

# EXPLORING CHALLENGES FACED BY GRADE 11 LEARNERS WHEN STUDYING ENGLISH FIRST ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE POETRY

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## Abstract

This article explores the challenges faced by English First Additional Language (FAL) Grade 11 learners when studying poetry. Poetry in South African secondary schools is a compulsory literature genre that is taught in both mother tongue and first additional languages. The literature genres as prescribed by the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) are short stories, poetry, drama and novels. Even though poetry is taught in schools, there are challenges since the learners' performance is generally lower in this genre. This was the case in a study of two secondary schools in Soweto that teach poetry in the subject English FAL. The study was qualitative and collected data through questionnaires, interviews and document analysis. Eighteen learners were sampled, nine from each school, for data collection. The reader-response theory by Rosenblatt which places emphasis on the relationship between the readers and the poems was used as a theoretical lens from which the study was viewed. The findings revealed that the learners struggled while studying poetry. Some challenges could have been as a result of the discrepancies between the CAPS Annual Teaching Plan (ATP) and the Grade 11 poetry anthology. There was less preference for poetry because of the difficulties in the language of poetry. This article concludes with the implications and recommendations that responded to the discrepancies in the CAPS, ATP, and poetry anthology for improved teaching and learning of poetry.

**Keywords:** Poetry; English First Additional Language; Poems; Grade 11; Challenges

## Introduction

Children are socialised through the use of language. Even prior to colonisation, indigenous communities emphasised the use of language to socialise their children through storytelling, proverbs, poetry, riddles, music and dance. Hence, the symbolic and figurative value of words became an important aspect in the lives of the society (Foster, 1994). The symbolic and figurative meaning of stories, poems, proverbs, riddles, chants, music and dance inculcated a way of living in a specific society. In indigenous gatherings and assemblies, people used poetry through singing, dancing and ululations. Muleka (2014) claims that it is the oral element that could be rendered through speaking, reciting or as [is] common in the African context, singing or chanting.

Poetry is a way of communicating a message and expressing feelings by a poet to an audience who could be readers, viewers or listeners (Muleka, 2014). It is a form of communication and a kind of speech that a poet delivers to the audience through writing or speaking. In addition, poetry is a means of connecting our intellect with our emotional lives (Zeilig, 2014) and an expression of emotions that can be used at gatherings to bring comfort, ease and joy to the audience.

Therefore, poetry is one genre that transcends the classroom context in which it is taught and learnt. It can be used at home to pacify an agitated baby, at a funeral to express lament, at a wedding to express love, to commemorate heroes and heroines, and it can be shared between friends and lovers (Malan, 1998).

Poetry and music were powerful expressions of resistance during apartheid in South Africa. For example, Black people used lyrics and music in the mid-sixties to express themselves against the oppression of apartheid. According to Emmett (1976), poetry was connected to Black Consciousness in that it aimed at raising awareness among Black people about the economic and political position in South Africa. Black writers opted to use poetry because it allowed for the expression of political ideas in an implicit if not hidden manner (Emmett, 1976). Hence, the White oppressor often did not comprehend the meaning of the lyrics and poems which were created by the poets and musicians. The vibrant and pulsating chants and songs often expressed the sadness and pain which apartheid inflicted on Black people, contrary to what was interpreted by the Western ear. In addition to being a form of expression, poetry displays musical features such as rhythm, metre, intonation and often even melody, which then makes it tangible and even danceable (Muleka 2014:152-153). According to Muleka (2014, p.150), before the advent of Western education, poetry in Africa was largely oral and almost invariably rendered as songs, chants and declamations.

In South Africa, most children are raised in poetic families because it is often used as a method of socialising children. This is usually noticed when the mother rocks the baby to sleep or when pacifying a crying baby. Those kinds of poems are called imilolozelo in IsiZulu. Imilolozelo are similar to nursery rhymes that a mother uses to make a baby sleep or to soothe an agitated baby (Ntuli 2011, p.19). They are also a means of socialising children into the community, culture and society at large. Using imilolozelo can be compared to the co-constructed process that is a sub-theme of the sociocultural theory that was developed by Vygotsky (Woolfolk, 2014). A co-constructed process is a social interaction where people interact and negotiate verbally to create an understanding or solve a problem (Woolfolk, 2014, p.56). Therefore, in this way, adults use poetry as a way of communicating with children and negotiate with them to stop crying or to solve a problem that is faced by a child.

