

ELT



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info.eltireland@gmail.com @ELTIreland

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Why and How to Use Short Fiction in the ESL Classroom

By Amanda McGreer (Teacher, SEDA College)

As a BA in English Literature graduate who went on to become an ESL Teacher, I consider my relationship with the English language to be divided into two worlds. One, my love for fictional narrative and the analysis of it. The other, the grammar rules and facilitating the development of a student's productive and receptive skills. While I have an appreciation for these two individual worlds as one that defines my university years and one that represents what I've done since, I've been working on a way to unify them.

When you ask an ESL student - "What do you think is the best way to improve your reading skill?", they will respond with "Oh, I need to read more.". This consistent awareness exists, but students often fall at the first hurdle, which is knowing where to start. As teachers and learners, we are gifted with literature. A world that was not made for English language learning, but can be utilised in numerous ways. However, we can still fall at that first hurdle - where to start? The world of literature is huge. In my experience of uniting literature with language learning, I have found that short fiction prevails. This article will outline why we should use short fiction in our ESL classrooms, how to choose, adapt and appreciate the genre in our lessons and give an insight into my experience of doing so to date.

Why short fiction?

The short story, as described by William B. Warde is often considered a "*literary stepchild*" (Warde, 155). When we walk into a bookstore, we see shelves and tables laced with novels. The movies we watch often originate from novels. The famous writers we know and love are famous because of the novels they have written. Putting the fact we're language teachers aside, even as readers, we often fail to consider the short story as a respected literary form. The American fiction writer, Lorrie Moore, said "*the short story is a love affair, a novel is a marriage. A short story is a photograph, a novel is a movie.*". Now, think of our students. Think of those who walk into a bookstore, determined to improve their reading skill and read their first book in English. They are greeted by the intimidating commitment of a "marriage" and the length of a "movie.". Some students immediately turn on their heel and tell themselves they'll read something online instead. Some students aren't afraid of the initial commitment, their determination brings them to the checkout with their choice.

“What do you think is the best way to improve your reading skill?”, they will respond with “Oh, I need to read more.”

However, half a chapter in, with its complicated vocabulary and overwhelming thickness of the book itself, often means the book is left dog-eared and unfinished. As teachers, we should take it upon ourselves to provide our students with the excitement and temporary nature of the "love affair" and use the "photograph" to prevent that feeling of dejection when they realise the book is just too long.

How do I choose a short story?

The most important thing to consider when selecting a short story to use with students is context. Context occupies a variety of forms - you must consider the context of your students in terms of age, language level and country, the context of the author and the context of the story. In my experience so far, I have worked predominantly with Level B1 (Intermediate) and above adults. I've worked with solely French speaking students in Paris and more recently with Non-European students in Ireland, who come from a variety of language backgrounds such as Portuguese, Spanish, Chinese and Japanese, to name only a few.

My consideration of the context of the author has varied while working in these two different environments. I found that my French students had a huge appreciation for the likes of Edgar Allen Poe, Ernest Hemingway and Virginia Woolf. Understandable when you consider all these writers spent time in Paris and the students grew up reading French translations of their work. Thus, having the opportunity to read the texts in the original language they were written in was a huge milestone for the students that brought immense satisfaction.

As I've worked with my Non-European students in Ireland, I've found that they tend to appreciate Irish writers a little more than my French ones did. The short fiction of writers like James Joyce and Oscar Wilde become a part of their own experience in Ireland and satisfaction comes from reading the work of the statues they pass in Dublin City Centre. In addition, I've found that they have a great appreciation for the authors whose works went on to become movies and tv shows they enjoy. An example of this is taking their childhood memories of watching "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" and "Matilda" and showing them the adult short fiction of Roald Dahl. Similarly, the horror and suspense short fiction of Stephen King has proved successful with the lovers of movies like "IT" and "The Shining".

Taking the context of the author into consideration when selecting a short story is also important when we go on and create an entire lesson on a piece of short fiction. You will read more about this lesson-creation process later but providing

your students with information about the author's life, their potential reasons for writing the story and the author's relationship with the country they're studying in, provides them with that extra motivation to read the story and that push to understand what it means.

Once the context of the students brings you to choosing an author, the next step is to choose a story. The first characteristic I tend to look for is length. Remembering that the reason for choosing short fiction over novels in the first place is to prevent the student feeling intimidated by the length of the story. My general rule of thumb is no longer than ten pages. Then, I turn to subject matter and this often filters back into a consideration of student context. I try to choose a story that relates to their interests and is culturally significant to them whether it be their own culture or the culture of the country they're studying in. Authors often have a large body of work to sieve through, so it will take some extra reading on the teacher's part, but in my view, there are worse ways to spend your lesson preparation time.

How do I adapt a short story and make a lesson out of it?

The simple answer to the question "How do I adapt a short story?" is don't. By eliminating paragraphs or changing vocabulary with the intention of making the text more accessible for learners, the ultimate goal of "satisfaction" from reading short fiction is prevented. Aside from the vocabulary development and reading skill practice that comes with reading a short story, the most important thing is allowing the student to feel the satisfaction of reading an authentic piece of literature that is no different to the versions read by native speakers. Depending on the author and literary period, some of the language may be inaccessible even for the most avid readers. Adding some footnoted explanations for exceptionally difficult vocabulary will prevent your lesson from becoming entirely vocabulary based and the footnotes will likely help you out when you're asked to explain words like "cruiskeen" (A small pitcher or jug for holding liquor) and "crubeen" (A pig's foot that has been cooked) when working with the likes of Joyce.

