

Pedagogical Approaches to Foreign Language Education: A discussion of poetic forms and culture

ROSA HONG CHEN
Simon Fraser University

In recent years an increasing interest has been directed to the study of the interplay of language and literature and to the various ways linguistic features in reading and teaching literature are related. This paper argues for the importance of poetry for cultural awareness in foreign language education. Through examining classical Chinese poetry, I emphasize that the non-ordinary use of poetic language has a special function in promoting cross-cultural understanding. This study focuses on examining the three poetic dimensions by showing their connotative potentials for social and cultural aspects essential to teaching poetic texts. Through exploring these three levels of poetry contributing to cultural significance, I explore the appropriate pedagogy in foreign-language poetry teaching.

Introduction

Over the last two decades questions have been posed on the role of literature in language learning (Edmondson, 1997), the educational relevance of literature has been perceived through exploration and demonstration of the potential relationship between literature and applied linguistics. This represents a significant relation between language and literature in language learning in general. Hence, it is necessary to acknowledge the self-same relevance of literature embedded in foreign language learning; foreign literature provides, for foreign-language learners, the best and richest of linguistic ambience intricately woven with social and cultural threads. This promotes cross-cultural understanding, an indispensably integral part of foreign language teaching (Hadley, 2001; *Standards*, 1999). As Robert de Beaugrande (1978) points out, the introduction of a foreign literary work has often contributed to new developments in the literary conventions of a culture (p. 8). And it is certainly undeniable that the assimilation of one foreign language and literature promote linguistic and cultural diversity in these developments. Widdowson (2003) states that in reading literature, we can inhabit “plural identities, invest ourselves in other kinds of being” (p. 95). This certainly holds true with reading foreign literature in foreign-language learning, because foreign literary texts embedded in their own kinds of culture and being present themselves with different identities and other kinds of being.

It is important to see the point of literature and particularly of poetry in language education. Widdowson (1992) has suggested that poetry represents “divergent individual experience” (p. 77), if this is so, poetry teaching harmonizes with the purpose of learning a foreign language. One aim to achieve in acquiring foreign-language competence is ultimately to gain an understanding of the diversity of

individual linguistic experience from diverse historical, social and cultural conventions, hence to achieve cross-cultural connections. Let us come to the central issues in the argument that poetry is a potent source in the process and the purpose of language learning. For “poetry is useful language because it represents language use...” (Widdowson, 1992, p. 172).

A question may be posed: is it about the poetry in the first language or second language? The answer is for both. The educational relevance of poetry in a first language is equally applied to the second- or foreign-language, at least for advanced foreign-language learners. Widdowson (1992) claims that the educational effect would be primarily achieved through first-language poetry, but he also notes that the second-language poetry cannot be “discounted,” especially “not in the case of advanced learners” (p. 84). He continues to stress that “the second-language poetry can be effective for the development of language awareness and ability” (p. 85), following which I claim that the second- or foreign-language poetry does more than that by developing the social- and cultural awareness in the second-language learners. Hanauer (2003) asserts that poetry brings its readers to their moment-to-moment experience in the cultural awareness and interaction uniquely structured in the poetic contexts, as “poetry is a genre with deep historical and cultural roots” (p. 71).

I thus seek to explore this poetic awareness to a foreign culture by examining three poetic dimensions of classical Chinese poetry and showing their connotative potentials for social and cultural aspects essential to teaching poetic texts. I further explore the appropriate pedagogy in foreign-language poetry teaching. With this in mind, I offer in this paper a view about the interplay of language and literature with poetry as a particular genre, suggest the significance of this view for the foreign language education, and illustrate how it may be applied to pedagogical practice. I suggest that the importance of foreign literary work, especially of poetry as part of the curriculum lies in the potential it has for developing awareness to culture. This aim can be achieved through the application of linguistics to what Hanauer (2003) describes as the “multicultural moments in poetry” (p. 71).

