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Using short Stories in Reading Skills Class

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Abstract

Using literature to teach language has several advantages such as contributing to a better linguistic understanding, a development of creative skills, an authentic model of language use with its rich potential (Ramsaran 1983; Collie & Slater, 1987). Short story seems to be the most suitable one since it is short, and aims at giving a 'single effect', there is usually one plot, a few characters; there is no detailed description of setting. Also, research on short stories in EFL classrooms state that they can be a good indicator of increased motivation, increased interest in reading and improved reading skills (Vural 2013; Saka, 2014; Pardede, 2011). This study aims to find out the thoughts and attitudes of the first year students in Bulent Ecevit University English Language and Literature Department towards the short stories covered in Reading Skills course in 2015- 2016 fall term. The data gathered via a questionnaire was analyzed using frequency tests. The results indicated that studying short stories has a number of benefits for the students such as broadening their perspectives, enabling them to think about the reasons rather than the result, showing them different life styles, providing them with a comparison between their own culture and other cultures, increasing their appreciation for literature and making them read more short stories.

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1. Introduction

Using literature to teach language has several advantages such as contributing to a better linguistic understanding, a development of creative skills, and a higher language proficiency, it also makes an important contribution to literary appreciation (Ramsaran, 1983). Integrating literature in EFL classes provides an authentic model of language use with its rich potential; by reading literary texts students face language written for native speakers and

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try to understand the texts. They also have to learn literary features such irony, exposition, climax, narration and so on (Collie & Slater, 1987). In this way, literature develops readers' language and literary awareness. It is very motivating and it provides them with an understanding of another culture (Lazar, 1993). Together with learning about the culture, students also learn about the past and present and about people's customs and traditions (Erkaya, 2005). As Collie and Slater state "a literary work can transcend both time and culture to speak directly to a reader in another country or a different period of history» (1987, p. 78). They also point out that literature "enables the learners to shift their attention beyond the more mechanical aspects of the foreign language system" (1987, p. 78). Literature may "serve as a médium to transmit the culture of the people who speak the language in which it is written" (Valdes, p. 137). The learner may find himself completely absorbed by the work and this will lead to a high motivation level making the activity memorable and enjoyable.

Literature can also be used to reinforce the language skills and complement language teaching (Erkaya, 2005). Literature promotes students' creativity by stimulating the imagination of students, develop their critical abilities and increase their emotional awareness (Lazar, 1993). Another aim of using literature in language teaching is to encourage students to read and experience it for their personal enrichment (Pieper, 2006). Since reading helps the second language learner acquire not only more vocabulary and more meanings and uses of the words already known (lexical competence), but it also contributes to develop syntactic knowledge whether it is taught or done for self-pleasure (Brumfit and Carter, 1986). It is through extensive reading, that learners acquire most of their vocabulary, and that instruction plays a rather insignificant role as the number of words learned is concerned (Krashen, 1989; Coady, 1997; Paribakht and Wesche, 1997). For Grabe and Stoller (1997), reading contributes greatly to vocabulary development and also to listening comprehension.

2. Short story

The research in the literature indicates the benefits of using literature in foreign language teaching, especially in improving reading skills. Saka (2014), in her descriptive study supporting Vural (2013)'s results, identified the ideas of 40 junior students of ELT department of Akdeniz University about the contributions of studying short stories. The results suggested that reading short story increased their wish to read more and appreciation for literature. Students reported that by reading good examples of literature they have become aware of the world of short stories. For example, Vural (2013) in his study with 34 students of prep classes of Two-Languages Department of Suleyman Demirel University, Almaty, Kazakhstan aimed to find out whether the use of literature in ELT at university level could increase motivation of the students and have a positive effect on reading and writing skills or not. He found that the use of literature in ELT classrooms may motivate students better than abridged and simplified reading passages in students' course books. The results suggested that literature can be used as a positive stimulation to motivate students, and a good means to improve reading and writing skills. The study also indicated that especially short stories are ideal literary means for classroom usage. Pardede's (2011) study at Christian University of Indonesia revealed that the majority of the students of English Teaching department basically found short stories interesting to use both as materials for self-enjoyment and as components of language skill classes.

The research on reading literature has suggested that it is positive in several ways. Firstly, it presents with authentic and varied language material, it also provides with contextualized communicative situations, real patterns of social interaction, and use of language (Collie and Slater, 1987), it highlights the central role of the learner in the learning process and stirs up interaction in the classroom, it motivates learners by allowing them to relate what is being read to their own experience since it calls on emotional responses (Collie and Slater, 1987), and it contributes largely to develop further reading skills like "deducing the meaning and use of unfamiliar lexical items", "understanding the communicative value (function) of sentences and utterances", "recognizing the script of a language", etc. (Grellet, 1981, p. 4-5). While reading literary texts, the interaction between the reader and the text is very important; personal interpretations and analysis of literature are based on not only the textual elements but also the readers' personal views, experiences and feelings; studying literature enables students to construct their own interpretation and reflection, according to their own experience, by thinking critically and comparing and contrasting two different cultures (Duff & Maley, 1990; cited in Khatib, 2011).

