

## DIDACTIC PROJECTS

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### DEVELOPING SPECIFIC COMPETENCES USING THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST

Stella GORBANI

#### Abstract

*Modern education lays stress on competence formation which has been lately abandoned by education in Moldova. The Curriculum in Foreign Language Teaching of Moldova identified a number of specific competences, which tend to educate an active and creative personality, flexible in the changing circumstances of life. They can be developed at the lesson of English, using poetry (in this case the poetry of R. Frost) which supplies a lot of ground not only for language teaching but for the formation of such competences as: communicative, civic, pragmatic, axiological, etc. A number of lesson projects are offered here to illustrate how various forms of specific competences can be developed at the lesson of English.*

**Keywords:** *Modern education, competences, poetry, formation.*

The center of TEFL of Moldova today is competence formation. According to the National Modernized TFL Curriculum „a competence is an integrated set of skills and abilities, which are supposed to be formed by pupils as a result of using language in different contexts of self realization, adequate to their age, cognitive levels and levels of language acquisition, which are crucial for the formation of a new personality, active and ready to act in new circumstances, for solving problems of everyday life in a society that is in constant change”<sup>1</sup>.

The specific competences are grouped according to educational domains formulated by the Common European Framework of References for Languages which was the basis for the elaboration of the Modernized Curriculum for Foreign Language Teaching of Moldova. Each domain determined by the Curriculum comprises several types of competences, the Domain of Communication including linguistic, communicative, discursive competences; the Domain of Culture, comprising cross cultural competences; the inter subject competences being developed within the Domain of Connection; the Domain of Community focusing on civic competences, developing the attitudes and directions in life, and the Domain of Connection forming the methodological skills. Each of these competences are crucial for the education of a new personality, active and creative, able to build a more mature society, which is the focus of education of Moldova at the present stage. Each of these competences can be successfully developed in TEFL using poetry as a teaching material.

Developing the communicative competence is the basic competence to be developed in TEFL. The Common European Framework of References for Languages states: “*Communicative language competence can be considered as*

comprising several components: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic"<sup>2</sup>. *Linguistic competences* include lexical, phonological, syntactical knowledge and skills and other dimensions of language as system, independently of the sociolinguistic value of its variations and the pragmatic functions of its realizations. This component, considered here from the point of view of a given individual's communicative language competence, relates not only to the range and quality of knowledge, but also to the cognitive organization and the way this knowledge is stored and to its accessibility"<sup>3</sup>.

There are many advantages of using poetry in TEFL. Being rich in multiple levels of meaning, poetry helps the learner to be actively involved in language study. A. Maley and A. Duff state about the roles of poetry in TEFL the following: "Poetry offers a rich resource for input to language learning. As such it is at least as relevant as the more commonly accepted types of input"<sup>4</sup>. "Encouraging our students to penetrate into the multiple ambiguities of poetry, we are helping to develop their capacity of penetrating into meaning which can be applied in real life. Meaning is a function of a focus on form and an increased awareness of the subtleties of poetic representation inevitably entailing an increased awareness of the signifying potential of grammar"<sup>5</sup>, points out H. Widdowson.

Poetry can help students to become more sensitive to some features of a language and especially of English, drawing parallels with the linguistic system of the native language comparing grammatical forms, usage, thus developing the competence of the Domain of Connection or the inter subject connection, which will help the students acquire knowledge and form competences in complex.

We cannot help mentioning the wide educational functions of poetry. "Although, poetry and grammar, linguistic analysis and literary interpretation have by tradition been seen as distinct polarities and in opposition, however, they can be combined for mutual benefits, and can have a broader educational perspective"<sup>6</sup>. Poetry can help promote the development of the competence of the Domain of Community which involves: the responsibility for one's own opinion, tolerance and respect towards other opinions, making a reference to the general human concepts about life in society, cherishing the universal values and being able to have one's own values which will make society more advanced in quality. Of no less importance is developing a positive attitude towards the surrounding world, possessing the competence of self-evaluation and self-assertion which never before have been in the focus of education in Moldova.

Poetry can stimulate the imagination of our students, increase their emotional awareness and develop their critical thinking, which is another demand of the Modernized Curriculum of TFL of Moldova.

Poetry can provide students with access to the culture of the people whose language they study, developing the cross cultural competence. It

includes using the knowledge of cultures of the target language, teaching tolerance to other cultures, using the cultural experiences beneficial for personal life, preparing the students for the general globalization, etc.

