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*The Role of Communicative Classroom
Activities in Foreign Language Acquisition:
The Case of Short Stories.*

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ABSTRACT

The present work advocates the use of short stories as an efficient communicative teaching technique to develop foreign language proficiency. We hypothesize that short stories in a TEFL context would particularly enhance three major components of foreign language learning namely, reading comprehension, vocabulary expansion and cultural awareness. The sample study will be represented by the second year Master students of Applied Language Studies at Mohamed Khider University of Biskra, Algeria. In fact, a pilot investigation will be conducted through the organization of four workshops which will be devoted to the precise evaluation of this technique of English language teaching with respect to two pre-determined objectives. The first one is the increase of students' motivation and enjoyment and, the second, its positive repercussion that would eventually acknowledge our preconisation that short stories – within a communicative approach framework-constitute an essential pedagogical tool in the foreign language learning process.

Keywords: short stories- techniques- FL teaching- motivation-reading-vocabulary-cultural awareness- skills- communicative approach.

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INTRODUCTION

In the early 1980's a polemical but widespread procedure advocated the teaching of English through the use of authentic texts for specific objectives; consequently, a great number of English language teachers decided to remove literature from language education. Even today, most English language teachers use content-based instruction, which means primarily that the texts used to teach language come from fields other than literature. Indeed, many students and many teachers of English as well believe that poems, short stories and plays have little or no place in classrooms oriented to developing linguistic as well as communicative competences in English; or that literary texts are only for advanced level learners.

In fact, students often claim that the study of English literary texts is boring and difficult. This unfortunate situation is probably the result of teaching literary materials in the wrong way, namely the choice of extremely complex texts, the reliance on word-for-word translation or lecturing to students on literary criticism and the meaning of English texts. As far as English learners are concerned, this is surely not the way to develop either language skills or literary appreciation. This leads to the need of new strategies and reformations of using literature. As a result, a hot debate imposes itself in relationship to a principal issue: how can teachers exploit literature in the language teaching process for EFL classes? Therefore, in an attempt to answer such essential question, the present article suggests the use of short stories through the careful selection of efficient classroom activities in line with the most important principles and requirements of the communicative approach of foreign language teaching.

2. General Principles of Communicative Language Teaching

* The communicative syllabus represents a more comprehensive view of language learning and teaching which integrates aspects of previous types of syllabuses, namely structures, topics and themes, situations, functions and drills.

* The communicative syllabus originates in the socio-cultural view of language as inseparable from its social and cultural context. Thus, in a communicative syllabus, the assumption which is made about language learning is that, the acquisition of the target language involves both grammatical rules and socio-cultural conventions.

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* Whereas, in the structural syllabus, the concern of syllabus designers is with what rules of grammar must be learned, the concern of a communicative syllabus is with what communicative tasks are to be achieved. It is once these tasks have been determined that the structural elements that are needed to complete them are defined.

* Communicative syllabuses look at the needs of the learner (Needs Analysis).

* By looking at the needs and using functions as filter, we will make the learner acquire communicative competence. In other words, we should ensure that the linguistic system is learned or attained within communicative competence.

* The type of methodology of teaching is not in reality primordial as long as we have applied a needs analysis operation.

*. Learners must feel as if they were an integral part of the quest for foreign language development.

3. Principal Parameters of Material Selection

The selection of the items (in the short story) that should be incorporated in the lesson should be chosen for different bases; indeed, they should satisfy the learners' needs in terms of functions not forms. Hence, the main difficulty lies in the determination of the basis to decide what the learners need. Accordingly, the foreign language teacher should take into account the following important factors:

* The category of language learners: the language learning process should aim at the attainment of academic or professional objectives.

* The language teacher should decide precisely what is to be required of the students.

* The careful and appropriate selection of the necessary functions to be taught among a long and exhaustive list of language functions.

* The organization of the teaching process: the language teacher should be aware of the problems concerning what to include or exclude under each heading, for instance a short piece of language may express many functions.

* There can be no one to one relationship between form and function. The language teacher should cope with the question of overlapping; different forms in various places in the materials but the functions must be kept apart.

