

Integrating Literature in the ESL Classroom: A Case Study

Rasha Osman Abdel Haliem, Higher Technological Institute, Egypt

The European Conference on Language Learning 2017
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

With the appearance of the Communicative Approach in the late 70's and very early 80's, using literature in the English classroom was ignored. The tendency in the EFL classrooms was to teach “usable, practical” content. However, since the 1980s literature has found its way back into the EFL classroom to improve communicative and cultural competence and enhance “critical thinking” (Bretz, 1990: 335). Besides, studies, like those of Lazar (1993), Cook (1994), and Shanahan (1997), strongly recommend the integration of literary texts into the ESL/EFL curriculum. Many writings on this subject advocate a content-focused curriculum that includes literature (Liddicoat and Crozet 2000). Practice showed that using literature in language teaching is very beneficial as it led to cultural enrichment, language advancement, and personal growth. This is in line with Erkaya (2005) views on the benefit of integrating literature in the English curriculum. The paper shows how literature was integrated in the general English classroom and how it played a role in equipping students with a number of skills including critical thinking, analytical skills, formulating and expressing independent opinions, presenting one’s own interpretations independently, improving language competence, such as reading, speaking and writing skills. It also played a role in enhancing their cultural awareness. The paper also discusses the challenges and perspectives of introducing literature into foreign language curriculum.

Keywords: literature, curriculum, ESL classroom, skills, short stories, questionnaires, reflection

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

The role of literature in enhancing ESL teaching and learning has been the subject of interest to many foreign language teaching researchers, especially in the 20th century. Using literature in the English classroom was ignored in the 1970s, in the 1980s throughout 1990s literature has found its way back into the EFL classroom for its value in improving language and critical thinking skills. In the 21th century, many teachers evade adding up a literature component to the curriculum as they have not been trained on integrating literature to the ESL classroom. As a researcher I was interested in adding up short stories to the curriculum. Practice showed that using literature in language teaching is very beneficial as it led to cultural enrichment, language advancement, and personal growth. This is in line with Erkaya (2005) views on the benefit of integrating literature in the English curriculum. The paper shows how literature was integrated in the general English classroom and how it played a role in equipping students with a number of skills including critical thinking, analytical skills, formulating and expressing independent opinions, presenting one's own interpretations independently, improving language competence, such as reading, speaking and writing skills. It also played a role in enhancing their cultural awareness.

Instructional context

I teach in the Higher Technological Institute. I most of the time teach General English to university level students. My students ages are 18-23. The number of the students in each class varies from 60 to 90. Their proficiency in the language varies as they come from different educational backgrounds. The students come from all over Egypt: Cairo (30%), Ismailia (15%), Suez (5%), Sharkiya (10%), and Upper Egypt (40%). They are low-middle, middle and upper-middle class. Many of them own laptops, have internet access via their phones, in the library of the institute and at home. The problem lies with those students whose parents see that internet is a luxury so they do not subscribe to internet service and with those who stay at the institute housing hostel that does not have internet access. 99 percent of the students are being introduced to using technology in education for the first time. The funny thing is that most of those who have smart phones or laptops have no access to the internet and if they have it so slow. Most of my students are graduates of public schools only 20 percent are either private or international (19 % private schools and 1% international schools). As such, most need to work hard on their English to prepare themselves for the market.

As denoted, some students have been learning in private schools where English is the first language. Others, have been learning English for the last three years. A third group knows only the alphabet. Besides, they are interested in the subjects they learn more than English, as English is a secondary subject in comparison to the subjects they major. Still, all students understand the importance of English in practical life. So, many of them attend, ask questions, and do the exercises I give. In addition, some are interested in improving their level, so they ask for materials they can do on their own pace. They also ask for soft copies and hard copies for the lectures they did not attend. They even sometimes ask for previous courses materials in order to revise and recap. They also say I am so serious but funny and they do the exercises to improve, but they want some fun for refreshment.

The class time is three hours. A break is given after each hour. There are no computers in the classroom and the computer labs are used for teaching engineering subjects like Matlab and Oracle. I sometimes, take my computer and sound amplifiers in order to introduce videos. Some students use their mobiles or laptops to look up new words online. The students are studying general English to be prepared for the market. They need it in their career interviews. Their career demands reading, writing, communicating in English when they deal with pamphlets or foreign clients. Still, the curriculum is basic English and being a secondary subject, many students underestimate it and do not exert real effort to do the extra curriculum activities or the assignments I give. They start taking courses and doing extra material on their own. The problems I continuously face are the different levels of students, their large numbers, and different levels of proficiency.

