

Short Story in an ESL Freshman English Course: Bridging the Gap between language and literature

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Abstract

In recent years, the place of literature in language teaching has regained its impetus and the prominent role it plays in promoting linguistic, cultural, intellectual and academic benefits has been acknowledged. Nevertheless, the place of literature in language teaching context in Turkey is still approached to be an outside source to be assigned as extensive reading rather than to be a classroom worthy material to be utilized in class. This article describes a literature lesson at a Freshman English level and outlines the steps to be taken to implement language based activities to promote 'language awareness' and to foster 'meaning construction' and 'cultural awareness' in a process based classroom setting. The steps also show that ESL Freshman students have much to gain from literature when the text is explored through language based activities without losing the literary nature of literature.

Keywords: *Literature; Short story; English as a Second Language; Once Upon a Time; Freshman English; Turkey*

1. Introduction

Following a paradigm shift in the 1980s, many theoretical arguments have been made for the implementation of literary texts in ELT/ESL context (Brumfit and Carter 1986; Maley and Duff, 1990; Carter and McRae, 1996; Gilroy and Parkinson, 1997; Hall, 2005). Literary texts initiate personal response and imagination, enable readers to make connections through experiences, develop awareness for different perspectives and multiple levels of meanings (McKay, 1984, Carter and Michael, 1991, Appleman, 2009.). McRae (1991 /1997) in *Literature with a small 'l'* calls this shift, 'the fifth skill' and puts forth that the development of the fifth skill, the skill of 'thinking in English', is mostly neglected in second language acquisition. This is due in part to the broad use of referential texts and 'the fifth skill' could be incorporated through the use of representational, imaginative texts in the ELT context.

The implementation of literary or representational texts in the ELT/ESL context by means of language-based approaches gives learners a rare opportunity in which they can react, respond, question and construct meaning by putting pieces together in a predictable world of English classroom where finding the right information and transferring it gets an applaud until the next 'wrong' answer. Carter (1996) advocates language based approaches to be 'essentially integrative' and sees the publication of *Reading Between the Lines* (1984) by

McRae and Boardman as the milestone in the integration of language and literary study because they propose approaches to literary texts from lower to higher levels contrary to the conventional belief that only advanced level learners should be engaged with literary texts. Gajdusek (1988) points out that it is prominent to have higher levels of reading and writing but not enough to survive in academic settings; thus, when presented with language based and student centered approaches, literary texts can facilitate improvement in the skills of higher thinking abilities and in particular 'the fifth skill: thinking in English requisite to survive in academic contexts, especially at the tertiary level..

Approaching *Literature with a small 'l'* requires a shift in methodology. The common misconception that literary texts could be used as an 'instrument to teach language structures or specific vocabulary for language manipulation' is prone to have a detrimental impact on learners (Carter and Long 1991, p. 2). If a text is approached this way, it is likely that the communicative impetus will simply be lost because of the devotion to mechanical aspects of the language as 'The content becomes subordinate to the mechanics' (McRae 1991 /1997, p.5). Another misconception which could turn the class into a traditional information transfer language class is teachers' imposition that 'the background to the work, the author and particular literary conventions' need to be presented when literature is in play (Collie and Slater, S. 1999, p. 6). Instead of focusing on the 'knowledge about literature', 'knowledge of literature and language' should be 'the ultimate aim where

learners are provided with some analytical tools with which they can find a way into the text' (Carter and Long 1991, p. 4) and thus construct meaning through student-centered language-based activities while promoting communicative competence and enhance language learning. With this broad rationale in mind this, it is the aim of this paper to outline the guidelines for the activities designed teaching a short story in a Freshman English ESL context. The two broad questions to be addressed are: what kind of classroom activities may contribute to 'language awareness' and could be implemented to promote 'meaning construction' and 'cultural awareness' ?

