Teaching Poetry to Increase the Comprehension of University Students: Myanmar Context

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Abstract

Dramatic play can be defined as a type of play where students accept and assign roles, and then act them out. It is a time when they break through the walls of reality, pretend to be someone or something different from themselves, and dramatize situations and actions to go along with the roles they have chosen to play. This research aimed to investigate university teachers' views of teaching poetry through dramatic play at universities in Myanmar and evaluate students' responses in such an approach to teaching poetry. A qualitative research study was conducted in language classrooms of selected universities in Myanmar. This research included the questionnaire data obtained over a one-year period (2018-2019) from 85 university teachers and 210 undergraduate students. Statistical analysis of the data revealed that only some of teachers asserted their role to the development of aesthetic appreciation among their students. They also make play possible. Dramatic play provides an excellent context for

students to develop and practice many important skills and behaviors that contribute to later success at university and life. Some of the students asserted themselves with greater confidence about their understanding of poetry. Thus, more attention should be paid to appreciate poetry as an artistic and aesthetic medium. Some of the benefits of dramatic play mentioned by the students are having relief from emotional tension, feeling powerful, using social interaction skills, having language development, using symbols, and sorting out fantasy and reality.

Keywords: Teaching poetry, University students, Myanmar context

Introduction

This research uses the combined theoretical framework of positivist and interpretative educational research paradigms (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). In doing so, it takes a 'pragmatic research approach' which focuses on an individual decisionmaker within an actual real-world situation. The process of undertaking a pragmatic study is first to identify a problem and view it within its broadest context. This leads to research inquiry, which seeks to better understand and ultimately solve the problem (Schwandt, 2001).

Literature Review

The success of the teaching poetry is measured by how far the objectives of teaching can be reached. Tiwari (2008) proposes the objective of teaching poetry into two objectives: general objectives and specific objectives. The general objective of teaching poetry basically is to increase students' appreciation of poems which is drawn into several points. In addition, the objectives of teaching poetry are to address the students to be able to understand, appreciate, and analyze the literary works deeply in order to increase the students' comprehension and other achievement such as critical thinking, cultural competence, personal pleasure, and language competence. Poetry is a broad area of literature offering teachers and students the opportunity to both dip their toe and completely dive into creative writing. One of the central ideas behind the teaching of poetry lies

in its ability to bring a fresh sense of life to language. It communicates through sound as well as sight and works its magic by tone as well as by engaging the eye with the pearl-bright moments of words moving along the currents of our changing times. Sarac (2003) divides the benefits of comprehending poems into four points. First, poems provide students with a different viewpoint towards language use by going beyond the known usages and rules of grammar, syntax and vocabulary. Second, poems can trigger unmotivated students to explore different interpretations. Third, poems evoke feelings and thoughts in heart and in mind. The last, poems make students familiar with figure of speech(i.e. simile, metaphor, irony, personification, imagery, etc.) due to their being a part of daily language use. In recent years, Myanmar educational system continues to focus on a cognitive rather than an interpersonal and aesthetic dimension. As a result, within this educational framework there are no necessary conditions for intuitive insight and subjects such as poetry become even more difficult to withstand the patterns of standardization, evident across the elementary university curriculum (Higgins, 2009). A curriculum that recognizes the central importance of emotion, body, and spirit as well as the mind is of vital importance**.** For this reason**,** many scholars recognize the transformative power of poetry as a means of cultural elevation**,** emphasizing that universities have the responsibility to lead student to an appreciation of those works of literature that have been widely regarded as amongst the finest in the language (Goodwyn, 1992; Powell, 1999). These scholars argue for an aesthetic approach to the teaching of aesthetic subjects such as poetry where the personal development supersedes the mere transmission of knowledge (Pike, 2004). Poetry is the form of writing that can help to bridge a body-mind dualism and undoubtedly mould student's life soul and the character. It tends to beget a love of beauty and of truth in alliance; it indirectly suggests high and noble principles of action, and it encourages people to regard emotion as a functional whole so helpful in making principles operative (Benton, 1984). Over the past decades, there has been an increasing interest by educators in understanding the positive impact of dramatic play on student's overall development. Many scholars regard dramatic play as a playful activity and as a means of inspiring student to develop symbolic, artistic and innovative

