CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The effectiveness of the role of poetry in an EFL curriculum is still debated. The arguments for and against the use of poetry continue to take up much space in scholarly journals and books in different languages. Why do teachers of language choose to include poetry? Is any poetry good enough? How should teachers present non-native poetry to undergraduate students? Can teachers put poetry on multiple-choice tests and still hope that students would enjoy it? How much of poetry is too much for EFL learners? These and other questions have for a long time engaged the attention of scholars and teachers alike and they will probably continue to do so as long as there is poetry and there are language classrooms.

The debate in EFL contexts became even more heated with the advent of what is called ‘pragmatic English’. The advocates of this approach to language teaching argue that the teaching of English be brought in line with the ‘practical needs’ of the society. In their teaching, they would focus more on communication in the daily language, on functions in the target language and on written assignments such as writing letters and emails. After all, this is what the learners would end up doing after their graduation. Now what role can literature play in preparing the students for the highly competitive market? Is literature a distraction? Is it a luxury the students can ill-afford?

Of all literary genres, poetry is thought to contribute the least in the development of either language competence or even literary competence. Its characteristic linguistic unorthodoxy is believed to be a disruptive influence in the rule-governed world of language learning. Learners are expected to be divergent in their reception, assimilating ‘incorrect’ uses of language, but convergent in their production, filtering out the ‘poetic uses’ they have been asked to read and ‘appreciate’. Besides, the ‘specialized’ vocabulary and the manipulations of syntax make it difficult for learners to come to terms with poetry without guidance and assistance. Poetry calls for an adjustment to reading habits and for extra-careful attention to linguistic choices. The demands on the non-native learners are doubled and so are the demands on their teachers. The job for the poetry teacher in a non-native context is to ‘exploit’ poetry in order to bring out all its educational benefits.
but at the same time ensure that it rubs off positively on the students’ language performance. An even bigger challenge is to devise a pedagogy which satisfies all involved.

‘Traditional’ poetry pedagogies have been predominantly dominated by the teacher. Right from the selection of teaching materials, through the explication of texts, to the selection of test tasks, it is the teacher and only the teacher who has full and unquestioned authority. The students are supposed to be delighted with the selected text and awed by the teacher’s explication of the text. The teacher hands over ‘the’ interpretation of the text and the students compete to make the most faithful reproduction of it. Such pedagogies fail to do justice to the genre and to justify its inclusion in the EFL curriculum. The main educational benefits of poetry are: 1) that it fosters critical thinking by requiring readers to work out a reality represented in language and 2) that it promotes tolerance for difference by dramatizing the various ways in which a situation can be seen. By assigning a passive role to the learner and involving little attention to language, traditional pedagogies deny these educational benefits. This scenario is not infrequent today despite the frequent outcries against it by educators and students alike.

The present study argues in favor of using poetry in EFL contexts. It argues that poetry can help learners develop their poetic, or literary, competence and also improve their language skills. It can prepare them well not only for the market but for life at large. The study also argues that poetry promotes cultural understanding and understanding of the self. It argues that poetry motivates learners to read more in the target language and creates a classroom environment where there are no barriers. Learners feel free to speak and exchange views without any fears of going ‘wrong’. It argues that poetry is not irrelevant and that it will continue to have its place in the curriculum. It argues, however, that poetry can not work magic on its own. Its benefits and potential will not materialize simply by its being included in the curriculum. ‘Inappropriate’ pedagogies may well frustrate students and create hostility to the genre. The need is therefore for a pedagogical approach which does not deny the educational benefits of poetry, which is appropriate to the nature of language organization in poetic discourse and which recognizes, and ameliorates, the difficulties experienced by undergraduate learners’ first encounter with non-native poetry.
Purpose of the Study and How it is Achieved

This study focuses on the teaching of poetry to undergraduate learners of English at the Taiz University (henceforth also TU), Yemen. After reviewing the status quo at poetry classes at the English department, the study proposes an alternative stylistic approach to the teaching of poetic texts.

The study has a dual aim: 1) to lay bare the inadequacies (if any) of the current pedagogy in the poetry classes of the Faculty of Arts, TU, Yemen, and 2) to propose an alternative pedagogy (if required) to the teaching of poetry. The first aim leads to, in fact provides the justification for, the second.

For the first of these aims to be satisfied, two questionnaires have been prepared. The first is for English poetry teachers at the department concerned. The set of questions asked aims at getting information on 1) the teachers’ course objectives, 2) how teachers select their texts, 3) how teachers teach the selected texts and 4) how teachers assess their students. The second questionnaire is for the level three and level four students of the department. The questionnaire elicits information on the students’ learning objectives, their evaluation of their teachers’ pedagogies and assessment strategies, and on what changes they would like to see in their poetry classes. The students’ responses to the questionnaire items are examined against their teachers’ responses. The aim is to uncover the discrepancies between the students’ needs and their teachers’ goals and to compare the teachers and students’ assessment of the current pedagogy and to find out what changes, if any, they would both like to see in the future poetry classes. The responses to the questionnaires items are verified by an examination of a sample of poetry exam papers (administered between the years 2002 and 2007) and a sample of students’ answer books. The aim of analysing the exam questions and teachers’ assessment of students’ test performance is to confirm the veracity or otherwise of the responses of teachers and students to the questionnaires and to arrive at more valid conclusions about the context of investigation.

