

Stylistic Analysis of Poetry: A Perspective from an Initial Training Course in TEFL¹

Ayşe Akyel

This article describes a five-week (4 hours a week) stylistic analysis component added to a one-semester initial training course for the use of literature in an EFL context. The aim of this experimental component was to help the student teachers explore the effectiveness of applying stylistic analysis of poetry to the design of language activities for use in EFL classes. The class consisted of 24 student EFL teachers, five male and 19 female. All were native speakers of Turkish. Discussions with the student teachers and observations of the lessons they had prepared were systematically carried out. The student teachers stated that stylistic analysis was an effective tool for preparing their own language awareness activities. Moreover, they reported that they could use these language activities successfully in EFL classrooms for practice teaching.

In general, poems, like other literary texts, focus on interesting and motivating topics open to multiple interpretations. In this sense, poems can be treated as one source among many different kinds of literary and nonliterary texts for designing meaningful language activities of the kind suggested in recent publications on the teaching of literature in EFL classes (Maley & Moulding, 1983; Collie & Slater, 1986; Carter & Long, 1987; Lazar, 1993). Yet because of the "unusual" features of poetic language, teachers either do not seem to be much interested in using poetry in the classroom, or they cannot communicate their enthusiasm to their students (Akyel & Yalçın, 1990; Lazar 1993).

However, it has been argued that teachers can help learners expand their language awareness and improve interpretive skills by making the language of poems the focus of classroom study. Carter (1983), Carter and Long (1987), Widdowson (1975, 1984). To do this, the teacher first needs to analyze what is unusual or distinctive about the language of the poem. At this stage he or she makes use of stylistic analysis. Then the teacher can prepare materials or tasks to help students explore these unusual features. Hence the students are also engaged in a form of stylistic analysis that will reinforce their knowledge of the norms of language and how these norms can be adapted for different communicative purposes (Carter, 1983; Carter & Long, 1987; Lazar 1993). Moreover, materials or tasks designed to encourage students to analyze the

unusual language features in a particular poem can also help them gradually to improve their interpretative skills.

The Initial Training Course

In the school of English Education at Bosphorus University, a one-semester initial training course for the teaching of literature in the EFL context has been offered as part of the curriculum since 1991.

As part of the requirements of this course, the student teachers are first paired to observe literature classes in English-medium high schools and reflect on what they have observed in terms of language activities, text selection, linguistic and cultural problems related to the texts, and student interest and participation.

The student teachers are required to do these observation tasks in pairs, compare their findings, and discuss questions related to particular aspects of the lesson with the teacher of the class they have observed. In this way they gain insights into alternative teaching techniques used in EFL literature classrooms.

Moreover, as part of their observation tasks, the student teachers are also asked to get as much feedback as possible from the students in the literature classes they observe. They are asked to do this mostly by chatting with them informally, because asking the student teachers to give questionnaires and evaluation forms to the students in a particular classroom could make the class teacher feel uncomfortable. In general, these informal discussions include the following questions:

1. Which literary texts did you find most enjoyable?
2. Was there enough opportunity for you to participate and respond personally to the text?
3. What activities did you like most? Why?
4. Were you helped to reach your own interpretation of the text? How?
5. Do you think that literature classes improve your language competence?

Discussions in Relation to Poetry

A close analysis of the reports of student teachers about their discussions with students and teachers in the past two years has indicated that among the literary genres, poetry was considered least relevant by the students for their interests and needs. Student responses in relation to their opinions about reading poetry in literature classes were as follows in order of frequency:

1. I find it difficult to understand poems.
2. I can't see the benefits of finding the rhyme of a poem or listing the metaphors in the poem.
3. I don't think reading poems will help me improve my English.

4. I don't read poetry in Turkish and I don't enjoy reading poetry in English either.

During discussions with class teachers, the following views were expressed:

1. Students seem uninterested and bored when reading poems.
2. Students have not developed enough literary competence to interpret poems by themselves.
3. Using poetry is not beneficial mainly because of the unusual characteristics of the language of the poems.