behaviours (Benton, 1984). The importance of incorporating both the subjective and objective, the cognitive and affective and the emotional and intellectual simultaneously within the framework of teaching poetry through dramatic play becomes evident (Horsman, 2000). The term dramatic play is generally used to describe all kinds of pretend play, that is, symbolic play, role-play, imaginative play, fantasy play, make-believe play, and socio-dramatic play (Miller, 2002). This kind of play appears in the form of artistic behaviour between symbolic play and dramatic art. Dramatic play is a student-oriented activity and includes the following elements: imitative role play, make-believe with regard to objects, make-believe in regard to actions and situations, interpersonal interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication and narratives (McCullough, 2000). Student's participation in dramatic play signifies symbolic transformation and personal imagination in real or imaginary situations (Crouch, 2009). The students use their internal symbolic abilities giving shape to their shared experience through the transformation process serving the general function of maintaining social contact (Minks, 2013). Participants in dramatic play maintain two types of shape in their improvisations. On the one hand, they represent their vision in the form of symbols and images which are directly related to their personal experiences of cultural identities, roles, social events, language varieties and different ways of representing an action. On the other hand, students uncover what they have internalized in relation to dramatic play. Dramatic play provides excellent opportunities for fine-tuning the roles which student play. It helps them to acknowledge and demonstrate their competence and provides a safe setting for exploring and practicing new and more satisfying ways for them to play their current roles. Aside from being lots of fun, taking on fantasy roles helps student to spark their spontaneity and creativity (Newman & Newman, 2011). Dramatic play gives them a time out from their daily concerns and a chance to deal with them in a figurative way. It also provides a culture medium for student to learn how to be group members and to learn how to express their individuality (Grainger, 2003).

1. The Benefits of Dramatic Play

Experts agree that dramatic play is an integral part of a well-rounded program as it is healthy for student development. Here are just a few of the many incredible benefits of dramatic play.

2. *Dramatic play teaches self-regulation.*

Students are known for acting with impulse, so dramatic play is a great stepping stone for learning to self-regulate their emotions and actions. Interestingly, when students assign and accept roles in dramatic play they are motivated to stick to them, thinking of them as rules to follow. This helps them develop the ability to coordinate and plan with others as well as control their impulses.

3. *Dramatic play encourages language development.*

Dramatic play teaches and encourages expressive language. Students are motivated to communicate their wishes to their peers and therefore must learn to speak from the perspective of their pretend roles. Dramatic play is often a very comfortable place for children who are shy or withdrawn to participate in a group.

4. *Dramatic play teaches conflict resolution.*

Both unstructured and structured dramatic play offer teachable moments of conflict resolution. Inevitably, disagreements will naturally arise during dramatic play, which offers children a chance to work through their differences and arrange a compromise. It also encourages students to consider alternate perspectives as they recognize various roles of people in their lives and communities.

5. *Dramatic play supports Math and Literacy.*

Dramatic play provides the perfect play setting for students to interact with functional math and print. Consider the students who is playing server at a restaurant. He will interact with both print and numbers as he takes orders, fills them and then rings up the total owed for the meal. Dramatic play is

also known for increasing comprehension as students love to act out their favorite storybooks.

6. Dramatic play relieves emotional tension.

Dramatic play offers a safe place for children to act out real life situations. Adults tend to cope with dramatic events by retelling it again and again. Children cope with dramatic events by acting them out.

7. Dramatic play is empowering to students.

This is not only because children can assign and accept their own roles in the play setting, but also because dramatic play offers a safe play for children to act out traumatic experiences. Typically, when students act out dramatic or frightening experiences, they place themselves in a powerful role. They choose to play mommy or daddy, two important figures in their lives, or a superhero with great powers. A child who has lived through real trauma, like a car accident, for example, might choose to be a paramedic or doctor.

