Modern English Poetry and Turkish Undergraduates: Learning Strategies Matter

Sally-Ann Ashton-Hay, Southern Cross University, Australia

Sally.ashton-hay@scu.edu.au

Abstract

This paper aims to demonstrate how learning strategies engaged Turkish English as a Foreign Language undergraduates studying Modern English poetry. The students believed they would not understand Modern English Poetry but ended up publishing a book of their own poetry resulting from classroom activities. This case study details the process of building engagement through connectedness and social constructivist communicative language teaching approaches. Slowly, as an interactive, learning-centred classroom evolved from pair and small group discussions, cognitive reading activities and statements about the text that required support, students gained confidence and expanded their English language resource. Universal themes linked Turkish poetry and student life experiences. Interactive communication and sharing of ideas enlivened the class as students responded to each other, to the poetry and then began writing their own individual expressions. Enthusiastic applause from classmates encouraged more creativity and the notion of publishing a book of the students' poetry. A student editorial team in collaboration with the teacher progressed the poetry book with student artistic illustrations to complement the poems. The book was published just before their graduation and was a reminder of their Modern English Poetry studies. Similar interactive, learning-centred strategies can be used in other teaching contexts to engage and encourage student voice, partnership in learning and inspire creativity.

Key words: engagement; learning strategies; international education; student voice; English as a Foreign Language; poetry

Summary

This case study describes an active teaching process to engage English as a Foreign Language (EFL) undergraduates studying Modern English Poetry at Atatürk University in Turkey. As an English Language Fellow, the brief was to use learning-centred language teaching pedagogy to teach future English language teachers. A social constructivist partnership model with communicative teaching strategies activated learning. Students engaged with poetic themes and devices, expanded their English language vocabulary and encouraged sharing of ideas. The partnership

model evolved through purposeful English language and literature activities, team discussions and listening to student voice. Although complex and sometimes abstract, the poems expressed easily understandable universal themes and this social connection was one of the keys to success.

No one ever expected a volume of poetry to emerge from Modern English Poetry classes, least of all the EFL students. Yet, as the semester progressed, a potential class project began to take shape. Once students started to understand the universal themes on love, beauty in nature, joy, sorrow, hope, and dreams for the future, a new freedom to link their own experiences cultivated creative poetic expressions. Students anecdotally reported that they did not believe they would understand English poetry. One even stated, *I never believed I could like English poetry or even write my own poems in English.*

As an English Language Fellow sponsored by the US Department of State English Language Programs Office, this teaching experience remains one of the most significant student-focused practices in my teaching career. The US Embassy in Ankara provided funding to publish the student poetry in a book at the end of the academic year. A student editorial team gathered class poems and artistically illustrated the themes. Atatürk University Press published the book, *All in Good Time.*

Description of Project

The nine-month English Language Fellow post was in the remote and traditional city of Erzurum in eastern Turkey at Atatürk University's English Department. The students had never been taught by a native English speaker nor studied English poetry before and were anxious, as this was their final year before graduation. During the first lesson, scarcely a word was uttered other than my own. As the lecture proceeded, it was not clear if my message was understood. Finally, the inevitable happened. "Can you understand me?", I asked 80 Turkish students. In an instant, the response resounded: "Yes!" Although this was a positive, more interactive, learning-centred activities would assist these students to discover and make meaning of the English poetry learning journey that we were about to embark on together.

One of the first steps in 'breaking the ice' was to create a participative and communicative teaching environment with active learning facilitated by a constructivist approach to create meaning collectively by learners and teachers (Weinstein 2001, p. 179). Vygotsky's (1998) theory of constructivism is one of the key learning theories expanding teaching models for social learning. Wenger (2018) emphasises the components of a social theory of learning including meaning, practice, community and identity. He claims that constructivist theories "focus on the processes by which learners build their own mental structures" (p. 227). Such a community of practice approach involved active learning through pair and group interactive tasks and dialogic discussions to promote student autonomy and confidence (Bandura, 1997). According to Matheson and Sutcliffe (2018, p. 40), "transformative capabilities are important for the development of self". Social constructivist strategies in communicative language teaching formed the basis for a purposeful process in learning.

