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Using Short Stories in English Language Teaching at Upper-Intermediate Level

This study examines a group of Turkish University students' responses to some short stories in English. The group consisted of nine participants-nine sophomores studying at Muğla University in Turkey. The participants took upper-intermediate English, and this study was carried out during their upper intermediate classes. For the first week the participants were given a text and they discussed it with their teacher but for the second and the third week they read the stories with another teacher and at the end of a three week short story reading period, they were asked to fill in a questionnaire and they were interviewed. The interviews and the questionnaire indicated that the students had positive attitudes to short story reading and they stated that short story reading contributed to their reading comprehension. They also found short story reading very useful for the fact that it enhanced their reading; the texts did not bore them as they were not too long and they also formed a cultural understanding.

1. Introduction

For a long time, literature has not been included in the curriculum of teaching English since teaching a foreign language has been regarded as a matter of linguistics. “*In the sixties and seventies, in fact, there was a distinct reaction against the use of any literary English at all in the classroom, but now the pendulum has swung the other way ...*” (Hill, 1994: 7).

As most of the studies that examined the relationship between literature and language teaching have articulated, the benefits of literature are: literature helps developing linguistic knowledge both on usage and use level (Lazar, 1994; Widdowson, 1984), literature has the potential to increase learners' understanding of the target culture (Parkinson and Thomas, 2000).

Using short stories in language teaching dates back to hundreds of years ago. Actually people have always told stories since the prehistoric times. The pictures that primitive tribes drew on the walls of ancient caves were telling a story (Demirtürk, 1). But 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 emphasised structures and vocabulary, literature was no longer used (Erkaya, 5).

Short story use has recently gained importance in foreign language teaching owing to the fact that they contribute to literature and foreign language teaching as they are usually based on authentic contexts. Even if they are not based on authentic contexts sometimes, they still reflect contexts that make sense to students. In some of these they can identify themselves with some characters which will make it easier for them to read and understand and help them learn L2 more easily. Some other benefits of literary texts can be expressed as follows: Containing real examples of grammatical structures and vocabulary items, the literary texts raise learners' awareness of the range of the target language and advance their competence in all language skills (Povey, 1967). Secondly, 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 (Collie and Slater, 1991), which fosters learners' ability to interpret discourse in different social and cultural target language contexts (Savvidou, 2004). Lastly, since literature enables students to understand and appreciate other cultures, societies and ideologies different from their own, it encourages personal growth and intellectual development (Carter and Long, 1991).

Instructors have realised that literature can be used to reinforce the skills and complement language teaching, in particular, the use of short stories. Besides that, for language teachers, short story reading is important because regardless of proficiency level, age, gender, and some other socio-economical factors etc. we can easily make use of them. Students/learners of L2 will take pleasure reading short stories.

In everyday life we still tell each other stories to share our experiences or to give some other people advice. Short stories engage us in real life. One of the benefits of short story reading as stated by Demirtürk (ibid.,) is that “the writer is using the short story as a medium to communicate the meaning of human experience to us. So, we the readers, learn to find meaning in this experience and to share it with others much like the way characters do among themselves.

2. Review of Related Literature

Literary texts can be very useful in stimulating the learner's acquisition since they provide authentic contexts for processing L2. Literary texts involve authentic examples of not only

vocabulary but also grammatical constructions. They raise learners' awareness of the target language and help them develop various skills and to become acquainted with the target culture. In language teaching it is widely accepted that for one to learn a foreign language, she/he not only needs to learn some grammatical constructions and vocabulary, but also learn about the target culture, and community, know about their lifestyles, what they eat, how they survive etc.

According to Collie and Slater (1990, 3) there are four main reasons which lead a language teacher to use literature in the classroom. These are a "*valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement*". In literature lessons, students read and then they have to resort to several comprehension strategies to be able to understand and decode the context. Therefore literature puts not only pressure on students but it guides them to make guesses, put themselves in the writer's shoes and most important of all, while reading literature, in particular short stories, students will have to share their opinions, views, and gists they get out of short story reading with their peers and partners.

