

## Using Short Stories in the Language Classroom\*

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There have been quite a few arguments about including literature as a part of the syllabus in a language course. The possibility of teaching language in its natural context has been emphasized while there is an equally strong argument that the language in a literary text is not a good model for language learners. After briefly summarizing the typical pros and cons for using a literary text, the present study tries to explore some valid points of how a literary work, especially a short story, can be effectively used in a language classroom. I give some specific ideas for introducing a short story to college-level English students, divided into three stages: before reading, while reading, and after reading. I also present some practical activities devised for one particular short story, "A Clean, Well-lighted Place" by Ernest Hemingway. Hopefully, the types of tasks and activities I suggest can be applied or adapted to many other short stories as well.

### I. THE CASE FOR TEACHING LANGUAGE THROUGH LITERATURE

In Korean universities, English language and English literature courses have been offered separately: the courses focusing on language communication are mainly offered by General English programs, whereas literature courses are offered by English departments. Most teachers seem to agree that the objectives and techniques they employ in these two areas are mutually

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exclusive and do not overlap: thus, 'English language teachers,' in most cases, do not look into the possibility of incorporating literature into their courses, and 'English literature teachers' do not regard teaching language skills as a part of their responsibility.

However, in English literature courses, problems arise when students do not have a relatively high proficiency in English. When they can hardly understand even the literal meaning of a text, let alone the deeper, implicit meanings, it is unrealistic to expect them to fully appreciate the work. So, ironically, literature courses often concentrate on the translation of the text, ignoring its features as a work of art. Thus, more often than not, teachers confront a double dilemma: teaching literature to students who do not have a reasonably good command of English reinforces a high degree of frustration: concentrating on the work merely as a lexical choice excludes all the beauty and depth of the work, stripping it of its value. However, when it is understood that the methods of language and literature instruction are never mutually exclusive but "they can cross-fertilize" (Reutershan, 1986:34), both parties will certainly benefit.

In the past, many language teachers believed that any material given to students should provide a linguistic model or pattern and that literary works are "linguistically unsuitable as a model" (Collie & Slater, 1987:10). And with its "static, convoluted kind of language, far removed from the utterances of daily communication" (Collie & Slater, 1987:10), literary English is often considered as an inadequate example, not recommended for students whose goal, after all, is to acquire a language used in everyday life. Outdated as it may be, Stevens' (1974) argument may still be quite convincing to many language teachers:

[Students' aim] is to acquire some degree of practical command largely unrelated to the study and appreciation of literature. The objectives of language teaching are to enable the young citizen to use English...as a tool: as a vehicle for comprehension and communication; or as a window on the modern trans-national world of science, technology, entertainment, art of ideas, or for quite specific or restricted needs in his occupation.

To some extent this is a valid point. If the syllabus in a language-teaching course is restricted to Renaissance poetry or Shakespeare's plays, a large portion of its language will be quite irrelevant to the students' needs. However, if a good modern prose is used as the basis for a course, let's say 20th-century American novels or short stories, the language cannot be too different from the language present-day Americans actually use.

The biggest problem in language teaching in Korea seems to be the tendency to regard language as a mere "tool" or means of communicative functions. Many language-teaching books available on the ELT market consist entirely of such functions as inviting, inquiring, answering the phone, asking for directions, etc., or the language used in specific places—at the hospital, at the bank, at a shop, at the post office, and so on. I have co-authored English textbooks for use both in elementary and secondary schools, and the guidelines given by the Ministry of Education also largely involve the above-mentioned functional exponents. Admitting these "tools" will obviously be of great help for survival in a second-language environment, this notional and functional teaching is likely to reduce the content of language teaching to a very narrow and restricted level. I wholeheartedly agree with Tomlinson (1986:34) who indicates that "as language teachers, we are fundamentally educationalists and not just instructors, and it is our duty to contribute to the emotional, imaginative, and intellectual development of our learners."

Widdowson (1983) also comments on the potential hazard of the mechanical way of teaching a language through "functional" dialogue:

It's not easy to see how learners at any level can get interested in and therefore motivated by such a mechanical and 'functional' dialogue about buying stamps at a post office. There is no plot, there is no mystery, there is no character; everything proceeds as if communication never created a problem. There's no misunderstanding and there's no possibility of any kind of interaction.

Of course, the concept of language as a "tool" should be the basic frame of every language course, but language classes involve not just language but also content, and this is where literature comes in. By providing authentic and meaningful situations, literature makes spontaneous

language production possible. In dealing with literary topics and themes, students' main concern is content: instead of constantly trying to recall those rules they learned through explicit grammatical drills, they are put in a situation where they can naturally apply their linguistic knowledge to the content-based explanations.

