

Teaching English Poetry in Rural Undergraduate Classrooms: Challenges and Pedagogical Strategies

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Abstract

This study explores the challenges of teaching English poetry to rural undergraduate students from vernacular-medium backgrounds. Despite the important role of poetry in developing linguistic competence, interpretative skills, critical thinking, and cultural awareness, many students in rural contexts struggle to engage meaningfully with poetic texts. The study adopts a qualitative research design and draws on classroom observations, informal student interactions, and teachers' perspectives to examine the linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical barriers that shape students' responses to English poetry. The findings reveal that unfamiliar vocabulary, figurative language, and cultural distance significantly hinder students' comprehension and confidence. Many learners experience anxiety while reading poems and often hesitate to participate in classroom discussions. The study also identifies the strong influence of examination-oriented learning practices, which encourage memorisation of summaries and guidebook interpretations rather than independent reading and critical engagement. As a result, poetry is frequently perceived as difficult and disconnected from students' lived experiences. The study argues that traditional lecture-based teaching methods are insufficient in such contexts and may further reduce poetry to examination content. It highlights the need for learner-centred and context-sensitive pedagogical strategies, including interactive classroom practices, guided interpretation, and supportive learning environments. The paper concludes that adopting such approaches can make English poetry more accessible, meaningful, and engaging for rural undergraduate learners and offers directions for future research in similar educational settings.

Keywords: rural education, poetry pedagogy, vernacular learners, learner-centred teaching, examination-oriented learning

1. Introduction

English poetry plays a significant role in undergraduate literature classrooms because it contributes to the development of language skills, interpretative ability, emotional intelligence, and cultural awareness. However, teaching poetry in rural undergraduate colleges presents a unique set of challenges, especially when students come from vernacular-medium backgrounds and have limited exposure to English outside the classroom.

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Among different literary genres, poetry is often considered the most challenging for second-language learners. Scholars point out that poetry compresses meaning through figurative language, symbolism, rhythm, and cultural references, making interpretation difficult for students with limited linguistic proficiency. Research indicates that many learners perceive poetry as obscure, abstract, and disconnected from their everyday experiences. As a result, classroom teaching frequently becomes focused on paraphrasing and examination-oriented explanation rather than encouraging personal interpretation and aesthetic appreciation. This situation often hinders students' interest and participation in poetry classes. This study aims to explore the major challenges faced in teaching English poetry to rural undergraduate learners and to examine possible pedagogical strategies that can make poetry more accessible and engaging.

Teaching poetry in rural undergraduate classrooms is further complicated by limited access to learning resources, lack of exposure to spoken English, and the dominance of examination-oriented academic culture. Many students encounter English primarily within the classroom and rarely use it in daily communication. Consequently, poetry, which often demands close reading and interpretative engagement, becomes particularly intimidating for learners. Understanding these classroom realities is essential for developing teaching strategies that are sensitive to the needs of rural learners.

Furthermore, the teaching of poetry in rural colleges is often influenced by institutional constraints such as large class sizes, limited teaching resources, and restricted access to digital learning tools. These factors reduce opportunities for individual attention and interactive classroom practices. In such circumstances, poetry teaching frequently becomes lecture-based and syllabus-driven. Recognising these institutional realities is essential for designing pedagogical approaches that are both practical and sustainable in rural higher education contexts.

Teaching literature in a second-language context has long been recognised as both pedagogically valuable and pedagogically complex. Scholars emphasise that literature offers rich linguistic input and encourages learners to engage with authentic language, multiple meanings, and emotional experiences. At the same time, the interpretative nature of literary texts requires learners to move beyond literal comprehension and develop higher-order thinking skills. For students with limited linguistic exposure, this dual demand can create significant barriers to participation and understanding.

Previous research highlights the importance of reader response and learner engagement in literature classrooms. When students are encouraged to interpret texts actively and relate them to their own experiences, literature becomes more meaningful and accessible. However, in many examination-driven educational systems, literature teaching is often reduced to transmission of fixed interpretations and examination preparation. Such practices may limit students' opportunities to develop independent reading strategies and critical thinking skills.

