Journal of Education Innovation & Language Teaching (JEILT)
Peer-Reviewed Journal; Vol.2, No.1, pp.11-23, 2026
ISSN:3080-4760 (Online); ISSN: 3080-0471 (Print)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.63381/jeilt.v2i1.85
https://jeilt.org
info@jeilt.org

Facilitating Poetry Learning for Language Students at Eastern University, Sri Lanka through Decoding Poetic Syntax: A Techno-Stylistic Integrated Approach

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To cite this article: Somathasan, M (2026). Facilitating poetry learning for language students at eastern university, Sri Lanka through decoding poetic syntax: A techno-stylistic integrated approach. *Journal of Education Innovation and Language Teaching (JEILT)*, *2* (1), 11-23

Abstract

English poetry, with its intricate syntax, often presents significant challenges for language students, particularly in higher education contexts. Understanding poetic syntax is important for language students because it unlocks deeper layers of meaning. At Eastern University, Sri Lanka (EUSL), language students often encounter challenges in decoding poetic syntax through traditional methods that emphasize memorization, teacher-centred lectures, and limited classroom exercises. Such approaches, while foundational, frequently fail to foster analytical depth or sustained engagement. By contrast, technology-enhanced approaches provide interactive, adaptive, and learner-centred environments that simplify the decoding of poetic syntax. As today's students are technophiles, providing them with innovative learning methods rather than traditional approaches is indispensable in order to significantly enhance their enthusiasm for poetry learning. Based on this, the researcher has developed a computational tool, "Poetic Syntax Decoder", in order to easily understand the structures in English poems. The study, being descriptive and qualitative, involved twenty first-year language students from the Department of Languages at EUSL. The data for the study were collected from a variety of English poems. To measure the effectiveness of the tool, two tests were administered. First, a traditional pretest assessed the participants' initial understanding of poetic structures, followed by a post-test utilizing the developed tool as a learning and testing platform for deciphering poetic structures. The results indicated a significant improvement in participants' performance on the post-test compared to the pretest. Thus, the findings reveal that students exposed to technology-enhanced learning demonstrated improved proficiency in interpreting poetic syntax, alongside increased motivation and autonomy. Finally, the integration of computer-assisted tools into poetry education at EUSL demonstrates how modern computational tools can bridge gaps in traditional teaching, making the study of poetic syntax decoding both approachable and intellectually rewarding.

Keywords: *EUSL, poetry learning, poetic syntax, traditional method, computational tool, improved proficiency*

Original Article History:
Received: 2025-12-19; Revised: 2026-02-27; Accepted: 2026-03-07

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1. Introduction

Poetic syntax is a key stylistic feature, and understanding it is a necessary tool for language students at universities because it unlocks a deeper comprehension of poetic texts and enhances their analytical capabilities. Culler (2002) says that poetry often deviates from conventional grammatical structures, employing inversions, ellipses, and unusual word order to achieve specific aesthetic and semantic effects. By dissecting these syntactic choices, students learn to identify how poets manipulate language to create rhythm, emphasize certain words or phrases, and evoke particular emotions or ideas (Abrams and Harpham, 2015). For example, analyzing the inversion in Milton's (1667) "Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit / Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste / Brought death into the World, and all our woe", reveals how the delayed subject ('fruit') heightens the dramatic impact and foreshadows the consequences of the forbidden act. This analytical skill is not merely about identifying grammatical anomalies; it's about understanding the purpose behind these deviations and their contribution to the poem's overall meaning and artistic merit (Leech, 1969). Further, Eagleton (2008) states that a strong grasp of poetic syntax fosters a more nuanced appreciation of linguistic flexibility and the expressive potential of language, which is invaluable for students pursuing careers in fields such as literary criticism, creative writing, and even linguistics. It also cultivates critical thinking, as students must actively engage with the text to decipher its intended meaning rather than passively consuming it (Short, 1996). Vendler (1997) describes that mastering poetic syntax equips language students with sophisticated tools for interpreting complex literary works and articulating their insights with precision and depth.

2. Literature Review

This literature review explores the growing body of research advocating for the integration of computer technology-incorporated methods to enhance language students' ability to decode poetic syntax, arguing for their superiority over purely traditional methods. The inherent structural deviations and stylistic choices within poetry, such as inversion, ellipsis, and enjambment, demand analytical tools that can systematically break down and visualize these linguistic phenomena (Sperberg-McQueen, 2002). Traditional methods, relying heavily on close reading and instructor interpretation, can be subjective and may not provide the granular, objective analysis that computational tools offer. The advent of digital humanities and computational tools has opened new avenues for analyzing literary texts.

