The Use of Poetic Devices in Teaching Semantic Relations for EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

In spite of the prolific literature on the use of literature in general and poetry in particular in EFL contexts and its effectiveness on improving the four main skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, very little has been done on the use of poetic devices in teaching the semantic relations in EFL classrooms. Teaching semantic relations is traditionally carried out through vocabulary lists with no focus on the communicative aspects of and cultural boundaries language. This has negative impacts on the performance of EFL students in different courses including academic writing, discourse analysis, and research projects. The hypothesis is that the use of poetic devices enhances learners’ understanding of the semantic relations and using vocabulary appropriately. As thus, this study addresses the impact of using poetic devices of imagery in teaching antonyms. The study is based on integrating the poems of William Butler Yeats into discourse analysis courses in 6 universities in Bahrain, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Students were taught the semantic relations of antonyms through selected poems of Yeats using implicit learning methods. Then they were asked to write an essay on the relationship between opposites in Yeats’s poetry. They were also asked to reflect on their attitude to the use of poetry in learning semantic relations and their previous experiences of learning semantic relations in vocabulary and semantics courses. Results indicate clearly that the use of poetic devices enhances students’ understanding of semantic relations and creates a positive learning atmosphere in the EFL contexts. EFL and semantics instructors are recommended to integrate poetry in teaching semantic relations in the different language courses. It is important to develop teaching strategies for linguistics courses to help students face the challenges in these courses. Finally, program designers, academic departments, and even instructors should consider the close relationship between literature and culture on one side and language on the other side in course designs, teaching strategies, and material selection.

Keywords: antonyms, EFL learners, implicit learning, poetic devices, semantic relations; W. B. Yeats

1. Introduction

The recent years have witnessed an increasing interest from EFL researchers in the importance of integrating literary texts in language teaching and learning processes (Ahmed, Giovannelli, Mansworth, & Titjen, 2020; Middeke, Wald, & Zapf, 2016; Schofer, 2002). The underlying principle is that the use of literature has positive impacts on the EFL learners’ linguistic performance as learners are more motivated to learn (Bredella & Delanoy, 1996; Byram & Hu, 2004; Carroll, 2011). In other words, it is through interesting narratives and poetical, EFL learners are more interested in language learning. This positive attitude towards language learning leads ultimately to better language competencies (Di Martino & Di Sabato, 2014). Furthermore, the integration of literary texts into EFL contexts enhances learners’ knowledge of society and culture which are integral and indispensable elements in L2 learning (Fogal, 2010; Haq, 2020; Lubis, 2018).
In light of the above argument, this study argues for the effectiveness of the integration of literature on improving EFL learners’ understanding and manipulation of semantic relations. The hypothesis is that the integration of poetic devices can be usefully used to enhance EFL learners’ acquisition of semantic relations including synonyms and antonyms. This can be done through implicit learning methods where students are not directly taught about semantic relations. The integration of literary texts is essential for both achieving effective communication and the understanding of cultural boundaries and the attempt to come to terms with those boundaries. As an example, this study is based on integrating the poems of William Butler Yeats into discourse analysis courses in 6 universities in Bahrain, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Students were finally asked to write an essay on the relationship between opposites in Yeats’s poetry. They were also asked to reflect on their attitude to the use of poetry in learning semantic relations and their previous experiences of learning semantic relations in vocabulary and semantics courses. The rest of the article is organized as follows. Part 2 is a brief survey of the use of literature in EFL contexts. Part 3 describes the methods and procedures of the study. Part 4 reports on the results of the study. Part 5 is conclusion.

2. Literature review

Numerous studies have been developed in the evaluation of the role of the use of literature in EFL contexts. There is a broad agreement that literary texts can be usefully used to enhance EFL learners’ language skills. The underlying principle is that the integration of literature helps EFL learners improve their communicative skills, which are the core of language learning. The argument is that language has always been associated with cultural and communicative aspects; therefore, literature is very important and useful in teaching English Language (Rahman & Weda, 2018; SiganJohn & Yunus, 2018; Tasneen, 2010).

