

Title: **Benefits of Using Short Stories in the EFL Context**



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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to familiarize EFL instructors with the effectiveness of using literature in language instruction. While some instructors may still believe that teaching EFL encompasses focusing on linguistic benefits only, so eventually their students will communicate in the target language, others who have integrated literature in the curricula have realized that literature adds a new dimension to the teaching of EFL. Short stories, for example, help students to learn the four skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing--more effectively because of the motivational benefit embedded in the stories. In addition, with short stories, instructors can teach literary, cultural, and higher-order thinking aspects. However, before novice instructors attempt to use short stories in their EFL classes, they

should understand the benefits of short stories and plan classes that meet the needs of their students.

Introduction

The use of literature to teach second/foreign languages can be traced back to over one century ago. In the nineteenth century, second/foreign languages were taught with the help of the Grammar Translation Method. Students would translate literary texts from the second/foreign language to their native language. When this method was replaced by methods that emphasized structures and vocabulary, literature was no longer used. Thus, neither the Direct Method nor the Audiolingual Method utilized literature to teach second/foreign languages. In the seventies, methods such as the Community Language Learning, Suggestopedia, the Silent Way, Total Physical Response, and the Natural Approach did not utilize literature to teach second/foreign languages, and neither did the Notional-Functional Syllabus.

For the past two decades or so, literature has found its way back into the teaching of EFL; however, not the way it was used with the Grammar Translation method. Instructors have realized that literature can be used to reinforce the skills and complement language teaching. Scher (1976) affirms that with students at the beginning and intermediate levels, instructors can use literary texts for “language practice, reading comprehension, and possible aesthetic appreciation” (Muyskens, 1983, p. 413). In contrast, with advanced students literary texts may be utilized for the “development of knowledge of world literature, practice in reading and discussing creative work, and the introduction of literary concepts, genres, and terminologies—e g, recognition of figures of speech, levels of meaning, and other stylistic features” (p. 413). Moreover, students can gain insight into literature by gaining entrance to a world familiar or unfamiliar to them due to the cultural aspects of stories, and taking a voyage from the literary text to their own minds to find meanings for ideas, leading to critical thinking.

Benefits of short stories

Researchers who advocate the use of short stories to teach ESL/EFL list several benefits of short stories. These include motivational, literary, cultural and higher-order thinking benefits. Nevertheless, before instructors look at these benefits in more details, they need to be reminded of one benefit that all instructors should take advantage of, reinforcement of skills.

Reinforcing the skills

Short stories allow instructors 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). He explains why stories should be used to reinforce ELT by discussing activities instructors can create such as writing and acting out dialogues.

Also, Oster (1989) affirms that literature helps students to write more creatively (p. 85). Instructors can create a variety of writing activities to help students to develop their writing skills. They can ask students to write dialogues (Murdoch, 2002, p. 9) or more complex writing activities if students have reached a high level of language proficiency. For example, if instructors bring to class “The Wisdom of Solomon,” they can assign the following writing activities:

- a. Write a dialogue between King Solomon and the guard holding the sword after the mother and the son, and the other woman left the palace.
- b. Paraphrase the first four sentences of the paragraph, “And in this way they argued . . . whose child it was” (fourth paragraph from the bottom).
- c. Summarize the story in three sentences, including the main character, setting, conflict, climax, and resolution.
- d. Write one sentence on the theme of the story.
- e. Write a paragraph on what causes people to lie.
- f. Write a classification essay on different kinds of lies.

Activities a and b are suitable for beginning levels; activities c, d, for intermediate levels; and activity f, for advanced levels.

In addition, stories can be used to improve students' vocabulary and reading. Lao and Krashen (2000) present the results of a comparison between a group of students that read literary texts and a second group that read non-literary texts at a university in Hong Kong. The group who read literary texts showed improvement in vocabulary and reading. Three activities can be added to “The Wisdom of Solomon,” to help students to acquire more vocabulary. These activities are related to form, meaning and use respectively.

- a. Complete the word form chart below. The first word has been done for you. Remember that some words do not have all forms.

Participle	Adjective	Noun	Verb	Adverb
speaking	speakable	speaker	speak	-----
-----	-----	-----	die	-----

There can be as many words as the instructor thinks necessary but not too many so as not to make students lose interest in the activity that should be included in every story. This activity helps students to learn more vocabulary, and it also teaches them how to use a dictionary.

- b. Write the letter of the definition/synonym in column B that most closely matches each word/phrase in column A.

In this activity, the words/phrases in column A come from the story students are reading. The definitions and/or synonyms provided in column B must match the meaning of the words/phrases in the context of the story to help students to understand how a different word/phrase can be used in the same context.

