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TEACHING ENGLISH SKILLS USING SHORT STORIES

E. Justin Ruben

Assistant Professor in English (Senior Grade)

Department of Humanities Coimbatore Institute of Technology, Coimbatore, India

Abstract

The use of literature is a very effective technique for teaching both basic language skills - reading, writing, listening, speaking and also fundamental lingual skills like vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation, in today's competitive times. The primary objective of this article is to enhance the already existent conventional English language teaching methods in which literary devices like poems, dramas and short-stories are used to engage learners of all levels in participatory learning. The article also proposes ways to devise standard language learning tasks from the literary devices to teach English so that it helps a learner comprehensively upgrade his/her linguistic competence using adroit techniques with the teacher's support.

Short stories can be used as a very helpful and inspiring literary device to teach English language skills in an effective and meaningful way. These stories are very effective in conveying much in their limited canvass and help the teacher not just to teach linguistic skills but also to promote intercultural awareness and harmony. Short stories can be utilized as an effective device by English teachers for refining the

traditional language learning experiences. One of the stalwarts of Indian Writing in English – R.K. Narayan's prominent short story "An Astrologer's Day" has been selected to generate language learning tasks for learners of the beginner, intermediate and advanced levels in this paper. Language teachers should not merely use the literary devices as a feature of the oral and written production/reproduction of words, phrases and sentences. Teachers should also be conscious and considerate in teaching basic language skills (using literary devices) as an integral part of the daily oral and written language use of the learner. The author would like to express his gratitude to Mr. Parlindungan Pardede, English Teaching Department of FKIP-UKI, and Christian University of Indonesia, Jakarta and Mr. Murat Hişmanoğlu, Language Instructor at Ufuk University, English Preparatory School, Turkey for influencing the author to focus on this particular teaching methodology through their enlightening research in this area.

Keywords: short stories, English, language, teaching etc

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Introduction

The use of literature is a very effective technique for teaching both basic language skills - reading, writing, listening and speaking and also the fundamental lingual skills like vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation, in today's competitive times. Many foreign learners of English tend to lack interest and lose their motivation when Grammar is taught to them as a discrete set of rigid rules to be memorized, practiced, and followed. Teaching English using literary devices is a very unique way to demonstrate the intricacies, inflections and intriguing concepts of the language. But this method has also been vehemently opposed by Linguistics like Topping who argue that literature should be excluded from the foreign language curriculum because of its structural complexity, lack of conformity to standard grammatical rules, and remote control perspective.

Using Literature to teach can be justified for good many reasons as listed down below: (i) Literature is authentic material. It is good to expose learners to this source of unmodified language in the classroom because the skills they acquire in dealing with a difficult or unknown language can be used outside the class. (ii) Literature encourages interaction. Literary texts are often rich in multiple layers of meaning, and can be effectively extracted for discussions and sharing feelings or opinions. (iii) Literature expands language

awareness and educates the whole person. By examining values in literary texts, teachers encourage learners to develop attitudes towards them. These values and attitudes relate to the world outside the classroom. (iv) Literature is motivating. Literature holds high status in many cultures and countries. For this reason, students can feel a real sense of achievement at understanding a piece of highly respected literature.

The primary objective of this article is to enhance the already existent English language teaching methods in which literary devices like poems, dramas and short-stories are used to engage learners of all levels in participatory learning. The article also proposes ways to devise standard language learning tasks that can help a learner comprehensively upgrade his/her linguistic competence using adroit techniques with the teacher's support. The author has selected R.K. Narayan's prominent short story "An Astrologer's Day" to generate language learning tasks for learners of the beginner, intermediate and advanced levels in this paper. Rasipuram KrishnaswamiIyer Narayanaswami – R.K. Narayan(1906 to 2001) was an immensely prolific highly influential author in Indian Writing in English. He was one of the very first authors from India who wrote primarily in English and was one of the very first Indian writers to be read widely outside of India.

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In addition to fifteen novels, he has also published five collections of short stories. Many of his short stories are set in an imaginary small town named Malgudi that he created.

When selecting the literary texts to be used in language classes, the language teacher should take into account needs, motivation, interests, cultural background and language level of the students. One major factor to take into account is whether a particular work of creative writing is able to reveal the kind of personal involvement by arousing the learners' interest and eliciting strong, positive reactions from them. It is exceedingly perplexing to presume that students like short stories better than poems or novels but the author confidently posits that in this fast-moving world of today, students especially from professional engineering courses do have enough time to read a short story quickly and comprehend it to a certain extent than reading, analyzing and interpreting a poem or drama.

Short stories can be used as a very helpful and inspiring literary device to teach English language skills in an effective and meaningful way. Short stories are very efficient in conveying much in their limited canvass and help the teacher not just to teach linguistic skills but also to promote intercultural awareness and understanding. Short stories can be utilized as an effective

device by English teachers for refining the traditional language learning experiences of the learners. For example the conversation practiced by the characters of a short story will be very beneficial to face similar situations in day-to-day life by the learners.

