

Poetry in Digital Times: A Didactic Proposal for the Use of Instapoetry in the EFL Context

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Abstract

Over the years, the internet has evidenced its proper language and influenced contemporary literature. Motivated by this context, this research focused on what has been called *Instapoetry*: an emerging digital genre characterized by free minimalist verses (Oliveira & Fazano, 2020) sharable on the social network Instagram. The gist of this study was to promote the literary literacy of eighth-grade students in the English classes in a private school in the city of João Pessoa, state of Paraíba, Brazil. At the same time, learners would be motivated to produce literary texts sensitive to themes that affect their daily social issues. Therefore, interventionist action research was done based on contributions from authors like Stringer (2014), Cosson (2021), Daniels and Steineke (2004), Kato (1990) and Leffa (1996), amongst others. The data obtained allowed a qualitative interpretive analysis. The proposal included the reading of the poem *Broken English* by Rupi Kaur, considered one of the harbingers of the genre. Before carrying out the study, a questionnaire was applied, to trace the students' profiles as social network users. The answers revealed that most learners use social networks considerably, especially Instagram. However, without contributing with their own written texts. The didactic sequence with instapoems reading and writing, in its turn, ended up in the genre understanding, discussion on different topics, as well as the production of texts that reflected some themes discussed in Kaur's poem: the use of the English language to express personal and collective feelings from an emancipatory movement, reflections on the pupils' origins, prejudices, pain, and hope. Results point to the effective contribution of this didactic proposal to the students' literary literacy and also to the development of reading and writing processes in the English language.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, Instapoetry, literary literacy, reading, writing production

1. Introduction

Textual genres have undergone transformations since the digital revolution, due to the advent of the computer, especially with the spread of the Internet, which has its own language, generally uniting text, image, and sound. Inevitably, these new forms of communication have influenced contemporary writing and literature. Consequently, some current art movements are adapting to new digital models, including poetry. This is what has been observed with Instapoetry, a type of cyberpoetry that is rapidly expanding in several countries, including Brazil, where this research was carried out.

This new genre has attracted young audiences from adolescence onwards, perhaps for its impactful content and for presenting a strong personal story, which brings identification between readers and poets. Their success began on the world wide web but is not limited to it, as many are releasing "old-fashioned" poetry books.

Oliveira and Fazano (2020) consider Instapoetry an emerging digital genre, characterized by free and minimalist verses, and "in terms of theme, aspects related to ideological complexes are recurrent, such as racial, gender, religious prejudice, immigration, the feminine universe, empowerment and relationships" (p. 1166). Thus, it is in accordance with current teenagers' topics of interest, which makes the research relevant for the chosen community.

Considering the recent environment, covered by multi-semiotic information, where the written text bonds words, images, and sounds, preparing students to distinguish and interact with the variety of textual genres to which

they are exposed is an assignment that demands special attention from 21st-century educators. More than just literacy, it is necessary to develop skills and competencies through multiple and collaborative literacies (Kleiman, 2005).

In addition, the *Base Nacional Comum Curricular*, which is the Brazilian Common Core Curriculum, establishes among the competences to be developed until the end of middle school, the ability to communicate in a globalized world, through printed and digital media, in a plurilingual and multicultural world (BRASIL, 2018). Therefore, in order to open new perspectives on emerging textual genres in the context of digital technology this work focused on Instapoetry reading and production.

1.1 Research Objectives

The purpose of this study, thus, is to present the literary genre Instapoetry aiming at promoting literary literacy with 8th-grade students from a private elementary school in the city of João Pessoa, capital of Paraíba state, in the northeast Brazil. From this objective, it will be possible to increase the students' contact with the target language and at the same time stimulate them to read Instapoetry in social networks, as well as to produce texts sensitive to their daily social concerns.

More precisely, the goal was not only observing the characteristics of the genre or decoding the words in the texts. Actually, it was to truly understand the genre, the themes, and the environment that surround the instapoems in order to contribute to the learner's literary constitution, in accordance with the perspective of constructing a reader community through literary literacy (Cosson, 2021).

Therefore, this research presents the report of an experience with the execution of a didactic sequence applied in two eighth-grade groups of students, as stated before. Hence, the article was divided into four parts, in addition to this initial introduction. The first one presents a brief review of theoretical perspectives, where the major concepts are described, mainly the ones related to Instapoetry and the theories on reading and its importance in the teaching-learning process of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Following up, the methodology and steps taken are detailed, subsequently, the results obtained are presented and discussed. At last, the final considerations about the study are presented.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Applied Linguistics and Second Language Teaching

Many scholars have long highlighted the importance of reading skills in order to enhance the students' knowledge of English. This practice helps them internalize grammar structures, expand their vocabulary and, consequently, improve their writing skills as well.

