

## HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF TEACHING POETRY TO ENGLISH SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

**Sboniso Praisegod Zondi, University of the Free State**  
**Ansurie Pillay, University of KwaZulu-Natal**

### ABSTRACT

*Poetry teaching in South African English Second-Language classrooms still challenges many teachers. Teachers complain about learners' lack of motivation and their inability to master figurative language. These classrooms are mainly teacher-centred and lack constructivist approaches. This article explores South African high school teachers' experiences in teaching poetry to English Second Language learners. Using a qualitative approach and case study design, the study worked with eleven purposively sampled teachers from three schools in one education district. Data were generated using semi-structured interviews. The study, underpinned by the theory of constructivism, found that the teachers had mixed experiences of teaching poetry. They regard poetry as beneficial for language and vocabulary development, critical thinking, broadening worldviews, and as a source of imagination and social tolerance. However, they also experienced poetry as a source of confusion due to its often complex language and structure, and they tended to depend on teaching material from colleagues, teacher development workshops, and the Department of Education. It is evident that ongoing teacher development, aligned with teachers' specific needs, is required to address teachers' pedagogical knowledge deficits. Such deficits include the necessary knowledge and skills to recognise the language resources inherent in poetry and the potential for poetry to engage learners' critical thinking skills, creativity and understanding of worlds other than their own.*

**KEYWORDS:** Teaching poetry, English Second Language, teachers' experiences, literature, language skills

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The South African Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for English (DBE, 2011) stipulates that teachers must teach novels, drama, short stories, and poetry within the English Second Language (ESL) classroom. In the Further Education and Training (FET) phase, the last three years of high school, teachers must teach these four genres within three years, focusing on at least two genres per year. Alameddine and Ahwal (2016) present convincing reasons why literature should be part of ESL teaching worldwide. They argue that literature serves as authentic material and has the potential to be inspirational and of educational value. Furthermore, studying literature in the ESL context helps learners understand other cultures, stimulates language acquisition and development, develops learners' interpretive abilities (Suhadi, 2023), enhances tolerance and critical thinking (Van, 2009), improves creative thinking skills (Rahman & Manaf, 2017), and assists in developing learners' listening, reading, writing, viewing, and presenting language skills (Amala & Oboko, 2019) as well as their grammar skills (Suhadi, 2023). As learners engage with different literary genres, they learn how writers write, master the art of authorship, and have opportunities to share their feelings about the texts in written and spoken forms. These abilities and skills are essential in the ESL classroom and must be continuously developed and improved. Thus, including literary genres in the English curriculum complements and improves English language learning (Suhadi, 2023).

The Department of Education prescribes the poetry to be taught in the South African classroom, although teachers may use non-prescribed poems that complement, not substitute, the prescribed examinable poems. Poems are usually shorter in length and unique in structure and linguistic formulations compared to other literary genres. These features make poetry suitable for an ESL classroom, as it allows the teacher to focus on poetic devices to develop awareness and appreciation of the language (Llach, 2007). Exposure to poetic devices may arouse the learners' interest and create enjoyment of the lessons, positively impacting their language proficiency (Ahmed, 2022). Poetry can also represent an introduction to other literary genres since poems are rich in imagery (Meidipa, 2022; Novio & Catane, 2018). However, many teachers still struggle with or feel uncomfortable teaching poetry, and often complain about learners' lack of interest and limited motivation, incomprehensible poetic devices, and an inability to interpret figurative language (Taufik & Hafilah, 2020; Mbambo & Hlabisa, 2024). Mbambo and Hlabisa (2024) suggest that teachers should employ approaches relevant to their learners' needs to arouse their interest in poetry learning.

This article focuses on a sample of South African teachers' experiences of teaching poetry to ESL learners at high schools and asks, What are South African high school teachers' experiences of teaching poetry to English Second Language learners? In answer to the question, the researcher surveyed relevant literature on the topic, explored the theoretical underpinnings of the study, explained the methodology used to generate data, discussed the findings from the data, and provided concluding thoughts.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Benefits of Teaching Poetry in the ESL Classroom

Syamsia and Ismail (2021) and Hess (2003) note that poetry is a valuable resource in teaching reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills in the ESL classroom, and such integration would bring a sense of cohesion to the individual experiences of learners. Poetry might be valuable for learning a language when used to enhance communicative competence within learner-centred classrooms (Fauziah, 2016; Cardoso & Lago, 2021). Learner-centred classrooms are outcomes-based because the focus is on what learners have learnt rather than what they have been taught. When learning is assessed, the focus is on problem-solving and critical thinking skills that they have mastered through collaboration and self-directed learning (Cardoso & Lago, 2021).

