

Multicultural poetry in ELT: benefits, challenges and strategies

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Abstract

This article explores how teachers can incorporate multicultural poems in their English lessons in order to address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. By engaging with such texts students are able to overcome traditional biases and develop an appreciation of contemporary society's vibrant cultural variety. At the same time a plurilingual perspective is allowed to enrich English learning. This article addresses the challenges that might discourage teachers from incorporating multicultural poetry in their lessons and outlines the value of using such poems as a means of teaching English. It also presents a number of strategies by means of which multicultural poetry can be woven into one's lessons. It focuses in particular on how multimodal poems and creative writing can be used as a means of developing students' multicultural appreciation while learning English.

1. Introduction

The premise for the arguments made in this article is an idea expressed by the Spanish writer Lucía Etxebarria (2007) who claims that “people appreciate each other when they get to know each other and, above all, to understand that which unites us is much greater than what sets us apart”. This article attempts to show that by engaging students with multicultural poetry written in English, teachers can help students become intercultural communicators. This is due to the fact that “literature and the arts contribute to the formation of a convivial culture, one that is tolerant and spontaneously at ease with its rich diversity” (López Roperero & Moreno Álvarez, 2011: 102).

Multicultural poetry is typically associated with ethnic minorities and other socioeconomically marginalized and underrepresented groups. Usually their literature is as sidelined in the curriculum as it is in society and this means that in an increasingly multicultural society students might find it difficult to engage with texts that are completely

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alien to the multicultural reality they form part of. Western society is becoming increasingly multicultural and in most classrooms the need to move away from an exclusive focus on the cultural manifestations of the dominant group is becoming ever more significant.

Students belonging to underrepresented social groups might find it hard to fathom why their own culture never forms part of any of the activities they do in class. This is especially so when students are presented with texts that they are meant to respond to orally or in writing. Colby and Lyon (2004) gave a group of teachers the opportunity to examine their beliefs and practices in relation to the use of multicultural texts in the classroom. They discovered that these teachers felt as if they had opened their eyes to the problems faced by a number of students when presented with material that is predominantly white European-American in origin. These teachers became aware of the fact that if students cannot identify with a text their level of engagement with the reading process diminishes. The implications of this are that if teachers fail to provide students with access to texts with which they can actually relate to, the development of their reading and writing skills might be affected.

Dong (2005: 367) posits that “there is an urgent need for English teachers to increase their sensitivity to cultural differences and develop teaching skills to conduct classroom discussions that promote cross-cultural understanding and culturally varied ways of living and knowing”. In order not to risk alienating students, teachers need to embrace the responsibility of making careful reading choices and avoid perpetuating practices that manifest a complete disregard for multiculturalism.

2. Some Potential Benefits

Willis (2000) indicates that the starting point for any teacher wanting to use multicultural texts in their lessons is an examination of one’s own cultural background and respect for other cultures. This is crucial because in order for multicultural poetry to be used effectively teachers need to reflect on what they want to achieve by means of it and to feel convinced that it is the right medium by means of which these objectives can be attained. These are some of the benefits that teachers may reap as a result of using multicultural poetry with their students.

2.1. *Meaningful Language Work*

A multicultural approach to ELT develops students’ linguistic skills in a meaningful manner by bridging students’ real-life experiences and language learning. Multicultural poems address the real-life concerns, cultural beliefs and practices of students’ home community. Just like other kinds of poetry, multicultural poems can be exploited in a variety of ways in order to improve students’ four skills, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation (Collie & Slater, 1987; Holmes & Moulton, 2001; Spiro, 2004; Duff & Maley, 1989, 2007; Vaughan-Rees, 2010). The added advantage of multicultural poems is that they are texts that the students can immediately identify with and hence their language

work is much more meaningful. Obviously, as with all other texts, care needs to be taken to choose poems that are suited to the students' level.

Students can use English not only to read multicultural poetry but also to write their own poetry. This allows them to realise that, just like the L1, English can be used as a vehicle for personal and cultural expression. Obied (2007: 51) claims that for students coming from cultures other than the dominant one, poetry can be a significant means of engaging with the target language as well as acting as a medium that allows them to express their thoughts and feelings about their own cultural experiences, especially if the learning process is "collaborative, intercultural and interactive". She highlights the example of Soriya, an 11-year-old Afghani student who wrote a poem describing her emotions during a night raid by the Taliban. Obied (2007: 45) shows how this student, in a poem entitled 'Why did I do nothing?', used the target language to describe her terror and guilt:

Scary they were.
Coming at night,
Like giants
Showing only the whites of their eyes.

