

FROM SHORTS TO HOTS: TAPPING CRITICAL CAPABILITIES THROUGH SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT: Literature has made a majestic and spirited comeback to the language classrooms after a period of gratuitous exclusion. Those who vehemently opposed literature's tenable role in classrooms contended that it was incapable of augmenting the communicative competence of the learners. Regrettably, it was like throwing away the baby with the bathwater. What their imagination failed to capture was the simple truth that it was not literature but the inept way of selecting and using it as resource materials that had stripped literature of its amazing potentiality in helping learners achieve communicative competence. Consequently, it invited the wrath of many less sagacious English language teachers. Nevertheless, the alluring features of literature have now compelled language teachers to welcome this enriching resource to the classrooms once again. It has now been realized that literature, if used judiciously, improves communicative competence, pragmatic competence and critical thinking faculties of the learners. Short stories have been identified as the most suitable genre for use in language classrooms for various reasons. This paper attempts to highlight how literature in general and short stories in particular can be effectively used to unleash the critical thinking faculties of the learners which, in turn, can also contribute to the development of communicative competence.

KEYWORDS: **communicative competence:** Critical thinking, higher order thinking skills, language, literature, short stories

I. INTRODUCTION

The teaching/learning of English was traditionally equated with the teaching/learning of English literature in almost every English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) situation. This obliquely helped serve the colonial interests by trumpeting the superiority of English culture and its literature which played no negligent role at creating subservient minds among the colonized. For example, Lord Macaulay, in his famous Minutes of 1835, clearly speaks of the superiority of English literature over other literatures. He believed that 'a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia'. To him, only English literature could help in 'the shaping of gentlemen, the molding of character, the development of aesthetic sense and the cultivation of ethical thinking'(para.10). However, with the retraction in the objectives of teaching/learning English in the post-colonial era, the role of English literature in the classrooms has been subject to severe scrutiny. There have been ardent supporters of Milton and Shakespeare whereas others stood on the other side of the battleground and clamored for meeting the pragmatic needs of the day.

The predominance of literature in the English classrooms resulted in the learners' use of archaic and formal expressions, preference for romance words (words of Latinate origin) and automatic expressions and clichés, thereby making their English not only unnatural but also stiff, unreasonably formal and pompous. This was a natural concomitant of the overreliance on literary works and grammar textbooks to learn the English language. It took a long time before the notions of communicative language teaching dawned upon the decolonized countries. In an attempt to do away with the bookish nature of teaching and learning English and to bring it adequately in touch with the living language of the day, most English courses closed their doors to literature – a rich source of language- instead of remolding it to meet the need of the hour. However, the role of literature in developing the linguistic skills has been re-established recently and there is an inexorable drive towards the incorporation of literature in language classrooms.

This paper attempts to show how the literary genre of short stories can fruitfully be used not only to develop linguistic competence but also to enhance higher order thinking skills (HOTs).

Back to literature

Literature was abandoned, condemning it as impractical and ineffective when Grammar Translation Method gave way to the later methods and approaches such as Structuralism, Direct Method, Audiolingualism, Community Teaching, Suggestopedia, Total Physical Response, Natural Language Teaching, Communicative Language Teaching etc. Notwithstanding the rejection literature received in classrooms in recent past, it is now finding its way back to the EFL/ESL classrooms though in a different shape and style. The focus now is not in

memorizing literary periods and showing erudition in Greek mythology. ELT practitioners across the globe have now realized the need to make the learners communicatively competent. Thus, the objective of teaching/learning literature is no longer developing an aesthetic appreciation for Anglophone literature but effectively using literature for developing communicative competence. As Pardede (2011) puts it, the use of literature in the EFL/ESL classrooms is now 'different from the way it was used with the Grammar Translation Method, the current use of literary works in ESL/EFL classes is to improve communicative competence' (p.15). To put it simply, today literature is not dealt with in the classrooms as an object of study, but it is used as a resource to develop linguistic competence and mental capabilities in the learners. The very features of literature make it an incredibly supplementing medium for these purposes. As Collie & Slater (1991) observe, in addition to offering authentic materials, literature also helps in cultural enrichment, language advancement and personal growth (as cited in Pardede, 2011, p.15).