To this extent, instructors have long resorted to the use of Applied Linguistics (AL) as a mediation field in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). According to Smith and Celce-Murcia (2020), AL is: "using what we know about language, how it is learned, and how it is used in order to achieve some purpose or solve problems in the real world" (p. 1). They also call attention to the fact that, traditionally, "the primary concern of applied linguistics has been second language acquisition theory, second language pedagogy and the interface between the two" (p. 2). Nevertheless, in Brazil, recently, the field has assumed a wider scope to "create intelligibility over social problems in which language has a central role" (Moita Lopes, 2006, p. 14) with whose concept this study is affiliated.

This research utilized AL processes to help construct a didactic proposal focusing on developing literary literacy as well as enhancing the reading ability in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context.

2.2 The Importance of the Reading

Among the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) intended to be developed when teaching a second language (L2), instructors, and didactic materials, tend to focus their teaching on only two of them: either writing or reading. Regarding the latter, which is the target of this study, some difficulties are faced to conduct strategies.

Undoubtedly, the word reading involves a complex process. The endeavor to define the term has been carried out by many linguistics. Leffa (1996), for example, considers reading "the act of looking at something but seeing another thing" (p. 10). This concept implies that to truly understand texts, a context is needed, as of previous knowledge of the world, insertion in the field, personal positioning towards the subject, readers' perceptions, etc. Martins (1997) adds the following reflection: "Decoding without comprehension is useless; comprehension without decoding, impossible" (p. 32). This reveals the need to accomplish both decrypting and interpreting.

Furthermore, research has been conducted to understand the readers' procedures while reading. Kato (1990), for

instance, points out that the act of reading may occur from the top to bottom and vice-versa. She describes the top-down process as a strategy to grasp general information from a text in a fast way, but without checking the concepts and/or ideas with data within the text. On the other hand, some readers start by understanding data that is literally laid in the words without getting meanings hidden between the lines. This reader, according to the author, is “slow and not very fluent and has difficulty synthesizing the ideas of the text because he/she does not know how to distinguish what is more important than what is merely illustrative or redundant” (pp. 40–41).

There seems to be a consensus among scholars that neither the ascendant model nor the descendent one is better. The ideal strategy for a skilled reader is to use both, according to the necessity. This is what Birch (2009) defines as a Balanced Approach. For her, “when someone is reading, they need both the information flowing upward from the bottom to the top and the information flowing downward from the top to the bottom in order to understand the meaning successfully” (p. 4).

When describing the types of readers, Kato (1990) defines the mature reader as someone who appropriately uses both processes and at the appropriate time, that is, “it is the reader who has conscious and active control of their behavior” (p. 41). This interactive nature of reading is also preferred by Leffa (1996), who confirms that the reader observes the text in its larger units, where the smaller ones are also contained. Thus, understanding takes place through the interaction between the reader’s knowledge and the information provided by the text.

Despite these specialists’ findings on interactive approaches, Eskley (1988) complains that the top-down process has had preference among EFL teachers and alerts to the fact that teachers should not “lose sight of the fact that language is a major problem in second language reading, and that even educated guessing at meaning is not a substitute for accurate decoding” (p. 97).

When it comes to the Brazilian environment, three major problems were described by Oliveira (2015): first, the lack of vocabulary school learners usually present; the second one is the difficulty in the cognitive process of reading itself, which they bring even from their mother tongue; and at last, the students desire to read text chosen by others, and not by themselves.

It is appropriate to consider, in this light, the power of enjoyment that literature might bring to reading, including when it is used as a tool for language teaching. To this extent, Hall (2003) argues that pleasure is “a key factor in successful and independent literary reading, despite its absence from too many literature school-rooms” (p. 397). In the author’s opinion, teachers mistake, for example, the use of poetry in class when they simply ask about the student’s general understanding instead of asking about their responses and emotional feelings towards poems.

More precisely, Hall (2003) advocates that, regarding second language teaching, instructors should go beyond the mere comprehension of vocabulary, and provide learners with the context in order to promote opportunities to consider and discuss “issues of greater moment or profundity (death, life, love, identity, and the rest)” (p. 396). In accordance with this position, Oliveira (2015) reinforces the necessity of stating the purpose of reading before exposing them to the texts.

In the light of what was exposed, this study takes its cue from the specific EFL context with middle school students, and for this reason, it was thought to be an efficient instrument to engage students in reading in English by introducing Instapoetry to them.

2.3 Instapoetry and Digital Genres

In the attempt to describe the word *poetry*, Connel (1913) supports that, as it is one of the fine arts, and it has as a unique objective: to express beauty by means of language. In accordance with Connel’s words, Constantakis (2011) completes that poetry “evoke an emotional experience in the reader through the use of meter, imagery, connotative and concrete words, and a carefully constructed structure based on rhythmic patterns” (p. 373).

