

TEACHING READING THROUGH THE USE OF SHORT STORIES

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Abstract: The role of literature in teaching foreign language is considerably important in maintaining the interest of students. Therefore, it is considered to be a highly effective tool for language teaching. Moreover, there are many experts who believe that for effective foreign language teaching and learning there should be a proper integration between language and literature. Using literature to teach language has several advantages such as contributing to a better linguistic understanding, a development of creative skills, a higher language proficiency, and an authentic model of language use with its rich potential, it also makes an important contribution to literary appreciation (Ramsaran, 1983). The research in the literature indicates many benefits of using literature in foreign language teaching, particularly in improving reading skills. By reading literary texts students get motivated, become familiar with authentic materials, and learn about a variety of cultures. Indeed, literature presents many positive outcomes in teaching all language skills, in particular students reading skill is honed by using different genres of literature. Short story seems to be the most suitable one 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. The aim of this article is to indicate the effectiveness of using short story technique in teaching reading skill.

Keywords: literature, interactive process, reading comprehension, short story technique, readability, idiomatic phrases, contextual understanding.

Introduction.

Literature is used to reinforce the language skills and complement language teaching (Erkaya, 2005). Literature promotes students’ creativity by stimulating the imagination of students, develop their critical abilities and increase their emotional awareness (Lazar, 1993). The essential skill of guessing the meaning of an unfamiliar vocabulary item from the context can be easily developed with the help of different forms of literature. Any literary texts whether prose or poem provides the learners with a rich context and adequate clues to guess and understand the meaning of new words. In a literary text words frequently occur in related groups and units. These groups of words, which are semantically related, not only contribute to a better understanding of the text but also facilitate register-based teaching of vocabulary items. The research on reading literature suggests that it is positive in several ways. Firstly, it presents with authentic and varied language material, it also provides with contextualized communicative situations, real patterns of social interaction, and use of language (Collie and Slater, 1987), it highlights the central role of the learner in the learning process and stirs up interaction in the classroom, it motivates learners by allowing them to relate what is being read to their own experience since it calls on emotional responses (Collie and Slater, 1987), and it contributes largely to develop further reading skills like “deducing the meaning

and use of unfamiliar lexical items”, “understanding the communicative value (function) of sentences and utterances”, “recognizing the script of a language”, etc. (Grellet, 1981, p. 4-5). While reading literary texts, the interaction between the reader and the text is very important; personal interpretations and analysis of literature are based on not only the textual elements but also the readers’ personal views, experiences and feelings; studying literature enables students to construct their own interpretation and reflection, according to their own experience, by thinking critically and comparing and contrasting two different cultures (Duff & Maley, 1990; cited in Khatib, 2011). Moreover, the incomparable role of literature in teaching all language skills, particularly reading skill should be taken into consideration due to its many positive practical outcomes. Reading skill as one of the complex activities in learning foreign language is generally about understanding written texts, in this sense it involves both word knowledge and thinking. Therefore, reading is not a passive process, but an active one since the reader actively engages with the text to construct meaning and to comprehend the text. The readers need to be able to manage each part of the text, as it is easy to gain the comprehension in reading when the readers are able to organize the text. In teaching this skill efficiently several methods and approaches might be indicated since the literature itself can present many ways to achieve a good comprehension of any literary text. Among all literary genres short stories are most appropriate and effective one for teaching reading. Short stories are great teaching tools that can fill a variety of needs. You might teach stories in conjunction with major course texts, to introduce an important course theme in a more digestible way. Because short stories are self-contained and can often be taught in a single class period, they can be especially useful for teaching close reading. Instructors might consider beginning the course with a short story to introduce close reading to students before they are asked to perform close readings in the much larger space of a novel. The short story technique is that students must depend on the text, intonation, pronunciation and stressing other for their information, so they must interact to accomplish a given task. The use of short stories offers the material which is real, creative and rich in language selection, as well as is amusing and motivational in nature. It is also considered as a highly effective approach for teaching and learning of foreign language. Short-stories are filled with many linguistic advantages such as simplicity of sentence structures and vocabulary used in context and make learning of foreign language skills easy and simple. They help to improve EFL learners’ vocabulary and motivate them to learn the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing more effectively.

Reading is an interactive process

Reading is an interactive process that goes on between the reader and the text, resulting in comprehension. The text presents letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs that encode meaning. The reader uses knowledge, skills, and strategies to determine what that meaning is. The purpose(s) for reading and the type of text determine the specific knowledge, skills, and strategies that readers need to apply to achieve comprehension. Reading comprehension is thus much more than decoding. Reading comprehension results when the reader knows which skills and strategies are appropriate for the type of text, and understands how to apply them to accomplish the reading purpose. Reading is one of the most fundamental skills in English language. The process of reading requires the reader to construct meaning from a written text. The researcher believes the reading process involves getting meaning from printed word symbols (Durkin, 2020). Moreover, Mikulecky (1990:156) states, “Reading is complex behavior which involves conscious and unconscious used of various strategies, including problem solving strategies, to build a model of the meaning which the writer is assumed to have intended”. From this definition it can be explained that when reading, reader has to be active to do many strategies in order to comprehend the content of reading material with the writer said. Some students cannot read a few paragraph in English text book and become

fluent in reading. They need reading continually and constantly. According to the purpose of reading, there are two types of reading.