In rural higher education contexts, these challenges are often intensified by sociolinguistic and institutional factors. Limited access to English-language resources, restricted opportunities for communication in English, and heavy reliance on traditional lecture methods can further reduce

students' confidence in engaging with poetry. Understanding these broader pedagogical concerns is essential for situating the present study within ongoing discussions on literature teaching in second-language classrooms.

2. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate classroom realities and learner experiences in rural undergraduate poetry classrooms. Data for the study were collected through classroom observations, informal student discussions, and teacher interactions. Classroom observations helped in understanding teaching practices and student responses during poetry lessons, while informal discussions provided insights into learners' difficulties, dissatisfaction, attitudes, and experiences. Conversations with teachers offered additional perspectives on pedagogical challenges and classroom realities. The qualitative approach allowed the researcher to explore learners' perceptions and classroom practices in depth and to identify recurring patterns in poetry teaching and learning.

The study was conducted in a rural undergraduate college in West Bengal, where most students come from Bengali-medium educational backgrounds. English functions primarily as an academic subject rather than a language of daily communication. Observations were carried out during regular poetry classes across different semesters, ensuring that the data reflected routine classroom practices rather than experimental interventions. This contextual focus strengthens the relevance of the findings for similar rural higher education settings.

The qualitative nature of the study prioritises depth of understanding over statistical generalisation. The aim is not to produce universal conclusions but to provide a detailed description of classroom realities that may resonate with similar educational contexts. Such context-specific insights can contribute to broader discussions on literature teaching in second-language environments.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, data collection was conducted over an extended period of regular classroom teaching rather than isolated observations. This prolonged engagement enabled the researcher to observe recurring patterns of behaviour and participation across different teaching sessions. Field notes were maintained after each observation to document classroom interactions, teaching strategies, and student responses.

Triangulation of data sources strengthened the reliability of the study. Classroom observations were complemented by informal student conversations and discussions with teachers, allowing the researcher to compare multiple perspectives on the same classroom experiences. This approach helped to minimise researcher bias and ensured a more balanced interpretation of the data.

Ethical considerations were also maintained throughout the research process. Students were informed about the purpose of the observations, and participation in informal discussions was voluntary. No personal identifiers were recorded, and the study focused on general classroom patterns rather than individual performance. Such ethical awareness is particularly important when conducting research in small educational communities.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Linguistic Challenges

The findings of the study indicate that linguistic difficulty is one of the most significant barriers to understanding English poetry among rural undergraduate students. Many learners struggle with unfamiliar vocabulary, complex sentence structures, and the condensed nature of poetic language. Figurative expressions such as metaphors, similes, and symbolism often create confusion, as students tend to search for literal meanings rather than interpretative possibilities.

Classroom observations revealed that students mostly depend on memorised notes and teachers' explanations, which limits their ability to engage with poems independently. This linguistic gap significantly affects both comprehension and classroom participation. Students' dependence on memorised notes often discourages independent reading and reduces opportunities for personal interpretation. Many learners express a preference for simplified explanations and expected answers because they feel insecure about their own interpretations. This reliance on external support prevents students from developing confidence in close reading and critical engagement with poetic texts.

These findings align with broader research on second-language literature teaching, which emphasises the importance of interactive and learner-centred approaches. Studies suggest that when learners are encouraged to share interpretations and participate in collaborative meaning-making, their confidence and motivation increase. In contrast, teacher-dominated classrooms often limit opportunities for active engagement and reduce literature to examination content.

The interconnected nature of linguistic, cultural, and psychological challenges indicates that poetry teaching cannot be improved through isolated interventions. Instead, a comprehensive pedagogical approach is required, one that integrates language support, cultural contextualisation, and supportive classroom interaction. Such an approach recognises poetry as both a linguistic and cultural resource for language learning.

3.2 Cultural Distance

Another major challenge identified in the study is the cultural distance between students and the poetic texts prescribed in the curriculum. Many poems reflect social, historical, and cultural contexts unfamiliar to rural learners. As a result, students often find it difficult to relate the themes and imagery of poems to their own experiences. This lack of cultural connection reduces students' emotional engagement and makes poetry appear distant and irrelevant.

