

Creative methods to teaching modernist short stories

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Abstract

The article aims at highlighting a brief theoretical investigation into Modernist Short Stories, approached from a didactic point of view, as well as the three literature models proposed by Carter and Long (1991). Moreover, it also focuses on a variety of student-centred strategies, based on several modernist short stories written by Katherine Mansfield and D. H Lawrence, which aim to spark student’s critical thinking and develop learner’s communicative competence and creative writing. This array of enjoyable activities is particularly important when working with students who are not short story or literature specialists. Pair and group work are now well- established as a means both for increasing learners’ confidence within the foreign language, and also personalizing their contact with it. Additionally, sharing short stories with students is a spur to the learners’ understanding of other cultures, and it can create opportunities for personal expression as well as reinforce their knowledge of lexical and grammatical structure.

Keywords: modernism, brevity, critical thinking, competences, group-work

1. The three teaching models (Carter &Long,1991)

In recent years, the role of literature as a basic component and source of authentic texts of the language curriculum, rather than an ultimate aim of English instruction has been gaining momentum. Among language educators, there has been an intense debate as to how, when, where, and why literature should be incorporated in ESL/EFL curriculum. Vigorous discussions of how literature and ESL/EFL instruction can work together and interact for the benefit of students and teachers has led to the flourishing of interesting ideas, learning and improved instruction for all. Therefore, I believe that successful teaching relies on searching for ways to make the learning

process easier and more enjoyable, hence methods used in this process need to be constantly re-evaluated.

Having decided that integrating literature into the EFL classroom is beneficial to the learner's development, then, we need to select approaches that best serve the needs of EFL learners. Thus, the three models proposed by Carter and Long (1991) will be presented and analyzed: the Cultural Model refers to the traditional approach to teaching literature and it requires learners to explore and interpret the social, literary and historical context of a specific text. By using such a model, teachers encourage learners to understand different cultures and ideologies in relation to their own; the Language Model or the language –based approach (Carter & Long, 1991) differs from the previous one, in terms of their focus on the text. Such an approach enables learners to access a text in a systematic and methodical way in order to exemplify specific linguistic features, for example literal and figurative language, direct and indirect speech. The drawback of this model is that it takes “a reductive approach to literature” (Carter & McRae, 1996:23) and the activities proposed for implementation are “disconnected from the literary goals of the specific text “ (ibid.) and as Carter points out there is little engagement of the learner with the text other than for purely linguistic practice.

Another model which constitutes an example of good pedagogical practice is the Personal Growth Model which attempts to bridge the cultural model and the language model, by focusing on the particular use of language in a text, as well as, placing it in a specific cultural context. Moreover, it emphasizes the interaction of the reader with the text: “Text itself has no meaning, it only provides direction for the reader to construct meaning from the reader's own experience” (ibid.). Thus, learning is said to take place when readers are able to interpret text and construct meaning based on their own experience.

The revision of various models of teaching literature should lead us to a particular genre to be taught in the classroom. Therefore, a teacher of English should consider some important aspects before making choices related to texts. First of all, depending on each particular group of students, in our case- advanced classes-, there must be some special incentives involved:

” Enjoyment, suspense, a fresh insight into issues which are felt to be close to the heart of people's concerns; the delight of encountering one's own thoughts or situations encapsulated vividly in a work of art “ (J. Collie & Slater, 1987:7). All of these incentives may help learners to overcome the

linguistic obstacles that might be considered too great in less involving material. Moreover, there is no doubt that sheer length of some works is daunting, and for this reason, I consider that Modernist Short Stories are often an ideal way of introducing students to literature in the ESL/EFL Classroom. Their brevity means that they can usually be read entirely within one or two class lessons. They also offer great variety than longer texts and they usually encapsulate experience with a masterly economy of language and imagery. From my point of view, short stories offer a world of wonders and of mystery which awaits to be discovered and questioned. In the ESL classroom, they definitely represent an invaluable source of motivating material and a bridge to provide access to cultural background.

Once the literary genre has been chosen, how best can the teacher and students work with it? It is well-known that the approach employed by the teacher should enable language acquisition, therefore, our paper will present a variety of student-centred strategies, based on several modernist short stories written by Katherine Mansfield and D. H Lawrence.