Lately, a growing number of teachers are becoming interested in literature as a possible means of teaching English. Appel (1990:67) goes as far as to use the term "renaissance": "...excluded from language classrooms for a long time, literature has experienced a recent renaissance."

Using literary texts to teach a language is generally justified in three areas: linguistic, methodological, and motivational. Collie & Slater (1987) claim that literary texts provide a rich context in which lexical or syntactical items are made more memorable: thus, the structure and the vocabulary can be subconsciously, and thus more effectively, registered. In other words, a literary text enables the students to make inferences from the given linguistic clues and "internalise" (Hill, 1986:7) their knowledge of the language. The reason native speakers can understand the meaning of the new words without consulting a dictionary is that they learn the words from meeting them in context. Likewise, a literary text provides the medium through which students are able to make an informed guess as to a word's meaning and significance, based on its context. Moreover, according to Legutke & Thomas (1991:5), by giving 'reality' and an important means of "authenticating" communication, literature provides a meaningful context for the students to which they can relate what they learn. That is, the material Krashen (1985) calls "comprehensible input" can be most naturally furnished by a literary text.

One of the most important factors in language classrooms should be students' motivation to say something meaningful. Students are most eager to learn when their intellect and feelings are simultaneously engaged. Incorporating literature in language teaching can provide teachers with unique opportunities not only to further students' motivation and participation but also to solicit their creative and imaginative responses. A good literary work addresses itself to complex situations and realistic conflicts and dilemmas, and naturally, it engages students psychologically as well as intellectually. As such, it can provide the material for a variety

of classroom activities in which students actively participate. Also, instead of simply 'studying' language, students are encouraged and helped to respond to it in a more creative and imaginative way. Widdowson (1984:246) has labeled that creative force "language capacity," by which he means 'the ability to exploit the resources for making meaning which are available in the language.'

To sum up, if a literary work is carefully selected so as to be linked with students' interests, it may provide a much more involving source for pedagogic activities than many pseudo-narratives that are specifically designed for language teaching.

## II. WHY SHORT STORIES?

From my experience, the most rewarding literary genre for language teaching is the short story, particularly ones with a fast-developing plot and relatively simple situations. Introducing poetry, with its compressed features and often abnormal syntax, can intimidate the students. Yet short stories, when effectively used, can develop students' awareness of the ways in which language is employed and, at the same time, improve their ability to discuss human and social problems. Linguistically also, short stories provide opportunities for expanding vocabulary span and for encountering grammar in actual use. Collie & Slater (1987: 196) give three concrete reasons why short stories are the most effective genre for language learners:

Their practical length means they can usually be read entirely within one or two class lessons....They are less daunting for a foreign reader to tackle or to reread on his or her own, and more suitable when set as home tasks....They offer greater variety than longer texts.

### III. APPROACH OF TEXT

#### 1. Criteria for the Selection of the Short Stories

In order to achieve the utmost effect in teaching literature, the teacher should evaluate the potential educational value of the work before including it in his or her syllabus. It is important to consider three criteria when selecting short stories: content, length, and level of difficulty. In terms of content, stories dealing with universal topics such as youth, love, friendship, death seem to be best accepted by college students whose age usually ranges from late teens to early twenties. Initiation stories, in which young protagonists gradually gain new knowledge or understanding of life, seem to be especially attractive to young language learners. (James Joyce's "Araby," John Steinbeck's "Great Mountains," Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party," Hemingway's "The Killers," Isaac Singer's "Fool's Paradise" are only a few examples of initiation stories which seem to be successful in language classrooms.)

The brevity of the story is also a crucial element to take into consideration. Stories which are too long and slow-paced often fail to adequately motivate students: the most appropriate stories are those which are brief enough to be dealt with as a complete text in a couple of weeks, taking perhaps four or five sessions. The stories should also be linguistically accessible: that is, they should not intimidate the students with stylistic complexities. The vocabulary span should be considered as well, for students will be discouraged if they have to stop frequently to look up the meanings of new words in the dictionary. Even if the teacher can recommend that students read for gist and not concentrate on vocabulary, it becomes problematic if the meanings of too many important words or phrases are missed.

#### 2. Before Reading

As a pre-reading activity, I try to think up discussion topics or writing assignments that can somehow bridge the world of the text and the world of the students. Also, students can be given the activities which will focus

their intellect and imagination on the content of the story. The activities usually arouse curiosity and expectations on the part of the students, making them eager to read the story. To have the best effect, these activities should focus on the content, not on the language of the story, and ideally, they should also involve the students in interactions which will engage them at once emotionally and intellectually.

