TEACHING THE SHORT STORY TO IMPROVE L2 READING AND WRITING SKILLS: APPROACHES AND STRATEGIES

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Due to the potential of literature to express both cultural values and universal human values, its study can promote internal as well as international communication. The literary reader’s creative (or rather, ‘co-creative’) role and the imaginative involvement engendered by this role encourage a dynamic interaction between reader, text and external world. Today, with the interdisciplinary outlook in the academics, there is a renewed concentration on the use of literature in the classroom.

Research into the interconnectivity of the short story teaching and the acquisition of L2 reading and writing skills supports the positive impact of the use of the short story and brief narrative texts in improving learners' reading and writing skills speaking and listening skills. The short story's distinctive features, i.e., its brevity, modernity, and variety make it appealing and interesting to language learners. When the short story is chosen based on the students' level of English proficiency, it can offer them adequate linguistic, intellectual, and emotional involvement and enrich their learning experience. Thus, this paper proposes that the short story can provide ESL learners with a suitable study resource which is both delightful and instructive to improve their linguistic proficiency and writing skills. Consequently, the researcher aims to put forward a variety of strategies to make the teaching of the short story enjoyable and an academically enriching experience. These strategies include the design and implementation of motivation building techniques which facilitate overall reading comprehension, written skills, and enrich their cultural orientation.

A systematic teaching strategy for the use of the short story to improve reading an writing skills can include the following stages:

I. Pre-reading activities: to provide students with vocabulary exercises and cultural background
II. In-class oral reading: to improve oral and spoken abilities
III. Textual analysis and group work: to improve reading comprehension and small scale writing tasks
IV. Post-reading assignments: to establish the acquired knowledge and improve more comprehensive written skills.

Moreover, the short story provides a way for teachers to assess listening comprehension beyond the usual asking of questions. Dramatizing a story causes the students to view the entire story, whereas answering comprehension questions draws attention to only small parts of what was read. The power and emotional impact found in a short story can offer the learners deeper meaning about the acquisition of reading and writing skills. Finally, short
stories invite students to engage in more active and informed discussion of their involvement with the text and their own personal experiences relevant to the world of the text.

**Keywords:** Short story, Approaches, Strategies, Reading, Writing, Tasks and actives, Distinctive features, Enriching experience.

**INTRODUCTION**

The interaction and mutual, reciprocal, collaboration of literature and language teaching has been the subject of interest to many foreign language teaching researchers, especially in the 20th century. Claire and Oliver Kramsch, in their investigation into the historical background of the use of literature in language teaching, assert that:

Throughout the 20th century, literature has been given many purposes in language study. It has been used for the aesthetic education of the few (1910s), for literacy of the many (1920s), for moral and vocational uplift (1930s-1940s), for ideational content (1950s), for humanistic inspiration (1960s-1990s), and finally for providing an 'authentic' experience of the target culture (1980s-1990s). Literature has consistently provided the cultural backbone and, very often the intellectually legitimation for the teaching of foreign languages. (568)

Using literature as a vehicle for the teaching of a second or foreign language has proved very beneficial to the EFL and ESL students’ learning experience. Notable researchers such as Susan Louise Stern (1985), Yorio (1971), McKinley (1974), Walsleben (1975), Gorman (1979), and Povey (1979) have all attested to the idea of the effectiveness of the implementation of literature in the language class. Povey, thus, proposes that, "Literature gives evidence of the widest variety of syntax, the richest variation of vocabulary discrimination. It provides examples of the language employed at its most effective, subtle, and suggestive" (162).

Reading comprehension and writing skills require complex acquisition processes which can account for the way that learners comprehend and respond to what they read. Many researchers and educators have done untiring attempts in order to find more efficient ways of enabling the learners to become more proficient readers and writers. According to Joann Hammadou, "Both groups have often been painfully aware of the limitations of their understandings of comprehension. … Yet today, most experts would readily agree that much is still not known about what reading comprehension is, let alone how educators can help learners to read better. These observations are especially pertinent to second language (L2) reading comprehension, which is even less well understood than first language (L1) reading comprehension" (38).

