

English Teachers' Desire to Teach Poetry: The Impact of Educational Backgrounds, Belief toward Poetry, and Level of Confidence

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Abstract

This study aims to examine English teachers' desire to teach poetry writing. The underlying assumption directing this study is that frequency of poetry exposure will influence English teachers' desire to teach poetry. Specifically, the study is intended to find out the ways through which English teachers' educational backgrounds, perceptions toward poetry, and confidence level of poetry writing, influence their desire to teach poetry writing. English teachers from a university in Western Pennsylvania in the United States and from that in central Indonesia completed an online survey (n= 57). Statistical analysis revealed that the frequency of poetry instruction correlated negatively to English teachers' desire to teach poetry. Through the independent t test, it was found that the English teachers' country of education had significantly influenced their desire to teach poetry writing. In terms of teachers' perception of poetry and their level of confidence in poetry writing, the statistical measure indicated various results, both positive and negative correlations. This study provides guiding evidence that educational background has played a role in shaping English teachers' desire to teach poetry writing.

Keywords: English teachers, teaching poetry, perception.

Teaching poetry has long been recognized as an aspect of English language and literature curricula, which presents specific pedagogical challenges for teachers in many contexts (Wilson & Myhill, 2012). Although studies have shown that teaching poetry is useful for students (Iida, 2012a, 2012b; Hanauer, 2010), poetry teaching can be described as “peripheral” in the field of teaching English (Wilson, 2010, p. 53). In regards to the importance of teaching poetry, Hanauer (2003) asserts that teaching poetry promotes understanding and tolerance because “poetic discourse promotes understanding of individual experience and thus can play a role in advancing concepts of human diversity” (p. 79). Also, incorporating poetry into English lessons may strengthen students’ abilities to infer and interpret from the linguistic and situational contexts of literary texts (Dymoke & Hughes, 2009). Despite the fact that poetry writing instruction is shown to be beneficial in language classrooms, Hanauer (2012) indicates that many students and teachers in ESL/EFL contexts are skeptical about using poetry in their writing class. The reason that many teachers avoid teaching poetry writing is they think that poetry is more likely to be taught as part of the reading curriculum rather than as part of the writing curriculum. Additionally, the teachers believe that “poetry writing is thought to be difficult.” The lack of desire to teach poetry writing could be caused by educational experiences that teachers have had, such as the level of exposure and experience in writing poetry in both their personal and academic lives. However, empirical inquiry into the teaching of poetry writing is limited with respect to teachers’ perception of and desire to teach poetry writing. This study therefore aims at investigating English teachers’ perceptions toward teaching poetry in both mainstream and ESL/EFL contexts.

Literature Review

Several studies have shown the benefit of incorporating poetry writing into a language classroom (see Disney, 2014; Garvin, 2013; Hanauer 2010, 2012; Iida, 2012a, 2012b; 2016; Liao 2016; Widodo, Budi & Wijayanti, 2016). Language students had positive perceptions towards poetry writing (Iida, 2012b; Liao & Roy, in this issue). However, studies indicated that teachers shied away from teaching poetry for a variety of reasons such as a lack of confidence (Hughes & Dymoke, 2011). Hughes and Dymoke (2011) indicated that teachers were not confident to teach poetry if they were not familiar with the genre. Their study on pre-service teachers’ perceptions of their multimodal poetry writing experiences demonstrated that the participants were able to write poetry in various poetic forms as they gained confidence to write poetry and reflected on themselves as writers. Also, their findings showed that as the pre-service teachers gained their con-

confidence to write poetry, they also became confident to act as models for poetry writers when incorporating poetry into their English classrooms. This suggests a close relationship between teachers' confidence levels of teaching poetry writing and their desire to teach poetry writing.

In addition, Wilson (2010) reported how in-service teachers of poetry writing perceive the practice of teaching poetry writing. His findings showed that these in-service teachers perceived teaching poetry writing as in relation to writer's autonomy, experimental writing, imagination, and evaluation. Wilson further indicated that these teachers associated intuitive thinking and craft with the teaching of poetry. This implies that all of them share a similar view of what poetry should be taught or cannot be taught, which indicates an influence of their own education, including both how they perceived poetry and how they were educated about poetry, on how they would teach poetry writing.

