Interpreting English Poetry in EFL Contexts: Linguistic, Cultural, and Cognitive Challenges

Huwaydah Aboulqasim Aldeeb
hu.abdullah@zu.edu.ly
University of Zawia, College of Education, Abuissa, English Department, Zawia, Libya

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Abstract

This literature review explores the primary challenges faced by non-native English speakers in interpreting English poetry, with a focus on three interrelated dimensions: linguistic, cultural, and cognitive. English poetry, unlike prose, presents a dense and stylized use of language that includes figurative expressions, complex syntax, and symbolic references often rooted in English-speaking cultural traditions. For learners of English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL), these features create significant obstacles to comprehension and interpretation. Drawing on theories from applied linguistics, schema theory, stylistics, and cognitive psychology, this review synthesizes scholarly findings that highlight how lexical ambiguity, cultural unfamiliarity, and cognitive overload impede the poetic reading process. In addition, it outlines pedagogical strategies that can enhance learners' ability to engage with poetry, such as scaffolding, explicit instruction in figurative language, and reader-response approaches. The review also identifies key gaps in current research, including the lack of learner-centered studies, limited use of digital tools, and the need for longitudinal investigations. The findings underscore the importance of integrative, culturally responsive teaching methods that enable learners to navigate the complexity of poetic texts while developing linguistic and interpretive competence.

Keywords: Poetry Interpretation, Linguistic Challenges, Cultural Schema,Figurative Language, Literature Pedagogy.

1. Introduction

Poetry holds a unique position in the landscape of English literature. Unlike prose, it often relies on compressed language, intricate symbolism, and layered meanings, making its interpretation especially complex. For non-native English speakers, engaging with English poetry presents not only an opportunity for linguistic enrichment but also a significant intellectual challenge. Poetry demands more than just a basic understanding of vocabulary and grammar, it calls for sensitivity to rhythm, metaphor, tone, and cultural nuance. As such, interpreting poetry is a multifaceted task that intersects with language proficiency, cultural awareness, and cognitive engagement.

Over the past few decades, an increasing number of studies have sought to understand the difficulties non-native speakers encounter when interpreting English poetry. These challenges can be broadly categorized into three key domains: linguistic, cultural, and cognitive. Linguistically, non-native readers often struggle with poetic diction, syntactic deviation, and figurative language that defies literal interpretation. Culturally, they may face barriers stemming from unfamiliar references, symbols, or contexts rooted in English-speaking traditions. Cognitively, the abstract and interpretive demands of poetry can overwhelm learners who are still developing their analytical reading skills in a second language.

This literature review aims to synthesize existing research related to these three dimensions. It explores the ways in which language structure, cultural background, and cognitive processing intersect in shaping non-native English speakers' engagement with poetry. By critically examining current academic discussions and empirical studies, this review seeks to highlight not only the primary obstacles learners face, but also potential strategies for educators to support poetic interpretation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework

The interpretation of poetry, particularly by non-native English speakers, is best understood through an interdisciplinary lens that incorporates theories from applied linguistics, cultural studies, and cognitive psychology. Each of these perspectives sheds light on the specific dimensions of difficulty encountered during poetic interpretation.

2.1 Linguistic Theory

The linguistic challenges of poetry interpretation are often grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), a framework developed by Halliday (1978), which views language not merely as a structural system but as a tool shaped by and shaping social meaning. In SFL, meaning is constructed through the interaction of three meta-functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Poetry, in particular, manipulates these functions by deviating from standard syntactic and lexical norms to foreground specific meanings while deliberately suppressing others. Unlike prose, where language often aims at clarity and direct communication, poetry subverts linearity and predictability, employing elliptical phrasing, inversion, fragmentation, and compacted metaphorical structures. This foregrounding disrupts the conventional grammatical and semantic cues that second-language learners rely on for comprehension, especially those still developing fluency in parsing sentence-level syntax (Lazar, 1993). As such, the poetic text becomes not only a challenge in content but a challenge in form, requiring learners to adapt their linguistic expectations and interpretive strategies.

Another valuable approach is Stylistics, which bridges literary analysis and linguistic description by examining how formal choices at the phonological, lexical, grammatical, and discourse levels generate literary meaning. According to Simpson (2004), stylistic analysis allows learners to systematically uncover how devices such as metaphor, alliteration, sound repetition, syntactic parallelism, and lexical deviation contribute to tone, mood, and theme. While these elements enrich the poetic experience, they also create interpretive ambiguity that may overwhelm learners unfamiliar with the aesthetic functions of such techniques. Figurative language, in particular, often requires non-literal interpretation, something that many EFL learners struggle with due to their tendency to prioritize direct, referential meanings in second-language processing.

2.2 Cultural Theory

From a cultural perspective, Schema Theory provides a foundational lens for understanding how a reader's prior knowledge and experiences shape their ability to interpret texts. As Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) explain, readers approach texts with mental frameworks, or schemata, that help them organize and interpret new information. These schemata include not only linguistic knowledge but also cultural, historical, and literary awareness.

In the context of poetry, this means that successful interpretation often depends on recognizing allusions, symbolic patterns, and culturally specific themes. Non-native readers, however, may not share the same cultural background as the intended audience of English poetry and thus may lack the schemata necessary to make coherent or nuanced interpretations (Kramsch, 1993). Without familiarity with cultural signifiers, such as references to British history, Christian motifs, or literary archetypes, learners may misinterpret key ideas or fail to engage meaningfully with the text. This lack of cultural grounding can create cognitive dissonance or lead to emotional disengagement, particularly when students sense that the poem was written for a readership to which they do not belong.

Building on this, Postcolonial Literary Theory sheds further light on the power dynamics at play in cross-cultural literary interpretation. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002) argue, canonical English literature, including much of the poetic tradition, often reflects the values, assumptions, and ideologies of dominant (typically Western and colonial) cultures. Non-native English readers, especially those from formerly colonized or culturally marginalized regions, may encounter not only unfamiliar references but also embedded discourses of exclusion or cultural superiority. These texts may present an "authorized" cultural worldview that does not accommodate alternative perspectives, thereby reinforcing feelings of alienation or inferiority in the reader. When faced with poems that implicitly privilege a Western aesthetic or historical experience, learners may struggle to locate themselves within the poetic narrative.