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* The communicative tasks are much easier if they are designed in very limited areas. Therefore, the selected short story in the teaching process should represent and exemplify the targeted objectives.

4. The Techniques of Reading the Short Story

It is evident that the main purpose of the present work is not to analyse literarily the short story with its different implications and features. The focus is not actually on the characteristics of the short story as a literary genre such as its length, unity, suspense and many other elements. However, it is assumed that the foreign language student should be aware of the general pattern and the stages of the short story. The reason is that such a process would facilitate the understanding of the story and, eventually this would result with a better grasping of the various forms and particularly the functions of the foreign language. Accordingly, the following stages are found in the pattern of the short story:

- * The situation;
- * The generating circumstances;
- * The rising action;
- * The climax;
- * The denouement.

Therefore, it is essential that the learner should master a limited number of reading techniques of the short story for an optimum benefit of the FL learning process (Manya and Eric De Leeuw, 1978: 137-142).

4.1 Skimming

Skimming is a technique of perspective and it is regarded as a process of reading. The reader who skims still has to relate what is given to what he already knows. The reader who skims is an expectant observer, operating at great speed with small quantities of vital information, particularly when the skimming process is concerned with specific information.

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4.2 Anticipation

Anticipation means that the reader's mind is ahead of his reading, preparing the way. He becomes actively engaged in predictive thinking, which enables him to prepare the ground and apply his own knowledge.

4.3 Organization

One familiar type of organization is Problem-Discussion-Conclusions. Here, the logical movement is so powerful that the organization of the material is usually internal. Another version of organization is that the act of investigating may start with Facts-Analysis-Statement of the Problem-Discussion-Conclusions. There is a fundamental psychological process by which meaning is discovered: ideas are grouped according to their affinities and characteristics; which makes it possible to see implications and arrive at new meanings (the discovery of language new functions in different linguistic forms). Additionally, there is another important component of organization which is usually referred to as Explaining. The author may describe characteristics, aspects, qualities (and this... and this). He may explain an operation, a process, or a procedure (do this... then this). He may narrate (and then... and then). He may give his reasons or unfold an argument (because of this... then this). On the whole, whatever the author's organization, there are always steps, stages, phases, aspects, areas, periods and divisions which represent the multiple parts of language functions.

4.4. Attitudes

Attitudes are determined by some significant parameters as judgement, bias and prejudice which are in their turn greatly influenced by the socio-cultural norms of the foreign language speech community. Indeed, reading a short story in the foreign language is not a process of cut-and-dried information: it is rather the agreement or disagreement (either cultural awareness or prejudices) of the points of view (cultural manifestations of an author or a reader or even an entire speech community). In fact, all judgement has a natural bias in the sense that it constitutes one's vision of life; however, if judgements are made without considering the facts, our thinking (or attitude towards the foreign language community) is prejudiced. Lastly, attitudes depend on the connection between the author's tone (persuasive quality of the text, attitude and personality) and the reader's attitudes; likewise, reading becomes a process of personal relationship.

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4.5 Memory

The process of reading short stories and grasping the foreign language speech functions depends to a large extent on and applies to memory. Indeed, there are some general principles that are related to the reader's memory:

- * Memory consists of three activities: learning, retaining, and recalling. The process is constituted of the assimilation of the information, retaining it once it has been assimilated, and being able to recollect it at will.
- * Memory depends on learning: this explains the connection between reading, learning and memory.
- * There is not one general memory, there are many specialized memories. The reader who is good at remembering some things (functions) may be bad at remembering others; the reason being that specialized interest produce particular storing systems (Ibidem).

Furthermore, the requirements of good memory are summarized as follows:

- * A motive and an interest;
- * An intention to remember;
- * Using one's existing knowledge;
- * The appropriate method of learning (selection, organization and constructive practice);
- * Adequate time;
- * The proper distribution of effort;
- * Over-learning (learning beyond what is necessary for retention in the short term).

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5. Communicative Classroom Activities through the Short Story

It is generally admitted that the appropriacy of the texts (short story) for a particular class remains a crucial factor in the success of the approach. Therefore, the language teacher should take into consideration some important features which should serve as significant criteria in the choice of the short story. Hence, texts (short stories) tend to be chosen in accordance with the following traits:

- * Not too long;
- * Not too complex linguistically;
- * Not too far removed from the world knowledge of the students;
- * Not too anachronistic (not anymore suitable because of the time factor);
- * Above all: the text has to have the capacity to engage the interest of the students.

