

Teaching Short Stories with a Difference

Madhu Neupane*

Abstract

This article aims to provide classroom teachers of higher secondary level with some practical techniques to deal with short stories. This will be helpful for secondary level teachers as well. The first part of this article deals with the rationales of introducing literature in language classes.

In the second part of the article, different activities which can be conducted in the classroom are given. The activities are divided into three stages viz. pre-reading activities, while reading activities and post-reading activities. It is expected that this brief article will stimulate the teachers to deal with short stories in more practical ways thus creating the situation conducive for the students to learn language through literature.

Introduction

Literature and language teaching are closely related. Though they are considered to be different, they are the same in the layman sense because literature is also language. Literature provides the language learners with a lot of exposure to the variety of language functions and structural patterns. Teaching language functions and structural patterns without their use in context is to force the students to suck the language item dry. To quote Collie and Slater (1987: 3) one of the main reasons for teaching literature is that "it offers a bountiful and extremely varied body of materials." At the same time, literature is authentic material for learning a language. By authentic we mean the materials that are produced in response to real life situation but not for the specific purpose of teaching.

Similarly, literature provides the students with the cultural knowledge of the language they are learning. Language and culture are so closely associated that it is difficult to understand one fully in the absence of another. Lazar (1993: 14) gives the following reasons for introducing literature in the language classroom:

- It is very motivating.
- It is authentic material.
- It has general educational value.
- It is found in many syllabuses.
- It helps students to understand the target language culture.
- It is stimulus for the acquisition of language.
- It develops students' interpretive abilities.
- Students enjoy it and it is fun.
- It is highly valued and has high status.
- It expands students' language awareness.
- It encourages students to talk about their opinions and feelings.

While answering the question 'Is literature taught or caught?' Brumfit and Carter (1986: 23) mention that "none of us teaches anything worthwhile directly to the students; we simply create conditions for

* Ms Neupane teaches at the Department of English Education, TU., Kirtipur.

successful learning." Therefore, the role of a teacher is to create conducive environment for absorbing literary texts rather than applying jug and mug theory. The students need to be provided with the variety of exercises for understanding the literary texts.

Literary texts are of in various genres. They are novels, plays, short stories, and poems to name the some. In this short article, I am going to deal with the techniques of teaching short stories.

According to Collie and Slater (1987: 109), short stories are often an ideal ways of introducing students to literature in the foreign language classroom for the following reasons:

- They can usually be dealt in a single class.
- They are less difficult for foreign learners to read on their own.
- They offer greater variety for teachers choose varieties of short texts according to the tastes and interests of the students.
- They can be used not only in long-term courses but in short-term courses as well.

On the other hand, since the short stories are compressed, care and preparation are needed for their successful presentation otherwise students may leave many things unnoticed. This is not always necessary to read the story in the class either silent or loud. Students can read them on their own at home. As such, different activities should be devised in order to help the students understand the text.

The activities for teaching stories can be divided into three stages. Some useful techniques for the different stages are exemplified here with the story 'Worn Path'. Teachers can use these and other similar activities to deal with a short story. At the same time, the difficulty level of the activities can be adjusted according to the level of students. The limitation of the time determines the number of activities. Some of the activities can be given as home assignment too.

Activities

This section deals with different activities that can be conducted on the different stages of teaching stories.

Pre-reading activities

Pre-reading activities are those activities which help the students to build up expectations for reading. While reading, students can confirm whether their expectations are met or not. To use another term, students need to be 'tuned in' (Underwood, 1989) so that, before reading they know what to expect, both in general and for particular tasks. This kind of preparatory work is pre-reading.

Activity 1

Teacher gives the background of the author.

Euroda Welty was born in 1909 in Jackson, Mississippi. She was educated at Mississippi State College for Women. She studied advertising. Her works include: *The Southern Review*, *The New Yorker*, *The Atalantic Monthly*, *Delta Wedding*(1946), *Ponder Heart*(1954), *Losing Battles*(1970), *The Optimist's Daughter*(1972), *The Eye of the Story*(1977 and *On Writer's Beginnings*(1984). She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for work *The Optimist's Daughter*.