2.3 Cognitive Theory

From a cognitive standpoint, Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) provides a valuable framework for understanding the mental effort involved in processing poetic texts. According to Sweller (1988), human working memory has limited capacity, and learning is optimized when cognitive load is carefully managed. Poetic language, characterized by syntactic deviation, semantic density, and figurative abstraction, places a high intrinsic cognitive load on the reader, as understanding the text requires simultaneous attention to vocabulary, imagery, sound patterns, and structural elements. For non-native speakers, who are often still developing automaticity in decoding and comprehension, this cognitive burden is further intensified by extraneous load introduced by unfamiliar forms, complex metaphors, and non-linear structures. As a result, learners may experience cognitive overload, impairing their ability to construct meaning or engage deeply with the poem's thematic content.

Complementing CLT, Cognitive Poetics, as formulated by Stockwell (2002), delves into how readers mentally represent poetic texts and how their expectations, prior knowledge, and emotional responses interact with linguistic features. This theory emphasizes that comprehension is not merely a passive process but involves active interpretation, inferencing, and the construction of mental imagery. Poetic texts, by their nature, encourage readers to form visual, emotional, and conceptual representations that go beyond surface-level meaning. However, for non-native speakers, unfamiliarity with the cultural and stylistic codes embedded in English poetry can interrupt this process. Without fluency in the symbolic or metaphorical dimensions of the language, learners may struggle to activate the appropriate mental schemas necessary for interpretation, which in turn hinders emotional resonance and intellectual appreciation. For learners reading in a second language, limited vocabulary and cultural distance can dampen these affective responses, creating a disconnect between the formal beauty of the poem and the reader's experience. In this way, poetry becomes not only cognitively demanding but emotionally inaccessible, unless pedagogical strategies are used to bridge this interpretive gap.

3. The Nature of English Poetry

English poetry is a rich and multifaceted literary form characterized by its unique use of language, rhythm, and imagery to evoke emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic responses. Unlike prose, poetry often departs from conventional grammatical structures and prioritizes sound, metaphor, and symbolism to communicate meaning. This deviation from linguistic norms presents a distinct interpretive challenge, especially for non-native English speakers.

3.1 Language and Form

Poetry frequently employs a condensed and stylized form of language that intensifies meaning through deliberate manipulation of diction, syntax, and structure. As Widdowson (1992) observes, poetry draws attention not merely to what is said but to how it is said, foregrounding language itself as an object of aesthetic and interpretive reflection. Unlike prose, which often seeks to convey meaning transparently, poetry resists direct communication by embedding meaning within complex linguistic patterns. Poets exploit the materiality of language, its sound, rhythm, and visual form, to heighten emotional resonance and to encourage deeper, often multiple layers of interpretation. In this context, every lexical and syntactic choice becomes potentially meaningful, with even small deviations from standard usage carrying significant interpretive weight.

This heightened linguistic awareness is further evident in the use of phonological devices such as alliteration, assonance, consonance, rhyme, and rhythm, which serve not only aesthetic functions but also semantic and thematic ones. For instance, repeated vowel sounds can evoke softness or sorrow, while harsh consonantal patterns may generate tension or urgency. Lazar (1993) emphasizes that such formal features, far from being decorative, often serve to mirror or reinforce the poem's underlying emotional or narrative content. Yet these features, which native speakers might process intuitively, often require explicit analytical attention from non-native readers who may not be attuned to the aural and rhythmic subtleties of English poetry.

The formal diversity of poetry presents another interpretive challenge. Traditional structures such as the sonnet impose strict constraints on rhyme scheme, meter, and thematic progression, typically exploring a conflict and its resolution within a 14-line framework. In contrast, free verse rejects these conventions in favor of syntactic and rhythmic freedom, relying instead on visual layout, line breaks, and enjambment to guide reading and generate meaning. As Attridge (1995) points out, enjambment, the continuation of a sentence or clause beyond the end of a line, creates deliberate tension between grammatical and poetic units, often inviting readers to pause where they grammatically should not, or to push forward through ambiguity.

3.2 Figurative Language and Ambiguity

Central to poetic expression is the use of figurative language, including metaphor, simile, personification, and symbolism, devices that elevate language beyond its literal function to evoke abstract ideas, emotional nuance, and philosophical depth. These figures of speech are not ornamental; rather, they constitute the core mechanisms through which poetry compresses and intensifies meaning. Through metaphor, for example, unrelated concepts are brought into imaginative relation ("Hope is the thing with feathers"), while personification can imbue inanimate objects with human qualities, allowing readers to experience abstract concepts as tangible and affective. This imaginative leap invites readers into a multi-dimensional engagement with the text, requiring interpretation on both cognitive and emotional levels. As Leech (1969) emphasizes, ambiguity in poetry should not be seen as a flaw but rather as a deliberate aesthetic strategy. The richness of poetic meaning often arises from polysemy, where a single word, image, or phrase carries multiple potential interpretations.

This ambiguity is what allows poetry to resonate differently with each reader, offering space for personal reflection, emotional projection, and interpretive variability. Far from offering a fixed meaning, poetry thrives on indeterminacy and metaphorical flexibility, encouraging readers to co-construct meaning with the text.

However, for non-native English speakers, this very ambiguity can become a significant obstacle to comprehension. The interpretive flexibility of figurative language often relies on shared cultural references, symbolic associations, or idiomatic knowledge that EFL/ESL learners may not possess. Without adequate linguistic and cultural grounding, learners may default to literal interpretations, misread metaphorical intent, or miss the layered significance entirely.

3.3 Emotional and Philosophical Depth

English poetry often addresses profound and universal human experiences such as love, death, nature, identity, and spirituality. These themes resonate across cultures and time periods, yet their artistic articulation in poetry is far from straightforward. Rather than presenting these subjects through direct exposition, poets often employ emotionally charged language, layered imagery, symbolic patterns, and sonic devices to convey their nuances. The emotional tone of a poem, whether one of melancholy, awe, joy, or irony, is not typically stated explicitly but is embedded in subtle elements such as diction, rhythm, metaphor, and even visual layout. This interplay between form and feeling requires readers to perceive and interpret not only what is said, but how it is said, making poetry a deeply interpretive and often affective reading experience.

As Short and Candlin (1989) note, this genre demands a heightened sensitivity to linguistic form, as even small choices in word connotation or sound can shift the emotional register of a poem. The use of evocative imagery, such as in lines that depict a "withered leaf" or a "silent moon," often carries emotional significance that goes beyond the literal, invoking themes of decay, isolation, or transcendence. These effects are frequently amplified by sound patterns such as alliteration or onomatopoeia, which subtly reinforce the mood and emotional rhythm of the poem. For second-language readers, however, this kind of interpretive sensitivity can be difficult to achieve. Linguistic limitations, such as restricted vocabulary or lack of familiarity with figurative conventions, may hinder their ability to perceive emotional undertones or thematic subtext.