As far as communicative classroom activities are concerned, it is beneficial to present Alan Maley's Model (2013: 184) which suggests a procedure that can be useful in the elaboration of various classroom activities with inciting and motivating tasks. Maley argues that the general heuristics that should be employed to generate activities are usually inclusive of the: What, How, Who, When/Where, Why Model. He states that for any text (short story) it is possible to examine the following:

- * What it contains: language features, information, emotions as well as what associations and personal feelings it arouses.
- * How it works: repetition, rhyme, rhythm, metaphor and parallelism.
- * Who wrote it and who it was addressed to.
- * When/Where it was written: background information on the socio-cultural and personal context against which it was written.
- * Why it was written: why certain choices were made (Why this word and not that? Why the omission of some information?)

On the whole, the framework of the different tasks follows a spectrum which is organized around certain types of questions which are orderly staged in the classroom as follows: Write before you read- Write after you read- Discuss after you read.

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6. The Organization of the Workshops

Participants: Second Year Master's Students.

Option: Applied Language Studies.

Population: 184 students.

Sample Study: we selected the first 24 volunteers who enrolled on a list of a total number of 86 students.

Time Allotment: 4 workshop sessions of 1 hour each.

Procedure: the organization of the workshops has obeyed to a precise procedure that can be described through the following parameters:

- * The experiment (workshop) is a literature-based skills course that has been elaborated to help readers (students) to improve their English skills by reading and analysing an outstanding short story.
- * The language of the short story can be easily understood by students.
- * The short story is divided into a number (4) of short sections to assist the reader in understanding the different parts of the story.
- * An outdoors pre-reading task introduces each section of the short story one (1) week before the programmed workshop.
- * The component parts or tasks: The Story and You, Learning about Literature, and Looking Ahead. These parts provide high interest material to motivate the learner to read the section that follows. This activity also offers important information about elements of literature.
- * Each part is followed by a comprehensive four parts skills-check that are constituted of a number of tasks which are distributed as follows:
 - Check your reading: multiple-choice questions review reading comprehension, vocabulary and idioms in the section of the short story.
 - Understanding the section: tasks use writing activities for mastery of reading comprehension, sentence structure, verbs, parts of speech, writing and punctuation.
 - Studying the section: post-reading tasks that provide opportunities for students to work together to improve their listening, speaking, and writing skills. An emphasis is also put on the different socio-cultural manifestations.

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- The vocabulary for each part of the short story is driven primarily from core word lists that are suitable to the Master students' level.
- Skills development is progressive, although it is possible to alter the practised sequence depending on students' needs, abilities and motivation.
- Thinking about Literature: literary elements explored include character, plot, setting, conflict and theme as well as genre such as folktale, science fiction, and autobiography.

7. Discussion and Interpretations

7.1 Analysis of Students' Online Interview

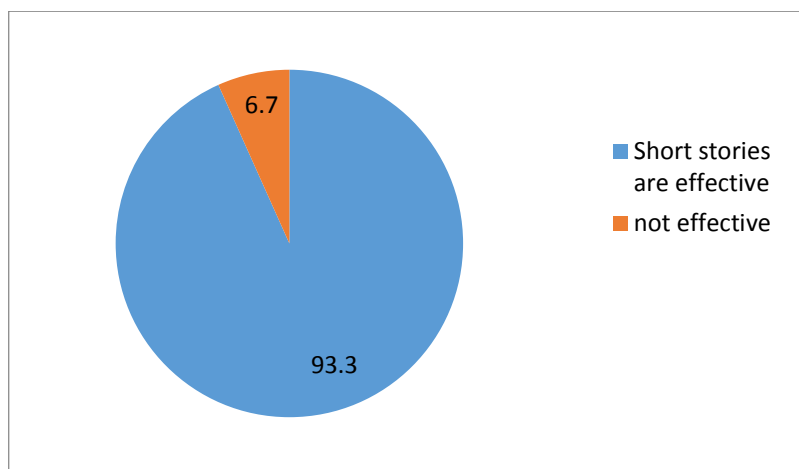
Question One: Do you think that short stories can be useful in an English language learning process? Whatever your answer, please justify it.