The recently witnessed enthusiasm among the ELT practitioners to reinstate the once ostracized literature into the language classroom is due to the above-mentioned riveting features of literature that facilitate the development of communicative competence. The context of globalization and the unprecedented interactions among the world communities have necessitated both linguistic and pragmatic competence for successful communication. A lack of mutual awareness of the cultural backgrounds of the interlocutors can result in communication breakups and even in misunderstandings. Pragmatic competence calls for an ethnographic understanding. The study of literature, as Anand (2012) observes, leads to an appreciation of cultural diversity (p.85). The need of the hour is not cultural assimilation but cultural understanding. The learners do not need to be absorbed into an alien culture; but they need to have a good understanding of alien cultures if they are to successfully communicate with the members of those cultures. Literature offers the opportunity to familiarize oneself with various cultures (Binu, 2018, p.44). This helps in making them pragmatically competent.

Yet another advantage is that literature presents language in context which makes it meaningful and authentic. As literature is a representation of real life, it provides the learners with situations and experiences they are more likely to face in real life in comparison to the artificially simulated situations found in many ELT books. The plausibility of multiple ways of responding and sometimes even not responding to a situation is seldom found in replicated situations though they are very common in literature as in real life. Literature offers variety and this, as Maley (1989) states, makes learning an enjoyable experience as the learners are exposed to impressive lexical, syntactic, authentic and culturally rich arrangement of ideas and words (p.12). When learning becomes enjoyable, it motivates the learners and makes them dynamic learners who enthusiastically involve in the learning activities. This in turn, promotes language acquisition.

What makes the use of literature more rewarding is that it promotes higher order thinking skills without which one cannot interpret and understand different kinds of texts and develop language awareness (Daskalovaska & Dimova, 2012, p.1183). Literary appreciation requires the reader to predict, analyze, evaluate, infer, read between the lines and thus interact with the text imaginatively. In the process of this close interaction with the text, readers develop not only their linguistic competence but also their mental capabilities. As the American poet Walt Whitman (1964) puts it, "Speaking generally, the tendencies of literature, as hitherto pursued, have been to make mostly critical and querulous men" (p. 366). Literature is not merely the imaginative use of language; rather, it involves thought and inspires others to think and when the mind becomes thoughtful, as Anand (2012) observes, it makes more use of language to analyze and synthesize. Features of the mind and the entire personality of a person are thus put to use and thus it helps in growing a cultivated mind that builds new thoughts in the language (pp. 82-83). The use of literature in EFL/ESL classrooms is holistic in the sense that it helps develop both linguistic competence and the higher order thinking skills.

Having discussed the advantages of using literature in the EFL/ESL classrooms, let us now look at what makes the short story the most suitable vehicle of language acquisition and cognitive development.

What makes short stories the belle in language classrooms?

Of all the literary genres, short stories have been celebrated as the most suitable resource in English classrooms for various reasons. The most striking feature of the short story is that it is brief as the name suggests. In fact, this is one of the main reasons that have made short stories the genre of the century. Short stories replicate the frenetic pace of modern life. They offer complete stories in a few words. If a reader is too busy to spare fifteen to twenty minutes, then there are short short stories (short- shorts) written in less than 1500 words or even mini sagas written in not more than 50 words. Unlike a novel that requires the reader to spend days and weeks on it or a poem that may be hallowed by ambiguity and esoteric allusions, a short story is short, enjoyable, easy to follow and at times even palpable. As Shapard (1986) describes, short stories are "highly compressed, highly charged, insidious, protean, sudden, alarming, tantalizing; they can confer form on small corners of chaos, and, at their best, can do in a page what a novel does in two hundred" (as cited in Barnard, 2020). A short story, in a very short time, gives the satisfaction that is tantamount to the reading of a novel. Teachers and students love short stories for this reason. Short stories are practical in the sense that they can be covered in one class.