The Status of Foreign Poetry in Foreign Language Teaching

During the past decades foreign language education has encouraged the teaching of literature for its literary, social and cultural attributes as well as its linguistic features. Researchers and practitioners have recognized that language learning goes beyond learning linguistic regularities; they have seen language and literature as complementary in learning and teaching (Widdowson, 1992, 2003; Hanauer 2001, 2003; Skehan, 1998; Tannenbaum, 2003; Leung, 2003; Hurlbert, 2003). The contributions that literature can make to language learning are not to be ignored. Hanauer (2003) has eloquently addressed “the relevance of poetry for applied linguistics,” which, historically, has been deeply concerned with the issues of “how second languages are acquired, learned, and taught” (p. 77).

In conjunction with the preceding point, poetry has a shared position with any other forms of literature in foreign-language education. Because of its non-ordinary uses of language, poetry is a unique genre of literature. Unique as poetry is in its ontological and epistemological properties as a literary genre, its linguistic and epistemic expression attracts attention to particular use of language and allows for diverse responses. As such, poetry has uncommon aesthetic functions and can “play a role in advancing concepts of human diversity” (Hanauer, 2003, p. 79):

Good poetry uses language to express the artist’s thoughts
in a way that brings aesthetic pleasure and thus is an
appropriate adornment to the original thought. (p. 73)

Poetry can facilitate the expression of individualized human

experience in a new linguistic and cultural system and allow the entrance into the language classroom of diverse human experience and points of personal, cross-cultural contact. (pp. 85-86)

Poetry as a literary object is different from other literary forms, such as prose. If we presented the conceptual content of the poetry in plain prose, it could not be called a poem. Poetry appeals to our imaginations, our emotions, and our ideals. It is the choice of the right words, the rhythms and sounds of languages and the devices of poetry that lend it power as a medium of expression different from other genres. Poetry supplies an instrumental usage of special language in the practice and discussion of language learning and teaching. When an individual experience is situated in such a unique discourse, reading poetry (and prose as well, in this case) then provides the reader with an insight into these individual multileveled experiences. These multileveled qualities of human experiences presented in poetic contexts can develop the understanding of human diversity, and hence promote cross-cultural interaction.

This significant, even central, role of poetry in applied linguistics and language education has not received the degree of scholarly attention commensurate with its importance. Hanauer (2001, 2003) points out in both his studies that there is “very little systematic empirical data on literature and even less on poetry” and both instrumentalism and empiricism have “truly marginalized the presence and importance of poetry within applied linguistics” (2003, p. 73). On the other hand, the application of language to literature has posed many questions concerning appropriate ways in which language is studied and how literacy study is integrated with language, contributes to foreign-language teaching, and so forth.

Foreign Poetry in Language Teaching: A Focus on Structure and Interpretation

In this section, I shall explore the pedagogical presentation of language in poetry. In carrying out such an experiment, I need first of all clarify a few points. For the purpose of readability for my intended audience, I choose classical Chinese poems in English translation, rather than in their original. This inevitably poses impediments for my current experiment. Strictly speaking, poetry is untranslatable; in general, it is to be felt. Particularly, it is not possible to consider that the uniqueness of Chinese poetic forms can be translated into another, and it would be much more rewarding to study them in the original. However, the technical constraint of translation is irrelevant to my inquiry and, therefore beyond the discussion of this paper. Being aware of this limitation, I will describe the unique poetic structure and forms of classical Chinese poetry when necessary in the subsequent discussion. In addition, using classical Chinese poetry to illustrate the linguistic constructs has a limit for the exploration of other language poetry. However, one thing seems certain: the poetry composed in any language constitutes the similar juxtaposition of lines, the formal poetic lines go from left to right, some from right to left or top to bottom in columns (like Chinese), and next to next with freer break-downs into lines. In such a case, a commonality across languages can be conceived. The formal structures are distinguishable by their physical alignment in the composing poetry of any language.