American literature supplies a rich variety of poetry which can be used for developing a number of competences, beginning with the competences of the Domain of Communication and finishing with the ones of the Domain of Community. The creation of Robert Frost, the well known American poet, contains nice poems on various themes, which can contribute to the formation of the competences in question.

We believe that the series of lesson projects devoted to the creation of Robert Frost, which we offer here, will be beneficial in competence development in TEFL.

The regretted President of the USA, John F. Kennedy, addressed a speech on the day of commemoration of R. Frost, published in "The Atlantic" magazine in 1964 under the title "Poetry and Power". It is a wonderful material for developing a number of competences at the lesson of English, such as: linguistic, cross cultural, civic and pragmatic. It is a valuable material for teaching the national pride, which is a thing the Moldovian nation lost along history. This article can serve as an introduction to the creation of R. Frost, whose talent was so beautifully presented by John F. Kennedy. This speech is very symbolical, because it reveals the attitude of a Statesman towards art, poetry and truth.

## L E S S O N P R O J E C T 1

**Theme:** *The Figure of a Poet and His Role in the Education of His Nation*

**Objectives:**

- to identify the role of R. Frost in the spiritual education of the American nation;
- to formulate the spiritual values of a democratic society, and of the national pride;
- to develop communicative, linguistic and pragmatic competences;
- to develop civic and cross cultural competences.

**Materials:**

- The article "Poetry and Power" by John F. Kennedy<sup>7</sup>.

**Procedure:**

**Stage 1: Introduction**

*Teacher:* "Today, we shall speak about the role of poetry in the spiritual education of people. For this we shall read an article which represents John F. Kennedy's address dedicated to the memory of the famous American poet, R. Frost. The article "Poetry and Power" contains the speech of the regretted President of the USA, John F. Kennedy on the day of memory of R. Frost. Robert Lee Frost (March 26, 1874 - January 29, 1963) is one of the most popular and critically respected American poets of his generation. "R. Frost was frequently honored during his lifetime, receiving four Pulitzer Prizes for

Poetry. He is highly regarded for his realistic depictions of rural life and his command of American colloquial speech. His work frequently employed settings from rural life in New England in the early twentieth century, using them to examine complex social and philosophical themes"<sup>8</sup>. The poet and the critic Randall Jarrell often praised Frost's poetry, writing: "Robert Frost seems to me the greatest of the American poets of this century. Frost's virtues are extraordinary. No other living poet has written so well about the actions of ordinary men; his wonderful dramatic monologues or dramatic scenes come out of a knowledge of people that few poets have had, and they are written in a verse that uses, sometimes with absolute mastery, the rhythms of actual speech"<sup>9</sup>. He also praised Frost's seriousness and honesty, stating that Frost was particularly skilled at representing a wide range of human experience in his poems. The article under consideration is an appreciation of the great merits of Robert Frost, as of a personality, poet and citizen".

### **Stage 2: Reading comprehension**

The class is reading the article using different methods of reading. Some passages are read individually, others are read in groups, others in pairs.

### **Stage 3: Answering comprehension questions**

*What epithet does John F. Kennedy use to qualify R. Frost as a personality? How does a nation reveal itself according to this speech? What does the author say about the nation and the personality of an artist? How does the author appreciate the role of the poetry of R. Frost in the life of his nation? What source is R. Frost for the American nation, according to this speech? What connection does John F. Kennedy see between Strength and Power? Which are the duties of a writer in a democratic society, according to this speech? What is the role of art in the education of a nation according to John F. Kennedy's speech?*

### **Stage 4: Focus on vocabulary**

*Teacher: "President John F. Kennedy uses many words that refer to the education of man in society. Pick up from this article all the sentences referring to education. Select from this article all the words that contain prefix self-. Define what is: self-esteem, self-comprehension, self-deception. Which of the following words are synonyms to the word esteem: honor, worship, respect, reverence, evaluation, assessment, rank? Use these words in situations of your own".*

### **Stage 5: Critical thinking development**

Write one paragraph about what self-esteem means for you.

### **Stage 6: Commentary of the merits of R. Frost to the education of the democratic values of the American society according to this article**

*Teacher: "Pick up from the text all the merits of R. Frost as enumerated by the President John F. Kennedy".*

### **Stage 7: Free discussion. Group work**

Students are divided into groups. Each group receives a card with assignment for group discussion.