Santaella (2007) warns that the changes at the beginning of the third millennium, caused by advances in digital technology, have opened new horizons to artists, including poets who are now getting engaged in cyberpoetry, in which she comprises e-poetry (electronic poetry) and net-poetry (from the Internet). The latter comprehends a category in which Instapoetry can be inserted, in which the support used is the main differentiating element.

As stated before, Instapoetry is a relatively new digital genre which comprehends short texts written, primarily, in verses and usually loaded with emotions, imagedic forms. It is mainly produced with the intention of sharing them on social networks, especially Instagram. To this account, Gazier (2001) states that “the digital field is a real form of practice and immediately relevant to any informed sense of what we call ‘poetry’ in coming years” (p. 5). For the author, people must change the way they read e-poems, as it also includes physical, virtual, and verbal writing material.

Undoubtedly, there has been criticism over the topic, and the purpose of this study is not to evaluate whether one should be against or in favor of cyberpoetry. Otherwise, as stated by Lévy (2010), the main point of digital production is “to recognize the qualitative changes in the ecology of signs, the unprecedented environment that results from the extension of new communication networks to social and cultural life” (p. 12). And Instapoetry is certainly modifying the way poetry has been produced.

Concerning the book industry, Berens (2019) emphasizes the power of Instapoetry sales, reproducing the NPD Group research, shown in Figure 1. For her, “Instagram poetry is a book publishing phenomenon, accounting for a stunning 47 percent of all the poetry books sold in the United States in 2017” (p. 1). The figure shows the poetry growth in book sales from 2013 to 2017. Furthermore, it displays the importance of Instapoetry in the book industry, a remarkable fact considering its digital/virtual genesis.

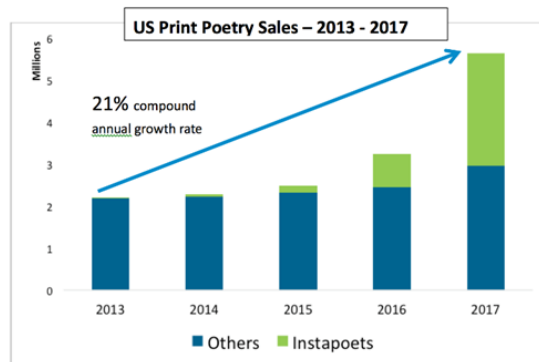


Figure 1. The NPD Group research

Source: The NPD Group/ NPD Bookscan (Note 1).

In the light of what was stated so far, it was believed that working with Instapoetry in EFL lessons would contribute sufficiently to teaching and learning processes. To achieve this goal, action research was carried out in two groups of students from the 8th grade of basic school. In the next topic, the method and steps employed are described.

3. Method

For this study, action research was chosen as the methodology due to its epistemological nature to find answers to problems people confront every day. Besides that, according to Stringer (2014), action research also contributes to building knowledge that improves community practices, expanding well-being among the participating people. The reason for selecting this practice was because of the environment faced while the study was carried out: after a long period of remote learning during the coronavirus pandemic, students came back to schools partially in a hybrid teaching phase, where teachers had to deal with online and in-person students at the same time.

This situation brought challenges which included the students' lack of motivation. As it was a specific context, the use of action research was preferred, in accordance with the perspective of Stringer (2014) for whom this method “is based on the proposition that generalized solutions, plans or programs may not fit all contexts or groups to whom they are applied and that the purpose of inquiry is to find an appropriate solution for the particular dynamics at work in a local situation” (p. 6). Figure 2 exposes the methodological path that was followed to reach the goals in this specific situation.