Even when the general meaning of a poem is understood, its emotional resonance may remain inaccessible or flattened if the reader cannot fully appreciate the nuances in tone or diction.

3.4 Reader Engagement and Interpretation

Poetry is inherently dialogic, it is not a closed system of meaning but an open, interactive form that invites the reader to actively co-construct meaning through interpretation. Unlike expository texts that aim for clarity and consensus, poetry thrives on ambiguity, multiplicity, and subjectivity, making the act of reading a uniquely personal and creative process. This interpretive openness is central to reader-response theory, particularly as formulated by Rosenblatt (1978), who views reading as a transactional process between the reader and the text. According to this perspective, meaning does not reside solely in the words on the page, nor is it wholly determined by authorial intent; instead, it emerges through the dynamic interplay between the reader's background knowledge, emotional state, personal experiences, and imagination, and the language of the poem itself.

This theoretical orientation has profound implications for how poetry is approached in the language classroom. It validates diverse interpretations, recognizing that each reader brings a unique set of cultural and emotional lenses to the reading experience. In doing so, it transforms poetry into a collaborative, evolving, and learner-centered text, where multiple meanings can coexist and be explored in dialogue with others. For non-native English speakers, this approach offers an empowering alternative to the often rigid expectations of "correct" interpretation, encouraging them to connect with poetry on a personal level, even when full linguistic mastery is still developing.

However, the very openness that makes poetry so enriching can also be intimidating or alienating for learners who lack the linguistic fluency or cultural familiarity to engage confidently with the text. When readers are unsure of basic vocabulary, figurative expressions, or cultural references, the transactional process described by Rosenblatt may break down. Instead of interacting meaningfully with the poem, the reader may retreat into surface-level decoding or passive reading.

4. Linguistic Challenges

The linguistic complexity of English poetry represents a primary barrier for non-native speakers. Unlike standard prose, poetry often employs non-conventional grammatical structures, highly figurative language, and archaic or idiomatic expressions that deviate from everyday usage. These features challenge second-language learners' comprehension by straining their lexical knowledge, syntactic understanding, and interpretive flexibility.

4.1 Lexical Complexity and Archaic Diction

Poetry frequently contains low-frequency, archaic, or literary vocabulary that poses significant challenges to EFL learners. Words such as *"thou," "ere," "thee,"* or *"thy"* are characteristic of older poetic traditions, particularly those from the Elizabethan and Romantic periods, and are virtually absent from modern conversational or academic English. These forms require not only historical-linguistic awareness but also an understanding of older grammatical systems, such as second-person singular verb conjugations, that are no longer taught in standard English instruction (Lazar, 1993). For learners who have been primarily exposed to contemporary English, through textbooks, media, or general ESL curricula, such lexical items can be alienating and lead to breakdowns in comprehension.

Even contemporary poetry, while more modern in its themes and syntax, often employs rare or elevated diction, including idiomatic, symbolic, or academic vocabulary that lies outside the high-frequency word lists typically used in second-language instruction. As Nation (2001) emphasizes, lexical difficulty remains one of the most powerful predictors of reading comprehension failure. When readers encounter multiple unknown or semantically opaque words within a single stanza, their working memory becomes overburdened by the need to infer meaning from limited context, detracting from their ability to grasp the overall tone or thematic direction of the poem.

4.2 Syntactic Deviation

Poetic syntax often intentionally violates standard grammatical and sentence patterns to achieve particular aesthetic, rhythmic, or expressive effects. Unlike prose, which generally adheres to conventional syntactic structures to ensure clarity and coherence, poetry frequently alters or disrupts these norms through techniques such as inversion, ellipsis, fragmentation, and non-linear sequencing.

These syntactic manipulations are not random; rather, they are strategically employed to enhance the poem's emotional tone, musicality, or ambiguity. For example, a poetic line like *"Silent was the night"* inverts the expected subject-verb-adjective order of standard English (*"The night was silent"*) to foreground the adjective "silent," thereby heightening the atmospheric effect and emphasizing stillness (Simpson, 2004). While such inversions are stylistically powerful, they can also disrupt syntactic parsing, especially for readers who rely on conventional sentence structures to process meaning.

For non-native English learners, especially those at the intermediate level of proficiency, syntactic deviation presents a formidable challenge. These learners often depend on predictable grammatical patterns to comprehend texts efficiently; when these patterns are violated, the reader must simultaneously decode non-standard syntax and reconstruct the intended semantic relationships, placing a heavier burden on their working memory and slowing reading fluency (Leech, 1969). For example, ellipsis, the omission of expected grammatical elements, can make sentences feel incomplete or fragmentary, requiring the reader to infer missing information based on context.

4.3 Figurative Language and Ambiguity

Figurative language, including metaphor, simile, personification, and metonymy, is central to poetic expression, as it allows poets to encode complex emotions, philosophical insights, and abstract concepts in compact and imaginative linguistic forms. These devices function by creating relationships between seemingly unrelated entities, enabling readers to grasp deeper meanings that transcend literal description. However, for non-native English speakers, figurative language often leads to misinterpretation or confusion, particularly when the metaphors employed are grounded in culturally specific conceptual frameworks. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have shown in their theory of conceptual metaphor, many metaphors are not just linguistic flourishes but are deeply embedded in the way speakers of a particular language understand and experience the world. Metaphors such as *"a heart of stone"* or *"the fog of war"* rely on shared cultural and cognitive schemas, associating emotions with material substances, or confusion with visual obscurity, that may not exist in the learner's first language or cultural context.

This disconnect can result in literal interpretations of figurative expressions, where the learner fails to access the intended symbolic or emotional layers of meaning. For example, an EFL learner unfamiliar with the metaphor *"a broken heart"* may interpret it as a physical condition rather than an emotional state. Even when learners are able to recognize that a phrase is metaphorical, they may not fully grasp its connotative significance, especially if the metaphor depends on historical, religious, or literary allusions. As Lazar (1993) points out, figurative language often demands a high degree of both linguistic fluency and cultural literacy, without which the interpretive process may falter.