2. Strategies for developing competences through Modernist Short Stories: (Katherine Mansfield and D.H. Lawrence's Modernist Short Stories)

Literary texts can be very useful in order to motivate students to develop skills such as reading, writing or speaking. Before tackling a literary text, we should, as EFL teachers, prepare activities that will help students advance their level in these skills. In order to develop various skills, I have chosen D.H Lawrence and K. Mansfield's modernist short stories to exemplify the use of different teaching techniques. Due to their practical length, these stories can be entirely read within one or two classes. They also offer great variety than longer texts and they are extremely compressed and as Dominic Head points out " they encapsulate experience with a masterly economy of language and imagery" (Head,1991:1), and that enhances the development of cognitive analytical abilities by bringing the whole self to bear on a compressed account of a situation in a single place and moment.

K. Mansfield and D.H Lawrence's short stories will benefit the students on various levels. On a personal level, these stories ("Miss Brill", "The Garden Party", "The Odour of

Chrysanthemums”) focus on the analysis of personality, self-reflection and may help students reflect upon existential matters such as love, death, alienation, loneliness and adopt various critical views. Moreover, it is the “incompleteness” (Head, 1992:7) of these stories, that raises questions, doubts, ambiguities: “More is suggested in a short story than it ever tells us “ (Head,1992:7). Thus, the concentration on plot and event is replaced by suggestion and details that need to be pieced together by the students.

Another trait of the modernist short story is ambiguity. Thus, the students’ imagination is always creatively engaged, and it is ambiguity which usually triggers more questions than it answers. The mystery employed by both authors is a great source for the teacher, when it comes to activities which rely on critical thinking, group discussions and debates. Therefore, it is the teacher’s duty to guide students on this journey and enable them to explore new ideas: “The students are invited to see the universe in a grain, of sand, and when they look at the grain of sand, they must be helped to see the universe within it, and respond to it on an emotional level” (J Collie and Slater,1987:6).

There is no doubt that language enrichment is another benefit sought through the teaching of these short stories. Although different in style, both modernist writers provide a rich context in which individual, lexical or syntactical items are made more memorable. The symbols employed by Lawrence and Mansfield alter the experience of the text and push students to transcend their own boundaries. Additionally, students gain familiarity with many features of the written language which may broaden and enrich their own writing. The reality described in these stories is enhanced by the use of dense, poetic descriptions that “bombard the reader” (ibd.) and create an intense aesthetic experience (Head, 1992:7).

On a productive level, students will hopefully become more creative and adventurous as they begin to appreciate the richness and variety of the language they are trying to master and begin to use that potential themselves.

2.1 Developing communicative competences and critical thinking through Modernist Short Stories

●Activity: **Just a minute**

Short stories: “The Odour of the Chrysanthemums” (by D.H Lawrence)/”Miss Brill” and “The Garden Party” (by K. Mansfield)

Interaction: Group work (Ss- Ss)

Level: Pre-intermediate/Advanced (B2-C1)

Time:10 min.

This activity can be used as revision work in class. The class is divided into teams of four or five. Each student talks about the story so far for a maximum of 15 seconds, at which point the teacher rings the bell. The next person in that team must take over at this point, and so on, until a minute has elapsed. The team then gains four points. If one member of the team stops before 15 seconds then the other team takes over. Repetition is not counted as a reason for losing the subject, nor is hesitation up to a maximum of three seconds. Deviation from the subject, however, is, and if another team spots it, they can claim the subject, with the teacher’s approval.

The teacher can change the subject whenever necessary from say “story”, “symbolism” or “character” etc.

The activity makes an excellent revision session for 10-15 minutes and works best when the rules and rhythm of this game are well established (Collie and S. Slater,1978:26).

●Activity: **Choosing an interpretation**

Short Stories: "Love among Haystacks" (by D.H Lawrence)/"Miss Brill" and "The Garden Party" (by K. Mansfield)

Interaction: Pair/Group work (Ss- Ss)

Level: Pre-Intermediate/Advanced (B2-C1)

Time:10 min.

After students have read the short story "the Garden Party" by K. Mansfield, they are given a series of different interpretations of events in the passage they are reading. They are asked to choose the one nearest to their own ideas, or write their own interpretation, selecting if they wish elements from those given (Collie and S. Slater,1987:25).