For the satisfaction of the second aim of the study, an eclectic pedagogically oriented stylistic model is proposed. The model draws on insights garnered from literary stylistics, Iser’s theory of aesthetic response and practical, or pedagogical, stylistics. The emphasis is on classroom tasks that build on what prior experiences the students bring to the act of reading. These lived experiences serve as the entry point to the world of the poem. The aim is to ‘desanctify’ poetry and make students relate the experiences represented in the text to their own life experiences. The tasks are
language-based. They aim to sensitize students to the communicative potential of language by examining the ways (attested and potential) in which lexical choices and structural patterning can be manipulated in the expression of meaning. They also aim at helping students develop a reading strategy for poetry that should help them not only make their own individual responses to the text but also convert their initial helplessness into the joy of conquering an ‘unknown territory’. The pedagogy is structured into three stages. These three stages are 1) initiating a response, 2) developing an interpretation, and 3) authenticating the interpretation. Each stage has its aims, its target skills to promote and its own selection of teaching tasks. The pedagogical stylistic approach proposed, however, necessarily presupposes a more theoretical stylistic approach. The two poetic texts selected are first stylistically analyzed using a combination of theoretical and analytical insights garnered from literary stylistics and theories of reader response. The detailed stylistic analyses are then pedagogically ‘treated’ to suit the linguistic and poetic competencies of the learners. The eclectic approach proposed for the analysis is retained for the pedagogy but combined with the more pedagogically oriented approach of practical stylistics. One of the two selected texts will be taught by the researcher to a sample of Yemeni undergraduate students. In order to verify the success of the approach, two post-tests have been prepared by the researcher to be filled in by the sampled students and two faculty members of the department acting as observers of the classroom trialing of the approach.

**Research Questions**

The study attempts to find answers to the following questions:

1. What are the teachers’ current criteria of text selection and do they consider the students’ language competence and interests?
2. Is the focus of the teaching on the content of the poems or on the skills of reading and interpretation?
3. Do the poetry tests focus on the retrieval of information already provided to the students or on the techniques of interpreting ‘unseen’ poems?
4. Does the current pedagogy satisfy the students’ learning objectives?
5. What are the discrepancies, if any, between the students’ needs and their teachers’ goals?
6. How do students assess their teachers’ pedagogical practices?
7. How do teachers assess their own pedagogical decisions?
8. What is the effect of the current pedagogy on the students’ motivation to read poetry not prescribed for classroom study?
9. Can a pedagogically oriented stylistic approach encourage students to concentrate on the text and do away with ready-made interpretations?
10. Can a pedagogically oriented stylistic approach involve the students more actively in the interpretation of poetic texts?
11. Can a pedagogically oriented stylistic approach relate the learning of poetry to the learning of language?
12. Can a pedagogically oriented stylistic approach make the study of poetry more interesting and encourage students to read more poetry?
13. Can a pedagogically oriented stylistic approach give the students a way into poetic texts and help them make their own personal interpretations of them?
14. Can a pedagogically oriented stylistic approach satisfy the students’ learning objectives?
15. Will the pedagogically oriented stylistic approach be welcomed as an alternative pedagogy by the students?

Significance of the Study

The teaching of English poetic texts to non-native learners is not a new research topic. Work in this area has followed several avenues. The significance of the present study is that it presents an evaluation through questionnaires of one such poetry teaching situation. This qualitative evaluation of an English undergraduate program which is at least twenty years old is carried out for the first time. The teaching of English poetry at Taiz University goes on much as it has always done and the assumption is that everything is taken good care of. The current pedagogy could well be inappropriate for its context and ineffective at creating self-reliant readers of poetry. Why should students develop an aversion to poetry when they can enjoy it and improve their language skills at the same time? The first part of the dissertation attempts to lay bare the problem areas (if any) at the levels of the selection, teaching and testing of poetic texts.
The study also offers a pedagogically oriented stylistic approach which should be appropriate for its context and which should provide students with the means of interpretation and make them read and enjoy poetry on their own. The benefits which can be obtained from stylistically oriented approaches to the teaching of poetic texts have been amply demonstrated by many publications, and this study will make a distinctive addition by extending this significant body of work.

