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## VOCABULARY ENHANCEMENT THROUGH POETRY WRITING IN ESL CLASSROOM

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### ABSTRACT

Literature is deemed as a contrivance for promoting language acquisition. It can be used to motivate learners to achieve the desired language that may improve their academic performance. Poetry, being contemplated as a component of literature, has proven to place a significant impact on the development of students' literacy competence. Hence, the goal of this study is to investigate the efficacy of adopting poetry in teaching vocabulary in the ESL classroom. It seeks to answer two research questions, (1) what is the level of student vocabulary according to the British National Corpus (BNC)? And (2) what is the frequency of part-of-speech (POS) in the poetry written by the student? This paper also discusses some of the advantages and pedagogical approaches of using poetry in the ESL classroom. The findings suggested that the highest frequency of POS is nouns and the pronouns *You* and *I* dominate the list. Based on these findings, the present research demonstrates that it is possible to employ poetry-based vocabulary teaching activities to improve teacher's instructional practices and enhance students' language learning outcomes. By incorporating poetry into their lesson plans, teachers can create a more engaging and meaningful learning experience for their students.

## **1. Introduction**

In most English proficiency education, students have very little to write because they lack practice and stimulation for their imagination and creativity. To some extent, their writing content in general reads dull and dry, and the plot is merely displaying plain chronological events with no twist and missing real-life experience. This suggests that students lack vocabulary in the language to express themselves. This study was carried out as one of several methods to ameliorate ESL student's language proficiency, especially in terms of their vocabulary, by engaging poetry in language learning.

It has been claimed that this literature is regularly adapted in ESL classrooms. Regarded as one of the literary elements, poetry is beneficial to expose students to English culture and to teach vocabulary. Several academicians have endeavoured to review the utility of linguistic analysis in poetry in a variety of ways. Amongst others are Javeed (2018) who combines poetry and communicative approach, also Ahmed (2014) and Inyang (2009) who employ stylistics in their poetry classes and Ekaterina & Irina (2021) who combine technology and poetry.

Furthermore, some scholars have also explored the use of cognitive linguistics and corpus linguistics in studying poetry. For instance, Minikeeva et al. (2020) argues that cognitive linguistics can provide insights into the conceptual structures and metaphors used in poetry, while Abdelzaher (2022) highlights how corpus linguistics can be used to identify recurring patterns and themes in poetic texts.

Drawing from that literature, this study laid its foundation on the British National Corpus (BNC) for comparison to the students' vocabulary. The BNC is a large collection of written and spoken texts from a wide range of genres, including poetry. By investigating the students' vocabulary in comparison to the BNC, this study aims to gain insights into their understanding and use of conceptual structures and metaphors in poetry. BNC was introduced by Paul Nation in 1990 as a valuable resource for language learning and teaching, as it provides a representative sample of the English language. The corpus has since become a widely used resource for language researchers and educators. It contains over 100 million words and is constantly updated to reflect changes in language use over time.

This article will also elaborate the approaches used in teaching poetry in ESL classrooms and some of the advantages of using them.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Interesting Approaches in Teaching Poetry in ESL Classroom**

Poetry is important and useful in language classes because it deviates from the standard language by implementing some infrequent ways of sentence structure, illustrative meanings to words, or combining sounds into words, in non-traditional and swerving style. Thus, language teachers should make full use of these deviations of poetic pattern to stimulate learners' language motivation toward the ways in which the vocabulary can be enhanced or changed to fulfil various communicative purposes.

Poetry, if taught interactively, can provide ESL students with a wide range of language learning opportunities. These intriguing features of poetry with its beautiful diction and embellished with rhythm and elevated grammatical features, can oblige as a prevailing stimulus to teach vocabulary to ESL students. Parkinson and Thomas (2000) identify several methods for encouraging students to learn poems when teaching and learning poetry. The three methods that are most relevant for vocabulary integration are:

1. Paraphrasing: Students use different words to signify what the poem is about, for example feelings, environments.
2. Linguistic characteristics: A description of the poem's language based on the concepts of regular and non-regular.
3. Personal experience: An explanation of how this has changed over time and attempt to find meaningful reasoning.