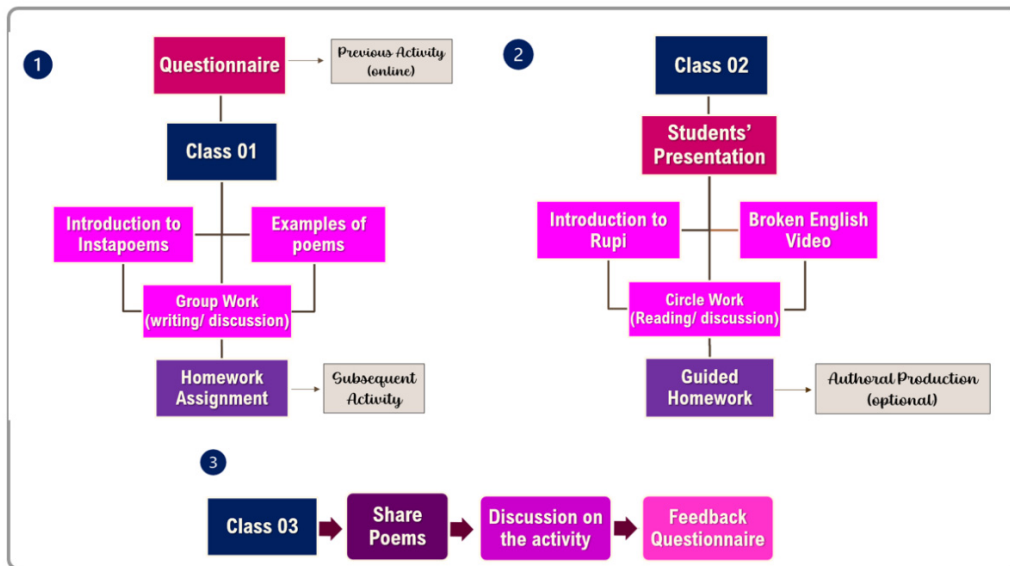


Figure 2. Methodological path

To better organize actions, a didactic sequence was planned inspired in the literary literacy proposal by Cosson (2021), and it consisted of three phases, one for each 45-minute class. The steps taken, illustrated in Figure 2, are described in the following topics.

3.1 Questionnaire Carried Out Before the Lessons

As previously mentioned, before applying the didactic sequence itself, for collecting the required data, a self-designed questionnaire was developed through Google Forms and answered by the two groups of students. In total, there were 63 responses that served as a guide to plan the steps and reinforce the idea of working with Instapoems, since most of them referred to Instagram as their preferred social media, as shown in Figure 3.

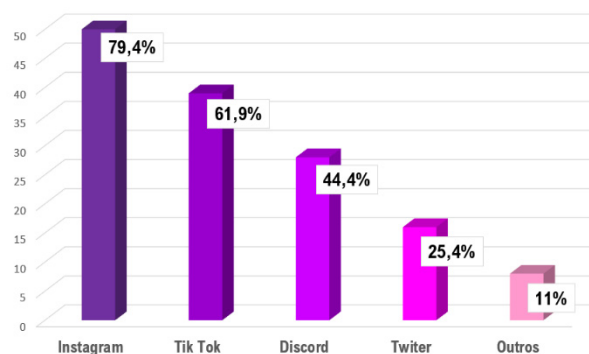


Figure 3. Social media mentions

Besides the platform used, learners were also asked about the time spent on these social media per day. It is worth mentioning that the questionnaire was answered in June of 2021, in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was a period called hybrid teaching, which means it was between the complete remote teaching, where both teachers and students were online (with synchronous classes) and the face-to-face teaching, which is the usual in-person modality of education in Brazil. It is widely known that the restrictions because of the coronavirus spread caused people to have more access and use more internet resources. For these reasons, it is believed that the number of hours spent online was elevated.

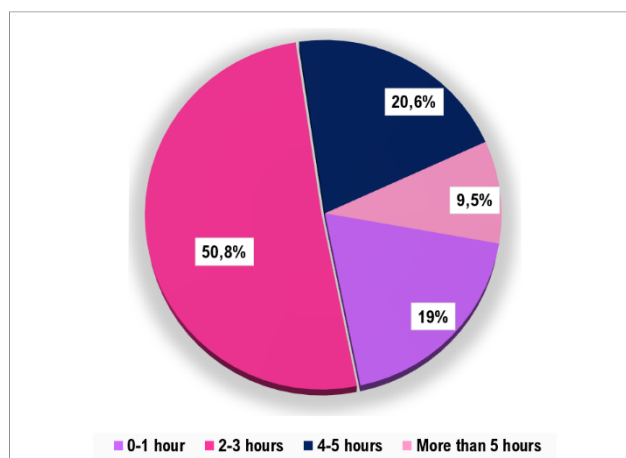


Figure 4. Daily time spent on social media

Figure 4 displays the expressive percentage of 30.1% of respondents who stay 4 hours or over online. This data brought the reflection: how can one's use of social media promote reading in English? Instapoetry might function as a good start due to its characteristics, notably because they are short texts, which would diminish the (un)conscious barrier learners build because of their narrow array of vocabulary in the English language.

Another question was about their knowledge on both Brazilians and English speaking instapoets. Most students (93.7%) did not know any mentioned authors. However, some Brazilian poets, namely, Zack Magiezi, Rafael Magalhães and Igor Pires were recognized by the classes, though pupils could not mention precisely what they wrote about. Additionally, none of them had heard the term Instapoem before.

In the light of the answers given, a didactic sequence was planned to have students know about the new digital genre and stimulate their reading in the English language on Instagram: a platform the students already spend a big part of their day in. The subsequent steps are described in the following topics.

3.2 Introduction of Instapoems

The first segment of this scheme, the introduction, began with the presentation of the genre. Initially, in support of Daniels and Steineke's proposal (2004), a teacher-led mini-lesson was conducted through oral presentation, using the support of slides.

Secondly, a video about Instapoetry, in Portuguese, was shown (Note 2). The decision to present it in the student's mother tongue was due to the fact that, although the group had been part of a bilingual program for about three years, it was identified that their knowledge in the target language, in general, was still incipient.