The norms laid down by Edgar Allan Poe (1842) who is known as the Father of modern short stories allow no more than 6000 words in a short story. The usual norm is from 1500 to 3000 words. It is a laborious attempt for short story writers as they have to avoid scenic descriptions or use them only when necessary and contributing to the main effect of the story. They choose familiar locales as scenes in order to avoid scenic descriptions and limit the number of scenes to two or three. Descriptions, if any, are done in concrete terms making it easy for the reader to visualize. In addition, short stories do not present too many characters. Most stories have only three to six characters and they are presented as they are since there is very limited scope for character development in short stories. As Poe says, "In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the preestablished design" (para.12). Compression and brevity are essential to short stories and this demands mastery over language. A short story does not put the reader in a maze. The use of properly graded and selected short stories in the language classrooms makes the learning process an enjoyable and a rewarding experience. This has been validated by Pardede's (2010) research on the incorporation of short stories in language skills classes.

ELT practitioners and textbook authors have come out with several short story-based activities that foster the development of language skills. The objective of this paper is to show how short stories can also be used for developing higher order thinking skills (HOTs) that in turn will also lead to the development of linguistic skills.

Stories for Critical Thinking

As Veettil (2016) puts it, thinking is a mental reaction to a situation that one encounters and is one of the innate capacities of every human being (p.171). Critical thinking, as the name implies, is a different way of interacting with situations as it involves both lateral and divergent thinking. Dictionary .com defines critical thinking as "the mental process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, synthesizing, and evaluating information to reach an answer or a conclusion." The hierarchy of critical thinking skills presented by Blooms (1956) has significantly affected the development of the educational curriculum and the reorienting of educational objectives all over the world. His taxonomy of critical thinking presents a hierarchy that vividly demarcates lower order thinking skills (LOTs) such as remembering, understanding, and applying from the higher order thinking skills (HOTs) such as analyzing, evaluating and the later addition of creating. Short stories present a wide array of situations for the reader to analyze, evaluate and think of alternatives creatively. It is more than befitting that such a rich source is fruitfully used for sharpening the critical faculties of the human mind.

Stories and storytelling have been part of every culture since humans inhabited the earth. Stories have been successfully employed in transmitting cultural values in almost every community. As eco- linguists would put it, "we live by our stories" (Stibbe, 2015, p.3). By implication, stories help in cementing out cultural identities and in creating concepts regarding how the world works and how one should behave in the community. Every culture creates stories intentionally to sustain and validate the practices it cherishes as important. In a larger sense, every belief and every ideology can be ascribed to the values and the systems a community would like to perpetuate. The relevance of subaltern studies in literature and sociology is that they dig out the roots of certain stories and link them to the then prevailing social systems and the interests they served. It is not hard to find stories preaching the rights of certain sects to own, to rule and dominate. 'Stories' such as 'Columbus discovered America' and 'All roads lead to Rome' can tell more tales than they apparently seem to. As Hall (2005) puts it, narratives perform the functions of teaching us the way the world works, our place in the world, how to act in the world and how to evaluate what goes on in the world (pp.74-81), to list only a few. Looking at a story from a critical perspective or from a different point of view can unravel things that otherwise remain hidden in a story. Such practices help learners improve their higher order thinking skills and uplift them from retrogressive states of existence. In the process of questioning, predicting, forming hypotheses, making causal connections, relating things to real life experiences, and arriving at satisfactory interpretations of their own, learners improve themselves both linguistically and cognitively. When students are allowed to respond to literature in the most effective way by presenting their own ideas and viewpoints, they inevitably improve their language skills (Leena, 2012.p.91) as well as their critical thinking faculties.

'Breakfast': Some Pedagogical Considerations

'*Breakfast*' is a 'short' short story by John Steinbeck. The brevity of the story and the simplicity of the diction employed make the story fit into the framework of a single class.