Different reasons have been suggested in terms of the use of literature in EFL learning contexts. First, literature uses the language that presents the real-life setting, in this way it offers different linguistic forms, communicative functions, and meanings to the learners (Collie, Joanne Collie, Slater, coaut, & Swan, 1987). Second, through literary texts, the learners encounter various syntactic structures as well as the discourse function of the sentences. The learners thus can enhance their writing skills through verities of sentence patterns that are put in literary texts (Brumfit, Strevens, Brumfit, & Carter, 1986). The use of literary texts in teaching language skills, Choudhary (2016) adds, has the potentials of enhancing the creativity of learners. She even argues that there is an urgent need for integrating the literature in EFL instruction. The argument is that EFL learners need to be aware about and familiar with the language of the literature which can be usefully used through interaction, collaboration, discussion, and collective learning. Similarly, Rai (2012) argues that literature provides learners with a wide range of individual lexical or syntactic items. That means learners become aware of many features such as learning syntactic and discourse functions of the sentences which can be usefully in communication. Furthermore, literary texts have rich elements such as similes, metaphors, and imaginary which enable learners to think deeply and to understand. Literature is widely known as about imagination, richness and knowledge of the culture and language, and that can be a good reason for language learners to acquire a language easily and successfully (Yeasmin, Azad, & Ferdoush, 2011).

Suwarsh et al. (2019) argue that EFL learners need to be exposed to various literary texts from different genres including poetry, narratives, and short stories to be familiar with the English culture which is important for successful and effective communication. The EFL courses thus should include literary texts that give the learners the opportunity to texts explore the lives of English speaking people and their feeling toward some cultural cliché. Kiet (2011) argues that through literary texts, EFL learners find the social and historical contexts of the event and become familiar with culture. It is through literary texts, learners can know well about the religious and superstition beliefs of English speaking culture. Nhung (2016) adds that literary texts enhance EFL learners’ imagination and interpretation of the world.

The use of literature has always been linked with implicit learning. It is claimed that the use of literary texts in EFL contexts has normally a positive impact on learners’ language accuracy (Burns, 2009). Through the integration of narratives and poems, grammar rules are implicitly taught (Choo, Lin, & Pandian, 2012; Doghondzade, 2017; Tütüncü, 2012). Learners are also encouraged to guess the meaning of vocabulary and relate these meanings to the wider contexts of narratives and poems (Gómez & Fernando, 2012).

Many studies have also investigated the relationship between the use of literature in EFL contexts and motivation (Bland, 2018). Generally speaking, the literature suggests that the fictional texts provide a motivation to the EFL learners. Motivation plays a vital role in language learning; therefore, ESL instructors should consider the selection of the learning materials. Learners will not be motivated and will not take much interest in the language learning process. In this regard, it is claimed that literature evokes feelings through words, pulls learners out of the grammatical forms, and helps them to communicate in a way that attracts language learning. Zacharias and Manara (2011) argues that literature deals with themes and topics that are intrinsically interesting, as they are part of the human experience, and treats them in ways designed to engage readers’ attention. As such, they become a source of interest for English learners.
Likewise, Keshavarzi (2012) argues that the material that is normally used in ESL and EFL classrooms lacks passion and intellectual energy. Therefore, the use of literature is rather quite useful because it is mostly relevant to the lives of the learners. At the same time is also more meaningful and contains some deep reflection over the general matters of life. It does not only help learners with various language patterns, but it also enhances the imagination of the learners and enables them to interpret the world in their own way. It is recommended thus English in ESL and EFL classrooms should be taught through literature to develop the various language skills of the learners. In this regard, it can be claimed that the use of literary texts in EFL contexts is correlated to motivation and the positive attitude of learners towards language learning processes. ESL instructors are thus recommended to select interesting narratives and poems that keep learners interested in the learning process (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2004).

It can be claimed then that in spite of the prolific literature on the use of literature in general and poetry in particular in EFL contexts and its effectiveness on improving the four main skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, very little has been done on the use of poetic devices on teaching semantic relations in EFL classes. This study seeks to address the gap in the literature through exploring the effects of the integration of the poetic devices on learners’ acquisition and understanding of semantic relations.

