

## FORUM

# The *Pleasure* of Poetry Reading and Second Language Learning: A Response to David Hanauer

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The aim of this article is to argue, in response to David Hanauer, that the approach of task-based instruction, while a useful tool in the language learning classroom, is too narrow a theoretical framework to properly analyse the use of poetry in such a context. It is argued that Hanauer's study contains a methodological error, which is due, in part, to the fact that the definition of a language-based task as an activity focusing on interpreting meaning and solving some sort of communication problem is unable to account for the aesthetic value of poetry.

From the very beginning of David Hanauer's 'The Task of Poetry Reading and Second Language Learning' (2001) the author addresses the question of why we should use poetry in the second language learning classroom. He writes, 'one of the main problems is that there is very little actual empirical data relating to the reading and comprehension of literature within the language classroom' (2001: 295). 'The aim', he continues, 'of the current paper is to address this imbalance by investigating and presenting data relating to one literary reading task—pair-group understanding of a poem in a second language' (ibid: 295). Stylistic research has provided insight into the use of linguistics 'to teach and interpret literature, [but] not to investigate empirically the role literature can play in language learning' (ibid: 296). It is by filling this empirical gap that Hanauer hopes to make a case for the use of poetry in the second language learning classroom. It is the argument of this short essay that while the concept of an empirically substantiated argument for the use of poetry in the second language learning classroom is indeed worthwhile research, Hanauer's paper, though full of valuable information and useful insight, falls short of providing truly 'objective' empirical evidence for the role of poetry in such a context. This is due to a procedural error. One of the consequences of this procedural error is that empirical data relating to the aesthetic value of poetry—which, I would argue, is precisely *the* characteristic that distinguishes poetry from many other forms of discourse—is notably absent.

Building on the work of Peter Skehan (1998), Hanauer begins by defining the concept of the 'task' in the second language learning classroom. He writes that 'meaning is primary; there is some communication problem to solve; there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome' (2001: 297). According to this view the task in the second language learning classroom must contain two essential elements for it to qualify as a task. First, it must deal with communicating in the language studied; that is to say, it must help students in some way to combine signs and sounds in a particular syntax to express some meaning. Second, it must be an 'authentic' discourse. Hanauer claims that poetry fills both these criteria when he states that '[t]he central argument for using poetry reading as a task is that poetry is a natural discourse context that directs the reader's attention to textual features of the poem while staying within a meaning construction framework' (ibid: 298). Having assumed that poetry meets the second criteria of a language learning task as an 'authentic discourse', Hanauer devotes his efforts to providing empirical evidence that the poetry reading task directs 'the reader's attention to textual features of the poem'.

To this end, Hanauer sets up an experiment where he gives 'twenty female college students [ . . . ] in a teacher training college in Israel' a poem by Leonard Cohen, 'Suzanne Takes You Down', to read and discuss. The group of twenty students is divided into ten pairs where their comments are recorded and then classified by Hanauer and a group of research assistants. The classification of the students' comments, provided by Hanauer, is well organized into nine categories that cover 'all the responses of the participants'. He labels them 'noticing, questioning, interpretive hypothesis, re-statement of interpretive hypothesis, counter-statement of interpretive hypothesis, elaborative statement of interpretive hypothesis, integrative interpretive statement, presentation of world knowledge, and general statement' (ibid: 303). It is based upon these categories of responses that Hanauer concludes at the end of his paper:

The results of the current study show that the task of poetry reading is primarily a close reading, meaning construction process. Of the nine categories defined for analyzing the participants' protocols, eight of them are associated with meaning construction and only one category—general statement—is not directly connected with the construction of meaning. Accordingly, 95.94 per cent of all statements made while doing the poetry-reading task were connected to the on-line construction of meaning. (Hanauer 2001: 316)