However, it is necessary to point out here that reading and writing are not simply a linguistic decoding, rather they result from the comprehension of the text’s meaning. Therefore, a good number of ESL/EFL experts do agree that content knowledge is an important factor in the learning process of reading comprehension. Moreover, they emphasize the impact of background knowledge in the effective acquisition of reading comprehension as Hammadou maintains: "Background knowledge does aid comprehension. The overwhelming evidence that prior content knowledge aids comprehension does not alter the fact that learners routinely read in order to gain new knowledge" (47). A valuable source of knowledge is, undoubtedly, literary texts, and more appropriately for reading comprehension purposes, the short story. Using the short story to enhance students' reading proficiency and writing skills has another privilege. The
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short story is a compact literary genre in which much is left unsaid in order for the reader to make implications. Therefore, it makes students sensitive to hidden and implied meaning. While in reading non-literary material students learn to read the lines and decode the meaning, in reading short stories they learn to read between the lines. Thus, the short story, in addition to the above mentioned advantages as material for reading comprehension and writing skills, is a carefully designed text that is organized to convey that “single effect” that Edgar Allen Poe, the great theoretician of the short story as a distinct literary genre, talks about. Regarding the issue of literary organization, Arens, Swaffar and Byrnes (1991) observe that “students have greater success with texts that convince, inform and persuade- texts with rhetorical illocution- than they do with readings that are purely descriptive” (115).

Indeed, the short story as a multi-dimensional literary genre can be profitably used in the acquisition of various language skills. The short story's distinctive features, i.e., its brevity, modernity, and variety make it appealing and interesting to language learners. When the short story is chosen based on the students' level of English proficiency, it can offer them adequate linguistic, intellectual, and emotional involvement and enrich their learning experience. Thus, this article proposes that the short story can provide ESL/EFL learners with a suitable study resource which is both delightful and instructive to improve their linguistic proficiency and reading/writing skills. Consequently, the researcher aims to put forward a variety of strategies to make the teaching of the short story enjoyable and an academically enriching experience in aiding reading and writing skills. These strategies include the design and implementation of motivation building techniques which facilitate overall reading comprehension, oral and spoken skills, and cultural orientation.

DISCUSSION

Using literature in the language classroom leads the learners to become better readers. In addition, as Knutson maintains, "drawing explicit attention to the interactive nature of the reading process provides a natural introduction to the theoretical issues of readability, comprehension, and interpretation, preparing students who plan to pursue advanced study for the increasingly important reader-based focus of current literary criticism" (23). Susan Louise Stern in her Ph.D. dissertation entitled,"Teaching Literature in ESL/EFL: An Integrative Approach," comments on the relevance of the structure and content of literary texts for language learning purposes: "those works that do contain complex structures give students the opportunity to practice and test their ability to unravel them. As with vocabulary, the context of the work gives readers the necessary cues to figure out the structures on their own" (4).

Among the literary forms, indeed, the short story is an engaging literary genre and can therefore be utilized for language learning purposes. Almost all modern short stories have the following unique characteristics which make them especially suitable to be used in reading comprehension classes:

Universality, Non-triviality, Personal relevance, Variety, Interest, Economy and Suggestive Power, Ambiguity; moreover, each learner's interpretation has validity and an almost infinite fund of interactive discussion is guaranteed.

The short story creates the tension necessary for a genuine exchange of ideas in class discussions. In addition, the short story pushes students out of a passive reading state into a personal connection with the text-and then beyond, extending the connection to other texts and to the world outside of school. Closely related to the issue of implied meaning, Knutson (1993) argues that there are two processes through which proficient readers figure out the meaning of a
text. One is what she terms “bottom-up process” and the other she calls “top-down process” (13). The bottom-up process is when the reader decodes the individual elements of the text to build a total meaning, while in the top-down process the reader starts with forming hypotheses and making predictions. It is obvious that these two strategies are used simultaneously by a successful reader. With regard to the above argument the advantage of using a short story rather than a non-literary text is that some pre-reading activities which can be nicely applied to the short story-such as the discussion of the topic and narrative structure- are very useful in facilitating the readers’ top-down process.