As the related research on using and reading literature in language classes, by reading literary texts students are motivated, become familiar with authentic materials, and learns about different cultures and the literary genres with

their specific features. Among the literary texts, short story seems to be the most appropriate for classroom usage. Short-story is defined by Poe as “a narrative that can be read at one sitting of from one-half hour to two hours (in Abrams, 1970, p. 158). Since it is short, and aims at giving a ‘single effect’, there is usually one plot, a few characters; there is no detailed description of setting. So, it is easy for the students to follow the story line of the work. Therefore, it seems to be the most suitable one to help students enhance the four skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing. The inclusion of short fiction in the ESL / EFL curriculum offers the following educational benefits as Arnoğul (2001) points out in his study: (p.11-18): It

- makes the students’ reading task easier due to being simple and short when compared with the other literary genres,
- enlarges the advanced level readers’ worldviews about different cultures and different groups of people,
- provides more creative, encrypt, challenging texts that require personal exploration supported with prior knowledge for advanced level readers,
- motivates learners to read due to being an authentic material,
- offers a world of wonders and a world of mystery,
- gives students the chance to use their creativity,
- promotes critical thinking skills
- facilitates teaching a foreign culture (i.e. serves as a valuable instrument in attaining cultural knowledge of the selected community,
- makes students feel themselves comfortable and free,
- helps students coming from various backgrounds to communicate with each other because of its universal language,
- helps students to go beyond the surface meaning and dive into underlying meanings, and
- acts as a perfect vehicle to help students understand the positions of themselves as well as the others by transferring these gained knowledge to their own world.

After reading a short story, having a class discussion using the following questions can activate students’ higher-order thinking skills which can make them critical thinkers and readers:

-“How would you change the plot?”

- “What would happen if . . .?”

-“What changes would you make to solve . . .?”

-“Do you agree with the actions . . .? With the outcomes . . .?”

-“Why did they (the character) choose . . .?”

-“What choice would you have made . . .?” (Bloom’s critical thinking questioning strategies)

3. The study

As the related research suggests (Collie and Slater, 1987; Grellet 1981; Khatib, 2011; Vural, 2013; Saka, 2014; Pardede, 2011), using literature in EFL classrooms, namely short stories can be a good indicator of increased motivation, increased interest in reading and improved reading skills. Therefore, this study aims to find out the thoughts and attitudes of the students in Bulent Ecevit University towards the short stories covered in “Reading Skills I” course in 2015- 2016 fall term. The participants are 40 first year students in English Language and Literature department taking the course obligatorily. Rather than a reading skills course book, fifteen short stories from the literature of various countries are covered such as *Overcoat* by Gogol, *Araby* by James Joyce and *The necklace* by Guy de Maupassant. The lessons took place every week for three hours; the story chosen for the week is presented by a group of students to give a brief analysis of the story. The lesson proceeded by a class discussion and a writing task based on the analytical questions asked by the teacher.

4. Results

Table 1. The results of frequency test analysis of the reading questionnaire

	Frequency					Mean	Std
	5	4	3	2	1		
How often do you read Turkish books?	35	21	38	3	3	3.82	1.058
How often do you read English books?	0	9	47	41	3	2.62	.697
Does studying short stories broaden your perspectives for the events you have never experienced before?	38	47	12	3	0	4.21	.770
Does studying short stories provide you with a better understanding for different behaviour?	47	38	15	0	0	4.32	.727
Does studying short stories provide you with a better understanding for different behaviour?	38	59	3	0	0	4.35	.544
Does studying short stories make you develop empathy with the people in different situations?	47	47	6	0	0	4.41	.609
Does studying short stories enable you to think about the reasons rather than the result?	27	35	35	3	0	3.85	.857
Does studying short stories show you different life styles?	62	34	3	3	0	4.53	.706
Does studying short stories increase your understanding about the personal relations?	41	44	9	6	0	4.21	.845
Does studying short stories provide you with a comparison between your own culture and other cultures?	41	44	15	0	0	4.26	.710
Does studying short stories teach you ethical and moral values of other cultures?	50	41	9	0	0	4.41	.657
Does studying short stories increase your wish to read short stories more?	27	41	27	6	0	3.88	.880
Does studying short stories increase your appreciation for literature?	32	50	18	0	0	4.15	.702
Does studying short stories make you more tolerant?	18	35	35	9	3	3.56	.991

A questionnaire on the benefits of short stories was conducted to the participants at the end of the 2015- 2016 fall term. The data was analyzed via SPSS, using frequency tests. As the results presented in Table 1 indicates, the students reported that studying short stories broadens their perspectives for the events they have never experienced before. They provide them with a better understanding for different behavior. Moreover, it helps them develop empathy with and a better understanding for the people in different situations and behaviors. As the results suggest, studying short stories enables them to think about the reasons rather than the result. They show them different life styles and provide them with a comparison between their own culture and other cultures while teaching them ethical and moral values of other culture and making them more tolerant. The results also demonstrate that short stories increase their understanding about the personal relations. The students reported that stories have increased their appreciation for literature, thus they wish to read more short stories.

The study has significant implications for foreign language teaching classroom. Firstly, this study also supports what Collie and Slater (1991) identified; integrating literature into classes provides an authentic model of language use with its rich potential. Thus, as Vural (2013) also suggests, literature can be used as a positive stimulation to motivate students, and short stories are ideal literary means for classroom usage. Secondly, rather than focusing on more mechanical aspects of the language as Collier and Slater (1991) suggest, the students absorb in the short story with a high motivation level; which turns the content to be covered into a meaningful, enjoyable and unforgettable memory. Stories such as “The necklace by Guy de Maupassant” and “The story of an hour by Kate Chopin” with very tragic and surprising ends capture the student interest making reading a valuable experience for them. Thirdly, EFL reading course books generally have limited information about the well- known traditions of a country or a culture and the daily lives of ordinary people. However, as Erkaya (2005) states, by studying literature, students learn about the past and present about people’s customs and traditions via stories together with learning about the culture.

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