4.4 Phonological Features and Sound Devices

Sound patterns such as alliteration, assonance, consonance, rhyme, and rhythm are not only hallmarks of poetic form but also essential mechanisms through which poets shape mood, convey meaning, and influence emotional response. These phonological features contribute to what Widdowson (1992) calls the textual significance of sound, where the auditory qualities of language are not just embellishments but integral to interpretation. The strategic repetition of sounds can draw attention to particular words or ideas, create musicality, and reinforce thematic content. For instance, alliteration, the repetition of initial consonant sounds, can generate a rhythmic effect that mirrors the poem's subject or emotional tone, while assonance and consonance enhance internal cohesion and sonic texture.

Moreover, sound devices often carry symbolic and affective weight. A deliberate cluster of harsh, plosive consonants (e.g., /k/, /t/, /g/) may evoke a sense of violence, tension, or urgency, whereas softer, sonorous vowel patterns (e.g., /oʊ/, /ɑː/) can create an atmosphere of tranquility, melancholy, or reverie. Similarly, Widdowson (1992) pointed out that rhyme schemes and metrical regularity help to establish expectations and reinforce emotional continuity, while deviations from these patterns, such as slant rhyme or irregular meter, can signal disruption, irony, or psychological unrest. In this way, sound in poetry not only enhances aesthetic pleasure but also functions as a semantic cue, guiding interpretation in subtle and often unconscious ways.

4.5 Linguistic Interference and Transfer

Learners often experience negative transfer from their first language (L1) when interpreting poetry in a second language (L2), a phenomenon widely discussed in the field of second language acquisition.

According to Odlin (1989), negative transfer occurs when learners inappropriately apply the linguistic structures or interpretive norms of their native language to the target language, resulting in errors or misunderstandings. In the context of poetic interpretation, this transfer can manifest at various levels, syntactic, semantic, and even conceptual, leading to distortions in meaning or misreadings of figurative elements.

A common example of such interference occurs when learners from L1 backgrounds that do not share English's metaphorical conventions attempt to interpret figurative language. In languages or cultures where metaphor is not used in the same conceptual or stylistic ways, expressions such as *"a heart of stone"* or *"time is a thief"* may be interpreted literally or dismissed as nonsensical. This can cause learners to miss the poetic nuance, emotional depth, or symbolic richness embedded in such phrases. As Leech (1969) notes, English poetry often depends on polysemy, the ability of words to carry multiple simultaneous meanings, and the reader's ability to navigate these layers is central to poetic interpretation.

5. Cultural Challenges

Beyond linguistic complexity, English poetry presents substantial cultural challenges for non-native speakers. Poetry is often deeply rooted in the cultural, historical, and ideological contexts of its time and place, drawing on references and traditions that may be unfamiliar or inaccessible to foreign readers. These cultural layers, while enriching the poetic experience, can also create significant barriers to interpretation and engagement for EFL/ESL learners.

5.1 Cultural Allusions and Historical References

Poetry frequently contains intertextual references, allusions to classical mythology, religious texts, national history, philosophical traditions, or other iconic literary works, that add depth, symbolism, and resonance to the poem. These references function as interpretive gateways that connect the poem to a wider cultural and literary tradition. In English poetry, for instance, one commonly finds allusions to the Bible, Greek and Roman mythology, Shakespearean drama, and major historical episodes such as World War I, the British Empire, or the Romantic and Modernist movements. These references are not always explicit; they are often embedded subtly within metaphors, imagery, or thematic suggestions that require a shared cultural background to be fully understood.

As Kramsch (1993) and Lazar (1993) point out, this cultural literacy, the background knowledge that native speakers often acquire through education, media, and lived cultural experience, is frequently taken for granted by poets and native readers alike. However, for non-native English learners, who may not have had direct or sustained exposure to these cultural foundations, such intertextual elements can become significant barriers to comprehension.

To illustrate, consider how a line like *"April is the cruellest month"* (Eliot, 1922) functions within a dense web of cultural meaning. This opening of *The Waste Land* not only references the cyclical nature of seasons but also subverts Romantic associations of spring with renewal and beauty. It alludes indirectly to both Chaucer's celebration of April in "The Canterbury Tales" and the trauma of post-war disillusionment following World War I. A reader unfamiliar with these literary and historical contexts may interpret the line at face value, failing to recognize its ironic tone or its thematic inversion of traditional poetic tropes. Such misreadings can flatten the poem's emotional and intellectual dimensions, reducing a richly layered text to a literal or incomplete interpretation.

Schema theory provides a compelling theoretical framework to understand this interpretive difficulty. According to Carrell and Eisterhold (1983), readers rely on pre-existing mental structures, or schemata, to process and make sense of new textual input. These schemata encompass not only linguistic knowledge but also cultural, experiential, and conceptual knowledge. When readers possess relevant cultural schema, they are able to draw inferences, recognize symbolic meaning, and relate textual elements to broader social and historical narratives.

5.2 Symbolism and Culture-Specific Metaphors

Many metaphors and symbols in English poetry are culture-bound, meaning they derive their significance from the shared values, beliefs, and experiences of a particular cultural or linguistic community. Unlike universal metaphors that may have cross-cultural resonance (e.g., light as knowledge, darkness as ignorance), culture-bound metaphors rely on historically and socially constructed associations that may be unintelligible or misleading to readers from different cultural backgrounds.

As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue, metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device but a fundamental mechanism of thought, shaping how individuals conceptualize abstract experiences through embodied and culturally situated frameworks. This means that the symbolic meaning of a poetic image, such as a flower, an animal, or a natural phenomenon, is not inherent, but rather culturally encoded.

For example, the rose in English poetic tradition often symbolizes love, beauty, and romantic longing, a symbolism reinforced by centuries of Western literary and artistic convention. Yet in other cultural contexts, the rose may carry different or even contradictory associations. A non-native reader unfamiliar with this cultural coding may interpret the image of a rose literally, as a plant, or misattribute meanings based on their own cultural lens. Similarly, animals such as lambs, ravens, or lions, frequently used symbolically in English poetry, may not evoke the same connotations outside Judeo-Christian or European traditions. As a result, learners may overlook or misread key emotional, spiritual, or philosophical dimensions of the poem, undermining their ability to access the deeper layers of poetic meaning.

One area where cultural symbolism becomes especially complex is in the use of color. As Kovecses (2005) notes, color symbolism varies significantly across cultures and is closely tied to historical, religious, and psychological traditions. In English literature, black is commonly associated with death, mourning, or evil, while green may symbolize envy, new life, or even magic, depending on context.