**Overview of the Dissertation**

This study is in six chapters. *Chapter One* is an introduction to the dissertation. It diagnoses the research problem, presents the research questions, and states the purpose of the study and how the purpose is achieved. The introduction also defines the relevant key terms and gives an overview of the structural organization of the dissertation. *Chapter Two* is a review of the relevant literature. This chapter introduces the key issues serving as the theoretical background for the rest of the chapters. It begins with a discussion of the nature of poetic communication, addressing issues like the distinction between poetic text and poetic discourse, the nature of poetic discourse and the pedagogical implications of these issues. This is followed by a review of the main approaches to the teaching of poetry and of the important issues of the selection of poetic texts and testing students of poetry. The review moves on to highlight the benefits of using stylistic approaches in the teaching of poetry, and presents a discussion of the different stylistic trends and their pedagogical relevance for the poetry classroom. The review concludes with a review of the research on the teaching of English literature to Arabic-speaking students. *Chapter Three* details the state of the art at the poetry classrooms of Taiz University. The chapter focuses on the three main elements of the teaching situation, namely, teacher, text and student. Two questionnaires, one for the teachers and the other for their students, are used in order to carry out the qualitative evaluation. The questionnaires elicit detailed information on the criteria of text selection, the teaching methodology and the assessment strategy. The results of the two questionnaires are interpreted and verified against an examination of a sample of poetry exam papers, administered between the years 2002 and 2007, and a sample of students’ answer books. The findings prepare the ground and provide the justification for the stylistic approach proposed in the following chapter. *Chapter Four* presents the theoretical framework and the underlying assumptions of the proposed pedagogically oriented
A stylistic approach. The approach is eclectic and has two related components: a stylistic analysis component and a pedagogical component. The first specifies the procedures of stylistic analysis while the second specifies the criteria of text selection, the methodology and the nature of the recommended language-based classroom tasks. Part of the second component is also a discussion of the analytical and reading skills which the approach requires the students to acquire and a suggestion of a set of exam questions to test the acquisition of these skills. Chapter Five offers a practical application of the theoretical arguments made in the previous chapter. This chapter presents two stylistic analyses of poems by Mark O'Connor, an Australian, and Langston Hughes, an American. The stylistic analyses are then ‘treated’ pedagogically in order that they suit the context for which they are proposed. One of these texts, Half an hour after, by O’Connor, has actually been taught by the researcher to a sample of Taiz University undergraduates according to the pedagogical treatment proposed. The chapter includes an analysis of the findings of the two post-tests filled in by the participant students and by the two observers who attended the teaching sessions. The final chapter lists the findings of the questionnaires given to the students before and after the use of the pedagogy in order to assess the success or otherwise of the proposed stylistic approach. The chapter draws together the threads of the arguments and presents a discussion of the findings and conclusions of the study. It also suggests their implications for the poetry classrooms of Taiz University and similar contexts where poetry is learnt as a subject. This concluding chapter concludes with the limitations of the study and its suggestions for further research in the area.

Definition of Terms

**Stylistics:**

is essentially a bridge discipline between linguistics and literature. Stylistics aims to show how the linguistic features of a literary work, such as the grammatical structure of its sentences, contribute to its overall meanings and effects (Barry, 2002, p. 203).

**Practical stylistics:**

the term is used to describe the work of stylisticians (like Widdowson, 1992) who are primarily interested in the stylistic analyses of texts as teaching aids for literature and language study by native and foreign
speakers of English. Another common term for this use of stylistic analyses is *pedagogical stylistics.* (Wales, 2001, p. 313)

**Coherence:**

refers to the underlying development of propositions. Coherence, or semantic meaningfulness, may be achieved through syntactical features (like the use of deictic, anaphoric and cataphoric elements) or through presuppositions and implications connected to world knowledge.

**Cohesion:**

refers to the formal linguistic realization of semantic and pragmatic relations between clauses and sentences in a text (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985, p. 1423). In contrast to coherence, cohesion is concerned with surface features of connectivity.

**Deviation:**

is used to refer to any unit which is not grammatical or is ill-formed, i.e. which does not conform to the ‘rules’ of the language.

**Foregrounding:**

is the psychological effect of deviation. In other words, it is the ‘throwing into relief’ of the linguistic sign against the background of the norms of ordinary language. (Wales, p. 157)

**Linguistic competence:**

is the internalized knowledge that users of a language supposedly have about its systems, which enables them to construct and interpret an infinite number of grammatically correct and meaningful sentences.

**Literary competence:**

is the ability to read a work of literature by bringing into play the necessary presuppositions and implicit understanding of how literary discourse works that tell readers how to read and what to look for.

**Schemata:**

are connected bits of general cultural information based on verbal and non-verbal experience which, although often stereotypical, are continually being ‘updated’. Schemata are crucially important for us to make inferences about what is going on in a text or discourse, to fill in gaps and to make it coherent. (Wales, p. 351)
Content schemata:

prior experience and background knowledge about objects, people and the world at large.

Formal schemata:

knowledge of the formal, rhetorical and organizational structures of different kinds of texts and different genres.

Reader response theory:

a composite of theories that focus on the activity of the reader in the interpretation of a work. All these critical approaches designate reading as an active and creative act of interaction between the reader and text.

Poetentiality:

is “the way in which the latent possibilities for meaning in language can be exploited to poetic effect, alienating the reader from what is familiar so as to realign reality into a different order” (Widdowson. 1992, p. 164).

Summary

This introductory chapter has provided a background for the study, presented its major purpose, research questions and an overview of the dissertation structure and contents. It has defined a few key terms circulating in the dissertation and argues the rationale and significance for conducting the study in the Yemeni EFL context. The next chapter will present a review of the theoretical and research-based literature that is related to the teaching of English poetry to native and EFL, and specifically Arabic-speaking, learners of English.