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Tools such as Natural Language Processing (NLP) and text visualization software can provide students with unprecedented insights into the syntactic structures of poems. For instance, part-of-speech tagging can automatically identify the grammatical function of each word, highlighting deviations from standard sentence structures and making inversions immediately apparent (Jockers, 2013). This objective identification of grammatical roles can significantly aid students in reconstructing the underlying prose order of a poetic line, a crucial step in comprehension. Further, dependency parsing, a more advanced NLP technique, can map the grammatical relationships between words, visually representing the syntactic tree of a sentence. This visual representation can be particularly beneficial for students who struggle with abstract grammatical concepts, allowing them to see how words connect and modify each other within a poetic context (Pustejovsky & Stubbs, 2012). The ability to interact with these visual representations, manipulating and exploring different interpretations, fosters a deeper and more active engagement with the text than passive reading alone.

Biber et al. (1999) say that by analyzing large collections of poetic texts, students can identify common syntactic patterns within specific periods or by particular poets, and then contrast these with individual poems that intentionally subvert these norms. This comparative approach, facilitated by computational tools, allows students to move beyond isolated textual analysis to a broader understanding of poetic conventions and innovations. Computer-assisted learning platforms can incorporate interactive exercises where students are tasked with reordering scrambled poetic lines to their original syntactic structure or identifying instances of specific syntactic devices (e.g. anaphora, chiasmus) within a text. Such gamified approaches can increase student motivation and provide immediate feedback, reinforcing learning in a way that traditional assignments often cannot (Gee, 2003). While traditional methods provide essential foundational skills in close reading and critical interpretation, their limitations in systematically dissecting complex syntactic structures can hinder comprehensive understanding. Computer technology-incorporated methods, conversely, offer objective, visual, and interactive tools that empower students to decode poetic syntax with greater ease and depth.

Decoding of Poetic Lines of English Poems into Ordinary English

The intricate beauty of English poetry often lies in its nuanced language, figurative expressions, and condensed imagery, which can pose a challenge

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for readers seeking direct comprehension. Decoding poetic lines into ordinary English involves unraveling these layers to reveal the underlying meaning, making the poem accessible without diminishing its artistic merit. This process is important for academic analysis, allowing for a deeper understanding of the poet's message, themes, and stylistic choices (Perkins, 1987). By dissecting the metaphorical and symbolic language, one can bridge the gap between poetic abstraction and concrete understanding. This analytical approach not only aids in interpretation but also highlights the poet's skill in conveying complex ideas through evocative language. The transformation from poetic to ordinary language often involves identifying key similes, metaphors, and personifications and then rephrasing them in a straightforward manner while retaining the original sentiment and intent (Frye, 1957). This activity is not about reducing the poem's complexity but rather about illuminating its core message for a broader audience, including those new to poetic analysis. The process of decoding poetic lines can be illustrated through examples from the following classic English poems:

Consider the lines in the poem, "A Poison Tree" by William Blake.

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe;
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

The above lines can be decoded into ordinary English as:

When I was angry with my friend, I expressed my anger, and it dissipated.
However, when I was angry with my enemy, I suppressed my anger, and it intensified.

This decode or translation clarifies the poem's central theme of suppressed anger leading to destructive consequences.

Similarly, consider the lines in the poem, "The Solitary Reaper" by William Wordsworth.

No Nightingale did ever chaunt
More welcome notes to weary bands
Of travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands.

The lines can be interpreted as:

No nightingale has ever sung more beautifully or offered more comfort to tired groups of travelers resting in a shaded oasis in the Arabian Desert.

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This above decoding illuminates the profound impact of the reaper's song, comparing it to the most soothing and welcome sounds in a desolate landscape.

Further, consider the lines in the poem, "An Unknown Citizen" by W.H. Auden

He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be
One against whom there was no official complaint,
And all the reports on his conduct agree
That, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint,

These lines can be translated into ordinary English as:

> Government statistics indicated that no formal complaints were ever filed against him, and all official records of his behaviour consistently show that, by contemporary standards, he was an exemplary and morally upright individual.

This decoding highlights the poem's satirical commentary on conformity and the reduction of individual identity to statistical data.

These examples demonstrate how decoding poetic language into ordinary English can unlock deeper meanings and facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the poet's message and the poem's thematic concerns (Eagleton, 2008). This analytical approach is fundamental for both students and literary scholars seeking to engage more deeply with poetic texts.