5.3 Religious and Ideological Themes

English poetry often engages deeply with religious, philosophical, and political themes rooted in Western intellectual and spiritual traditions, which can present significant interpretive challenges for EFL learners, particularly those from non-Western backgrounds. Many canonical English poets, including John Donne, George Herbert, and T. S. Eliot, weave Christian theological concepts, metaphysical inquiries, and cultural critiques into their work. These themes are often expressed not only through explicit references to biblical texts or liturgical imagery, but also through symbolic structures and philosophical frameworks that presuppose a degree of familiarity with Western religious history and thought. For instance, Donne's poetry is steeped in Christian metaphysics, combining erotic and spiritual language in a way that reflects Renaissance theological concerns about the relationship between body and soul, sin and salvation.

Similarly, Eliot's *The Waste Land* blends Christian eschatology, classical mythology, and modernist disillusionment, requiring not just textual analysis but also an understanding of Western philosophical pessimism, post-war malaise, and religious fragmentation. Readers unfamiliar with these discourses may find such poems obscure or inaccessible, particularly when allusions are made without clear context or explanation.

From a postcolonial perspective, these texts may also represent not merely unfamiliar worldviews but manifestations of cultural authority and imperial ideology. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002) observe, the canon of English literature, including its poetry, often privileges Eurocentric values and marginalizes alternative cultural voices.

5.4 Cultural Distance and Reader Identity

Kramsch (1993) introduces the concept of "cultural distance" to describe the affective, cognitive, and interpretive gap that exists between a reader's cultural identity and the cultural norms, values, and worldviews embedded in a text. This distance can profoundly influence how a reader approaches, understands, and emotionally responds to literary texts, especially poetry, which often reflects culturally specific experiences, ideologies, and aesthetics. In the context of English poetry, which is frequently steeped in Western literary traditions and symbolic conventions, cultural distance may hinder motivation, empathy, and comprehension among non-native speakers. When readers cannot identify with the poem's social context, moral assumptions, or worldview, they may find it difficult to establish the emotional connection that is often crucial to literary appreciation.

In addition to misinterpretation, cultural distance can produce a sense of alienation or exclusion, particularly when learners perceive English poetry as the domain of a culturally elite or privileged readership. According to Byram and Kramsch (2008), learners who feel that their own cultural identities are not reflected in or welcomed by the text may begin to view English poetry as opaque, inaccessible, or irrelevant to their lived experience. This perception can inhibit confidence, diminish engagement, and discourage learners from developing the interpretive skills necessary for deeper literary analysis.

6. Cognitive Challenges

Interpreting poetry requires significant cognitive engagement, particularly in terms of processing complex language, sustaining attention, and inferring layered meanings. For non-native English speakers, these cognitive demands are heightened due to limited language proficiency, lack of cultural familiarity, and unfamiliarity with literary conventions. Poetry interpretation engages a range of mental faculties, including memory, inferencing, attention, and abstraction, which can strain second-language learners' cognitive resources.

6.1 Cognitive Load and Working Memory

According to Cognitive Load Theory (CLT), as developed by Sweller (1988), learners possess a limited working memory capacity that constrains the amount of information they can process at any given moment. Learning occurs most effectively when instructional content is structured to minimize unnecessary cognitive strain. However, poetry inherently places a high demand on cognitive resources, particularly due to its compact, abstract, and multi-layered nature. With its condensed syntax, dense imagery, unfamiliar vocabulary, and reliance on non-literal meanings, poetry significantly raises what CLT refers to as intrinsic cognitive load, the load that stems from the complexity of the material itself.

For non-native English speakers, this intrinsic load is compounded by extraneous load, which arises from features that interfere with learning but are not essential to the content, such as navigating syntactic inversion, polysemy, or culturally unfamiliar metaphors. As Paas, Renkl, and Sweller (2003) explain, the more learners must expend cognitive effort on decoding language or compensating for background knowledge gaps, the fewer resources remain for actual interpretation and analysis. In the case of poetry, the cognitive demands can become so high that the learner's working memory is overloaded, leading to cognitive fatigue, reduced comprehension, and eventually disengagement.

Unlike prose, poetry often withholds explicit meaning, demanding readers to tolerate ambiguity and maintain multiple interpretive possibilities simultaneously (Grabe, 2009). A line of poetry may contain metaphors, sound devices, and cultural references that require a reader to actively construct and revise meaning as they proceed through the text. This process, referred to in cognitive science as mental juggling, can be especially taxing for EFL learners who have not yet achieved automaticity in English reading.

6.2 Inference and Abstract Thinking

Poetry interpretation often requires readers to move beyond surface-level decoding and engage in inferential processing, drawing conclusions from subtle textual cues, figurative language, and emotional undertones rather than from explicit statements. Unlike narrative prose, where plot and meaning are usually conveyed directly, poetry typically relies on elliptical phrasing, symbolic imagery, and tonal shifts that invite readers to fill in gaps and uncover implied meanings. According to Kintsch (1998), constructing a coherent mental representation of any text involves more than linear decoding; it requires the integration of linguistic input with prior knowledge, contextual reasoning, and inferential leaps. This process becomes especially cognitively taxing for EFL learners, who may not only face challenges at the lexical and syntactic levels but may also lack the necessary cultural or conceptual frameworks to make accurate inferences.

When key cultural references, historical contexts, or symbolic conventions are unfamiliar or misinterpreted, learners may construct mental representations that are incomplete or distorted, leading to confusion or disengagement. As Carrell (1984) argues, inferencing in ESL reading is particularly fragile when schema activation fails, that is, when the reader cannot relate the new input to a meaningful prior knowledge structure. In poetry, where so much of the meaning depends on the reader's ability to "read between the lines," this breakdown can be especially pronounced. For example, interpreting a line such as *"The crown lies heavy on the brow"* requires not only literal understanding but also recognition of symbolic and possibly intertextual meanings related to authority, burden, or monarchy.

Further complicating interpretation is the fact that many poems operate at an abstract conceptual level, dealing with philosophical, emotional, or existential themes that resist literal explanation. This metaphorical and introspective nature of poetry demands a high level of conceptual abstraction, a skill that is often underdeveloped in learners from educational systems that emphasize rote memorization, translation, or formulaic reading strategies (Pishghadam, 2011). In such systems, learners may be trained to seek "correct" answers and clear referential meaning, leaving them unprepared for the ambiguity, multiplicity, and interpretive openness that poetry often celebrates.