Using poetry as a teaching resource could help address the numerous barriers and challenges ESL teachers encounter (Mbambo & Hlabisa, 2024). Fauziah (2016) notes that ultimately, teaching poetry depends on the teacher's passion and love for poetry. Learners identify when teachers are not enthusiastic about teaching poetry and lose interest in mastering it. In addition, the assessment-oriented approach to poetry teaching might undermine learners' engagement with the genre, which inhibits and dilutes the benefits of engaging with poetry in the ESL classroom.

### 2.2 Pedagogical Strategies for Poetry Teaching in the ESL Classroom

The appropriateness of the selection of poetry is another factor. Before selecting poems, teachers must consider whether they would be readable, suitable, and understandable to learners (Fauziah, 2016). Cooper (2020) adds that focusing solely on identifying figures of speech or line-by-line analyses removes the meaning of poetry. Cooper (2020) refers to this approach to poetry as 'schoolifying' poetry and blames it for inhibiting rich, creative, and spontaneous teaching-learning activities. Xerri (2016) proposes that teachers should encourage learners to conceptualise their understanding of the poem and use a reader-centred approach to analysing poems to mediate this situation. This proposal suggests that enhancing the learning experience depends on the teacher's ability to encourage learners' use of their imaginations and engage learners in experiencing new worldviews (Grove, 2019). Meidipa (2022) further suggests that using music in the ESL environment might bridge linguistic and societal limitations when teaching poetry. She asserts that combining music with poetry is a powerful tool for creating a joyful yet educational environment. She further argues that music and poetry benefit learners mentally, since music can decrease anxiety and improve self-confidence as learners sing along and recite songs and poems. Muthmainnah (2021) reinforces this idea by advocating for blending education and entertainment, and suggests using visualisations and technology to enhance literary knowledge. Technology, such as the internet, cellphones, and computers, can assist learners in sourcing additional information on poems and poets, which could prove motivating for them. However, in environments without access to technology, such

tools are not a reality in many South African schools, requiring teachers to improvise using whatever resources the school or learners have at their disposal.

The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (DBE, 2011) mandates educators to teach poetry, not poems, whereas the CAPS document focuses on assessments and discrete skills, causing teachers to ignore learners' interpretations and, instead, teach for assessments and expected meanings. This perspective might become a limiting factor that does not impel teachers to go beyond teaching and drilling learners for passing the assessments.

### **2.3 Teachers' Challenges and Preparedness of Teaching Poetry in the ESL Classroom**

Moea and Mahao (2023) assert that most high school learners hear poetry daily, even though they may not recognise it as such. Indeed, poetry has surrounded most learners from infancy through nursery rhymes and the music they listen to. However, teachers often complain that poetry is problematic for ESL learners due to their backgrounds, which are not reflected in the poems they study, suggesting that teachers need to find appropriate poems to teach in their classrooms (Alsyouf, 2020; Syamsia & Ismail, 2021). Teachers also note that learners have language challenges, including insufficient English vocabulary (Alsyouf, 2020; Meidipa, 2022). Suhadi (2023) argues that integrating literature and other language skills is an exciting way to solve learners' language barriers. Furthermore, Alsyouf (2020) points out that teachers must find appropriate approaches to enhance vocabulary development and language proficiency within the ESL environment. Poetry can be an effective vocabulary-building tool because poems can be easy to remember and memorise (Alsyouf, 2020).

Besides language challenges in general and vocabulary in particular, Alem (2020) also notes that teachers encounter challenges when using poems to teach reading skills. Such challenges include the learners' lack of motivation to read and study poetry and their poor knowledge of the background of the poem, and teachers' teaching approaches that are not sufficiently diverse and inclusive, as well as the choice of poems that lack exciting and rich content (Alem, 2020). In the English curriculum, Jabeen and Sarifa (2022) posit that 21st-century learners could be motivated to learn and discover knowledge through diverse literary texts, including poetry. Teachers also avoid teaching how to write poetry because they believe poetry is only relevant to the reading curriculum, not the writing curriculum (Moea & Mahao, 2023).

In addition, teachers often do not see the link between poetry and speaking skills, yet poetry might be a resource through which to teach and enhance learners' speaking skills (Deepa & Ilankumaran, 2018). Teachers can use various strategies to ensure the integration of speaking skills into poetry lessons, which can be accomplished through class discussions, peer conversations, roleplay and poem recitation, storytelling, debates, and spontaneous activities that would test and help improve learners' speaking skills constantly (Deepa & Ilankumaran, 2018).