As the door opened
And they stood, framed by the light
I saw their beards long and dark,
Turbans snaking around their big heads.

Then they shouted.
We could do nothing,
Women sitting fearful,
Men running to hide in the attic.

Now I remember
Why did I do nothing?
I'm angry with myself.

2.2. *Cultural Empathy*

Multicultural poetry not only helps students to identify with their own culture but also exposes them to other cultures. It provides students with models of fluent writers and speakers who appreciate other cultures and allows the class to explore issues regarding cultural diversity; it is thus enriching and empowering. Most importantly it enables students to empathise with other people's experiences. Johnson and Rinvoluceri (2010: 16) affirm that one of our aims as teachers is that of encouraging students to develop a better understanding of different cultures and to transcend cultural stereotypes by means of an empathetic attitude:

If we want our students to think about and engage with ideas and beliefs that challenge them, that is, to teach them to listen without judgement, to share ideas without prejudice and start to empathise with people from different backgrounds who may have (and be happy with) a different set of beliefs, then we need to help

them understand that one's home culture is simply a system of learned behaviour patterns and not the only way to do or see things. We do this by facilitating the sharing, and comparing, of information and experiences of home and other cultures.

Multicultural poetry is a means of achieving the above aims because by cultivating students' intercultural competences it allows them to broaden their appreciation of cultural diversity. In fact, this is one of the aims of a "cultural-response approach...an approach challenging students' preconceived notions about another culture" (Dong, 2005: 369). When students read and respond to multicultural poetry they are not only using the target language in order to communicate about something meaningful and engaging but also reflecting on the diversity that exists within and outside their own classroom.

In addition to developing students' own sense of empathy with other cultures, multicultural poetry probably also makes it easier for teachers to understand their students' identity. This is because the use of engaging texts that speak about those students' cultural milieus enhances teachers' ability to comprehend the cultural practices and beliefs that have gone into shaping students' identity. In fact, Singer and Smith (2003: 17) found that the act of reading and discussing multicultural literature aids trainee teachers to "develop a deeper understanding of themselves and of different others". In this way teachers are better able to respond to the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Another idea related to this is that multicultural texts compel teachers to switch roles with their students. Dong (2005: 381) argues that "With multicultural literature, culturally and linguistically diverse students are often cultural insiders and the teacher may be a cultural outsider. These dynamics may require that the teacher play the role of the learner".

2.3. *Valuing Plurilingualism*

In line with the work of the Council of Europe (2007), multicultural poetry allows teachers and students to question traditional biases and take into account the importance of plurilingualism in today's society as a vehicle for effective communication. In a world 'dominated' by one global language, English language teachers have the responsibility of allowing other languages and cultures to permeate their lessons in order to undermine insularity and encourage co-operation. This is significant in order not to silence any student's voice in the classroom. In fact, Ruiz Cecilia and Guijarro Ojeda (2007: 69) affirm that "In EFL settings, target culture is constantly redefined and enriched with new ways of seeing and thinking portrayed by students' pluri-L1s".

Multicultural poetry is most often written by people who were brought up in multilingual communities and sometimes despite writing in English they also allow words and expressions from the languages forming part of their background to seep into their poetry. This enables students to perceive plurilingualism as a positive thing and undermines any misconceptions they might have about English being a threat to the survival of other languages. It allows students to acknowledge that in many communities all over the world a wide array of languages co-exist with the global language and that people in these communities are increasingly embracing the concept of plurilingualism.

3. Overcoming Challenges

There exist a number of challenges that might discourage teachers from using multicultural poetry in their lessons. However, these challenges are not necessarily tougher than the ones teachers face when making decisions about the use of other kinds of texts. For each one of these challenges there exist a number of effective remedies and ultimately all that it takes is the courage to prevail over one's assumptions and the will to experiment with different poems.

3.1. *Linguistic Competence*

The most immediate challenge is perhaps related to the fact that amongst certain teachers there is often the misconception that in order for them to incorporate literary texts into their lessons students should first be linguistically competent. However, as Hall (2005: 145) points out "Assuming linguistic competence, rather than attempting to extend it through literature...is likely to be even more problematic". Hence if teachers wait for students to develop the right level of linguistic competence before using poetry in class their students are most probably going to miss out on the opportunity of benefiting from poetry's potential to boost language proficiency. Research indicates that in a second language context the use of poetry actually leads to the noticing and retention of linguistic forms (Hanacur, 2001).