6.3 Emotional and Affective Processing

Poetry frequently evokes strong emotional responses, requiring readers to engage not only cognitively but also affectively with the text. Unlike informational or expository texts, poetry often seeks to elicit feeling, to move the reader through carefully chosen words, rhythm, imagery, and tone. This dimension of poetic reading depends on the reader's ability to emotionally connect with the speaker's voice, mood, or subject matter. According to Schuman (1999), successful poetry interpretation involves emotional imagination, the capacity to place oneself in the position of the poetic persona or scenario and to respond empathetically to the emotional cues embedded in the text. This emotional engagement is a vital part of the interpretive process, as it allows readers to relate to abstract or unfamiliar experiences on a human level.

However, for non-native English speakers, this affective connection may be dampened or entirely blocked by a variety of factors. Limited linguistic proficiency, including gaps in vocabulary or difficulties with syntax, can prevent learners from fully accessing the emotional tone or nuance of the poem. Even when the general meaning is understood, emotional subtleties; such as irony, longing, melancholy, or joy, may be lost in translation, especially when conveyed through idiomatic or culturally loaded expressions. Furthermore, when the cultural or thematic content of a poem is unfamiliar, such as poems about war, faith, or existential despair, the emotional experience may fail to resonate, leaving the reader feeling detached or confused rather than moved.

As Hanauer (2003) notes, this sense of alienation can lead to avoidance behavior, where learners actively disengage from poetic texts, perceiving them as irrelevant or too complex to be worth the effort. This aversion not only limits their exposure to a rich and expressive genre of language, but may also reinforce negative attitudes toward literary study in general. Over time, this can hinder both language development and literary appreciation, depriving learners of the opportunity to develop interpretive sensitivity, emotional intelligence, and cultural literacy through poetic reading.

6.4 Metacognitive Awareness and Strategy Use

Cognitive challenges in poetry interpretation are closely linked to the reader's level of metacognitive awareness; the ability to monitor, regulate, and adapt one's own reading strategies in response to textual complexity.

Metacognition plays a crucial role in effective literary comprehension, especially when readers are required to engage with ambiguous, abstract, or symbolically dense texts such as poetry. However, many non-native English readers may lack formal training in the self-regulatory strategies that are essential for navigating difficult passages. As Anderson (2002) notes, skilled readers routinely use metacognitive strategies such as pausing to reflect, rereading unclear lines, visualizing mental images, and paraphrasing complex expressions to aid comprehension. These strategies allow readers to monitor their understanding in real time and adjust their approach when confusion arises.

Research by Jiménez, García, and Pearson (1996) on bilingual literacy demonstrates that successful bilingual readers tend to employ a wide range of flexible, dynamic strategies, often switching between languages, drawing on multiple forms of knowledge, and monitoring their understanding across linguistic contexts. These readers view confusion not as failure but as a cue to re-engage with the text through strategic problem-solving.

7. Pedagogical Implications

Given the multifaceted challenges non-native English speakers face when interpreting poetry; linguistic, cultural, and cognitive, it is essential for educators to adopt informed, responsive, and strategic pedagogical practices. The goal is not only to make poetry more accessible, but also to preserve its interpretive richness and aesthetic depth while supporting learners' language development.

7.1 Scaffolding Interpretation through Pre-Reading Strategies

One of the most effective pedagogical responses to the cognitive and cultural barriers that learners face when interpreting poetry is the use of scaffolding, structured, adaptive support that helps students gradually assume greater control over the reading process. Scaffolding provides learners with the linguistic, conceptual, and cultural tools necessary to make sense of a text, particularly in the early stages of exposure. In the context of poetry, this approach is especially valuable, as it helps learners navigate the non-linear, abstract, and symbolically rich nature of poetic language without becoming overwhelmed. Pre-reading activities are a crucial component of scaffolding. These can include targeted vocabulary instruction, especially focusing on low-frequency, archaic, or metaphorical language that may otherwise obstruct comprehension.

Providing cultural background knowledge, such as explanations of historical events, literary movements, or religious references, is also essential for activating relevant schemata that enable learners to contextualize the poem's content. As Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) explain through schema theory, comprehension is facilitated when learners can relate new information to existing cognitive frameworks. Without such activation, learners may miss key references or fail to infer deeper meanings.

Lazar (1993) emphasizes the value of introducing poems through contextual frameworks, such as the author's biography, the socio-historical background of the text, or the poem's dominant themes. These entry points help learners anticipate tone and content, orient their expectations, and develop interpretive readiness (Grabe, 2009). This preparation reduces both the extraneous cognitive load associated with unfamiliar contexts and the emotional resistance that can arise when a poem feels distant or inaccessible.

7.2 Teaching Figurative Language Explicitly

Because figurative language represents one of the most persistent and significant linguistic obstacles in poetry interpretation, it must be addressed through explicit and systematic instruction. Figurative devices such as metaphor, simile, personification, and symbolism often convey meanings that are not immediately accessible to non-native speakers, particularly those who are accustomed to literal modes of language use. Without targeted pedagogical intervention, learners may either misinterpret these devices or overlook them entirely, reducing their engagement with the deeper emotional and philosophical layers of the poem.

To support learners in this area, educators should adopt an approach that demystifies figurative language by teaching it as both a linguistic phenomenon and a literary technique. One effective strategy is to begin with examples drawn from everyday language, such as "time flies" or "she has a heart of gold", before introducing more complex poetic metaphors. This method allows learners to understand the conceptual basis of metaphorical thinking and gradually build a bridge from familiar expressions to literary ones. As Simpson (2004) notes, cultivating stylistic awareness helps learners recognize how linguistic choices contribute to tone, theme, and interpretive richness. Encouraging this shift from literal interpretation to figurative sensitivity is a key developmental goal in poetic literacy.

In addition to recognition, learners must be taught interpretive strategies for unpacking the meaning of figurative expressions (Anderson, 2002). One effective technique is to ask students to paraphrase figurative lines in plain English, thereby making their implicit understanding explicit and promoting deeper engagement with the language. For example, a line such as *"grief is a barren field"* can be rephrased as *"grief feels empty and lifeless"*, helping students grasp the emotional core of the metaphor. These activities not only clarify meaning but also develop learners' metacognitive awareness, prompting them to think consciously about how they interpret figurative language and how that interpretation shapes their overall understanding of the poem.