1. Reading for practicing. In this type of reading, reader should read slowly and concentrate on the relationship of words and grammatical structures. This is a way of reading that students read English to learn how a sentence was put together and how verbs agree to the subject, etc.

2. Reading for information. In this type the reader does read like his own language. In other word, the reader does not stop to analyze grammatical structure when he picks up some reading materials. He understands the structure without thinking about it and must be able to read beyond the clause maker, preposition and other structure clauses. Reading for information requires the reader understand the meaning of the passages. He should have the ability to understand the author's main idea and fact that used to support the main idea.

The importance of using short stories

One of the teaching learning methods for students that can motivate them to understand reading and teaching language skill wholly is using short story technique. Short story technique is a cooperative learning approach with a track record of successfully reducing racial conflict and increasing positive educational outcomes. Eventually each student will come back to her or his contextual understanding to try present a well-organized report or answer for some questions based on the text. Luckily, by using short story technique, reading is effectively supposed to enlarge the students' vocabulary store, promote their ability to enrich their reading skill and to cultivate their sense of English language and composition structures. According to Wolfgang Gehring, the short story, besides the novel, is one of the genres which is used most frequently in school. The short story has many uses concerning the field of didactics: it can be used for introducing different topics and for accustoming the learner to different methods of interpretation. The short story is one of the most common narratives that is used in the language classroom. Of course, one of the characteristics of the short story is that it is short. Therefore it can be read in one sitting and the pupils are not put off by an endless amount of pages. As the short story possesses a relative length, it contains just a few characters what makes it less complex and easier for the reader to follow. The short story disposes of limited time and space dimensions. It concentrates on one section of the characters' lifes and offers a direct access to the action. Among the literary texts, short story seems to be the most appropriate for classroom usage. It is defined by Poe as "a narrative that can be read at one sitting of from one-half hour to two hours (in Abrams, 1970, p. 158). 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. Therefore, it seems to be the most suitable one to help students enhance the four skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing.

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: 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.

The importance of considering these criteria could be perceived by realizing that the vocabulary and sentence structure of the short-story to be studied must be suitable to the level of the students. The short-stories with archaic, slang, foreign words, and allusions, having sentences imitating the speech of a particular locality or ignorant people or foreigners should be avoided if the text is intended for students below intermediate level. Similarly, very long sentences are difficult for students to understand. As students will not understand these sentences and words, they will get bored and not read the work. Therefore, before giving the short-story, the teacher should decide the readability of the text.

In order to meet that readability criterion, using graded or simplified stories is possibly the most practical way. According to Ur (1996: 150), "... the use of 'authentic' text with less proficient learners is often frustrating and counter-productive". Therefore, the use of simplified text with less proficient readers is highly suggested for the sake of suiting the texts with the level of students.

In addition to the previous criteria, Spack (1985) suggests the aspect of interest to be considered. According to him, it is important for the teacher to choose stories that would interest students that he/she most likes to read and teach, and that have been made into film to provide visual interpretation. McKay (2001: 322) and Rivers (1968: 230) point out that students read and enjoy a text if the subject-matter of the text is relevant to their life experience and interests.

Reading activities by using short stories

Idiomatic Isolation

Despite the fact that short story writers actively try to avoid using well-worn phrases and clichés, story reading still provides a rich opportunity for ESL students to identify difficult words and idiomatic phrases that native speakers consider common. After reading through a passage from a story, ask the class if they noticed any words or phrases that stuck out as unrecognizable or incomprehensible. For example, the phrase "matter of fact" might not make sense to an English learner. Take the time to discuss each phrase individually, and model other situations when the phrase is appropriate -- along with its spoken cadence -- in other conversational situations.

Make a list.

Listing out material objects in the text is a great way to get your students to pay attention to detail in the text. Give them a category of material objects that are significant to the text and ask them to go through the story and list all of those objects. Why are these objects described in detail? How do the material items focus your attention on immaterial things, like character's emotions? How do they convey important information about character and setting by signaling personality, historical/geographical location, and class status? Sometimes this requires helping your students make contemporary comparisons to understand the significance of these items.

Map it out.

Anything you can do help your students visualize the story more vividly is good. Asking them to visualize it literally, by making a map, is really good, because it helps them order things like plot events and identify the significance of settings in a really concrete way. You can map settings or you can map out characters movements over the course of a scene/story. If your story takes place

in a real location, you might make use of Google Maps/Google Earth to show various locations relationships to one another.

Repeated readings.

Have students read a story four times at home and chart their understanding and enjoyment of the text with each reading. Then, during class time, ask them meet in four small groups and give short presentations about their experiences with each reading and then to summarize their discussions to the larger group.

Repetition, repetition.