These studies have touched upon the ways through which English teachers perceive teaching poetry (Hughes & Dymoke, 2011; Wilson, 2010), but both of them only deal with English teachers in English speaking countries and K-12 settings. More empirical studies regarding ESL/EFL teachers' perceptions toward teaching poetry are needed. As suggested by the aforementioned studies, the underlying assumption directing the current study is that English teachers' exposure to poetry, their confidence level toward writing poetry, and their perceptions toward poetry will affect their desire to teach poetry in their English classes. Therefore, the study is directed by the following research questions:

1. In what ways do English teachers' educational backgrounds influence their desire to teach poetry writing?
2. In what ways do English teachers' perceptions toward poetry influence their desire to teach poetry writing?
3. In what ways do English teachers' levels of proficiency in poetry writing influence their desire to teach poetry writing?

Methodology

Participants

Participants of this study were English teachers at a university in Western Pennsylvania and in central Indonesia. Of all the 112 teachers invited, 57 completed the full survey. Demographic information for the teachers participating in this study is provided in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of the participants (n= 57)

Characteristics	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	28	49%
Female	29	51%
First Language		
English	26	46%
Indonesian	28	49%
Others	3	5%
Country of Education		
USA	27	47%
Indonesia	25	44%
Others	5	9%
Strongest affiliation/Expertise		
Composition and TESOL	25	44%
Applied Linguistics	13	23%
Education and/or Curriculum	9	16%
Literature and Creative Writing	10	17%
Country Where (Currently) Teaching		
USA	29	51%
Indonesia	28	49%

Instrument

The instruments used in this study included 12 questions regarding teachers' educational background including their exposure to poetry reading and writing, and two questions regarding their desire to teach poetry (see Appendix A). Most of the aforementioned questions were designed in a 5-point Likert scale. We also provided one open-ended question asking the participants' reasons for their willingness or unwillingness to teach poetry writing in their English class. These questions were workshopped and validated before being used in this survey.

Data Collection

After validation of the instrument, the questions were distributed via an online survey software (Qualtrics). Upon the IRB approval (Log No. 16-252), an invitation email along with the link to the online survey was distributed to the English teachers at a university in Western Pennsylvania and central Indonesia through email and Facebook.

Data Analysis

The first step in analyzing the obtained data was to conduct descriptive analysis in obtaining an overview of the normality of data distribution. After analyzing the data descriptively, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. We also conducted an independent *t* test to find out the influence of different countries of education on English teachers' desire to teach poetry writing. Last, the verbal data gained from the open-ended questions were analyzed based on common themes.

Results: Statistical Analysis

Before the online survey was distributed, internal-consistency reliability for questions regarding desire to teach poetry was measured with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The result was $\alpha = .95$, indicating the internal consistency of a multiple-item scale was very high, suggesting good reliability for the scale. The next step in analyzing the data after obtaining the descriptive overview was conducting a correlation analysis to answer the first research question, namely "In what way do English teachers' educational backgrounds influence their desire to teach poetry?"

Table 2 presents the Pearson correlations measuring variables related to educational backgrounds and teachers' desire to teach poetry writing. The findings presented indicate that:

1. There was a significant negative correlation between the length of poetry instruction and English teachers' desire to teach poetry writing ($r = -.27, p = .043$).
2. There was a significant negative correlation between the length of exposure to reading poetry in the first and second language, the length of exposure to poetry writing in the first and second language, and their desire to teach poetry writing.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations between English Teachers' Educational Backgrounds and Their Desire to Teach Poetry Writing (N=57)

		The desire to learn how to teach poetry	The desire to teach poetry writing
Years of poetry instruction	<i>Pearson Correlation</i>	-.194	-.269*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.147	.043*
Frequency of reading poetry in L1	<i>Pearson Correlation</i>	-.448**	-.524**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
Frequency of reading poetry in L2	<i>Pearson Correlation</i>	-.454**	-.478**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
Frequency of writing poetry in L1	<i>Pearson Correlation</i>	-.337*	-.406**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.010	.002
Frequency of writing poetry in L2	<i>Pearson Correlation</i>	-.354**	-.349**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.007	.008

Note: ** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); * correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

An independent *t* test was conducted as a further analysis to see if English teachers' who earned their highest degree from the United States and from Indonesia had different beliefs toward poetry and exhibited different levels of desire to teach poetry writing. Table 3 presents the means and standard deviations for each item, measuring the two groups of English teachers' beliefs toward poetry and their desire to teach poetry. The findings indicate that:

1. English teachers who earned their highest degree from Indonesia showed a significantly stronger belief that a poet has natural talent ($M = 1.56$, $STD = 1.00$) than teachers who earned their highest degree from the United States ($M = 3.30$, $STD = 1.43$), $t(50) = 5.02$, $p = .00$.