Learners can read and write poems in a short space of time and use them to express their feelings. Poetry is a genre of literature that uses symbols and figurative language that readers use to discover what the poet is referring to. It expands the creativity of learners and, if integrated with language teaching, can teach grammar and vocabulary to learners (Kirkgöz, 2008, p.94). In schools, poetry is taught in a written format, that is, it is paper-based in the form of poetry anthology books.

Malan (1998:5) explains that poetry is read and performed in different contexts, such as schools, funerals, weddings and other social gatherings. This means that poetry is a way of connecting to other people and their cultures. Furthermore, Malan (1998) says that poetry exposes us to different worlds and cultures and, in that way, we learn about other cultures. Poetry is a way of expanding our experiences of life. People live the experiences of poets from different parts of the world through poems and expand their thoughts, knowledge, and life experiences.

With that being said, the study on which this article is based explored the challenges faced by learners when they studied poetry in Grade 11 English FAL and showed that they were underperforming in poetry.

## **Literature Review**

This section will present a literature review focusing on the title of the study which is exploring challenges faced by Grade 11 learners when studying English First Additional Language poetry. The literature review is divided into two sections which will be discussed below.

## **How Poetry is Taught**

The teaching of poetry is done within the prescription of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). It therefore forms part of the reading and viewing skills of English FAL (Department of Basic Education, 2011, p.17) within the CAPS policy. Three stages are followed when teaching this skill: pre-reading, during reading and post reading. According to the Department of Basic Education (2011, p.10), pre-reading is when teachers teach learners about the text and background information of the text and introduce it to learners. Pre-reading activates associations and previous knowledge that learners have before reading the poem. The during reading stage informs teachers and learners of what they should look out for as they read the text in class and it is when the text is read that meaning is made out of it. During this process, a glossary of terms that learners might find difficult to understand might be included. This will help the learners on how to read at the right pace, expression and the right tone (Department of Basic Education, 2011, p.10). The post reading stage is when the text has been read and learners do a formative assessment task.

The reason why poetry is taught is to develop the language skills of learners. That is why Hopkins (2015, p.35) states that poetry improves learners' reading skills and appreciation of words in secondary education. Therefore, poems introduce learners to new words that improve their vocabulary and knowledge of the English language and contribute to the language development of learners. The new words that they learn in poetry can be used when writing essays and other transactional texts that are written in the English FAL. As Mustakim, Mustapha and Lebar (2018, p.35) say, literature exposes learners to good writing skills. The words that are learnt from poems can also be used by learners when they undertake public speaking and debates that are held at school, day-to-day interactions and situations beyond school. Tuvuzimpundu (2013:2380) confirms that poetry benefits learners in terms of language development, knowledge increase and the perfecting of intelligence.

In teaching, poems that are to be taught have to be selected. All content to be taught is found in the Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs), including the prescribed literature set works (Department of Basic Education, 2011, p.10). This selection of poems by teachers tends to impact on the learners' performance. How poems are taught affects how learners perceive poetry (Linaberger, 2004, p.366). Linaberger (2004) implies that learners are affected when teachers just choose to read poetry to them instead of critically analysing the poem with the learners.

Weaven and Clack (2014, p.147) further say that teachers believe that learners will not need poetry in real life thus excluding it from the English curriculum, and this influences how learners respond to poetry. According to Sigvardsson (2017, p.594), there is a relationship between the students as readers and poetry being read as a text. Sigvardsson (2017) adds that when poetry is taught, the socio-economic backgrounds and ethnicity of the learners are not considered enough and even allowing the students use their experiences when reading poetry is given little attention.

The relevant skills of learning poetry should be taught. According to Kearney (2008), there is an inability by the learners to analyse poetry and he says that if learners cannot master the skills of analysing a poem in school, their inability to understand it will be stuck with them until they reach tertiary education and it will go even further to the teaching of poetry if they choose teaching as a career.

