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Poetic Impulse as Means to Produce Healthier Communication in English

Key words: creativity, joy of learning, types of teacher (transmitter / interpreter), specialist course, poetic impulse, *poentiality*, *poeteacher*.

Streszczenie

Poetycki impuls jako środek do „tworzenia” zdrowszej komunikacji w języku angielskim

Słowa kluczowe: kreatywność, radość nauki, rodzaje nauczycieli (nauczyciel przekazujący wiedzę / interpretator), kurs specjalistyczny, poetycki impuls (bodziec), potencjał, nauczyciel poezji.

W artykule rozważa się stan nauczania języka obcego w Republice Białoruskiej. Zadaniem dzisiejszym jest szkolenie nauczycieli zdolnych do stworzenia „zdrowej” atmosfery na lekcji. Niezbędny jest więc wysoki poziom motywacji oraz kompetencji komunikacyjnej. Aby to osiągnąć można włączyć do procesu przygotowania nauczyciela ćwiczenia z tekstami poetyckimi. W artykule został opisany autorski kurs specjalistyczny.

English seems to be the most likely candidate for the position of lingua franca in the new Europe. If so, EFL teaching will remain a priority decision area in education for many years to come.

In Central and East Europe, accordingly, there is a growing need to have more certified EFL teachers who are able to handle classes from kindergarten to high school. Thus, teaching EFL for educational applications will also thrive here.

Every school in this part of Europe needs an English teacher these days, and usually not one such teacher. At the same time the rotation rate is high enough, and college graduates are unwilling to stay long. That means the EFL teachers corps is not very stable, which causes lack of continuity in teaching a given student body, and many related problems.

On the other hand, it is the EFL teachers who can contribute a lot to changing school environments for the better. This possibility, primarily, can be realized due to the practically limitless subject area, which can satisfy the ever growing public demand for effective EFL instruction.

One problem remains, though. It is directly connected with the way English is being taught at college level, and it can be defined as follows. How should professional language training be conducted so that student teachers of English not only stayed motivated to work as educators after graduation but also were able to bring joy to classrooms thus making their students' lives happier and healthier?

Obviously, an individual EFL teacher can "make things better" only within her reach. The most effective way of making EFL classes joyful is to organize meaningful communication between students and teacher. Healthy communication patterns, when started and maintained by the teacher since early stage, can become instrumental in enriching the humanitarian experience of every individual learner. If students are exposed to such patterns on a regular basis throughout their school lives, they are sure to make appropriate use of them as communication models when speaking their native language.

The core element of any healthy communication strategy in a FL classroom is the approach chosen by the teacher. The present author maintains that the approach that best meets the requirements of individual development and intellectual growth (of students and teacher alike) is the one based on fostering creativity. The latter is understood in this context as a fundamental attitude of the EFL teacher towards in-class and out-of-class verbal and written interaction.

Generally speaking, creative production is known to include diverse activities. In case of EFL teaching, even a minor change in the arrangement of tables and chairs in the classroom that makes it a more suitable layout for group discussion can be treated as a major creative effort on the part of the teacher. What we are going to discuss is the problem of how to foster creativity when teaching oral speech and writing.

Young learners who are reinforced by EFL teachers for creative activity, which goes beyond performing specified tasks and discovering pre-structured relationships, stand a good chance of eventually making a contribution to societal life that will be considered creative, too. For this to happen, EFL teachers should be well aware of how to reinforce students. Yet various researchers suggest that classroom communication in a FL is not commonly treated as an exercise in creativity.

Learning foreign language is normally viewed as a dull and painful process by many a learner. Unfortunately, some of them later become EFL teachers, which actually restarts the dull and painful process in a new setting. This makes the average communication experience of an individual student to be not much of a joyous thing.