Moreover in short story reading usually there is immediate feedback by the teacher or students correct one another. Short story reading usually triggers students and motivates them because of their authentic contexts and different interpretations, and meanings. By means of short stories students can become aware of such characteristics of the target language as similes, metaphors, rhymes, colloquial speech etc. The inclusion of short fiction in the ESL / EFL curriculum offers the following educational benefits (Arioğul, 2001:11-18):

- (1) makes the students' reading task easier due to being simple and short when compared with the other literary genres,
- (2) enlarges the advanced level readers' world views about different cultures and different groups of people,
- (3) provides more creative, encryptable, challenging texts that require personal exploration supported with prior knowledge for advanced level readers,
- (4) motivates learners to read due to being an authentic material,
- (5) offers a world of wonders and a world of mystery,
- (6) gives students the chance to use their creativity,
- (7) promotes critical thinking skills,
- (8) facilitates teaching a foreign culture (i.e., serves as a valuable instrument in attaining cultural knowledge of the selected community,
- (9) makes students feel comfortable and free,

- (10) helps students, coming from various backgrounds, communicate with each other because of its universal language,
- (11) helps students to go beyond the surface meaning and dive into underlying meanings,
- (12) acts as a perfect vehicle to help students understand the positions of themselves.

On the other hand, Oster (1989) argues that students should be encouraged to question and discuss the short stories that are told from a single point of view. Following that, they can tell the story from a different character's view or rewrite it from their own views. This activity not only integrates reading with the productive skills but also enables students to realise how their own experiences, culture and values affect their views.

To sum up, it is widely accepted that short story reading has great roles in foreign language teaching/learning; a number of studies carried out to date lay emphasis on the importance of using short stories. Short stories that they are selected and applied properly with regard to the students' needs, will enhance students' level of proficiency and students will become more engaged in the target language.

2.1 Definitions

Short story: is a supreme resource for observing not only language but life itself. In short fiction, characters act out all the real and symbolic acts people carry out in daily lives, and do so in a variety of registers and tones (Hişmanoğlu, 2005: 61).

Literature: is the art of written products i.e poetry, drama, prose etc.

Metaphor: A way of describing something by saying that it is like something else, without using the words 'like' or 'as' e.g. *That man is a snake.* (Thornley and Roberts, 2002).

Culture: integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behaviour which has to do with social learning.

Reading comprehension: the level of understanding a text or any sort of writing.

2.2. Statement of the Problem

Literature can be seen as a tool to stimulate learners' personal and cognitive development through understanding of the real world. Using literature provides a recognition of the value of introducing authentic contexts as opposed to those artificial ones in the classroom. It helps to motivate students and attracts their attention.

In this respect short stories are important for students to develop their L2 skills. These short stories provide students with socio-cultural dimensions which contribute to the enrichment of their vocabulary. Short story reading provides the basis for highly motivated small-group work in the classroom. When we ask students to do prereading activities we guide them to work out meaning from the context; they read a text and then by guessing meaning they analyse it. They use the whole context to decode meaning of unfamiliar words (Cooper, 1984: 128). All such practices form the basis not only for vocabulary, but also for grammar, speaking and all other aspects of language learning.

Therefore this study examines the role of short story reading in an upper intermediate class consisting of 9 students. This study was carried out at Muğla University in Turkey to address the afore mentioned issue to indicate whether short story reading will contribute to the students' reading comprehension as well as their other skills. We want to test the relationship between short story reading and its contribution to the students' level of English.

2.3. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore some positive contributions of short story reading and its effect on the students' level of reading comprehension with a focus on some cultural aspects and to motivate them to become more engaged in learning English and to evoke their interest. The study is based on the following questions:

- (1) To what extent does short story reading contribute to the students' level of comprehension?
- (2) What are the students' attitudes towards short story reading?
- (3) Is there a significant relationship between short story reading and the students' development of cultural awareness?