3.2. *Distraction from Language Learning*

An awareness of the fact that the use of multicultural poetry can actually have an impact on students' language learning should help convince those teachers who feel that the use of such texts in ELT is a distraction from the business of language learning. Dymoke (2009: 84) warns against the tendency of encouraging students to "spend a disproportionate amount of lesson time exploring what they understand by the terms 'cultures and traditions' in a homogenized and unhelpful way that has little to do with the texts or the readers themselves". If a teacher plans to use multicultural poetry then it should be viewed both as a meaningful source of content for students to engage with and a means by which their linguistic proficiency can be enhanced. These two aspects should be given equal weight.

3.3. *Availability of Poetry*

Another important challenge is probably that teachers might believe that it is difficult to find suitable poems to use in an ESL or EFL context. However, nowadays there are many multicultural poets writing in English and their work is easily available through the leading booksellers. Moreover, poetry dedicated websites like poetryarchive.org, poetryfoundation.org and poets.org contain thousands of freely available poems for

teachers to download and multicultural poets are well represented. In addition to actual poems, these websites are an excellent resource for teachers because they contain sections devoted specifically to the use of poetry in class and teachers can download lessons plans and materials and adapt them according to the level and needs of their students. Most poems are recorded in an audio format, with some also being accompanied by a video of the poem. Another excellent source for multicultural poetry is poetryinternationalweb.net, which is a virtual repository of thousands of poems from all over the world.

3.4. *Teachers' Stance*

Obviously the best way for teachers to find appropriate examples of multicultural poetry is to read widely and in fact not adopting the stance of a reader hinders the creation of a culture of reading. Reading plenty of multicultural poetry will not just enable teachers to determine which texts may be used with their students but will also allow them to position themselves as role models and thus overcome one of the challenges in the cultivation of a reading culture. If teachers do not act as passionate readers, students will not be able to see them as role models. In fact, "Effective extensive reading teachers are themselves readers, teaching *by example* the attitudes and behaviours of a reader" (Day & Bamford 2002: 140).

Research I carried out amongst teachers and second language learners of English in Malta shows that teachers tend to avoid talking about their reading habits in class. Interviewed students indicated that they are unaware of whether their teachers read any poetry, some of them assuming that "it's sort of necessary to read poetry if you're an English teacher". Students claimed that very few teachers ever share their reading experiences with them; the majority of students expressed the desire that this should happen more often. In their opinion "teachers have a huge influence, so it would help many students to take the initiative to read more poetry" if they knew that their teachers enjoy doing so. Students declared that they perceive teachers as readers whom they "trust" and hence they appreciate their suggestions in terms of which books to read. These students' views seem to give weight to the idea that when teachers position themselves as fellow readers forming part of a classroom reading community, students are provided with the impetus to engage in extensive reading.

3.5. *Convincing Teachers*

Convincing teachers of the importance of sharing multicultural poetry with their students is another significant challenge. That is why it is important for teachers to be convinced of the benefits of using multicultural poetry. This can only happen if they are provided with adequate training that illustrates how experienced teachers effectively exploited such texts in a variety of learning contexts and what were the outcomes of such lessons. Teachers most often learn best from one another and if they are shown how other practitioners successfully used multicultural poetry they might be tempted to overcome their fear of incorporating such texts into their lessons.

Such training would also serve the purpose of allaying teachers' worries about the cultural content of multicultural poetry. Like any other meaningful text no poem is ever culturally neutral nor is it desirable for it to be so. At the same time not all multicultural poetry is culturally dense and adequate training would help to show teachers how to address the significant cultural aspects of these texts in order for them to capitalise on the many benefits of such poetry. Aware of the fact that some teachers feel uncomfortable with the presence of multicultural poetry in the English lesson, Dymoke (2009: 84) suggests that when planning a lesson based on a multicultural poem one should reflect on the following issues vis-à-vis one's students:

What are their cultural experiences and traditions?

What are the everyday contexts in which they live and learn?

How similar or different might these be from those explored in the poem?

What events or issues in the poem might they find most difficult to understand?

What are the potential difficulties in terms of language? Of imagery?

What bridges or links will you need to make to aid the students' engagement with the poem?

3.6. *Student Resistance*

Yet another challenge is that of overcoming student resistance to poetry. To some extent this is linked to the fact that through the way they approach poetry some teachers unwittingly consolidate students' belief that poetry must necessarily contain a hidden meaning and is thus difficult. My research shows that students seem to prefer prose to poetry because they consider poetry to be "hard" or "enigmatic". In order to explain why they do not read any poetry some students claimed that "it just isn't in me", "I cannot understand it", and that it is "boring...I just don't enjoy reading it...it frustrates me". However, other students took a somewhat opposite perspective, with one of them saying, "Through my lessons I'm finding poems that I really like and then at home I look for others by the same poet online". This link between lesson activities and enjoying poetry is also made by a student who admits not to reading a lot of poetry but finds it "interesting" because she gets "to see how the poet plays with English". A teacher's attitude towards poetry can help either inspire students or else alienate them from an entire genre.

