



## The Efficacy of Teaching English as Foreign Language through Literature

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### Abstract

The accomplishment of any language lies in its inherent ability to equip the learners for a lifetime of communication. The aim of my paper is to portray the efficacy of using literature as a popular technique for teaching the four basic skills of language (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and strengthening simultaneously the other areas of language (vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation). Learning Language through Literature is definitely an exciting and different approach to language learning and it facilitates the process of language learning. This method in which language is taught in integration with literature proves to be effective as the teachers and learners engage in learning language in context through interesting pieces of literature—short stories and poems comprising majority of the spectrum of literary pieces in the given context. Although the studies in the use of literature in teaching English Language have been increasing abroad, in the ICSE, CBSE school curriculum, in the public or government school of West Bengal, only English grammar is being taught and that too in isolation from the literary context. The learners are expected to memorise the rules by heart and accordingly are tested in their grammar and vocabulary skills which never enable them to learn and use the English Language when situation demands. English therefore remains a foreign language to them – something they are very scared of as the people in colonial India were. Thus, The purpose of my study is to exhibit why and how literary pieces like poems and short stories can be used in order to teach a foreign language effectively and efficiently. I propose to familiarize the teachers and learners of English as Foreign Language (EFL) with the efficacy of using literature while trying to teach English as a foreign language. While some teachers may still believe that teaching EFL encompasses focusing on linguistic benefits only to enable their learners communicate effectively in the target language, others who have integrated literature in the curricula have realized that literature adds a new dimension to the teaching of EFL. Short stories, for example, enable students to learn the four skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing more effectively because of the motivational benefit embedded in the stories. Moreover, while teaching short stories, teachers can teach literary, cultural, and higher-order thinking aspects. However, before attempting to use short stories in their EFL classes, they should comprehend the benefits of short stories and plan classes that meet the needs of their learners.

**KEYWORDS:** Literature, language, teachers, skills, learners, interaction, context

### Introduction

The use of literature to teach second/foreign languages can be traced back to over one century ago. In the nineteenth century, second/foreign languages were taught with the help of the Grammar Translation Method. Students would translate literary texts from the second/foreign language to their native language. When this method was replaced by methods that emphasized structures and vocabulary, literature was no longer used. Thus, neither the Direct Method nor the Audiolingual Method utilized literature to teach second/foreign languages. In the seventies, methods such as the Community Language Learning, Suggestopedia, the Silent Way, Total Physical Response, and the Natural Approach did not utilize literature to teach second/foreign languages, and neither did the Notional-Functional Syllabus.

For the past two decades or so, literature has found its way back into the teaching of EFL, however, not the way it was used with the Grammar Translation Method. Instructors have realized that literature can be used to reinforce the skills and complement language teaching. Scher (1976) affirms that with students at the beginning and intermediate levels, instructors can use literary texts for “language practice, reading comprehension, and possible aesthetic appreciation” (Muyskens, 1983, p. 413). In contrast, with advanced students literary texts may be utilized for the “development of knowledge of world literature, practice in reading and discussing creative work, and the

introduction of literary concepts, genres, and terminologies eg, recognition of figures of speech, levels of meaning, and other stylistic features” (p. 413). Moreover, students can gain insight into literature by gaining entrance to a world familiar or unfamiliar to them due to the cultural aspects of stories, and taking a voyage from the literary text to their own minds to find meanings for ideas, leading to critical thinking.

Benefits of using Literary Pieces( Short stories):

The question may arise as to why short stories be chosen as an effective medium for teaching English as a foreign or second language. Though the use of literature is beneficial for students, objections may be raised against its use in government high schools due to overcrowded classes, syllabus to be completed within a stipulated time and the majority of the learners hailing from such a background that they are in majority first generation learners. Students belonging to middle and upper middle classes tend to shift to English medium schools for getting a grip on the language which will help them in multifarious ways to build their career. These are some of the major problems met in the public high schools in West Bengal. Nevertheless, in order to help the young generation, specially from tribal areas, economically backward sections of the society, literary works should be incorporated in the curriculum of teaching English language. Considering the above-mentioned problems, it can be said that the deviated and figurative language of poetry, length of novels may pose problems in such classes. Drama can be used in classes but in reality it will be difficult to act out a play in crowded classes within limited course hours. Thus short stories are the most suitable ones to be used in a classroom in public high schools. The answer to the question of why short story is the most suitable form to use in English classes lies in Edgar Allan Poe's definition of short story. He defines it "as a narrative that can be read at one sitting of from one half hour to two hours and that is limited to 'a certain unique or single effect', to which every detail is subordinate". (Abrams, 1970, p. 158). Since it is short, and aims at giving a single effect, there is usually a one plot and few characters, though plot embedded in another plot is also found. It is easy for the learners to follow the storyline of the work. However, the role of the teacher is of immense importance. The teacher must choose a suitable text to be used in class according to the grade and proficiency of the learners, and should aid the learners engage in various activities for comprehending the story. The text should be such that the learners achieve their goal of learning the language in context and that in turn will boost their self confidence and promote active participation in learning English language to the extent of being able to use it in different social contexts.

