

## Teaching L2 Reading Comprehension through Short Story

Parvin Ghasemi<sup>1</sup> and Rasool Hajizadeh

Associate Professor, Center of Excellence in L2 Reading and Writing, Shiraz University, Iran  
Molana University, Abyek Gazvin, Iran

**Abstract.** Many ESL/EFL experts agree that content knowledge is an important factor in the learning process of reading comprehension. The short story's distinctive features, i.e., its brevity, modernity, and variety make it appealing and interesting to language learners and a value source for the improvement of L2 reading comprehension. The short story can offer learners adequate linguistic, intellectual, and emotional involvement and enrich their learning experience.

**Keywords:** short story, reading comprehension, improvement, linguistic proficiency

### 1. Introduction

The interaction and reciprocal, collaboration of literature and language teaching has been the subject of interest to many foreign language teaching researchers, especially in the 20th century. Using literature as a vehicle for the teaching of a second or foreign language has proved very beneficial to the EFL and ESL students' learning experience. Notable researchers such as Susan Louise Stern (1985), Yorio (1971), Mckinely (1974), Walsleben (1975), Gorman (1979), and Povey (1979) have all attested to the effectiveness of the implementation of literature in the language class. Reading comprehension, as a fundamental language skill, requires a complex acquisition process which can account for the way that learners comprehend what they read. Many researchers and educators have made untiring attempts to find more efficient ways of enabling the learners to become more proficient readers. However, it is necessary to point out here that reading is not simply a linguistic decoding; rather, it is the comprehension of the text's meaning.

Therefore, a good number of ESL/EFL experts do agree that content knowledge is an important factor in the learning process of reading comprehension. A valuable source of knowledge is, undoubtedly, literary texts, and more appropriately for reading comprehension purposes, the short story. Using the short story to enhance students' reading proficiency has another privilege. The short story is a compact literary genre in which much is left unsaid in order for the reader to draw implications. Therefore, it makes students sensitive to the hidden and implied meaning. While in reading non-literary material students learn to read the lines and decode the meaning, in reading short stories they learn to read between the lines. Regarding the issue of literary organization, Arens, Swaffar and Byrnes (1991) observe that "students have greater success with texts that convince, inform and persuade- texts with rhetorical illocution- than they do with readings that are purely descriptive" (115).

Indeed, the short story as a multi-dimensional literary genre can be profitably used in the acquisition of various language skills. The short story's distinctive features, i.e., its brevity, modernity, and variety make it appealing and interesting to language learners. When the short story is chosen based on the students' level of English proficiency, it can offer them adequate linguistic, intellectual, and emotional involvement and enrich

---

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author. Tel.: 0098-09177160121; fax: 0098-0711-6288721.  
E-mail address: pghasemi54@gmail.com.

their learning experience. Thus, this paper proposes that the short story can provide ESL/EFL learners with a suitable study resource which is both delightful and instructive to improve their linguistic proficiency and reading comprehension. Consequently, the researchers aim to put forward a variety of strategies to make the teaching of the short story enjoyable and an academically enriching experience in aiding reading comprehension. These strategies include the design and implementation of motivation building techniques which facilitate overall reading comprehension, listening and spoken skills, and cultural orientation.

## **2. Discussion**

Using literature in the language classroom leads the learners to become better readers. Among the literary forms, indeed, the short story is an engaging literary genre and can therefore be utilized for language learning purposes. Almost all modern short stories have the following unique characteristics which make them especially suitable to be used in reading comprehension classes: universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy, suggestive power, and ambiguity; moreover, each learner's interpretation has validity and an almost infinite fund of interactive discussion is guaranteed.

The short story creates the tension necessary for a genuine exchange of ideas in class discussions. In addition, the short story pushes the students out of a passive reading state into a personal connection with the text and then beyond, extending the connection to other texts and to the world outside of school. Closely related to the issue of implied meaning, Knutson (1993) argues that there are two processes through which proficient readers figure out the meaning of a text. One is what she terms "bottom-up process" and the other she calls "top-down process" (13). The bottom-up process is when the reader decodes the individual elements of the text to build a total meaning; however, in the top-down process the reader starts with forming hypotheses and making predictions. It is obvious that these two strategies are used simultaneously by a successful reader. With regard to the above argument, the advantage of using a short story rather than a non-literary text is that some pre-reading activities which can be nicely applied to the short story (such as the discussion of the topic and narrative structure) are very useful in facilitating the readers' top-down process. The short story offers certain advantages for material design for ESL students since this genre includes short textual material to be satisfactorily handled in a one or limited teaching sessions.