In implementing this purposeful process, one aim was to build a sense of trust and connectedness (Anstey 2003; Burke et al., 2016) as an integral part of literacy pedagogy in a supportive classroom environment where students take some responsibility for their learning. Poetry study could not be successful without first providing encouragement, praise and affirmation to the students in order to sustain that supportive environment and risk-taking in using the English language. During the initial weeks, contributions to class discussion were sparse, although any student input was highly commended and encouraged while limitations, such as shyness or English language inability were 'desuggested' (Larsen-Freeman 2000, p. 81) with positive suggestopedia (Bancroft, 2005). These two strategies encouraged students to overcome the risk of speaking in English and offering opinions on the poetry as well as supporting a social constructivist class environment.

Gradually, a sense of rapport developed through sharing, humour and fun. Cooperative structures (Kagan 1994, 1999) provided opportunities for teams to discuss different poems and compare responses to questions. The class began to enjoy listening to their friends' ideas, which encouraged participation. Teamwork, as a basic principle of communicative language teaching, helped extend students' knowledge through negotiation of meaning and communication in the English language.

Themes for lectures were introduced on the board at the beginning of class to link lesson materials and poetic themes. The characteristics of writing styles and poetic devices were compared and contrasted. Quotes from various poets were discussed such as William Carlos Williams's statement that poets "see with the eyes of angels" (Ginsberg 1968, p. 8) and Robert Frost's "Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another" (Frost, 1931). The students responded positively to this connectedness in their learning and began to exhibit a sense of pleasure and satisfaction in their study. Ensuring a supportive classroom atmosphere was an integral first step in encouraging individual responses, building confidence and assisting students to interact responsibly with their learning materials and teammates.

Throughout the semester, learning strategies raised awareness and comprehension. Strategies such as cognitive reading (Schramm, 2008) helped to build understanding of literal vocabulary, the use of metaphors, and figurative and symbolic aspects of language. Schramm (2008, p. 231) claims that cognitive reading involves "an active process of constructing understanding" which developed from her own realisation that literal translation of vocabulary was insufficient (Oxford et al., 2014). According to Schramm, the ability to infer from context was essential in her own second language learning and the basis of self-regulation in higher psychological processes where practices such as analysing, synthesising, planning, monitoring and evaluating are internalised in the learner (Oxford et al. 2014).

One of the cognitive strategies was the use of supporting statements about a particular poem to assist students to share cultural understanding and unpack meaning. Top down (understanding the macro or overall meaning), bottom-up (decoding from the micro or word level meaning through definitions of words) and schemata building (understanding and constructing meaning from the ideas represented in the poetry) took place. Students examined denotive and connotative

meanings in the poem *A White Rose.* The split screen notes helped comprehension in a step-by-step process shown below in Figure 2.

A White Rose

The red rose whispers of passion,
And the white rose breathes of love;
Oh, the red rose is a falcon
And the white rose is a dove.

But I send you a cream-white rosebud,
With a flush on its petal tips;
For the love that is purest and sweetest
Has a kiss of desire on the lips.

John Boyle O'Reilly (1844-1890)

Red rose = Falcon	White rose = Dove
Denotative meaning Falcon: any of various birds of prey of the family Falconidae aving a short curved beak and long, pointed powerful wings adapted for swift flight.	Dove: any of various widely distributed birds of the family Columbidae which includes pigeons, having a small head and a characteristic cooing call.
Connotative meaning Falcon characteristics: • Hunter • Attacks • Swoops on small prey victims • Trained to hunt small game such as rabbits, squirrels, snakes, etc • Fast and quick • Powerful and strong	Dove characteristics: • Gentle, innocent • Sweet • Peaceful, quiet • Purity • Symbol of peace • Homing pigeons bred for navigational ability to always return to home roost or loft
The Falcon relates to physical desire and passion in love.	The dove relates to a pure and spiritual attachment in love.
The poet likens falcons to red roses and white roses to doves, although he is really comparing falcons and passion, not falcons and roses.	