3. Data, methods and procedures

In order to explore the effect of integrating the poetic devices on EFL learners’ understanding of semantic relations, W. B. Yeats “Leda and the Swan” and “The Lake Isle Innisfree” were integrated into the teaching of semantic relations in the Discourse Analysis course in six universities in Bahrain, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. The rationale of Yeats’s poetry is to understand the poetic relationship between the opposites presented. It is through analyzing the two poems, mentioned above, that this study hopes to point out how and why Yeats illustrates such a relationship between opposites in each poem. Students were introduced to the concept of antonyms through exploring the manipulation strategies of the opposites in Yeats’ poetry.

William Butler Yeats (1865 - 1939) is widely considered to be one of the most prominent and greatest Irish and English poets and dramatists of the twentieth century. He is also considered by many critics as one of the great literary figures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Schneider, 1975). Unlike many of his contemporaries, his poetry merges both the Romantic and Modernist aspects (O'Neill, 2004). Although Yeats belonged to the Anglo-Irish Protestants, a minority who considered themselves to be English people born in Ireland and who for many decades dominated Irish political, economic and cultural life, he faithfully adhered to and defended his Irish nationality. Perloff, (2019) observes that Yeats proclaimed strongly his image as an artist, regardless of the allegation of elitism that suddenly led to this image.

One of the most artistic aesthetic features of Yeats’ poetry is his mastery of handling opposites. In many of his poems, Yeats is so interested in representing his topics through opposites and contrasting images. He is even referred to by many critics as ‘a poet of opposites.’ There are different examples that support the argument: past and present, human and divine, natural and artificial, city and country, physical and spiritual, myth and reality, colonial and anti-colonial, end and beginning, mortal and immortal, order and chaos, mundane and heroic, nature and culture, moist and dry, high and low, day and night, living and dead, objective and subjective, art and life, youth and old age, black and white dark and light, hot and cold, change and stasis, …etc. (Amos, 2016).

Henn (1950) writes that Yeats expressed the opposites in man’s life. He explains that Yeats tended to assert that every action, even the smallest, moves towards its opposite, and then relapses into its first condition. Man even desires and always tries to be his opposite, running the course of his life between these opposites, in an attempt to achieve that unity:

Between extremities
Man runs his course;
A brand, or flaming breath,
Comes to destroy
All those antonyms
Of day and night.
("Vacillation", I)

As seen in the above lines, Yeats depicts the life of man as struggling and moving between extremities. In his desire to achieve and get what he desires, he is once again moving to the opposite direction. In Yeats’s poetry, the existence of these conflicting opposites is necessary for understanding the existence of man in this life and modern world. Falllik (2005) observes that the opposites in Yeats poetry are driving forces that help people fulfill themselves and achieve their desires and being. Opposites are also significant for provoking the clashing emotions in man’s life.

In this sense, it can be suggested that it is important to understand the conflicting opposites in Yeats’ poetry to appreciate it well. This is not surprising; Yeats himself had the belief that opposites have a significant function in man’s life. According to Jackaman (1978), opposites allow man to see the two sides (e.g. positive and negative; black and white; terrible and beautiful) simultaneously so that he can see the terrible beauty he was born in. Schneider (1975,
p. 179) agrees that “Yeats insists on every being’s need to find his opposite, or daemon, in order to fulfill himself: queens need swineherds, mortals need immortals, objective needs subjective”.

**Leda and the Swan**

In “Leda and the Swan”, this sense of conflicting opposites and extremities is well expressed in several ways. The poem is based on one of the most famous Greek myths, that of the Supreme God in Greek mythology, Princess Leda and Zeus. Zeus raped the exquisite Leda in the shape of an immense white swan. Helen, the most beautiful lady, who caused the Trojan War with its tragic results, was the fruit of this physical union. Helen was married to Menelaus, a brother of the great Greek leader, King Agamemnon, but secretly she was in love with Prince Paris of Troy. Therefore, with him, she fled to Troy. King prepared a large army and besieged the city of Troy for ten years. Eventually, the Greeks were able to devastate the city and bring back Helen. Tragically, Agamemnon’s disloyal wife managed to slaughter him with the aid of her paramour, Aegisthus, upon his triumphant return. Such horrific consequences were all brought about by that tragic rape of Leda by Zeus.