Subsequently, ten poems, in English, were displayed by the teacher. After clarifying some vocabulary difficulties, volunteers read the poems, and then the class was divided into groups of four students. Each group was asked to reflect on the poems they had just read and write, in English, a paragraph with their thoughts. During this step, the teacher avoided interfering with the groups' discussions and just observed. After noticing they had finished the activity, the groups were encouraged to read and comment to the whole class on the paragraph they wrote. This procedure was based on Cosson's suggestion to "involve integrated reading, writing and oral activities" (Cosson, 2021, p. 57).

This phase, which lasted a 45-minute class ended up with the request of a homework assignment: students had to search for instapoems and select some they liked. Then, they could either make their own poem or choose one they selected to bring to class the next day to read and comment on their choices.

3.3 Students' First Homework Activity

During this step, learners should present one instapoem, which could be, as mentioned before, one they produced by themselves or the one they enjoyed most among the poems they selected.

Most students (64%) brought poems they encountered through research on the Instagram platform; a few (8%) declared they found the poems on the world wide web when searching about instapoets; and only three students (5%) brought authorial texts, though there was some incoherence with the characteristics of the genre. It is important to mention that 23% of the students did not bring any poems at all. The three authorial productions

handed in are presented in Figure 5.

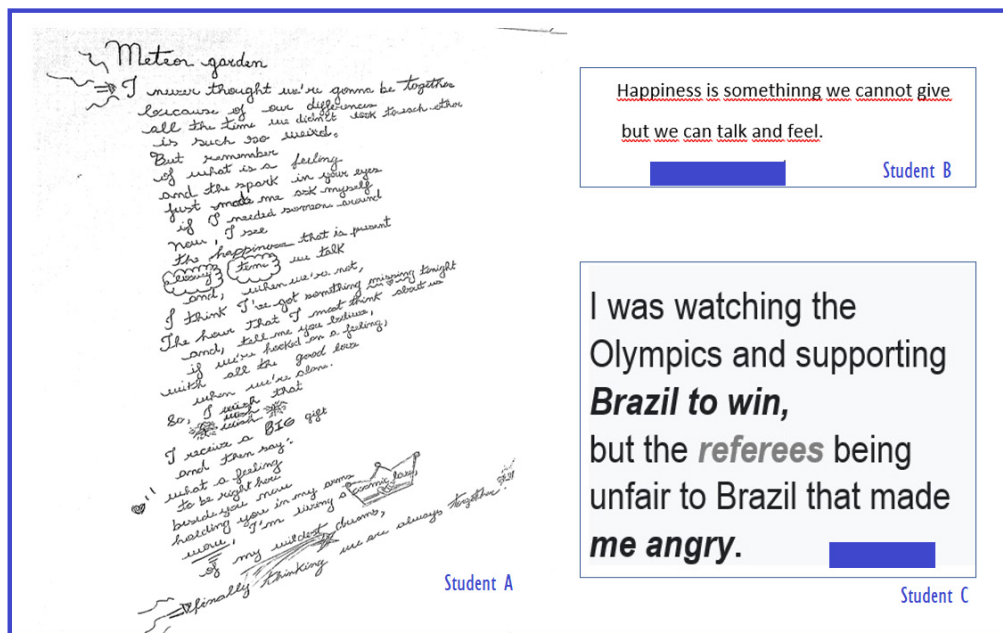


Figure 5. First production of Students A, B and C (Note 3)

Student A used a blank sheet to write about love and the (im)possibility to make it come true. S/he draw some forms and made circles in some words. It can be perceived that, on the one hand, the aid of visual items was incorporated in the text, on the other hand, it is too large to legibly fit on an Instagram post. Student B wrote about happiness, which is a theme that usually appears on instapoems. However, it can be noticed that s/he had difficulty in transforming the text into a picture, besides the fact that s/he used a rectangular format. Student C reproduced the Instagram square shape and used different fonts, which are characteristics of instapoems. Despite these visual effects, the subject of the text: a soccer game, and his/her opinion on the referees' job, is not suitable for a poem.

The other two authorial poems were shorter, but also had problems with visual aspects and structure. In reason of these findings, an extra step was added to the plan to dedicate some time to teaching the use of some resources, such as apps and programs that could be used to create the instapoem, as well as aware them of graphical strategies. This module took place before their final production, after the presentation of Rupî Kaur.

3.4 Rupî Kaur and Broken English Poem

Born in India, but raised in Canada, Kaur is drawing attention worldwide due to her sharp poems themed on feminism, violence, sexual harassment, loss, family, and love. Assink (2019) claims that Rupî has gained voice and visibility because of her online activism against gender inequality. For the author, the poet is an example of "marginalised voices that use Instagram to share their stories and art" (Assink, 2019, p. 6). Besides using words to express feelings, she also combines them with her drawings as can be observed in the three poems Figure 6 displays.