7.3 Incorporating Cultural Competence

To effectively engage non-native speakers with English poetry, educators must directly address the issue of cultural distance, the gap between the learner's cultural framework and the cultural assumptions embedded in the text. When this distance is not acknowledged or mediated, learners may struggle to interpret symbolic references, misread emotional cues, or disengage from poems whose themes feel foreign or irrelevant. As Kramsch (1993) argues, culture is not an "add-on" to language instruction but a constitutive element of meaning-making. Every act of interpretation is filtered through cultural understanding, and thus, teaching poetry without cultural context risks leaving learners linguistically competent but interpretively excluded. Visual aids are another valuable tool in supporting cultural understanding. As Hanauer (2001) notes, incorporating multimodal representations, such as paintings, photographs, or video adaptations of poems, can make abstract or culturally embedded references more concrete and accessible. A video interpretation of a Shakespearean sonnet, for instance, can illuminate tone, emotion, and setting in ways that printed text alone may not convey. Similarly, showing artworks related to Romantic or Modernist poetry can provide learners with a visual context for understanding symbolic references or historical allusions. These resources help learners connect emotionally with the content while also reinforcing interpretive skills through sensory engagement.

7.4 Promoting Reader-Response Approaches

The reader-response theory, as articulated by Rosenblatt (1978), emphasizes that the act of reading literature, especially poetry, is a transactional process in which meaning is not fixed within the text but co-created by the reader through engagement with the language, imagery, and emotional tone.

From this perspective, each reader brings a unique constellation of experiences, emotions, values, and prior knowledge to the interpretive act, and these subjective factors play a central role in shaping understanding. This theoretical framework supports the view that learners are not passive recipients of literary meaning but active participants in its construction.

In practical terms, this means that poetry instruction should prioritize opportunities for personal response, allowing learners to connect with the text on an emotional and experiential level. When students are invited to reflect on how a poem resonates with their lives, identities, or cultural backgrounds, they develop a sense of ownership over the interpretive process, which in turn fosters deeper cognitive and affective engagement. Activities such as personal reflection essays, creative rewrites (e.g., adapting a poem into a different cultural setting or personal context), or performance-based projects (such as recitation, dramatization, or multimedia presentation) can make poetry feel relevant, accessible, and empowering.

As Hanauer (2003) notes, such learner-centered approaches are especially valuable in EFL contexts, where students often feel alienated from the aesthetic and intellectual norms of English poetry. Encouraging personal response shifts the focus from decoding a "correct" interpretation to exploring a range of possible meanings, grounded in the reader's lived experience. This transformation reframes poetry not as an intimidating literary exercise, but as a dialogic encounter, a conversation between text and reader, mediated by imagination, emotion, and personal insight.

7.5 Differentiation and Text Selection

Text selection plays a critical role in determining the degree to which learners can meaningfully engage with and benefit from poetry instruction. The accessibility, relevance, and complexity of a chosen poem can either facilitate or obstruct learners' interpretive success. In selecting poems for the EFL classroom, teachers must consider not only linguistic difficulty but also cultural familiarity and thematic resonance. As Lazar (1993) and Widdowson (1992) argue, the most effective poetic texts for instructional purposes are those that strike a balance between literary richness and learner accessibility, texts that challenge without overwhelming, and that invite interpretation without requiring encyclopedic background knowledge.

In this context, shorter poems, narrative poetry, or contemporary works tend to be more effective than highly abstract, linguistically archaic, or intertextually dense texts. Poems that address universal themes, such as love, identity, conflict, family, or memory, often serve as productive entry points for interpretation, as learners can relate the poem's content to their own lived experiences, thereby activating personal and cultural schema. For instance, a modern free verse poem about migration or belonging may resonate more deeply with learners than a metaphysical sonnet steeped in 17th-century theological imagery. While it is important to expose learners to a variety of poetic traditions, careful sequencing and selection help ensure that engagement and comprehension are not compromised.

Equally important is the application of differentiated instruction, the practice of tailoring content and support to accommodate learners at varying levels of linguistic proficiency and interpretive skill. In a diverse classroom, students will inevitably vary in their ability to decode, analyze, and emotionally connect with a text. Through differentiation, teachers can provide scaffolded activities, such as vocabulary glossaries, guided questions, visual aids, or modified versions of the poem, while also offering extension tasks for more advanced learners, such as comparative analysis or creative reinterpretation.

8. Research Gaps and Future Directions

While considerable scholarly attention has been given to the general challenges of second language (L2) reading and literary interpretation, the specific experience of non-native English speakers interpreting poetry remains relatively under-explored. Much of the existing research emphasizes prose or narrative texts, leaving key areas within the domain of poetry interpretation open for further investigation.

8.1 Underrepresentation of Empirical Studies in EFL Contexts

Despite a growing body of theoretical literature on poetry interpretation, one major research gap is the limited number of empirical studies specifically investigating how EFL learners process, interpret, and engage with poetry. While foundational frameworks such as stylistics (Simpson, 2004), schema theory, and cognitive models of reading (Kintsch, 1998) offer valuable insights into the mechanisms of literary comprehension, their practical application to poetry reading in EFL contexts remains underexplored.

Much of the existing research tends to focus either on theoretical abstraction or on native-language literary analysis, leaving a methodological void in understanding how non-native speakers, especially adolescent and university-level learners, actually experience and interpret poetry in the classroom. This gap is particularly significant because poetry, unlike narrative or expository prose, involves unique cognitive and cultural challenges: condensed language, symbolic density, ambiguity, and aesthetic form. Yet there remains a lack of classroom-based, learner-centered research that examines how these challenges are perceived and managed by EFL students in real educational environments.

8.2 Neglect of Learner Voices and Reader Identity

A further limitation in the existing body of literature on poetry interpretation in EFL contexts lies in the dominance of teacher-centered and researcher-driven perspectives, which often overlook the learner's lived experience and subjective engagement with poetic texts. Much of the current scholarship emphasizes pedagogical techniques, theoretical models, or curriculum design, but pays insufficient attention to how learners themselves experience, interpret, and emotionally respond to poetry. This omission is especially striking given the emphasis in reader-response theory, most notably in the work of Rosenblatt (1978), on the centrality of the reader's role in constructing literary meaning through personal interaction with the text.

In EFL literature studies, however, reader-response approaches remain underutilized, and empirical research that explores learners' voices, perspectives, and interpretive agency is relatively sparse. This gap results in a partial and potentially distorted view of what poetry means to language learners and how they navigate the affective and cognitive terrain of poetic reading. A more learner-centered research orientation, grounded in qualitative methodologies such as narrative inquiry, reflective journals, or in-depth interviews, could illuminate how individual identities, emotional histories, and cultural narratives shape interpretation and engagement.