Learning in general is rarely treated so. T. Armstrong (1998) writes: "Recently I did a computer search of literature in Educational Resources Information

Clearinghouse for citations related to the «joy of learning». Between 1982 and 1996 there were 13 «hits» and only two actual research studies related to the term. On the other hand, for «learning disabilities» there were 7,322 citations”¹. Indeed, educational priorities become clearer when we consider this fact. Small wonder that the joy of learning a FL, which is the direct result of healthy communication in class, is rarely taken into account by “teachers of EFL teachers”, that is, by college language instructors.

College instructors see themselves, primarily, as providers of information and knowledge, not as enthusiastic communicators. This tells upon the quality of the “end-product”; student teachers’ skills and abilities leave too much to be desired. When they become professional educators themselves, they fail to avoid many of the occupational hazards.

D. Barnes (1987) points out teachers can be described by the two basic types: the transmitters and the interpreters². The purpose of the transmitter type of teacher is, primarily, the recording and acquisition of information; the response of such a teacher to student work is confined to assessment and correction. There are virtually no ‘surprises’ for the transmitter teacher. And there is no joy.

The interpreter type of teacher treats learners to a particular portion of material and seeks understanding and feedback. It is much more difficult but very rewarding to do so. In this case, teaching equals art. The cognitive and personal development of individual students becomes the purpose of the teaching process; the interpreter teacher not only comments on the result; she uses it in future teaching.

However, the transmitter type seems to prevail, especially among EFL teachers. What is more unfortunate, this type of teacher is still cloned at colleges of education in this country.

Long-term observations of the present author make it possible to sort out several most common occupational hazards EFL transmitter type teachers start suffering from soon after they begin to work at school. These hazards are (1) power talking, (2) loss of interest, and (3) failing language proficiency. The three above are not given in the order of priority; they also can take other, more subtle forms. Yet all three, or any single one of them, are instrumental in creating a most unhealthy environment in class and outside it. The results of various in-service training workshops for EFL teachers led by the author support the idea that the most effective means for combating common occupational “colds” is to bring creativity into the process of communication in a FL.

If the ultimate aim of EFL teaching is to help mould a healthy personality, then all EFL student teachers’ personalities should first be shaped accordingly. That means changes are to be made in the hierarchy of college-level instruction

¹ T. Armstrong, *Awakening Genius in the Classroom*, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria Va 1998, p. 5.

² D Barnes, *From Communication to Curriculum*, Penguin Books, London 1987.

aims. The emphasis at advanced level (pre-last and last year of studies) should be on fostering creativity in student teachers themselves. Each and every graduate is supposed to become more or less “creative” in his or her approach to EFL teaching.

Creativity is a very complicated concept having been elaborately studied by generations of scholars. Among others, Jackson and Messick (1965) developed a theoretical model of creativity in which they outlined the relationships between the cognitive styles of the creative person, his non-cognitive psychological qualities, the characteristics of his product, and society’s responses towards products that are accepted as creative. According to this conceptualization, the corresponding personality characteristics from which highly creative products emerge are originality, sensitivity, flexibility, and poetic impulse³. It is worthwhile to note that the predisposing cognitive style of such persons is spontaneous and reflective, and their aesthetic responses can be confined to savoring.

Given this model, one can suggest that stimulating originality, sensitivity, flexibility, and poetic impulse in student teachers may result in higher creativity. Oral and written speech practice classes offer the widest range of opportunities for such stimulation being the very environment that requires the use of spontaneous and reflective communication strategies.

However, the concept of “poetic impulse” may seem puzzling. The practical application of the idea can easily take the misleading form of compulsory poetry composition or vivisection of classical poetry pieces. Such is the common practice when they write about “bringing poetry into the classroom”. The examples abound⁴.

In the opinion of the author, this is very far from what student teachers should really try to do during speech practice classes. Evidently, we cannot do without the understanding of the nature of poetry and how it is related to the process of speaking a foreign language.

There exists some fundamental similarity between poetry and speaking or writing in a foreign language.