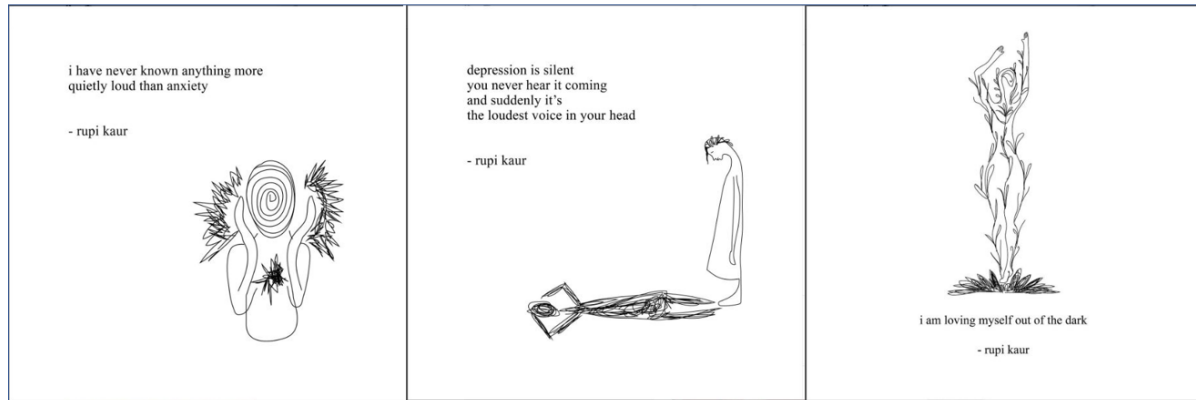


Figure 6. Rupi's feelings

As stated by Rojo and Moura (2012), multimodal texts should be read considering not only the verbal aspects, but also static or dynamic images. For the authors, while observing all these items “the elaboration of meanings will take other path besides the one formed strictly by the words” (p. 182). The poems in Figure 6 show how Kaur makes use of the combination text-image.

Rupi used the same strategy to write the poems about the sorority, friendship, and self-esteem, as in the three texts highlighted in Figure 7. They are examples of the need to read words and images together to comprehend the complete concept. It called special attention to how she used the phrase *be here* to compose the drawing on the poem on the far right. These elements were greatly discussed during this moment.

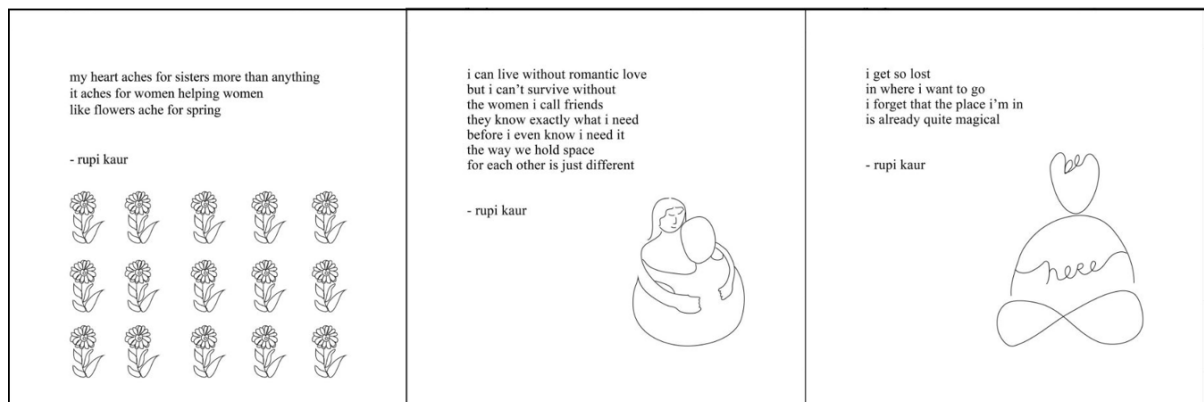


Figure 7. Image and words in Rupi's poems

Hence, Kaur's profile was believed to adequately fit the purposes of this didactic sequence. According to Cosson (2021), motivation plays an important role to prepare learners for literary reading. For him, “the initial success on the reader's encounter with literature depends on high-quality motivation” (p. 54). Therefore, the reason this poet was chosen was the teacher's knowledge about students' characteristics of engagement in minorities' defense. This behavior is encouraged by the school administration and also by the didactic material adopted by the school, which brings reflections about themes such as abusive relationships, sexism, human rights, and immigration. This way, students were thought to be motivated by the type of poems written by Kaur.

The poem chosen to read was *Broken English*. It was selected because of the discussion it brings on immigrants and the use of non-standard English. Before showing/reading the poem, the teacher engaged in the presentation step, following the didactic sequence proposed by Cosson (2021). According to the author, during this phase, the writer and literary work are introduced to students. Firstly, a short biography from the author was read, then a video (Note 4) with Rupi reciting the poem on a TV show was presented. Then, the class was organized in a circle and a sheet of paper with the printed poem (Note 5) was given to each student and volunteers read it. Figure 8 shows the selected part.