The problem, however, and this is the principal argument against Hanauer's findings, is that 95.94 per cent of participants' comments were directed at understanding the meaning of the poem 'Suzanne Takes You Down' precisely because the researcher, at the outset, informed the twenty female students that 'the aim of your reading is to understand the poem' (ibid: 300). The

measurement of participants' comments directed at the 'construction of meaning' is not truly objective empirical evidence that the poetry reading is a task in the second language learning classroom because the procedures followed by Hanauer almost guaranteed this sort of result. Hanauer begins with the premise that a language-based task is primarily concerned with meaning. He then distributes the poem to his participants and gives the following instructions: 'In this study, you will read and discuss a poem [ . . . ] Express your thoughts to one another so that your partner will be able to follow your *understanding* of the poem. The *aim* of your reading is to *understand* the poem' (Hanauer 2001: 300, my italics). Afterwards, he then ushers in evidence proving that poetry reading is a task in the second language learning classroom because 95.94 per cent of participants' comments dealt with understanding the poem. In fact, it would be hard to imagine that Hanauer could have obtained any other results based upon the given inputs—which, in turn, renders any conclusive argument based upon such 'empirical' evidence unconvincing.

If Hanauer had not, in fact, instructed the participants that 'the aim' of their reading was 'to understand the poem', I do not believe that the results would be *radically* different from what he presented in his essay; however, they may not be so categorical and they may contain other types of comments surprisingly absent in his study. For example, one might have expected to see at least some occurrence of comments relating to personal preference. Comments such as, 'I like this poem' or 'I think this poem is silly'. Poetry, after all, is meant to please. It is an art form like painting, fiction, or the cinema. While art is very much concerned with meaning, it also must give pleasure—otherwise, the aesthetic difference between a poem and a textbook would be nil. In *Art and Ideas*, William Fleming (1955) writes that the artist 'is one who gives blood transfusions to the cold logic of reality in the world of events, and breathes into disembodied abstract principles the breath of life and the warmth of humanity' (1955: x). I am not suggesting that discussions of poetry in the second language learning classroom should, or might, include *exposés* on the infrequent use of iambic pentameter in modern Anglo-Saxon poetry and the aesthetic value of such a move. I am simply arguing that any comment relating to the *affect* of poetry is surprisingly absent in Hanauer's study. If such comments were allowed the possibility of presenting themselves within the context of Hanauer's investigation, they would not nullify his results—on the contrary, his findings would be more scientifically sound.

Hanauer's study, though, touches on a much deeper issue than the role of the poetry reading in the language learning classroom. The definition of the task in the language learning classroom used by Hanauer as an activity which is both 'authentic' and primordially concerned with 'meaning' seems rather narrow, and the somewhat construed results of Hanauer's investigation might be an indication that the current definition of the language learning task needs to be altered. Is it not conceivable that students discussing the rhyme of a particular stanza of 'Suzanne Takes You Down' are actively and didactically

engaging the phonetic structure of the English language? For example, students might have picked up on the use of the phoneme [ai] in the lines 'you can hear the night go by / you can stay the night beside her'. Students may not name such rhyming so technically; however, they might very well say that they 'like' these particular lines of the poem both because of the meaning they express and the way it is expressed. Furthermore, students discussing why they like or dislike a particular poem are not only using the poem for truly 'authentic' discourse, but would need to construct arguments supporting their particular opinion—thereby engaging, first-hand, in the meaning construction process. Yet these sorts of comments are unfortunately absent from Hanauer's study due to a determination *a priori* of the task in the second language classroom. It seems that the aesthetic aspects of the poetry reading have been stripped away in order to meet the definition of a task in the second language learning classroom as primarily a meaning construction activity.

While I understand the need to predefine what constitutes a task in the second language classroom and what does not, I think this is a good opportunity to note that not all 'authentic' discourses are primarily concerned with meaning, and vice-versa as Cook has recently observed (1995, 2000). While meaning is important in poetry it is not the sole, nor even the primary, objective. If it were, many twentieth century poets would be considered failures (Pound 1971, Mallarmé 1989, or Ashbery 1972) because of the apparent lack of meaning in many of their poems. In researching literature in the second language classroom, I would agree with Hanauer that we need to investigate empirically the role of such discourse in language learning, while, at the same time, making space for its uniqueness.

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