Figure 1: Reading poetic metaphors and symbols

Another purposeful strategy was the statement strategy (Strong, Silver & Perini 2001) which adapted well to various poems where students agreed or disagreed with a simple statement and then provided support for their idea. This strategy stimulated students to be a "brain-on reader" (Davies 2011, p. 49) and read purposefully rather

than mindlessly. Figure 2 shows an example with a Shakespearean sonnet. Small groups shared ideas before coming together in a larger class discussion. Statement strategies encouraged deeper listening to the poem's theme and imagery. The statement strategy can be adapted to almost any subject area.

Shakespeare and the Statement Strategy

Sonnet 73

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourish'd by.
   This thou perceives, which makes thy love more strong,
    To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

William Shakespeare
(from The Sonnets of William Shakespeare, 1961)

1.   The poet is a young man.   Agree   Disagree
     Support your idea.

2.   This poem is mostly about nature.
       Support your idea.

3.   The poet is consoling someone at the end of the poem.
       Support your idea.

4.   There is a connection between love and death in this poem.
     Support your idea.

Figure 2: Shakespeare and the Statement Strategy (Strong, Silver & Perini, 2001)

Evidence of Effectiveness and Impacts

The effectiveness of this project became evident as students began responding to the English poetry. First, it was through sharing ideas in small groups and then more actively in class discussions. The next step developed when students responded to

poets such as Emily Dickinson in her poem *This is my Letter*. Students shared their letter to Emily and classmates applauded enthusiastically. Peer encouragement created eagerness for further creativity and artistic self-expression. Figure 3 shows Dickinson's poem with four de-identified examples of student voices.

This is My Letter

This is my letter to the world
That never wrote to me –
The simple news that Nature told
With tender majesty.
Her message is committed
To hands I cannot see;
For love of her, sweet countrymen,
Judge tenderly of me.

Emily Dickinson (1830 – 1886)

My Letter to Emily	To Emily Dickinson
This is my letter to Emily whom I've never seen before, I'm a leaf of a tree which you really adored understanding me, even a small piece of nature be sure, is understanding all the world. Then why, why did you feel so lonely In such a crowded world.	Nature is one of the great loves of people's lives, I know she is frightening; But also she is peaceful And I know that's a big dilemma. Man has a very little existence in Nature, Do you believe that you are strong versus her? And most of all, do you have peace and might? You just know, she has the real power.
We're Nobody This is my answer to you: I'm nobody too! But I can't decide, To stand on which side; To be a total recluse in my cage, Or to be an extra on this stage. I don't care to be banished: "We're nobody!" I cry it!	Loneliness The harmony of ground and sky Make a beautiful picture. If you look at this picture carefully, You will see the tears of beautiful nature. She feels the cruelty of wars, Hears the scream of the wind. She knows: She knows the compassion on her. You Emily, you are alone And I share your loneliness With my loneliness.

Figure 3: This is my Letter Student Responses

Comparisons were made to Turkish poets such as Orhan Veli's *I am Listening to Istanbul* and Yunus Emre's *The City of the Heart*. These poets were familiar to students in their own language and demonstrated similar poetic devices. The

students began to write poems on other themes related to their lives. They encouraged each other, valued supportive feedback and developed their English language resource. After class, they shyly offered their work for teacher review, pointing out how they had used a specific poetic device learned in class and the number of poems kept coming.

The growing quantum of student poetry lead to the suggestion of publishing a poetry book and students unanimously agreed on the project. They formed an editorial team to select appropriate poems for publication and gather artistic drawings from classmates to illustrate some poetic themes. The class energised the project and engagement lifted to a new level. The US Embassy in Ankara provided funding to publish the student poetry book at Atatürk University Press and copies of *All in Good Time* became available. The poetry book, although naïvely written, demonstrates student engagement and creativity from a purposeful process in learning.

Reflections on the Project

Perhaps poetry is a natural part of the Turkish character (Kanık, 1997) or perhaps "each of us has a bit of the poet" hidden within (Holmes & Moulton, 2001). Perhaps students enjoyed the opportunity to lose their language inhibitions and cast off on an imaginative voyage, freely expressing stories of their own lives. Their poetry was naïve, tender and, at times, profound. What seemed at first to be deceptively simple and fresh had a remarkable resonance. Any reader can recognise the feelings of youthful love, beauty in nature, fear of loneliness, the terror of earthquakes, worry for family and friends as well as dreams for the future. Such universal themes are easily understood and shared by human beings.