Broken English

i think about the way my father
pulled the family out of poverty
without knowing what a vowel was
and my mother raised four children
without being able to construct
a perfect sentence in english
a discombobulated couple
that landed in the new world with hopes
that left the bitter taste of rejection in their mouths
no family
no friends
just man and wife
two university degrees that meant nothing
one mother tongue that was broken now
one swollen belly with a baby inside
a father worried about jobs and rent
cause no matter what this baby was coming
and they thought to themselves for a split second
was it worth it to put all of our money
into the dream of a country
that is swallowing us whole

Rupi Kaur

Figure 8. First part of *Broken English*

After reading it, the groups were encouraged to state their points of view about the poem. Most of the students participated in this part of the sequence. They compared the written poem to the video where Rupi recites it. Some discussed the way she writes using only lower-case letters and the meaning of some words.

This class ended up with a “mini-lesson” (Daniels & Staineke, 2004) when the teacher explained the guided homework assignment, which was composed of a set of questions about the topics discussed in these two days with an optional request for producing their own instapoems. It bears remembering that students who made their poems, in the beginning, had difficulties in properly presenting their texts to be displayed on Instagram, so this mini-lesson was an opportunity to share design elements as well.

To conclude this sequence of activities, two steps took place: the presentation of the authorial poems and a feedback questionnaire. Both are described in the next session.

4. Results and Discussion

The two groups who took part in these activities were composed of 72 students in total. However, as mentioned before, due to the hybrid teaching and the troubled period this research was carried out amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, only 51 students (70%) participated in all the steps in the three classes. Nevertheless, it was positively seen that, even though it was optional, 35 pupils (48.6%) turned in instapoems they made. Except here and there, it can be noticed in the students’ production that most themes discussed in the Broken English poem were present, such as: the use of the English language to express personal and collective feelings from an emancipatory movement, as well as reflections on origins, prejudices, pain, gender, love, and hope. Figure 9 displays two poems in which we can see the formerly mentioned elements.

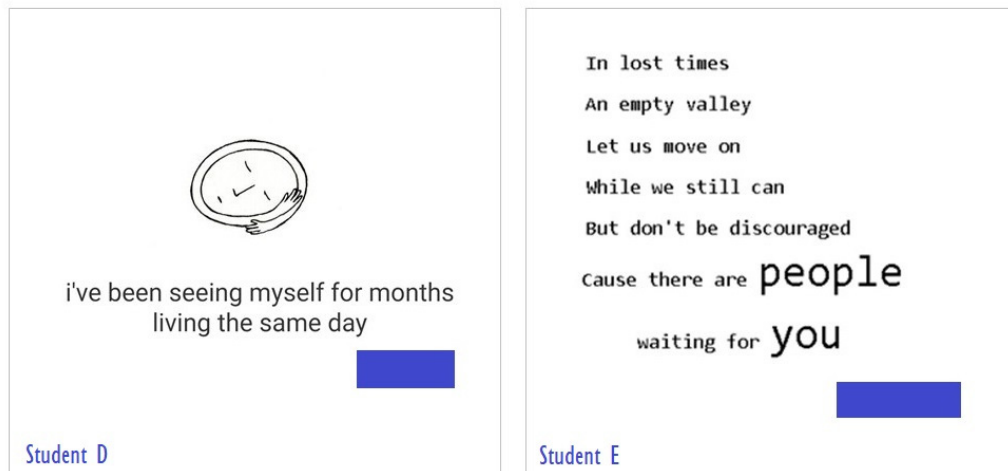


Figure 9. Students D and E final poems

The drawing element and the lowercase letters in the poem on the left immediately resemble Rupi's work. In the same way, the use of different fonts to highlight some words and the form to exhibit the verses in the poem on the right show elements discussed during the lessons.