8. How to Encourage Dramatic Play

There are so many important benefits of dramatic play, the more important it to encourage it whenever possible. And it's simple to do because kids naturally gravitate toward it. Some programs have huge dramatic play centers with an even greater amount of dress-up clothing. But dramatic play can happen in the home, too. If you don't have a lot of room for full on dress-up costumes, go smaller. Try starting with a box of play silks, and some hats or masks. Add a few dolls or stuffed animals. Let students define objects for use and let them pretend whatever to be whatever they would like.

Research Objectives

Some of the studies deal with the significance of the student's personality in the form of acting out behaviours in dramatic play and some focus on the importance of dramatic play in supporting student's cognitive, social, and affective development. However, the goals of this research are:

1. To investigate university teachers' views of teaching poetry through dramatic play
2. To evaluate students' responses in such an approach to teaching poetry

Methodology

1. Research Design

The study comprised two main phases. Phase one was consisted of the completion of a self-administered questionnaire by teachers and phase two for students. The questions focused on the teachers' and students' perceptions towards teaching poetry through dramatic play.

2. Population and Samples

Altogether 320 students and 115 teachers from selected universities took part in this research.

3. Instrument and Procedures

A questionnaire was designed to collect the data of the teachers' and students' perceptions towards teaching poetry through dramatic play. Phase one was consisted of the completion of a self-administered questionnaire by teachers and phase two for students.

4. Data Collection

The questionnaire was disseminated in the university classrooms of first year, second year, third year and fourth year English Specialization students by the researchers. Since any research needs to adhere to the relevant ethical principles, students and teachers were asked to provide pseudonyms so as to protect their identities and maintain privacy.

5. Data Analysis

Statistical analysis was performed by the use of a concrete methodology and organizing data into categories based on emerging themes. Each category was codified, and simple descriptive analysis was used to analyze the data and to provide an account of the practices and embraced views of the teachers and students involved.

Table 1

Illustration of the Gender Distribution of the Research Cohort

| Sr No | Gender | Sample Size and Composition Gender | | | |
| | | Teachers | | Students | |
		no	%	no	%
1	Male	33	28.70%	150	46.88%
2	Female	82	71.30%	170	53.12%
	Total	115	100%	320	100%

Information of a more qualitative nature, gathered through phase two, included detailed interviews that were of a semi-structured nature in order to enable data gathering related to specific beliefs and issues of particular significance to teachers. The purpose of this phase was to conduct an in-depth inquiry into the issues emergent from phase one. Phase two data were transcribed, analyzed and interpreted, via thematic content analysis, for emergent themes reflective of participants' visions of poetry teaching in higher education.
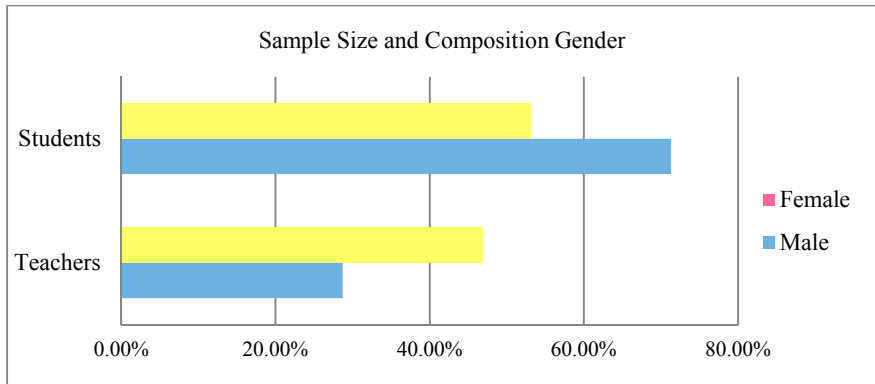
*Figure 1.* Gender distribution of the research cohort**.**

The main purpose at this stage of the research process was to present preliminary findings on research question item (i). This data served to highlight the principal areas of interest and relevance for phase two.