It becomes clear that ESL learners and teachers experience difficulties related to teaching and learning poetry. The ESL classroom is the common ground for interaction. It provides an arena

where teachers and learners can contextualise their engagement to limit challenges and develop a more conducive teaching and learning environment. There is a need for continuous professional support for teachers in utilising integrative approaches to enhance poetry understanding and expertise within and beyond the classroom walls.

### 3. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

This study is underpinned by the constructivist theory of Vygotsky (1962), which recognises that prior knowledge and social and cultural contexts influence how new knowledge is constructed and acquired. In a constructivist classroom, the teacher ensures that learners are actively involved in the learning process, which usually involves learner interactions (Sharma & Gupta, 2016), and the teacher attempts to understand the learners' current understandings before designing activities and facilitating the extension of such understandings (Shah, 2019). The teacher coaches, guides, assesses collaborative learning, and uses inquiry-based activities, thereby ensuring that learners actively construct knowledge rather than resorting to memorisation, rote learning, or reproducing knowledge from the teacher or textbook (Shah, 2019). Thus, constructivism focuses on meaning-making (Ciot, 2009) by explaining how learners actively acquire knowledge and master it with guidance from the teacher (Bada, 2015; Suhendi & Purwarno, 2018).

The constructivist theory by Vygotsky (1962) was suitable for understanding teachers' experiences of teaching poetry in the high school ESL classroom. The theory assisted in understanding how teachers enabled learners to construct meaning by using previous knowledge and experiences, and how they recognised the social and cultural contexts influencing their classrooms. The theory helped understand learner-centredness, collaborative learning, and meaning-making. Phillips (1995) maintains that under constructivist theory, teachers cannot view their learners as empty vessels but rather as knowledge constructors through their experiences. The teacher participants in this study possessed their own previous learning experiences. They were located within their own social and cultural contexts, which shaped their teaching practices and perspectives on poetry teaching in the ESL context.

### 4. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research approach and a case study design. A qualitative approach was suitable because it allowed the researchers to understand the participating teachers' experiences through their own words that could not be portrayed numerically (Hancock, 2009; Thanh & Thanh, 2015). The participants were recognised as constructors of their histories, meanings, and realities through their experiences and daily practices (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Case studies are embedded within participants' social lives and are bound by issues of honesty, transparency, open communication, and interpretability (Sarantakos, 2005). Cohen et al. (2018) argue that case studies allow participants to share their ideas and experiences freely in their natural environments. Therefore, a case study design was

suitable for this qualitative study as it allowed for insights into the participants' situations, experiences, and classrooms (Rule & John, 2011).

Before identifying and recruiting potential participants, the study sought and received gatekeeper authorisation from school principals and the Department of Education. The study participants were purposively sampled, and they consented to participate in writing. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method that consciously selects participants based on their characteristics (Cohen et al., 2018). The eleven high school teachers from three schools in one education district were selected based on their meeting the research needs and providing rich data as practising teachers (Rowley, 2012; Patton, 2002). The sampling criteria were teachers in ESL high school classrooms who had taught poetry in their ESL classrooms. The participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, and they were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

The researcher conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews to generate data. Patton (2002) notes that semi-structured interviews use an interview schedule with a list of open-ended questions posed to the participants. However, the researcher may probe and ask other questions that emanate from participants' answers. The interviews were recorded with the participants' permission and then transcribed. The researchers employed thematic data analysis by organising data into themes, coding according to relevance and relationships, and interpreting the responses, per Cohen et al. (2018) and Hancock (2009). Thematic data analysis allowed for identifying and naming themes and connecting relationships between them (Rowley, 2012). The data analysis process was guided by the following steps: organising data, becoming familiar with data, synthesising ideas, summarising and arranging data using codes, defining key terms, interpreting and analysing data, identifying themes and links, and presenting the findings (Creswell, 2013; Gibbs, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Newby, 2010).

## 5. FINDINGS

The analysis of the participating teachers' interviews produced five main themes: teachers' experiences of poetry as a linguistically rich source that enhances critical thinking, teachers' experiences of poetry as a source to enhance learners' imagination and worldviews; teachers' experiences of poetry as an aspect that foregrounds teachers' incompetence and overdependence on external sources, teachers' experiences of poetry being difficult for learners, leading to learners' underperformance, and teachers' experiences of poetry based on how they were taught poetry at school and university. The study used pseudonyms for all participants in the discussion of the findings below. The upcoming sections quote and discuss only a sample of verbatim statements under the respective themes.