The short story offers certain advantages for material design for ESL students since this genre includes short textual material to be satisfactorily handled in a one or limited teaching sessions. As John Povey points out, the distinct features of the short story make it desirable for its inclusion in the ESL curriculum because “it is brief, contemporary, interesting and portrays a modern cultural environment that is either relatively familiar to the student or else significantly attached to the target culture of the language s/he is studying” (1).

**TEXT SELECTION**

The issue of text selection is a very significant one in using literature in general in language classes. Basically literary material is more suitable for students with a high level of language proficiency. Regarding literary material, apart from the reader’s linguistic proficiency, text difficulty depends on text’s characteristics and the reader’s literary competence. Literary competence can be achieved through repeated exposure to literary material. However, regarding the text’s features a careful attention should be paid to the structure of the text. It is generally prefered to choose texts with straightforward structures. The general assumption is that when the ESL student is reading a text s/he has to devote more attention to linguistic encoding, therefore s/he will be easily confused with a text which has a complicated structural organization. As Riley (1993) points out “studies of reading English as a second or foreign language confirm the hypothesis that a story which violates various aspects of a story grammer would be more difficult to integrate and understand than one matching a canonical structure” (418).

Generally, the more confident choice concerning a suitable text for ESL/EFL learners may be the short stories which are more contemporary and short enough to be discussed in one or two teaching sessions. The linguistic aspects of the text should concern the language, style and diction, appropriate to the level of our students; Gillian Lazar proposes that “the text should be sufficiently challenging without being so difficult as to be demotivating…. [It] should be within the student’s grasp, in terms of their linguistic, intellectual, and emotional capacities” (1990, p. 206). Furthermore, reading a whole, unabridged and non-simplified literary text gives the students a sense of accomplishment. Therefore, it will be encouraging when students are psychologically satisfied that they have read the very words of a great writer.

**PROCEDURES AND STRATEGIES**

A systematic teaching strategy for the short story can include the following stages:

I. **Pre-reading activities**: to provide students with vocabulary exercises and cultural background

II. **In-class oral reading**: to improve oral and spoken abilities
III. Textual analysis and group work: to improve reading comprehension and communicative skills

IV. Post-reading assignments: to establish the acquired knowledge and improve written skills.

Keeping in mind that the comprehension of the text is the central focus of the reading of the short story, as Richard A. Raschio elucidates, the teacher must pay attention to nonlinear process of the skill of reading: "It involves the integration of sound, symbol, word, phrase, context, text, and cultural information as presented by the author and comprehended by the reader…. When cultural information is considered to be important to the comprehension of a text …by providing the author's cultural perspective, we [teachers] encourage students to rely on it rather than on their own view of the cultural content, which might have distorted their comprehension" (1140). For each short story, a number of tasks can be designed to cover the basic language skills required for an efficient reading comprehension. These tasks may include vocabulary work, reading comprehension questions, oral presentation of the text, in-class discussion and interpretation, and finally follow-up tasks which can take the form of written responses or keeping a journal.

Pre-reading activities: Vocabulary work

As Riley asserts, "Pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading activities tailored to the specific learning context may help the learner gain access to the story by becoming more aware of its structure"(426). One vital issue concerning preliminary comprehension involves the task of overcoming the vocabulary presented by the text.

Research studies have confirmed that the comprehension of reading passages which might present linguistic difficulties can be facilitated by appropriate pre-reading tasks. One aspect of the reading material is the vocabulary work. Susan Louise Stern in her investigation into the issue of effective acquisition of vocabulary by ESL learners reports the following findings:

[T]here are three ways of improving L2 learner’s vocabulary: (1) through word-study exercises, i.e., the study of word derivations—prefixes, suffixes, roots, cognate, and word formation; (2) by presenting new vocabulary in meaningful situations, i.e., in an appropriate context so that in practice is not usually feasible to isolate the learning of vocabulary from comprehension of the subject matter generally or in relation to words which are grammatically or semantically related to them; and (3) through regular practice in determining the meaning of words from the context, i.e., using contextual clues to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words and using contextual redundancies to determine lexical meaning. This last strategy for coping with unfamiliar words is especially important for non-native speakers, not only because it encourages them to be more self-reliant, but because, as Gorman (1975) points out, it is generally impossible to ensure that students have been presented with all the lexical items they are likely to encounter in advanced texts. Literature serves as excellent material for exercising the second two ways described above. (39-40)

