‘LOVE IS...’

POETRY WORKSHOPS, IN ENGLISH, FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

The savings bank La Caixa offers an extensive cultural and educational program alongside its main financial activities. It has established Cultural Centres throughout Catalunya which offer a wide variety of activities for the general public, including those specifically aimed at young people from local schools. As part of this program, which covers areas such as music, mathematics, science, theatre and poetry, I have given 2 series of poetry workshops in English for secondary school students aged 14-18 in the Cultural Centres in Granollers and Vic: ‘Love is..’ (December 2002 – April 2003); ‘Love, Hope, Freedom’ (December 2003 - April 2004).

Activities such as these are an example of the growing importance of what is often called ‘informal education’. This type of learning experience, based in museums, libraries, cultural centres etc and delivered outside the traditional, more formal confines of the classroom, has been aptly defined as ‘edutainment’ Friedman 2003. It reflects the growing awareness that such institutions can no longer serve only as passive, often private receptacles of our historical patrimony but need to play an active, public role in a more eclectic type of educational program offering life-long learning to a diverse public. The students who attend the poetry workshops in English, for example, complement this activity with another workshop offering activities related to mathematics or science and they also have a guided tour of the current exhibition being shown in the Cultural Centre e.g. Viatge al món de les Ombres’ (Journey into the world of Shadows); ‘Ficar-hi el nas. Essencies i fragrances naturals’ (Being nosy. Perfumes and natural fragrances) ; ‘Els anys 60’ (The Sixties.)
The workshops have 3 objectives: firstly, to demonstrate to the students that poetry need not be considered obscure, difficult and irrelevant to their lives, but that it can be enjoyable, stimulating and accessible for them. This invariably contrasts with the predominantly negative experiences, associated with the study of poetry, which I believe most students undergo during their time at school. Secondly, I aim to briefly share with the students some of the satisfaction which can be experienced via a detailed analysis of a well-written poem. Finally, it is hoped that the workshop will serve to consolidate and extend their knowledge of English. Most students in Catalan/Spanish schools have just 3 hours per week of English classes, concentrating primarily on grammar, reading and writing skills.

The workshops take place on the stage of the auditorium in the Cultural Centre, with groups of 15-40 students from schools in the area, accompanied by their teacher. The stage is decorated with large images of some of the poets whose work will be discussed e.g. W. Shakespeare, W. Blake, John Lennon, Bob Dylan and as part of the session, students read poems, which are recorded on a cassette that they take back to the school with them. The workshops are based on two anthologies of poems written in English, which have been especially printed by La Caixa. I have selected the poems myself and organised them thematically, bearing in mind the age and maturity of the students, the range of subjects of interest to them and their limited knowledge of English.

The first anthology ‘Love is...’ includes poems dealing with different aspects of love: love experienced in childhood, adolescence, middle and old age; the love of an older person for a young lover; the attitude of young people to two elderly people who are in love; love which co-exists with physical or emotional violence etc. Poets represented include: Adrian Henri, Roger McGough, D.H. Lawrence, Maya Angelou, Andrei Voznesensky, William Blake; William Shakespeare and Mavlâna Jalaluddin Rumi. The poems in the second anthology ‘Love, Hope, Freedom’
cover themes such as loss, grieving, loneliness; the hope which lives on despite a painful childhood, imprisonment or the horrors of war; the desire for and attainment of freedom for the oppressed. Poets represented include Benjamin Zephaniah, Bob Dylan, Philip Larkin, Osip Mandelstam, Dorothy Parker and Siegfried Sassoon.

Each workshop last for two hours and centres on students’ active oral participation. I believe very strongly that an oral/aural approach to the study of poetry is of major importance in any syllabus and I am also aware that oral skills are seriously neglected in English classes in the great majority of Secondary schools in Spain. Students are therefore always delighted when they are informed that during the session they will ‘only’ have to “listen carefully, speak a lot and read a little”. They are encouraged to speak English as much as possible but are reassured that it is perfectly acceptable to speak in Catalan or Spanish if they prefer. It is made clear that my role as teacher/facilitator/mediator will be unequivocally that of the ‘guide by the side’ rather than the ‘sage on the stage’.