### **2.1. Text Selection**

The issue of text selection is a very significant one in using literature in general in language classes. Basically literary material is more suitable for students with a high level of language proficiency. Regarding literary material, apart from the reader's linguistic proficiency, text difficulty depends on text's characteristics and the reader's literary competence. Literary competence can be achieved through repeated exposure to literary material. However, regarding the text's features, a careful attention should be paid to the structure of the text. It is generally preferred to choose texts with straightforward structures.

Generally, the more confident choice concerning a suitable text for ESL/EFL learners may be the short stories which are more contemporary and short enough to be discussed in one or two teaching sessions. The linguistic aspects of the text should concern the language, style and diction, appropriate to the level of our students; Gillian Lazar proposes that "the text should be sufficiently challenging without being so difficult as to be demotivating....[It] should be within the student's grasp, in terms of their linguistic, intellectual, and emotional capacities" (1990, p. 206). Furthermore, reading a whole, unabridged and non-simplified literary text gives the students a sense of accomplishment. Therefore, it will be encouraging when students are psychologically satisfied that they have read the very words of a great writer.

### **2.2. Procedures and Strategies**

A systematic teaching strategy for the short story can include the following stages:

- Pre-reading activities: to provide students with vocabulary exercises and cultural background
- In-class oral reading: to improve listening and spoken abilities
- Textual analysis and group work: to improve reading comprehension and communicative skills
- Post-reading assignments: to establish the acquired knowledge and improve written skills

Keeping in mind that the comprehension of the text is the central focus of the reading of the short story, as Richard A. Raschio elucidates, the teacher must pay attention to the nonlinear process of the skill of reading. For each short story, a number of tasks can be designed to cover the basic language skills required for an efficient reading comprehension. These tasks may include vocabulary work, reading comprehension questions, oral presentation of the text, in-class discussion and interpretation, and finally follow-up tasks which can take the form of written responses or keeping a journal.

### **2.2.1. Pre-reading activities: Vocabulary work**

One vital issue concerning preliminary comprehension involves the task of overcoming the vocabulary presented by the text. Research studies have confirmed that the comprehension of reading passages which might present linguistic difficulties can be facilitated by appropriate pre-reading tasks. One aspect of the reading material is the vocabulary work. Students can be required to identify the new vocabulary in the text. The teacher can work together with the students to make a vocabulary list which includes new and targeted vocabulary list. The list can, then, be discussed in class. Students can form groups and work on portions of the list to find their meanings, both denotative and connotative. Since unfamiliar vocabulary will usually interfere with the students' comprehension and may demotivate them to finish the text, such a list can be very useful.

Pre-reading the vocabulary items can also be used to facilitate the introduction of the necessary cultural background and even refer to thematic features of the short story. However, the real vocabulary task occurs when students try to use these words in the textual context. A related and accompanying activity can be preparing a brief cloze-type exercise to encourage the students to guess the meaning from the context. In selecting and making the final vocabulary list, items which contain vital or emotional clues should be chosen.

### **2.2.2. In-class oral reading: Comprehension work**

In the second stage, students focus on smaller units of the text. At the third stage, the teacher may activate the students' initial response to the text and finally in the fourth stage the teacher can introduce the formal features (figurative language) of the text. During the reading process, the teacher can help students prepare questions which can ultimately lead to the overall understanding of the text and thus facilitate the reading comprehension objectives. This list of questions can serve various purposes. It can stimulate a motivated reading at home, prior to the short story's live presentation in the classroom. At the same time, it aids the comprehension of the text. It can also draw the students' attention to the major issues and ideas presented in the text. It will also serve to prepare and assist the students' capacity for developing independent literary and critical skills. It is not, however, recommended that the teacher provide a plot summary or a statement of the theme since that should be reserved for the end result. The teacher should allow the students to enjoy the pleasure of discovery and learn how to comprehend and appreciate literature.

### **2.2.3. Textual analysis and group work:**

A useful activity at this stage is allowing time to the students to think about major issues of the text. To initiate this process, the teacher can give the text to the student, to read at home, using the prepared glossary, and requiring the students to comment on basic issues of the text. The teacher can stimulate their imaginative power by inviting the students to write one or two paragraphs on the main ideas of the text or relate these ideas to their own real life experiences or even imagine themselves in circumstances suggested in the text. When working with motivated students, even two readings of the short story at home prior to its oral presentation in the classroom can be achieved. The first reading can accomplish comprehension objectives and the second one interpretation and critical analysis. It should be noted that the primary purpose of the use of a literary text in ESL curriculum is not just to expose our students to literature, but to involve them in a direct experience. In addition, the objectives of a language class should be carefully followed and implemented. Students' interest should be stimulated by activating their particular skills. They should be encouraged to read aloud the parts of the story, supply summaries of the parts or whole of the text, and take part in group discussions concerning the important issues of the text. At this stage, students can move towards more mature critical analysis of the text.