The research question for this study was: What are South African high school teachers' experiences teaching poetry to English Second Language learners?

Eleven Grade 10 to 12 teachers from one district participated in the study.

### 5.1 Teachers' Experiences of Poetry as a Linguistically Rich Source that Enhances Critical Thinking

The teacher participants' responses indicated they experienced poetry as a vital language source:

PTG: *I love the language devices poets use to explain certain concepts. I love poetry, the play of language, the language devices that poets use, and the intriguing aspects they use to challenge the reader to dig deep and understand the deeper meaning.*

PTI: *Poetry improves the learners' language skills and understanding of figurative language, and they must always think creatively.*

PTB: *I get inspired when learners reason and think critically.*

The participants' responses above show that the language used in poetry appealed to them and their learners. They appreciated poetry for language development and its ability to encourage learners' active engagement with the poems' meaning and language. Therefore, the poetry lessons create a constructivist environment where learners participate and engage with each other and, with the teacher as a facilitator (Vygotsky, 1962). This finding agrees with Mavhiza and Prozesky (2020), who recognise the creative power of poetry in a classroom. Most teachers who enjoyed teaching poetry could easily point out its benefits. These findings confirm the assertion that learners' enjoyment of poetry depends on the teacher's passion and love for it (Fauziah, 2016). The teacher participants' responses also indicate that they experience poetry as a source to develop critical thinking, as Van (2009) emphasises. From the quotations, it is clear that those participants teach poetry through active engagement, whereby the teachers help learners construct their meanings (Vygotsky, 1962). This outcome confirms that poetry can be a valuable resource for shaping the personal and social attributes of the learners.

### 5.2 Teachers' Experiences of Poetry as a Source to Enhance Learners' Imaginations and Worldviews

The teachers experienced poetry as the basis for developing learners' imaginations:

PTB: *I love poetry because it takes learners to places [imagine], travel, and view life and certain things differently. They explore and intensely discuss themes emanating from the poem.*

PTC: *I use poetry to improve [learners'] imaginations and creative writing skills. Learners get inspired by the poetry they learn and the vigorous critical analysis and discussion. I love how short and straightforward but profound a poem can be. I enjoy the fact that it allows learners also to have their interpretations; it allows engagement; moreover, it is something you can do within a single class period.*

PTA: *Poetry is my favourite genre because it exposes learners to different writing styles and widens the scope of how they view the world.*

*PTD: I enjoy teaching poetry because there are many things one can learn from each piece of writing. I have found that providing a brief background of the poem usually helps the learners to understand the context.*

The findings show that these teachers are passionate about teaching poetry and able to facilitate knowledge construction in their learners, and that their learners have the space and time to explore and discuss intensely (Vygotsky, 1962). The responses indicated that these teachers loved poetry because it enhanced their learners' imaginations. Furthermore, some used poetry to shape their learners' authorship talents and skills and become poets. Similarly, in Levine, Moore, and Bene (2023), English teachers stated that they believed it would benefit learners to write poems to enhance their enjoyment of poetry lessons and learn more about it. Teachers also experienced poetry as a resource to broaden learners' worldviews (Cooper, 2020). PTD's words indicate the importance of a teacher being an effective facilitator who allows learners to construct meanings (Bada, 2015; Vygotsky, 1962). These teachers believed that while poetry may be simple, it develops the learners holistically when the lessons are learner-centred. The findings suggest that harnessing learners' imaginations and increasing their worldviews are essential for enjoying and using poetry in ESL classrooms.

### **5.3 Teachers' Experiences of Poetry as an Aspect that Foregrounds Teachers' Incompetence and Overdependence on External Sources**

The teachers' unfavourable experiences of poetry arise from their feelings of incompetence when teaching the genre. The teachers' negative experiences emanate from their perspective that poetry is challenging and the assumption that their learners would not cope with the linguistic and poetic devices in poetry (Moea & Mahao, 2023). Furthermore, their teaching experience in the ESL environment causes them to avoid teaching poetry, especially in Grade 12, due to lower academic performance in poetry assessments, which could lead to them being judged negatively by the Department of Education:

*PTF: Sometimes, I would read a poem and not fully understand it until I read summaries and analyses. I am not comfortable teaching poetry. I also do not enjoy teaching Shakespearean poetry because the language used is so old and difficult to understand. Moreover, if they were to read that, the learners would find it difficult to comprehend.*