Table 2

Interview Responses of the Teachers to Survey Question Item (i)(n=115)

SN	Question item	Responses of the teacher participants on the general aims				
(i)	What is your purpose in the teaching of poetry atundergraduate level?	To enable students to appreciate the beauty, rhyme and style of poem	To help students appreciate poetry as an artistic and aesthetic medium to which they can relate perfectly	To sensitize students to the pleasure of appreciating a high literary genre, by helping them better understand themes, structure and imagery	To foster a passionate form of engagement with poetry and to cultivate a lifelong love of poetry	To explain poems to their class and to help prepare students by supplying various notes and questions on selected poems
		13%	38%	14%	17%	18%

According to the data, 38% of teachers asserted their role to the development of aesthetic appreciation among their students, by stressing that their purpose was to help students appreciate poetry as an artistic and aesthetic medium to which they can relate perfectly. Aesthetic means the pleasant, positive or artful appearance of a person or a thing. Only13% of the participants mention that their purpose in the teaching of poetry at undergraduate level is to enable students to appreciate the beauty, rhyme and style of poem.
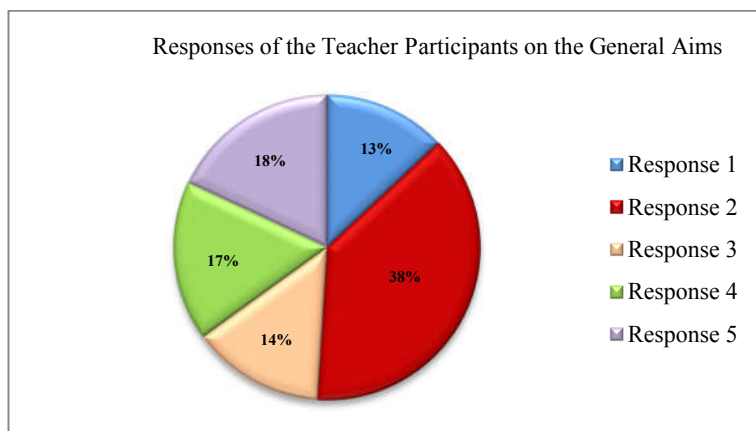
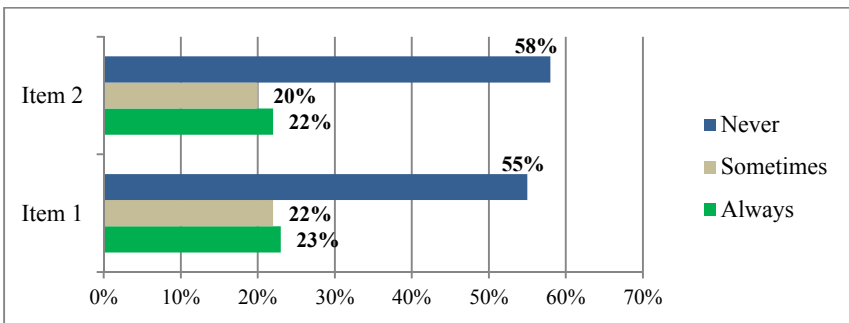*Figure 2.* Interview responses of the teachers to survey question item (i)(n=39)**.**

Increasingly, we are recognizing the creative talents of students and providing opportunities for them to develop their skills through an alternative way of creative art expression and to encourage students to write their own poems by using dramatic techniques.Creating poetry is a wonderful way for students to share information they learned through class or independent study.