### **Challenges Encountered in Teaching and Learning Poetry**

Some teachers still encounter problems when it comes to teaching poetry. Tuvuzimpundu (2013:2381) attributes the challenge of teaching and learning poetry to the lack of competence of teachers because of their own poor schooling. This means that poorly taught teachers in the genre of poetry lack competence to teach poetry to learners. Tuvuzimpundu (2013) stresses that teachers who never contextualise the content of poetry are not directing the teaching of poetry to the social experiences and environment of the learners and are uncomfortable with the abstractness of poetry and the figures of speech in it. Linaberger (2004, p.366) attests to this by saying that learners as readers of poems are unable to express their opinions, analyse it and even engage in discussions about poems.

Therefore, language barriers faced by the learners cannot be ignored. Evans and Nthulana (2018, p.3) claim that learners in rural areas hardly ever have time to interact in English with those who are innate English speakers and when they do their interactions barely go beyond greetings. Evans and Nthulana (2018) further report that the only opportunity for learners to read English is through textbooks and examination papers and that makes English an unfamiliar language to them. English becomes a new language that learners are not used to speaking at home and that creates a distance between them and the subject content, especially in learning poetry. Roberts (2015, p.105) says that many teachers may find that English is not their students' favourite subject and almost all students seem to shy away from poetry in particular. Emanating from the work by Timothy and Obiekezie (2019, p.4), poetry has several layers of meanings that contribute to confusion and that students never like it because of its duality.

Furthermore, Linaberger (2004, p.366) says that many teachers share misinformed ideas about what makes great poetry. These misinformed ideas are that poems should have a structured form or use words and language that is incomprehensible. This could be based on their experience with their teachers, lecturers, or their background in poetry which was shaped by their culture or home environment. Weaven and Clark (2014, p.147) claim that teachers believe that students will not use poetry in real life. As a result, some educators do not see the need to introduce poetry into their classes because they believe that if learners were exposed to it at home, they would not find it difficult.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study was grounded on the reader-response theory, which is a theoretical framework that emphasises the relationship between the reader and the text. This theoretical framework, was essential to zoom in on how learners respond to poetry. Also, it emphasises a relationship between the reader and the poem as that is how meaning is made in poems Sinha (2009, p.227). In this study, the reader refers to the learner and the text refers to poems.

The purpose of using this theory was to explore how learners interpret and understand poems after being taught poems. Also, to see the learners' responses after reading with comprehension, analysing, and discussing poems in class with the teacher and fellow learners. Furthermore, to see how the learners as readers make meaning of the poems and what challenges this presented to them. Moore (2002) agrees that the reader-response theory is a leading theory when it comes to making meaning. This was done with the background of learners in mind as one of the lenses to look at how they perceive poetry and how that contributes to their challenges when studying poetry.

## **Methodology**

The study followed a qualitative research methodology. According to Creswell (2002, p.46), a qualitative research approach is a research that takes place in an educational setting where the researcher depends on what the participants say. Creswell (2002) states that the researcher asks the participants a wide range of general questions subjectively that are in words or text.

In addition, Creswell (2002) says that the researcher describes the data and analyses it to discover themes. The data collection tools used in the study were questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis. The CAPS, ATP, and the anthology of poetry for Grade 11 English FAL formed part of the document analysis.

## **Research Site**

Two secondary schools in Soweto under the Florida education district that teach English FAL in grade 11 were used as research sites in this study.

The two selected schools, in two neighbouring multicultural townships in Soweto, are comprised of different ethnic groups. They are non-fee-paying schools, as stated by the National Norms and Standards for School Funding (2004, p.8) since they are defined as schools that cater to the poorest 20 percent of learners in the province. Learners from the sampled schools speak different languages such as Setswana, isiZulu, Xitsonga and Tshivenda.

## **Sampling**

Homogeneous purposeful sampling is a sampling method that was adopted in this study. This is a strategy whereby participants and sites are sampled based on their belonging to a certain group with similar characteristics (Creswell, 2002, p.216). The 18 Grade 11 learners who were sampled were not mother-tongue speakers of English.