2. The Place of Literature in ESL

Widdowson (1983) in an interview in ELT journal explains the differentiating feature of literature which underpins the preliminary basis for implementing literary texts in ELT context: '... it is representative of a new reality' and one has to find evidence in the process of making sense, which is not required when reading 'conventional discourse'. Gajdusek (1988) concurs that in literary texts '... primary purpose is not just to convey information, but to involve the reader in direct experience...' and 'the techniques for contextualization, for explicitly providing background and signaling relationships-clues to meaning-are different; ... they are more consistently implicit than explicit' (p.229). Thus, on the

learner's side, reading literature is a procedural task where the evidence needs to be put together to decipher the context and construct meaning rather than following the frameworks of conventional reading process. McRae (1996) expounds a similar view when differentiating between the referential and representational materials. In the latter 'the rules are questioned, played around with, and put to different uses as part of that ongoing process of language acquisition' (p.17). For McRae, representational materials provide 'knowledge about language' and allow for the 'necessity of imaginative engagement' which are paramount in the language awareness process, constructing the bridge between native and target language when a learner goes beyond the application of rules and seeing language learning as an exercise (*ibid.*).

Apart from the discourse related aspects of literary texts, linguistic features; 'variety of language' and differentiating features of language used in literary texts are other aspects where learners can build language awareness and start questioning. Short and Candlin (1989) propose that 'Contrary to much received opinion, it is difficult to make a linguistic distinction between literature and other kinds of language' (p. 201) because any particular deviant feature of language could also exist in a corpus of non-literary texts (Short, 1986). Lazar (1993) sees the variety of language and style in literary texts to be an induction

to build language awareness through investigation where learners ‘become aware of specific stylistic effects’ and this helps them to interpret what is achieved through departing a form and discover the underlying meaning’ (p.19). Therefore, language variety in literary texts is argued to trigger ‘questioning’ and ‘making intelligent guesses’ thus initiating the construction of meaning (Lazar, 1993, Parkinson and Thomas, 2000). Still, the teacher needs to select the level and targeted skill appropriate texts especially in the lower levels.

On a broader scale, literature just like other representational texts is ‘authentic’ material, which is not molded for the specific purpose of language teaching. Language learners are exposed to language intended for native speakers and become familiarized to different meaning construction, linguistic uses and conventions (Collie, J and Slater, S. 1999). It provides personal involvement, personal growth and a motivational reinforcement pushing the learner to go beyond the boundaries of the mechanical aspects of language learning when the text is not approached ‘efferently’ but in a manner that forms an ‘aesthetic interaction between the reader and the text’ (McKay, 1984, p.192). The language learner’s discovery that language is not only a rule-based system but also a socio-semantic system creates different demands on the learner as information transfer would not suffice to construct meaning and learners are required to apply their knowledge of the world, life experiences and imagination in this new context making inferences and interpretations, building hypothesis while looking for evidence to support them. McRae (1996) states that ‘as soon as language begins to mean, it begins to expand its meaning, to make demands on its users... and questions of interpretation, of shades of meaning, of reaction and response’ follows (p.19). ‘Language’ itself requires ‘a more representational approach to teaching and learning’ (*ibid.*) and this is when it ‘begins to mean’, thus, the earlier a learner is exposed to such materials, the earlier it ceases to be a ruled-based system and becomes ‘language’.

3. Background to Class Implementation

Most language learners at Istanbul Sehir University receive a one-year English Preparatory School instruction and are required to pass the IELTS with an overall score of 5.5 to be able to move to freshman year. During one-year English Preparatory School instruction, learners mostly encounter representational or literary texts tailored for the specific purpose of language teaching in their textbooks and graded readers as extensive readings at the discretion of the teachers. The Freshman English Program curriculum aims at equipping students not only with higher level of English skills but also developing higher order

thinking skills to be able to cope with the academic requirements. With this aim in mind, classroom materials designed in a content-based syllabus include a blend of literary texts;

short stories and novels, representational texts; speeches, editorials and referential texts; academic texts. Under one of the themes, learners study two short stories ‘Once Upon a Time’ by Nadine Gordimer and ‘Doll’s House’ by Katrine Mansfield in a two- week period, the instruction of the former being the focus of this paper.

‘Once Upon a Time’ by Nadie Gordimer consists of two parts; a non-fictional opening and a fictional part resembling a fairy tale. The initial part is a first person narrative and explains why the narrator changes her/his mind and decides to write a children’s story after going through an experience thinking someone; (here ‘the other’) has broken into her/his house. The second part depicts the increasing fear of a white family placed in a gated community in the suburbs as the riots take place in the city. The fear of ‘the other’ and the need to keep them away leads the family to put up fences and walls which eventually ends up killing their little boy as he plays in the razor wires up on the walls. It touches upon the issues of fear of ‘the other’, discrimination, social classes, social hierarchy and a severe criticism of the remnants and collective memory of the Apartheid era.