Table 3

Interview Responses of the Teachers to Survey Items(ii) & (iii) (n=115)

SN	Questionnaire statements	Responses		
		Always	Sometimes	Never
(ii)	I could ask students to illustrate poems through an alternative way of creative art expression.	23%	22%	55%
(iii)	I could encourage students to write their own poems by using dramatic techniques.	22%	20%	58%

According to the data, some teachers were more likely to ask students to illustrate poems through an alternative way of creative art with a high percentage of answering 'never' (55%), and a much lower 'sometimes' (22%) or always (23%) using these instructional strategies. Twenty-two percent of the teachers interviewed answered that they 'always' encourage students to write their own poems by using dramatic techniques for the teaching of poetry, 20% 'sometimes' and 58% 'never'. The composition of a poem is also noted as a vital necessity for students. Within the class, composition provides rich terrain for students' affective development who may write poems through dramatic conventions as a daily diary or various forms of writing in role. However, only 22% of teachers surveyed answered 'always' and 20% 'sometimes' encourage their students to write their own poems with the use of dramatic techniques.

Figure 3. Interview responses of the teachers to survey items (ii) & (iii) (n=39).

Exploring poetry gives students the chance to develop higher levels of self-awareness on their own responses, emotional, imaginative, and intellectual to aesthetic texts on the ultimate goal of fostering an aesthetic pedagogy in the classroom (Cockett & Fox, 1999). In order to realize this ambition of teaching poetry teachers need to focus on the student's personal response to a poem. To this end, students were asked to list the most frequently occurring pedagogical activities in their class. Table 3 displays students' responses to survey questions regarding various issues for the teaching of poetry.

Table 4

Students' Responses to Survey Questions (n=320 Undergraduate Students)

Sr No	Question Items	Emerging themes		
		Yes	Not Sure	No
(iv)	Could you list the most frequently occurring pedagogical activities in the teaching of poetry in your class?	41%	33%	26%
(v)	Do you feel confident about your understanding of poetry?	37%	41%	22%

So increasingly it seems in Table 3 that while 41% of the students can name the most frequently occurring pedagogical activities in the teaching of poetry in your class, only 37% still feel confident about their understanding of poetry. Soteachers should encourage them to be confident about understanding of poetry.

	Item (iv)	Item (v)
■ Yes	41%	37%
■ Not Sure	33%	41%
■ No	26%	22%
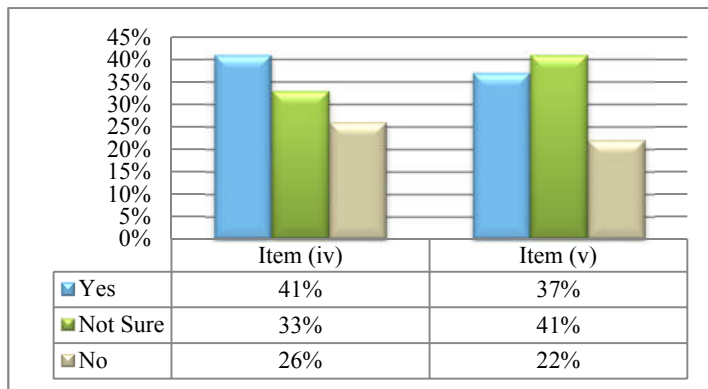
Figure 4. Students' responses to survey questions (n=320 undergraduate students)**.**

The resource materials focus on developing students' poetry analysis skills and provide guidelines on how to approach a poem and develop critical responses to it. It is intended for use by literature in English teachers either as a learning task in the class or as supplementary materials to promote self-directed learning and extend students' learning beyond the classroom. The materials consist of two sets, each with the student's copy and teacher's notes. The student's copy includes handouts and worksheets for students, while the teacher's notes provide teaching steps and ideas, as well as the suggested answers and resources for teachers' reference.