Activity 2

Teacher asks some questions to make predictions about the story:

- What do you guess from the title?
- What do you mean by the word 'worn'?
- Do you know any poor and old woman in your locality?
- How is she like? What does she wear? Who does she live with

Activity 3

Students will be divided into two groups and read the following extracts on 'unconscious heroism' and 'Phoenix' (a mythical bird). Then they will exchange the ideas between the groups after reading (This is an activity which has information gap activities).

Group A

A hero is a person who is admired for courage, outstanding achievement and adventurous act. Generally, in Greek mythology it refers to the man of superhuman qualities. Heroism refers to the

great courage. It is the ability to conduct courageous and adventurous activities. Generally, heroism is conscious because people do courageous activities knowingly. The 'unconscious heroism', on the other hand, refers to the quality in which a person does heroic activities unconsciously. In such case, heroic activities are guided by the unconscious desire of a person.

Group B

A phoenix is a mythical bird with beautiful gold and red feathers. At the end of its life-cycle the phoenix builds itself a nest of *cinnamon* (a tropical tree) twigs that it then ignites; both nest and bird burn fiercely and are reduced to ashes, from which a new, young phoenix arises. The new phoenix is destined to live, usually, as long as the old one. In some stories, the new phoenix embalms the ashes of the old phoenix in an egg made of myrrh (aromatic resin used in perfume) and deposits it in the Egyptian city of Heliopolis (*the city of the sun* in Greek). The bird was also said to regenerate when hurt or wounded by a foe, thus being almost immortal and invincible—a symbol of fire and divinity.

Activity 4

Students make prediction about the story on the basis of the following extracts taken from the story:

- *She was very old and small and she walked slowly in the dark pine shadows, moving little side to side in her steps.*
- *Her eyes opened with their widest and she started down gently. But before she got to the bottom of the hill a bush caught her dress.*
- *She passed through the old cotton and went to the field of dead corn.*
- *Moving slowly from side to side, she went into the stone building and into the tower of steps, where she walked up around and around until her feet knew to stop.*
- *'Here I be', she said. There was a fixed and ceremonial stiffness over her body.*

Activity 5

General discussion on the theme:

This story is about an old black woman called Phoenix Jackson. She lives in a house long way from the town. She has a grandson who is ill. She makes a very difficult journey long way from her house to town to take medicine for her grandson. Though she is very old to make a long and difficult journey, she is guided by unconscious heroism i.e. the love of her grandson whom she loves more than herself.

Activity 6

Match the following words with their meaning:

<i>Creek</i>	a narrow trench like depression
<i>Furrow</i>	human figure dressed in old cloth and set up in a field to scare birds away
<i>Scarecrow</i>	stream
<i>Lolling</i>	five cent coin
<i>Nickel</i>	water made alkaline with wood ashes
<i>Dime</i>	a brown North America dog
<i>Lye</i>	(of tongue) hanging loosely
<i>Persistent</i>	US ten cent coin
<i>Mourning dove</i>	continuous
<i>Spry</i>	a case where medicine doesn't work
<i>An obstinate case</i>	elastic

While-reading activity

While reading activities are the activities which students do while reading the text. The purpose of these activities is to help them to comprehend the text. These activities should be chosen carefully.

Activity 7

Read the story and order the events as they happen in the story.

- After she got to the top she turned and gave a full severe look behind her where she had come.
- The old women walked slowly in the dark pine shadows.
- She crossed the creek along the log with great difficulty.

- She was frightened with the scarecrow.
- She went through a barbed fence.
- A man took her out of the ditch.
- She took a nickel which was fallen out of the white man's pocket.
- She fell in the ditch.

Activity 8

Complete the following sentences with appropriate words from the story:

- Phoenix Jackson was making afrom her house to town.
- On the way she has to face many.....
- She was going to town.....some medicine for her grandson.
- When she reached the city, it was the time of
- When she reached the place, she..... the purpose for which she made the trip.

