



Robert Frost's "Home Burial": A Material for Undergraduate Level EFL Class

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Abstract

This is an attempt to bring out English grammatical items from an authentic literary text for the purpose of teaching language through literature in undergraduate level EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes. The text explored here is "Home Burial", a dramatic poem in a rural setting by the famous American poet Robert Frost. The characters in this poem use simple colloquial language in their speech. Different features of this poem are utilised for teaching the basic four skills of English language to the students. Items like guessing word meaning from context, completing sentences, answering questions, changing narrative style, summarising, pronunciation practice, writing paragraph, writing dialogue, role-playing, regularising deviations can be used for developing listening, speaking, reading and writing skills of the learners. This attempt shows "Home Burial" in particular and poetry in general to be a potential source of grammatical items exploitable in EFL classes. The potentiality of this poem may further be explored in future studies.

Keywords: poem, language skills, teaching, undergraduate level

1. Introduction

Literature is primarily a "specialized mode of language" (Abrams, 1999, p. 102). This specialised mode is evident in the poems of Robert Frost (1874-1963). According to Gerber (2017), he is much admired for his portrayal of the rural life of New England, his use of American colloquial speech, and his realistic verse portraying common man in practical situations. The poem "Home Burial" (1914) is a typical Frost creation that depicts a rural couple using colloquial language in a real-life critical situation. It can be selected as a material for using at undergraduate level EFL classes for various reasons. Firstly, this poem can be utilised for developing the four basic skills of undergraduate level EFL learners. Secondly, the learners do not need much briefing on poetic metalanguage that refers to "any technical language which describes the properties of language" (Cuddon, 1999, p. 506). Thirdly, it is a dramatic poem that can be exploited as a one-act play and be performed on stage by the learners. Such dramatisation of the poem may invite the attention of the learners and make the teaching-learning activities interesting. Finally, the conflict that the poem shows has something universal in it and is more or less familiar to all the undergraduate level language learners irrespective of their country, religion and culture.

2. Literature Review

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Ogden (1997) has dealt with “The Silken Tent,” “Home Burial,” and “I Could Give All to Time.” He has shown his interest in the effects of the sounds and meanings of the words and the sentences used by Frost in these poems and tried to find out how these effects are created by the use of language. Regarding “Home Burial”, he says that it is “one of the most successful efforts in American poetry to capture in verse the sound and feeling of people talking to one another” (p. 627). He also says, “A major part of the poet’s attempt to write dialogue in poetry involves the effort to capture in the action of the language itself the living sound and experience of speech” (p. 627). The phrase “to gain time” used in line no. 10 seems most interesting and telling to him. He has also shown how the words “mounting” and “cowered” used in line no. 11 give sexual implications, how the word “place” used in line no. 13 creates a sense of the way the couple have individually taken an immobile “place” in the way of understanding each other. The entire discussion is very much helpful in getting a new insight into the poem and in understanding the poem better. However, the linguistic items we are searching for are not discussed in this study.

Sanders (2003) considers *North of Boston*, the collection that includes “Home Burial”, to be the first book to reveal Frost’s full dramatic power and moral awareness. He says, “It was also the first to explore the culture of rural New England in which these poetic powers had grown to maturity” (p. 70). While talking about the language of Frost’s poems, he says, “Frost puts grammar and logic aside for the moment to de-familiarize the written sentence” (p. 72). Sanders likens Frost to Wordsworth for his demand of “a respect and an authority for the language of ordinary people from which poets, he felt, had too often set poetry apart” (p. 73).

Phelan (2004) has given a response to Charles Altieri’s challenge to contemporary ethical criticism of Wayne C. Booth and Martha Nussbaum. Altieri advocated the expansion of the area of ethical criticism beyond narrative to lyric. In response to Altieri’s challenge, Phelan has further developed “a rhetorical approach to ethics” (p. 628) and taken the help of “Home Burial” to advance his opinions. Phelan considers “Home Burial” to be “a powerful text” that demands the readers to be “worthy of it” (p. 629).

Analytical works on the poems of Robert Frost are numerous. But works on the exploitation of his poems for language teaching purpose seem inadequate.