The poem runs through a series of conflicting opposites. It is through these opposites that the myth of raping Leda by Zeus is told. Both Zeus and Leda are presented as two series of conflicting opposites: Zeus is divine, immortal, colonial, spiritual, powerful, subjective, knowledgeable, and heroic; whereas Leda is human, mortal, anti-colonial, physical, helpless, objective, ignorant, and mundane:

- A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
- Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
- By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
- He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.
- How can those terrified vague fingers push
- The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
- And how can body, laid in that white rush,
- But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

(“Leda and the Swan”)

The above lines reaffirm Yeats’ belief in the interdependence of opposites. They exemplify his embrace of intellectual opposites. In other words, Yeats used the opposites in order to convey the idealized nature. It is through the union of these opposites that the beautiful Helen is born. The contrasting images of Zeus and Leda convey some symbolic meanings. In many ways, the poem reflects Yeats’ politics and the political implications of his post-nationalist writing (Lloyd, 1989). Zeus is powerful and heroic because he comes with a sudden blow which astonishes Leda and takes her by surprise. His great wings, feathered glory and white rush, dark webs cannot be resisted. It is a sudden attack which makes Leda helpless in front of his overtaking power. She staggers, her thighs caress and her terrified vague fingers fail to push the overtaking bird away. We feel that Leda finally responds to the Zeus’s beating heart. Therefore, she caresses her thighs and shares with him some of the excitement of that encounter. Such a contrast urges us to recall the contrasting images of the irresistible, powerful, imperial England colonizing the helpless, submissive Ireland. Such an occupation looks like a rape which leaves the victim devastated both physically and spiritually:

- A shudder in the loins engenders there
- The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
- And Agamemnon dead.

- Being so caught up,
- So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
- Did she put on his knowledge with his power
- Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

(“Leda and the Swan”)

The image of rape cannot be shunted; it is a physical union which has very tragic consequences. To put it clearly, the powerful Zeus, with her irresistible power, stands for the ugly face of the British Empire while Leda represents the powerless colonized Ireland. Leda is raped by Zeus in the same way that Ireland is raped by England. Barnwell (1977) asserts that the poem is often read as a rape-poem. Ramazani (1998) argue that Yeats’ poetry reflects the British imperial devastation of Ireland through allegorizing and symbolizing Ireland as a bleeding, rock-enchained woman who is possessed by a “demon dull and unsubbudable.” It is obvious therefore that Yeats is manipulating the Leda-Zeus myth in a way that alludes to the political connotations of the possession of Ireland by the dull brutal Britain. This possession is physically represented in the form of a rape. Ireland (represented as a staggering terrified girl, with caressing and loosening thighs and helpless breasts) is feminized by England (represented in Zeus, the father of Gods sudden blow, the great wings, the dark webs, the catching bill, the feathered glory).

Powerless Ireland is raped by the violent Zeus. The rape of Leda by Zeus is depicted through opposites: the brutality of the raper (‘brute blood’) is contrasted with the girl’s weakness; she has been caught up and mastered by the raper.
In this regard, Yeats considers the British occupation of Ireland as a political rapethat is associated with violence and brutality. Neigh (2006) sees Leda as the symbolic rape of Ireland by the British Colonizers. Neigh goes on to assert that Yeats questions what power Leda might gain from the swan before she is dropped to the ground after the rape. His decision to conclude the sonnet with a question invites his readers … to imagine how Leda might recover agency and to develop strategies of resistance to colonialism and sexism. His final question makes his readers ask where, how, and whether Leda will find power. (Neigh 2006, p. 147)