Group 1: *What can you say about the merits of R. Frost as of a citizen and as of a poet, after reading this article? What is John F. Kennedy's attitude towards R. Frost?*

Group 2: Pick from the speech 5 adjectives which the speaker uses to characterize the creation of the poet. What makes a good poet in your opinion?

### Stage 8: Follow up

Home assignment is to read the poem "Stopping by Woods in a Snowy Evening" by R. Frost, the study of which will be used for developing "key-transversal competencies".

Note: according to the "Modernized Curriculum of Foreign Language Teaching of Moldova" key-transversal competences refer to the general group of competences which are supposed to develop a harmonious personality, knowledgeable and competent to act in different situations of life, flexible and active in society<sup>10</sup>.

The poem "Stopping by Woods in Snowy Evening" by R. Frost is a nice poem suitable for developing the competences of self-evaluation and self-comprehension which will help the students to follow and appreciate their personal development and adjust it to the requirements of time.

## L E S S O N P R O J E C T 2

**Theme:** *Knowing oneself is victory in life*

**Class:** Intermediate and advanced

**Moto:** *Knowing others is intelligence; knowing yourself is true wisdom. Mastering others is strength, mastering yourself is true power.*

### Objectives:

- to illustrate the talent of the poet R. Frost in depicting nature and feelings;
- to deduce meaning from context;
- to develop aural reading skills, paying attention to rhyme and rhythm;
- to discuss the mood and attitudes revealed in the poem;
- to develop the competence of self-evaluation and self-comprehension;
- to develop discursive competence.

**Competences to develop:** communicative, linguistic, attitudinal (self evaluation, self comprehension), axiological competences.

**Materials:** "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost:

*Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village, though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.  
My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.  
He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.  
The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,*

*But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.*

**Stage 1: Checking comprehension of the poem**

The students are asked to tell the story of the poem in their own words. *Story sample:* A man is on his way somewhere at nightfall. As he rides along the country road in snow, he stops his horse to watch the woods. He knows who is the owner of the woods and where he lives. The horse thinks it strange to stop in the snow, wondering why the man stops there on the coldest day, having no farmhouse around. The horse gives its bells a shake, as if saying: "Hey, what's wrong? Why did we stop?" A deep silence fills the air which is soon broken by the bell sounds. Only then the man awakens as if from a dream. Then, he reminds himself of his earthly duties, thinking about the long way to go before he can sleep.

**Stage 2: Arranging the poem in correct sequences**

Students are given lines from this poem written on separate pieces of paper, which are given scattered. The students work in groups and have to arrange the poem in the correct order.

**Stage 3: Commenting on the mood of the story** by illustrating with words from the poem that reveal it.

**Stage 4: Commenting on the message of the poem**, which deals with of self-comprehension. Students pick examples which illustrate these feelings.

**Stage 5: Discussion of students' experiences about their self-evaluation**

Bringing examples of life experiences when they paid attention to their "self-...".

**Stage 6: Writing a commentary of the motto of the lesson** "Knowing others is intelligence; knowing yourself is true wisdom. Mastering others is strength, mastering yourself is true power".

Next follows a lesson plan which will introduce the poem "The Road Not Taken" by R. Frost, which supplies a nice opportunity for teaching communicative, lexical, competences, introducing the notion of figurative language and symbolism, and developing the competences of the Domain Community, civic and axiological competences.

### L e s s o n P r o j e c t 3

**Theme:** *Choices in life*

**Level:** advanced

**Objectives:**

- to define figurative language and symbol;
- to identify cases of symbols in a poem;
- to comment on each symbol;
- to create their own context, using symbols;
- to determine the role of symbols in poetry;
- to develop the following competences: communicative, linguistic, pragmatic, self-evaluation, self-comprehension.

**Materials:** Poem "The Road not Taken" by R. Frost:

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;  
Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear,  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,  
And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I marked the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way  
I doubted if I should ever come back.  
I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference".

**Procedure:**

**Stage 1: *Listening comprehension of the poem***

The teacher is reading first the poem for student's oral perception.

**Stage 2: *Discussion of the poem "The Road not Taken" by R. Frost***

Teacher: "Answer the questions: How many travelers are presented in the first stanza? Why did the traveler stand for a long time, looking down the road? Which road did the traveler chose? Why? How did both roads lay that morning in the eyes of the traveler? Did the traveler plan to take the second road some other day? Was the traveler sure that he would come back some time? Why will the traveler tell this with a sigh ages and ages hence?"