Untitled
Li Shang-yin¹

It is hard to meet; it is hard to part;
The east wind is weak, the flowers die.
With the spring silkworm's death, the threads end;
When the candle turns to ash, the teardrops dry.
The morning mirror frowns on my newly cloudy hair;
At night reading poetry, feel the moon's cold stare.
The Magic Mountain is not so far from here;
A busy green bird will keep a careful eye.

(Translation from *AsiaYouthMedia sinazen.com*)

无题

相见时难别亦难，东风无力百花残。
春蚕到死丝方尽，蜡炬成灰泪始干。
晓镜但愁云鬓改，夜吟应觉月光寒。
蓬莱此去无多路，青鸟殷勤为探看。

The seven-character regulated poem quoted above is a love poem written by Li Shang-yin, one of the two greatest poets of Late Tang². As the particulars of the rules for Chinese regulated verse (*lushi*), however, are not my major concern in discussion. I have cited the original poem just to illustrate the poetic structure for the reader. The aim of my exploration here will be focused on the syntactical and lexical levels applicable to poetry in general.

What would be an appropriate pedagogy in reading and teaching this classical Chinese poem in the foreign language classroom? And how can we conceive the multifaceted nuances of the poetic context, and further the awareness of cultural aspects this paper aims to explore? I will begin by viewing some traditional ways of teaching poetry; I do not deny whatever merits they may have. Some early language teaching methods, such as the Grammar-Translation method proposed by Howatt (1984), are used in reading and understanding of literature, which was thought to constitute the main aim of language learning. Using linguistic knowledge to understand poetry has a long history in literature reading classrooms. Stylistics is an approach to the understanding and interpretation of the poetry using linguistic delineation (Hanauer, 2001; Carter, 1982). Some recent theoretical frameworks suggest that meaning is

¹ Li Shang-yin (831-858): one of the two greatest poets in Late Tang. Among his 598 extant works, the best known are his untitled love poems that describe in rich and sensuous details. The above is one of his untitled love poems. Tang “Untitled” poems originated from Li Shang-yin. His poems have enjoyed a great reputation in Tang poetry. His subtle use of allusion and the metaphorical complexity of his couplets have puzzled commentators of all ages

² Late Tang was the last stage of Tang Dynasty (618-907), which was divided into Early Tang, High Tang, Middle Tang and Late Tang. Regarded as a high point in Chinese civilization, The Tang period was the Golden Age of literature, especially, poetry. Tang poetry is not only unique in quantity, but also remarkably extensive in its range of subjects, ingenious in artistry and consummate versification in various metrical forms.

primary and communication problems need to be solved in the reading and teaching of second-language poetry (Skehan, 1998). Therefore, the approaches under this claim equate the meaning of a poem with its paraphrase or definitive explanations, or make the poetic text equivalent to an exegesis of its meaning. It must be stressed here, though, that the pedagogical approaches, derived from such theoretic orientation, prevent diversity of presentation, hence the diversity of poetic experiences created by the non-ordinary use of language. In response to this pedagogical method, Widdowson (1992) argues: "...the essential nature of poetry is denied, and consequently there are no educational effects of individual recreation..." (p. 86).

Take the above-cited poem as an example. The poem is condensed in words and multifaceted in meaning, generating a universe of sentiments and emotions. The multileveled nuances are implied in this poem, about love, missing love, or lost love or imaginary love, and so forth. It may even be about the poet's wish for a post in the imperial offices. Particularly the last couplet manifests the possible layers of implications. The words *peng lai* ("The Magic Mountain") in the original text refers to "a fairy mountain" that was often viewed as the high fame and position in the imperial offices. The word *qing niao* ("the busy green bird") is a literary allusion, referring to a fairy or a love messenger. Therefore, is it possible to draw more than one definitive explanation or interpretation of the meaning from the following two lines?

The Magic Mountain is not so far from here;
A busy green bird will keep a careful eye.