Decoders of Poetic Syntax in English Poems

While there isn't a single, universally recognized decoder or computational tool that perfectly decodes English poetic syntax into ordinary English, several approaches and research efforts have explored this complex task. The challenge lies in the inherent ambiguity, figurative language, and deviation from standard grammatical structures often found in poetry. However, advancements in Natural Language Processing (NLP) and computational linguistics offer promising avenues. The following are some approaches that modern NLP offers for poetic syntax analysis:

1. Part-of-Speech (POS) Tagging: This involves identifying the grammatical category of each word (e.g. noun, verb, adjective, and adverb). Poetic inversion often rearranges typical subject-verb-object (SVO) order. By accurately tagging words, a system can then attempt to reorder them into a more conventional structure. For example, in a poetic line, "A feather on the bright sky I am", POS tagging would identify 'feather' as a noun, 'on' as a preposition, 'bright' as an

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adjective, 'sky' as a noun, 'I' as a pronoun, and 'am' as a verb. This allows for reordering to "I am a feather on the bright sky".

2. Dependency Parsing: This technique analyzes the grammatical relationships between words in a poetic line, showing which words modify or depend on others. For instance, it can identify the subject of a verb or the object of a preposition, even if they are separated by other words due to poetic license. This is important for understanding the core meaning when syntax is inverted or fragmented.
3. Named Entity Recognition (NER): While more focused on identifying proper nouns (people, places, organizations), NER can help distinguish between common nouns and specific entities, which can be important for contextual understanding, especially when allusions are present.
4. Coreference Resolution: This identifies when different words or phrases refer to the same entity. In poetry, pronouns or descriptive phrases might refer back to an earlier, less obvious subject. Resolving these coreferences helps clarify who or what is being discussed.

Despite the existence of various NLP and computational tools for analyzing poetic syntax, their complexity and limited accessibility hinder their usefulness. Many of these tools are not only cumbersome to use but also restricted by download limitations, creating barriers for students, researchers, and scholars. To address these challenges, this study introduces the "Poetic Syntax Decoder", a novel computational tool designed to simplify the analysis of poetic structures, providing an intuitive and freely accessible solution for uncovering the intricate syntax of poetry.

3. Methodology

The methodology employed in this research was both descriptive and qualitative. In this study, a student-friendly computational tool, "Poetic Syntax Decoder", was developed to master the decoding of poetic structure in English poems.

Research Participants

In this study, 20 first-year students enrolled in the B.A. degree, which includes English as one of the subjects, from the Department of Languages at EUSL were taken as participants.

Data Collection and Distribution

A total of sixty (60) poetic lines were collected from the English poems in the syllabus. From the 60 poetic lines, 20 were utilized for a conventional pretest.

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Subsequently, another 20 poetic lines were fed into the developed tool to help participants practise with both their laptops and desktops. Finally, a post-test was conducted with the tool, employing the final 20 poetic lines for this assessment.

Research Design

This study was carried out in three phases: Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3.

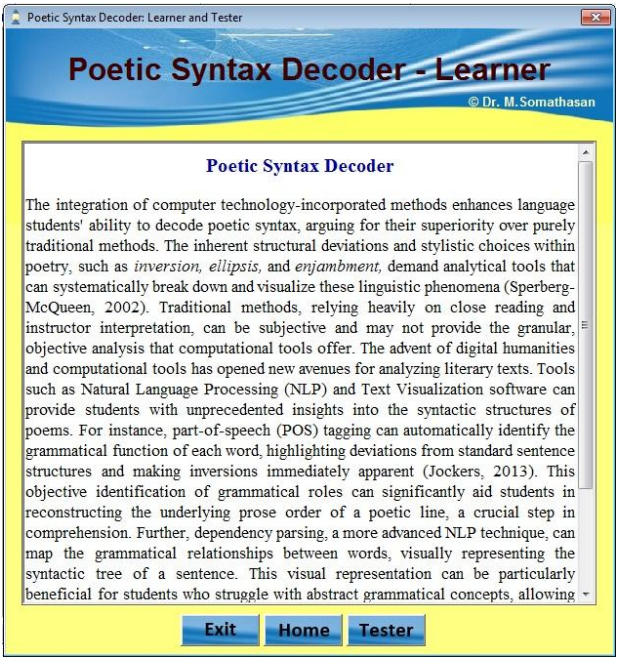
1. Phase 1: Pretest

In this phase, a traditional pretest in the format of Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs) was conducted to evaluate the participants' existing knowledge of decoding the poetic structure into ordinary English. The pretest was scored out of 100 marks. Then, the responses to the test were recorded for the purpose of results, analysis, and conclusions.