Teachers can adopt and adapt various approaches available in the field to teach poetry to their students. This is to ensure that the approaches used are suitable to cater to multiple intelligence levels of students. According to Hughes (2007), "Poetry offers wonderful opportunities for reading, writing, speaking, and listening practice for ELLs. Poetry also gives students a chance to expand vocabulary knowledge, to play with language, and to work with different rhythms". Javeed (2018) as mentioned in the introduction above, recommended a supplementary approach in teaching poetry that is an integrated approach. In this study, the researchers have divided the lesson into three which are the pre-reading, whilst-reading and post-reading activities.

The pre-reading activities involve activating prior knowledge, introducing new vocabulary, and setting the purpose for reading. The whilst-reading activities include analysing the poem's structure, identifying literary devices, and interpreting the meaning of the poem. Lastly, the post-reading activities involve evaluating the students' understanding of the poem through discussions, written responses, and creative projects. This integrated approach ensures that students develop a deeper appreciation and understanding of poetry.

Many researchers insist on the integration of literature in language teaching (Savvidou, 2004; Stacey, 2009; Panavelil, 2011; Marin, 2017; Gonen, 2018; Akhmedov, 2018). These researchers argue that literature can help students develop their language skills while also exposing them to different perspectives and cultures. By incorporating literature into language teaching, teachers can foster a deeper understanding and appreciation for diversity among their students.

In defining integrated approach, Savvidou (2004) opines that what is required in the classroom for teaching literature is an approach that attempts to amalgamate components of those approaches that make literature comprehensible to students and constructive to their linguistic development. This approach should also take into consideration the cultural background of the students and their personal experiences. By doing so, teachers can create a more inclusive and engaging learning environment that promotes critical thinking and empathy.

The integrated approach can be defined as a linguistic methodology that employs stylistic analysis to reconnoitre texts, literary and non-literary, from the perception of style and its relationship to text and context. It entails an organized and thorough examination of a text's stylistic features to determine not only what a text means but also how it came to mean what it does. Furthermore,

teachers guide students while also participating in an integrated approach. This gives the teachers parallel experience to what the students are learning while adopting the approach to suit the student's needs.

## **2.2 Advantages of Using Poetry in ESL Classroom**

Poetry has some advantages in EFL classrooms for developing students' literacy competence. On the authority of Panavelil (2011), the advantages of using poetry in language teaching are as follows: (1) it can be used to expose students to authentic models – real language in context that can help them develop their language skills; (2) It is inspiring because it elicits strong emotional reactions in students; and (3) it provides students with insight into developing cross-cultural awareness, which aids them in acquiring fluency in the target language.

Conversely, in the opinion of Gonen (2018), using poetry in the English classroom can boost students' inventiveness and foster an engaging learning environment. Gonen (2018) elaborated further, stating that adapting poetry in the classroom could encourage students' literacy learning, vocabulary enhancement, and linguistic proficiency. Moreover, Gonen (2018) further opines that teaching poetry in the language classroom can help teachers teach sentence style, grammar, and word choice. The practice of poetry in language learning may incite learners to coin a new word or interpret a poetic style that they were unfamiliar with previously.

Al-Mahrooqi (2012) proposes a novel method of teaching poetry through interviews with students. In the investigation, the researcher found that students enjoy learning literature with teachers who could astound their imaginations. This approach is a technique of teaching English literature that employs literary texts for specific purposes to improve students' language skills.

On using poetry in teaching vocabulary, few researchers like Killander (2011) and Aydinoglu (2013) have identified different angles to this matter. Aydinoglu (2013) discusses suitable activities to be conducted using poetry to teach vocabulary. On the other hand, Killander (2011) identifies difficulty in using poetic words as a major challenge to integrate poetry in English classrooms. The difficulties that these students encountered are primarily linguistic in nature, as well as a lack of interest in poetry. As a result, the author sought solutions to this problem. It is important to collect the words of highest frequency used by the students to aid instructors to overcome this problem.

Furthermore, Aydinoglu (2013) suggests that teachers should select poems that are relevant to their students' interests and level of proficiency in English. Killander (2011) recommends incorporating visual aids and contextualising the poems to help students understand the meaning of poetic words.

Despite the different perspectives, both authors agree on the potential benefits of using poetry in language learning. Killander (2011) suggests that incorporating poetry can enhance students' language proficiency and creativity, while Aydinoglu (2013) emphasises the emotional and motivational aspects of using poetry to engage learners.

