Chapter – IV

The Pilot Survey

4.0 Introduction

We have seen in the previous chapter the advantages of the oblique method in the teaching of poetry, over traditional methods. The traditional approach treats the text as a corpse for dissection; the analysis, the interpretation and the paraphrasing are mostly done by the teacher and the students are just passive listeners. The oblique method treats the text as a living organism which produces lively off-springs in the form of other language activities which induce greater learner-involvement and meaningful group work.

The major task of this chapter is (1) to review the current syllabus of the undergraduate studies in the University of Madras, (2) to choose a set of poems which exemplified most of the facets of the oblique approach, (3) to describe the samples of the target group of learners and the actual classroom teaching, (4) to record the reaction of the learners to this method of teaching, and also the researcher’s observation, and (5) to evolve a pattern of utilizing this method for a Survey.

4.1 Why Oblique Method

From a very early age, the researcher has been exposed to the traditional lecture method only, barring a few activities around the poem put forth by one or two of his poetry teachers. The method had appeared to be working well till the researcher himself began to teach poetry in the school first and then in the college.
Though the children at the school were prompt in taking down whatever the teacher dictated, and though they passed in the examinations after mugging up and reproducing what was dictated in the class, there was always something missing; a lack of interest on the part of the learners to reciprocate the enthusiasm of the teacher. They were interested in filling the pages of their poetry notebooks, and not in the poem itself.

In his attempt to change the situation, the researcher introduced some of the activities which his poetry teachers adopted, namely depicting some of the scenes in poetry in pictures: e.g., the daffodils as seen by Wordsworth, or dramatizing Matthew Arnold's "Sohrab and Rustum". He even fitted some poems into familiar tunes and made the learners sing them; choral speaking also was adopted. The later two activities could not fetch the required effect as they would disturb the other classes; yet they were done with some restriction on the sound produced; however, the children enjoyed these activities. Though formation of very small groups was not possible, the class could be divided at least into three or four large groups (depending on the seating arrangement), and the team-spirit prevailed. They learnt the poem taught very easily; they could even memorize the poem without much efforts.

At the college level, the absence of enthusiasm of the students in the poetry class was still more significant. The choice of poems and the constraint of the examination were proven hurdles to meaningful poetry teaching. Any activity which the researcher tried to introduce in his poetry-class met with derision at the beginning, though it was not fully opposed. Role-playing could be very easily introduced and the learners had no
inhibitions about this. But that was mighty little, and involved only a few enthusiastic learners; to others it was something not for the examination and therefore a waste.

The researcher's exposure to stylistics during a course at CIEFL and again during the M.Phil Degree Course induced him to adopt a stylistic approach to the teaching of poetry in his language classes. Stylistics could provide some solution to the problem of student apathy; it could make the reader involved in the exploration process and make discoveries for himself. And on the whole, it could be a powerful pedagogical tool in the hands of the teacher. Yet it has its limitations; it ceases to be an effective approach if the learners continue to be passive listeners, as they normally are.

At that time Mario Rinvolucri's *Grammar Games: Cognitive, Affective and Activities for EFL Students* (1984) suggested to the researcher the possibilities of arranging in the class a number of interesting group-activities which demanded active involvement of the learners. *The Inward Ear – Poetry in the language classroom* by Alan Maley and Alan Duff (1989) and *Poem into Poem: Reading and Writing Poem with Students of English* by Alan Maley and Sandra Moulding (1985) also put forth a number of such activities.

Further, the suggestion by the research supervisor to teach Shakespeare's "All the World's a Stage" through picture depiction method kindled the interest of the researcher in oblique method. This interest was further increased by an interview with Mr. Alan Maley, an expert in this field. Finally it was decided to try this approach in the researcher's language classes, through a Pilot Survey.
4.3 The Pilot Survey

4.3.1 The Current Syllabus


4.3.2 The Sample

The I B.Sc Chemistry students of Voorhes College, Vellore, where the researcher is working at present, were chosen, as sample group, as the researcher is teaching this class. The class is 50 in strength. They have joined this course after studying in different types of schools: Tamil medium/English medium schools located in and around Vellore, some urban and some rural. They have not been exposed to any teaching yet in the college.

4.3.3 The Poems

It was decided to teach two prescribed poems, to begin with, adopting the following techniques:

1) Shakespeare’s “All the World’s a Stage” – through picture depiction.

2) Rudyard Kipling’s “If ” –through letter form.

The change of genre involved in these techniques has to be discussed; It is to be noted that this change of genre we practise all the time, e.g. when Shakespeare- plays meant for
staging, are read as if they were to be read like poetry. John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is the result of such a transfer only – from art to poetry.

Further, since students will be interested in drawing pictures, this poem “All the World’s a Stage” is taken first.

As the students know how to write letters, the letter form is introduced to teach “If”.

To add variety in oblique approaches and to sustain the interest of the learners, two unprescribed poems have also been taught: As there is a question in the Examination on paraphrasing an unknown poem (Appendix 14c), learners have found these activities useful.