It is quite noticeable that the majority of students (93.3%) strongly believe that short stories constitute a very effective tool in the ELL process. Moreover, students have suggested numerous and various advantages which can be obtained from the utilization of short stories in the ELL operation, namely:

- * The exploration of the target culture;
- * The development of the FL vocabulary;
- * The discovery of different writing styles;
- * The increase of students' motivation;
- * The use of rich, creative and genuine material;
- * The improvement of students' oral skills through classroom activities that require 'reading loudly';
- * The access to multiple literary materials.

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Fig.1. The effectiveness of short stories

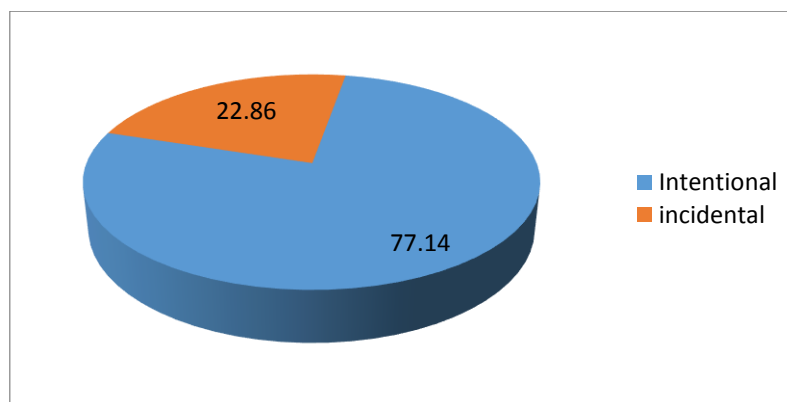


Question Two: Do you believe that short stories represent an intentional (designed or intended by teacher and/or students) or incidental (casual) tool of learning English?

The general observation that one can advance is that students are deeply convinced (77.14%) that short stories in the FLL operation can be both intentional and incidental. Indeed, short stories can alternatively or simultaneously constitute an academic or casual tool of foreign language acquisition. The argumentation which has been developed by the students is that short stories can reach the assigned objectives of the teaching process in an entertaining context. Furthermore, students think that it is equally possible to use short stories out of the classroom situation for the sole ‘enjoyment of reading’ in the English language.

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Fig.2. The type that short stories represent as a tool of learning English



Questions Three and Four: Have you ever read a short story in English? If your answer is positive, can you please indicate the nature of benefits you have probably drawn from your reading?

It is obvious that nearly all of the students at this advanced level (second year Master) (86.7%) have already read numerous short stories in English. Additionally, students have indicated that the benefits they have grasped are in the order of importance ranking from 1 to 4 as follows:

- * Better reading comprehension.
- * Vocabulary expansion.
- * Target culture awareness.
- * Increase motivation.

Question Five: What kind of short stories do you particularly appreciate?

It is interesting to have insights into the preferences and choices of the types of short stories which mostly attract and motivate the English language learners. In like manner, the FL teacher would select material that is highly appealing to the students and, therefore; positive incidence would be impacted on students' motivation and enjoyment. Within the same vein, the preferred types of short stories are respectively ranked as follows:

- * Social Issues (66.7%);
- * Science Fiction (43.3%);