## **Participants and Selection Criteria**

The selection of participants in this study was not based on any particular criteria such as gender, age, academic performance or the number of years in a grade or phase. The only criterion used in the selection of participants was that learners must be in Grade 11 and be taught poetry in English FAL in the academic year 2020. Importantly, it should be noted that teachers were not sampled for data collection processes. However, their challenges in teaching poetry emerged during the interviews and questionnaires of learners.

## **Data Collection Process and Analysis**

Three data collection instruments were used in this study. Firstly, questionnaires were used to collect data from learners through their writing and the expression of the experiences, perceptions and challenges that they encountered when studying poetry. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were used to investigate learners' challenges when studying poetry and these were audio recorded. Lastly, document analysis was also an instrument that was used and the three documents analysed were: The English FAL CAPS document, the 2020 Grade 11 English FAL ATP, and the anthology of poems textbook that was prescribed for Grade 11.

For the purposes of document analysis, a critical analysis was done to look at what the English FAL CAPS document says about how English FAL poetry should be taught. The analysis also examined the types of questions that are asked in the poetry anthology and the prescribed poetry and the literature content in the ATP.

## **Ethical Considerations**

To ensure that this study was conducted ethically, ethical clearance was obtained from the University attached to this study and the Gauteng Department of Education. Furthermore, approval was obtained from the two public secondary school principals, the school governing bodies, parents and learners. Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary participation in the study. There were no incentives and participants were free to withdraw from the study whenever they desired.

## **Findings**

The following themes emanated from the study: poetry-reading challenges, language barriers, the relevance of African and Western poems, metalanguage, metrophobia, and learners' confidence when reading poems.

The findings also revealed that challenges were encountered by learners in learning poetry as a result of the teachers' practice in teaching poetry, discrepancies in the Further Education and Training Phase English FAL CAPS document, the ATP, and the poetry anthology.

The following are the challenges that learners encountered when studying poetry.

### **Language Barriers**

English being their second language presented a challenge to most of the learners. They found it difficult to understand most of the words that were used in the poems and they considered them to be complex. Failure to understand words that were used in the poems led to the learners experiencing challenges in understanding what the poems said and eventually to failure in answering questions that were set in formal assessment tasks.

Most of the learners who participated in this study preferred other genres of literature to poetry because they found them easier to study. Almost all the learners in Soweto are not native English speakers and their background and upbringing did not align with those depicted by most Western poems. The content of the prescribed African poetry indicated that there was a relationship between their background and the poems because they aligned with the learners' culture and identity, which made the learners resonate with African poems and enabled them to have a better understanding of the meanings of those poems. However, although the participants identified with African poems, they still did not perform well in poetry.

### **Difficulties in Reading and Understanding Poetry**

There seems to be an emergence of reading challenges by the learners of English FAL. Between reading and listening to poems, the study showed that some participants preferred listening to poems while only a few preferred reading the poems themselves. The learners would rather have had someone reading the poems to them. Also, the learners saw poetry as the responsibility of teachers whilst they became the audience. This could be because learners experience reading difficulties as a result of barriers to understanding English as a language and the language that is used in poems.

### **Language Used in Poems is a Barrier**

It was also found that most of the contributory factors to the learners' poor performance in English FAL poetry were not innate. Learners struggled to answer questions in poetry because of the difficult English words. The English language served as a barrier to their understanding of the content of the poems. This resulted in the learners' inability to deal positively with the formal assessment activities because the assessments were administered in English. The learners found it difficult to understand the important literary terms that are used to analyse poems. Also, they failed to understand the figurative language since they could not explain its relevance in poems.

This led to them struggling to answer questions that were based on figures of speech and even to explain their relevance in specific poems. Furthermore, they were unable to differentiate between figures of speech and parts of speech.

### **African Versus Western Poems**

The study revealed that the English FAL learners preferred to learn African poems written in English, that is, poems that were written in African settings and backgrounds. The reasons for their preferences in African poems centred around the themes of culture and identity that they found in African poetry. Furthermore, history, traditions, self-identity, and an ability to relate to the poems formed part of the reasons why learners preferred African poems over Western poems. Learners failed to relate to Western poems because of their difficulty with the language and also because the learners did not identify with the culture depicted in Western poems.