2. Phase 2: Development of the Computational Tool and Practice

In this phase, a computational tool, "Poetic Syntax Decoder", was developed by the researcher, utilizing the programming language Visual Basic 6. A sample visual representation of the developed computational tool is given below:

The Sample Visual of the Developed Computational Tool



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Mechanism of the Developed Tool

The innovative tool, "Poetic Syntax Decoder", is a computer programme for mastering the knowledge of decoding poetic syntax into ordinary English. This tool is two-fold: Learner and Tester. In the learning part (by clicking the 'Learner' button), language students at EUSL thoroughly learn the poetic structures of certain English poems and how they are converted into their ordinary English equivalents. On the other hand, students use the testing part (by clicking the 'Tester' button) to test their gathered knowledge of how poetic syntax is converted into ordinary English. When clicking the 'Tester' button, a testing environment will appear, in which the student can see a 'Sentence' button. When clicking it once (then, it changes into the 'Next' button automatically), a poetic line will display with four interpretations (one is correct and the other three are incorrect) in ordinary English. Consider the following example:

Poem - "The Solitary Reaper" by William Wordsworth

"Behold her, single in the field," means,

1. Watch out for her, as she is a dangerous lone soldier on the battlefield.
2. Look at her, she is by herself working in the field.
3. The speaker is referring to a unique, one-of-a-kind flower growing in the grass.
4. See that woman, she is getting ready for her wedding ceremony in the meadow.

Now, to decode the given poetic line, students have to read four interpretations carefully and find out the correct answer (here, 2). For most students, it would be difficult to decode the meaning of the poetic line because of its structure. However, if the structure is in ordinary English, like "Look at her, she is by herself working in the field", almost all the students would understand it.

If a student likes, he can check his status, i.e. whether he is right or wrong, by clicking the 'Check' button in the tool after every sentence, after any number of sentences, or at the end of the activity. The 'Next' button is used to go to the next sentence. As far as the marks are concerned, 5 marks are given for the correct answer and 0 marks are given for the wrong one or for not attempting the answer. The 'Refresh' button is used to refresh the activity and the 'Exit' button is for ending the programme. This is the mechanism of the tool. Further, this tool was practised by the participants with both their laptops and desktops for one week.

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3. Phase 3: Post-test

In this phase, a post-test was conducted with the developed tool to understand the participants' gained knowledge in decoding the poetic syntax of English poems. Further, the post-test was evaluated out of 100 marks. The answers to the test were recorded for results, analysis, and findings.

Analysis of the Results

Based on the study, the following results (Table 1) were analysed to draw the findings by comparing the results of the pretest (i.e., the traditional method) with the results of the post-test (i.e., the innovative method) regarding the participants' knowledge of decoding the poetic structure of poems into ordinary English.

The Results of Pretest and Post-test on Decoding Poetic Syntax				
Marks Range	Number of Participants (20)			
	Pretest	Percentage (%)	Post-test	Percentage (%)
0-24	2	10%	0	0%
25-29	3	15%	0	0%
30-34	2	10%	0	0%
35-39	5	25%	0	0%
40-44	4	20%	2	10%
45-49	2	10%	1	5%
50-54	1	5%	3	15%
55-59	1	5%	4	20%
60-64	0	0%	3	15%
65-69	0	0%	4	20%
70-84	0	0%	2	10%
85-100	0	0%	1	5%
	20	100%	20	100%

Table 1 – The results of pretest and post-test on decoding poetic syntax

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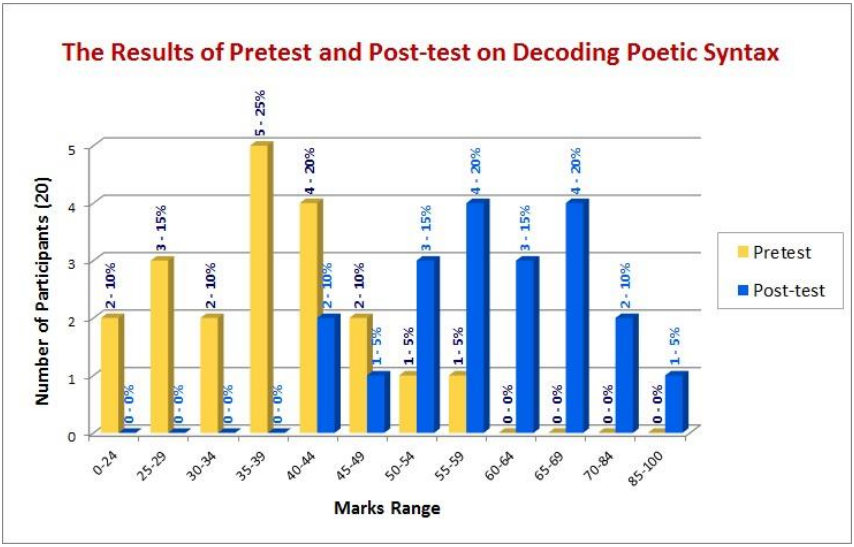