Poetry is the highest level of language organization. The word is derived from the Greek *poieein* meaning ‘to make’. When poets are at work, they apply words that normally carry several meanings, and suggest several more, and join with other words to imply yet further meanings. Word choice, the craft of selecting and joining words to enrich their power to communicate messages, is one of the basic skills of the poet’s craft. Thus, the language of poetry is the pinnacle of literary language. Would-be EFL teachers are supposed to know about Anglo-American poets and their work, and to be able to handle poetic texts with a measure of confidence. Handling texts implies understanding the

³ J.A.R. Wilson, M.C. Roebeck, W.B. Michael, *Psychological Foundations of Learning and Teaching*, McGraw Hill, Inc., New York 1974.

⁴ F.B. May, (1990) *Reading as Communication*, Merrill Publishing Co., Columbus 1990.

poets' message and language, various devices included. The importance of such work was emphasized by many researchers⁵.

Yet, speaking a foreign language and writing in it can resemble "poetic diction" in another way: the speaker, when he or she *really* thinks aloud, assembles the target language words not automatically, as native speakers do on most occasions, but quite consciously, being fully aware of the intricacies involved and of the desired impact on the listener. That means FL speaking and writing may simply *become*, to some extent, oral or recorded poetry.

The more EFL students understand *how* poetic speech works, and use consciously a plethora of stylistic and syntactic means of expression, *the more poetic* their speech productions become. That is why close contacts with poetry are not unwelcome at advanced level.

On the other hand, the experience of the present writer proves that English teachers-to-be are poor readers of poetry, be it silent reading or reading aloud. Acquaintance with poetry is confined to random citations or controversial poems scattered in textbooks for the purposes of generating group discussions. The *poetenliality* (H.G. Widdowson) of such texts has been recognized.

For the benefit of EFL teacher training, though, it seems necessary to introduce specialist courses aimed at increasing the *poeteaching* potential of every would-be educator. The ultimate aim of such a course can be to help mould *poeteachers*, that is, EFL teachers who are on the way to fully becoming "poetic personalities" and who are able and motivated to shape the reality of classroom communications according to the standards of poetry production. Such a course should emphasize, among other things, various aspects of such sorts of language practice as poetry composition and/or translation, to name a few.

The subject matter of such a course should be good poetry. It seems that good poetry is a combination of satisfying sounds, along with sharply focused and structurally organized content. In this country, educators used to approach poetry in terms of didactic message. At this level readers most readily accept poetry, though. On a more sophisticated level, poetry's message is no longer propaganda-bound or dully didactic. Most gifted poets produce literature that deals with eternal questions. Poetry of this sort becomes prophetic. The poetry written by Emily Dickinson is one such example.

The author designed a course entitled "Poetry and Translation: Transcending the Limits" for the purposes of training EFL teachers at the English Department of Baranovich State Higher College of Education. The 28-hour course was taught at the institution for four academic years (1998 – 2002). The ultimate aim of the course is to help teacher students look beyond their immediate educational needs and frustrations. The course was taught to medium-size student groups (about 25 students each) and took the form of 7 "lectures" and 7 "seminars".

⁵ H.G. Widdowson, *Practical Stylistics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1992.

Course lectures are a cross between a standard academic event and exploratory talk on one of the topics.

The texts of poetry in English and/or Russian are served between bits of biographical or literary information. The texts are whole poems accompanied by translations, which require full-scale discussion on the spot. The three S's of poems — sound, structure, and sense — are to be appreciated at this point. The three are subject for assessment, evaluation, and interpretation. The instructor acts as facilitator helping students to go beyond the printed word and free themselves from the limitations of text-bound reading.

The seminars include group discussions of the most important themes of the preceding lecture. Home-prepared assignments contain Individual or Small-group Tasks that presuppose detailed study of certain text(s) in order to infer innovative conclusions. The possibilities are roughly sketched by means of the arrangement of the texts themselves. Optional tasks include, first of all, Activities: reading and reciting, rendering and translation, rewriting and composing of poetry, along with a variety of rack-your-brains-over-poems tasks. Students will require high levels of creativity to complete the latter. For instance, a famous poem by Dickinson is presented, but without a single dash, the poet's favorite punctuation mark.