Li Shang-yin's poems are characterized by genuine depth and vitality with indirection and extreme ambiguity. This makes his poems very difficult for precise interpretation and definitive explanation. As Watson (1971) describes: "Like Li Po, he is a poet who often trembles on the brink of meaning, particularly in love poems..." (p. 192). In reading such poems, can the reader not directly approach the precise meaning but simply experience the richness and beauty of their imagery and the unique linguistic skills in the poetic constructs? Would it be more rewarding for the language learners to experience the diversity of the individualized and universalized experiences by exploring the syntactic, lexical and semantic use of target language?

When the focus is on a psycholinguistic position (Hanauer, 1997, 2001; Widdowson, 1975, 1992), the argument that supports using poetry reading in the language classroom is that poetry is a natural discourse context that directs the reader's attention to "textual features of the poem" while staying within a meaning construction framework. These "textual features of poems" are referring to the linguistic forms of poetry in the contexts. It is necessary to note that reading a poem involves close consideration of the specific linguistic forms used to express the meaning (Hanauer, 1998, 2001, Widdowson, 1975). As argued above, the linguistic importance of poetry is to be denied if the pedagogical focus is only placed on the meaning-equivalent paraphrase or interpretation of the poetry.

Thus, I contend that using poetry in second- or foreign-language learning and teaching needs to preserve the unique linguistic nature of poetry and as well to maintain the linguistic relevance to its special facilitation in second- or foreign-language acquisition. With this claim, I explore methodological approaches appropriate in foreign poetry teaching. Let us envision the formal lines of poetry from horizontal and vertical angles and further examine the third poetic dimension beyond these two physical constructs. On a linguistic level, the notion of viewing poetry as constructs in horizontal and vertical juxtaposition is not novel. However, reading the poetic "blank" or "space" (Author, 2006, p. 10) is worthwhile exploring.

Social and Cultural Connotations across Poetic Lines

I'm ensuring that although the demonstration of pedagogy that follows will make exclusive use of classical Chinese poems, the principles will be applicable to poems in general.

One Moonlight Night Du F/ Tu Fu³

On this moonlight night in Fuzhou
 She will be watching in her room alone;
 Far away, my heart aches for our children,
 Too young to remember Chang'an.⁴ Her cloudy hair will be damp in the fragrant mist,
 Her jade-white arms cold in the limpid light;
 When shall we lean together by gauze curtains,
 Side by side beneath the moon, all our tears dried?

(From *Poetry and Prose of Tang and Song*, 1984, p.56).
 Translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang,

The poem was written in September 757, when the poet was a prisoner in Chang'an. In July 756, Tang-huang (emperor of Tang) was captured by a rebel army, and Chang'an fell into the rebels' hands shortly afterwards. The poet, having been appointed to a small position in the capital, decided to move his family to a place of greater safety, a place called Fuzhou. Then he attempted to make his way alone north to the headquarters of the crown prince to offer his services. However, he fell into the hands of the rebels and was taken to Chang'an. While he was being held captive, the poet wrote this poem while thinking of his wife and children in Fuzhou on that autumn night.

Like many other poems, this poem embodies the story of the poet. But this is not what I am inclined to touch upon. I will focus on the possible significance of the syntactical and lexical features in the poetic texts, but at the same time take note of the meanings, which are the associative resonance of the words. What I mean by the two physical poetic lines is the syntactic dependencies and lexical links across the lines juxtaposed horizontally and vertically. This is typical formal structure of poetry. When discussing the parallel lines of the poetry in his *Practical Stylistics* (1992), Widdowson expresses his view of the significance of the vertical arrangements of poetic language as "the vertical juxtaposition itself, the physical alignment of the lines, keys in with the way the experience of time is represented by lexical and grammatical means" (p. 49).