As the semester progressed, the students' confidence grew and their potential in understanding complex English poetry expanded from communicative activities. Wenger's (2018) four social learning components fit together as students: 1) made *meaning* from the poetry; 2) *practiced* through class activities and writing; 3) developed *community* as students built and shared understanding; and 4) formed *identity* as English language users and future English teachers. Social learning and explicit learning strategies were useful in teaching students to listen more deeply, search the text for clues and find reasons to support their opinions.

One of the most promising results evolving from these teaching strategies is the students' voice in poetic expressions. At the beginning of lessons, different students shared their poems and classmates applauded enthusiastically. Such peer encouragement inspired further willingness to create and self-author. The communicative learning-centred classroom challenged students to respond to English poetry and facilitated using the English language to create and make meaning. Students were empowered by connecting the language of poetry to express their own life stories.

Hattie and Donoghue (2018) outline a model of learning to optimise the effectiveness of learning strategies. Their model includes "the skill, the will and the thrill" (p. 102) as input and outcomes. The skill involves prior achievements and other influences related to skills that the students bring to learning such as their language resource. The will relates to dispositions and ways of thinking and responding to situations such as grit, mindfulness and growth versus fixed mindsets. The third component, thrill relates to the motivation for learning that combines complex influences to learning including surface, deep, and achieving (Biggs, 1993). On reflection, this student partnership experience combined the skill, will and thrill of Hattie and Donoghue's model. The students brought and acquired surface learning skills, consolidated deep learning through poetry analysis and self-authoring, and finally realised the ability to transfer these learning strategies to their own professional careers as English language teachers.

The experience was a joyful and memorable highlight in my own teaching career, deeply satisfying from surpassing language boundaries to reach unexpected milestones of creative expression. With little experience in active learning, a limited English language resource and unfamiliarity with poetry from a foreign culture, the Turkish undergraduates engaged and produced their own original poetry book keepsake. This creative poetry volume was the outcome of two semesters and nothing anyone ever expected.

Agnes Lam is a contemporary poetry lecturer in Hong Kong who wrote (Than, 2004):

<div align="center">

To the teacher who cried

A poem is not a poem
Until it is heard
Some poems are not heard
If the soul is not listening.

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I am happy that I am not "the teacher who cried". The poetry book is a confirmation that students heard the poems, listened with their souls and responded with their hearts.

Follow up and Future Plans

The Fellowship project highlights the possibilities of engaged learning, activating student voice and creating poetry in another language. The project demonstrates how students studying English as a foreign or additional language engaged through a learning model that facilitates skill, will and thrill (Hattie & Donoghue, 2018). This case study oriented learners through social constructivist methodology, connectedness and communicative learning strategies to encourage participation and use of English, development of a learning community, and skill transferability to a professional career.

 It would be interesting to follow up on some of the Modern English Poetry students from Atatürk University and visit their English language classrooms today. How

would these former students teach their students? What teaching strategies would this group employ? Would they be champions of active learning and cognitive reading strategies? Would they remember the benefits of constructivist pair and group discussions in their lessons? Would they give students enough opportunities to make sense and meaning and respond to texts in their own unique ways? It is pleasing to imagine so.

In addition to a successor generation of teachers who would implement activate learning, the real value of this case study is through the evidence of student engagement, student voice and student creativity in producing a poetry book in a foreign language. For a teacher, this experience of student transformation was an unforgettable career highlight. The choice to "push gently at the boundaries of convention" (Casanave, 2010) was worthwhile. Educators are encouraged to connect with students, explicitly teach and model learning strategies, deconstruct texts to explain English language metaphors, symbolism and innuendo, and encourage students to respond to texts by designing purposeful group activities to construct meaning and understanding. The learning outcomes cultivated student autonomy, enriched their English language resource and added authority and creativity to their voices as they engaged with their learning more deeply. It is the hope that other students and teachers of literature will benefit from the insights presented in this case study.

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