*PTL: I sometimes fail to get to the bottom of the writer's intention. I ask my colleagues for help and support whenever I feel trapped and forced to teach poetry. One of my colleagues taught me how to teach poetry. Moreover, he instilled in me a love for poetry. I now adore teaching poetry.*

*PTH: I do not like teaching poetry. I only teach it because it is a requirement at the school where I am teaching. I get help from other teachers who are experts in the genre. Reading the analysis from the study guides and the department notes offers help. I also do not miss content workshops in anticipation of poetry pedagogy and content being tackled.*



Some teachers shared that they were not confident in teaching poetry because they felt the language was challenging. Consequently, they realised they would find it difficult to teach something they could not master themselves. The teachers believed their learners sometimes shared the same sentiments that poetry is difficult, as noted by Meidipa (2022). Feeling uncomfortable and less confident is common for ESL teachers (Aysu, 2023). Notably, some participants indicated that they had asked for help. Learners probably sense teachers' negative attitudes towards poetry, leading to further negativity towards the genre. The teachers expressed discomfort with poetry is common to many ESL contexts (Mavhiza & Prozesky, 2020).

Some teachers solely depend on their colleagues and the content workshops provided by the Department of Education. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) also applies among colleagues, as knowledgeable teachers assist those who need to be raised to their level (Vygotsky, 1978). This community of practice is often the most effective form of support for teachers. When teachers experience poetry as unfavourable and believe that teaching poetry highlights their incompetence, their learners may harbour negative feelings towards poetry. However, while it is commendable that teachers turn to teaching resources and other teachers, their overdependence on external sources for extended periods could be detrimental to their growth as teachers. While partnerships and mentorship programmes are good practices, they cannot be the sole support for a teacher, implying that teachers should reflect on how to attain the necessary skills for themselves.

#### **5.4 Teachers' Experiences of Poetry Being Difficult for Learners Leading to Learners' Underperformance**

Teachers' experiences with teaching poetry were based on their contention that poetry was difficult for learners. Some experiences were shaped by concern about the mediocre performance of her learners when studying poetry:

*PTC: Poetry is difficult for my kids, judging from their responses to questions.*

*PTJ: My learners find it challenging to understand poetic devices, and poetry needs avid readers and critical thinkers.*

*PTG: The challenges of learners' language barriers and lack of reading motivation. Mostly, learners are ill-prepared to understand poetry because teachers fail to lay a solid foundation for teaching poetry in the lower grades. If I received learners willing to learn, I would teach poetry for a living.*

Some teachers' negative experiences of teaching poetry emanated from the frustration that learners did not understand it, leading to poor performance in assessments. PTJ seemingly believes poetry is not for all ESL learners but only for exceptional readers who enjoy reading and are critical thinkers. The implication is that poetry cannot help to develop the language, contrary to the findings by Aysu (2023), who argues that literature, including poetry, may be a flexible strategy for language teachers to develop learners' language skills. Both teachers point to the deficits in their learners and appear not to focus on themselves and how they may mediate

knowledge construction. In constructivist classrooms, teachers help learners construct meanings through active engagement, interaction, and collaborative learning (Shah, 2019).

PTG mentioned that he taught exit-level Grade 12. He found that learners reached this grade with little prior knowledge on which to build, due to differences in the cultural contexts of the prescribed poems, which Vygotsky (1962) emphasises as an excellent building block. PTG placed the blame on the teachers in the previous grades and then on the learners' academic and language barriers and lack of motivation; he could not recognise his role to scaffold the learners' abilities from limited to expert knowledge of poetry (Vygotsky, 1978). The participant's words also imply that studying poetry requires linguistically and academically advanced learners, as poetry cannot be used to enhance their language learning and development. These findings concur with Moea and Mahao (2023), who find that teachers believe poetry is challenging, exacerbated by insufficient teaching time for poetry in high schools. Divsar and Tahriri (2009) note that poetry typically uses non-conventional English for poetic effectiveness; consequently, learners and some teachers find comprehending such language arduous.

The findings and supporting literature imply that poetry perpetuates the language barrier instead of alleviating it, which aggravates learner and teacher demotivation and underperformance. The research indicates that literature, including poetry, can enhance, supplement, and complement the English language curriculum (Alameddine & Ahwal, 2016; Amala & Oboko, 2019; Suhadi, 2023; Van, 2009), yet other findings reflect differently. Some teachers have identified how to facilitate learners' construction and acquisition of new knowledge and meanings in poetry, while others have not (Vygotsky, 1962). However, the use of multilingual pedagogies, such as codeswitching and translanguaging to mitigate language barriers, is missing from these findings (Shinga & Pillay, 2021; Mbambo & Hlabisa, 2024; Mbambo, 2025).