As a result of the findings mentioned above, a new five-week component focusing on stylistic analysis of poetry was added to the syllabus in the academic year of 1994. The objectives of this component were to familiarize the student teachers with ways of analyzing the distinctive features of the language of poetry and help them to prepare materials or tasks around these distinctive features; to identify the opinions of the student teachers on the role of stylistic analysis in preparing language activities; and to help the student teachers learn ways to develop positive feelings about poetry in high school literature classes. The class consisted of 24 Turkish EFL student teachers, five male, 19 female.

Tasks

Reading and Discussion

The student teachers were initially given reading assignments from Leech (1971, 1973), Widdowson (1975), and Short (1983). The purpose of these reading assignments followed by discussions was: to introduce the student teachers to ways of analyzing the language of the poem on any one of the levels of linguistic description, that is, phonology, grammar, semantics, and discourse; and to provide them with sample analyses of poems done by Leech (1971, 1973), Widdowson (1975), Carter (1983), and Short (1983).

Stylistic Analysis of a Poem

The student teachers were first divided into groups of four and assigned the task of selecting a poem for possible use with a group of intermediate or advanced EFL students in a local English-medium high school. One group selected the poem *Resolution*² by Audrey Longbottom, a contemporary Australian poet (Appendix 1A) and justified their selection as follows:

We chose this poem because of its universal theme. We feel that the students will be able to relate the ideas in the poem to their personal experience or opinions. We believe that reading this poem will make them more aware of the different functions of language. These students are so opposed to poetry that they may regard any poem irrelevant to their im-

mediate needs. So, the choice of the poem is as important as making the lesson interesting and motivating.

After the selection of the poem, the groups were asked to prepare an analysis of the prominent features of the language of the poem they selected and a possible interpretation of the poem for presentation in class. They were especially advised to benefit from sample analyses of poems they had been asked to study. It was specifically stressed that they were not being tested for their expertise in applying stylistic analysis of poems as illustrated in the sample analyses. At this stage they were expected to demonstrate only their ability to detect and interpret distinctive features of the language of the poem.

For the day of the group presentation, the rest of the student teachers were asked to prepare their own analyses and interpretations of each poem so that they could participate actively in the discussion following the presentation. The instructor's role was to chair, to make notes, and to intervene when there were problems.

The resulting analyses and interpretations presented in class were generally based on the selection of the distinctive features of the language of the poems as illustrated in Widdowson (1975), Short (1983), and Carter (1983, see Appendix 1B for the analysis and interpretation of the poem *Resolution* prepared by one group.

Preparation of Language Activities

After the discussions and the analysis of the poem, each group was asked to prepare a sequence of activities with the following purposes:

1. To encourage EFL students to call on their own personal experiences to respond to the poem.
2. To help the EFL students explore the distinctive features of the language of the poem.
3. To improve the language learners' interpretative and inference-making skills by encouraging them to draw on their knowledge of grammar, lexis, or discourse to make aesthetic judgments about the text.

The groups were required to state the purpose of each activity and were told that they could use the tasks/activities they had prepared for both peer presentations in class and practice teaching in local schools.

As indicated in the "sample sequence of activities/tasks" (Appendix 2), the student teachers focused on the following aims: preparing the EFL students for the reading of the poem by activating or building their schemata and relating the title and theme of the poem to the students' personal experience (Appendix 2-1; 2-2; 2-3); focusing on the EFL students' knowledge of the referential meaning of the lexical items used in the poem (Appendix 2-4); helping the EFL students understand the poet's unique choice of words to create a specific meaning (Appendix 2-6); focusing on word associations as

one form of intratextual relations that exist between the language items in a poem (Appendix 2-7); focusing on the textual organization of the poem, that is, punctuation, typographical characteristics, lineation, and paragraphing, and the contribution of these features to the meaning of the poem (Appendix 2-8); and improving inference-making and interpretative skills (Appendix 2-6; 2-7; 2-8; 2-9) and combining interpretation with personal evaluation (Appendix 2-10).

