a case, we should not be discouraged; instead, we should find out the right solution. Exploratory action research is one of the best solutions for improving both teaching and learning. It would be very fruitful to provide students with opportunities to read the poem in pairs and to summarise the poem themselves. I found that we should emphasise more on giving the meaning of unfamiliar words, the detailed background information of the poet and poem and explanation of the figures of speech. It is also essential to inject fun and humour into the classroom. The findings suggest that exploratory action research is an effective approach to identifying challenges and improving teaching strategies, ultimately fostering both students' appreciation of poetry and their language development in a meaningful and enjoyable way.

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