- c. Choose the word/phrase that best fits each sentence, drawing upon the list under column A in the previous activity. You may need to add -s to a plural word or to a third person singular of a verb in the present tense, -ed to the past tense of regular verbs, etc.

In activity c, students practice using the words that they already understand the meanings of.

Since “The Wisdom of Solomon” does not include a list of unknown words/phrases in bold and the words/phrases do not have explanation and/or synonyms on the footnote, instructors should add both. As a student taught by this author and instructor has said: “The list of words helps us go on reading without stopping for too long to look them up in a dictionary or thesaurus.”

As far as reading comprehension is concerned, the new vocabulary will help students with comprehension; however, it does not guarantee that students will understand the story. The activities included in section 3, Introducing literary elements, will reinforce reading comprehension.

High-intermediate and advanced students also profit from literary texts. What they read gives them the opportunity to come up with their own insights, helping them to speak the

language in a more imaginative way. They become more creative since they are faced with their own point of view, that/those of the main character(s) of the story and those of their peers, according to Oster (1989, p. 85). This thoughtful process leads to critical thinking. As Oster confirms, “Focusing on point of view in literature enlarges students' vision and fosters critical thinking by dramatizing the various ways a situation can be seen” (p. 85). Therefore, when students read, they interact with the text. By interacting with the text, they interpret what they read. By interpreting what they read, they can work toward speaking English more creatively. Activities on higher-order thinking are found in section 5, Teaching higher-order thinking.

In reference to listening, instructors can do the following:

- a. Read the story out loud so students have the opportunity to listen to a native speaker of English (if at all possible); or
- b. Play the story if a recording is available.

The activity is done for fun or for students to find answers to questions given and explained to them prior to the listening activity. For students to understand the story when they listen to it for the first time, the questions can be based on literary structures.

- a. Who is the main character of “The Wisdom of Solomon”?
- b. Where/when does the story take place?
- c. What is the problem (conflict) in the story?

Motivating students

Since short stories usually have a beginning, middle and an end, they encourage students at all levels of language proficiency to continue reading them until the end to find out how the conflict is resolved. Elliott (1990), for example, affirms that literature motivates advanced students and is “motivationally effective if students can genuinely engage with its thoughts and emotions and appreciate its aesthetic qualities” (p. 197). He stresses the importance of developing student–response (individual and group levels) and competence in literature. In addition, one of the reasons Vandrick (1997) lists for using literature with students is that literature motivates students “to explore their feelings through experiencing those of others” (p. 1). In addition, according to the Internet article (author not named) “Using Literature in Teaching English as a Foreign / Second Language” (2004), “Literature is motivating. . . . Literature holds high status in many cultures and countries. For this reason, students can feel a real sense of achievement at understanding a piece of highly respected literature. Also,

literature is often more interesting than the texts found in coursebooks.” As a result, instructors should agree that literary texts encourage students to read, and most literary texts chosen according to students’ language proficiency levels and preferences will certainly be motivating.

By selecting stories appropriate to students’ level of language proficiency, instructors avoid “frustrational reading” (Schulz, 1981, p. 44). To choose stories according to students’ preferences, stories should have various themes because, as Akyel and Yalçin (1990) point out, variety of themes will offer different things to many individuals’ interests and tastes (p. 178). But the themes should be “consistent with the traditions that the learners are familiar with” (Widdowson, 1983, p. 32) to avoid conflicts.

Introducing literary elements

Instructors can introduce literary elements with short stories. With beginning and low intermediate levels, instructors can teach simple elements, such as character, setting and plot. The same and more complex elements, such as conflict, climax, resolution, etc., can be introduced with more advanced levels. Gajdusek (1988) explains how literature can be introduced by describing the order of activities: pre-reading activities, factual in-class work, analysis and extending activities. In the pre-reading activities, students have the opportunity to learn about the background of the story and vocabulary (p. 233). Instructors can start by asking students questions before they are introduced to “The Wisdom of Solomon”:

- a. What is justice?
- b. How can people behave in a fair way?
- c. Have you ever been treated unjustly? When? Why?

In factual in-class work, students should be introduced to who, what, where and when of the story, or point of view, character, setting and action (pp. 238-239). If “The Wisdom of Solomon” is the first story that students will read, instructors can add questions to the left margin of the story. Each question should be placed next to the paragraph in which the answer is found so students can begin to understand with the help of the instructor what each literary structure means. The questions can be the ones below:

- a. Who is the main character of the story?
- b. Where does the story take place?
- c. When does the story happen?

d. Who is narrating the story?