In concert with Widdowson's notion of the physical language arrangement, I invite attention to the third dimension called in this paper 'poetic blank' or space. From the poem cited above, I touch upon the potential of this non-physical dimension as a poetic construct in parallel with the other two physical lines in the poem.

This is a pentasyllabic poem in five-character regulated verse. Again, I propose not to explain the complicated rules of euphony, which governs the patterns of tones, nor do I discuss the rhyme scheme in this poem, for the simple reason mentioned earlier about the constraint of translation between different languages. I more focus on the syntactic and lexical variables to explore the multileveled experiences of foreign linguistic and cultural diversities.

³ Du Fu (Romanised as Tu Fu, 712-770), a poet in High Tang, is regarded by many Chinese as their greatest poet and named as 'sage poet'. He was born in Gongxian County, Henan and spent the greater part of his boyhood in Luoyang. In 746 he went to Chang'an, the Tang capital, in an unsuccessful attempt to secure an official post. He fled the capital when the An Lushan rebellion broke out in 755, but was captured by the rebels. He escaped in 757 and offered his services to the new emperor. In 759 he resigned and went to Chengdu in Sichuan. He died in 770.

⁴ Chang'an is a place name, the capital of the Tang Empire, now Xi'an.

The first line “On this moonlight night in Fuzhou”, is a very common line; however, it opens with the mention of the title and the setting for the emotion to happen. There is more than just what the lexical and syntactic present to the reader. In this line, a very strong cultural touch is embodied. That is the moon and moonlight, which can be considered as universal themes in literary works. Nevertheless, these two elements are the Tang poets’ favourite topics, and in Chinese culture they often symbolize love, sentiments, melancholy, and more often express the separation from and longing for far away loved ones. This further shows the social and cultural conventions of the Chinese family model. It was, and it is still, very common for families to be separated for whatever reasons may be: political, historical, occupational, personal, and so on. The second line, “She will be watching in her room alone,” vertically and semantically responds to the first line: separation, loneliness with the words “watching...alone.” In the original line, *guizhong* (“in her room”), literarily “in the women’s apartment”, is synonymous for ‘wife’. This is not a simple “in-her- room”. It is indicative of one prominent social and cultural ideology of women in China. According to the traditional Chinese way of thinking, a wife is the “person inside” (*neiren*), another expression for wife.

As apparently shown in the first couplet of the poem, such a depth of cultural ambience, embedded among the words and across the lines, emerges from the two lines. This poetic, non-physical language ambience is the space between words, and blank beyond the lines. The first couplet creates an atmospheric dimension. So does the third couplet in the poetic context:

Her cloudy hair will be damp in fragrant mist,
Her jade-white arms cold in the limpid light;
(from Du Fu’s *One Moonlight Night*)

Reading the lines even without too much focus on the syntactical or lexical constructs, the reader immediately senses the smell, the colour, and feels the moisture and temperature, which permeates between and beyond the lines. If it is true that the diction and the syntactical alignment in these lines provoke such sensual awareness, it is certainly true that a poetic ambience permeates the lines. Then let us look at the syntax and semantics of this couplet. Horizontal lines show one level of the poetic texts. They present an image of a woman through the use of descriptive and qualifying adjectives, such as “cloudy, damp, fragrant” and “jade-white, limpid”. This image of a woman enriched by the powerful use of words portrays a woman: sentimental, delicate and vulnerable, and probably more. Vertically, the words create a special responsive structure: “cloudy hair...damp” and “jade-white arms cold”; then, “fragrant mist” and “limpid light”. Technically, these pairs are antithetical to one another. Besides the unique poetic imagery and emotions created by these dimensional linguistic constructs, the cultural layer is richly encompassed. The phrase “cloudy hair” literally translated is *yunbuan* in Chinese character, the term for a traditional hairstyle in a circular bun on the back of a woman’s head. This hair bun becomes a symbol of a married woman in a traditional sense. In Chinese culture, when a woman gets married, the most prominent change in the appearance is the hair, from a maiden’s hairstyle changed to a bun labeling her woman rather than girl. Let us just pause here for a moment and go back to look at the third couplet in the first poem quoted. The words “my newly cloudy hair” show a deep melancholy of a woman as in the following lines:

The morning mirror frowns on my newly cloudy hair;
At night reading poetry, feel the moon’s cold stare.
(from Li Shang-yin’s *Untitled*)

This is no longer a tradition now for married women in modern Chinese life. However vestiges of such tradition still remain not so much in real life but in art or artistic forms, such as dance and painting.