I want to help students get interested in learning English, enhance their proficiency and improve their critical thinking skills. I thought about using short stories . We can read together some in class and assign others as home assignments and then quickly discuss them in class. The format of these stories will be both paper-based and electronic in order to engage the students in the readings. The short stories should cover all range of topics.

Hypothesis

The most suitable type of literature to add up to ESL classroom is the short story as it can be covered in one or two teaching sessions. The chosen texts should be challenging and cover many topics. Gillian Lazar denotes: “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). Reading a whole, unabridged and non-simplified literary text gives the students a sense of accomplishment and adds up to their confidence.

I think using short stories will help all students of all proficiency levels. Students of all levels will learn something from reading the short stories. They will see vocabulary in context. They will see grammar in use. They will be exposed to new words. Writing their opinion on the short stories will improve their critical thinking skills and they will gain confidence that they can express themselves. The idea of choosing short stories on more than one topic is motivation and interest. It will also teach them that they can learn independently via reading on all subjects they like.

As Parlindungan Pardede (2011) denotes in his article “Using Short Stories to Teach Language Skills”:

The notion that the main objective of EFL teaching is to help students to communicate fluently in the target language cause many teachers still believe that an EFL class should focus on mastering linguistic elements only. However, recent trend in EFL teaching indicates the necessity of integrating literature because of its rich potential to provide an authentic model of language use. Among literary genres, short stories seem to be the most suitable choice for this due to its potential to help students enhance the four skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing—more effectively because of the motivational benefit embedded in the stories.”

Odilea Rocha Erkaya asserts this idea in the article "Benefits of Using Short Stories in the EFL Context" (2005) : "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 idea of the effectiveness of the implementation of literature in the language class. Povey, thus, proposes that, "Literature gives evidence of the widest variety of syntax, the richest variation of vocabulary discrimination. It provides examples of the language employed at its most effective, subtle, and suggestive" (162).

As for my concerns, will all students like the stories I add up to the curriculum. Will the steps I take concerning adding short stories really help all students of different proficiency levels improve. Will the students accept the idea of expressing their opinion as they have never been trained on the idea of evaluation and expressing their opinion? Will the administration accept the idea of adding up short stories to the curriculum of general English. As for the steps I will take to make things more smoothly, I will speak to my colleagues and supervisors before I take steps. I will speak to my students and explain to them the relevance of expressing opinion and how self-expression is a skill that can be improved.

Research on story teaching and the L2 acquisition shows that it improves students' reading and writing skills speaking and listening skills. The more short stories topics, the better the results as students feel the stories cover many ideas the students want to learn about. It can also offer intellectual, emotional involvement, and enrich their learning experience. The short story should be chosen according to the students' level of English proficiency.

- I. Pre-reading activities: to enhance students vocabulary
- II. In-class oral reading: to improve oral and spoken abilities, and critical skills
- III. Textual analysis and group work: to improve reading comprehension and writing skills
- IV. Out of class reading assignments: to improve students reading, writing, critical thinking skills and extend the learning behind the walls of the classroom.

Texts used

I used a number of short stories written by writers from all over the world. I also used short stories for Arab writers writing in English and short stories translated from Arabic text written by renowned Arab writers. The texts I used are "The Director and Other Stories from Morocco", by Leila Abouzeid, Naguib Mahfouz at Sidi Gaber: Reflections of a Nobel Laureate, 1994-2001 Hardcover – October 1, 2004 by Naguib Mahfouz (Author)

Sample Short story

The Lighting Bug

Japan is homogenous. This is a word I did not learn until many months after visiting the United States. But I felt the power of this word as soon as I moved here.

Homogenous means being of the same type or group. It means fitting in. It means how I did not feel when I came here to the United States. I remember not even knowing how to order French fries, because the phrase we use in Japan is “fried potatoes.” Because I knew the phrase was English, I thought that is what Americans would call them. I remember wondering why the cashier did not understand me. I saw fried potatoes everywhere, yet when I told her I wanted them, she just stared at me. Was it my accent? Was it my color?

I was not homogenous anymore.

This is a strange feeling coming from Japan. In Japan, there are very few minorities. There, I am the majority. People dress like me, they eat like me, they ARE me. White is exotic. Black is exotic. Only Japanese is normal. And now in the United States, I was exotic.

Back in Japan, my older sister was at her desk studying for a college entrance examination, and something flew into her sight. At first she didn't recognize what it was. It was a bug that was black, tiny, and moving slowly. She quickly learned that it was a lightning bug because the bug's behind lit up. She was so happy to see it that she kept it as a pet in a glass. The very day after that she was also studying at her desk when a black, tiny bug flew into her sight. As she reached to grab it, she realized that the bug on her desk was a cockroach. Upon seeing that, she screamed very loudly and then, without mercy or a second thought, killed it quickly. What a difference a lightning bug and a cockroach are for her!