Following the group presentations, the student teachers discussed alternative activities that could be prepared. For example, one activity suggested was to ask the students to change some of the words in the poem or add auxiliaries, conjunctions, or other grammatical items where necessary and compare the resulting poem with the original. In this way, the language students would be further sensitized to how the poet breaks the rules of ordinary use of language, that is, the unique choice of words, deletion of auxiliaries and conjunctions for the purpose of presenting the persona's flow of thoughts or mental state in the poem.

The Student Teachers' Opinions on the Effectiveness of Using Stylistic Analysis in Preparing Their own Language Activities

During the discussions related to the preparation of language activities, the student teachers pointed out that close analysis of the language of poems helped them to understand better how language is used to produce a particular meaning and that this made it easier for them to prepare their own language awareness activities. Furthermore, the student teachers felt that in the future they would not feel constrained to use the poems, interpretations, and activities included in textbooks or resource books, but could make their own selection and interpretation of poems and prepare language activities for the specific needs of a particular group of EFL learners.

Those student teachers who could use some of these activities/tasks for practice teaching in local schools felt that they were successful because, contrary to what they had observed in those classes, there was a considerable increase in student participation. The student teachers reported the student responses as follows:

We had never concentrated on the language of the poem this way.

This is the first class we have had without the teacher asking, "What are the metaphors in this poem?"

These exercises helped me to understand the poem.

This poetry class was not boring.

I benefited from the language activities.

Conclusion

As can be seen, the stylistic analysis component of this initial training course focused on giving the student teachers some practice in analyzing the language of poems by benefiting from techniques of stylistic analysis. This was followed by practice in preparing language activities around the distinctive features of the language of the poem they analyzed to help EFL learners develop an awareness of how language is used to produce a particular meaning, as well as gain confidence in reaching and accounting for their own interpretations. The student teachers reported that stylistic analysis was a great help in preparing engaging activities for EFL learners.

Note

¹This paper was presented at the 17th TESOL-Spain Convention, April 22-24, 1994 in Madrid.

²Despite the efforts of the author, the publishers, and Oxford University Press, we have been unable to trace the copyright holder of the poem *Resolution* before printing. If notified, we would be pleased to rectify any omission at the earliest opportunity.

The Author

Ayşe Akyel teaches TEFL methodology, skills, and literature in EFL courses at Bosphorus University, Faculty of Education, Istanbul, Turkey. She has published articles on ESP, the teaching of literature, writing, and teacher training in Belgium, England, Sweden, Spain, and Turkey.

References

- Akyel, A., & Yalçın, E. (1990). Literature in the EFL class: A study of goal-achievement incongruence. *ELT Journal*, 44, 174-180.
- Carter, R. (1983). What is stylistics and the teaching of English? In M. Short (Ed.), *Reading, analyzing and teaching Literature* (pp. 161-177). London: Longman.
- Carter, R., & Long, M. (1987). *The web of words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Collie, J., & Slater, S. (1986). *Literature in language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lazar, G. (1993). *Literature and language teaching: A guide for teachers and trainers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leech, G. (1971). This bread I break: Language and interpretation. In D.C. Freeman (Ed.), *Linguistics and literary style* (pp. 120-128). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Leech, G. (1973). *A linguistic guide to English poetry*. London: Longman.
- Longbottom, A. (1979). Resolution. In *Relatives and reliques*. Sydney, New South Wales: Transpareon Press.
- Maley, A., & Moulding, S. (1985). *Poem into poem*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Short, M. (1983). *Reading, analyzing and teaching Literature*. London: Longman.
- Widdowson, H.G. (1975). *Stylistics and the teaching of Literature*. London: Longman
- Widdowson, H.G. (1984). The deviant language of poetry. In *Explorations in Applied Linguistics*. London: Longman.

Appendix 1A

RESOLUTION

Tomorrow
 will be
 different
 I'll get up early
 or e the c h e n 5
 r z i l d r
 gan i
 send them neatly to school
 my husband quietly to work
 and I shall surprise
 with gentleness eyes 10
 l o e d
 wer
 dressed in blue
 smelling of lavender
 hair parted in the
 .dd
 i l
 m e

SHOUTING IS OVER AND 15
 the little monsters gone
 hot-eyed to school after
 placating the cat kicked only
 beyond its dignity and him at
 work no doubt extracting the barbs 20
 of insults well earned and aimed
 now I shall clear away the muck of this
 half eaten breakfast then get dressed
 and by tonight it will be all right and
 Tomorrow 25
 will be
 different

Appendix 1B

Analysis of the poem "Resolution" at the level of grammar, semantics and discourse accompanied by one possible interpretation as prepared by student teachers.