“Hope” is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops at all

The task is to restore the original dashes, which requires profound understanding of the poem's structure and message. Other tasks are prepared in the same vein. The students also might like to visit *Poeteachers' Corner* where additional poems can be found. When the seminar is over, students are to write an essay based on the discussion. A selection of eight tasks is presented after each seminar. According to the level of creativity, the title options range from a conference report to a private diary entry⁶.

The process of teaching the course and creative products (essays in English, translations into Russian and English, original poetry in either language) were analyzed by the author. It was acknowledged by the entire student body (150 students) that the course proved to be useful and enriching. At the same time the analysis of various aspects of student learning behavior poses serious questions about the ways to activate creativity.

For instance, let's have a closer look at the students' strategy in choosing the type of written task (2000/2001 academic year). 36 students took the course and produced 157 essays. The choice of type of essay was in no way influenced by the teacher; no comments were made on the “proper” or “improper” choices

⁶ Y. Maslov, *Poetry and Translation: Transcending the Limits*, BGVPK, Baranovichy 2001.

made. As a result, 89 essays *bear critical* writing titles, and only 68 are of a *more creative* sort. The winning task turned out to be the following: *Write a short report about Emily Dickinson's life and activities* (18 choices, half of the group). There is nothing wrong with the enthusiasm of predominantly female student audience about Dickinson's life and work. But that seems to indicate again that previous stages of EFL teaching did not prepare the students for tackling more challenging writing tasks, that is, for displaying their creativity. No specialist course can fill the gaps in regular language instruction.

At the same time, the same 36 students produced numerous translations and original poems. Some of those were made with great artistry, like the following sonnet written by Yury Kadevich.

Born stuck amidst thick clouds —
Tremendous threatening mounts
Of virtues, vices, painful sores,
Huge piles of Afters and Befores;
Bury thy scrolls — thou'lt need thy brain
Behold! The world goeth down the drain,
Lend thine ear to a story sad
Of the old world in Misery clad;
He that surviv' th shall have his share,
To those who fail no sun shall shine
Envy not fate the others have to face,
Mirthful be thou to escape Despair —
Thus, presently thou'lt find the Truth sublime
Falling asleep in Lethe's sweet embrace.

Communication in class, as well as essay-writing, provided a good chance to develop a wide range of creative characteristics of student speech in English. Observations led us to believe that the ability of students to transfer linguistic experiences into new situations, as well as their imagination and risk-taking have been considerably improved as a result. If so, then stimulating the poetic impulse can really become an effective weapon in the hands of college EFL instructors. The task is to make it a compulsory, rather than optional element of professional language instruction.

One of the former students who sat for the specialist course became a teacher at a village school in September 2000. Several weeks later, in her lesson, she paid attention to a small sheet of paper lying on a student's desk. The sheet didn't really belong to the lesson. The teacher asked for permission to take a look. The student, a girl of 15, looked somewhat annoyed but allowed the teacher to do so. To her surprise, the teacher read a poem written by the girl. And the poem was really powerful. What's even more amazing, the poem had a title, a famous Latin saying. To her credit, the teacher did pay attention to the poem and to its author. It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship that lasted for the entire academic year. The girl, a problem child, became a devoted friend and deputy.

The young teacher could have easily overlooked the student's production. Yet she didn't. It is not altogether groundless to suggest that the teacher's supportive behavior was partly due to the fact that she herself had just been taught the specialist course in poetry and translation.

This makes it possible to maintain that poetry studies of the kind described above can serve many different purposes. The most valuable result is probably the rising levels of creativity displayed by student teachers. Obviously, such creativity might make young teachers immune from low professional motivation and other "occupational ailments".