1) Cloze Dictogloss technique in “Walking Tall” – Alan Maley.

2) Poem Construction using Robin Thurston’s poem for comparison.

These two activities are found in Mario Rinvolucri’s Grammar Games (Rinvolucri 77-82).

4.3.4 The Students’ Response

The researcher has to observe the class carefully and to note down the progress of the different stages as each poem is dealt with. It is planned also to get the opinion of the individual learner at the end of each poem.

4.3.5 The Procedure

It is planned to have two hours together on the first day; and again one hour on the next day, so that each poem will get three hours altogether for group activity, discussions and consolidation.
The details of the procedure and the responses and the observations are given at the end of each Pilot Survey.

4.4 A Description of the Items of the Pilot Survey

4.4.1 Pilot Survey – 1: Picture Depiction Method

Class: I.B.Sc.: Chemistry. Strength 50 (Voorhees College, Vellore)

Poem: “All the World’s A Stage” from their prescribed book of poems (cf 4.3.1) (Appendix –1)

Aim: To learn the poem through picture depiction

Previous knowledge: The poem had been studied already at the school level, but now they have forgotten most of the details. This was revealed to the researcher at the beginning of the class.

Time Required: A two hour session on the first day, and a one hour session on the next day.

Material: As it was the poetry hour all of them had the poetry books with them.

4.4.1.1 Procedure

Stage 1: The researcher read the poem aloud in the class once.

Stage 2: The learners were asked to listen carefully when the poem was read a second time and to find out the central theme of the poem. By asking questions such as “What do you think the poem is about?” and other such questions, the central idea of the poem, “the seven roles enacted by a man in his life-time” was arrived at. Further questions were put: “What is the world compared to?”, “What are the men and women
said to be?" "What are you reminded of by the words 'exits and entrances'?; "Which line/lines reveal(s) most the central idea of the poem?"

**Stage 3:** When the poem was read a third time, the learners were asked to identify and underline the word/words which indicate(s) each of the seven stages. The lists were cross-checked and most of them had underlined the following. (1) the infant (2) the school boy (3) the lover (4) the soldier (5) the justice (6) the pantaloon (7) the second childishness.

**Stage 4:** The learners were asked to read silently the lines describing each stage and understand, in full, the description of each stage, taking into account the details given in the poem and also with the help of the glossary given at the end of the poem.

However certain words and phrases which might cause difficulty in understanding, were explained by the researcher. They were 'mewling and puking', 'whining school boy', 'sighing like furnace', 'seeking bubble reputation/Even in the cannon's mouth', 'capon lined', 'pantaloon', and 'childish treble'.

They were also asked to focus attention on the closing line of the poem and not to lose sight of the effect (pathos) caused by this line on the whole poem in general and on the last stage in particular.

The first 30 minutes were over.

**Stage 5:** The learners were asked if they could give a description of each stage in their own words; most of them said 'yes'. At this stage they were asked if, given sketch
pens and papers, they could draw the picture depicting each stage. Though there was a general disagreement and hesitation, a few hands went up.

The hesitation might have been caused by an under-estimation of their capacity to draw and paint, or they thought it strange to indulge in drawing in a poetry class, or they could not see the relevance of depicting the poem in pictures.

However we must realize that this activity is not new to classroom teaching. The researcher recalls his school days when his poetry teacher, after teaching Wordsworth’s “Daffodils”, asked the boys to sketch the natural scene witnessed by Wordsworth and paint it and bring it to the class. This he gave as homework. The researcher and two or three more brought the pictures (drawn on drawing sheets) the next day. They were shown to the class and a discussion ensued, though not in an orderly way. And one picture which was most appealing to the class was chosen and fixed on the wall.

Other poems like “Sohrab and Rustum” also attracted the students to depict certain interesting scenes in pictures, and they were done by a few students on their own. The poetry class became delightful (at least for a few minutes) whenever a picture was shown to the class. This activity was indulged in only the next day after finishing the poem, and so the boys merely checked if all things they learnt were shown in the picture. This served more for recapitulation than for learning, yet the boys liked it.

Stage 6: Those who volunteered to draw the pictures were brought to the front of the class; about 7 were there; they served as leaders; others were asked to form teams of 7
members, with these 7 as team leaders. Each team chose a convenient place in the classroom. Numbers were allotted to the teams: 1 to 7.

**Stage 7:** Each team was given 7 sheets (Quarter sheets: 18cm x 11cm). A few sets of sketch pens were made available. The teams were asked to discuss and have a mental picture of each of the 7 stages and draw them; they could refer to the poem as often as needed; they could use rough papers during the trials. They could use pencil and rubber if available. They were asked to finish drawing them in 30 minutes and then to reassemble. Each member of the team could choose one or more stages for drawing and the leader must choose the best from each and make a set of pictures of 7 stages.