3. Home Burial: Linguistic Analyses

The poem is a blank verse or an unrhymed poem of 120 lines composed in iambic pentameter. That means, each line of the poem has ten syllables that form five meters where an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable. The entire poem is the dramatisation of a conflict between a wife and a husband who are opposite to each other in their attitude to and perception of life. The cause of the conflict between them is the wife’s inability to understand how a father can dig the grave of his first born with his own hand. She is a bit frenzied either genetically or from the shocks she has received from the aforesaid death. On the other hand, her husband is pretty cool having a tendency to be sarcastic at times. So, on an unidentified day they engage themselves in a sudden debate in which the wife accuses the husband of his too practical activities done on the day of their baby’s burial. The husband tries to clarify his position to her but cannot be diplomatic enough to tackle his wife. The poem ends with Frostian unresolvedness suggesting the end or “burial” of their conjugal life. The real life flavour of the poem has made it a good read. A selection of the text of the poem is given below:

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs
Before she saw him. She was starting down,
Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.
She took a doubtful step and then undid it

Amy! There's someone coming down the road!" 115

"You—oh, you think the talk is all. I must go—
Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you—"

"If—you—do!" She was opening the door wider.
"Where do you mean to go? First tell me that.
I'll follow and bring you back by force. I *will!*—" 120

(Frost, 1915 pp. 43-49; see also; Frost, 1914, 1949, and Hamilton, 1973)

4. Exploitability of the Poem

The poem is a highly suitable one to be used in an undergraduate level EFL class because it is exploitable in different ways and for different purposes. Some of the ways of exploiting the poem are illustrated below:

4.1. Brainstorming

The intended EFL class may be started with a brain storming session. Keeping the theme of the poem in mind, "Communication Gap" may be selected as the topic for this session. The learners may be asked to think for a minute about the definition of communication gap. Then the teacher can throw the question, "What is communication gap?" and elicit the answers and give necessary feedback. The answers provided by the learners are supposed to give a sense of authorship to them and ensure greater involvement of the learners with the topic. After that the teacher may talk about the communication gap to be found between the husband and the wife in the poem.

4.2. Speech identification

Then the learners may be provided with the text of the poem and an idea about the identity of the characters (Amy and her husband) to be found in it. Then they may be asked to identify the speeches uttered by the characters and mark them whether they are Amy's or her husband's. It will also be helpful to involve the students with the topic.

4.3. Guessing meaning from context

In order to enrich the reading skill of the learners, they can be asked to skim through the poem individually. Then, for testing the level of their understanding, they can be asked to write the contextual meaning of some words from the poem. Contextual meaning is "the meaning a linguistic item has in context, for example the meaning a word has within a particular sentence, or a sentence has in a particular paragraph" (Richards, Platt, & Weber, 1985, p. 62). They can also be asked to select the possible meaning out of a group of options provided. Examples of such item are given below:

Select the contextual meaning of the word and put a tick mark (✓) at the beginning of your answer:

- a. Undo (present form of 'undid' mentioned at lines 4-5: She took a doubtful step and then undid it / to raise herself and look again.)
 - i. loosen something
 - ii. untie something
 - iii. cancel a previous action

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- b. Mount (base form of 'mounting' mentioned at lines 10-11: He said to gain time: "What is it you see," / Mounting until she cowered under him.)
- to furnish with a horse or other animals for riding
 - to climb
 - to set or place at an elevation
- c. wanted (line 23: I must be wanted to it—that's the reason.)
- habituated
 - usual
 - frequent
- d. mound (lines 30-31: But I understand: it is not the stones, / But the child's mound—')
- a natural elevation of earth
 - a dam
 - a grave
- e. rumbling (lines 85-87: I heard your rumbling voice / Out in the kitchen, and I don't know why, / But I went near to see with my own eyes.)
- a deep, heavy sound
 - taking part in a street fight
 - angry

4.4. Completing sentences

There are a number of incomplete or partially uttered sentences in the poem. The learners can be asked to complete the sentences according to the context. Such exercise is helpful for developing both the reading and writing skills. Examples of incomplete sentences used in the poem are given below:

- "You don't ... (line 20)
- But I understand: it is not the stones, / But the child's mound— (lines 30-31)
- "I'm not, I'm not! ... (line 71)
- How can I make you— (line 117)
- I will!— (line 120)