### **5.5 Teachers' Experiences of Poetry Based on How They Were Taught Poetry at School and University**

The participating teachers' experiences with teaching poetry were also shaped by their own experiences of poetry as learners in high school or as university students. The teachers who had positive experiences taught poetry out of love; those who had negative experiences taught it to meet the curriculum requirements:

*PTA: I loved poetry and hated novels and drama because they were too long and out of touch. Poetry stood out more for me as I took a great interest in learning how to teach it and knowing how to interpret it.*

*PTB: I found poetry enjoyable because some of our poems were relevant and interesting, such as 'Let Me Not to the Marriage of True Minds'. It inspired me to improve my critical thinking and writing skills. I enjoy reciting poems and mastered that at university.*

PTI: *Poetry allowed me to think outside the box and deal with all the figurative language.*

PTJ: *How our lecturers taught poems made me fall in love with poetry. As a student, I could imagine the poem and could grasp the poet's intention.*

These teachers loved poetry in high school and at university. PTA experienced poetry as meaningful and relevant to her life; she felt dramas and novels were out of touch and could not make sense of them. PTB's reference to a Shakespearean sonnet suggests an engagement with a poem beyond her social, cultural, or temporal context that she nonetheless related to.

Some of the teacher participants' university poetry experiences were crucial. PTA reflected that her experience of poetry led to her interest in how to teach it effectively, seeking to reproduce the positive experience for her learners. The findings above align with Fauziah (2016), who asserts that poetry requires critical reasoning and multiple interpretations and, thus, is a valuable tool for learning a language. These teachers mentioned specific skills learnt from their study of poetry. They recognised their learning experiences within their social and cultural contexts as necessary to their roles as poetry teachers.

PTJ's words signify the importance of how teachers and lecturers teach poetry in the classroom, as their teaching impacts how learners perceive the genre. His love for poetry appears to be based on the nature of poetry and how he was taught poetry. These findings concur with Novio and Catane (2018), who note that poetry is an excellent introduction to literature, since poems are rich in imagery. Moreover, the findings agree with Moea and Mahao (2023) that teachers' experiences of poetry might emanate from their previous experiences in learning poetry. Lastly, the findings indicate that teachers draw on prior experiences and contexts to help build their learners' constructions and knowledge acquisition (Vygotsky, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978).

## 6. CONCLUSION

This article explored a sample of ESL teachers' experiences of teaching poetry in a South African high school environment through interview data. The decision to use interviews only as a data-generating method can be considered a study limitation. However, it proved helpful in encouraging the participating teachers to share their positive and negative experiences of teaching poetry openly. However, future research using other or multiple methods might provide further insights into teachers' experiences of teaching poetry to ESL learners.

The findings indicate that some participating teachers consider poetry a rich linguistic resource that enhances and develops learners' critical thinking, imagination, and worldviews. However, some teachers identified poetry as an aspect of the English curriculum that they found challenging and exposed their incompetence, leading them to request or find support for understanding poetry. Such experiences of perceived incompetence resulted in teachers' demotivation and learners' underperformance. The implication of this finding is that curriculum documents need to go beyond prescribing what to teach; they should also offer ideas on engaging with aspects of the curriculum in the classroom. Such ideas could assist teachers who experience difficulties inasmuch as they do not know how to teach specific aspects.

An important study finding was that the significance and role of the participating teachers' positive experiences in learning poetry similarly led to positive experiences in teaching poetry. The impact of teachers emulating others emphasises teachers' responsibility to enable understanding of subject matter at any level and to do so in a way that motivates and inspires. This finding underlines the importance of empowering all poetry teachers with the knowledge and skills to recognise the language resources inherent in poetry and the potential for poetry to engage learners' critical thinking skills, creativity, and understanding of worlds other than their own. Such empowerment, in turn, empowers and motivates their learners, leading to improved results in poetry assessments. A professional practice implication is the recognition that ongoing teacher development support structures are required to address deficiencies in teachers' prior knowledge. In this regard, employing the constructivist theory in this study proved useful for understanding how prior knowledge, learning experiences, and social and cultural contexts influence how teachers experience learning and teaching poetry. The findings in this study resonate with studies worldwide and enhance and expand the understanding of the current body of knowledge on teachers' experiences with teaching poetry to ESL learners.