For foreign-language learners, the very fact that each of these two couplets consists of a set of phrases syntactically arranged and connected both in lines and across lines, and in other words, on a linguistic horizontality and verticality, this means that the images they express here cannot be a sheer combination of associated words or lines. For the vertical and horizontal juxtaposition itself creates a close alignment. Another culture-embedded phrase “jade-white arms” appears vertically below “cloudy hair”, forming an antithesis. The word jade is used to describe the woman’s complexion, which is compared to the pure colour and exquisite texture of jade, showing her feminine beauty. Culturally, this word will not be used to describe males in a complimentary fashion. The two lines, appearing in parallel, suggest the sequence of the emotion and simultaneously: the image of the woman. We see now what poetic texts can do within the lines and across the lines. What these patterns also do is to exploit the inherent potentials of the language forms and non-language ambience constituted in the poetic verse.

Pedagogical Implications and Final Remarks

Retrospectively, it seems clear that the use of literature within the second- or foreign-language classroom has a long history. Although the role and relevance of literature for language learning have evoked some debates, continuing efforts have been made to argue and support the application of literary work in foreign language learning. A series of recent studies have emphasized the significance of poetry incorporation in language learning and teaching. As discussed above, more in-depth investigation and scholarly research need to be directed to both theoretical and empirical areas. Through examining classical Chinese poetry, I have explored the non-ordinary use of poetic language that has a special function in leading to social and cultural contact. I have particularly investigated the three poetic dimensions describing their connotative qualities for social and cultural aspects essential to teaching poetic texts.

It is important to point out that including poetry in the curricula of foreign language classes can help develop greater awareness of and sensitivity to (foreign) language and culture and at the same time introduce a cross-cultural difference to discussion. There are always differences across cultures at any time and across any languages. This cultural relativity responds simultaneously to linguistic relativity, through which the individual experiences associate with and react to the universalized experiences. That is why poetry serves to promote the diversity of linguistic and cultural experiences, such also including emotional and spiritual responses. In so doing, poetry offers readers a means of experiencing language emotionally and spiritually, thus depending their linguistic and cultural understanding, hence their literacy. From this the reader, while reading foreign poetic texts, interacts with the culture of the target language by means of personal experience in the texts. Such experience in foreign-language learning allows the reader to inhabit different identities and invest themselves in other kinds of being.

As we can discern from the above discussion, engagement with foreign poetry, as with any other literary texts, is an interactive process of language and literature, and as well an associative process of individual and universal experiences. Such interactive engagement includes associations developed in the minds and hearts and out of the experiences of the individuals involved as both teachers and students. Furthermore, within the association and interaction with the linguistic structures, the culturalinguistic implications for language learners are readily perceived.

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About the Author

She is a third year PhD student in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University. Her areas of interest lies in philosophy and education, Eastern and Western epistemology; language, literacy, and literature; autobiography, cultural identity, poetry, and narrative as research; epistemology and philosophy of education. Since 2006 she has published three articles and one in press in refereed journals. One poem appeared in 2007 Poetry Canada. A book chapter will appear in 2009 and her MA thesis is accepted to be published as a book. She is a member of AERA (American Educational Research Association), CSSE (Canadian Society for the Study of Education), AAAL (American Association for Applied Linguistics), and a member of CFP (Canadian Federation of Poets). Email address: hrchen@sfu.ca.