**Stage 8:** It was interesting to note that each started drawing some figures in the rough papers; very soon they gained confidence. The leader started to draw one and the others who were hesitant and indifferent also became enthusiastic and they also opted to draw at least one each, as per their choice. (They were competing with one another to choose the easiest one; there was a clamour for the schoolboy scene).

The researcher moved about, helping them to overcome hurdles. On the whole the class was silent; any discussion inside the team was done in English only and in a murmuring voice.

**Stage 9:** The class reassembled, the members of the team sat in a group. Each team leader was given one minute (before handing over the drawings) to express in English his team's view on this activity: was it interesting?, was it of any use?, how did
the members co-operate?, was it a waste of time?, and what specific difficulty did they face?

4.4.1.2 The Reports of the Team Leaders

The reports of the 7 team leaders could be summarized as follows:

1) In general the activity was interesting and useful; all the teams reported that some of the abstract ideas could not be portrayed in pictures (e.g. 1. The soldier jealous in honour sudden and quick in quarrel/Seeking the bubble reputation in the cannon’s mouth, 2. The justice full of wise saws and modern instances, 3. The pantaloon’s big manly voice/Turning again towards childish treble, pipes/And whistles in his sound).

2) The teams also remarked that painting failed to retrace the pathos found in the closing line “Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.”

3) The leaders remarked that some stages demanded more than one picture. e.g. The infant mewling and puking requires more than one sketch. This difficulty had been overcome by some teams by drawing a secondary picture (inset) in the corner of the given sheet.

4) In some teams, each member wanted to draw all the 7 pictures and insisted that they should be presented. The leaders allowed them to use their own papers and draw as many pictures as they wanted, and chose the best for each of the 7 Stages.

5) No team reported about any member who had not involved himself in this activity in one way or another.
**Stage 10**: Discussion: Students were instructed to talk only in English, while participating in the discussions. The volunteers fixed on the wall/blackboard the first row of pictures depicting the first stage in the order of the teams: 1 to 7.

The class had a look at these (each team had done its best, though some had failed to embed the poem’s details, and some other had embedded irrelevant and unwanted details such as giving a beautiful look to the nurse and forgetting to portray the infant properly). Whenever the details in one picture differed from the details given in the poem, the members of the other teams raised objection and asked for clarification from the team which had drawn the picture. After a few minutes’ discussion, one or two pictures were selected as carrying almost all the details in the poem.

The pictures of the schoolboy stage were fixed in the same order in a row and a discussion ensued. Some had drawn the school boy as carrying a bag in his hand or around his shoulder; but some had the school bag on the back of the boy, and his back was bent under the load, and this third one was given credit to by the class, while it rejected the first two. In some pictures the inset contained a snail with a sad face. The boy’s unwillingness was shown on his face. But they remarked that it was difficult to portray the shining morning face and the unwillingness together.

The lover’s pictures had a care-laden face: the lover had a number of papers (ballads) stuck to his waist. Some had included the picture of a lady also before the lover – this they said was to show the beauty of the ‘mistress’ eyebrow’! 

Each of the soldier's pictures had an angry face; he was thickly bearded; in an inset he was seen quarreling; in another there was the picture of a cannon; another inset showed him shaking his fist at others ('full of strange oath').

The justice had been invariably and mistakenly portrayed as the judge in the court of law -- a wig, a black gown and a hammer. The teacher explained their mistake He had a round belly. What is 'capon lined'? -- there was no pictorial depiction. In the inset he was seen talking to some people in a proud manner.

The slippered pantaloon had been thoroughly mistaken. They had drawn a picture of a circus clown, there was no picture with slippers (all wearing fancy shoes!). "His youthful hose well saved, a world too wide/For his shrunk shank" had been depicted successfully. Yet the boys had found it difficult to portray his big manly voice turning again toward childish treble.

The second childhood was depicted as a very old man with a walking stick; he was toothless and his eyes were almost blind (wearing thick spectacles/or seen shading his eyes with his palms and struggling to look before him. "Sans taste" was portrayed in the inset: he pushing away a delicious dish

During the above stage of exhibiting the pictures and generating discussions, the teacher mostly played the role of a facilitator. He took care to see that they spoke only in English; he settled the dispute when two teams quarrelled over the correctness of their pictures; he insisted on their going back to the text whenever there was a controversy.
Stage 11: Finally, the researcher expressed his dissatisfaction over the picture of the justice. Some teams promised to draw a different picture at home and bring it to the class the next day.

The next day, during the English hour, the teacher fixed on the board one picture for each stage which he thought to be the best among those drawn by the groups the previous day. The students were asked to sit group-wise as on the previous day with their poetry books kept open and looking at the pictures, they were asked to write the summary of the poem in their notebooks. They were also asked to write any one or two lines of the poem and write two appreciation questions underneath, and also their answers. All these they had to do within 30 minutes.

Each one promptly wrote the essay. They found it difficult to frame appreciation question, but they were asked to consult the other members of the group and do that exercise. They could accomplish it as a team. Each group was asked to select the best essay and the best set of appreciation questions and answers from the members.