Each session begins with a short discussion of the students’ previous experience of poetry, which has generally occurred (if at all) in Catalan or Spanish classes at school. The majority of students invariably report that they have found the poems they have studied “boring and difficult to understand”. This leads to a discussion of why this should be so and of those elements which distinguish poetry from other literary forms more easily understood by the average reader e.g. a newspaper report or short story. Points raised here include the imaginative input of poet and reader; the fact that the poet is not required to follow conventions of grammar, punctuation or word order; the use of poetic devices such as metaphor, imagery, rhyme etc; the fact that a poem generally requires several readings in order to be understood, and the fact that a poem can be defined as ‘a dream dreamt in the
presence of reality’ (Heaney 2003) and thus may frequently seem to have the ‘confusion’ and ‘unreality’ of a dream.

Finally, students are reassured as regards their anxieties about not having a sufficient knowledge of English to appreciate the poems. They are told firstly, that the poems have been chosen with their level of English in mind and secondly, that they undoubtedly know more than they think they do. Finally, they are advised that throughout the session, they should always concentrate on words they do understand rather than on those they do not understand. They are encouraged to ‘remember the memorable’ and to ‘forget the forgettable’.

Teaching strategies based on oral/aural skills are given major importance BEFORE the students have the opportunity to see the poems. If a student’s first contact with a poem is via reading it, particularly in the case of a foreign language, there is always a tendency to concentrate on individual words that are not understood rather than interacting with the poem on that initial, vitally important ‘holistic’ or imaginative level.

After an initial introductory brainstorming task based on the title of the poem, predicting and/or discussing the poem’s theme, or pre-teaching some of the vocabulary, students are therefore instructed to close their eyes and to listen. I then read the poem to them 3 or 4 times. On the first reading, the students are told they must simply listen carefully. After the second reading, students are invited to call out any word or groups of words they have understood from the poem. During the third reading, I stop at regular intervals and invite the students to suggest the word(s) which will follow, checking understanding as I proceed. After this reading, I may provide a word and ask the students to remember the line or phrase in the poem where this word appeared or I may read out a striking image or group of words and ask the whole group to repeat these after me, imitating my intonation and pronunciation.
As a result of these strategies, by the time the students actually see the poem the following has occurred: the students are familiar with the theme, lexis, rhymes and rhythm of the poem; they have had the opportunity to ‘taste and feel’ the words; they have been able to realise how much English they can in fact understand and, most importantly, they are genuinely motivated to read the poem for themselves.

While they read the poem (projected onto a screen or in individual copies of the anthology) the students are encouraged to check any lexis they have not understood and to clarify any doubts they had during the listening section. According to the group dynamic, we then continue in one of the following ways: I may ‘lead’ the group in a more detailed reading of the poem, highlighting the ways the poet has used poetic devices such as repetition, contrast, hyperbole, alliteration etc. Alternately, in pairs, students may be invited to select an image or line from the poem which they find particularly effective and to justify their choice to their classmates. Or students may be asked to read the poem with the student sitting beside them, each person reading alternate verse: a:b, a:b on the first reading, b:a,b:a on a second reading. We often conclude with a whole class reading, the students repeating the poem line by line after me, trying to imitate my heightened use of intonation, rhythm and speed. Finally, a recording is made of a volunteer(s) from the group reading the poem into a microphone.

In each workshop, we cover approximately 6 poems and in the time available, it is clearly impossible to study the poems in great depth. I am aware, however, that if these sessions formed part of a complete poetry syllabus, the initial work done on each poem, as outlined above, would naturally be reinforced and extended by further written, reading and oral tasks. The teachers who accompany the students are always encouraged to continue with such activities when the students return to the school classroom.
Both teachers and students have reported that they find these poetry workshops stimulating, enjoyable and enriching. Teachers have confirmed that the majority of their students, and often they themselves, had been extremely sceptical beforehand about understanding and enjoying a two hour session based on poems in English. I am convinced that carefully selected poems and appropriate, imaginative teaching strategies such as those used in these workshops can contribute to a change in people’s perception of the nature of poetry and the way it can be taught. While these sessions have the specific, dual objective of making young people aware of the joys of poetry and extending their knowledge of English, I believe that the methodology and principles outlined above are applicable to the teaching of poetry in any language and in any learning situation.

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Bibliography