As Hanauer (2003) suggests, poetry interpretation is not merely an academic exercise but an affective and autobiographical act, often touching on deeply personal themes such as identity, loss, love, or belonging. Learners bring with them rich emotional landscapes and cultural perspectives, which can either align with or conflict with the poem's imagery, tone, and values. Investigating how learners' motivation, empathy, and self-expression interact with their reading of poetry would contribute to a more nuanced and holistic understanding of literary engagement in EFL contexts.

8.3 Lack of Cross-Cultural Comparative Studies

While cultural barriers to poetry interpretation are well acknowledged in the literature, particularly through the work of Kramsch (1993) and Byram & Kramsch (2008), there remains a significant lack of systematic, comparative research on how learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds interpret the same English poems. Most existing studies tend to examine learner engagement within a single cultural or national context, which limits our understanding of how culture-specific worldviews, symbolic associations, and literary conventions influence poetic interpretation. As a result, there is relatively little empirical data on how different cultural groups diverge or converge in their reading of the same poetic texts. Cross-cultural comparative studies would offer substantial benefits to both research and pedagogy. Such investigations could reveal patterns of interpretation, including which symbolic or figurative elements are widely accessible across cultures and which are interpreted differently or misunderstood due to varying cultural schemata or symbolic systems. For instance, while metaphors involving seasons or colors may carry similar emotional connotations in some cultural contexts, they may differ significantly in others, impacting both the emotional and conceptual interpretation of the poem. A comparative approach would thus help distinguish between universal poetic features and those that are deeply culture-bound, offering a more nuanced understanding of literary universality and cultural relativity.

8.4 Digital and Multimodal Approaches to Poetry

Another under-researched area in the study of poetry interpretation among EFL learners is the role of digital tools and multimodal resources in supporting comprehension, engagement, and affective response. In an era of rapidly expanding educational technology, the use of multimedia platforms, including animated poetry videos, audio recitations, interactive poetry applications, and digital annotation tools, offers promising opportunities to mediate the cognitive and linguistic demands of poetry. Yet, despite the increasing integration of technology in second language instruction, relatively few empirical studies have investigated how such tools specifically impact the teaching and learning of poetry in EFL contexts.

Hanauer (2001) highlights the potential of non-traditional and experiential approaches to poetry instruction, arguing that poetry should be presented in ways that allow for emotional resonance and learner investment.

Digital resources naturally lend themselves to this goal, as they can present poems in dynamic and engaging formats that blend text, sound, image, and even user interaction. For instance, audio recitations can support learners' phonological awareness, rhythm sensitivity, and emotional attunement, while visual animations or artistic representations may help clarify symbolic imagery or contextualize abstract themes.

8.5 Genre-Specific Challenges within Poetry

Another important but often overlooked dimension in the literature is the tendency to treat "poetry" as a monolithic category, without accounting for the significant differences between poetic subgenres, such as sonnets, haiku, spoken word, narrative poetry, and free verse. While the general challenges associated with poetry, such as ambiguity, figurative language, and cultural allusion, are well documented, few studies interrogate how the formal features of specific poetic types may pose distinct cognitive and pedagogical demands. This lack of granularity limits our ability to develop targeted instructional strategies or to match poem types to learners' proficiency levels, learning styles, or interpretive preferences. Each poetic subgenre has its own characteristic structure, rhythm, tone, and stylistic conventions, which may either facilitate or complicate comprehension. For example, the sonnet, with its strict metrical and rhyming constraints, often encodes complex arguments within tightly compressed structures, possibly demanding more advanced syntactic processing. By contrast, free verse may pose difficulties in terms of interpretive ambiguity and rhythmical irregularity, but offer greater accessibility through its conversational tone. Haiku relies heavily on imagery and minimalism, requiring high levels of inferencing and symbolic sensitivity, while spoken word poetry emphasizes performance, tone, and emotional immediacy, potentially increasing engagement but complicating interpretation if the rhythm or colloquial language is unfamiliar.

8.6 Longitudinal Impact of Poetry Instruction

A final but crucial gap in the current literature is the lack of longitudinal research examining the sustained impact of poetry instruction on second-language literacy development. While many existing studies provide valuable insights into learners' short-term responses to poetry, often through qualitative data, small-scale interventions, or isolated classroom observations, they rarely investigate how poetic engagement influences language learning outcomes over extended periods of time. As a result, our understanding of poetry's role in broader language acquisition trajectories remains incomplete and speculative.

Poetry instruction holds potential benefits across a range of literacy domains, including vocabulary acquisition, syntactic awareness, inferential reasoning, cultural competence, and emotional expression. However, without longitudinal evidence, it is difficult to assess whether these benefits are durable, cumulative, or transferable to other reading and writing tasks. For instance, it remains unclear whether regular engagement with poetry contributes to measurable gains in academic reading proficiency, or whether learners retain the figurative and cultural knowledge acquired through poetic texts over time.

9. Conclusion

The interpretation of English poetry by non-native speakers is a complex, multilayered process shaped by linguistic, cultural, and cognitive challenges. Unlike prose, poetry resists literal reading and demands deeper engagement with figurative language, rhythm, symbolism, and cultural allusion. As this literature review has demonstrated, learners often face considerable difficulty in decoding poetic meaning due to unfamiliar vocabulary, syntactic irregularities, and abstract or ambiguous language. These linguistic obstacles are compounded by cultural barriers, as many poems rely on background knowledge, symbolic traditions, or historical references rooted in English-speaking contexts.

In addition to these external difficulties, learners contend with cognitive demands that strain their working memory and interpretive abilities, particularly when they are unfamiliar with poetic conventions or lack metacognitive strategies. These challenges make poetry a highly demanding genre, but also a uniquely rewarding one. When approached with the right pedagogical strategies, poetry can foster language development, intercultural understanding, critical thinking, and emotional engagement. The review also highlights significant research gaps, particularly the need for empirical classroom studies, learner-centered perspectives, cross-cultural analyses, and innovative approaches involving digital tools. Future research should continue to explore how poetry can be more effectively integrated into EFL curricula in ways that empower students as active, reflective interpreters of literature.

Ultimately, teaching English poetry to non-native speakers should not aim to simplify or avoid complexity, but rather to scaffold learners into deeper engagement with literary language and meaning. By recognizing and addressing the interrelated linguistic, cultural, and cognitive factors, educators can transform poetry from an intimidating challenge into an enriching experience of language, thought, and imagination.

About the Author

Huwaydah Aldeeb is a lecturer in the Department of English at Abuissa College of Education, University of Zawia, Libya. Her academic interests lie primarily in applied linguistics, with a particular focus on second language acquisition, literature pedagogy, cognitive linguistics, and English for specific purposes (ESP).

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