

USING SHORT STORIES TO TEACH ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS

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Abstract: The notion that the main objective of EFL teaching is to help students to communicate fluently in the target language cause many teachers still believe that an EFL class should focus on mastering linguistic elements only. However, recent trend in EFL teaching indicates the necessity of integrating literature because of its rich potential to provide an authentic model of language use. Among literary genres, short stories seem to be the most suitable choice for this due to its potential to help students enhance the four skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing—more effectively because of the motivational benefit embedded in the stories. The purpose of this article is to familiarize EFL instructors with the effectiveness of using short stories in EFL instruction. After presenting criteria for selecting a short story, discussion is focused on how to exploit a short story for enhancing students' language skills.

Keywords: EFL teaching, source of material, literature, short story, language skills, communicate.

In the nineteenth century, the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) predominated ESL/EFL teaching. During the era, translating literary texts from the second/foreign language to the students' native language was one of the main learning activities. Therefore, literary works were a notable source of material in ESL/EFL teaching (Prodromou, 2000). But when GTM was

replaced by the Structuralism Approach in 1960s to the end of 1970s, literature was no longer used. Structuralism was concerned with correctness of grammatical form and not with content or interpretation of the written word or style. In other words, teaching a foreign language was regarded as a matter of linguistics. Then, when the Direct Method, the Audiolingualism, Community Language Learning, Suggestopedia, the Silent Way, Total Physical Response, and the Natural Approach successively dominated ESL/EFL teaching, literature was not utilized. Later on and with the appearance of the Communicative Approach in the late 70's and very early 80's, literature was also ignored. The tendency in the EFL classrooms was to teach "usable, practical" contents. Thus, literary works had no place in the curriculum. During this period most EFL courses were mainly aimed to enable the students to communicate orally. Consequently, dialogues dominated the curriculum.

However, since the 1980s the situation changed quite radically when literature has found its way back into the teaching of EFL. But, different from the way it was used with the GTM, the current use of literary works in ESL/EFL classes is to improve communicative competence and providing "a springboard for the development of critical thinking and aesthetic appreciation" (Bretz, 1990: 335-338) and create students' awareness on the culture and society of the relevant country. Since then, literature is undergoing an extensive reconsideration within the language teaching profession. Literary works use in ESL/EFL classes has attracted more interest among teachers, and more and more studies on how to use literature in EFL/ESL classes are conducted. The results of some studies, like those of Lazar (1993), Cook (1994), and Shanahan (1997), for instances, strongly

recommend the integration of literary texts into the SL/FL curriculum. Many writings on this subject advocate a content -focused curriculum that includes literature (Kramsch, 1993; Liddicoat & Crozet 2000).

Why Short Stories? Despite its benefits for students, some objections are always raised against the use of literature in public schools due to overcrowded classes, overloaded syllabus and limited time—some problems commonly met in elementary to high public schools in almost all developing countries. First, the deviated and figurative language of poetry necessitates very long time to grasp. Second, the length of novel will make it difficult for such classes to finish. Finally, drama can be used in classes, but it will be difficult to act out a play in crowded classes within limited course hours. Considering these objections, it is obvious that among literary forms, short-story, which is defined by Poe (as cited in Abrams, 1970, p. 158) “as a narrative that can be read at one sitting of from one-half hour to two hours, and that is limited to „a certain unique or single effect,” to which every detail is subordinate”, seems to be the most suitable one to use in public schools. Since it is short, and aims at giving a „single effect”, there is usually one plot, a few characters; there is no detailed description of setting. So, it is easy for the students to follow the story line of the work.

The idea that short stories are the most suitable literary genre to use in English teaching due to its shortness is supported by Hirvela and Boyle’s (1988) study on adult Hong Kong Chinese students' attitudes towards four genres of literary texts (short story, novel, poetry and drama) indicated short stories as the genre that is less feared and the second most enjoyed (43%; the novel is the most enjoyed with 44%), since short stories are easy to finish and definite to understand. The idea is also in line with Collie and Slater (1991, p.196) when they list four advantages of using short stories for language teachers. First, short stories are practical as their length is long enough to cover entirely in one or two class sessions. Second, short stories are not complicated for students to work with on their own. Third, short stories have a variety of choice for different interests and tastes. Finally, short stories can be used with all levels (beginner to advance), all ages (young learners to adults) and all classes (morning, afternoon, or evening classes).

Choosing the Text: The use of short-story in English teaching should be aimed to encourage the students to use what they have previously learnt. By doing this, the learning process will be student-centered. However, the teacher plays a great role. She/he must choose a suitable text to use in class, and should help her/his students understand the story with various activities. In using short stories to teach English, story selection is indeed one of the most important roles of the teacher. Since the lengths of short-stories quite vary, choose a story short enough to handle within course hours. The shortness of the text is important for the students because they will see that they can read, understand and finish something in English, and it will give the students a feeling of achievement and self-confidence. Besides the length of the text, Hill (1994, p. 15) points out three other basic criteria of choosing the text: (1) the needs and abilities of the students; (2) the linguistic and stylistic level of the text; (3) the amount of background information required for a true appreciation of the material.

Short Stories and Language Skills Development: Short stories allow teachers to teach the four skills to all levels of language proficiency. Murdoch (2002) indicates that “short stories can, if selected and exploited appropriately, provide quality text content which will greatly enhance ELT courses for learners at intermediate levels of proficiency” (p. 9). According to him, short stories could be very beneficial materials in ELT

reinforcement by using them in learning activities such as, discussion, writing and acting out dialogues. In the following sections, while showing how to exploit a short story to develop language skills, a series of activities is presented as a sample so that eachers get concrete ideas about how to

use short stories in their EFL classrooms. A student-centered approach is presented in this sample. This approach allows more exploration of the short story, offers the students more opportunities to formulate their own ideas or feelings about the issue(s) as well as to improve their basic skills in the language learning process. To cater various learning styles, it is necessary to devise various kinds of tasks and activities. All of them are carried out in English to immerse students in an English-speaking environment.

Conclusion: Since the objective of EFL teaching is to help students to communicate fluently in the target language, teachers should provide an authentic model of language use. To do it, she/he should focus not only on linguistic but also on literary and cultural elements. Since short stories offer these elements, they are highly beneficial to use in ESL/EFL teaching programs. However, the selection of short stories should be done in reference to the course objective, the learners' profile, and the story content in order to make the best of it. Since every teaching situation is unique, the use of one single piece of literature varies from classroom to classroom and from teacher to teacher. Like what the discussion in this paper shows, short stories can be used to provide different activities for reading, listening, writing and speaking classes. Short story creates a

meaningful context to teach different language focuses and to improve the students' interpretative strategies. Last but not least, the same story may also serve for some other language focuses or skills such as vocabulary development.

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