Some possible pre-reading activities include:

- predicting the content of the story from the title
- discussing personal experiences related to the theme or the character of the story
- discussing current topics related to the theme or the situation of the story
- discussing photographs or drawings related to the content of the story
- listening to related songs or music and writing impressions about them
- watching plays or movies related to the story
- sampling random lines from the story
- performing simulated situations related to the story
- describing personal experiences related to the setting of the story
- writing down any words that are associated with words given by the teacher

### 3. While Reading

Recently some collections of stories have become available which are specially designed for the overseas reader and contain notes and glossaries as well as literary criticisms and commentaries. If such an edition is not available with the chosen text, the teacher may compile and supply a study guide to the work consisting of a glossary of words and expressions, a set of guiding questions which will bring out the narrative flow of the story, and a set of comprehension questions which will lead students to the possible themes of the story. Also, if considered necessary, a brief biography of the author and a discussion of local customs and background relevant to the text may be added.

For the language learner, it can be frustrating only to focus on the

explorations of the profound philosophical implications of the text. The goal of understanding seems to be most successfully achieved through three basic elements of the story: the content, the character, and the language.

### **1) Content**

To have the students fully appreciate the text as a literary work, it is crucial to introduce the basic storyline. Instead of giving a literal translation of each sentence, however, it is more effective if the teacher gives a brief summary of the story or has some students give a presentation on the plot. Providing some guiding questions which can help students follow the series of actions will also enable the students to understand the storyline. One could also have the students make their own questions (or a cloze test) about the plot of the story and ask these questions of each other in the form of a group game.

Other activities that can help the students understand the content include:

- filling in the missing links between the actions
- filling in the missing character's name
- writing an imaginary dialogue not given in the narrative
- recasting a segment of the text to include information that the original gave only later
- creating a story using the same characters in a different setting
- creating a story using different characters in the same setting
- rewriting a passage from a different point of view
- creating a different ending to the story
- rearranging shuffled sentences

### **2) Character**

Characters seem to be the most convenient and effective element of a story for a language teacher. Writers usually employ concrete and descriptive words relating to characters—their physical appearance and personality traits, clothing, patterns of behaviour, their likes and dislikes.

values and thoughts, etc. With realistic characters, students can identify themselves with one or more characters in the story, actively registering what they say, what they do, how they respond to the circumstances, and so on. They may even be willing to go beyond the superficial understanding of the characters and try to reach a deeper comprehension of their motives and inner conflicts.

Some activities related to characters include:

- making a list of all the characters appearing in the story
- collecting all the words (especially adjectives) related to each character
- drawing a sketch of the main characters
- describing a character (in words or mime) and playing a “Name That Character” game
- reading a dialogue using a particular character’s tone of voice
- writing a diary entry of a character
- dramatizing some characters’ dialogue

### **3) Language**

In an attempt to make the language of a story more accessible to students and increase their awareness of how it conveys mood and theme, I try to introduce activities related to stylistic analysis. I encourage the students to identify how specific lexical and grammatical choices contribute to producing some specific tone or character and other stylistic effects. If some grammatical structures, such as conditionals, subjunctives, or modals, recur in the story, they can be most conveniently used to reinforce the structure.

Some activities related to lexical choices include:

- making a list of syntactic parallels
- transforming the verbs depending on the context
- making a list of idiomatic expressions and writing a short sentence using each expression
- finding similes, metaphors, and other figures of speech
- playing a game related to certain structures (e. g., a “Chain Sentence Game” can be used to have the students practice the subjunctives:

one student says a sentence using an "if" clause, and the next student takes it up using the main clause as his other "if" clause.)

#### 4. After Reading

After students have finished reading the story, there can be a wrap-up period in which students can give their responses to the story. They should be made to feel free to express their reactions in any way they wish. But it should be recommended that the views be based on concrete evidence in the text, rather than on completely arbitrary impressions. Still, even if the students' responses are rather arbitrary and based on personal prejudices, the teacher should refrain from judging or, even worse, correcting them. This should produce what Candlin (1981:18) calls "divergent talk"—different opinions among students and between students and the teacher. It is intended to help students become more actively involved as readers and more independent in their judgment and appreciation of the literary text. If time allows, extended interactions are recommended. The students can apply their knowledge and impressions about the story to some creative tasks, which will naturally involve them in the intelligent use of English.

Activities for the extended interactions can include:

- painting group interpretations of the story
- writing a further episode after the given ending
- giving a different title to the story
- producing mime or dance versions of the story
- turning the story into a poem or a song
- rewriting the story from a different viewpoint
- writing a short skit based on the story
- comparing the story with other texts on the same theme
- discussing controversial statements about the story
- discussing other stories with the same theme

## IV. SAMPLE LESSON

Following the framework of the above generalizations, I will present some specific activities for Ernest Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-lighted Place." Employing a 'hard-boiled' style, which is characterized by simple sentences (often connected by conjunctions) and little use of embellishment, Hemingway's story is in general lexically accessible for foreign students. The plot of the story is very simple: late at night, in a "clean, well-lighted" cafe, two waiters, one young and the other old, are observing an old customer. The story, mainly consisting of the dialogue between the two waiters, is concerned with their contrasting characters and attitudes toward the old man.