### **Metrophobia**

The study showed that some of the learners had developed metrophobia, that is, a fear of poetry. Not only was it the learners who had the challenge of metrophobia, but the attitudes of the teachers towards poetry were also highlighted through the learners' responses. According to the responses of the learners, some teachers displayed a negative attitude towards poetry. The study found that some of the teachers did not teach poetry with enthusiasm nor did they make the poetry lessons exciting, while some of the educators showed a negative attitude towards and lack of interest in the poems.

### **Lack of Confidence in Reading Poems**

The learners were reluctant about reading poems in class in front of their classmates. Not only did their scepticism to read poems expose the lack of reading skills of the Grade 11 learners, it also revealed their lack of confidence in reading poems. The learners' self-esteem and self-confidence were adversely affected by poetry. This was aggravated by their peers laughing at them, and eventually, the learners began disliking poetry.

The diagnostic analysis that was done internally at the schools showed that the learners underperformed in poetry compared to other literature genres. This could be as a result of the learners' negative perception and attitude to studying poetry.

### **Teachers' Inadequacies in Teaching Poetry**

It was discovered that the teachers did not delve deeply into the poetry they taught. The learners revealed that when teaching poetry, the teachers did so to cover the content indicated in the ATP. The educators did not ensure that the learners mastered the skills to understand the poetry nor answer questions based on the poems. Based on the observations by the learners, the teachers did not show interest when teaching poetry.



There was no differentiation by teachers in their teaching strategies when teaching poetry. Since poetry was taught like any other literature genre, this explains why the learners preferred other genres over poetry. The teachers read the poems and analysed them line-by-line without following the guidelines that had been provided in some textbooks. This teaching approach is likely to be one of the contributory factors to the learners' poor performance in poetry. Besides the lack of preparedness, the teachers seemed to have some degree of fear to teach poetry. Some teachers lacked confidence in teaching poetry due to insufficient skills and knowledge in teaching and analysing poems. It was discovered that sometimes teachers failed to understand the symbolism of some poems.

### **Misalignment of Documents is Likely to Impact Negatively on the Teaching and Learning of Poetry (CAPS, ATP and Anthology of Poems)**

It was found that the FET English FAL CAPS is ambiguous regarding the teaching of poetry. Firstly, the aims, objectives and goals of teaching literature are not specified. Secondly, there are no clear guidelines for how each genre should be taught and, thirdly, it does not provide an elaborate, structured guideline as to how poetry should be taught. Poetry being taught like other genres such as novel, drama and short stories could be because of literature approaches are not clear and specific in the English FAL CAPS document. Teachers might not know all the approaches to teaching literature from the CAPS document, which contributes to how learners learn poetry.

The teaching of literary terms late in the year, as prescribed by the ATP, was also a contributing factor to the learners' inability to know these terms and understand the poems. Lack of a clear guidelines as to when literature metalanguage should be taught according to the English FAL CAPS document is also a contributing factor to the challenges in the teaching and learning of poetry.

Also, the ATP does not specify the exact "notes of literature" that should be taught in the first week of the academic year. The ATP does not prescribe the rudimentary background knowledge required for the teaching and learning of poetry before learners read the prescribed poems. Therefore, key literary terms (literature metalanguage) were only introduced late in the academic year (Term 3) when almost 89 per cent of the prescribed poems had already been taught. Instead of a congruence between the CAPS document and the ATP, there was a discrepancy between what CAPS prescribes and what is prescribed in the ATP. The ATP has more poems prescribed in Grade 11, thus deviating from the CAPS policy and adding some confusion for both teachers and learners.

Furthermore, the analysis notes in the learners' poetry anthology discouraged learners' autonomous interpretations. Those analysis notes and marking guidelines made learners more reliant on the textbook because the activities for some poems did not capture the prior knowledge of learners and the questions did not directly link to the content of the poems. Activities that were in the anthology of poems do not fully prepare learners for examinations. Questions on appreciation at the cognitive levels of the taxonomy were not found in class activities that were in the anthology of poems.

