

Short Stories as a Strategy for Second Language (English) Acquisition: A Study Report

M. Praveena,

Lecturer in English, Government Degree College, Patancheru

Abstract:

Language learning is an unconscious instinct that flowers in a supportive environment. There is an acute need to create authentic language learning situations for first-generation learners for the acquisition of English language learning. The existing curriculum and its supportive materials are discouraging first-generation learners from using them as social strategies for language learning. Short stories fill the gaps created by the existing curriculum and improve the cognitive and metacognitive strategies of the students. This paper speaks about an action research project where the target group is degree second-year students. The students were exposed to thirty short stories and their strategies in reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, and grammar components were assessed over a period of 30 days. The results, which were interesting and encouraging are documented for the purpose of this paper.

Keywords: L 1 -First language, L 2—second language, LAD-Language Acquisition Device.

First language acquisition happens naturally. According to Noam Chomsky, the language acquisition device (LAD) is present in all human beings and can be triggered by adults' speech or environment. LAD's theory also states that the human brains has already attained the ability to acknowledge, analyze, and apply language structures. This phenomenon is known as universal grammar. Whereas behaviorist theory says that language acquisition happens only through imitation or repetition. Urge or compulsion boosts the cognitive instincts of the learner and helps them to learn a second language by applying compare and contrast methods as tools.

This is where short stories play a key role as they are filled with content, compulsive situations, creative instincts, language expressions used in situations, idiomatic expressions, contextualized content, compelling climax, and model inputs of language applications. The above features of a short story triggers LAD and creates a natural environment.

This study arose from the belief that successful second language learning can result when learning strategies of the learners are assessed and administered from learners' perspectives. It reports data about 50 degree second-year students (45 girls and 5 boys) of a heterogeneous group of Government Degree College, Patancheru Medak, who had exercised a choice to enroll in an extracurricular English proficiency course. All of them are first-generation learners and the English language learning environment is hardly conducive to them.

Since language learning is an unconscious instinct that flowers in a supportive environment, there is an acute need to create authentic language learning situations for first-generation learners for the acquisition of English language learning. The existing curriculum and its supportive materials discourage first-generation learners from using social strategies for language learning. Most of the students get through the examinations by

translating the given content into L1, and learning them by rote for the examinations. Surprisingly, 80 percent of them are able to score the qualifying marks in university examinations, whereas it differs with their proficiency level. Even while choosing themes for translation, they preferred the literary pieces to the essays.

John Kurrien, Director of the Centre for Learning Resources, Pune, surveyed 100 students of class 10 and found that there is a mismatch between quality and qualifying examination grades. He points out that

. . . about half of these best students were unable to write a single correct sentence, or at best could manage only one correct sentence. While less than 10 percent were able to write more than five correct sentences, the subsequent board examination results declared a few months later indicated that more than 80 percent of all candidates passed in English (The Times of India 22nd July 2008).

The situation is not much different in higher education in Telangana State. This made me explore the learning strategies of the tertiary-level students, who cleared their first-year degree English examination in order to maximize the benefits of competency and to insert an element of democracy while learning a language. Questionnaires were given with open and close-ended questions. The analysis of these scripts revealed the following interesting strategies of the students:

1. 90 percent of them wrote that they prefer to answer Summary-based questions of short stories to essay-based questions on technical topics.
2. 10 percent of them chose grammar-based questions.
3. 88 percent of them responded that they understood the storyline in their mother tongue and had learnt the summaries by heart.
4. 12 percent of them expressed that they understood the storyline in their mother tongue and put it in their words in English.
5. All the students felt that the teacher should explain the gist in their mother tongue.

This study opened up two interesting focal points: (1) Learners are considering their mother tongue (L1) as an associative tool rather than interference or influence. (2) They are interested in comparing, contrasting, and critically examining the L2 against the L1 and are quite comfortable translating the ideas and themes into L1 to learn a new language.

