



Short Story Based Language Teaching (SSBLT): A literature-based Language Teaching Method

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Abstract

Notwithstanding the past belief, recently there have been some attempts by scholars who encourage the incorporation of literature in language classes. In other words, literature has been discovered as a valuable and interesting material for improving students' language ability. There exists a variety of language teaching methods that all receive conspicuous criticisms by scholars- though there are still at work- but there is not yet a language teaching method solely based on literature as the authentic material. The purpose of this paper is two-fold: first, it accentuates the importance and benefits of using literature- short story in particular- in language teaching and second, considering the importance of continuous progress and innovation in language teaching methods on one hand and the advantages of using short stories in language classes, a new language teaching method as Short Story based Language Teaching (SSBLT) is introduced here. SSBLT is a humanistic literature-based language teaching method that aims to promote the learners' personal, cultural and linguistic awareness. Its main purpose is to help learners to learn language by enjoying and help them use language for communication through using short stories as the materials in a friendly atmosphere. It is particularly designed to develop communicative competence and critical thinking. In the end, the paper discusses the teaching procedures and advantages of SSBLT.

Keyword: Short Story Based Language Teaching (SSBLT); Literature-Based Method; Communicative Competence; Critical Thinking

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Introduction

The history of foreign language teaching witnesses a variety of methods proposed and practiced for a long time. Over the entire century of language teaching, a number of language teaching methods and approaches ranging from the grammar translation method, audio-lingual method to communicative language teaching have been experienced. Each new method has been introduced to overcome the shortcomings of the previous methods. While some have gained worldwide recognition, some faded away soon after they were created. In other words, there is a swing

of pendulum in the methods proposed. In the same line, Candlin and Mercer (2001) go through different language teaching methods introduced, their characteristics and criticisms against them and how some underpinning aims of methods have been revived after a while [1].

The literature reports great oppositions against methods and the concept of method itself. For instance, Allwright (1991) reports "the death of the methods" as they did not bring fruitful results [2]. Kumaravadivelu (2003) also criticizes the concept of method for three reasons [3]: a. "methods are based on idealized concepts geared toward idealized contexts; b. "methods tend to widely drift from one theoretical extreme to the other; c. the

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concept of method “is too inadequate and too limited to satisfactorily explain the complexity of language teaching operations around the world”. He also quotes some dissatisfactions with the concept of method as Clarke (1983) states “the term method is a label without substance” and in Pennycook’s (1989) words, method has “diminished rather than enhanced our understanding of language teaching”. Having noticed the shortcomings of each method, some scholars advocate an eclectic approach to language teaching. For example, Prabhu (1990) claims in his seminal paper that “There is no best method”. But eclectic approach is also criticized for its lack of principles [4]. For instance, Stern (2001) states “There is no agreement as to what the different methods precisely stand for, nor how they could be satisfactorily combined” [5]. Although there exists a variety of methods and there is not a general consensus on which method is the best one and even there are reservations against methods and the concept of method itself, these methods are still alive and at work in various parts of the world. The purpose of this paper is two-fold: first, it accentuates the importance and benefits of using literature-short story in particular- in language teaching and second, it introduces a new method in language teaching as Short Story based Language Teaching (SSBLT) that is a literature-based language teaching method. Finally, the aims, procedures and advantages of this new method are discussed.

The benefits of using literature in language teaching

There has been a great debate on the use of literature in language teaching classes. Some such as the proponents of audio-lingual method and communicative approaches reject the use of literature in language classes due to unrealistic nature of literary text. On the other hand, some such as Grammar Translation Method considers literature as an ultimate aim of English instruction. But 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. Numerous studies have discussed the benefits of using literature in language classes. For example, Maley lists some reasons including universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power and ambiguity for using literature in the language classroom [6]. Parkinson and Reid Thomas state that literature should be used in language classes because they provide cultural enrichment, linguistic model, mental training, extension of linguistic competence, authenticity, memorability and they are rhythmic

resource and motivating convenient material that are open to interpretation [7].