Yeats ends the poem with a rhetorical question: “Did she put on his knowledge with his power/ Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?” Here he rhetorically asks whether Leda has acquired any knowledge of this bloody future after this sexual act. In the myth of Zeus and Leda, The rape has very tragic consequences, represented by the destruction of the city of Troy and the bloody murder of the victorious leader, Agamemnon at the hands of his treacherous wife. Not surprisingly, the colonizer raped the anti-colonizer knowingly, since he knows the tragic implications of this rape beforehand. A pair of opposites is inserted in this context: knowledge and ignorance. Zeus was aware of the tragic aftermath before the rape, while Leda was utterly unaware of what would happen. England knows in advance that colonizing a free, independent nation would entail tragic consequences. Ireland resisted the British colonization in all ways but eventually she could not but surrender to his irresistible power: “How can those terrified vague fingers push//The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?”

**The Lake Isle of Innisfree**

In “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”, Yeats establishes the role of man in modern life through his use of opposites. Innisfree is a small, uninhabited island in Yeats’ home county, where he used to live as a child. The poem contrasts the fascinating picture of nature portrayed by Innisfree, with the stark reality of urban life in the city of London. Indeed, it is a comparison between reality and imagination; between where he is and where he wants to be:

- I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
- And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
- Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
- And live alone in the bee-loud glade.
- (“The Lake Isle of Innisfree”)

Yeats here wants to escape the dull life of the city and go to the idealized life of nature. Pettijohn (2017) argues that Innisfree is a symbolic representation of nature with its tranquility, simplicity, spirituality, and beauty; while city life stands crowdedness, noise, industrialization, dirtiness, and ugliness. She adds that Innisfree reflects Yeats’ fascination with the return to simple life. In this regard, Innisfree is more than a simple location; it is a symbol of nature, something sacred where you can find solace for your disturbed soul. “In ‘Innisfree,’ Yeats’ narrator asserts his desire to leave the ‘pavement gray’ of his current locale and dwell on the mysterious island of Innisfree, with only bees, crickets, and linnets for company (Pettijohn, 2017, p. 75). The journey from the city to the island is a sacred journey from stress to peace of mind. His longing for this island is a longing for his homeland, Ireland. The island is so coloured by his imagination that it looks like an idealized holy place.

The poem, therefore, is considered by many critics as Yeats’ spiritual journey, the journey towards a simple life where he enjoys peace and tranquility:

- And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
- Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
- There midnight’s all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
- And evening full of the linnet’s wings.
- (“The Lake Isle of Innisfree”)

In this idealized natural place, peace comes dropping slowly like drops of water. The symbolic meaning is further established through the opposites of the adverbs of place: ‘here’ and ‘there’. ‘Here’ refers to the ugly city of London where he lives, while ‘there’ refers to Innisfree to where he desires to go. The third stanza offers further comparisons through opposites between nature’s incredible beauty and the ugliness of London:

- I will arise and go now, for always night and day
- I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
- While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
- I hear it in the deep heart’s core.
- (“The Lake Isle of Innisfree”)

The repetition of the emphatic sentence: ‘*I will arise and go now,*’ stresses the poet’s eagerness to return back to his country so as to enjoy its peace and relish its beauty. The enchanting sound of the lake water contrasts sharply with the boredom and ugliness of the gray pavements and roadways portrayed by urban life. Yeats’ nostalgia of for Innisfree reflects his strong passion to return to his Irish tradition.
The selected texts indicate clearly that opposites play an important role in Yeats’ poetry. For him, opposites are deeply rooted in man’s life. They even account for his existence and being. Furthermore, opposites were manipulated to convey Yeats’ symbolic world. The underlying principle here is the poetic handling of opposites (colonial and anti-colonial, objective and subjective, mundane and heroic, nature and culture, natural and artificial, city and country, art and life, reality and imagination, mortal and immortal, physical and spiritual, human and divine, order and chaos). These contrasting images can be usefully used in widening students’ knowledge and enhancing their understanding of semantic relations.