4.5. Brief-answer questions

The learners may be asked to provide brief answers to some questions. Such questions will further testify their comprehension of the poem. Examples of such questions are given below:

- What is the reason of conflict between the husband and the wife?
- How does Amy differ from her husband?
- Who do you think is correct? Amy or her husband?
- Why, according to Amy, are the minds of friends turned?
- How does the poem end?
- Will Amy's husband follow her and bring her back by force?
- What does the title of the poem suggest?
- What are the subject and the verb of line no. 25 (So small the window frames the whole of it.)?
- What is the antecedent of 'those' mentioned at line no. 29 (We haven't to mind *those*)?
- What do the words 'your spade kept lifting' at line 84 mean? (And I crept down the stairs

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- and up the stairs / To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.)
- xi. What does the 'darkened parlour' at line no. 100 symbolise? (What had how long it takes a birch to rot / To do with what was in the darkened parlour?)

4.6. Changing narrative style

A part of the poem may be selected and the learners may be asked to change the narrative style of the selection from direct to indirect speech. Examples of such exploitable selection are given below:

- i. "What is it—what?" she said.
"Just that I see."
"You don't," she challenged. "Tell me what it is."
- ii. "There you go sneering now!"
"I'm not, I'm not!
You make me angry. I'll come down to you.
God, what a woman! And it's come to this,
A man can't speak of his own child that's dead."
"You can't because you don't know how."
- iii. "There, you have said it all and you feel better.
You won't go now. You're crying. Close the door.
The heart's gone out of it: why keep it up.
Amy! There's someone coming down the road!"
"You—oh, you think the talk is all. I must go—
Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you—"

4.7. Summarising

The learners can also be asked to write a summary of the poem. They can also be asked to enlist the stages of development of this poem so that they can get a holistic picture about the content of the poem.

4.8. Writing paragraph on similar topics

The writing skill of the learners can be developed by asking them to write a paragraph related to the theme of the poem. The title of the paragraph may be "Conflicts in Conjugal Life". It is such a title that may be suitable for undergraduate level language learners. The writing of the paragraph can also be given as a home work if the class hour does not permit.

4.9. Pronunciation practice

The teacher may ask the students to practice both the British and the American pronunciations of a list of words from the poem since many EFL learners have problems in English pronunciation. Hoque (2010) has conducted an extensive study on the problems of Bangladeshi students in English pronunciation. He has concluded that "Bangladeshi learners of English, especially tertiary students, have manifold constraints when they go to produce English sound patterns. They are ignorant of the English pronunciation system, ... they lack the proper guidelines on English pronunciation" (p. 219). As a part of addressing these problems, the following words selected from the poem may be chosen for pronunciation practice:

Word	British Pronunciation (in IPA)	American Pronunciation (in IPA)
Birch	/bɜ:tʃ/	/bɜ:rtʃ/
Bottom	/'bɒtəm/	/'bɑ:təm/
Burial (Bury)	/'berɪəl/ /'beri/	/'berɪəl/ /'beri/
Door	/dɔ:(r)/	/dɔ:r/
Evil	/'i:vəl/, /'i:vɪl/	/'i:vəl/, /'i:vɪl/
Go	/gəʊ/	/goʊ/
Gone	/gɒn/	/gɔ:n/
God	/gɒd/	/gɑ:d/
Heard (Hear)	/hɜ:d/ /hɪə(r)/	/hɜ:rd/ /hɪr/
Home	/həʊm/	/hoʊm/
House (Houses)	/haʊs/ /'haʊzɪz/	/haʊs/ /'haʊzɪz/
How	/haʊ/	/haʊ/
Little	/'lɪtl/	/'lɪtl/
Mound	/maʊnd/	/maʊnd/
Murmured (Murmur)	/'mɜ:məd/ /'mɜ:mə(r)/	/'mɜ:rmərd/ /'mɜ:rmər/
Now	/naʊ/	/naʊ/
Parlour	/'pɑ:lə(r)/	/'pɑ:rlər/
People	/'pi:pl/	/'pi:pl/
Sneering (Sneer)	/'sniəriŋ/ /'sniə(r)/	/'sniəriŋ/ /'snɪr/
Somewhere (Somehow)	/'sʌmwɛə(r)/ /'sʌmhaʊ/	/'sʌmwer/ /'sʌmhaʊ/
Talk	/tɔ:k/	/tɔ:k/
Turned (Turn)	/tɜ:nd/ /tɜ:n/	/tɜ:rnd/ /tɜ:rn/
What (When) (Which)	/wɒt/ /wen/ /wɪtʃ/	/wɑ:t/ /wʌt/ /wen/ /wɪtʃ/
Where (Why) (Who) (Whom)	/weə(r)/ /waɪ/ /hu:/ /hu:m/	/wer/ /waɪ/ /hu:/ /hu:m/
Woman (Women)	/'wʊmən/ /'wɪmɪn/	/'wʊmən/ /'wɪmɪn/
Wonder	/'wʌndə(r)/	/'wʌndər/