Students can be required to identify the new vocabulary in the text. The teacher can work together with the students to make a vocabulary list which includes new and targeted vocabulary list. The list can, then, discussed in class. Students can form groups and work on portions of the
list to find their meanings, both denotative and connotative. Since unfamiliar vocabulary will usually interfere with the students' comprehension and may demotivate them to finish the text, such a list can be very useful.

Pre-reading the vocabulary items can also be used to facilitate the introduction of the necessary cultural background and even refer to thematic features of the short story. However, the real vocabulary task occurs when students try to use these words in the textual context. A related and accompanying activity can be preparing a brief cloze-type exercise to encourage the students to guess meaning from the context. In selecting and making the final vocabulary list, items which contain vital or emotional clues should be chosen.

II. In-class oral reading: Comprehension work

After overcoming the vocabulary items, the students are required to focus on the whole text. A thorough reading is suggested here. In the second stage, students focus on smaller units of the text. At the third stage, the teacher may activate the students' initial response to the text and finally in the fourth stage the teacher can introduce the formal features (figurative language) of the text. During the reading process, the teacher can help students prepare questions which can ultimately lead to the overall understanding of the text and thus facilitate the reading comprehension objectives. This list of questions can serve various purposes. It can stimulate a motivated reading at home, prior to the short story's live presentation in the classroom. At the same time, it aids the comprehension of the text. It can also draw the students' attention to the major issues and ideas presented in the text. It will also serve to prepare and assist the students' capacity for developing independent literary and critical skills. It is not, however, suggested that the teacher provides a plot summary or a statement of the theme since that should be reserved for the end result. The teacher should allow the students to enjoy the pleasure of discovery and learn how to comprehend and appreciate literature.

III. Textual analysis and group work

Knutson in "Teaching Whole texts" puts a great deal of significance on text interpretation done through group work:

A discussion/interpretation phase can include whole group work with semantic mapping, that is, brainstorming followed by organization of themes or ideas, as well as supporting examples on the board... Once examples from the text have been written on the board, students can begin to formulate their interpretation of the novelistic perspective on these issues. The instructor can also present certain story elements and invite group discussion of possible outcome. (20)

A useful activity at this stage is allowing time to the students to think about major issues of the text. To initiate this process, the text can be given to the student, to read at home, using the prepared glossary, and requiring the students to comment on basic issues of the text. The teacher can stimulate their imaginative power by inviting the students to write one or two paragraphs on the main ideas of the text or relate these ideas to their own real life experiences or even imagining themselves in circumstances suggested in the text. When working with motivated students, even two readings of the short story at home, prior to its oral presentation in the classroom, can be achieved. The first reading can accomplish comprehension objectives and the
second one interpretation and critical analysis. Linda Gajduesk (1988) confirms the merits of two readings as: "the first time to gain an overall sense of the piece and enjoy the story, a second time to look for answers to problems and questions prepared for them in anticipation of the factual and analytical work that is to follow" (238).

It should be noted that the primary purpose of the use of a literary text in ESL curriculum is not just to expose our students to literature, but to involve them in direct experience. In addition, the objectives of a language class should be carefully followed and implemented. As Stern observes, "the objectives of some of the ESL/EFL literature textbooks for including exercises in syntax do appear, however, included the ability to use syntactic devices productively". She further mentions various short story textbooks, such as 20th century American Short stories, which "follow each story with exercises in grammar and syntax designed (1) to enhance the readers' understanding of what they have just read, and (2) to help them assimilate new words and grammatical constructions for their own use" (75). Students' interest should be stimulated by activating their particular skills. They should be encouraged to read aloud the parts of the story, supply summaries of the parts or whole of the text, and take part in group discussions concerning important issues of the text. At this stage, students can move towards more mature critical analysis of the text. This can lead to their personal involvement with the text as Gajduesk asserts, "having established the facts, students now begin to ask why and to develop their own attitudes towards the characters, values, and situations of the story, in short, to move beyond information to involvement and experience..." (224).