Baki & Behood (2012) argue that because the vocabulary used in poetry can improve the effectiveness of the learning process, teachers can help students develop language awareness. By incorporating poetry into their lesson plans, teachers can expose students to a variety of vocabulary and language structures that they may not encounter in everyday conversation. This can help students develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of the language they are

learning. This is parallel to the second research question which is which Parts of Speech components are used most by the students, can aid in teaching basic grammar to students.

The findings of Imron and Hantari's (2020) research support the following claims about the benefits of literature in English teaching: (1) it is a reasonable basis for vocabulary expansion, (2) it encourages empathetic, critical, and creative thinking, and (3) it involves emotions as well as intellect, which adds to motivation and may contribute to self-development. In Kahn's (2020) accord, his research agrees that poems often use words that are rarely encountered in other texts used in English classrooms, hence helping students to expand their knowledge of vocabulary. The use of figurative language in poems also promotes creative thinking skills as well as teaches students 'to be more profound in expressing their intended thoughts yet maintaining brevity and clarity (Kahn, 2020)'.

Thus, this study hopes to answer two research questions which are (1) what is the level of student vocabulary according to the British National Corpus (BNC)? And (2) what is the frequency of part-of-speech (POS) in the poetry written by the student? Addressing these research questions is essential to gaining a comprehensive understanding of the linguistic and creative aspects of student poetry. The first question regarding the level of student vocabulary, as measured against the British National Corpus (BNC), holds significant implications for evaluating the students' language proficiency and the richness of their lexical choices. The BNC, being a comprehensive and well-established linguistic resource, provides a standardized benchmark against which the students' vocabulary can be objectively assessed. The analysis of their vocabulary in comparison to the BNC can shed light on their exposure to diverse language sources, their ability to incorporate varied words into their writing, and their overall linguistic competence.

The second research question concerning the frequency of part-of-speech (POS) in the student-written poetry delves into the syntactic and stylistic dimensions of their creative expression. Investigating the distribution of POS categories, such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and conjunctions, can uncover patterns in their writing style and illuminate their choices in constructing sentences. For instance, a high frequency of adjectives and adverbs might indicate an inclination towards descriptive and vivid imagery, while a prevalence of verbs could suggest an emphasis on dynamic and action-driven narratives. By quantifying and analysing the POS distribution, this study aims to provide insights into the students' stylistic preferences and the linguistic strategies they employ to convey their poetic ideas.

In conclusion, these two research questions are pivotal to unravelling the intricate relationship between language proficiency and creative expression in student poetry. The study's findings could contribute not only to the field of linguistics and education but also to the appreciation and pedagogy of creative writing. By examining the level of vocabulary and the distribution of part-of-speech in their poetry, we can illuminate the dynamic interplay of linguistic competence and imaginative prowess, ultimately enriching our understanding of how students harness language to craft artistic and meaningful verses.

#### **4. Methodology**

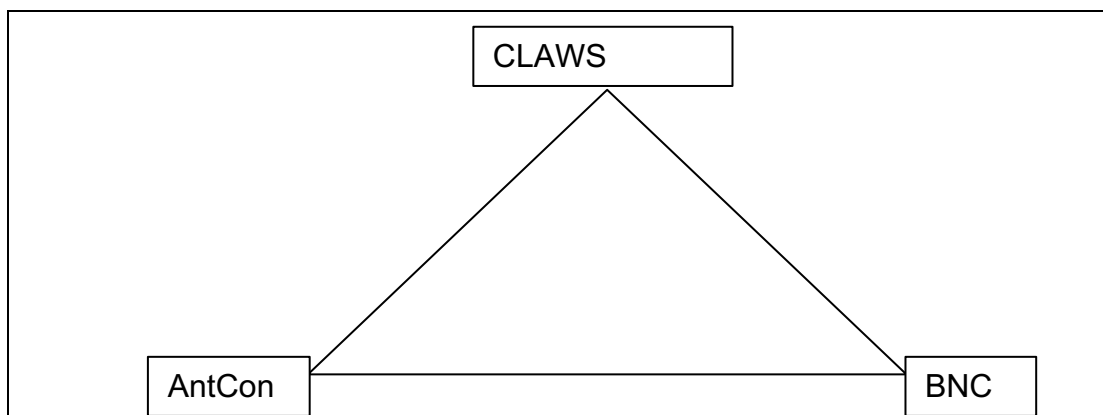
Using a mixed method research design, the researchers selected ten poems written by ten first year diploma undergraduates of a public university in Malaysia. Enrolled in the Diploma in Accountancy course, these students are between the age of 18 to 19 years old on average. The

poem writing exercise was given to enhance the undergraduates' use of personal pronouns in their classroom written assignments. They were required to submit the written poems via email to the lecturer. The choice of the Diploma in Accountancy course as the subject of this study offers a unique angle, as it provides insights into a field often presumed to be dominated by technical and numerical content, highlighting the multidimensional nature of education.