And so I learned there are two kinds of ways to look at people also. I will call it “good” exotic and “bad” exotic. For example, when I walk into a math class, immediately students wanted to sit next to me, and at least two people asked for my number. On the first day. It did not take long to realize that Americans had a positive stereotype about Asians in science and math classes. On the other hand, when I went to a dance club, it was almost impossible for me to get the courage to ask an American girl to dance, although I had my American roommate there to encourage me. I felt like I was foreign, even ugly. Perhaps this is not true. I do not mean to offend, and perhaps it is my own fear of feeling different. I simply don't look like that so-blue-eyes boy as he glides across the floor. I look like me.

I have to decide if, even though I do not look like him, that I am also something and someone who these girls will dance with. There are many Japanese stories that reminded me to be brave, and I decided to be brave. I walked to a group of girls and said, in my broken English, if anyone would like to dance. One girl turned away not just with her eyes but with her body. Another looked at her friend and both began speaking as if I were not there. But the fourth girl said yes. I could not help smiling.

So I think that, on days that we are not homogenous, we must make a decision. When we meet those who are different from us: are we the cockroaches, or the lightning bugs? And, I think, it is our own choice—it is something we must believe about ourselves.

As for me, I choose to glow.

By Hara Yung

Questions to Think About

1. In what places or situations do you feel the most different?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

2. What does Haru mean that he chooses to glow? How does one do that?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Data Collection Techniques

I always conduct questionnaires. The main purpose of the questionnaires is to gather as much information as possible to make sure whether they are really improving, whether they like the way things go and if they would like to increase or decrease the number of the short stories. I will analyze the different answers provided by the students to make sure if things are going well, whether I am on the right track or my plan needs adjustment. I conducted three questionnaires at the beginning of the course, at mid course and after the course.

Here is the first paper-based questionnaire:

Answer the following questions. Feel free to write as much as you like to fully explain your answer.

- 1) Would you like to add up short stories to our curriculum?
- 2) Would you like to read short stories written by Arab writes in English or translated short stories written by famous Arab writers?
- 3) Do you think reading short stories would be interesting?

Here is the Mid course questionnaire:

Student Questionnaire

This survey is anonymous. Your teacher will not see your individual response.

1. I like adding up short stories to the curriculum.
1 2 3
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true
2. When we read the short stories together, the teacher encourages us to share ideas and opinions with one another in class.
1 2 3
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true
3. The teacher tries to help when I am struggling to understand something.
1 2 3
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true
4. The short stories help us understand the language grammar not just memorize it.
1 2 3
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true
5. Discussing the short stories help me contribute some good ideas and thinking in this class.
1 2 3
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true
6. My teacher asks me to explain and give reasons for what I think.
1 2 3
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true
7. I can engage in all the learning activities related to the short stories in class and out of class.
1 2 3
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true
8. My teacher listens to my opinion when discussing the short stories.

1 2 3
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true
9. My teacher gives us assignments and lessons that pushes me to think hard about what we are studying.
1 2 3
Not at all true Somewhat true Very true
10. My teacher encourages us to build on and extend other people's ideas.
1 2 3

- | | Not at all true | Somewhat true | Very true |
|--|-----------------|---------------|-----------|
| 11. My teacher respects my opinion and encourages my ideas. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| | Not at all true | Somewhat true | Very true |
| 12. I'm certain I can understand and master the ideas I learn through the short stories. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| | Not at all true | Somewhat true | Very true |
| 13. Reading short stories at home gives me the opportunity to really explore and understand new ideas, learn vocabulary and new expressions. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| | Not at all true | Somewhat true | Very true |
| 14. The teacher encourages us to discuss our work with classmates. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| | Not at all true | Somewhat true | Very true |
| 15. My teacher does not let us make fun of someone opinion. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| | Not at all true | Somewhat true | Very true |
| 16. My teacher does not allow students to make fun of other students' ideas in class. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| | Not at all true | Somewhat true | Very true |
| 17. Even if the ideas are difficult and hard to understand, I can learn them. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| | Not at all true | Somewhat true | Very true |
| 18. My teacher makes sure that students don't say anything negative about each other in class. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| | Not at all true | Somewhat true | Very true |
| 19. My teacher really wants us to enjoy learning new things. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| | Not at all true | Somewhat true | Very true |
| 20. My teacher lets us ask other students when we need help with our work. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| | Not at all true | Somewhat true | Very true |
| 21. I'm certain I can figure out how to do the most difficult and challenging assignments. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| | Not at all true | Somewhat true | Very true |

22. My teacher recognizes us for trying hard and taking chances.
- | | | |
|-----------------|---------------|-----------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Not at all true | Somewhat true | Very true |

Answer the following questions. Feel free to write as much as you like to fully explain your answer.