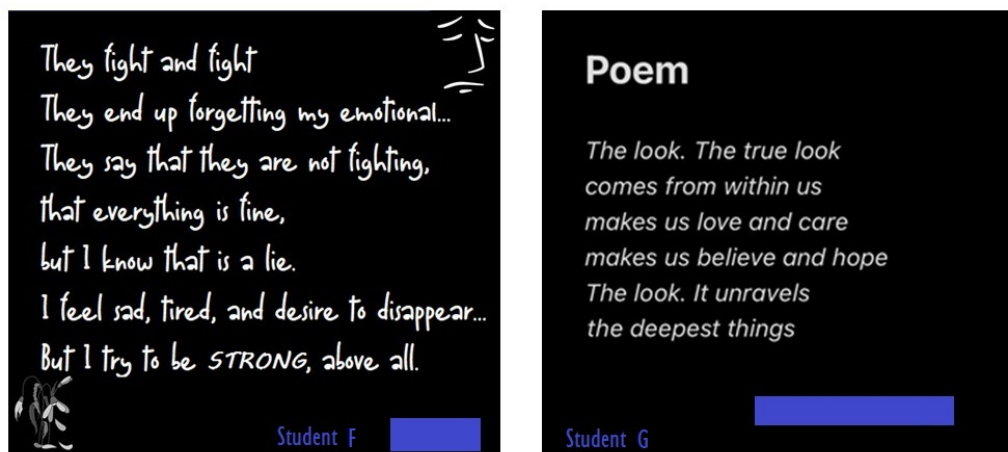


Figure 10. Students F and G final poems

Figure 10 presents two examples of poems that were made using a dark background. Thus, the one on the left also brings a *dark* theme, disclosing the writer's inner conflict, probably as a result of the moment Student F is probably going through. On the other hand, the one on the right reveals a *lighter* topic, contrasting to the background.



Figure 11. Students H and I final poems

Sadness, a fundamental component of Rupi's (and other authors') poems studied, was also present in the learner's productions. Figure 11 contains examples where sorrow is the principal motif. On the one hand, Student H complains about society-imposed patterns and his/her feelings towards them. On the other hand, Student I, on the right, uses illustration and designed fonts and colors to express his/her message.

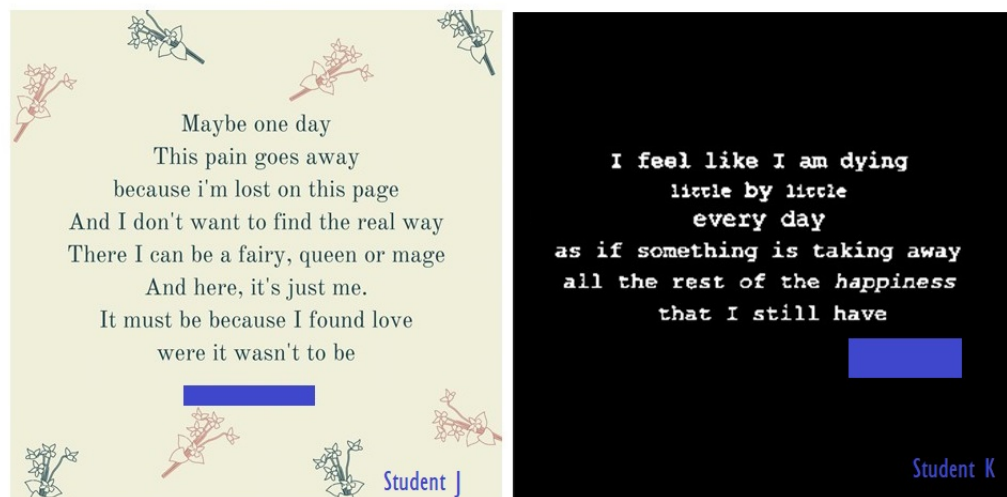


Figure 12. Students J and K final poems

Pain and melancholy are also found in the poems shown in Figure 12. In the poem by Student J, the sorrow expressed in the words contrast with the beauty of the flourishing illustrations. Whereas Student K combines the theme with words and background, subtly changing the font in the word "little" and "happiness".

Rupi Kaur's presence in the students' productions also reflects their approval of the Indian-Canadian poet. She was positively referred by many students in the questionnaire taken after the experience. This inquiry showed that most participants related well to the lessons (66.7% evaluated it with grade 10) and started reading instapoems (47.6%) after the first contact with the genre in class.

5. Conclusions

After analyzing the sequence of activities accomplished by the learners, it can be concluded that this study's aims were achieved. The students' contact with English has increased through instapoem reading and they demonstrated consistent understanding of the new digital genre. Additionally, they were very enthusiastic during the classes and their comments on the final questionnaire expose their endorsement of the proposed activities.

Therefore, the desired atmosphere to promote literary literacy was reached.

It is also worth underscoring that the experience evidenced some of the positive aspects of action research, for example, the commitment to finding appropriate solutions to particular situations and the significant role of the researcher's insertion in the environment. These attributes were crucial to the accomplishment of this study since the teacher knew the groups' characteristics and preferences on the topics brought by the instapoems.

Finally, regarding the literary texts produced, it was also an opportunity to have students talk about their feelings and personal problems they were facing. This fact was relevant for all participants due to the delicate period of the Covid-19 pandemic that had brought several psychological effects besides mobility restrictions.

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Notes

Note 1. Retrieved May 13, 2022, from <http://electronicbookreview.com/essay/e-lits-1-hit-is-instagram-poetry-e-literature/>

Note 2. The video can be accessed on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zn9IolZ9lrQ>

Note 3. Names were preserved to protect the participants identity.

Note 4. Retrieved May 13, 2022, from <https://www.instagram.com/tv/COQa0pSh3LL/>

Note 5. Due to the lack of time, just the beginning of the poem was given.

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