As a researcher, I am interested in incorporating short stories to the curriculum of teaching English as a second language in the classroom of public high schools in West Bengal. This paper examines how using literature in teaching a language is immensely beneficial as it enhances the cultural repertoire of the learners, widens the language range, besides improving critical thinking skills.

How does the addition of short stories to the curriculum impact students' interest and motivation for the course? The research is also concerned with the question: What impact the addition of short stories has on students of all levels of proficiency and whether it will help improve students' critical thinking skills?

The short story is one of the most convenient genres of literature that can be added to the curriculum of the public high schools in West Bengal to teach English as a second or foreign language as it can be covered in one or two teaching sessions. The themes should be challenging but comprehensible and the language should be within the range of the students. Reading whole, unabridged and non simplified literary texts helps students gain confidence. Howie (1993) agrees with the benefits of using literature and asserts its role in enhancing the critical thinking skills of the learners as they learn to make judgements, be decisive, come to conclusions, synthesise information, organize, evaluate, predict and apply skills." (p.24) Paran (2006) in his research asserts that learners who read literary texts improve in vocabulary and reading.

I think and firmly believe that adding short stories to the curriculum will help all students of different proficiency levels, Learners will see vocabulary in context, grammar in use, and be exposed to the language. Writing their opinion on the short stories will improve their critical thinking skills and instill confidence in them that they can express themselves in the foreign language, their fear of English will gradually go. The incorporation of short stories to the curriculum of learning a second language will enhance the idea of independent learning via reading on all subjects they like.

Literature and especially short stories has long been used for exercises in English as a first language- predominantly in the ICSE and CBSE schools. However, in recent years with the students from all boards having to compete with each other, there has been a growing interest in utilising literature in second language classrooms. Integrating short stories into teaching a foreign or second language can create a congenial learning environment that will provide a comprehensible input and a low affective filter. Short stories can be used for both intensive and extensive reading.

Langer(1995) asserts the relevance of literature: “ Literature plays a critical role in our life, often without our notice. It helps us to explore both ourselves and others, to define and redefine who we are , who we might become and how the world might be...”

Langer (1997) believes that when literature is absent, learners do not practice language through personal and meaningful engagement and thus lose the opportunity of developing their skills.

Rodrigo et al (2004) explain that integrating literature into second language learning can create a learning environment that will lead to comprehensible input and a low affective filter. Strong(1996) asserts the relevance of integrating literature in the ESL curriculum as it develops students’ reading strategies and knowledge of non-fiction and literary texts, acquisition of new vocabulary and grammatical forms and offers the opportunity to explore cross cultural values.

Hess( 2006) calls for adding literature especially short stories for its cultural and educational values.

Notable researchers such as Banks(1987), Ellis (2000), Murdoch (2002), Erkaya (2005), Paran(2006), have all asserted the efficacy of the implementation of literature in the language classroom for teaching a language. The world of short fiction both mirrors and illuminates human lives ( Sage 1987:43) . Leahy (1997). Wang (2004), Thiyagarajan(2014) and Lowe(2015) enforce the value of short stories in teaching language.

Research on short story teaching and second language acquisition also shows that it enhances the motivation of students. Integrating short stories in the curriculum also leads to intellectual and emotional involvement, and enriches the learning experience of the learners, Kim (2004) , Krashen ( 2004) and Cemin (2009) enforces that reading literature especially short story enhances motivation of students and promotes independent learning.

Fisher and Medvic (2003) identified seven components of an effective short story choice and enforced that reading short stories with appropriate practice, learners gradually realize that they can achieve a higher level of comprehension by reading larger meaningful units of texts rather than focusing in individual units.

There have been talks about the paradigm shift from teacher centric classroom to learner centric classroom which remains nothing but a myth in the learning process of our country, especially in the public institutions.. The present study tends to pave way for learner centric classroom by teaching English as foreign language to the students of public high schools through the use of literature concentrating mainly in the use of short stories.

Conclusion:

Research shows that use of literature in language teaching is immensely beneficial as it leads to cultural awareness, language improvement and artistic appreciation. I firmly believe that using short stories to teach English as second language in the classroom is immensely beneficial in language learning as it allows the learners to question, interpret, connect and

explore. This study has important implications for English teachers and EFL/ESL learners. Teachers can be aware of the effectiveness of integrating short stories in the teaching of English as it motivates learners to learn wholeheartedly. Studying short stories offers an opportunity to the learners to articulate their opinion and find their voice

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