4. **Strategies**

In order to elucidate some of the strategies that may be used when using multicultural poetry for the purpose of teaching English, the next few sections describe activities that formed part of a 90-minute lesson I did with monolingual and multilingual classes at upper intermediate level. This lesson was based on a poem entitled 'They'll say, 'She must be

from another country” (Appendix 1) by Imtiaz Dharker, a Scottish Muslim poet born in Lahore and brought up in Glasgow. Currently she makes her home in the United Kingdom and Mumbai. According to Willis (2010), Dharker calls herself a “cultural mongrel” and her work is very sensitive to a wide variety of multicultural issues. The poem comes from a collection called *I Speak for the Devil* (2001), however, it can also be found in a book called *In Person: 30 Poets* (2008). The latter contains not just the text of the poem but also a video of Dharker reading her poem and talking about it. Both the printed poem and the video were used in the lesson described hereunder. A handout with all the lesson activities is found in Appendix 2.

4.1. Pre-reading

Since the poem discusses the issue of personal and cultural differences and the prejudice that people may feel towards those who are different from them, the lesson begins by means of an activity in which students are meant to think about possible causes of discrimination. This is inspired by an activity forming part of a BritLit kit based on the poem ‘Celebr8’ by Levi Tafari, a poet of Jamaican origin living in Liverpool (www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/celebr8_kit.pdf). Students are asked to think about whether they have ever suffered discrimination or whether they know of anyone who has.

The listening activities that follow are meant to provide students with a bit of background to the poet and her poem and this is achieved by means of the video. Students are given an opportunity of watching Dharker reading the first four stanzas of the poem twice before being asked to identify the causes of discrimination mentioned in the poem. For now they do not know that the poem they have listened to and read actually consists of another two stanzas. Allowing students to experience the poem by audiovisual means is important because as Dymoke (2009) points out “poetry is a playful, multimodal medium rather than one destined to be stranded for ever on the printed page” (p. 80). Moreover, a multimodal approach helps teachers to “develop an engaged enjoyment and appreciation of poetry” as well as “creative and critical thinking” (Blake, 2009: 28).

4.2. Reading

Students read the poem in order to confirm their answers to the last activity. They underline any words or phrases in the poem that help to indicate causes of discrimination and discuss the way they are described in the poem. Then students work in pairs in order to guess the meaning in context of a number of words from the poem. These two activities are an opportunity to make students think about language within a creative context. In a way this is in line with Spiro’s (2004: 7) idea that “a focus on form and language is exactly what makes poetry different from other written texts”. Close attention to the language used in a poem is recommended as a means of understanding how a desired effect is created (Booth & Swartz, 2004).

4.3. Post-reading

Using Dharker's first four stanzas as a model, students are provided with a frame and asked to complete the stanza by referring to some of the cultural and personal differences dealt with in the lesson's first activity. They may also come up with their own examples. This activity is meant to provide students with an opportunity of engaging in creative writing. According to Beach and Marshall (1991: 392) the latter is important because there exists "a necessary and organic connection between the reading and writing of poetry that poets understand, students need to experience, and English teachers all too often forget". With students who have no experience of creative writing it might be better to transform this activity into shared writing, which is "an activity in which the teacher acts as a scribe and the students, either as a class or else in small groups, help the teacher rewrite the model text" (Xerri, 2011: 178).

These stanzas were produced by three different students, the first one in a monolingual class while the other two in a multilingual class:

When I get in the bus and everyone stares at my hair,
they look confused and interested at the same time,
when I stay at the bus stop and don't wave my hand,
the bus passes by and they look at me out of the window,
they stare at me without being sorry,
they laugh and say,

She must be from another country.
Ruth (16), Maltese

When I'm on the bus and answering my phone
speaking to my mother,
when I'm with my family in a restaurant
and we are laughing loudly
they turn around and stare at me
and think to themselves,

She must be from another country.
Selma (22), Bosnian

When I can't comprehend why they don't want to be
independent in the things they do in life,
when I don't present my friends the most
expensive brands of shoes for their birthday,
they lift up their shoulders
and show their palms and say,

'She must be from another country.'
Marika (32), German

Whenever students do creative writing it is important for them to share their work with their peers and if possible to receive feedback from them. The act of sharing one's

writing with others and inviting response is seen as a community-building activity (Sautter, 1991).