During the next 30 minutes each leader read to the class the answer selected by his team. At the end of each reading sufficient time was given to the class to suggest modifications, which if accepted by the teacher, were incorporated in the answers of the individuals.

The essays were found to be of a higher order, written in good sentences; they reflected an enriched language with most of the sentences embedded with some words/phrases culled out from the text. The content part revealed their familiarity with
the figure in each stage; the colourfulness and minuteness of details put in the painting had been transferred to this mode of description of each stage. Their concluding lines carried the pathos revealed in the last line of the poem which, otherwise, would have been missed if it had been taught in the lecture method (See Appendix 15b). The appreciation questions and answers also were found to be comprehensive and accurate.

4.4.1.4 A Note on the Individual’s Experience

At the end of this activity, the individuals were asked to jot down in a few sentences a note on this experience of depicting a poetical scene in a picture and then writing down the substance of the poem. This gives a very valuable insight to the researcher into this method of teaching. Some of their remarks are:

- It is new and thrilling, drawing pictures in the class has always been forbidden by teachers; it is a welcome change.

- My drawing habit is put into a good use.

- The picture of each stage stands so vividly before my mind that I’ll never forget its details.

- The details which I embedded in my picture, cannot be forgotten by me.

- Some poetical lines which I converted into the picture will be fresh in my mind; now only I understand the meaning of “Pantaloon”.

- Since the method is very different, it made me concentrate.

- This helped me to realize the transient nature of man.

- I begin to recall how I could have been in my mother’s arms as a child.

- It has made me think spiritually about man’s life.
(The last three remarks show that the students have started to relate the
given poem to themselves and to their personal life. This shows that real teaching-
learning has taken place. After all, a poem delights first and teaches next, without seeking to
teach). There were a few negative remarks also; ‘It is a waste of time’, ‘It looks childish’,
‘We do not draw pictures in the examination’ and others. The researcher talked to each
of them separately and they were convinced of the usefulness of this activity.

4.4.1.5 Inferences

The above remarks indicate that our students welcome change. Anything
different from the usual method of teaching is welcome to them. They also talk of the
effectiveness of this method. The researcher has seen poetry teachers of Tamil singing the
poetical lines, and then explaining them to the class. The tune and the rhythm make the
lines linger in the learners’ minds. Some English teachers (including the researcher) also
fit the poem into some familiar tunes and make that class sing together. It has its own
effect and there is no doubt about it; in a similar way a poem taught through pictures
drawn by the students themselves will be/must be effective (Appendix 15a).

The researcher’s personal experience is that apart from enabling the learner
to learn the poem well, this method has endeared him to his students; students look
forward to the next poetry class. The researcher feels strongly that attempts should be
made to teach a few more of the prescribed poems in this method or similar methods in
which lecturing is pushed to a place of secondary importance. Old methods are good, but
anything new can be better. “At any rate, this is true that whatever relation we may keep
with the great masters of the past, our present business is to go beyond and not to repeat them, [...]” (Aurobindo 8).

4.4.1.6 Merits

The above method is new and is welcome to the learners. It puts forth a challenge and does not allow the learners to be passive in the class; it is activity packed; it kindles the imagination and enables the learners to give expressions to their imagination; team spirit is promoted; what is learnt remains in the mind for a longer time.

4.4.1.7 Demerits

The only demerit, observed by the researcher, is that certain abstract ideas cannot be represented in a picture.

4.4.1.8 Conclusion

On the whole, this is found an effective method of teaching. As Ronald Bottrall points out, “One of the principal difficulties in approaching a poem is that it consists of words, and often words in an unusual order, [...] to the foreigner they are bugbears which have to be hunted down in the dictionary [...] they too easily get bogged down in meanings” (39). Our new method may help the learner to overcome this hurdle.
4.4.2 Pilot Survey 2 – Letter Form Technique

Class: I B. Sc (Chemistry): Strength: 45

Poem: “If” – Rudyard Kipling (Appendix-2)

Method: Turning the poem into a letter – and comparing this letter with Hazlitt’s “Letter to his Son”. (Appendix-3)

Previous Knowledge: The class had already been taught in the composition classes how to write a private letter, given a situation.

Aims: The aims of these activities are as follows:

1) To appreciate poetry which leads to the learning the language.
2) To improve the skill in letter writing.
3) To promote confidence in the minds of the learners through group activity.
4) To give opportunities to speak and to discuss

Materials required:

1) This prescribed poem is found in their poetry text, Harmony.
2) 45 copies of the prose piece “Letter to his Son” by Hazlitt.