The selection of poems as the medium of creative expression is significant for various reasons. Poetry, characterized by its condensed form and deliberate language choices, necessitates a heightened awareness of vocabulary, syntax, and semantics. By engaging students in a poetic exercise, the study targets a specific linguistic skill – the use of personal pronouns – while also indirectly assessing their broader language proficiency and creative aptitude. The poems, submitted via email to the lecturer, not only mirror real-world practices of communication but also provide a diverse collection for analysis.

### **3.1 Research Design**

The poems were then converted to plain text and compiled into a genre-specific corpus, following the steps proposed in CACA (Singh, 2014; Singh et al. 2012). The data analysis was conducted using CLAWS Tagger where the vocabulary used in students' writing were tagged according to the POS. The data was then uploaded to AntConc, a concordance software, which can be accessed online for free. Besides having the functions of concordance and plotting, AntConc is also useful to collocate and compute the frequency of the tags (Singh & Shamsudin, 2011).



*Figure 1. Data Triangulation*

Following Paul Nation's methodology of headwords count, high frequency words are of 2,000 words and low frequency words are around 10,000 in number. Nation (2001, p. 388–389) mentioned "if more than five percent of the running words is unknown, then it is likely that there is no longer meaning-focused learning because so much attention has to be given to language features". Undoubtedly it is of utmost necessity to investigate the frequency level of vocabulary used in language lessons to determine its relevance. If the frequency level is incompatible with the standard, it is necessary for the teachers to provide supplementary activities to bridge this gap



(Shauki & Singh, 2018). Language students would be at a loss without these activities because their vocabulary level is insufficient to help them understand materials containing high frequency words.

Additionally, incorporating vocabulary instruction across content areas can also support students in building their understanding of high frequency words. This is compatible with a study from the National Reading Panel report (2005) which found that explicit vocabulary instruction can improve reading comprehension. Therefore, educators should prioritise providing students with a variety of strategies and opportunities to develop their high frequency word recognition skills.

Although poetry writings in the classroom have placed special focus on literary techniques and the poet as topics of interest, the least researched area seems to be that of vocabulary and frequency. Vocabulary is not just about expressing context and ideas; it is also about the representation of the author's creative personality and projecting perception. Hence, writers must carefully choose their words so that readers will be engaged and persuaded. The choices that we opt for is an indication of who we are as a writer. Therefore, the decision to explore vocabulary in poetry writing was prompted by the main consideration of providing an academic insight for further analysis on this discourse.

## 5. Results

Table 1  
*Summary of frequency count*

|                             |   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| <b>Coverage</b>             | <b>100.00% (509 counted/ 0 not counted)</b> |
| <b>Tokens (Total items)</b> | 509 (509 known)                             |
| <b>Types (Unique items)</b> | 251 (251 known)                             |

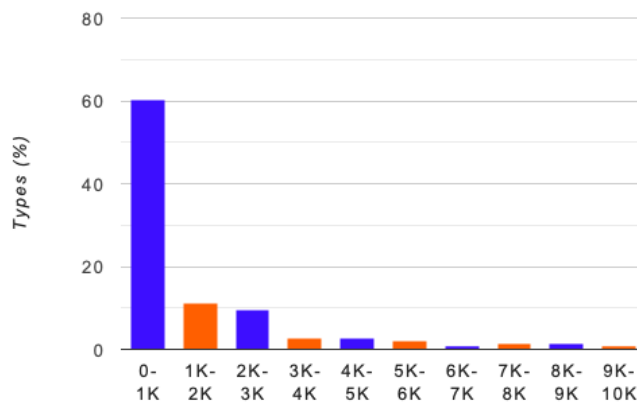


Figure 2. Percentage of total frequency according to British National Corpus (BNC) of 10K

