AD EDUXIAN JOURNAL
A Quarterly Multidisciplinary Blind Peer Reviewed & Refereed Online International Journal
Google Scholar Indexing PIF: 1.048(I2OR), 3.125 (IIFS) & 3.8(SJIF)
Vol (3), Issue (3), July-September 2026 ISSN: 3048-7951

Contemporary Pedagogy in English Literature: Traditional Practices, Challenges, and Pedagogical Innovations in Teaching Poetry

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DOI: http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23643468

Review: 14/09/2026 Acceptance: 15/09/2026 Publication:25/10/2026

Abstract

This study explores the existing classroom culture, operational challenges, and pedagogical innovations within the domain of English literature instruction, focusing specifically on the pedagogy of poetry. Traditional methods of literature instruction increasingly face limitations in addressing contemporary learner needs and bridging the gap between historical textual structures and modern educational demands. Through a critical synthesis of existing pedagogical frameworks and thematic textual analysis, this paper identifies key limitations in current instructional modes, such as over-reliance on monotonous recitation and purely narrative summaries. It outlines major pedagogical hurdles, including conveying poetic mechanics, navigating cultural variances, and managing stylistic connotations. Finally, the paper highlights innovative pedagogical interventions—specifically stylistic analysis, technology integration, learner-centered collaborative learning, and eclectic instructional design—illustrating their application through a study of Amina Saïd's poetry.

Keywords: Pedagogy, English Literature, Innovative Pedagogy, Genre Pedagogy, Stylistics, Poetry Instruction.

Introduction

In recent years, educational technology and contemporary instructional models have emerged as essential components of effective teaching and learning processes across discipline boundaries. Modern pedagogical frameworks actively shapestudent engagement and conceptual understanding in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. However, traditional instructional methods in arts and humanities disciplines—particularly literature and language—have often lagged behind, resulting in a perceived decline in engagement, critical comprehension, and practical relevance. Literature, as a core dynamic of humanistic inquiry, possesses the capacity to develop critical thinking, linguistic agility, and cross-cultural empathy. Yet, transforming literature education into a responsive, industry-relevant, and intellectually engaging field requires creative teaching methodologies. Identifying pedagogical challenges and introducing targeted instructional innovations are therefore essential steps toward modernizing literature curricula.

Theoretical framework and conceptual foundations

The Concept of Literature

Etymologically derived from the Latin *littera* (meaning "an acquaintance with letters"), literature broadly encom passes written and printed texts. In a refined academic sense, literature refers to an organized body of creative oral, written, or visual works that utilize expressive language to depict human thought, emotion, and existence. Core attributes of literary texts include:

- **Enduring Value:** Persistence over time rather than transience.

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- **Human Experience:** The structured articulation of significant lived experiences.
- **Aesthetic Precision:** Carefully chosen and intentionally arranged linguistic forms.
- **Functional Outcomes:** Providing recreation, recognition, redemption, and revelation.

Philosophical and academic perspectives further refine this definition. Thomas Carlyle characterized literature as an "apocalypse of nature" and a continuous revelation of human reality (Nuttall, 1907). Similarly, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn emphasized its historical role, asserting that literature serves as the living memory of human experience across generations (Solzhenitsyn, 1970).

Understanding Pedagogy & Genre Differentiation

Pedagogy refers to the method, practice, and theoretical formulation of teaching. Emerging historically in the late 16th century from the French *pédagogue* and Greek *paidagōgia* ("child-leading"), pedagogy encompasses both the strategies used to deliver instructional content and the theoretical justifications underlying those choices (Anthony, 1963). Literature exists across distinct genres—poetry, drama, short stories, and novels—each requiring specialized pedagogical strategies rather than a uniform instructional model:

Genre	Traditional Instructional Mode	Core Pedagogical Focus
Poetry	Printed text reading & narrative summary	Prosody, oral cadence, and symbolic structure
Drama	Silent reading of written dialogue	Theatrical performance, action, and dynamic dialogue
Short Story	Plot summary and character listing	Compressed narrative techniques and thematic focus
Novel	Expository lecture on themes	Extended plot architecture and character evolution

Need and significance of the study

While language pedagogy has undergone significant research and modernization, literature pedagogy has frequently been neglected. Traditional, teacher-centric methods continue to dominate literature classrooms. Consequently, even highly motivated students often lack the analytical frameworks necessary to engage deeply with different literary genres. This issue is especially critical in 21st-century classrooms, where diverse student demographics, digital media exposure, and evolving linguistic patterns necessitate pedagogical models that move beyond passive lecture delivery. Investigating current pedagogical habits and proposing actionable, innovative methods is therefore essential to literature education.

Research objectives and methodology

This study was conducted with the objective to review existing classroom practices, identify key instructional challenges, and evaluate pedagogical innovations within English literature classrooms with respect to poetry. A qualitative pedagogical framework was adopted, combining literature review, instructional analysis, and a contextual illustration using selected poetry extracts.

Teaching of poetry: existing culture and practices

An examination of current poetry instruction reveals a reliance on legacy teacher-centered methodologies:

Recitation Without Rhythm
Poetry is frequently read aloud as standard prose narrative, ignoring metric rhythm, rhyme scheme, and intentional cadence.