"Laurie put his arm round her shoulder. "Don't cry," he said in his warm, loving voice.

"Was it awful?"

"No," sobbed Laura. "It was simply marvellous. But Laurie looked at her brother. "Isn't life," she stammered, "isn't life explain. No matter. He quite understood. *Isn't it*, darling?" said Laurie." (The Garden Party", K. Mansfield)

- a) She realizes that death is a normal part of our lives.
- b) She is elated to find out that her neighbour will go to a happier place.
- c) Laura considers that death is related to a divine punishment.



●Activity: **The Six Thinking Hats**

Short stories: "Miss Brill" and "The Garden Party" (by K. Mansfield)

Interaction: Group work (Ss- Ss)

Level: Advanced (C1,2)

Time:10 min.

De Bono's Six Thinking Hats offer us a simple yet powerful alternative to discussion. Through this method, we can investigate the facts, the feelings, the pros and cons and creative solutions we can come up with.

The principle behind the "Six Thinking Hats" is parallel thinking which ensures that all the students in the classroom are focused on and thinking about the subject at the same time. The Six Thinking Hats represent several aspects of our students' thinking. When students wear a specific hat, the rule is to stick to the kind of thinking it represents. When students want to switch to a different style of thinking, they need to switch to a different style of thinking, they need to switch hats as well. The colors of the hats are white, red, black, yellow, green and blue. The colours are associated with certain situations and feelings.

For example (questions to be analyzed):

Why does Miss Brill see world as a play?" ("Miss Brill", 1920)

After Laura sees the dead neighbor she says about this experience " It was simply marvelous."

("The Garden Party", 1922). What does Laura mean by that?

White hat: Students focus their thoughts on information- the facts and figures. What info is available? How do we get it?

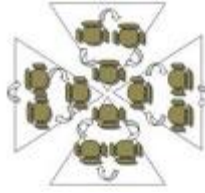
Red hat: Unlimited use of feelings, intuition and emotions which do not have to be justified

Black hat: Warning! Difficulties, dangers and problems. What can go wrong? And does this comply with our knowledge and experience?

Yellow hat: Focus the thinking on benefits, values and attainability. Focus on the positive side.

Green hat: Conscious creative effort. Generating ideas looking for alternatives. Solving problems.

Blue hat. Defining the topic, giving the summaries, making decisions and drawing conclusions.



●Activity: **Pinwheel discussion**

Short stories: "Miss Brill" and "The Garden Party" (by K. Mansfield)

Interaction: Group work (Ss- Ss)

Level: Intermediate/Advanced (B1-C2)

Time:10 min.

Students are divided into 4 groups. Three of these groups are assigned to represent specific points of view. Members of the fourth group are designated as "provocateurs," tasked with making sure the discussion keeps going and stays challenging. One person from each group (the "speaker") sits in a desk facing speakers from the other groups, so they form a square in the center of the room. Behind each speaker, the remaining group members are seated: two right behind the speaker, then three behind them, and so on, forming a kind of triangle. From above, this would look like a pinwheel. The four speakers introduce and discuss questions they prepared ahead of time (this preparation is done with their groups). After some time passes, new students rotate from the seats behind the speaker into the center seats and continue the conversation.

2.2 Developing writing skills: creative writing

Activity: Adapting the literary work for another audience

Short stories: “The Odour of the Chrysanthemums”/”Miss Brill” and “The Garden Party” (by K. Mansfield)

Interaction: Pair/Group work (Ss- Ss)

Level: Intermediate/Advanced (B2-C1)

Time:15min.

The activity involves rewriting the literary work for a different audience; for example, for a child, an elementary learner, a horror movie director.

A prompt is often useful to start the activity. For example, a group of students asked to retell “Miss Brill” as a fairy story for children, can be given the following beginning.

“Once upon a time there was a wicked old woman. Her name was Miss Brill. She was so lonely that she had to go to the.....”(Collie and S. Slater,1987:30).

●Activity: Retrospective writing

Short stories: “The Odour of the Chrysanthemums”/”Love among Haystacks” (by D.H Lawrence)/”Miss Brill” and “The Garden Party” (by K. Mansfield)

Interaction: Pair/Group work (Ss- Ss)

Level: Advanced (B2-C1)

Time:10 min.