3. Implementation in Class

3.1 Lesson 1

The ‘activity’ is ‘where students actively participate in making the text mean’ (Carter 1996, p. 3). Actively processing the text is different from completing tasks to ‘comprehend’ it. In this lesson, learners engage with the text through constructing meaning following a language-based approach, by means of ‘open ended high order questions’, a ‘targeted cloze procedure’ and ‘the movement of the text’. Questioning’ is a text-processing activity commonly used in language classes; however majority of questions involve ‘the lowest level of mental capacity’ which ‘goes against the most fundamental characteristics of texts as linguistic events’ (Van Peer, 1989, p. 276). Carter and Long (1991) advocate the

use of ‘ “high-order, open questions” involving the learner’s own responses, inferences, knowledge and experience of the world’ to generate meaning. These questions ‘rarely have a right answer’ (p.36) what will be used in this and the following lessons to involve learners’ own responses. The second activity directs the learners’ attention to the change of style and the language in the beginning of the story. The last two lines of ‘one line paragraphs’ were designed as a ‘cloze-text activity’, which aims at ‘ confronting learners with texts that are open in the material sense of the world and have them reconstruct the text... on the basis of cohesion’ (Van Pier, 1989, p. 281). With the last activity, learners trace the movement in the text and underline some of the verbs in paragraphs five and seven. This might give the learners a confidence in understanding how the text works and

following 'I' in 'present and past', start constructing meaning on the change of attitude and 'point of view' through syntax and lexis recognition and awareness. If we look at the first section of the story, questions such as 'What can you tell about 'I'?', 'Do you think 'I' is a male or a female?', 'Think of some adjectives to describe 'I'. Which of the following adjectives ... (McRae and Vethamani, 1999) 'Why do you think the word "ought" is in the quotation marks? What do you think this tells us about how 'I' feel?', 'Do you think 'I' is right to feel/ think this way?' aim at involving learners' own responses, knowledge and experience of the world which would trigger a higher level of cognitive skills and help construct meaning regarding the point of view of 'I'. In the beginning of the story, one - line paragraphs are central to understanding the underlying premise of the story. Learners are asked to fill in two blanks reconstructing the question and the answer posed in the story by 'I' Comparisons of the reconstructed and the original text will facilitate another discussion on the choices of the words and 'point of view' and help elicit the theme of 'fear' analyzing the following contrasts: 'question & answer', 'subconscious & conscious level', 'a voice & a sound'. This activity instigates 'questioning' and 'making intelligent guesses' thus initiating the construction of meaning (Lazar 1993, Parkinson and Thomas, 2000).

In 'Once Upon a Time', verbs move from past, past continuous and to present in recurring order in the first section and learners trace this movement and make a list of the verbs in past and present. Questions such as 'Are these verbs mostly negative or positive? Are any of the verbs that you don't know are positive or negative?', 'How does 'I' feel about the past and about the present?', 'Would it be different if we eliminated the sentences in 'present tense?'' would be a starting point to work on the first binary in the text: 'past and present'. Comparison of some of the verbs in past '*murdered, guarded, strangled, dismissed, threatened*' with the ones in present '*surrounds, trembles, detaches, falls, shifts*' could open up a new dimension on the idea of 'point of view' and the change in 'point of view' from past to present. The lesson ends with a prediction activity: 'What do you think this bed story will be about?' which leads learners to make intelligent guesses elaborating more on the movement in 'point of view'.

3.2 Lesson 2

Lesson two starts with the question 'How is this section similar to the first one?' And how is it different?'. Here some of the features of literary texts such as 'setting, plot and characters' would be elicited through the comparison with the nonfictional opening of the story. The differences and the ideas learners propose through this comparison will be revisited at the end of the story. In the prereading activity, a basic comprehension question: 'How many people are mentioned in this passage?' followed by 'high order-open

questions' (Carter and Long 1991) such as 'What can you tell about where they live?' 'What does this tell us about the people in the story?' would help form a context of meaning, a lack of which would lead to difficulties in understanding the text and therefore

should be established in the beginning of the text. Picking out 'binaries or contrasts' follows the pre-reading activity. Using 'binaries or contrasts' as a first activity gives learners a starting point and an opportunity to say something about the text focusing on what they know rather than what they don't know and helps develop confidence in reading as well as constructing meaning through implicit 'relationships-clues'. (Gajdusek 1988, p.