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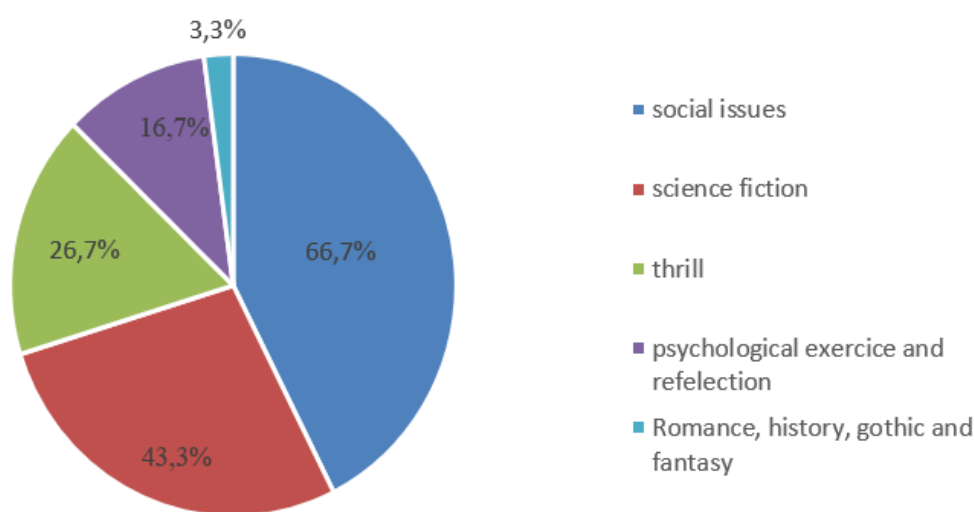
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* Thrill (26.7%);

* Psychological exercise and Reflection (16.7%).

However, there are a small number of other types which have been cited by students such as: Romance, History, Gothic and Fantasy that have obtained the score of (3.3%).

Fig.3. The type of short stories that students appreciate



Question Six: What kind of classroom activities (using short stories) do you prefer? Please classify them from the most to the least motivating activities (ranking from 1 to 6).

It is evident that the main objective of this question is to gather information that would eventually guide the FL teacher in his selection of the most motivating and enjoyable classroom activities through the use of short stories. The classification from the highest to the lowest (in terms of interest and pleasure) classroom tasks is displayed as follows:

- * Classroom discussion (in small groups).
- * Reading comprehension checks.
- * Literary initiation.

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- * Language focus tips.
- * Socio-cultural focus tips.
- * Writing comments.

Lastly, it is worth noticing in accordance with this ranking that students favour the speaking skill and they are less inclined to practise the writing skill.

Question Seven: If you think it is necessary to add any further comments, observations or suggestions, we will be very grateful and delighted to share them with you.

The most recurrent comments which have been advanced by the interviewees are summarized in the following tips:

- * Short stories are motivating, inspiring and useful in foreign language learning;
- * Not sufficiently used as classroom activities at university level;
- * The selection of the short stories should be left to the students for better enjoyment and encouragement. Free choice and sharing are advocated by students who seemingly (and perhaps subjectively) believe that the teacher's choice of certain short stories can be 'dull and worn';
- * Reading loudly parts of the short story in the classroom can improve the students' pronunciation and fluency under the supervision of the teacher;
- * The proposition that the reading skill should constitute an independent course in itself among the offerings of the programmes at least at the BA level.

8. Conclusion

In summary, the use of short stories in the FLL process opens new horizons for class participation either in the reading or acting (classroom discussion) tasks which can indeed be extended beyond the short story itself. Consequently, the students characterized are intended to be modern in their attitudes, adventurers and independent. This again allows of certain flexibility, and perhaps further enlargement of some of the themes treated in the short stories. On the whole, one can assure that the use of communicative classroom activities through short

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stories in a TEFL context is a dynamic process that higher students' motivation and, incidentally improve learners' foreign language proficiency.

9. General Recommendations

In line with the results which have been reached and in accordance with the students' opinions, some of the gains of this investigation can be put forward through the following recommendations:

- * Reading literature especially short stories in a foreign language learning situation promotes cultural understanding, enrichment and awareness.
- * Short stories as a teaching tool provide foreign language linguistic models, linguistic diversity and various expressive ranges.
- * Communicative classroom activities in relationship to short stories extend not only learners' linguistic competence but also communicative competence.
- * The use of short stories represents authenticity in terms of genuine teaching material instead of the usual linguistically contrived textbooks.
- * Short stories are characterized by being impeded and open to debate and interpretation, therefore, they can serve as a basis for classroom interaction in order to ameliorate students' speaking skill.
- * Short stories constitute a highly motivating material unlike the traditional and artificial teaching inputs because they deal with themes and issues which may be of a great interest to the English language learner.

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