

Enhancing Reading Skills through Short Stories

Alimova Kamola Mirshahidovna

Uzbekistan State World Languages University, Senior teacher, department of integrated English language teaching № 2

Abstract: The article describes the use of short stories in teaching English. Reading occupies an important place in teaching a foreign language. Thanks to it, the teacher can simultaneously solve several educational problems: compensate for the lack of a language environment, fill in gaps in the knowledge of linguistic and cultural material, expand vocabulary, consolidate understanding of grammatical material, etc. And, it is a flexible material that also helps students develop their writing, speaking and listening skills. To do this, it is effective to use specific techniques and post-text exercises: reading for study, reading for speaking, writing, etc.

Keywords: material, reading, specific techniques, foreign language.

INTRODUCTION

An important component of effective reading is educational content. In academic education, in foreign language lessons, adapted materials are usually used for reading: non-fiction, non-fiction, literary texts. The latter type of texts includes classical and modern works of poetry and prose, less often folklore works. It is believed that fairy tales, parables, legends are used only in primary and secondary schools. Thanks to them, the teacher realizes not so much teaching as educational goals, which is irrelevant for teaching in higher education.

Using literature in language teaching has the advantage of providing cultural information about the target language. Literary texts increase foreign language learners' insight into the country and the people whose language is being learnt which fosters learners' ability to interpret discourse in different social and cultural target language contexts. By reading literary works, learners learn to see a world through another's eyes, observing human values and a different kind of living, and discovering that others living in very different societies. They will understand and become broadly aware of the social, political, historical, cultural events happening in a certain society. Through literature, learners can deepen their cultural understanding.

Since literature enables students to understand and appreciate other cultures, societies and ideologies different from their own, it encourages personal growth and intellectual development. In accordance with these ideas, Littlewood emphasizes the importance of the use of literature in EFL classes by arguing that:

A major problem of language teaching in the classroom is the creation of an authentic situation for language. All language classrooms, especially those outside the community of native speakers, are isolated from the context of events and situations which produce natural language. Literature can overcome this problem because, in literary works, language creates its own context. The actual situation of the reader becomes immaterial as he or she looks on the events created by language. These events create, in turn, a context of situation for the language of the book and enable it to transcend the artificial classroom situation.

Based on these ideas, it is obvious that literary works undoubtedly enable students to understand the language better by providing them with real world experiences, relationships between society and people where the target language is spoken, even if they are fictions.

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 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, since short stories are easy to finish and definite to understand. The idea is also in line with Collie and Slater 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).

The idea that short stories are very suitable to use in English teaching is supported by Pardede’s research findings on the interest, perceptions, and the perceived needs of the students of the English teachers training of University of Indonesia towards the incorporation of short story in language skills classes. The research revealed that a majority of the respondents basically found short stories interesting to use both as materials for self-enjoyment and of as components language skill classes. Most of them also agreed or strongly agreed that the incorporation of short stories in language skills classes will help learners achieve better mastery of language skills. They even believed that English teacher candidates should master the skills of employing short stories to teach language skills. In addition, the statistical analysis revealed that the students’ interest and perceptions were positively and significantly correlated, and both variables significantly affected each other.

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 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 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, "... 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 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 and Rivers point out that students read and enjoy a text if the subject-matter of the text is relevant to their life experience and interests.

Short stories allow teachers to teach the four skills to all levels of language proficiency. Murdoch 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". 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.

Short story can also be a powerful and motivating source for teaching speaking. Oral reading, dramatization, improvisation, role-playing, re-enactment, and discussion are some effective learning activities which centre on a short story EFL classes can use for enhancing this skill. Asking students to read story aloud can develop their speaking. Moreover, it also leads to improving pronunciation.

Among the literary genres in the English as a foreign language curriculum, short stories seem to be the most suitable choice for enhancing students' language skills. Although storytelling is one of the oldest teaching tools in the world, it has featured prominently in the teaching of English at the elementary and intermediate levels. An effective teacher undoubtedly makes a lasting impression on the minds of children. Short stories are flexible enough to address a range of contemporary issues. There has been a lot of discussion over the past few decades about the benefits of trying to teach any kind of literature, be it poetry, drama, novel or short story, as part of an English curriculum.

Research shows that teaching poetry, drama and romance to students is impractical and problematic to use in classes that have limited time and a relatively large number of students. Many students believe (s) that poetry is figurative and novels are long. Dramas are long and difficult to perform in crowded classrooms with limited time. Scholars and educators have realized that short fiction can be used to reinforce skills and teach additional language teaching. Storytelling promotes language practice, comprehension understanding, and eventual aesthetic appreciation. In addition, students can gain insight into literature by gaining entry into a world familiar or unfamiliar to them through the cultural aspects of stories, and by making a journey from a literary text into their own hands to find ideas that lead to critical thinking. Short stories make it easy for language teachers to teach the four skills at all levels of language proficiency so that students can participate in various activities such as group discussion, character play, theme critique and interpretation, content, organization style, etc. To enrich the concept, Murdoch adds: "Short stories can, if chosen and used appropriately, provide quality textual content that will greatly improve English language courses for students at intermediate levels."



Reading and listening short stories motivate students not only to develop their reading skills but also their creativity. It also improves students' vocabulary by changing words from one form to another, such as changing a word from a verb to a noun, a noun to an adjective, and a verb to an adverb. And other learning activities include listening (oral) comprehension, reading comprehension, searching for synonyms and antonyms for difficult words from paragraphs. Guessing the right words in the given gaps, matching the words to the corresponding meaning, and analyzing a particular statement improves reading and writing skills. Thus, the activity cultivates the analytical thinking of the reader, which leads to a better understanding of the language. Finally, the lower and middle students benefit greatly from the content of literary texts (stories). Telling stories makes students' minds develop and their mouths become more flexible. Being able to read gives them the ability to speak the language more creatively and discuss each other's perspectives. The focal point of literature expands the students' vision and moves things around by dramatizing the situation in different ways.

Thus, the use of short stories as part of literature in teaching English as a foreign language is very motivating and literature has a high status in many cultures and countries. For this reason, students can feel a real sense of accomplishment by understanding a piece of highly respected literature. In selecting short stories, educators should pay attention to student skill levels and those stories that play a vital role in motivating students.

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