Time required: This activity is spread over 2 sessions – a two hour session on the first day and a one hour session on the following day

4.4.2.1 Procedure

Stage 1: At first the students were properly motivated: Literature is for life; it is to prepare them to face real life and to solve practical problems. As literature is language, learning literate will help them to learn language, and through language to communicate.
After asking the learners to follow the poem in their books, the teacher read the poem aloud. When he read it a second time, they were asked to find what the poem was about. By asking a few questions and by drawing their attention to the concluding words of the poem "you'll be a Man, my son!", the teacher enabled the class to establish the following ideas:

What Kipling had in his mind, has been communicated to the world through the poem "If" We the readers of this poem have been influenced by what the poet wants to say though everything seems to have been addressed to his son. It has been a delight to read his poem, though what he has written is a set of instructions which if given in a matter-of-fact way would have been very dull to read.

If we are asked to relate this to someone and if we do it in a prosaic way (as the elderly people do when they indulge in giving advice) no one will like to listen to it, and we cannot write it in an effective way also, if we attempt to write, as it is a set of instructions.

Let us imagine a situation in which Kipling's ideas, which we have delightfully taken possession of, can be conveyed to someone in a pleasurable way

[Each one suggested one mode of conveying: 1) rewriting the poem, 2) enlist the instructions, 3) rewriting the poem in the form of a dialogue, 4) rewriting the poem in the form of a letter written by Kipling to his son... These are some of the suggestions given by the class].
Stage 2: Now the class chose to rewrite the poem in the form of a letter. Further suggestions emerged: usually parents write to their children when they are studying at school, especially when they leave home and join the boarding school. So the class decided like this: each has to think of himself as a parent whose son has joined the boarding school just a few days ago. In this situation both the parent and the son will be happy to write letters and to receive letters.

Stage 3: Now the poem was read a third time by one of the students. The class was asked to guess the meanings of 'Triumph and Disaster', impostors', 'knaves', pitch and toss' and 'the unforgiving minute'. Whenever they struggled, the teacher helped them. Finally, the class was asked to read the poem silently and to get ready to rewrite this in the form of a letter.

Stage 4: A short discussion enabled them to recollect the format of the private letter. They were asked to use real names of places to give a touch of reality to their letters.

Stage 5: The learners were urged to imagine a situation in which the writing of this letter was necessitated: e.g. illness of the parent and the likelihood of his death, complaints received by the parent from the headmaster of the school, letter received by the parent from the son saying that the atmosphere at school did not suit him...... Accordingly a few openings of the letter were suggested. Each student was asked to write a letter to his imaginary son studying in a far off school.

(The above discussions took 30 minutes and the remaining 30 minutes were given to write the letter). In an informal way of writing, each prepared his 'son' to become
interested in what was going to follow, namely, a set of instructions. The researcher enabled them individually to overcome difficulties in the opening and the closing parts of their letters.

**Stage 6:** At the beginning of the next hour, one volunteer was asked to read his letter to the class. The class pointed out the differences (in ideas) between his letter and the poem. Another volunteer was asked to read his letter. This time the discussion was on the format of his letter.

The researcher gave some comments in a general way.

**Stage 7:** Now the class was asked to reassemble in groups of 4. In the next 30 minutes each of the four members should read his letter to the other three, and make corrections wherever necessary, by going back to the text again and again. Now in each team, the letters of four members would have been read and listened to, and they would be thorough with the content, put in a variety of ways. Then the leader of the team prepared a fair draft of the letter.

**Stage 8:** Now the attention of the entire class was focused on the teacher. During the next 30 minutes the class listened as the team leaders read the fair drafts one by one. When each one finished reading, the other teams pointed out the similarities and dissimilarities between the letter read and the poem. As all the 12 leaders could not finish reading the letter, they had to stop with the first six.

[It is very astonishing to note that the learners could reproduce the poet’s thoughts with the same force and effect with which the poet had written them. The letter form has
given them an opportunity to write effective sentences which had the strength of poetical lines. The format of the letter also had been well learnt. The discussions in the teams have helped them to learn the format well.] (Appendix 15c)

**Stage 9:** The next day, during the English hour, the class assembled as usual. Each one was given the copy of Hazlitt's "Letter to his Son". The researcher read it in the class. Each one was happy to see that he could also write a powerful letter like Hazlitt.

**Stage 10:** Now the class sat in groups of 4 (each group containing the same members as before) and compared the leader's fair draft with Hazlitt's letter. The similarities and the dissimilarities were discussed. The teacher asked each to write in his notebook the content of the poem. As they have used the imperative mood in their letters they can rewrite it in the third person. They were also asked to choose one or two lines of the poem and frame two appreciation questions and their answers. They wrote for some time and then they were asked to read their answers to the other members of the group. Corrections were made wherever necessary.

During the next 30 minutes, the leaders of the second six groups were given chances to read their answers to the class. At the end of each reading, time was given for discussion. Any modification suggested by the class or by the teacher was incorporated in the individuals' answers.

4.4.2.2 A Note on the Learners' Experience

When asked about this activity, most of them said that at the beginning, the poem was uninteresting as it contained only instructions. They began to rewrite it in the letter
form only half heartedly. But once they began to bring the poem into a real life situation, the vague ideas in the poem became concrete and they enjoyed doing this exercise. They were delighted to see that they had written the letter in the same way as Hazlith had written to his son.