229). This activity would provide the 'necessity of imaginative engagement' (McRae, 1996, p.17); delving into the new world created in the story that would foster the 'exploration and discovery of key concepts required' to compensate for the lack of explicit contextualization. (Gajdusek, 1988, p. 231). If we return to the story, learners only focus on the first paragraph initially and pick out the binaries related to the concepts of 'danger and security' making a list of words associated with these concepts under each heading. The next activity moves them forward to identify other contrasts in the text in terms of 'People, Places, Mood, Positive and Negative' and directing students to identify the main contrasts in the story. Binaries in relation to people also lead to a more detailed analysis on the

concept of 'point of view'. Questions such as 'What adjectives are used for...?', 'Who do you think chose the adjectives?' instigate questioning on the 'choice of adjectives' and would guide students to a better analysis of the characters' and /or the author's point of view. (McRae and Vethamani 1999) The choice of adjectives for the maid and the gardener with adverbs 'absolutely trustworthy', 'highly recommended' and for the husband's mother 'wise old' witch would be connected to the concept of 'point and view' and lead to questioning why no adjectives are used to describe the main characters: the husband and the wife. Focusing on the maid and the idea of 'advice' in the story, learners would trace the changes in the family's life and would answer if they sympathize with the husband or wife or with someone else in the story. The lesson ends with the questions 'Do you think the husband and the wife and their little boy are safe now?' and 'What do you think will happen next?' allowing the learners to reconstruct the text; the ending of the story in pairs or groups and reporting to the class how they would finish the story.

3.3 Lesson 3

The last lesson focuses on the issues raised in the story and requires the learners to answer 'what the story might have meant' to create cultural awareness and a recognition in the universality of the issues making references to their own lives. The pre-Reading task is designed to elicit the stylistic features in the story resembling a fairy tale story. Students discuss in groups and pick the most appropriate title for the story and justify their reasons

referring to evidences in the story ‘making intelligent guesses’ thus initiating the construction of meaning (Lazar 1993, Parkinson and Thomas, 2000). After the students are presented the real title ‘Once Upon a Time’, they continue working in groups and pinpoint some of the features in this story that are similar to a fairy tale and propose their personal responses on why the author might have chosen this title and particular style of storytelling.

Drawing a mental picture of these particular societies (the society ‘I’ and the other characters live in) and their comparisons follow the initial activity and this aims at encouraging students to postulate some hypothesis on the author and her point of view and whether it is different than ‘I’ ‘s point of view. Through some ‘high order-open questions’ (Carter and Long, 1991), students are directed to question ‘who is responsible’ for what happened to the little boy, whether their sympathy for any characters have changed, whether it is a recent story, in which country this story might have taken place and if the society they live in is any different. These kind of questions ‘make demands’ on language users and interpretation, of shades of meaning, of reaction and response’ follows (McRae,

1996, p. 19). In the last activity learners are presented with a list of ‘moral lessons’ that this story might contain; they are asked to pick the most appropriate one or if they don’t agree with the morals presented, construct their own morals justifying their reasons. This last activity should lead to a class discussion, as the learners defend their own reconstruction of the story in one sentence and decide which of the following issues seems to be central to the meaning of the story: fear of ‘the other’, discrimination, social classes, social hierarchy.

4. Conclusion

Implementing literary texts in the ESL /EFL context, in our case; in an ESL Freshman English Program could facilitate improvement in the skills of higher thinking abilities, a lack of which puts overwhelming demands on the learners in academic contexts. Introduction to literary texts by means of student-centered and language-based activities would reinforce promoting communicative competence, as students need to ‘find a way into the text’ (Carter and Long, 1991, p. 4) in a context where comprehension would not suffice and the approach to language as a rule-based system need to shift into ‘language’ through meaning construction. In the instruction of the short story ‘Once Upon a Time’ by Nadine Gordimer, varied language based activities are designed to introduce the concept of ‘point of view’ and create an awareness towards the function of the text; thus, create cultural awareness on some of the universal issues depicted in the story. Regardless of the historical context or place, students are guided towards using their knowledge of the world and need to engage with the text in an imaginative way, react, respond and ‘make the text mean’.

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