Another way to reinforce authorial choice and to teach students to be aware of how an author might be focusing their attention in very specific ways, is to attend to repetitions in a short story. Ask you students to track repeated words, phrases, or images in a story. Why are they there? What are they supposed to communicate to you? Students are occasionally resistant to this idea, but a good way to affirm that these repetitions are not simply an accident made by an inattentive author is to have your students remove them from the text and replace them with variations. What is lost in the communication and content of the story if you remove the repetition(s)?

Highlighting Character.

Short stories use different techniques to set up character than novels or drama (which have the advantage of development over a longer stretch of time). Short stories have to establish character quickly, often in just a few words or sentences. Ask students to choose a character from the story and describe him or her in detail. Then ask them to identify passages from the text that support/flesh out their descriptions. What are the author's physical descriptions of the character? What do we know about their demographic factors (age, gender, race, class, etc.)? You can divide your students into different groups for multiple characters and have them compare and contrast their descriptions. You might even want to put a focus on secondary characters: what is their purpose, especially in relation to the central characters?

Highlighting plot.

Plot is also condensed in short stories and, because of its small scope, it is often easier for students to see and understand how plot is working in a short story than in a longer work. One way to help them focus on plot specifically is to have them list characters' actions and reactions. Which actions/reactions are the most important? What about reactions that aren't fully explored in the text but may occur as a result of actions in the text? (This is also a useful way to demonstrate the unity of plot and character.) Another way to focus on plot is to ask your students to write a timeline of the events in the story. This is especially useful for stories that have nonlinear plots, or when there are significant flashbacks (as with Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily.") It's also a useful way to discuss the unity of plot and point of view: Is the author recounting the story while it is happening or after the fact? Writing a narrative timeline allows students to explore the author's purpose in telling the story as well as confirm actions of the plot.

How would this be different if...?.

Students struggle to remember that every word in a story is a choice; they often talk about literature as if it were fact or if it emerged complete, Athena-like, from the author's head. A great way to counteract this impulse is to ask them to consider how the story would be transformed by changing small things (specific words of descriptions, minor details) and large things (point of view, important facts about the characters, etc.). If the ending of the story is unsatisfactory to your students or surprising to them in some way, asking them to rewrite the ending is a particularly effective way to make them think about authorial decisions. (Students also tend to think that short stories are always depressing. Giving them the opportunity to give a sad story a happy ending can be really cathartic - and educational.)

Adaptations.

A useful way to get students to think about genre specifics is to ask them to adapt a short story into a short play. Divide them into groups and assign them either a short section of the work or the entire thing itself (if you think they're up to it). Once they've written a short script, ask them to act out their scene for the class. How does the loss of descriptions change their interpretation of the dialogue? What editorial decisions (omission of dialogue, addition of action, etc.) did they have to make and why where they necessary? This activity can be time consuming, but it's also a good way to draw out quiet students and visually engage the students' interest in an active way. It's also easy to expand this adaptation exercise by asking them to consider what a film adaptation of the short story would be like: Who would you cast in the roles? Would we see the characters in close-up, medium, or long shots? What colors would you want to present on camera? How long would the scene be? Bringing in real theater terms (like "blocking" and "beats") for either version of the activity can give students some ideas of how to proceed with the task in a thoughtful way.

Back to the Future.

Many short stories may seem "old" to the students, and they will often preface their interpretative comments with the phrase "back then"—or, worse, "back in the olden days." While it is obviously important to address the historical issues and contexts (and clarify which "olden days" we're talking about), an interesting challenge for the students is to ask them to modernize the story to make it seem relevant to them today. Their changes can include updating the setting or the use of language, increasing the severity of the transgression or crisis so the impact is consistent with what they think it would have been at the story's original publication. Their changes can be quite innovative, and even radical, but they must maintain the overall theme and effect of the story as it is written. For this reason, it is important to lay very specific boundaries for your students when doing this activity: requiring that they not only update the story but set it in the neighborhood they grew up in can be useful.

Perform the Story.

For stories that rely almost entirely on the dialogue and actions of the characters to convey meaning, rather than exposition, you might have your students perform the literature. It is an effective way for them to figure out what is going on and to pick up on things like sarcasm because it forces them to contemplate how each character delivers the lines, the mood, and what lies beneath seemingly mundane phrases. You might break up the class into groups of four and assign a director, an assistant director, and lead actors. Each group performs a section of the story. They spend some

time rehearsing, and the director and assistant director help with directing the actors, which is where the real learning takes place, as they puzzle it out.

Conclusion.

The use of short-stories in ELT classroom has always been recommended in the field for developing reading comprehension skill as stories offer infinite linguistic as well as personal, socio-cultural, cognitive and emotional benefits for the language learners. The main objective of EFL teaching is to help students to communicate fluently in the target language. In this sense, teachers should provide an authentic model of language use by focusing on literary and cultural elements. Since short stories offer these elements, they are extremely beneficial to use in ESL/EFL teaching programs. As a conclusion it is important to note that as the main organizers of the lessons teachers should consider the integration between language and literature and apply to short stories when seeking and selecting appropriate materials and methods to improve students' reading skills.

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