Students in small groups, are asked to reconstruct, from details given in the first pages, events which happened just before the opening of the novel. This is a planning session which will lead to students individually writing the last few paragraphs of the imaginary chapter which would precede the opening section of the “The Garden Party”:

”And after all the weather was ideal. They could not have had a more perfect day for a garden-party if they had ordered it.” *The Garden Party* (1922), K. Mansfield

●Activity: Creative conversation writing

Short story: “The Odour of the Chrysanthemums”/”Love among Haystacks” (by D.H Lawrence)/”Miss Brill” and “The Garden Party” (by K. Mansfield)

Interaction: Group work (Ss- Ss)

Level: Advanced (B2-C1)

Time:10 min.

Writing dialogues is a good way for students to explore their view of a character or fictional situation. The exchanges are kept simple so that they remain effective even if learners have not yet achieved perfect control of the target language. One popular way of creating dialogues is to have them written in the round as follows. The teacher having set the scene, each student writes the first utterance, imagining that they are character A. They then pass their slip of paper to their right-hand neighbor. Everyone now reads the utterance they have received, and, imagining they are now character B, write a reply to it on the paper back to their left-hand neighbor, that is, the learner who originally wrote the first exchange. Each student is now character A once again, and replies to character B’s part of the dialogue. At the end of the activity, each learner will have helped build up two dialogues, one in which they have consistently been character A, the other in which they have consistently been character B. This technique often makes dialogue writing more enjoyable because it contains an element of surprise: each learner must react to the part of the conversation written by another student (Collie and S. Slater 1978:37).

Conclusions

Teaching literature to students constitutes an enormous challenge nowadays, as well as encouraging students to think creatively and independently. In order to determine which strategies to employ in the literature classroom, teachers should be aware of previous approaches. The history of language teaching with its diverse teaching methods, shows a constant search for effective and efficient ways of teaching languages, together with its principles, which still influence our teaching activity. However, we are interested in the way literature approaches have been tackled, so Carter and Long's models (1991:2) on the use of literature represent another point of focus in our current paper. The first model under discussion is the Cultural Model which represents the possibility literature brings into the picture as regards the understanding and appreciation of different cultures and ideologies, together with the developing of one's perception of feelings and artistic forms. The Language Model, mainly considers literature to be aimed at language development and awareness. In other words, it defends that the aesthetic aspect of literature is achieved only through the linguistic and discorsal quality of literature (Lazar, 1993). No attention is given to the literary quality of the texts. Nonetheless, special attention should be paid not to let the linguistic features vitiate the pleasure of reading literature (Lazar, 1993:5). The last model, Literature as Personal Growth or Enrichment gives priority to personal experience as a means to

engage students in the literary works. Learners' interaction with literary texts is intended to enhance their personal development and language awareness (Carter & Long, 1991,2). Here the learners are not to identify and learn the new words or exclusively work out on the linguistic features, but appreciate the literary experience which is associated with the learners' own real-life experience.

In order to create associations with the literary texts, the literary genre chosen to be studied in the classroom is of great importance. Modernist Short Stories written by D.H Lawrence and Katherine Mansfield display intricate networks of symbolism that alter the reader's experience of the text. The concentration on plot and event is replaced by suggestion and minute detail that need to be pieced together by the reader. Instead of the text as a product that can be consumed, the reader encounters the symbolist theory as a process that requires decoding. The central preoccupation of these authors is to survey the human souls through epiphanies which give rise to different interpretations. Additionally, creating new interpretations and dialogues between the reader and the text through challenging methods are among the main aims of this article. Therefore, several methods which play emphasis on peer-interaction, thinking skills and boost students' creativity have been adapted to short stories written by K. Mansfield and D.H Lawrence. Critical thinking activities imply higher-order skills which challenge students to think independently and adopt different views. In addition, writing activities focus on students' imagination and aim to enhance writing abilities by peer or group interaction. Finally, communicative strategies enable students to practice oral skills in an engaging and enjoyable way, while emphasis is placed on content and fluency, not accuracy.

All these activities create a shift from the traditional teaching of the past century. Thus, they do not only improve the students' language skills, but they also operate on a personal level through rich input which will enhance their motivation and will keep them engaged.

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