The corpus-based analysis in Figure 1 illustrates distinct frequency patterns within different word ranges. In the 0-1k total range, comprising 88 words, common instances include "the" (7), "your" (10), "my" (5), "I" (9), and "you" (9). Moving to the 1k-2k range, a total of 16 words emerge, exemplified by terms like "smile" (2), "perfect" (1), and "faith" (1). Notably, the 2k-3k range encompasses 14 words, accounting for a cumulative 77.6% of the text, with examples such as "fast" (2), "deep" (1), and "sky" (1). Transitioning to the 3k-4k range, a computed frequency value of 4 is observed, featuring words like "gift" (1) and "sharing" (1). Similarly, the 4k-5k range exhibits a frequency of 4, prominently featuring "friendship" (3) and "forever" (1). Contrasting this, the 5k-6k range appears in only 3 instances, with the term "hearts" (1) being the primary representation.

The frequency distribution depicted in Figure 1 offers valuable insights into the vocabulary preferences and thematic inclinations present within the analysed text. The prominence of words such as "you," "I," and "your" in the 0-1k range suggests a strong personal and possibly introspective dimension to the content. The appearance of terms like "smile" and "perfect" in the 1k-2k range introduces an element of positivity and perhaps emotional resonance. Interestingly, the 2k-3k range, which constitutes a significant portion of the text, is characterized by descriptive words like "fast" and "deep," potentially indicating a focus on sensory experiences or vivid imagery. Furthermore, the recurrence of words like "friendship" and "forever" in the 4k-5k range points to enduring themes of human connection and longevity. While the 5k-6k range, represented by "hearts," offers a concise yet impactful note, underscoring the text's emotional core.

In summary, the detailed breakdown of word frequency across different ranges provides a nuanced perspective on the composition's linguistic and thematic composition. By recognizing the prevalence of certain words within specific ranges, we gain insights into the emotional tenor and narrative threads that weave through the text. This analysis not only enhances our understanding of the linguistic choices made by the writer but also hints at the underlying sentiments and motifs that give depth and meaning to the written piece.

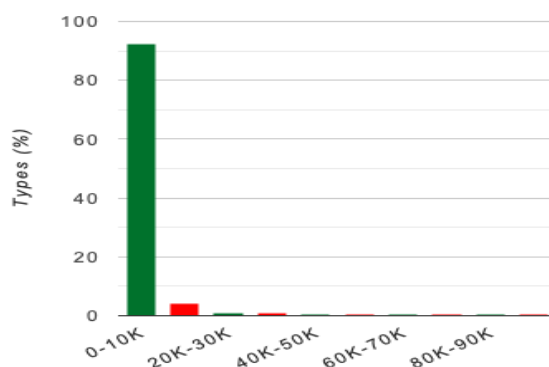


Figure 3. Percentage of total frequency according to British National Corpus (BNC) of 10K

Amazingly, there are six occurrences of 10K-20K words with examples being heartbeat (2) and spoil (2) as shown in Figure 2 above. When students used words in the 10,000 to 20,000 frequency range of the British National Corpus (BNC), it signifies that the words they employed are relatively common and moderately frequent in the English language. Words falling within the 10,000 to 20,000

frequency range are not among the most used words in English, but they are also not extremely rare. When students use words from this frequency range, it suggests that they have a grasp of vocabulary that extends beyond the very common words used in everyday speech.

## **5. Discussion**

Paul Nation's headword list compiled from BNC is a convenient application for the matter of word rank. The list is organized in such a way that the level of the words and learner's description is cataloged accordingly (Shauki & Singh, 2018). In understanding ESL vocabulary instruction, it is necessary to select from the frequently used word, which words are of a priority. As Nation and Gu assert that "in terms of usefulness, all words are not created equal" (Nation, 2007, p. 20). The idea of 'usefulness' in this perspective refers to communicative usefulness. The main and most important goal of language learning in the modern era is for students to be able to successfully communicate themselves.

The presence of appropriate vocabulary that is used within context improves communication. Parenthetically, vocabulary learning should expose students to the words that will provide the greatest benefit in terms of adequately expressing themselves. Thus, to answer the first research question of this paper which is, what is the most frequently used vocabulary in poetry, the answer lies in the frequency count of the word. In Figure 1, the word from 10K or known as K10 in Nation & Davies (2012) shows the highest frequency with label K10 refers to the 10th 1,000 Most Frequent Words of English (words 9001 to 10000). As we can see in the description of the figure above, the highest frequency words mostly came from the pronouns type with examples given such as me, I and you. This indirectly has answered the second research question of this study which is, which Parts of Speech components are used most by the students.