Arens, Swaffar, and Byrenes, however, favor learner-directed questions, e.g., "What do you think about the main character? What do you think will happen next? Why do you consider this as an important idea?" (82). Knutson believes that "questions of this nature place emphasis on the students' cognitive processes and thinking skills" (21). Knutson further suggests small group activities which can follow whole group work. These small group activities, focusing on a specific task, such as close reading of a significant part of the text, can encourage students to write relevant questions and later try to answer them. Knutson concludes that, "close textual analysis in small groups allows students to confirm their hypotheses about meaning by working 'bottom up' with the text. Students in pairs or small groups can also be asked to focus on broader pragmatic issues, such as the inscribed audience, or the reception/interpretation of the text from various reader perspectives" (21).

**FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES AND FURTHER TASKS**

Re-reading of the short story provides the students with an added advantage of establishing their previous knowledge about the text. To augment the effect of this pre-reading activity, short writing assignments can be given to students to enable them to articulate and further develop their thoughts and the thematic meaning they have discovered through class discussions. The focal point which the teacher should pay attention to concerning these written assignments should be the meaning expressed by the students and the extent of the development of the argument or ideas; linguistic features and accuracy are of secondary importance.

Writing assignments based on the assigned short story enhances the students' involvement with the text and encourages them to think about, re-read, and further explore the text. Tierney and Shanahan confirm that recent researches have indicated that writing tasks as a follow up activity promote better learning and comprehension compared to reading alone; they lead to long-term recall of text content (267-69).
Knutson (22) states that, "Re-reading is an appropriate closing activity for many texts. … For novels or short stories, a writing assignment involving re-telling of a particular portion of the narrative from a different perspective (the point of view of a different character for example) offers an effective vehicle for re-interpretation. But even the most traditional kind of essay writing can stimulate the reading and manipulation of text which are essential to comprehension and appreciation" (22).

Indeed, students should be able to carry an interaction with the short story beyond the oral class discussion to develop their language skills effectively. A more useful task would be to require the students to prepare creative, relevant written responses and reaction reports. This opportunity allows the students to express their independent attitudes and opinions about the significant issues of the story. Writing tasks at this stage can take various forms. Students may be encouraged to keep a short story journal. Thus, they may be asked to write their personal attitudes about the short story. They may also be asked to comment on the outcome of the story and how they evaluate the ending. In accomplishing these tasks the following tips are very useful:

1. Make sure your students understand the notion of “the reader” and anticipate the potential reader when they write their creative responses to short stories.
2. Require them to prepare an outline of the plot of the short story. Then, ask them to write a paper based on their own life experiences, following a similar outline.
3. Students can write their variations of the ending of the short story. They can create their own favourite endings.

Follow the Rhetorical Triangle: Encourage the students to see the three important components of the rhetorical triangle in the short story. [The relationship between the three forms of rhetoric - Ethos (character), Pathos (emotion), and Logos (logic)]. Then, they can employ the same principles in their own creative writings.

4. Encourage the students to discuss the main theme(s) of the short story in their own independent writing by keeping a course journal. This way they will develop a writing habit beyond the routine classroom assignments.

CONCLUSION

In the long run, the teacher’s role is a facilitator who guides the students as they draw inference and form learning experiences through personal involvement with the text. The exposure of the students to literature as ESL material can ensure that they enjoy, understand and appreciate a life-like material while they are improving their linguistic proficiency. Thus, it is to the overall benefit of the ESL learners if the instructors promote the use of stories as a tool to introduce, accompany, and supplement tried and basal teaching techniques. The power and emotional impact found in a short story can offer the learners deeper meaning about the acquisition of language skills. Finally, short stories invite students to engage in more active and informed discussion of their involvement with the text and their own personal experiences relevant to the world of the text.
REFERENCES