Deductive Biographical Focus
Instructors start with long author biographies before stating the theme directly, bypassing original textual discovery.

Neglect of Literariness
Focusing exclusively on extracting moral messages overlooks the aesthetic mechanics and artistic craft of the poem.

Pure Lecture Dominance
The instructor maintains total authority in the classroom, leaving minimal space for student-led interpretation (Allwright, 1984).

Major Instructional Challenges in Poetry Pedagogy

Instructors face several operational and conceptual challenges when teaching poetry in modern literature classrooms:

- **Engaging Prosodic Features:** Assisting students in identifying formal poetic elements (meter, stanzaic form, rhyme) rather than reading solely for basic narrative plot.
- **Teacher Mastery of Poetics:** Delivering effective instruction requires teachers to maintain a strong technical command of poetics and genre structures.
- **Cultivating Aesthetic Appreciation:** Moving beyond factual recall to help learners perceive and evaluate the artistic quality of a poem.
- **Assessing Receptive Levels:** Gauging students' varying levels of literary readiness and tailoring interpretations appropriately.
- **Navigating Cultural Contexts:** Bridging cultural and historical gaps between the context of the poem and the background of the students (Berns, 1990).
- **Managing Connotative Meanings:** Helping students decode contextual, metaphorical, and hidden meanings inherent in poetic language.
- **Fostering Motivation:** Overcoming student reluctance toward poetry by generating intrinsic interest and creative engagement.

Innovations in poetry pedagogy

To address these challenges, several contemporary pedagogical approaches offer practical alternatives to traditional literature instruction:

1. Autonomous Textual Approach
Treating the poem as a self-sufficient entity where internal structural, thematic, and linguistic elements create meaning together.

2. Audio-Visual Technology Integration
Using digital media, performance recordings, and audio recitations to create an immersive, multimodal environment.

3. Application of Stylistics
Utilizing linguistic tools to analyze syntax, lexical choice, and Phonological patterns to unveil the poem's construction (Andrews, 2003).

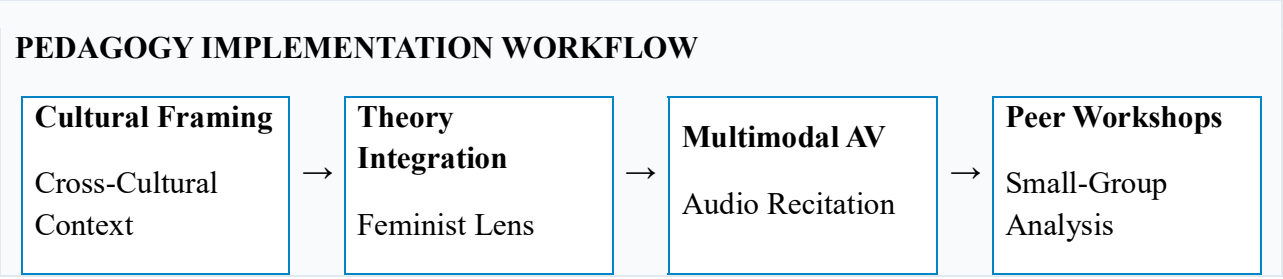
4. Learner-Centered Peer Groups
Dividing students into small collaborative groups to discuss and Negotiate interpretations, reducing classroom anxiety.

Pedagogical illustration: amina saïd's "my woman's transparence"

To illustrate these pedagogical principles, consider the following excerpt by African poet Amina Saïd:

> *"my woman's transparence*
> *has the whole sea*
> *as its mirror"*

Amina Saïd utilizes minimal, imagery-rich verse to articulate themes of identity, femininity, and bodily presence. Key motifs include *transparence*, *sea*, and *mirror*—words that evoke fluid self-expression, depth, and reflection.



Application strategy for the classroom

When teaching Amina Saïd's poem, instructors can combine these pedagogical methods for optimal engagement:

1. **Cross-Cultural Contextualization:** Address geographical and socio-cultural variations in literature, helping students contextualize gender norms without making rigid assumptions.
2. **Theoretical Framing:** Introduce foundational concepts from feminist theory and gender studies, guiding students to analyze how the poem subverts traditional perspectives on the female form.
3. **Technology Integration:** Use high-quality audio recordings to allow students to hear intended pauses and rhythm patterns, compensating for difficulties in classroom recitation.
4. **Collaborative Workshops:** Students analyze key metaphors (*sea*, *mirror*) in small peer groups, sharing diverse interpretations before consolidating findings in a teacher-guided summary.

Conclusion

The pedagogy of poetry requires a deliberate transition from rigid, lecture-heavy frameworks to adaptive, student-centered methodologies. While traditional approaches often reduce poetry to thematic summaries or memorized biographical details, modern literature classrooms benefit significantly from integrating stylistic analysis, multimedia tools, and collaborative group work. Treating a poem as an autonomous, multifaceted text enables educators to address instructional challenges related to prosody, cultural context, and artistic value. Adopting an eclectic pedagogical approach ensures that literature education remains dynamic, intellectually rigorous, and relevant to modern learners.

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