## REFERENCES

- Ahmed, MA. 2022. L1 poetry and moral stories as a factor affecting acquisition of L2 oracy skills in EFL settings. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 12(9):1930–1938.
- Alameddine, MM & Ahwal, HW. 2016. Inquiry-based teaching in literature classrooms. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 232:332–337.
- Alem, DD. 2020. Challenges encounter in teachers' practice of using literary texts to teach reading skills: Some selected high schools in Enbse Sar Mider Woreda. *Journal of Literature, Languages and Linguistics*, 70:32–43.
- Alsyouf, A. 2020. Cento as a creative writing approach to language learning. In Almeida, A, U Bavendiek & R Biasini (Eds), *Literature in language learning: new approaches*. Research-publishing.net. 33–39.
- Amala, PI & Oboko, U. 2019. Teaching language through literature: an innovative paradigm. *International Journal on Sustainable Development*, 15(1), 1–18.
- Aysu, S. 2023. Attitudes of Language Teachers Towards Using Literature in Language Classrooms. *1st International Conference on Frontiers in Academic Research*. 229–234.
- Bada, SO. 2015. Constructivism learning theory: a paradigm for teaching and learning. *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 5(6):66–70.
- Cardoso, A & Lago, NA. 2021. Literature in EFL classes: four teachers' experiences in Brazil. *Revista Investigações*, 34(2):1–22.

- Ciot, MG. 2009. A constructivist approach to educational action's structure. *Bulletin of University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Cluj-Napoca. Horticulture*, 66(2):621–626.
- Cohen, L, L Manion & K Morrison. 2018. *Research methods in education*. 8th edn. Routledge.
- Cooper, A. 2020. “That’s schoolified!” How curriculum, pedagogy and assessment shape the educational potential of poetry in subject English for black high school learners. *Education as Change*, 24:1–20.
- Creswell, JW. 2013. *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches*. 4<sup>th</sup> edn. Sage.
- Deepa, P & Ilankumaran, M. 2018. Teaching poetry enhances speaking skills - An analysis based on select poems. *International Journal of Engineering and Technology*. 7(4.36):619–623.
- Department of Basic Education (DBE). 2011. *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement: English First Additional Language. Grade 10–12*. Government Printing Works.
- Divsar, H & Tahriri, A. 2009. Investigating the effectiveness of an integrated approach to teaching literature in an EFL context. *Journal of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics*, 13(2):105–116.
- Fauziah, F. 2016. The approaches to teaching literature for EFL young learners. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Linguistics (JELTL)*, 1(2):145–158.
- Gibbs, GR. 2012. Software and qualitative data analysis. In Arthur, J, M Waring, R Coe & LV Hedges (Eds), *Research Methods and Methodologies in Education*. Sage. 251–258.
- Grove, A. 2019. *The teacher’s role in student engagement*. Gardner-Webb University.
- Hancock, BO. 2009. *An introduction to qualitative research*. The NIHR RDS.
- Hess, N. 2003. Real language through poetry: A formula for meaning-making. *ELT Journal*, 57(1):19–25.
- Jabeen, R & Sarifa, N. 2022. Probing the approaches to teaching literature to EFL students—graduate learners’ perspective. *Journal of Arts & Humanities*, 11(1):1–8.
- Levine, S, DP Moore & E Bene. 2023. What if it were otherwise? Teachers use exams from the past to imagine possible futures in the teaching of literature. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 58(1):5–24.
- Llach, PA. 2007. Teaching language through literature: the waste land in the classroom. *Odisea*, 8:7–17.
- Marshall, C & Rossman, GB. 2016. *Designing qualitative research*. 6<sup>th</sup> edn. Sage.
- Mavhiza, G & Prozesky, M. 2020. Mapping pathways for an indigenous poetry pedagogy: performance, emergence and decolonisation. *Education as Change*, 24:1–25.