Poetry frequently includes references to historical events, social traditions, and landscapes unfamiliar to rural learners. Without sufficient background knowledge, students may struggle to visualise poetic imagery or understand symbolic meanings. This gap highlights the importance of contextualising poems through relevant explanations and classroom discussion.

3.3 Examination-Oriented Learning

The study also revealed the deep influence of examination-oriented learning on students' engagement with poetry. Many learners approach poems primarily as texts to be memorised for examinations rather than as works to be explored and interpreted. This exam-driven

approach makes students dependent on guidebooks, summaries, and expected answers, which limits creativity and critical thinking in the classroom. As a result, classroom teaching often prioritises examination preparation over interpretative exploration. Teachers may feel pressured to complete the syllabus quickly and provide model answers, leaving limited time for discussion or creative engagement. This situation reinforces passive learning habits and reduces opportunities for active participation.

3.4 Low Classroom Participation

Students often hesitate to participate in poetry discussions due to fear of making mistakes in English. This anxiety reduces classroom interaction and reinforces passive learning habits. Consequently, poetry classes frequently become teacher-centred and lecture-based. This hesitation is often linked to fear of grammatical errors, pronunciation difficulties, and peer judgement. Over time, such anxiety can reduce learners' confidence and limit opportunities for collaborative learning. Encouraging a supportive and inclusive classroom atmosphere is therefore essential for improving participation.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the challenges of teaching poetry in rural undergraduate classrooms are interconnected rather than isolated. Linguistic difficulty, cultural distance, examination pressure, and classroom anxiety interact to shape students' overall learning experience. Addressing only one of these factors may therefore produce limited improvement. A holistic approach that considers linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical dimensions simultaneously is necessary for meaningful change.

4. Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest the need for learner-centred and context-sensitive teaching strategies. Interactive teaching methods, such as group discussions, guided interpretation, and connecting poems to students' local experiences, can improve engagement. Teachers can also simplify complex language, encourage multiple interpretations, and create supportive classroom environments that reduce learner anxiety.

Teachers can gradually introduce student-centred activities such as small-group discussions, peer interpretation, and reflective writing tasks. Using audio recordings, visual aids, and simplified background information can also support comprehension and reduce anxiety. Incorporating students' local experiences and encouraging bilingual discussion at the initial stages may further help learners bridge the gap between familiar contexts and unfamiliar texts.

Teachers may also benefit from professional development opportunities that focus on innovative approaches to literature teaching. Workshops, peer collaboration, and sharing of classroom practices can help teachers experiment with new strategies and adapt them to local contexts. Such initiatives can gradually shift classroom culture from teacher-centred instruction to more participatory learning.

The integration of technology, even at a basic level, can further support poetry teaching. Simple digital tools such as audio recordings, online videos, and presentation slides can help students visualise poetic imagery and understand pronunciation and rhythm. When used thoughtfully, technology can make poetry more engaging and accessible for learners with limited exposure

to English. Such approaches can help transform poetry from an examination-focused subject into an engaging and meaningful learning experience.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical challenges involved in teaching English poetry to rural undergraduate students. The findings show that traditional lecture-based teaching methods and examination-oriented learning practices limit students' engagement and understanding. Adopting learner-centred and context-sensitive strategies can make poetry more accessible and The study emphasises that improving poetry teaching in rural colleges requires both pedagogical flexibility and institutional support. Teacher training programmes, curriculum design, and resource development should recognise the specific needs of rural learners and promote inclusive teaching practices.meaningful.

The study also highlights the importance of recognising the diverse backgrounds and learning needs of rural undergraduate students. Developing inclusive teaching practices can contribute not only to improved academic performance but also to increased confidence and motivation among learners. Strengthening poetry teaching in rural colleges therefore has broader implications for equitable access to quality higher education.Future research may further explore innovative classroom practices and curriculum design that support poetry learning in rural educational contexts.

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