Knutson further suggests small group activities which can follow whole group work. These small group activities, focusing on a specific task, such as close reading of a significant part of the text, can encourage students to write relevant questions and later try to answer them.

#### **2.2.4. Follow-up activities and further tasks**

Re-reading of the short story provides the students with an added advantage of establishing their previous knowledge about the text. To augment the effect of this re-reading activity, short writing assignments can be given to students to enable them to articulate and further develop their thoughts and the thematic meanings they have discovered through class discussions. Writing assignments based on the assigned short story enhance the students' involvement with the text and encourage them to think about, re-read, and further explore the text. Tierney and Shanahan confirm that recent researches have indicated that writing tasks as a follow-up activity promote better learning and comprehension compared to reading alone; they lead to long-term recall of text content (267-69).

Indeed, students should be able to carry an interaction with the short story beyond the oral class discussion to develop their language skills effectively. A more useful task would be to require the students to prepare creative, relevant written responses and reaction reports. This opportunity allows the students to express their independent attitudes and opinions about the significant issues of the story. Writing tasks at this stage can take various forms. Students may be encouraged to keep a short story journal. Thus, they may be asked to write their personal attitudes about the short story. They may also be asked to comment on the outcome of the story and how they evaluate the ending.

### **3. Conclusion**

In the long run, the teacher's role is a facilitator who guides the students as they draw inferences and form learning experiences through personal involvement with the text. The exposure of the students to literature as ESL material can ensure that they enjoy, understand and appreciate a life-like material while they are improving their linguistic proficiency. Thus, it will be to the overall benefit of the ESL learners if the instructors promote the use of stories as a tool to introduce, accompany, and supplement tried and basal teaching techniques. The power and emotional impact found in a short story can offer the learners deeper meaning about the acquisition of language skills. Finally, short stories invite students to engage in a more active and informed discussion of their involvement with the text and their own personal experiences relevant to the world of the text.

### **4. References**

- [1] K. M. Arens, J. K. Swaffar, H. Byrnes. *Reading for Meaning: An Integrated Approach to Language Learning*. Prentice Hall, 1991.
- [2] L. Gajduesk. Toward wider use of literature in ESL: Why and how. *TESOL Quarterly*. 1988, 22: 227-257.
- [3] T. P. Gorman. Teaching reading at the advanced level. In: M. Celce-Murcia and L. McIntosh (eds.). *Teaching English as a Second Language*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House. 1979, pp. 203-220.
- [4] E. M. Knutson. Teaching Whole Texts: Literature and Foreign Language Reading Instruction. *The French Review*. 1993, 67 (1): 12-26.
- [5] C. Kramsch, and O. Kramsch. The Avatars of Literature in Language Study. *The Modern Language Journal*. 2000, 84 (4): 553-573.
- [6] G. Lazar. Using novels in the language-learning classroom. *ELT Journal*. 1990, 44: 205-214.
- [7] ----- . *Literature and Language Teaching: A Guide For Teachers and Trainers*. Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- [8] C. A. Mckinley. *A Study of ESL reading difficulties*. Unpublished M.A. Thesis. University of California, 1974.
- [9] J. Poverly. The teaching of literature in advanced ESL classes. In: M. Celce-Murcia and L. McIntosh (eds.). *Teaching English as a Second Language*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House. 1979, pp. 162-186.
- [10] R. A. Raschio. Coursework for Developing Reading skills in a Second Language. *Hispania*. 1991, 74: 1139-1143.

- [11] S. L. Stern. *Teaching Literature in ESL/EFL: An Integrative Approach*. University of California, 1985.
- [12] R. J. Tierney, and T. Shanahan. Research on the Reading-Writing Relationship: Interactions, Transactions, and Outcomes. In: R. Barr, et al (eds.). *Handbook of Reading Research*. New York: Longman. 1991, pp. 246-80.
- [13] M.C. Walslenben. *Improving advanced ESL students' reading comprehension: an analysis and evaluation of materials and procedures*. Unpublished M.A. Thesis. University of California, 1975.
- [14] C. A. Yorio. Some sources of reading problems in foreign language learners. *Language Learning*. 1971, 21: 107-115.