Here is an example of the way each question could be placed on the left margin of the story.

“The Wisdom of Solomon”

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Who is
the <u>main</u>
<u>character</u> ? | As the two women came to King Solomon to plead their case, one of them spoke first. “I plead with you, Sire, to hear what I have to say!”
“Speak!” said the King. “What is your problem?” |
|--|--|

The questions on the left margin introduce students to character, setting, and point of view.

Both pre-reading activities and factual in-class work analysis can be assigned to beginning and low intermediate students since they require very little analysis.

Extending activities, on the other hand, deals with why, that is, “involvement and experience” (p. 245). Students must be able to use their knowledge of the language to express their ideas. Thus, only students who have reached a high intermediate/advanced level of language proficiency should be introduced to these activities. “This might . . . be the time to approach the text as literature,” says Gajdusek (p. 245). About extending activities (writing and in-class group work such as role-play), Gajdusek states that the activities ask “for creative, relevant responses from the readers” (p. 251). For students to succeed, they must have understood the story.

An extending activity that can get students more involved in the story is role-play. Instructors can ask students to play the role of several characters.

- a. Imagine you are the guard who is told by King Solomon to cut the child in half. If you don’t think you can do what the King has asked you to do, tell him how you feel. Make sure you are convincing.
- b. Suppose you are the guard who is told by King Solomon to cut the child in half. After cutting the child in half, tell him how you feel about his decision. Make sure you are convincing.

Teaching culture

Short stories are effective when teaching culture to EFL students. Short stories transmit the culture of the people about whom the stories were written. By learning about the culture, students learn about the past and present, and about people’s customs and traditions. Culture

teaches students to understand and respect people's differences. When using literary texts, instructors must be aware that the culture of the people (if different from that of the students) for whom the text was written should be studied. As students face a new culture, they become more aware of their own culture. They start comparing their culture to the other culture to see whether they find similarities and/or differences between the two cultures. Misinterpretation may occur due to differences between the two cultures as Gajdusek (1998, p. 232) explains. To avoid misinterpretation, instructors should introduce the culture to the students or ask them to find relevant information about it.

Before reading/listening to the story "The Wisdom of Solomon," students should read some information about King Solomon. The paragraph below tells students who King Solomon was and how he became the wisest leader in the world. If students have access to the Internet, instructors can ask them to read information about the King from http://www.geocities.com/thekingsofisrael/biography_Solomon.html before they read/listen to the story.

Solomon became king of Israel after the death of his father, David. The Old Testament account of his life tells of how he had a special dream early in his reign. In his dream God told him that he could ask for anything he desired. Solomon answered that he wanted nothing more than to have an understanding heart in order to rule wisely over his people. According to the account, God then praised Solomon for asking for wisdom rather than riches and honor. The Old Testament writer says that Solomon subsequently became the wisest leader in all the world. Many came to seek his advice, even leaders of other countries. The most famous story of the wisdom of Solomon, however, is the one in which he settles a dispute between two women about questions of motherhood. (Janssen, 1981, p. 123)

Teaching higher-order thinking

Of all the benefits of short stories, higher-order thinking is the most exciting one. High intermediate/advanced students can analyze what they read; therefore, they start thinking critically when they read stories. Young (1996) discusses the use of children's stories to introduce critical thinking to college students. He believes that "stories have two crucial advantages over traditional content: . . . [First,] because they are entertaining, students' pervasive apprehension is reduced, and they learn from the beginning that critical thinking is

natural, familiar, and sometimes even fun. Second, the stories put issues of critical thinking in an easily remembered context” (p. 90). Howie (1993) agrees with the use of short stories to teach critical thinking. He points out that instructors have the responsibility to help students to develop cognitive skills because everyone needs to “make judgements, be decisive, come to conclusions, synthesize information, organize, evaluate, predict, and apply knowledge.” By reading and writing, students develop their critical thinking skills (p. 24).

Introduced by Bloom et al. in 1956, thinking skills, called Bloom’s Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain, include both lower-order and higher-order thinking. Depending on students’ level of proficiency, instructors can activate students’ lower-order or higher-order thinking. Beginners are able to recall information and respond to questions about dates, events and places. Thus, when asked questions about names of characters, setting and plot of the story, they will have no difficulties responding to the questions. This is level 1 of the taxonomy—knowledge. As students become more proficient in the language, they can move to level 2—comprehension. In this level, they must demonstrate their comprehension by comparing, interpreting, giving descriptions and stating main ideas. When students become even more proficient, they move to level 3—application. In level 3, students try to solve problems by using the knowledge they have about the story. In level 4—analysis—students must have reached the high intermediate level of proficiency to succeed. The reason is that students must analyze, compare, contrast, explain, infer, etc. facts/ideas about the story. Upon reaching the advanced level of proficiency, students can synthesize and evaluate what they read, the last two levels of the taxonomy (synthesis and evaluation). Instructors can then ask questions such as “How would you change the plot?” “What would happen if . . .?” “What changes would you make to solve . . .?” “Do you agree with the actions . . .? with the outcomes . . .?” “Why did they (the character) [sic] choose . . .?” “What choice would you have made . . .?” (Bloom’s critical thinking questioning strategies).