Prominent grammatical features:

Examples of grammatical deviation in the poem are as follows:

- a. In lines 16-21, auxiliaries indicating aspect are left out: "little monsters gone," "him at work," "extracting the barbs"
The deletion of auxiliaries is indicative of the woman's flow of thoughts where present, past and future are intermingled.
- b. In line 19 "him" instead of "my husband" or "he" highlights the housewife's feeling of contempt.
- c. The most obvious grammatical pattern in this poem is the use of will/shall future in line 1-2, 4-14 and line 22: "Tomorrow will be different," "I'll get up ... organize ... send them," "I shall surprise," "I shall clear away."

In lines 1-14, the patterns "I'll get up," "send them neatly to school," "I shall surprise with gentleness" depicts the housewife's state of mind: calm, organized and optimistic. The implication is that she wants to change her ways. However, this ideal state is contrasted with the events described in lines 15-21 where auxiliaries are deleted. This suggests that these events are the past, present and possibly the future situation in her life that she cannot easily escape.

Prominent lexico-semantic features:

The following are examples of foregrounded groupings of lexical items. (Leech, 1971, 1973, interprets foregrounding as "a motivated deviation from linguistic or other socially accepted norms"; Widdowson, 1975, for further reading.) These are illustrations of metaphorical language in which meanings of the words go beyond their code meaning in the poem:

1. "gone hot-eyed to school" (lines 16-17)
2. "placating the cat" (line 18)
3. "The cat kicked only beyond its dignity" (lines 18-19)
4. "extracting the barbs of insults well-earned and aimed" (lines 20-21)

In line 17 "hot-eyed" is used as a "compound adjective," instead of the more usual collocation "red-eyed" which would only indicate that the children were crying. "Hot-eyed" may also imply that the children (little monsters) will be up to more mischief when they get to school. Moreover, unlike in lines 18 and 19, "placated" and "dignity" are generally used in reference to humans, not cats. This suggests that the cat is symbolic of the housewife, "kicked" beyond her dignity. In line 18, the word "only" understates the action according to the language code; that is, the cat was not badly

injured. However, it emphasizes the seriousness of the loss of dignity in the poem's context. In line 21, a normal choice would be, for example, the extracting of teeth, not barbs. In the poem, the woman's husband earned the insults and she aimed them. The housewife's insults are described as having barbs because they are sharp and painful and the effects are so deep that they are difficult to get out.

The lexis in lines 1-5 depicts routines such as "get up," "organize," "send." These are contrasted with words or phrases in lines 9-14. "Surprise," "gentleness," "dressed in blue," "smelling of lavender," "hair-parted in the middle" "eyes lowered." This is indicative of the housewife's desire to escape the daily routine of her life by changing her appearance and behavior.

The lexis in lines 15-21 is more emphatic and determined. "IS OVER," "well earned" and "aimed." The words and phrases in lines 15-21 are contrasted with those in lines 1-14: "children" become "monsters," "neatly" becomes "hot-eyed," "the cat" becomes "the housewife" by implication, and "my husband" becomes "him." In this way, the chaotic routines of her unsatisfactory daily life are contrasted with her plans for change as reflected in lines 1-14. Hence a sense of futility is revealed through contrasted lexis. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, by reference to the "muck of this half-eaten breakfast" the housewife's frustration with the present condition is depicted. In this way, the poet depicts the housewife's flow of thoughts.

Prominent discursal features:

The poem has no punctuation. In this way, the poet depicts the housewife's flow of thoughts. In lines 3-15, this creates a listing effect that suggests the woman's process of planning related to her desire for change. In lines 15-25, the poet delineates the woman's "state of mind" overwhelmed with her present situation.