Do you think adding up short stories to the curriculum help you improve?

What ideas should the range of short stories cover?

Here is the final questionnaire:

Answer the following questions feel free to write as much as you like to explain your answers:

Did reading short stories develop your language skills?

Did it improve your personal reflection?

Did reading short stories increase your cultural understanding/ tolerance? How?

How I use the data collection tool:

Student Reflection and Teacher Refection Journals:

After each time they read a short story in class or at home students are required to write a reflective paragraph and commentary on the short story and the learning experience they attained after reading the text. The main reason is make sure that the short story was a good choice and that it really help move a step forward in their trial to master the language.

Students guided reflection questions:

As for me my teacher reflection journals will be done in two phases. The first after each class and the second after reading students' reflections. This method will provide me with very valuable qualitative data about my student's thoughts. It will also make them gain the habit of reflection. Reading my reflections will compliment students reflection so the next time I add up stories to the curriculum the pace would be better and the learning experience would be better.

Student Reflection

Write your opinion about the stories you read?

Answer the following and give reasons for your rating:

Reading the assigned short stories enhanced your imagination

1	2	3
Not at all true	Somewhat true	Very true

Reading the assigned short stories make the learning process interesting

1	2	3
Not at all true	Somewhat true	Very true

Reading the assigned short stories enhance creativity

1	2	3
Not at all true	Somewhat true	Very true

Reading the assigned short stories motivate you to reflect upon your views

1	2	3
Not at all true	Somewhat true	Very true

Reading the assigned short stories make the learning process interesting

1	2	3
Not at all true	Somewhat true	Very true

Conclusion

Using literature in the English classroom is an old trend that came back in trend. Practice showed that using literature in language teaching is very beneficial as it led to cultural enrichment, language advancement, and personal growth. The students' answers to the questionnaires' shows that when literature was integrated in the general English classroom it played a role in equipping students with a number of skills including critical thinking, analytical skills, formulating and expressing independent opinions, presenting one's own interpretations independently, improving language competence, such as reading, speaking and writing skills. Practice also showed that the most suitable kind of literature to be added to the general English curriculum is the short story as some students do not like poetry; the more topics the short stories cover, the better students like it.

References

Abouzeid, Lelia. "The Director and Other Stories from Morocco", Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas, 2006.

Cande M. and Swain M. (1980), 'Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing: Applied linguistics'

Carter R. and Long M. N. (1991), 'Teaching Literature' Harlow: Longman.

Collie J. and Slater S. (1990), 'Literature in the Language Classroom: A Resource Book of Ideas and Activities' Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Custodio B. and Sutton M. (1998), 'Literature-Based ESL for secondary school students' in TESOL Journal Vol.7, No.5.

Edward Sapir. "Language," Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences (New York), 9 (1933): 155- 169.

Erkaya , Odilea Rocha. "Benefits of Using Short Stories in the EFL Context" Asian EFL Journal, Volume 8, 2005.

Foster, Whitney. "How to Use Short Stories to Improve Your English" in Fluent, U 2017.

Hill J. (1994), Using Literature in Language Teaching, London: Macmillan.

Hymes D. (1972), 'On Communicative Competence in Sociolinguistics' J.B. Pride and J. Holmes (Eds.,) Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Integrating Short Stories in the ESL Classroom for Developing Learners'
Communicative Competence 678

Lowe, Alexandra. "Teaching Short Stories" TESOL International Association Blog, June 2015.

Mahfouz, Naguib. Naguib Mahfouz at Sidi Gaber: Reflections of a Nobel Laureate, 1994-2001. The American University in Cairo Press; 2004.

Murdoch, G. (2002). Exploiting well-known short stories for language skills development. IATEFL LCS SIG Newsletter, 23, 9-17.

Oster J. (1989), 'Seeing with Different Eyes: Another View of Literature in the ESL Class' TESOL Quarterly, 23.

Pardede, Parlindungan "Using Short Stories to Teach Language Skills" Journal of English Teaching, 2011.

Piera Carroli. (2002), Perceptions of literature: a comparison of students and educators. Views.113-128.

Rivers W. M. (1981), *Teaching Foreign-Language Skills*, 2nd ed. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Sage H. (1987), *'Incorporating Literature in ESL Instruction'* New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Thiyagarajan, K. "Integrating Short Stories in the ESL Classroom for Developing Learners Communicative Competence" in *Language in India* Volume 14, 2014.

Contact email: rashaosman77@yahoo.com