Literature can provide the most authentic materials for language teaching and learning. In Hismanoglu’s (2005) words, literary texts are primarily written for native speakers, they are not written for pedagogical purposes [6]. Sell (2005) criticizes standard FL textbooks for abnormal and non-authentic language [7]. She also mentions that textbook topics are inappropriate to the foreign language learners. They rarely address the real issues that learners face in real-life. Textbooks are full of fiction and unreal materials. Besides, as McKay (2001) argues, literary texts can be ideal for all the four language skills [8]. In reading comprehension tasks literary texts can stimulate interest and closer reading of the texts, as well as integrating the four skills during reading practice. Literature also provides learners with hefty valuable cultural information. As Sell (2005) mentions “Teaching literature provides learners with a truly cultural competence, equipping them with culturally-apposite pragmatic and socio-psychological components around which to build effective identities which will enable their socialization in the target culture and enhance the effectiveness with which they participate in that culture” [7]. Regarding appropriateness for classroom discussion, literary texts are often rich and have multiple layers of meaning, and can be effectively mined for discussions [9].

Advantages of using short stories in language classes

Various advantages have also been proposed for the use of short stories in the language classes. Short story like other literary texts can raise cultural awareness, linguistic awareness, motivation, and etc. Short stories are claimed to improve all four skills. Murdoch (2002) states that “short stories can, if selected and exploited appropriately, provide quality text content which will greatly enhance ELT courses for learners at intermediate levels of proficiency” [10]. Erkaya (2005) also believes that reading literary text can lead learners to be critical thinkers [11]. Arigol believes that short stories can have the following pedagogical advantages [6]:

- a) making the students’ reading task easier because they are simple and short;
- b) giving learners a better view of other cultures;
- c) requiring more attention and analysis;
- d) presenting a fictional and interesting world;
- e) helping students to be more creative and raising the critical thinking skills;
- f) raising cultural awareness;
- g) reducing students anxiety and helping them feel more relax; and

h) providing multicultural contexts because of its universal language.

Short Story based Language Teaching (SSBLT)

Considering the importance of continuous progress and innovation in language teaching methods on one hand and the advantages of using short stories in language classes, a new language teaching method as Short Story based Language Teaching (SSBLT) is introduced here. Story based Language Teaching (SSBLT) is a humanistic literature-based language teaching method that aims to promote the learners' personal, cultural and linguistic awareness. The main purpose of SSBLT is to help learners to learn language by enjoying and using language for communication through using short stories as the materials in a friendly atmosphere. It develops the learners' communicative competence and critical thinking. SSBLT aims at cultivating all language skills cooperatively.

Characteristics of Short Story based Language Teaching (SSBLT)

- 1) The primary function of language is interaction and communication.
- 2) SSBLT is based on humanism and cooperative learning.
- 3) Personal, cultural and linguistic awareness should be developed.
- 4) Short stories are used as learning and teaching materials.
- 5) Linguistics, sociolinguistic and communicative competence are emphasized.
- 6) All four language skills receive attention and are practiced integratively.
- 7) The student's native language should be avoided in the classroom but can be used to talk about the procedure and cultural points.
- 8) All of the class activities should be done in a stress-free friendly environment.
- 9) Vocabulary is taught in the context of the short story.
- 10) Grammar is taught based on focus on form.
- 11) All types of interaction: Teacher-student, student-teacher and student-student interaction exist.
- 12) One of the main purposes of SSBLT is to help learners to be critical thinkers.

Teaching Procedures of Short Story based Language Teaching (SSBLT)

The language class based on SSBLT goes through the following steps:

1. Pre reading activities:

- a. The teacher explains the procedures to the students in their native language and tells them that they are going to learn language by reading short stories and enjoying. The teacher identifies

linguistic objectives, for example, what vocabulary and sentence structures wants students to learn for sound, word and sentence levels.

- b. The teacher provides a context for the story and presents the main characters. S/he asks them some questions about the short story content to make their schemata activated. Therefore, students will link their own experiences with those in the story.
- c. The teacher shows the students the cover of the short story and they talk about what they see (title, pictures, etc.).