The unusual capitalization of line 15 reinforces the woman's desire juxtaposed against the real situation depicted in lines 16-25.

The lineation of the poem is suggestive of a visual impression of a woman's body. Looking at the poem in this way, we can see the title we can see the title as hair, line 14 as the waist, lines 15-24 as the woman's skirt and lines 25-27 her ankles and her feet. The curves of line 5 suggest someone picking up two children. Lines 1-3 and 25-27 "tomorrow will be different" are exactly the same both in terms of wording and lineation. This creates a circular effect that can be indicative of the fact that the situation depicted in the poem is a vicious circle. Hence the reader can ask the question, "will tomorrow really be any different?" Moreover, the way the title "Resolution" is written, reinforces this question. That is, the title indicates a climactic point in the housewife's determination that becomes weaker as she sees her real situation, "by tonight it will be allright." In other words, the curve of the title suggests that her resolution will never be fulfilled.

Appendix 2

A Sample sequence of Activities/Tasks prepared by student teachers using the poem "Resolution" by A. Longbottom.

1. T asks Ss to recall their daily routine in their family or routine they were used to as a child.

Group Work.

2. T pre-teaches/elicits the word: resolution. T demonstrates with "resolution to quit smoking."

T asks Ss when they usually make resolutions. Ss give some examples of resolutions they have made. Did they really work? Ss note down their ideas in groups.

3. T asks Ss to list problems a housewife faces. What resolutions may a housewife make?

Pair Work and then compare with another pair.

4. T asks Ss to match the following words with their definitions. Pair work and then compare with another pair.

(Use a dictionary)

- a) placating — dirt, filth, disorganized mess
- b) extracting — consoling, calming, appeasing
- c) muck — removing or pulling out by force
- d) barb — pride, the state of being honored or esteemed
- e) dignity — a sharp, needle-like object that is difficult to get out

5. T asks Ss to read the poem. Individual work.

6. T asks Ss to compare the collocations in the poem with the collocations in daily life given below to help them interpret the intended meaning of the poem. Pair work.

- a. After placating *the cat/their mother*, the children left the house.
- b. The man was extracting *the barbs of insults/her teeth*.
- c. The *muck/mess* of this half eaten breakfast has to be cleared away.
- d. The barbs of *insults/the fish hook* pierced my skin.
- e. The *cat/mother* was kicked beyond her dignity.

7. T gives Ss the following words and asks them to group the words/phrases together based on clues from the poem. Ss put these words/phrases into different boxes and justify their answers. Pair Work. Ss are encouraged to explain the underlying meaning of the poem. him-A, monsters-A, neatly-B, quietly-B, smelling of lavender-B, insults-A, children-B, my husband-B, hot-eyed-A, shouting-A, this muck-A

A

B

8. T asks Ss to compare the poem and the text below. They compare the effect both layouts have. What can Ss see in the original layout? Does it have any implications? Group work.

Tomorrow will be different. I'll get up early, organize the children, send them neatly to school, and my husband quietly to work, and I shall surprise them with my gentleness: eyes lowered, dressed in blue, smelling of lavender, hair parted in the middle.

The shouting is over, and the little monsters have gone hot-eyed to school after placating the cat, kicked only beyond its dignity; and he is at work, no doubt extracting the barbs of insults that were well earned and aimed.

Now I shall clear away the muck of this half eaten breakfast, then get dressed. By tonight it will be all right, and tomorrow will be different.

9. T asks Ss to read the statements below and agree or disagree giving evidence from the poem. Group Work.

a The woman usually gets up early.

b The children usually go to school untidily dressed.

c Her husband goes to work calmly everyday.

d Arguments are normal in this household.

e The housewife will change her ways.

f The children wanted to hurt the cat.

g The husband deserved his wife's insults and she wanted to insult him.

10. T asks Ss "Do you think the woman described in lines 3-14 is a realistic picture of a housewife? Which part of the poem is realistic? Why do you think so?"

Group Work. Ss refer back to the words highlighted in activity No 7. If necessary, T. focuses on "the cat" asks Ss how the cat felt? How does the housewife feel?

The same is done for "the husband" (extracting the barbs of insults).