The findings from the corpus-based investigation showed five types of POS were present in the study. The five POS are Nouns (83), Adverbs (44), Preposition (37), Adjectives (33), and Verb (24). There are dominating uses of the pronouns 'you' and 'I' in the ten poems analysed. The pronoun 'you' in normal writing usually indicates the pronominal reference of the writer to its reader. Nonetheless, it is a different case with poetry writing because if the writer uses the pronoun 'you', it is usually the indefinite version of the pronoun 'you'. Consequently, it can be unclear to whom the speaker is referring to as it can refer to anyone and/or everyone. It is up to the audience to interpret to whom the pronoun refers.

As exemplified in poem (2), it is unclear to say the writer uses 'you' to indicate reference to his own parent or parent in general as his special nurse and chef. This is the similar situation with poems (1), (3) and (7).

Poem (2):

You are the best nurses

who have treated me

you are the greatest chef

ever to provide meals for me

On a different note, poem (5) and (6) give us clear pronominal references with you in poem (5) refers to the pop singer, Justin Bieber, while you in poem (6) refers to Mathematics subject. The differences might be because for these two poems there are many occurrences of the specific subject in the poem. It might be safe to say the use of proper nouns along with you will give a clear understanding of whom it refers to.

Poem (6):

Oh mathematics,

Sometimes you make me happy,

Sometimes you make me laugh,

Additionally, it is important to note that the context and tone of the poem can also provide clues as to what the subject is referring to. It is always best to scrutinise the poem rather than solely focusing on individual words or phrases. Furthermore, the use of mathematical language and concepts in the poems adds depth and complexity to the overall meaning. The poems may also highlight the intersection between art and science, showcasing how seemingly disparate fields can intertwine in unexpected ways.

Poem (1):

Tirelessly,

Your sacrifices have been so precious to me,

Poem (7):

If only to avoid loneliness,

anything will do.

In these two poems (1) and (7), the authors used C5 vocabulary: sacrifices and loneliness, which shows the depth of human emotions. The poems also depict the struggle of individuals to cope with these emotions and how they affect their lives. The authors' use of vivid imagery and metaphors adds to the overall impact of the poems, making them a powerful representation of the human experience.

Among the advantages of knowing a high level of CEFR vocabulary are the ability to express oneself more precisely and effectively, as well as the capacity to comprehend complex texts and ideas. This advantage aligned with the study conducted by Kilandar (2011) and Krishnan & Yunus (2019) where students show remarkable aptitude and ability to use the language when they are exposed to low-frequency words. Furthermore, possessing a broad range of vocabulary can also enhance one's critical thinking skills and overall cognitive abilities.

This is the same case with Poem (3) which uses a C6 vocabulary. These poems are longer and have more vocabulary compared to the poems that use the lower CEFR level of vocabulary. It suggests that writing practice with more advanced literature can be a valuable exercise in improving one's language skills and cognitive development. Additionally, exposure to diverse vocabulary can also expand one's cultural knowledge and understanding of different perspectives.

Poem (3):

I fell in love with your melody.

## **6. Conclusion**

Among the advantages offered by knowing highest frequency words is it will inexorably be linked to the communicative efficiency of the user. As Baron, Rayson and Archer (2009) states, "A frequency list records the number of times that each word occurs in the text. It can therefore provide interesting information about the words that appear (and do not appear) in a text". For instance, the word smile, smiling, smiled and smiles, do we count it as one word or six parental words? Thus, other than providing data that stores regularity of the word, frequency list also contributes to an abundance of information of the implicit or explicit word (Shauki & Singh, 2018).

Furthermore, it is critical to teach the learners vocabulary knowledge that will benefit them the most. According to Nation (2001), the most attention should be paid to the most frequently used words in General English. Low frequency words are not worthy of classroom time, and different learning and guessing strategies should be used after sufficient exposure to those frequent words.

Nonetheless, the study found that incorporating poetry into language learning not only improved vocabulary, but also enhanced students' understanding of cultural nuances and emotional expression in the English language. This suggests that poetry can be a valuable tool for ESL students to develop both linguistic and cultural competence.

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## **Authors Contributions**

All authors collectively contributed to the research and the final manuscript.

## **Conflict of Interest**

There is no conflict of interest associated with this publication.

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