2. English teachers who earned their highest degree from Indonesia evinced a significantly stronger belief that poetry must have rhythm ($M = 1.12$, $STD = .60$) than teachers who earned their highest degree from the United States ($M = 3.81$, $STD = 1.24$), $t(50) = 9.86$, $p = .00$.
3. English teachers who earned their highest degree from the United States showed significantly higher interest to learn how to teach poetry ($M = 2.85$, $STD = 1.43$) than teachers who earned their highest degree from Indonesia ($M = 3.76$, $STD = 1.67$), $t(50) = -2.11$, $p = .04$.
4. English teachers who earned their highest degree from the United States showed a significantly higher desire to teach poetry writing in their English class ($M = 2.74$, $STD = 1.56$) than teachers who earned their highest degree from Indonesia ($M = 3.80$, $STD = 1.63$), $t(50) = -2.39$, $p = .02$.

Table 3
English Teachers' Country of Education and Their Perception and Desire to Teach Poetry

	USA		Indonesia		<i>t</i> test	p
	(n = 27)		(n = 25)			
	M	SD	M	SD		
I believe that a poet has natural talent.	3.30	1.436	1.56	1.003	5.015**	.000
I believe that poetry must have rhythm.	3.81	1.241	1.12	.600	9.836**	.000
I would like to learn how to teach poetry in my English class.	2.85	1.433	3.76	1.665	-2.112*	.040
I would like to teach poetry writing in my English class.	2.74	1.559	3.80	1.633	-2.393*	.021

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

In order to explore how English teachers' beliefs toward poetry influence their desire to teach poetry writing, another Pearson correlation was conducted. Table 4 presents the correlational analysis of variables related to English teachers' belief of the poetry and their desire to teach poetry. As can be seen in Table 4, the findings indicate that:

1. There was a significant positive correlation between English teachers' beliefs about the importance of teaching poetry and the teachers' desire to teach poetry.
2. There was a significant negative correlation between English teachers' beliefs about the impossibility of writing poetry and their desire to teach poetry.

Table 4

Pearson Correlations between English Teachers' Perception of Poetry and Their Desire to Teach Poetry Writing (N= 57)

		The desire to learn how to teach poetry	The desire to teach poetry writing
Poetry is important in social occasions.	<i>Pearson Correlation</i>	.388**	.369**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	.005
I believe that a poet has natural talent.	<i>Pearson Correlation</i>	-.145	-.222
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.283	.097
I believe that learning to write poetry is impossible.	<i>Pearson Correlation</i>	-.390**	-.401**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	.002
Knowing how to teach poetry is important.	<i>Pearson Correlation</i>	.795**	.850**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000

Note: ** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); * correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Another correlational analysis was conducted to investigate whether English teachers' level of confidence in poetry writing influences their desire to teach poetry. The findings presented in Table 5 indicate that there was a significant positive correlation between English teachers' level of confidence to write poetry in their first and second language, and their desire to teach poetry writing.

Table 5

Pearson Correlations between English Teachers' Level of Confidence in Poetry and Their Desire to Teach Poetry Writing (N = 57)

		The desire to learn how to teach poetry	The desire to teach poetry writing
I am confident that I can write poetry in my mother tongue/first language	<i>Pearson Correlation</i>	.368*	.402**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005	.002
I am confident that I can write poetry in my second/ foreign language	<i>Pearson Correlation</i>	.764**	.682**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000

Note: ** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); * correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Our last analysis aims to find out the reasons why English teachers are willing or unwilling to teach poetry. Out of 57 participants, 54 responded to the open-ended question concerning their reasons of (un)willingness to write poetry in English. Table 6 shows the thematic analysis of these reasons. There are three main thematic categories: negative attitude (59%), positive attitude (35%), and mixed attitude (6%). In the negative attitude category, seven themes emerged from 59% of the responses. Not in line with curricula (44%) is the most reported reason among all the respondents who were unwilling to teach poetry while six other themes had lower rates: not trained or difficult to teach poetry (31%), difficult for students to write poetry (25%), not useful or interesting for students (19%), time-consuming (9%), not interested in teaching poetry (6%), and unclear reasons (3%). As for the positive attitude category, five themes were found based on 19 responses: expression (42%), language development (42%), meaningful experiences (37%), creativity and innovative thinking (16%), and reasons not identified (5%). Plus, the mixed attitude contains three responses with both positive and negative viewpoints, which shows while some teachers might be willing to teach poetry writing, they have some concerns. Overall, Table 6 (next page) shows a much higher negative attitude (59%) than positive (35%) from these English teachers to teach poetry in their classrooms.