Once the short story has been chosen, a lesson is made using three stages - before reading, during reading and after reading.

Before reading the story, some attention should be given to the author. Whether the story was chosen because of the author or not, an exploration into who wrote it and why it was written can be both beneficial and interesting. Placing the story on the timeline of an author's life will allow the students to appreciate it for its origin while generating some predictions about its content. Speaking of predictions, one of the first things that should be examined is the story's title. Take the title as an opportunity to explore any pre-existing understandings of the words and as guidance for the direction the story is about to take.

Furthermore, take the "before reading" stage of the lesson as an opportunity to explore some elements of literary theory. One of the most compelling theories in short fiction is known as the "Iceberg Theory" or the "Theory of Omission". Ernest Hemingway describes this theory in his 1932 nonfiction book *Death in the Afternoon*,: "If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water."

The visual aid of an iceberg, with the majority of the structure below the surface of the water, will prepare the student for the complexities involved in understanding the true meaning of the story when only the iceberg's tip is exposed and can also become an interesting "after reading" small group work activity. I've witnessed that this specific element of using the literary theory of short fiction strongly appeals to those who have an interest in reading and literary theory in their own language. This element also contributes new layers to the goal of "satisfaction", where a learner will revel in not only successfully making their way through a story but applying literary theory to it.

For the "during reading" stage of the lesson, focus is placed on some questions to consider about the text. These questions, created by the teacher with the directions they wish their lesson to take in mind, should orientate around language analysis, both linguistic and literary. The short story and its questions can be used to correspond to grammar concepts that have been taught recently, where students read to identify the use of the structures they have been exposed to. Additionally, use the story as a means to facilitate vocabulary development and explore the ways certain words are used in contrast to how the students already understand them.

Before reading:

About the author:

Elizabeth Bowen (June 1899 - February 1973) was an Anglo-Irish writer famous for some of the best fiction about life in wartime London. Bowen was inspired to write "The Demon Lover" during World War II, after experiencing the Blitz of London by the Germans during 1940-41. While remembering the damage of World War I, people in London were overwhelmed by the events of World War II. Bowen's story represents the idea of "war on top of war" that existed in post-Blitz London. Bowen's wartime experiences had a significant influence on her work, where the work often focuses on the effects of war on the individual.

Context of the story:

From September 1940 to May 1941, the German air force launched a series of bombing raids to destroy London and force Great Britain to surrender. Many families evacuated the city and moved to country villages and towns.

After reading:

1. What did you think of the title when you first saw it?
2. How does the title influence your understanding of the story?
3. Is it a good title for the story?
4. What mood or atmosphere do the first two paragraphs of the story create? What words or phrases create this mood?
5. What are the strongest/most detailed images for you? What language creates these images?
6. What is Mrs. Drover's personality like?
7. What words or sentences allow you to understand the context of the story?
8. Do you think the ending of the story is unpredictable?

Sample Reading Activities

Pic by Author

The addition of some comprehension questions prevent students from missing the overall meaning and will guide them to the areas of the text that require specific focus and interpretation. The questions to be considered while reading should also focus on the more literary elements of the story such as image creation, the emotions that are evoked and the response to characters. Creating a mental picture of the world in which the story is set, submitting to the emotions the author wished to be felt and developing relationships with the characters are vital elements that achieve the overall understanding of the text.

"It's important to give the students the space to engage with each other and share their opinions about what happened..."

The first thing that should be done in the "after reading" stage of the lesson is the return to the short story's title - Were the predictions correct? If they were, you have a group of lucky guessers. If they weren't, you know that they have read with the curiosity of "Am I right?" in mind.

It's important to not let this stage of the lesson be dominated by the correction of the grammar, vocabulary and comprehension questions. The "after reading" stage is an opportunity for the teacher to investigate and confirm if the goal of "satisfaction" has been achieved. It's important to give the students the space to engage with each other and share their opinions about what happened, how it ended, the characters and what they liked and disliked about the narrative. If the group seemed keen in the "before reading" stage, return to the "Iceberg Theory". Ask them to label a picture of an iceberg with what was omitted from the story and what was given. The level of engagement with these simple questions will reveal their satisfaction and sense of achievement - mission accomplished! The next time they walk into a bookstore with their determination and ambition to read in English, they may head straight towards the "Short Story Collection" section.

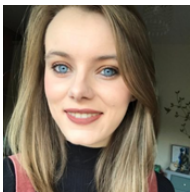
As teachers, we have the responsibility to share everything we enjoy about the English language with our learners. The world of literature can be overwhelming for our students, but it can also carry the "where do I start?" question for using it in our classrooms. I hope that this article has inspired you to open your mind to the power of short fiction and that you use my guidelines as a means of appreciating the genre in your ESL classroom.

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Amanda McGeer is a UCD BA English graduate from Wicklow. She is currently teaching at SEDA College Dublin.

amcgeer1@gmail.com.

@AmandaMcG96

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