The story revolves around an epiphany of the narrator. It is about the narrator's encounter with a strange family in a valley surrounded by mountains. The narrator was in the valley; it was early in the morning and it was cold. The characters in the story are the members of the family – two men and a nursing mother- and the narrator. The story recounts, with meticulous vividness, the narrator's memory of the breakfast he had with the family. This experience is profoundly inscribed on the narrator's mind and every evocation of it brings 'more detail out of a sunken memory'. The story, though a short one, is resplendent with potential situations for higher order thinking. It can be dexterously used for predicting, analyzing, evaluating, and as a springboard for developing

creativity. In all these activities, students should be directed to justify their answers with close reference to the text and their own individual experiences of human behavior.

1. To begin with, the story could be presented to the students without its title. They can be asked to suggest a title and later justify the relevance of the title they suggested. If found irrelevant, they can suggest another title.
2. The story does not give enough details about the narrator. Students could be asked to guess who the narrator is and why he is there in the village early in that cold morning.
3. Another possible prediction question is to ask the students whether they think that the narrator is there on a mission. If they think so, what could that be?
4. There could also be questions on what the villagers do to make a living when there is no cotton picking.
5. The learners can also be encouraged to think about what the narrator might do on his return from the village. This could be fine-tuned into a creative activity as well.

Prediction questions like these ensure the learners active involvement with the text and encourage them to relate the story to their life experiences. In addition, they help widen the horizons of their imagination.

There could also be questions that require the application of the learners' analytical capabilities. These questions can vary in their perspectives depending on the scope of the story. The following questions will help the reader analyze the story from a sociological point of view.

1. The elder man invites the narrator, who is a stranger to them, to have breakfast with them. The young man in the story says that they had work for twelve days, till then. The two men seem to be proud of the new dress they wear. The young man also says that they have been eating good for twelve days. Towards the end of the story, the young man invites the narrator to join them in cotton picking if the narrator wants to. What do a consideration of all these tell you about the life of the villagers in the valley?
2. The two men and the woman, though poor, are presented as leading a happy life. The way they enjoy their food and the elegance with which the woman nurses the child and does the household chores are indicative of this. Are they really happy or, is it feigned happiness? What makes them happy?
3. If 'contentment in the midst of poverty' is the theme of the story, does the descriptive passage (the second paragraph of the story), in any way, contribute to this effect? If yes, how?

The story also offers the possibility of a feminist interpretation. There is only one woman character in the story. The narrator says that she looks no more than a girl dressed in a faded cotton skirt and waist. When the narrator sees her, she is nursing her child and at the same time working in the kitchen alone. The men come out only when the breakfast is ready. The elder man invites the narrator for breakfast without asking the woman if there is enough for everyone. She squats down by the box while the two men and the narrator have their breakfast. The girl says that they have even got new clothes. There is a clear demarcation of 'they' and 'I' in the story. The men eat and the woman serves; the men wear new dungarees and the girl a faded cotton shirt and waist. She is 'really a girl' but a nursing mother. She works in the kitchen alone while the men are still at sleep. Keeping all these in the backdrop, the learners could be asked to answer the following:

1. What does the story tell you about the life of women in the village the narrator is talking about?
2. What are the similarities and differences between the life of women in your community and that of those in the village in the story?

As mentioned earlier, many of the above activities could also be tweaked slightly and transformed to develop creativity. The following are some suggested tasks in this regard.

1. Imagine that you are the narrator of the story. Prepare a journalistic news story about the village for a newspaper.
2. Write a thanksgiving letter to the family on your return from the village.

As it can be seen, all the above-mentioned tasks require the learners to actively connect themselves with the story. They analyze and interpret various aspects of the story from varying perspectives and this in turn develops not only their linguistic skills but also their higher order thinking skills.

II. CONCLUSION

To conclude, literature in general and short stories in particular can be effectively used in the English language classrooms to develop both the linguistic capabilities and the critical faculties of the learners. A judicious teacher should choose short stories that match with the level of his/her learners and frame tasks in such a way that they will be both linguistically and cognitively beneficial to the learners. Literature should no longer be viewed as a taboo in the language classrooms; instead, it should be reckoned as an invaluable resource material for language teaching and learning. It is not to be kept at bay in the name of developing communicative competence; rather, it should be exploited to the full to develop the learners' ability to use both referential and representational language.

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