4.4.2.3 Merits and Demerits

Their exercise sheets revealed that they were thorough with the content of the poem. They could express the poet's ideas in a powerful way through the medium of the letter; they could write effective and grammatical sentences in a coherent way – in a way in which the reader of the letter will be delighted to read further, and not bored; they were able to begin the letter in a striking way and end the letter in a smooth way; now they were thorough with the format of the letter; now they have gained confidence and could deal with the poem also in such a way as it would help them in the examination. However at the initial stage, the teacher found it difficult to make the learners willingly accept to convert the poem into a letter.

4.4.2.4 Conclusion

This activity has already been thought of and advocated by Don Salter (see item 5 of the list of activities in 3.4). The learners who are accustomed to taking down notes, express difficulty when they are asked to do some real work. However they see the real meaning of their work, once they plunge into it
4.4.3 Pilot Survey – 3: Cloze Dictogloss Technique

Class: I B.Sc (chemistry): Strength 50

Method adopted: Cloze Dictogloss

Poem: Walking Tall – Alan Maley

Time required: One Session of two hours.

Aim:

The poem was new to the class. The Cloze Dictogloss technique was adopted with the aim of appreciation of the poem which led to the learning of specified grammatical structure useful in communication. Here we enabled the student to appreciate the poem by making him reconstruct the poem; he did so with the help of the keywords he noted down after listening to the teacher who read the poem once only and with the help of the cloze version supplied to each.

In the poem “Walking Tall” the learner should be able to visualize the contrast between simple present and simple past as he reconstructed the poem.

Materials required:

1) 45 copies of the poem. (Appendix-4)

2) 15 copies of the cloze version containing verbs only. (Appendix-4a)

3) 15 copies of the cloze version containing nouns and pronouns only. (Appendix-4b)

4) 15 copies of the cloze version containing other words in the poem. (Appendix-4c)

In the cloze version containing verbs only, the position of each verb in a particular line is to be seen clearly; in the cloze version containing nouns and pronouns only, the position
of every noun/pronoun in a particular line can be seen clearly; and in the cloze version containing the other words, the position of each word in a particular line can be seen clearly. The punctuation marks are also given.

4.4.3.1 Procedure

Stage 1: At first the students were motivated: Literature, especially poetry, is the best form of language used by the best type of people. We have come to class to learn the language, and its best form can be learnt by becoming familiar with the words and structures used by the poets. In poems, the structures are backed by the full weight of the message and this enables us to learn the structures easily and in a delightful way. As an attempt to become familiar with the words and structures of the poem, we will do this exercise:

(Here the researcher does not talk of any specific grammatical structure; the learner should become aware of it as he comes in contact with the poem.)

Stage 2: The researcher told the students that he was going to read to them a short poem. They should note down all the keywords they caught as they listened. It was explained to them how important it was to listen closely, or they would have to experience the blankness of not having listened well. As they listened, they had to grasp the gist of the poem and also remember the important words that conveyed the message.

(The poem will be read to them once only, (it will be read twice if it is their first exercise). After the reading, their task will be to re-construct the poem as closely and
accurately as possible, given further a specific set of all verbs, all nouns and pronouns, or all other words that figure in the poem. Of course they can do so in a team of 2 or 3.

Stage 3: The poem "Walking Tall" was read aloud. The learners were given a couple of minutes for the writing down of key words. This they did very enthusiastically – except a few who could not go beyond five or six words. They were encouraged by saying that they could do well in a team.

Stage 4: The researcher asked the class what the poem was about. Some answers came up. "growth of a baby", "construction of tall buildings", "the slow or the swift growth of skyscrapers", "modern buildings separate people and endangers togetherness", "a kid's wonder at the sudden growth of a building", "kids want to be grown-ups soon" – these were given as the central idea of the poem.

As they listened to the poem once only, and as the details were still missing, we could not expect any exactness in their statements of the central idea. However at this stage there was a remarkable interaction mostly between the researcher and the learners. Each one was encouraged to say something about the theme of the poem. They were eager to know what could be the exact theme of the poem. The researcher told them that they would get to know the other details if they could reconstruct the poem and that would enable them to arrive at the central idea.

Stage 5 (a): The researcher asked the class if they could reconstruct the poem if all the verbs in the poem, all the nouns and pronouns in the poem, or all the other words in the poem were given: some said they would do if the verbs were given; some wished to
The researcher divided the class into three groups according to their choices. Some did not opt for anything; they were encouraged to join any of the above groups. By some adjustment the class was made into 3 teams of 15 each. The members of each team were asked to sit together.

Copies of the Cloze version chosen by each team were given. The members of each team should interact within the group, discuss and arrive at the central theme of the poem in the process of their attempt to reconstruct the poem. They had to “marry” the key words they had already written with the Cloze version chosen. Many more words would come to mind in doing this.