Table 6

Thematic Analysis English Teachers' Reasons of (Un)willingness to Teaching Poetry Writing (N=54)

Thematic Category	Subcategory	Ratio	Example
Negative Attitude <i>32/54 (59%)</i>	Not in line with curricula	14/32 (44%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● My ENGL 101 course should focus on orienting students to items discussed relating to the rhetorical situation, not about how to write creatively in poetic form, which violates the course objectives for [the University's] English course, for instance.
	Not trained or difficult to teach poetry writing	10/32 (31%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I think it would be a disservice to my students to substitute important knowledge in the field of composition and rhetoric in a composition course in order to teach something that should be left to creative writing courses taught by professors with degrees in that field.
	Difficult for students to write poetry	8/32 (25%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Not all EFL students are capable in writing poetry in English.
	Not useful or interesting for students	6/32 (19%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I do not want to teach poetry writing in my writing class because I'd rather teach my students composition and grammar skills to improve their writing abilities. Poetry will not be very useful for them to apply jobs [sic] or to continue their study for higher degree.
	Time-consuming	3/32 (9%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● After all, the time for teaching English is limited, incorporating poetry writing will be time - consuming
	Not interested in teaching poetry	2/32 (6%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I have no interest in teaching poetry whatsoever. I'd rather teach first-year composition and rhetoric that does not involve/incorporate poetry.
	Unclear reasons	1/32 (3%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Because not feeling well
Positive Attitude <i>19/54 (35%)</i>	Expression	8/19 (42%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I would like to use poetry writing in my language classrooms since I believe students can express their emotions through poetry writing. I am positive that poetry writing in language classrooms allows students to reflect upon their personal life experiences and produce a text that is related to their interest and background.

Language development	8/19 (42%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching poetry is beneficial to improve my students' vocabulary and their sense of art. Also, it will be good to give in [sic] every language skills, since it can be integrated for four language skills.
Joyful & meaningful experiences	7/19 (37%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I want to learn to teach poetry in my English class to make the class fun, to get students to think of other genres, and to get students to go through a possibly transformative experience.
Creativity & innovative thinking	3/19 (16%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I really want to teach poetry in my English class because it can make my students to be more creative and promote innovative thinking.
Reasons no identified	1/19 (5%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wanting.

Discussion

This section will discuss how English teachers' educational backgrounds, perceptions toward poetry, and level of confidence in poetry writing influence their desire to teach poetry in their English classes. We are aware that the limited number of participants involved in this study has prevented us from generalizing our findings. However, despite this limitation, the study offers some insight about the correlation between the teachers' backgrounds, their perceptions of poetry, and their desire to teach poetry writing.

First, our findings contradicted the popular assumption that English teachers who have more exposure to poetry, i.e., having higher frequency of reading and writing poetry both in their first and second language, might have higher desire to teach poetry writing. Rather, our findings suggested the opposite, that is, the more frequent the English teachers are exposed to poetry learning, the lower their desire to teach poetry writing. This is in alignment with the finding from Liao and Roy's study (in this issue) that the more frequently that L2 students are involved with poetry reading and writing in their first and second language, the less they are interested in writing poetry. Low level of desire to teach poetry writing might be caused by the English teachers' educational experience when they were at school as found in Liao and Roy's study. Specifically, their unwillingness to teach poetry writing might be related to the English teachers' skepticism that poetry is difficult for both teachers and students as reflected in our qualitative finding. This coordinates with Liao and Roy's argument that a higher poetry reading and writing frequencies would result in having an idealistic expectation toward what a poem should be like.