2.4. Hypothesis

The use of short stories at upper intermediate level will result in a high level of reading comprehension and comprehension of the target culture. Therefore the students will become more motivated to learn English.

2.5. Sampling

9 participants from Muğla University were involved in this research. The participants had already attended prep. School, had been taking English courses for 2 years and were at upper-

intermediate level. The number of participants was limited to 9 as there were only 9 students taking this course.

The study was conducted with a group of sophomore upper-intermediate level students at Muğla University in Turkey. The proficiency level of these students was quite high since they had been learning English for sometime and most of them had been working in the tourist industry where they had a chance to practise their English easily. The scope of this research is to look at their interest in short story reading and see how short story reading enhanced and contributed to their reading comprehension and some other skills. With regard to research ethics the students signed a consent form to take part in this research study.

2.6. Instrumentation

The following short stories were selected because they represented various classic English / American literature adaptations with comprehensive vocabulary and grammar structures. They are leveled books with vocabulary and grammar structures at Upper English language proficiency level as determined by the book publishers.

- (1) “*Charles*” by Shirley Jackson
- (2) “*No speak English*” by Sandra Cisneros
- (3) “*Cat in the Rain*” by Ernest Hemingway.

Short story as a literary genre is brief, contemporary, interesting, and portrays a modern cultural setting that is either familiar with the student or attached to the target language and its culture. Therefore it is essential that a teacher has in his/her mind the elements that allow the apprehension of a story. It is a matter of taste whether one makes an initial explanatory lesson for example, about how to understand a character in a story, or whether one allows questions to form the desired approach and results inductively. In either case the essential aspects of the story have to be established for full understanding. *Setting* may at one level be the obvious fact of geography but it could equally be a significant dimension of the plot and may form the major justification of the events.

The most convenient handle for understanding a short story is through its characters. This requires that we have some idea as to how an author builds up his/her characters and how we learn of their nature. As suggested by Povey (ibid.) characters are established in five ways:

- a) the explanation of the author;
- b) what the character says;
- c) what is said about him/her;

- d) what the character does;
- e) what is done to him/her .

It is not always easy to establish the individual difficulty level of vocabulary, because the readers may have a varied background and some readers may already be familiar with some expressions or foreign elements. If a teacher has some doubts about the students' level of comprehension she/he might begin by asking the students to go through a page underlining all the unfamiliar words. This was one of the ways in the presentation of the short story. The students underlined the unfamiliar elements in the story. The teacher asked them to search for the dictionary meaning of these unfamiliar words. This process was carried out before the first reading of the story.

After the presentation of vocabulary and cultural elements there were two reading sessions. The first one was for rapid general reading, the second one a slower one for deeper comprehension. After that the students were asked how/what/where/who questions but they were not asked any "why" questions because "why" questions were reserved for the second part after the factual ground had been established and understood. This is because "why" questions require that students develop their interpretation from the already firmly fixed knowledge of fact.

At the second stage after establishing what a character actually did, we asked such questions as "Why did he think Charles was to blame?" "Why was his mother suspicious of him?"... or at the next stage we asked the students questions which required his/her own interpretation and involved the student such as "Would you have done this?" "What would you rather have tried?"

Another issue which was paid attention to was the principle of reading with close attention and the close and precise examination of language and its connotative and semantic features. This technique is useful as students are quantitatively different in their skills but not qualitatively different in the intellectual and social experience.

The experimental group participants were provided with three short stories. The first short story was discussed in class with the teacher after pre and post reading sessions. The students first did silent reading; then the teacher read the story out so that the students could pay attention to pronunciation and the teacher got three students to read the same text out in paragraphs so that he could correct any mistakes regarding mispronunciation and then the teacher guided the students with some comprehension questions and encouraged them to

speak and practise their English. Hence the second and third stories were discussed with another teacher to avoid any bias that was likely to arise.