Table 5

Students' Responses to the Most Effective Class Resources for Enhancing their Understanding of Poetry (n=320 Undergraduate Students)

SN	Survey question	Percentage of Respondents		
		Dramatic play	Teacher's notes	Poetry textbook
(vi)	Which are the most effective class resources for enhancing your understanding of poetry?	53%	26%	21%

Table 5 displays students' responses to survey question (vi) regarding various issues for the teaching of poetry. Most of them (53%) wrote about poetry positive experiences with drama, music and painting. Some of the students (21%), however, mentioned negative experiences in memorizing and reciting poetry in the textbook in front of the class, as well as 26% trying to figure out the teacher's interpretation in their notes.
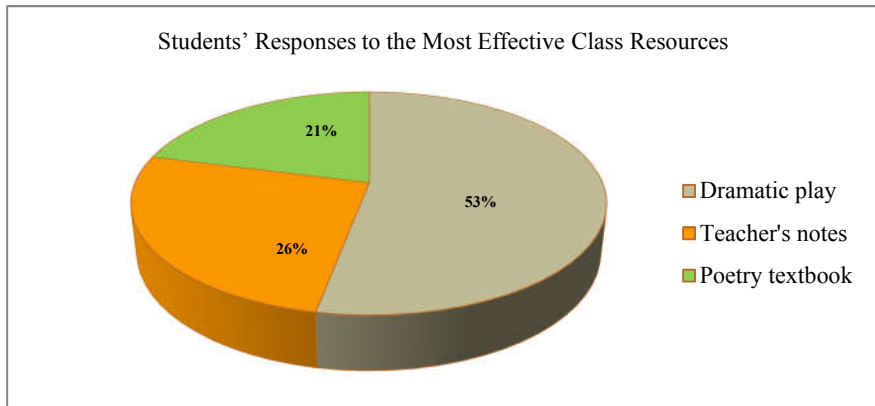
Figure 5. Students' responses to the most effective class resources for enhancing their understanding of poetry (n=320 undergraduate students)**.**

Benefits of dramatic play mentioned by the students are having relief from emotional tension, feeling powerful, using social interaction skills, having language development, using symbols and sorting out fantasy and reality.Most of the students, through questionnaire responses, made positive comments about the value of dramatic play as a means of teaching poetry in tertiary education.

Table 6

Students' Responses to the Benefits of Dramatic Play for Enhancing Their Understanding of Poetry (n=320 Undergraduate Students)

Sr No	Benefits of dramatic play	Percentage of respondents		
		Agree	Not Sure	Disagree
(i)	Having relief from emotional tension	67%	13%	20%
(ii)	Feeling powerful	48%	33%	19%
(iii)	Using social interaction skills	79%	11%	10%
(iv)	Having language development	90%	8%	2%
(v)	Using symbols	35%	36%	29%
(vi)	Sorting out fantasy and reality	41%	22%	37%

According to the data, dramatic play teaches and encourages expressive language. Students are motivated to communicate their wishes to their peers and therefore must learn to speak from the perspective of their pretend roles.
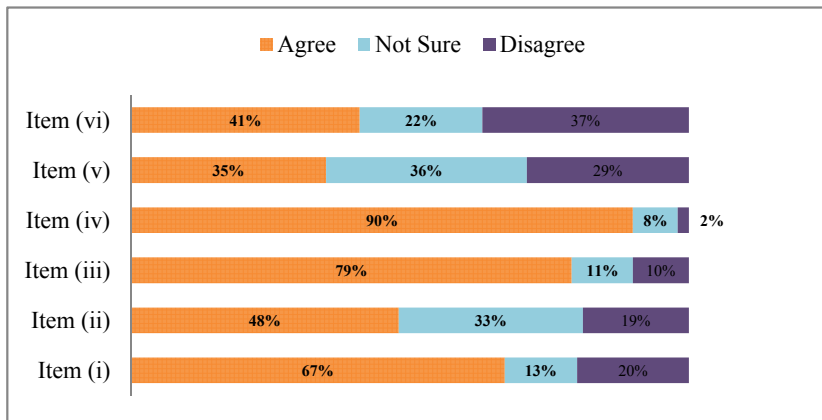
Figure 6. Students' responses to the benefits of dramatic play for enhancing their understanding of poetry (n=320 undergraduate students).