Second, when analyzing the country of education, we found that English teachers' desire to teach poetry writing varied significantly with the countries where they earned their highest degree. Compared with English teachers earning their degree from ESL contexts (i.e. the United States), English teachers earning their highest degree in EFL contexts (i.e., Indonesia) perceived learning to write poetry as less feasible, demonstrating a lower desire to incorporate poetry writing in their English classes. Therefore, we seek to understand factors that cause the difference between the two groups of teachers. Our findings indicated that English teachers earning their highest degree from EFL contexts perceived that poetry was closely associated with rhythm and talent compared to the ones who received their degree in ESL contexts. This suggests that if one perceives poetry as closely related to rhymes and talents exemplified in the classic poetry, one will have a lower desire to teach poetry writing and consider it less possible to learn poetry writing. On one hand, it can be understood that English teachers in EFL contexts are primarily exposed to the model of classic poetry throughout the process of becoming English teachers, such as poems by Wordsworth and Shakespeare. On the other hand, English teachers who earn their degree in ESL contexts are more likely to be introduced to different forms of poetry and poetry from different eras and cultures. Based on these assumptions, we argue that being exposed primarily to classical poetry might have negative effects on English teachers' perceived ability to write and teach poetry. The negative effects of the exposure to classical poetry on English teachers' desire to teach poetry correspond with Liao and Roy's study (in this issue) that English majors tended to feel inferior about their poetry writing ability, resulting in having a lower desire of writing poetry, compared to engineering majors. However, more studies are needed to examine the influence of English teachers' backgrounds on their perceptions toward poetry from a socioeconomic perspective, such as the levels of education and income.

Third, our data also showed the top three reasons for not being willing to teach poetry writing, were not incorporating poetry in the curricula, not being trained/finding it difficult to teach poetry writing, and finding it difficult for students to write poetry. Based on these qualitative findings and the negative effects of prioritizing learning classic poetry, we have come up with the following administrative guidance. First, because, the most reported reason for the teachers' unwillingness to utilize poetry writing in English classrooms is that teaching poetry is not in line with the curricula, this shows a need to incorporate creative writing as a component in the curricula. Studies have shown that poetry writing is useful for teaching ESL/EFL students to become engaged

with the critical self-exploration of their thoughts, emotions, and experiences (Garvin, 2013; Hanauer, 2010, 2012; Iida, 2012a, 2012b, 2016; Liao, 2016). Additionally, educational program administrators should offer professional development opportunity for their teachers to be involved in workshops that introduce them to different varieties of poetry writing other than classic poetry. As suggested by Dymoke and Hughes (2009), if teachers are exposed to poetry in a variety of poetic forms, they will gain confidence in their ability to view themselves as competent writers of poetry. Once they experience poetry writing in a positive light, it is expected that they will demonstrate increased expectations toward their students' ability to write poetry.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

1. How many years of poetry instruction (e.g, poetry, novel, fiction) have you had from your previous education?
 - a. 0-5 years
 - b. 6-10 years
 - c. 11-15 years
 - d. 16-20 years
 - e. 21-25 years
 - f. Over 26 years

2. How frequent have you read poetry in your mother tongue (first language)?
 - a. Never
 - b. Seldom
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Often
 - e. Always

3. How frequent have you read poetry in your second/foreign language?
 - a. Never
 - b. Seldom
 - c. Sometimes

- d. Often
 - e. Always
4. How frequent have you engaged in poetry writing in your mother tongue (first language)?
- a. Never
 - b. Seldom
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Often
 - e. Always
5. How frequent have you engaged in poetry writing in your second/foreign language?
- a. Never
 - b. Seldom
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Often
 - e. Always

In the following questions please rate your answer on the scale of

1=strongly agree

2=somewhat agree

3=neither agree nor disagree

4=somewhat disagree

5=strongly disagree

1. Poetry is as important as social occasion such as funerals and weddings
2. I believe that a poet has natural talent
3. I believe that learning to write poetry is impossible
4. Knowing how to teach poetry is important
5. I would like to learn to teach poetry in my English class
6. I would like to teach poetry writing in my English class

Demographic information: Please answer the following questions.

7. What is your mother tongue/first language?
8. What is your second/foreign language?
9. From which country did you earn your highest degree?

10. What is your age?
- a. 20-29
 - b. 30-39
 - c. 40-49
 - d. Above 50
11. What is your gender?
- a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Other
12. What is your strongest affiliation within the field of English teaching?
- a. TESOL
 - b. Rhetorical and/or Composition
 - c. Applied Linguistics
 - d. Education and/or Curriculum
 - e. Literature
 - f. Creative Writing
 - g. Others (Please specify: _____)
13. Which country are you teaching now?