Table 1: Words and Their IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) Transcriptions³

³ For the IPA transcriptions of the words, we have consulted the online edition of Oxford Learner's Dictionaries (2017).

The teacher should emphasise on the varieties of English pronunciation so that the learners become aware of the variations. This variation occurs both at national and international levels. For example, the pronunciation of the consonant sound /r/ is very important as it widely varies.

4.10. Role-play

Another suitability of this poem is its exploitability in a role-play session. Role-play is “a learning activity in which you behave in the way somebody else would behave in a particular situation” (Hornby, 2015, p. 1344). It is also defined as “drama-like classroom activities in which students take the ROLES of different participants in a situation and act out what might typically happen in that situation” (Richards et al., 1985, p. 246). The performance of a role is “used as a technique in training ...” (Murray, Bradley, Craigie, & Onions, 1989, p. 41). However, in this session, two learners (preferably a female and a male) may be asked to play the roles of Amy and her husband. They may be guided by the teacher to deliver dialogues using paralinguistic features. Paralinguistic features include “facial expressions, head or eye movements, and gestures, which may add support, emphasis, or particular shades of meaning to what people are saying” (Richards et al., 1985, p. 206). The use of paralinguistic features will impart the flavour of reality to the performance. It will be helpful for the learners to relate the content of the poem to their real-life experience. The students may also be guided to use the narrative parts of the poem as stage directions. The participation in and the enjoyment of the stage performance will shift the learners from conscious learning to subconscious acquisition of language. It will develop the listening skill of the audience and both speaking and listening skills of the performers.

4.11. Dialogue writing

As the poem is mainly based on dialogues, the teacher can exploit this feature in teaching language. He/she can ask the learners to write a dialogue between a husband and a wife on something related to the theme of the poem. He/she may explain to the learners how spoken English varies from written English. He/she can also brief the learners on how to start, continue and conclude small talks and what set of expressions can usually be used for these purposes.

4.12. Utilising deviations

Deviant or unusual use of language is a common feature of poetry. “When using poetry in the classroom, we could therefore exploit the more ‘deviant’ or unusual use of language we find in it as a basis of expanding the student’s language awareness and interpretative abilities” (Lazar, 1993, p.100). The poem “Home Burial” is not devoid of deviations. These deviations are mainly caused by Frost’s use of American colloquial English. The learners may be asked to find out such deviations in the following lines of the poem and to rephrase them in prosaic English:

- i. What is it you see / From up there always—for I want to know.
- ii. The little graveyard where my people are!
- iii. Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight / On the sidehill.
- iv. But I might be taught / I should suppose.
- v. You *couldn't* care!
- vi. I won't have grief so / If I can change it.

5. Conclusion

A language learner will find all-in-one in this poem. He/she will get the prestige and pleasure of reading an authentic text; enjoy a one-act play and find materials for practising all the



basic skills of language. Recitation of the poem using paralinguistic features may develop the speaking skill of the learners. Pronunciation practice and role-play session may prove fruitful for both the speaking skill and the listening skill of the learners. Speech identification, guessing meaning from context, brief-answer questions may be helpful for developing their reading skill. The other items including completing sentences, changing narrative style, summarising, writing paragraph on similar topics, writing dialogues and utilising deviations may be useful for developing their writing skill. So “Home Burial” by Robert Frost can really be a suitable poem to be used in an undergraduate level EFL class. Therefore, this study follows the new trend in teaching language through literature, in which the problem of learners’ boredom of learning grammar traditionally is addressed.

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