Results

Dramatic play is a type of play where children assign and accept roles and act them out. It's pretending to be someone or something else. Someone different and new like a super villain, or someone well known and familiar like mom. Sometimes students take on real-world roles, other times they take on fantasy roles. Either way, it is a play that involves breaking down the barriers of reality and results in serious and natural learning. The involved educators in the reflective development through this research were not limited to a singular point of view or role. Figure 1 displays teachers' responses to survey question item (i) regarding general aims for the teaching of poetry at undergraduate level.

According to the data, 38% of teachers asserted their role to the development of aesthetic appreciation among their students, by stressing that their purpose was to help students appreciate poetry as an artistic and aesthetic medium to which they can relate perfectly. Aesthetic means the pleasant, positive or artful appearance of a person or a thing. Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy that examines the nature of art and our experience of it. An aesthetic experience could include a mixture of feeling, such as pleasure, rage, grief, suffering, and joy. In addition, 18% of teachers felt their purpose was to explain poems to their class and to help prepare students by supplying various notes and questions on selected poems. However, these teachers reported that this technical focus had a subversive effect on the fulfillment of their primary target in the aesthetic appreciation of poetry. They (14%) also affirmed that their prime aim was to sensitize students to the pleasure of appreciating a high literary genre, by helping them better understand themes, structure and imagery. 17% of the teachers said that what they wanted for themselves was to foster a passionate form of engagement with poetry and to cultivate a lifelong love of poetry to their students.

Table 7

Teachers' Responses to Pedagogical Activities in Teaching Poetry

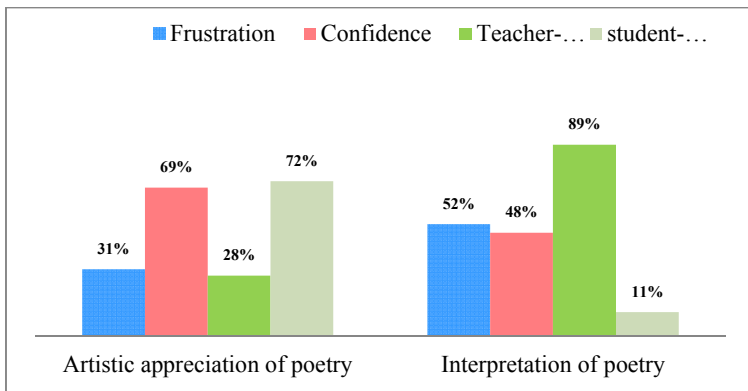| S N	Teaching poetry	Pedagogical activities	Responses			
			Feeling		Approach	
			Frustration	Confidence	Teacher-centered	student-centered
1	Artistic appreciation of poetry	Dramatization, music and painting	31%	69%	28%	72%
2	Interpretation of poetry	Memorization, recitation, interpretation	52%	48%	89%	11%

Figure 7. Teachers' responses to pedagogical activities in teaching poetry.

Students stressed that they felt frustrated towards what they realized as the equivocal nature of poetry, with 52% of them assuring the difficulties of the correct way to understand the multiple meanings of a poem. It was evident, too, a modest sense of dependency on the part of both teacher and student for pre-scripted responses to questions about interpreting the poetry, with time constraint being cited as the primary reason in this tendency. Approximately 69% of the students asserted themselves with greater confidence about their understanding of poetry and cited teacher's

notes as the primordial cause for this sense of self-confidence. Support for the use of dramatic play was also evident in the responses, with students citing this student-centered teaching strategy (72%) as the most effective class resources for enhancing their understanding. Pretending a play can take on multiple forms, and while pretending may just look like "playing", it is integral to the developmental learning process. It should be encouraged, and students need lots of opportunities to engage.