This made me think about maximizing the benefits of learners' strategies to improve communicative competence with content-based authentic materials. When reflecting upon the avatars of literature in language learning, it appears that the use of literature in language teaching is not a recent development. In their extensive survey of trends of literature in foreign language education over the past century, Kramsch and Kramsch (2000) indicate that learning a foreign language in the early part of the 20th century entailed a close study of the canonical literature in that language. Though literature disappeared from the language curriculum from the 1940s to the 1960s with the advent of functional models of learning, the growth of CLT from the 1970s through to the 1990s brought literature back into the curricula and methodologies of language teaching. CLT saw in literature "an opportunity to develop vocabulary acquisition, the development of reading strategies, and the training of critical thinking, that is, reasoning skills" (Kramsch and Kramsch, 2000:567).

Literary texts are used in language teaching for linguistic, methodological, and motivational reasons. They expose learners to language in use that can enable them to understand the register; the social context in

which it is used; the role relationships involved in the communicative event; and the form-function relationships. Since literary texts are open to multiple interpretations, they can generate a great deal of interaction in the classroom which helps learners to hone their communication in the target language. Learners can get connected to literary texts as they embody human feelings that can stimulate learners to express their opinions and relate the topics and the characters in literary texts to their own lives. In the words of Lazar (1999):

By exposing students to the rich language of the text, we can expand their language awareness and their overall knowledge of how words and grammar can be used. By presenting students with the complex themes in the literary text we can motivate them to reflect imaginatively on their own experience and on that of writers in different societies. By gently encouraging them to make their interpretations of a text, we can develop their confidence in forming well-reasoned interpretations of the language that they read and hear (14-19).

There are three approaches to using literature in the ESL classroom: the cultural model, the language model, and the personal growth model. The cultural model, which is teacher-centric, treats literature as content and requires learners to explore and interpret the social, literary, and historical context of a specific text. The language model views literary texts as examples of language in operation. It sensitizes learners to the literary text as a genre in terms of its physical appearance, register, form-function relationships, sound, and movement in terms of tense, images, unusual uses of collocation, binary oppositions, figurative language, rhyme, and style. The personal growth model encourages learners to make connections between their own personal and cultural experiences and those in the text.

Lazar (1993) recommends the integration of these three models to ensure learners' enjoyable involvement in using literature in the classroom. Collie & Slater (1987) and Lazar (1993) offer a series of tasks and activities that can be used to exploit literary texts for developing materials for ESL learners. This is in line with Erkaya (2005) who notes four benefits of using of short stories to teach ESL/EFL, i.e., motivational, literary, cultural, and higher-order thinking skills.

The undergraduate textbook currently in use in Telangana State is a case in point. In its preface, it states that a communicative curriculum is designed to improve the skills of the students. In execution, it does not quite achieve the stated objective in terms of learners' proficiency levels. So, I have chosen short stories, which are easily comprehensible and have maximum reach with their lucid language and style. The chosen short stories can explore lexis, grammar, LSRW skills, social skills, and life skills. The length and content of them were suitable to the CLT classroom needs and period. 30 short stories were chosen for this study. 15 of them were known to them and 15 of them were unknown. 60 percent of them actively participated in the follow-up activities and 40 percent of them passively enjoyed them. They too gained confidence at a later stage.

With the known stories, they have picked up similar vocabulary expressions. Learners used the comparative analysis method and co-related the lexis and themes by activating the schemata. Gradually, the slow learners gained momentum and retold them. With the unknown stories, they tried to guess the meanings from the given contexts. Their retelling capacities were more effective when they were exposed to listening to a story. They have used similar and creative verbal expressions while rewriting the stories. As an extension part

of the creative exercise, they rewrote the stories in their sentences. It was interesting to note that action-oriented vocabulary was elevated. When compared to other functional method classes, the short story sessions were self-motivated, participative, regular, and attentive.

To conclude, I can say that sequential, contextual, and content-based short stories are more effective and conducive for first-generation learners to learn a new language like English.

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