2. While reading activities:

- a. The teacher reads the story slowly and clearly, making use of gestures; facial expressions and intonation that could help students follow the story.
- b. The teacher makes the students active by asking them about the characters, and to predict what happens next in the story.
- c. New vocabularies and grammatical items are explained in the text.

3. Post reading activities:

- a. Students are asked to make groups and answer the questions orally: All types of questions (Factual, referential, inferential and evaluative).
- b. Students are asked to write a dialogue between two characters.
- c. Then, they are asked to paraphrase some sentences of a paragraph.
- d. After that, they are asked to write one sentence on the theme of the story.
- e. They are also asked to write a paragraph on what caused a character did something for example lying.
- f. Next, they are invited to summarize the story in three sentences, including the main character, setting, conflict, climax, and resolution.
- g. Then, the students go through a Discussion on the themes of the story and what they would do if they were the protagonist of the story.
- h. Finally, the teacher asks them to express their opinions about the story and the activities.

The classroom activities explained above should be done all in groups. Students should be given voice about the short story to be used in the classroom, their groups, and different activities. For homework, they are asked to listen to the story, write a summary of the story activating the new words and write a summary of discussion done in the classroom.

Advantages of using SSBLT

Employing SSBLT as the teaching method can be highly fruitful as it offers the following advantages:

1. *Cultivating all language skills*

SSBLT allows instructors to teach the four skills to all levels of language proficiency. Murdoch (2002) indicates that “Short stories can, if selected and exploited appropriately, provide quality text content which will greatly enhance ELT courses for learners at intermediate levels of proficiency” [10]. He explains why stories should be used to reinforce ELT by discussing activities instructors can create such as writing and acting out dialogues. Oster (1999) also affirms that literature helps students to write more creatively [12]. Instructors can create a variety of writing activities to help students to develop their writing skills such as writing dialogues, paraphrasing some sentences, summarizing the story, writing the theme of the story, writing a paragraph on the reason why a particular character did something, writing a specific kind of paragraph about the theme of the story.

Regarding reading, based on Harmer’s (1994) view, SSBLT boosts learners’ reading comprehension by helping them practice the following skills through the activities in the classroom: predictive skills, extracting specific information, getting the general picture extracting detailed information, recognizing function and discourse patterns and deducting meaning from context. The emphasis of this approach is on the elicitation of students’ response to a text. Rosli (1995) asserts that the reason behind it is to motivate and encourage students to read by making a connection between the themes of a text and his or her personal life and experiences [13]. Responses are personal as they are concerned with students’ feelings and opinions about the literary text. SSBLT focuses on activities like question-discussions, activities which are interpretative in nature generating views and opinions on the text and brainstorming, guided fantasy, small group discussions, revealing students’ reactions in a short paragraph or journal writing.

2. *Motivating students*

The students are eager to continue reading short stories until the end to find out how the conflict is resolved. In the same line, Elliott (1990) states that literature motivates advanced students and is “motivationally effective if students can genuinely engage with its thoughts and emotions and appreciate its aesthetic qualities [14]. According to Vandrick (1997), short stories motivate students to explore their feelings through experiencing those of others [15].

3. *Developing cultural and personal awareness*

Short stories transmit the culture of the people about whom the stories were written.

Culture teaches students to understand and respect people’s differences. As language learners face a new culture, they become more aware of their own culture. They start comparing their own culture to the other culture to see whether they find similarities and/or differences between the two cultures. Misinterpretation may occur due to differences between the two cultures explains [16]. To avoid misinterpretation, instructors should introduce the culture to the students or ask them to find relevant information about it. The more the students learn about other cultures, the more tolerant they will be regarding other cultures. In so doing, they will be free from bias, prejudice and stereotyping.