Stage 5(b): As “Cloze Dictogloss” was done for the first time, the rule on reading the text once only was broken and a second reading was given with the Cloze versions they had chosen before them. Now they were actually in a position to reconstruct the poem.

The 15 students in each team discussed, asked questions to one another like “how does the poem begin?”, “What words we have in the list of key words and what words in the Cloze version combine to form the first line and then the second line of the poem?”, “What is said about the kids?”. … “Is there any word after the word ‘Above’ in the 7th line?”, “Why and how does that one word alone form a line?”, “Why the 9th line is within brackets?”, “‘There we were’ and ‘And there we remain’ – why this contrast between two tenses?”, “What does the poet say in the concluding three lines?” – These were some of the questions asked in the team and heard by the researcher as he went round. A leader
chosen by them noted down the words suggested by the members to fill the gaps in the Cloze version. Some protested about the inclusion of a particular word and there was a debate on it.

The researcher, as he moved about, observed that 15 was too big a group; the interaction was somewhat noisy and not fruitful; they found it difficult to make any progress towards reconstructing the lines. To the great relief of the researcher, it was seen that slowly the team of 15 broke into smaller sub-groups of 2 or 3 in each and they started working. It brought about the real effect; some opted to work independently, and though this lacked interaction, the efforts were encouraged. However each individual or each leader of a small group was urged to compare his version with the others’ (The researcher feels that it will be good that each individual in a group of 15, does his own reconstruction first, and then brings it to the team for discussion and improvement or modification)

Stage 6: Now the version constructed by each group was shown to all the members of that group. The three teams were now allowed to mingle. One from each group came out and those three formed a new group; similarly they were regrouped. Each group of 3 had in the hands of its members the 3 versions which they could compare, modify and improve.

Stage 7: After a few minutes, the class was asked to reassemble. One volunteer came forward to write his version (improved and perfected at the previous stage) on the board. After he had finished writing, the class was asked to suggest to him any correction needed, with proper explanation. In this way minor mistakes like a wrong word-order, or
a wrong punctuation mark could be rectified. The Clozed version in each one's hand with which he was well versed would enable him to point out these errors.

Still there might be a wrong word used, or a gap not filled, or a punctuation mark not included, there might be mixing of lines. These errors got rectified at Stage 8:

**Stage 8:** Each one was given a copy of the poem “Walking Tall” Each one was asked to assess his level of success. One volunteer compared this printed version with the version on the board and pointed out (underlined) the mistakes on the board. The class was delighted to see that there were only 8 mistakes: 2 words in wrong places in a line, 2 words put at the ends of the wrong lines and 4 punctuation errors.

On the whole there was delight and also a sense of achievement in the heart of each student. They could reconstruct a poem! They could touch and feel the words and structures of the language used by the best people. They were the budding poets who could understand the hardship the poet would have endured in making this poem.

**Stage 9:** The last few minutes of the period were spent in questioning. The researcher questioned the class on the subject matter of the poem, and urged the students to answer his question in the light of the discussion they had in each team. It was evident that given some time, they would easily write a page on the content of the poem, using as many textual words as possible, for each of these textual words had been handled by them just recently.

The researcher asked the class what tense has been used in this poem. Some said “present”. Some said “past”: Others said “both”. Lines 1 to 4 contain the simple present
tense indicating a habitual occurrence; lines 5 to 12 contain the simple past tense indicating past events (the poet’s anguish and his feeling of fulfilment), lines 13 to 15 contain the present tense indicating the continuity of the past action in the present time.

Here the poet has introduced a contrast between the simple present and simple past. This contrast has been brought about in such a natural way that the learners did not feel any hitch in understanding the poem. They took this for granted; and that is the effect of poetry. They became aware of the existence of these two tenses only after a delightful appreciation of the poem, the learners said.

The learners began to understand the uses of these two tenses. They learnt it without much effort, unlike in the grammar class.

4.4.3.2 A Note on the Learners’ Experience

The researcher asked the class what they thought about this Cloze Dictogloss technique. Most of them said that it was an easy and delightful method of learning; yet there were hurdles to overcome and it was a challenge to them.

4.4.3.3 Merits and Demerits

The researcher feels that on the whole it was a fruitful exercise; we teach a grammatical structure without the learner’s knowledge of the fact that he is taught grammar. This removes the boredom and dullness they always associate with grammar classes.
**Challenge level:** There is a high level of challenge in asking the learner to reconstruct the poem by ‘marrying’ the keywords with the Cloze version chosen. It is a challenge indeed to all of them including the clever students. The challenge level is lowered a little when we ask him to interact in a group and perfect his version; but this lowering of the level of challenge is unavoidable. Further it is fruitful because it makes him enter into a discussion among his peers. It makes him talk; he learns the context of the poem thoroughly.

The challenge level is lowered further when he is allowed to sit in discussion with two other learners belonging to the other two groups having two other Cloze versions. This activity is, of course, needed at least for the slow learners; and to him only is it a challenging activity.