**Stage 3: *Introduction of the notion of symbol, as figurative language***

Teacher: "This poem is rich in symbols. The symbol is a device the poets use in order to make their images more expressive, introducing variety to their expression. "The Oxford Dictionary of Current English" defines the word "symbol" as follows: 1. *Something that represents something else by association, resemblance, or convention, especially a material object used to represent something invisible.* 2. *A printed or written sign used to represent an operation, element, quantity, quality, or relation, as in mathematics or music.* 3. *Psychology. An object or image that an individual unconsciously uses to represent repressed thoughts, feelings, or impulses<sup>11</sup>.* "The Glossary of Literary Terms" introduces the following definition: "Symbols are physical objects in a story intentionally repeated so that they come to represent some larger, abstract concepts. In order to comprehend a piece of poetry one should be able to identify symbols and interpret them".

**Stage 4: After reading activity**

Students are supposed to find the symbols used by R. Frost in the poem and comment on each symbol. We offer an interpretation of each symbol:

- *road* symbolizes the life of a person;
- *two roads* symbolize the choices man has to do in his life. One can never walk or take two roads at once. The problem of the choices in life is very important and very responsible. Sometimes a choice can either bring success or failure in life;
- *woods* symbolize first of all life, being full of trees. A tree is a symbol of life. At the same time the woods having many trees symbolize the numerous events of life. A tree can hide a man from the storm or from the wind. At the same time in the woods the visibility is reduced because of many trees. Just as man can not see far away in the woods, the same in life man can not know what follows next, what will happen after a moment, an hour, a day, etc. In woods man can feel pretty insecure, never knowing what is waiting for him behind a tree or a bush- may be a fearful animal, or a trap. Or may be a beautiful mushroom, or a nice clearing full of flowers where man can relax, or may be a hunters' hut which can save the life of a man who has lost his way..., etc. So the word "woods" can symbolize quite a number of things. It depends what interpretation the reader gives to the word in a concrete context;
- *yellow* symbolizes autumn which is often associated with the decline of life, of youth. Though it is associated with the colour of gold but still in figurative language it usually stands for withering decline of life;
- the *traveler* is considered a traveler on earth. Traveler is considered any person who is on a road or on a way. So Frost uses this beautiful comparison of a traveler with a man who is on his road of life;
- *undergrowth* is the thick carpet of grass and weed that fills the ground under the bushes and trees. It symbolizes the uncertainty and difficult situations which always occur here or there;
- *no step back*, this expression is very symbolical because it shows the impossibility to return into the past, being on the road of life. One can return physically in a certain place but man can not return any moment of his life back.

**Stage 5: Interpretation of the message of the poem using the symbols**

There is a very neat parallel between the message of the poem and the symbol used by R. Frost. A traveler found himself in woods or in the midst of life events, surrounded by many things, but at the moment he faces just two roads. The two roads symbolize the choices a man has to do in life, to take one way or another. Both the ways are full of the unknown, just as man does not know what will happen in the next moment, so this traveler has to decide which road to take. Both ways seem the same, though he actually chooses the one which is grassy and wants wear, meaning it was more attractive with more grass, seeming easier and more pleasant to walk on. Still the road not taken remained in the heart of the traveler and he thought about taking it some other day. Though after some more thinking he doubts if he will ever come back. It is interesting to notice that the traveler thinks about ages to come and about the sigh he will give for missing the opportunity of taking the other road. It means the traveler admits that something will be missed in life and that one can not realize all the dreams.



### Stage 6: Discussion of the theme and idea of the poem

After analyzing and discussing all the symbols used by R. Frost in this poem we can conclude that its main theme is: "Life and the Regrets of Life". The idea is that life always makes people regret about some things done or not done. Regrets are inevitable in life. Another theme is: "Choices in Life". The idea is that life often requires choices to be made after which man regrets or keeps thinking about the missed opportunity.

We believe that these materials will be helpful for the EFL teachers and students in competences development.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Curriculumul..., 6.

<sup>2</sup>Common..., p. 9.

<sup>3</sup>Common..., p. 10.

<sup>4</sup>Maley et alii, 1989, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup>Widdowson, 1989, p. 145.

<sup>6</sup>Widdowson, 1989, p. 139.

<sup>7</sup>Kennedy, 1963.

<sup>8</sup>Pritchard, 2000.

<sup>9</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Frost](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Frost)

<sup>10</sup>Curriculumul..., p. 7.

<sup>11</sup>Hornbey, 1982, p. 372.

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