At the end of each reading session, the participants were asked comprehension questions to make sure they understand the stories. In the selection of these short stories the fact that these stories were by some famous authors was taken into account. Also the stories “*No speak English*” and “*Cat in the Rain*” contained some foreign elements and vocabulary from Italian and Spanish and they also reflected the melting pot that was the USA. Therefore such short stories were important in awareness raising of the students. However it should be also stated that any familiarity with Italian and Spanish or with colloquial English with regard to their prior knowledge would provide them with advantage over the others.

When all the stories were finished at the end of the third session they were given a questionnaire to reflect their attitudes towards short story reading. The questionnaire consisted of 11 open-ended questions (see *Appendix*).

2.7. Data Analysis

Before and after each session, the participants were asked comprehension questions and true/false questions. Discussion was initiated by the teachers and particularly a special emphasis was laid on culture. Semi-structured interviews with the other colleague and the students contributed to the data in this study. Also discourse analysis-analysis of the short stories was administered as a source to obtain data. Teacher fronted group discussion was indexed asking the students where the story took place and who the main characters and the like. In order not to affect the students’ anxiety level they were not videotaped however it could have been better to obtain every single detail. In this study the students’ attitudes towards short story reading is the “*independent variable*” and their level of reading comprehension is the “*dependent variable*”.

2.8. Limitations of the Study

The following limitations of this study were as follows. In the first place, there were 9 participants who were sophomores and who had been attending upper intermediate English classes. As mentioned earlier the number of participants was limited to 9 because only 9 students took this course. Second, the results obtained in this study can be applicable to other students in other countries not only in Turkey. Also in order to avoid any bias that is likely to arise, another teacher was employed in the discussion of the second and third short stories.

3. Findings and Discussion

Teaching a foreign language is a combination of not only teaching but also developing the four skills of students as well as providing them with the culture of the target language so that the students can best benefit from it.

Of all literary genres short stories seem to be the most useful ones due to their length. The shorter a story the better it is because students do not feel bored. Harmer (2001) lays an emphasis on the importance of simplified books as extensive reading materials, claiming that “such books succeed because the writers or adaptors work within specific lists of allowed words and grammar. This means that students at the appropriate level can read them with ease and confidence. At their best such books, despite the limitations on language, can speak to the reader through the creation of atmosphere and/or compelling plot lines. The teacher should choose a story of an appropriate length because the students can then read, comprehend, synthesise and produce something in English therefore they will gain a language awareness.

4. Conclusion

This paper has tried to lay an emphasis on several beneficial points of authentic texts in EFL classrooms using three short stories. The short stories in this study were valuable for students to raise their language awareness, and internalise the language rules again and recreate them as their own rules. Teaching short stories has a key role in EFL/ESL, which helps to develop the language, and gain socio-cultural competence as well as helps students expand their linguistic and high-order thinking skills.

As the participants in this study contended short story reading provided them an authentic and natural context for the teaching of vocabulary and grammar. Because it appeals to the readers' imagination, it motivates the reader, it helps learners to develop their general language awareness, broadens their knowledge about language, and it provides readers with insights into the cultural as well as humanistic values in a language. Short story reading can lead students to gain more profound proficiency in understanding the target language as they are all based on everyday life. This study has indicated that short story reading should be given priority in the EFL/ESL classroom.

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APPENDIX

Short story reading questionnaire

Retrieved and adapted from www.ket.org/education/guides/pd/teachingtheshortstory.pdf

Over the past few weeks you have had the chance to examine numerous things that can make a short story effective. You have created characters and “dipped the character in paint.” We have done all these things as part of your preparation:

Find evidence of these in the stories

- 1-Protagonist**.....
- 2-Background information**.....
- 3-Conflicts**
- 4- Vivid verbs**.....
- 5-Foreign elements (if any)**
- 6-Sensory details**.....
- 7-Climatic moment**.....
- 8-Point of view of the story**
- 9-Concrete/abstract words**
- 10-Snapshot or thoughtshot**.....
- 11- Problem words/expressions or sentences**