The last chance to perfect his version was given when the poem was written on the board by a volunteer and left open for modification. A majority should have succeeded by this time. Yet this activity ended with the final version of the poem, but with 8 mistakes. We have no other alternative except to attribute this to the newness of this technique.

4.4.3.4 Conclusion

It is heartening to note that the learners became familiar with the content of the poem; they enjoyed doing this exercise; a grammatical structure has been taught in a covert way. Communication has been promoted.
4.4.4 Pilot Survey-4: Poem Construction Technique

Class: B.Sc (chemistry) Strength: 45

Method: Construction of poetical lines with the given words.

Poem for comparison: Robin Thurston: Collected Speeches of P Arthur Truscott Travelling by Rail between Vladivostok and Grand Rapid Falls. (Appendix 5).

Aim: Learners gain confidence in reading/writing poetry and thereby attain confidence in learning the language.

Nature of the poem chosen: This poem is not known to the learners. The researcher knows how the poet has written this poem observing the following restrictions: He took some chance verbs, nouns, prepositions, articles and conjunctions, the verbs in the present, past and perfect tense forms; the nouns in the singular and plural forms. He wrote the poem using only the words found in the list. His sentences included some of the words given or all of them. The learners are given the same list of words.

Time required: One session of two hours.

Study materials:

(i) the list of words written on the black board

(ii) the poem for comparison (45 copies)

List of words:

we/us/our face/s/d the to
enemy/ies see/saw/seen to an
and have/has it
work/s/ed of the
4.4.4.1 Procedure:

**Stage 1:** The learners were motivated adequately. They were told that they were going to take up a group activity.

**Stage 2:** The list of words described above was written on the blackboard and each one was asked to copy the words in a sheet of paper.

**Stage 3:** They were asked to write as many sentences as they could, working in pairs and using only the words given above. Their sentences might include some of the words given or all of them.

They wrote very short sentences at first and then seeing the scope of writing longer sentences, they wrote some sentences involving almost all the words. A discussion evolved in each group before they could write each sentence.

They wrote for some 10 minutes.

**Stage 4:** Now the pairs were put together in fours; each pair had to read their sentences to the other pair. Again they discussed and added more sentences to the list or they set right the sentences which were wrong.

**Stage 5:** Now the fours were put together in eights, they compared their sentences; some sentences were rejected; some more sentences were added to the final list in each group.
Stage 6: The class reassembled. Each leader of the groups of eight read the sentences to the class. Some of the sentences were unacceptable because they did not follow strictly the grammatical rules. The researcher helped them to understand that grammatical rules could be violated if those sentences were to form a part of a poem. The learners marveled at some of the sentence written by some groups.

Stage 7: Now each learner was given a copy of the poem written by Robin Thurston. The researcher read the poem to the class and told them that the poet has followed the same method as they had followed: He has written some lines which do not strictly follow the grammatical rules; for example.

(i) We have faced the enemy work and it's a have.
(ii) We have faced the work of HAVE and it's the enemy.

The learners were thrilled to note that they had also written sentences like Robin Thurston, and their set of sentences could also be rightly called a poem. Thus the learners gained confidence through this activity.

4.4.4.2 Learners' Remarks

At the end of the session, the learners were asked to express their opinions on this activity. Almost all said that it was a useful activity; it kindled their imagination, increased their language skills, and also gave them an opportunity to work in groups. They welcomed such thought-provoking and confidence-inducing activities in the English classes.
4.4.3 **Merits and Demerits**

Apart from achieving confidence in learning the language in general, the learners had been constantly exposed to the uses of simple present and present perfect tenses involved in these lines.

4.4.4 **Conclusion**

By way of conclusion we can say that this activity creates opportunities for informal collaborative writing advocated by Don Salter (see 3.5).

4.5 **Summary**

The teaching of these four poems through the oblique method had been a thrilling experience both to the learners and the teacher. Though there were hurdles and hardship at the beginning, they could be overcome, once the learners were properly motivated. Learning took place, and there is no denial of it either from the learners' side or from the teacher's side. The poems have been used not only for appreciation but also for learning communication skills.

4.6 **A pattern for a Survey**

After successfully completing the Pilot Survey, it was decided to evolve a pattern of utilizing this method for a Survey. It is necessary to test whether this method will prove to be useful to a new/different set/sets of learners belonging to the same tertiary level. The following are to be noted
1) The Survey must have a pattern.

2) Though the approach is successful so far, it will be useful to give a Pre-test and a Post-test by way of additional verification of progress.

3) Exposure should be for a longer period.

4) There should be a range of all the possible techniques – at least those which can be adopted in our classroom atmosphere.

5) It should also include an observer (other than the researcher) who will be following a prescribed parameter for his observation

4.7 Conclusion

The Pilot Survey was found effective, and it encouraged the researcher to take up the Survey with more confidence. Chapter V describes the Survey.