Discussion

In qualitative research reliability refers to the extent to which findings from a study can be replicated. As Merriam (2002) put it, 'Reliability is problematic in the social sciences simply because human behavior is never static, nor is what many experience necessarily more reliable than what one person experiences'. As the current study is qualitative in nature, the findings are inevitably specific to the particular time and place and they cannot be applied to a wider population or to different contexts. Moreover, despite being impossible to produce generalizable results, this qualitative study achieved to obtain in-depth knowledge about teachers' experience of teaching poetry through dramatic play. The aim of the research was to investigate the teachers' views and perceptions of their role in developing an aesthetic appreciation of poetry by encouraging engagement, interest, enjoyment and inspiring a love of poetry into their students with the use of dramatic play. There were some teachers who appeared more concerned about the standardized approach to poetry analysis in which the lowest level of aesthetic development appears to be well situated rather than a sincere reflection on the poem's overall aesthetic unity. In this case, students deal with the literal meaning of the verse and the technical analysis of form, rhyme-scheme, mood, tone, etc. However, there were a lot of teachers who attempted to develop students' emotional and subjective sensibilities. Thus, they have succeeded, through dramatic play, in providing space for a more aesthetic approach to the teaching of poetry. The use of dramatic play, as reported above by students, evidences its significance as a teaching strategy in expedient access to the meaning of the poem. Moreover, some students reported a need for teacher's notes and

poetry textbook in which meaning is transparent and clearly defined. It is widely recognized that enthusiastic teaching based on a wide range of teaching and learning strategies is the key to keeping students engaged in poetry lessons (Hennessy, Hinchion, & McNamara, 2010). If students only read poetry, their approach to it is often superficial and they might not adequately notice important aspects that are hidden between the lines. Students need to experiment with non-verbal communicative aspects of language (body language, gestures, and facial expressions), as well as verbal aspects (intonation, rhythm, stress, slang, and idiomatic expressions), when analyzing and interpreting poetry. Dramatic play holds the potential to enhance students' subjective understanding and leads to an active exploration of the emotional and imaginative aspects of the poem (Neelands, 1999). Dramatic play is essentially improvised in nature. Drawing on the elements of drama, it enables students to create and inhabit a fictional world for the experiences, insights, emotions and understandings (Machado, 2010). Besides, it encourages students to bring their interests and personalities, their 'cultural capital', to the learning process so that they can become actively involved and personalize their knowledge (Luongo-Orlando, 2010). Dramatic play helps student explore different roles and situations as they play with items and tools adults use in everyday life.The present research stresses the need to support teachers in their attempts to foster enhanced potential for the affective development of students through dramatic play. This study also acknowledges the notable challenges and obstacles that language teachers encounter in the teaching of poetry. Moreover, it underlines the existence of an aesthetic consciousness for poetry pedagogy amongst teachers which encourages dignified levels of students' intellectual and emotional engagement. It should be noted that there are concrete dangers to teaching the arts, especially in disciplines such as poetry which seek to cultivate aesthetic experience (Cockett & Fox, 1999). What is essential, in this regard, is that teachers need to get out of the traditional word-by-word focus on meaning, verbal inflection and figure of speech. Their role is not to impose authoritative interpretations but to develop individual responses, to be non-prescriptive, non-didactic. They should alternatively view the continuity of the poem as a whole, as though it were an oil painting. Teachers

themselves, in general, need to help students enjoy poetry's metaphors, sounds and images through dramatic play.

Recommendations

In conclusion, teachers need to put forth the necessary effort required to promote students' affective and aesthetic sensitivity while they try to find ways to streamline their work in a context of standardization and uniformity. It is also the responsibility of education faculties preparing future teachers to provide them with methods that will enrich and enliven their teaching. Teachers often steer clear of poetry fearing negative reactions because they are not confident about their ability to stimulate and encourage students on the pleasures of dramatizing, reading and writing poetry. The process of introducing poetry into the classroom can be fun, if this is done through movement, dramatic play and art. Enactment, enthusiasm and engagement with students, so as to enhance their self-concepts, allow teachers and students to overcome seemingly insuperable difficulties. Part of what poetry gives student is human connection and fresh ways of interpreting and translating images and signs. But even if poems don't have the strength to change the world, what they do is that they change students' understanding of what's going on in their world and can inspire them to be better human beings.

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