4. Results & discussions

After students were introduced to the use of opposites and antonyms in Leda and the Swan” and "The Lake Isle Innisfree", they were asked to write an essay on the relationship between opposites in Yeats’s poetry. It was clear that learners’ understanding of the semantic relation of antonyms through the poetry of Yeats was positively reflected on their writing. They also reported that teaching semantic relations should not be just a process of providing students with a list of words showing synonyms and antonyms. It was also observed that learners had a positive attitude towards the use of poetry in learning semantic relations. The majority of the students also reported that literary texts were not included in previous courses including vocabulary and semantics.

Teaching semantics through Yeats’ poetry provided the students with good opportunities to think about surface and deep meanings of the poems. The opposites and contrasting images in Yeats’ poetry broadened the students’ knowledge. The study was not confined to the literal meaning of these terms. This extended knowledge should have its good implications to their progress in different courses including discourse analysis and translation. It was a good opportunity also to introduce the students to the interdisciplinary nature of language. The underlying principle is that language analysis needs a thorough understanding of language components. Students need to be introduced to the associations between vocabulary and real world.

It was also obvious that the use of literature in teaching the semantic relations had positive impacts on the learners’ deep understanding and use of language appropriately as reflected on their assignments on Yeats’ poetry. The selected poems helped learners to grasp the deep meanings of antonyms and use these antonyms in different contexts. It was also obvious that the selected poems helped the students to go beyond the surface meaning and dive into underlying meanings; that is, it enables students to go beyond what is written and dive into what is meant. Students’ familiarity with these meanings is undoubtedly useful for their study in courses that need the analysis of the language at the discourse-level.

The results of the study agree with the bulk of EFL literature on the importance and effectiveness of integrating literary texts in teaching and learning a second language (Çetinacvi & Tütüniş, 2012; Nanda & Susanto, 2020). This study stressed the positive impact of using literature as an effective tool of teaching semantic relations to EFL learners. Literary texts are considered as authentic, useful, meaningful, and related to learners’ lives. Literature provides greatest opportunity to learners in order to be creators, writers, analysts, and poets. It can be claimed that using literary texts as authentic material has positive impacts on the development of the language skills of EFL learners and their understanding of some complex semantic relations as exemplified in the use of Yeats’ poetry to teach the semantic relations.

The results of the study have some implications to the choice of study materials in language learning classes and contexts. The selected materials should have fun, intellectual excitement, and passion. In this context, it is argued that literary texts help EFL learners acquire the language as an integral main part of successful communications. It can also be claimed that the use of literary texts in language contexts enhances the implicit processes of acquiring language. It is through narratives and poems, learners can acquire a native-near competence in English, express their thoughts in perfect English, acquiring the benefits of modern English, speak fluency, precisely, and concisely, and become more expert in English language.

Although the study was limited to selected poems by William Butler Yeats, the findings can be extended to the significance of incorporating poetry and literary texts in teaching linguistics courses. The idea is that the culture and literature of any language cannot be separated from any linguistic study. Teaching linguistics cannot be separated from literature. In this way, the relation between literature and linguistic courses in the English Programs need to be redefined. Teaching linguistics and literature courses should go hand in hand. In spite of the limitations of the study, however, the results are encouraging in that the students’ attitudes, perceptions, and motivation were found significantly positive.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the effectiveness of teaching semantic relations using implicit learning methods through the poetry of W. B. Yeats. Results indicate clearly that the students had a positive perception towards the use of poetic devices in understanding the semantic relations. It can be finally concluded that the use of literature in general and poetry in particular can be usefully used for enhancing learners’ effective communication and understanding cultural boundaries which are indispensable from the language learning process. It is important thus in teaching semantic
relations to guide students to what is beyond these words so that they are able to critically read the texts and use synonyms/antonyms effectively. The study has implications to the teaching methods and strategies of linguistics courses. Given the fact that teaching language skills receive the utmost interest of researchers, it is important to develop teaching strategies for linguistics courses to help students face the challenges in these courses. It is also recommended that program designers, academic departments, and even instructors consider the close relationship between literature and culture on one side and language on the other side in course designs, teaching strategies, and material selection.

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