Figure 1 – The results of pretest and post-test on decoding poetic syntax

Figure 1 presents a comparison of participants' pretest and post-test scores, highlighting their ability to translate complex poetic structures from English texts into clear, accessible language. The results demonstrate significant growth in their capacity to analyze and interpret poetic syntax, particularly through the use of the newly designed educational tool, "Poetic Syntax Decoder". This innovative learning and assessment platform enabled participants to effectively decode and reframe intricate poetic devices from course readings into straightforward, contextually comprehensive English.

4. Findings

The findings of this study underscore the significant efficacy of the "Poetic Syntax Decoder" as a computational learning tool in enhancing students' ability to decode poetic syntax. A comparative analysis of pretest and post-test results revealed a marked improvement in participants' performance: while the majority of students scored below 50 in the traditional pretest, nearly all post-test participants achieved scores of 50 and above, with several attaining scores in the 65–84 range. This demonstrates that computational tools proved significantly more effective in unravelling the complexities of poetic structures than conventional teacher-centred methods (Jockers, 2013). By providing an innovative platform for analysis

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and interactive exploration, the tool empowered B.A. English students at EUSL to engage more deeply with English poetry, fostering a nuanced and informed appreciation of the literary form. The integration of this technology into the language classroom produced a highly engaging learning experience, with all participants expressing enthusiasm for the interactive and feedback-rich environment (Gee, 2003). A particularly notable advantage of the tool was its capacity to deliver instant, formative feedback, enabling students to iteratively refine their skills in translating poetic language into everyday English, ultimately enriching their comprehension of literary texts (Pustejovsky & Stubbs, 2012). The findings thus confirm that technology-enhanced learning environments can substantially bridge the gap between students' initial limitations and the analytical proficiency required for meaningful poetic interpretation.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the teaching and learning of poetic syntax in higher education contexts, particularly in universities in Sri Lanka and similar settings. First, it is strongly recommended that language departments formally integrate computational tools such as the "Poetic Syntax Decoder" into their English literature and language curricula. As Jockers (2013) argues, digital tools offer unprecedented capacity for objective, systematic analysis of literary texts that traditional methods alone cannot replicate. Accordingly, curriculum designers and faculty should consider embedding technology-assisted learning modules alongside conventional poetry instruction to ensure a blended pedagogical approach. Second, institutions should invest in training educators to use Natural Language Processing (NLP)-based tools effectively in classroom settings. Biber et al. (1999) emphasise that corpus-based and computational approaches to language can reveal syntactic patterns with a precision that enriches both teaching and research; however, their value is contingent on pedagogically informed implementation. Faculty development programmes should therefore equip teachers with the technical competence and instructional strategies required to deploy such tools meaningfully. Third, this study recommends that future research expand the sample size and diversity of participants to validate the scalability of such tools across different linguistic backgrounds and proficiency levels. As Gee (2003) points out, gamified, interactive learning platforms have transformative potential, but their design must be sensitive to learners' sociocultural contexts. Fourth, developers and researchers should focus on making computational poetry tools more accessible by hosting them as web-

based or mobile applications to overcome download and hardware limitations. Finally, similar tools should be developed for other challenging areas of literary analysis, such as figurative language and prosody, thereby broadening the scope of technology-enhanced literary education (Pustejovsky & Stubbs, 2012; Eagleton, 2008).

5. Conclusion

The research presented a novel approach to enhancing poetry comprehension among language students at EUSL, by integrating techno-stylistic methods for decoding poetic syntax. The study's findings unequivocally demonstrate the efficacy of the developed computational tool in facilitating a deeper understanding of English poetry. The significant improvement observed in post-test scores compared to pretest results, particularly in the ability to translate complex poetic structures into ordinary English, underscores the potential of technology-enhanced learning environments in language education. Such environments can bridge the gap between linguistic complexity and learner comprehension. This aligns with broader trends in educational technology, where computational tools are increasingly leveraged to address specific learning challenges. The qualitative data further support these quantitative findings, with participants reporting increased confidence and reduced frustration when engaging with previously challenging poetic texts. Thus, this research contributes significantly to the field of language pedagogy, particularly in the context of literary studies, by offering a scalable and replicable model for improving poetry learning outcomes.

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