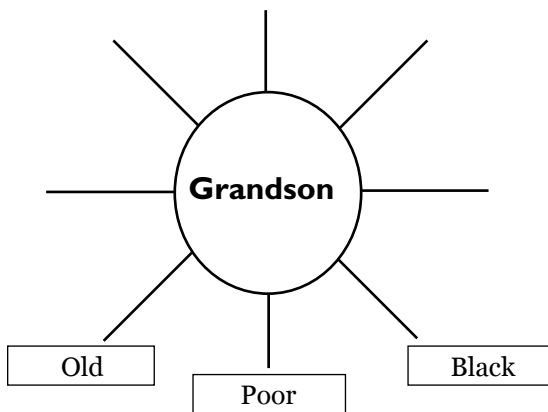
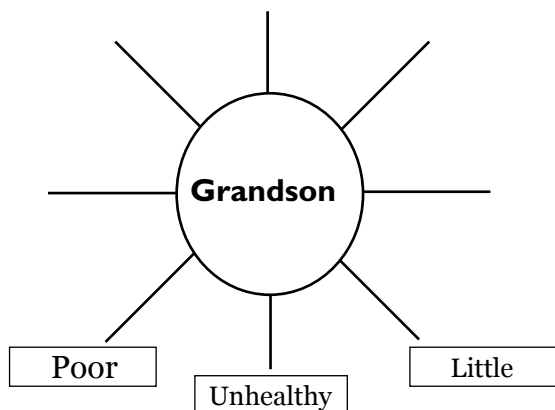
Activity 9

Read the story and answer the following questions:

- What are the various obstacles faced by Phoenix Jackson on her way to the town?
- What did she do when she was knocked down by the dog?
- Give some evidences to prove that Phoenix is very poor.
- Why does she make the journey to the town in the time of Christmas?

Activity 10

Students will make a web to describe the character of Phoenix and her grandson.



Activity 11

Change the following direct speech into indirect ones.

- "Doesn't the gun scare you", he said.
- "I am bound to go on my way", said Phoenix.
- "Please, missy, will you lace up my shoes", she said by holding up her foot.
- "Are you deaf", cried the attendant.
- "Now, how is the boy?" said the nurse.
- "I thank you", she said.

Activity 12

Give the present forms of the following verbs.

Tried	cried	made
ran	stood	left
Went	shut	bent
came	gave	heard

Why do you think these verbs are used in the past tense?

Activity 13

Correct the following grammatically incorrect and elliptical sentences taken from the story uttered by Phoenix Jackson.

- "Glad this not for the season for the bulls," she said.
- "Ghost," she said sharply, "who be you the ghost of?"
- "Dance, old scarecrow", she said, " While I dancing with you."
- "This the easy place. This the easy going."

- "No sir, I going to town."
- "I doesn't mind asking a nice lady to tie up my shoe when I gets out on the street."
- "Here I be," she said.
- "My little grandson, he sit up there in the all wrapped up, waiting by myself," Phoenix went on.
- "I going to the store and buy my child a little windmill they sells, made out of paper."

Now discuss with your partner why these sentences have been used and what they indicate.

Post-reading activities

Post-reading activities are done after the reading is completed. Usually these activities are the extensions of the work done at pre-reading and while reading stages. These activities are useful in checking whether the students have understood the text or not. These activities can be given to the students as the home assignment. These activities should be designed in such a way that they stimulate the expressive power of the students.

Activity 14

- Write the story as it is told by Phoenix Jackson herself.
- Students will play the role of Phoenix Jackson and the white man in front of the class.
- Suppose that you are the nurse who met Phoenix Jackson. Write a letter to your friend describing the event.
- How can you compare Phoenix Jackson with the mythological bird Phoenix?

Conclusion

Now there is no debate on whether literature should be introduced in language classroom or not. The importance of introducing literature in the language classroom cannot be exaggerated. The most important aspect is that literature provides the context for meaningful learning of language. Only the meaningful learning can have lasting effect on the life of the learners. Though literature is important, it may be meaningless and time consuming if it is not exploited properly. So the activities which maximize the involvement of the students and thus maximize the learning should be devised. To quote Brumfit and Carter (1986:23), "none of us teaches anything worthwhile directly to the students; we simply create conditions for successful learning."

References

- Brumfit, C. J. & R. A. Carter (eds.). 1986. *Literature and Language Teaching*. London: ELBS.
- Collie, J. & S. Slater. 1987. *Literature in the Language Classroom*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Grellet, F. 1981. *Developing Reading Skills*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Lazar, G. 1993. *Literature and Language Teaching*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Lohani, S. P. & R. P. Adhikary. 2004. *The Magic of Words*. Kathmandu: M.K. Publishers and Distributors.
- Undrewood, M. 1989. *Teaching Listening*. London: Longman.