4. *Developing critical thinking*

Reading different short stories with different themes and perspectives helps the students look at the world from different lenses. Therefore, they start thinking critically when they read stories. Young (2007) believes that “stories have two crucial advantages over traditional content [17]:... [First,] because they are entertaining, students’ pervasive apprehension is reduced, and they learn from the beginning that critical thinking is natural, familiar, and sometimes even fun. Second, the stories put issues of critical thinking in an easily remembered context”. Howie (2003) also agrees with the use of short stories to teach critical thinking [18]. He points out that instructors have the responsibility to help students to develop cognitive skills because everyone needs to “make judgments, be decisive, come to conclusions, synthesize information, organize, evaluate, predict, and apply knowledge.” That is why SSBLT can pave the way for personal growth.

The practical ways to develop critical thinking for the learners in SSBLT are as follows:

- a. Annotating: it is fundamental to all strategies. Students should annotate directly on the page (underlining, writing comments, numbering, making notes).
- b. Previewing: learning about what the text is about and how it is organized by reading the head-notes and skimming.
- c. Contextualizing: placing a text in its historical, biographical, and cultural context and adapt one’s values and attitudes with the ones in the text.
- d. Questioning about the content helps the learners understand and remember. The questions should focus on main ideas and should be replied in your own words.
- e. Reflecting on the challenges to personal beliefs and values on current issues by marking and making notes.

- f. Outlining and summarizing: distinguishing between the main and the supporting ideas and restating them in their own words (results in deeper understanding).
- g. Evaluating an argument: evaluating the logic, credibility, and emotional impact of a text. The two essential parts of an argument are claim and support. Claim asserts a conclusion (idea or opinion) and support includes reasons (beliefs and values) and evidence (facts and statistics).
- h. Comparing and contrasting related readings: fit the text into an ongoing dialectic.

5. Building up extensive vocabulary

Ellis and Brewster (1990) highly recommend teachers to use stories to teach vocabulary saying "The story notes highlight the main vocabulary areas in each story [19]. Some will be for passive recognition only. Vocabulary in stories is presented in a vivid and clear context and the illustrations help to convey meaning. Therefore, SSBLT makes the learners get the words in context and increases their retention of the words.

Discussion and conclusion

In spite of the past belief in the uselessness of literature in language classes, there have been recently a lot of studies that emphasize the great advantages of literature in language teaching. For instance, as Obediat (1997) states, literature helps students acquire a native-like competence in English, express their ideas in good English, learn the features of modern English, learn how the English linguistic system is used for communication, see how idiomatic expressions are used, speak clearly, precisely, and concisely, and become more proficient in English, as well as become creative, critical, and analytical learners [20]. Custodio and Sutton (1998) also explain that literature can open horizons of possibility, allowing students to question, interpret, connect, and explore. Sage (1987) also states that it is better to use literature rather than a communicative textbook as it can change the learning approach from focusing on grammar to creative thinking [22]. He believes that literature-based programs focus on the interpretation of the language and this allows students to experiment with the language. It can be assumed that literature allows the students to be creative in their thinking and also gives the students a platform to use the language.

Short stories are great sources in language classes because they can raise cultural awareness, linguistic awareness, motivation, and etc. They can improve all four skills. Murdoch (2002) states that "short stories can, if selected and exploited appropriately, provide quality text content which will greatly enhance ELT courses for learners at intermediate levels of proficiency" [23]. In brief, the

use of a short story seems to be a very helpful technique in today's foreign language classes. As it is short, it makes the students' reading task and the teacher's coverage easier. An important feature of short fiction is its being universal. In other words, students all over the world have experienced stories and can relate to them. Moreover, short stories, like all other types of literature, make contribution to 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.

A new language teaching method as Short Story based Language Teaching (SSBLT) is introduced in this paper. SSBLT is a humanistic literature-based language teaching method that aims to promote the learners' personal, cultural and linguistic awareness. It emphasizes using short stories as the materials in a friendly atmosphere. It is designed to develop the learners' communicative competence and critical thinking. SSBLT aims at cultivating all language skills cooperatively. Then, the characteristics and teaching procedures of SSBLT have been discussed. In the end, it was discussed that SSBLT provides some advantages such as cultivating all language skills, motivating students, developing cultural and personal awareness, developing critical thinking and building up extensive vocabulary.

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