- Mbambo, K. 2025. Translanguaging as an effective pedagogical tool for teaching English second language short stories in selected township high schools. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, 1–9.
- Mbambo, K & Hlabisa, MV. (2024). South African rural high school teachers' experiences of teaching English poetry. *Journal of Education (University of KwaZulu-Natal)*, (97), 261–281.
- Meidipa, LF. 2022. The impact of using music on teaching English poetry in senior high school SMA Negeri 6 Padangsidempuan. *Jurnal ESTUPRO*, 7(2):9–16.
- Moea, KS & Mahao, M. 2023. Challenges and perceptions in learning poetry in two Leribe high schools in Lesotho. *Journal of Educational Research and Review*, 1(2):9–15.
- Muthmainnah, D. 2021. Framing future education through funtainment learning based. In Sanjayan, TS (Ed.), *Engaging Learners in the Twenty-First Century*. Taran Publication. 1–3.
- Newby, P. 2010. *Research methods for education*. Pearson Education.
- Novio, EBC & Catane, NG. 2018. Poetry in EFL teaching: Perspectives of the students based on gender. *Asian EFL Journal*, 20(4):275–279.
- Patton, MQ. 2002. *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. Sage.
- Phillips, DC. 1995. The good, the bad, and the ugly: The many faces of constructivism. *Educational Researcher*, 24(7):5–12.
- Rahman, SA & Manaf, NFA. 2017. A critical analysis of Bloom's taxonomy in teaching creative and critical thinking skills in Malaysia through English literature. *English Language Teaching*, 10(9):245–256.
- Rowley, J. 2012. Conducting research interviews. *Management Research Review*, 35(3/4):260–271.
- Rule, P & John, V. 2011. *Your guide to case study research*. Van Schaik.
- Sarantakos, S. 2005. *Social research*. 3rd edn. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shah, RJ. 2019. Effective constructivist teaching and learning in the classroom. *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 7(4):1–13.
- Sharma, HL & Gupta, P. 2016. Constructivist approach for teaching English: Making sense of paradigm shift from the traditional approach. *International Journal of Science and Research*, 788–792.
- Shinga, S & Pillay, A. 2021. Why do teachers code-switch when teaching English as a second language? *South African Journal of Education*, 41(1), 1–7.
- Suhadi, A. 2023. ELT in literature: Using poetry in enhancing students' speaking performance. *English Teaching and Linguistics Journal*, 4(1):24–30.

- Suhendi, A & Purwarno, P. 2018. Constructivist learning theory: The contribution to foreign language learning and teaching. The 1st Annual International Conference on Language and Literature. *KnE Social Sciences & Humanities*, 87–95.
- Syamsia, S & Ismail, H. 2021. Teaching English Poetry in EFL classroom through classroom presentation. *Langua – Journal of Linguistics, Literature, and Language Education*, 4(1),1–13.
- Taufik, LK & Hafilah, ZA. 2020. Learning poetry: Attitudes and challenges faced by ESL students. *LSP International Journal*, 7(2),55–69.
- Thanh, NC & Thanh, TT. 2015. The interconnection between the interpretivist paradigm and qualitative methods in education. *American Journal of Educational Science*, 1(2):24–27.
- Van, TTM. 2009. The relevance of literary analysis to teaching literature in the EFL classroom. *English Teaching Forum*, 47(3):2–9.
- Vygotsky, LS. 1962. The development of scientific concepts in childhood. In Vygotsky, L, E Hanfmann & G Vakar (Eds), *Thought and language*. MIT Press. 82–118.
- Vygotsky, LS. 1978. *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Xerri, D. 2016. Teaching and learning English in a multicultural classroom: strategies and opportunities. *Journal for Multicultural Education*, 10(1):19–32.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

**Dr Sboniso Praisegod Zondi** is a lecturer in the Languages in Education Department at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa. He has worked as an English teacher for 14 years, and then joined academia as an English lecturer at the University of the Free State, South Africa. His research interests are ESL teaching, multilingualism, and literature integration in teaching and assessment.

**Professor Pillay** holds a PhD in English Education and has served as a teacher of English in high schools, a documentary film-maker, and currently lectures preservice teachers in the School of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal. She supervises postgraduate students and has examined many postgraduate dissertations. While she researches and publishes in her field, she has also peer-reviewed many articles, chapters, and books. Prof Pillay has held many leadership roles at the university, and in 2017, won the University Distinguished Teachers Award.

## **APPENDIX A: Interview schedule**

## **APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

#### **1. Experiences in teaching literature to ESL learners.**

- i) May I ask if you enjoy teaching English literature? What are your reasons for that?
- ii) Could you please share any experiences of teaching literature that stand out in your mind?
- iii) Which genres do you teach in your classes?
- iv) Did you choose the genres, or did the school/management/colleagues choose them for you?
- v) If you were allowed to choose again, would you choose the same genres? Why is that?
- vi) Which genres do you like the most, and what are your reasons?
- vii) Which genres don't you like teaching and why?
- viii) How do you find the teaching of literature in the grade(s) you are teaching?
- ix) If there is anything you could change in your ESL literature class, what could it be and why?