The next activity is about the last two stanzas of Dharker's poem. Students are provided with the first and last few lines of these stanzas and asked to predict what could come in between. This is meant to make them think about the reasons for which the poet seems to be agreeing with those who discriminate against her by saying that she is from another country. Students then watch Dharker reading the last two stanzas and confirm their predictions. Finally, students engage even further with the text by discussing a few questions and deciding whether they agree with the poet's attitude to discrimination or not.

5. Conclusion

This article has sought to show that the use of multicultural poetry in one's English lessons helps to bolster students' language proficiency by providing them with an opportunity of engaging with meaningful texts. Moreover, it fosters students' development of multicultural competencies and can also cultivate an appreciation of plurilingualism. These are crucial aspects of any twenty-first century student's repertoire of communicative skills and this is because "the principle of diversity as a quality dimension for education and learning can stimulate personal growth, enhance learning to live together, provide more opportunities to do and more means to know" (Alidou et al., 2011: 537). Multicultural poetry is an enriching resource that will hopefully be utilized by many more teachers working in an ELT context.

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Appendix 1. **Poem**

They'll say, 'She must be from another country' by Imtiaz Dharker

When I can't comprehend
 why they're burning books
 or slashing paintings,
 when they can't bear to look
 at god's own nakedness,
 when they ban the film
 and gut the seats to stop the play
 and I ask why
 they just smile and say,
 'She must be
 from another country.'

When I speak on the phone
 and the vowel sounds are off
 when the consonants are hard
 and they should be soft,
 they'll catch on at once
 they'll pin it down
 they'll explain it right away
 to their own satisfaction,
 they'll cluck their tongues
 and say,
 'She must be
 from another country.'

When my mouth goes up
 instead of down,
 when I wear a tablecloth
 to go to town,
 when they suspect I'm black
 or hear I'm gay
 they won't be surprised,
 they'll purse their lips
 and say,
 'She must be
 from another country.'

When I eat up the olives
 and spit out the pits
 when I yawn at the opera
 in the tragic bits
 when I pee in the vineyard
 as if it were Bombay,
 flaunting my bare ass
 covering my face
 laughing through my hands

they'll turn away,
shake their heads quite sadly,
'She doesn't know any better,'
they'll say,
'She must be
from another country.'

Maybe there is a country
where all of us live,
all of us freaks
who aren't able to give
our loyalty to fat old fools,
the crooks and thugs
who wear the uniform
that gives them the right
to wave a flag,
puff out their chests,
put their feet on our necks,
and break their own rules.

But from where we are
it doesn't look like a country,
it's more like the cracks
that grow between borders
behind their backs.
That's where I live.
And I'll be happy to say,
'I never learned your customs.
I don't remember your language
or know your ways.
I must be
from another country.'

Appendix 2. Lesson Activities

- a) Differences amongst people are sometimes a cause for discrimination. Look at the following words and underline the ones that might be a possible cause of discrimination.

Religion
Immigration
Artistic taste
Skin colour
Education
Fashion
Gender
Wealth/poverty
Language accent

- Appearance
- Sexuality
- Age
- Food
- Social class
- Disability

- b) Have you ever been discriminated against? Do you know of anyone who has? Look at the list again and tick the causes for this discrimination.
- c) Listen to the poet Imtiaz Dharker talking about Bombay. Why do people migrate to Bombay?
- d) Listen to Dharker’s poem ‘They’ll say, ‘She must be from another Country’’. Why do people say that she must be from another country?
- e) Listen to the poem again. Which causes of discrimination from the above list does Dharker refer to?
- f) Read Dharker’s poem and confirm your answers. Underline those lines which refer to some form of discrimination.
- g) What do the following words and expressions from the poem mean? Discuss with your partner.

- comprehend
- slashing
- ban
- gut
- catch on
- pin it down
- cluck
- purse
- yawn
- flaunting

- h) Complete this stanza. You may refer to some of the cultural or personal differences listed above or choose your own examples.

When I

.....

when I

.....

they

.....

‘She must be from another country.’

Show your stanza to your partner. What similarities and differences are there?

- i) Dharker's complete poem consists of another two stanzas. These are the first and last few lines:

Maybe there is a country
where all of us live,
all of us freaks

.....

I must be
from another country.'

What could the missing lines be saying? Discuss with your group.

- j) Listen to the last two stanzas of Dharker's poem. Were you right? Discuss the following questions with your group:

How does Dharker feel about being different?

Do you feel the same way?

Is this the best way of dealing with discrimination?