The three documents, the ATP, CAPS and the anthology of poems did not expose learners to different types of poems. The poems in the anthology of poems were arranged according to themes rather than types.

## **Discussion**

The findings indicate that poetry is the least preferred genre of literature. Even though some learners mentioned that poetry was necessary to them as youth, it was found to be self-contradicting. The learners experienced difficulties because of the terminology that was used in poems. The English language, which is a second language to the participants, posed a challenge to them when they had to answer questions based on figures of speech and/or explanations of their relevance in the poems during assessments.

The learners did not know different types of poems because the CAPS and the ATP do not prescribe that they should be taught that way, despite the fact that the Grade 11 curriculum requires them to be known. Also, the learners struggled to differentiate between figures of speech and parts of speech, as they confused the two. The African poems were easier to relate to and identify with than the Western poems because the African poems were about the learners' history, tradition and culture. There are, therefore, gaps and unanswered questions in the teaching of poetry documents in English FAL. The approaches to teaching literature are too general and not genre specific. There are also no clear guidelines nor specific outcomes as to why and how poetry should be taught by the English FAL CAPS. There are discrepancies between the CAPS and the ATP regarding the content coverage of poetry.

The questions assessing the poems which are found in the activities of the prescribed book, do not cover all the different cognitive levels, and, as a result, they do not prepare learners for the formal assessment.

There are no questions on higher cognitive levels of evaluation and appreciation as they are found in formal assessment tasks such as examinations and literature tests. Questions in the formal assessment activities require learners to know and apply figurative language (figures of speech and their relevance); but learners are unable to answer them. All the findings above, sought to answer the research questions.

## **Recommendations**

With all the challenges faced by learners when studying poetry, the following recommendations are made. Instead of the poetry anthology book having the marking guidelines, there should be a separate teacher's guide with a marking guideline and analysis notes for the teacher to guide learners' answers. The learners' anthology of poems textbook should only have content that is relevant to learners, such as the background of the poets, poems, literary terms related to that poem, literature analysis terms, and questions. Teachers should guide learners' interpretations. The interpretations should be those that will provide and empower learners with the skills to be able to read and understand poetry on their own.

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The ATP needs to be revised and it should introduce the teaching of literature metalanguage, key literary terms, and types of poems in the first week of the academic year so that learners know the key literary terms and how they are used before they read literature set works.

Teachers should be encouraged to be more innovative and cater for learners' multiple intelligences by incorporating music, pictures and videos to emphasise tones, moods and atmosphere when teaching poetry in the classroom.

The English FAL CAPS document should be revised and amended to include the approaches of teaching each genre, that is, a literature genre-specific approach. The policy should also have clear guidelines, aims and objectives for the teaching of literature. Class activities in the anthology of poems must have a variety of cognitive levels, in accordance with the taxonomy of assessment, and should mirror the end-of-year examinations by observing the 40/40/20 per cent split of questions according to different cognitive levels. The above split is as follows: According to the CAPS document, the questions in each assessment task have to be divided into different cognitive levels to cater for all learners since they have different abilities. The higher order questions should be 20 percent, the medium order 40 percent and lower order 40 percent. This will gear up and expose learners to all types of questions.

### **Conclusion**

This study found factors that contribute to the challenges that Grade 11 learners face in English FAL poetry. A variety of stakeholders have contributed to the challenges encountered by Grade 11 learners in English FAL poetry. The learners' background cannot be ignored, considering that Sowetan learners are not usually English speakers. The English FAL CAPS document serves as a foundation and a "bible" for curriculum delivery.

The foundations of the policy give the impression that there are gaps that need to be filled to ameliorate the performance of Grade 11 learners in poetry. There needs to be a clear direction and purpose for why poetry is taught. If the English FAL CAPS has clear guidelines, the ATP will follow suit, teachers will then deliver content effectively, and learners' performance is likely to improve. Inadequately skilled teachers should be given support in the form of in-service training or workshops to enhance their poetry teaching skills.

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