### 1. Before Reading

One way to prepare students for this kind of story is to have them familiarize themselves with the serene and peaceful mood. The setting, which in itself is the title of the story, is almost an integral part of the story and largely responsible for creating such a mood. Thus, the pre-reading activities may well be focused on the setting—"a clean, well-lighted place."

- Have the students predict the atmosphere of the story by the title.
- Have them give examples on how a setting can create a certain mood.
- Ask them whether they have been to any "clean, well-lighted" cafe or any other kind of cafe or bar.
- Ask the students to recall the moments in their own lives when they thought they had a glimpse into life—for example, when they caught sight of a scene or overheard a conversation.
- Have the students make a list of the characteristics of youth and age—what they seem to have in common and how they differ from each other.
- Divide the students into several groups and have them write chain compositions, with each member beginning his or her composition saying "Old people are often very..." or "Young people are often very..."

## 2. While Reading

Once the students are tuned into the general mood of the story through the pre-reading class activities, ask the students to read the story at home. Since the story is written in simple language, it is not necessary to go over the story in class line by line to render the literal meaning. It is recommended, however, to explain the basic situation of the story in advance and give the students a list of some important words and expressions. For example, students should understand the meaning of the Spanish word 'nada' (nothing), and to understand the parodies in the story, they should be given the English version of the Lord's Prayer.

### 1) Content

After the students have read the story at home, before seriously discussing the story in class, ask some comprehension questions to check their understanding:

- Does the old man come to the cafe often?
- Who is watching the old man and why?
- Why, according to one of the waiters, did the old man try to commit suicide?
- What reason does the older waiter give for the old man's staying up late?
- Are both waiters in a hurry to leave?
- Why is the older waiter reluctant to close up for the night?
- What doesn't the older waiter like about bars?
- Where does the older waiter go on his way home?
- Does the older waiter fall asleep as soon as he goes to bed?
- What does he think might keep him awake?

Some activities that can help students better acquainted with the content of the story include:

- Have the students draw a sketch of the setting.
- Have the students summarize the dialogue between the two waiters in the form of a narrative.
- Leave the adjectives 'old' and 'young' as blanks and have the students

fill in.

- Have the students tell the differences between the “clean, well-lighted cafe” and the ‘bodegas’.
- Have two students dramatize the two waiters’ dialogue about the old man’s attempt to commit suicide.

Ask the students some interpretation questions:

- What is the difference in the two waiters’ attitudes toward the old man?
- Neither of the two waiters in the story is named. Does that signify anything?
- What is the difference in the attitude of the two men toward the cafe?
- What is the significance of the garbled Lord’s Prayer?
- What do you think is the significance of the title of the story?

## 2) Character

One of the most distinctive features of the story is the contrasting character of the two waiters. The younger waiter is callous and insensitive to the old man’s feelings while the older waiter feels sympathetic for the old man because he recognizes the tragedy of human loneliness. Students can underline and discuss all the passages and dialogues which illustrate general tendencies of each character. Attention can be drawn to the fact that the waiters are unnamed but differentiated only by two adjectives—old and young.

Possible activities that can help students have a better understanding of the characters include:

- Have the students make a list of all the characters (the old waiter, the younger waiter, the old man, the soldier and the young girl, and the barman).
- Have them collect all the words, especially modifiers, related to each character.
- Have the students bring the photos of two men who represent their idea of what the two waiters would look like and explain why they feel that way.
- Have the students dramatize the dialogue between the waiters, using

appropriate intonation.

- Have the students look for some symbols related to each character.

### 3. After Reading

The class can again discuss the significance of the title, "A Clean, Well-lighted Place," this time focusing on its symbolic implications. To the younger waiter the café is nothing more than a workplace, but to the older waiter, as well as to the old man, it is a shelter from the emptiness and disorderliness of life.

Although the story is short and simple, its impact is tremendous. The success of teaching the story may depend on the degree of the students' understanding of the messages of the story—the sympathy for the basic human situation, a sense of emptiness of life, and insights into the loneliness of old age. Several wrap-up activities can trigger further discussions among the students:

- Have the students think of a different title for the story and explain why their title is as good as the original one.
- Have the students write a poem about loneliness.
- Have the students pretend to be the old man in the story and write his last will before he tries to commit suicide again.
- Have the students write a different ending to the story.
- Have the students retell the story from the point of view of the old man or the younger waiter.

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