Questions added to each story should train the students to think critically. Some of the questions are exemplified below:

1. In the story, “The Wisdom of Solomon,” would it have made any difference if the real mother of the baby who was about to be cut in half, had stayed quiet instead of pleading to King Solomon not to cut him and give him to the other woman?

2. What would have happened if King Solomon had not heard the real mother of the baby and cut the baby in half, giving half to the real mother and half to the other woman who claimed to be the real mother?

Questions 1 and 2 require students to think of a different end to the same story and probably see both the real mother of the baby and King Solomon in different ways from how they were portrayed in the original story.

3. Do you agree with the way King Solomon acted? Do you agree with the way the real mother acted?

4. Do you agree with the resolution of the story?

Questions 3 and 4 require students to make judgement.

Different stories may elicit different questions. The questions will depend on the plot, characters, conflict, climax, complications, and resolution of each story. The more questions requiring higher order-thinking students answer, the better prepared they will be to face the world once they graduate.

Conclusion

Since the goal of EFL teaching must be to help students to communicate fluently in the target language, instructors should focus not only on linguistic benefits, but also on other benefits. In addition to the four skills, short stories help instructors to teach literary, cultural and higher-order thinking aspects. As far as culture and other benefits are concerned, Henning (1993) believes that culture should be integrated into the curriculum and “literature is one feature . . . in the cultural domain that provides . . . added value beyond the level of language acquisition.” Literature helps students to expand their “linguistic and cognitive skills, cultural knowledge and sensitivity” (quoted in Shanahan, 1997, p. 165). Consequently, one can say that integrating short stories into the curriculum will help EFL students to become well-rounded professionals and human beings since short stories teach more than the skills necessary for survival in the target language. Short stories teach literary, cultural and higher-order thinking benefits.

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Note

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Appendix

“The Wisdom of Solomon”

As the two women came to King Solomon to plead their case, one of them spoke first. “I plead with you, Sire, to hear what I have to say!”

“Speak!” said the King. “What is your problem?”

She pointed to another woman who was standing near her with a tiny baby in her arms. “Sire, this woman and I live in the same house. About two weeks ago I gave birth to a son. She helped me. She and I were the only ones there.” As she spoke, tears came to her eyes.

“Go on, my daughter,” said the King.

“Three days later, my lord, this woman also had a baby. And it, too, was a son. I helped her give birth. There were still only two of us in the house.” Tears streamed from her eyes as she continued.

“A few days later, her baby died in the night because she accidentally lay on it as she slept. And then she took my son from my bed while I was sleeping and put her dead child beside me.” She continued to weep as she spoke. “When I got up in the morning to nurse my son, I found that it was dead; but when I examined it, I discovered that it was not my child.”

“That’s not the way it was!” the other woman interrupted. “That’s not the way it was at all! She’s just making up an emotional story for you, Sire, and she has produced some tears to go with it! This is my son; the dead child is hers!”

“You’re lying!” said the first woman. “And you know it! The living son is mine and the other is hers!”

“Oh no it isn’t!” said the other woman, as she held the child close to her. “It’s the other way around! This is my son!”

And in this way they argued back and forth in front of the King. Solomon had listened and observed carefully and it seemed as though he had made up his mind. However, he asked

the woman to lay the child down in front of him. He looked intently at the child and then at each of the women as though he were trying to determine by appearance whose child it was. Then, to the great surprise of all who heard, King Solomon said, "Bring me a sword." One of his guards came with a sword in his hands. "Divide the child in two parts!" he said coldly. "Give half to one and half to the other!"

As the guard raised the sword to obey the King, the first woman cried out, "Don't kill the child, my lord! Please don't do it! Let him live and give him to her."

The other woman, however, thought Solomon's idea was a good one. "Cut it in two!" she shouted. "Then neither one of us will have it!"

Then the King raised his hand and spoke. "Don't kill the child! Give it to the first woman!" he commanded, pointing to her. "She is the mother!"