The Benefits of using Short Stories as an Instructional Medium

The short story is a supreme resource for observing not just language but life itself. In short stories, the characters act out most of the real and symbolic acts people carry out in their daily lives. These characters do so in a variety of registers and tones as rendered in the plot. The world of short stories both mirrors and illuminates human lives. Short stories are easier to connect with the psyche and boast of an instant positive appeal to the learners from all levels. Stories from around the world are excellent to use in the classroom, but teachers should focus on using stories from the students' own culture and heritage. Using local or regional stories ensures that the students know the background culture, easily identify and understand the context. This familiarity reduces the young learners' stress and anxiety in the classroom.

The inclusion of short stories in the language curriculum offers some of these educational benefits: It makes the students' reading task easier because most of the short stories are narrated in a simple, direct style and they are precise and short when

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compared with the other literary genres. This technique enlarges the learners' worldviews about different cultures, customs and groups of people. The cultural cognizance that language learners from India receive after reading and comprehending a short story written by an Indian writer is always authentic and persisting. Myrtis Mixon, a teacher at the University of San Francisco and Philomena S. Temu is a senior school inspector at the Ministry of Education and Culture, Tanzania, in their article entitled "*First Road to Learning: Language through Stories*" have emphatically presented the need and relevance of using short stories as instructional medium in a classroom with young learners.

Using short stories motivates learners to read because the text is an authentic material of literary value. Short stories open up a world of wonders and a world of interest. These stories give the students a chance to use their creativity and promote critical thinking skills. Short stories make students feel themselves comfortable and free from pressure. It helps students coming from various backgrounds appreciate, communicate and understand each other because of the universal themes. It also helps students from advanced level to go beyond the surface meaning and dive into underlying meanings (Arioğul, 11-18).

The selected Text for designing Instructional Tasks

"An Astrologer's Day" was first published in the newspaper 'The Hindu' and then was made the title story of R. K. Narayan's first collection of short stories entitled 'Malgudi Days', which was published in 1947. "An Astrologer's Day" remains a major work in R. K. Narayan's literary corpus and displays all the characteristics associated with his writing. R.K.Narayan's sense of irony, his deep moral sensibility, his humor, his consciousness of the significance of mundane everyday occurrences of life are all candidly revealed in this story. "An Astrologer's Day" has a deceptively simple plot, although the full significance of the story becomes evident only after a second reading. There is also no clear indication where the story occurs or when it does, although it is possible to make an educated guess about both. The story begins almost in the middle and concludes on what appears to be an ambiguous note. But the story is a tightly knit one in which all parts fit together.

"An Astrologer's Day" takes place in a small town in India supposedly in 1947. The central character has left his home village many years ago, under a cloud of trouble the readers at first do not understand. The astrologer has the ability to convince others that he could see into the future through reading a client's astrological chart. He

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marries and sets up a shop in the market by a highway in which he tells fortunes and gives advice. He has learned to listen very carefully to his clients and ask a few open ended questions that give him enough data to seem to have a mysterious knowledge of the lives and future of his clients. He knows he is a fake but he has learned to give his customers what they want and he has a family to support. One day a stranger challenges the astrologer to look into his past and future. Initially quite reluctant, he gets everything right without even asking the man any questions. How he does this provides a wonderful ending to the story that really surprises the readers and for that matter shocks his wife when he explains to her how he was able for once to really know the truth without being told it.

Sample Tasks for teaching Basic Language Skills

There are some basic communication skills tasks that can be prepared by the teacher for learners of all levels. Here are a few simple and effective tasks that are proposed based on the short story 'An Astrologer's Day'. The teachers are at liberty to design as many questions based on their discretion under the listed tasks.

I. Reading Skills Task (for all levels)

Read the following passage and answer the questions given:

He had a working analysis of mankind's troubles: marriage, money, and

the tangles of human ties. Long practice had sharpened his perception. Within five minutes he understood what was wrong. He charged three pies per question, never opened his mouth till the other had spoken for at least ten minutes, which provided him enough stuff for a dozen answers and advice.

When he told the person before him, gazing at his palm, "In many ways you are not getting the fullest results for your efforts," nine out of ten were disposed to agree with him. Or he questioned: "Is there any woman in your family, maybe even a distant relative, who is not well disposed towards you?" Or he gave an analysis of character: "Most of your troubles are due to your nature. How can you be otherwise with Saturn where he is? You have an impetuous nature and a rough exterior." This endeared him to their hearts immediately, for; even the mildest of us loves to think that he has a forbidding exterior.

Reading Comprehension

a) Questions:

1. Who had a working analysis of mankind's troubles?
2. How was the personal perception of the astrologer sharpened?
3. How much did the astrologer charge per question?
4. How did the astrologer analyze his client's character?

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5. What is the topic sentence in the first paragraph?
 6. Can the astrologer be called as an intuitive mind reader? If so validate your stand.
 7. Is astrology such an easy art as portrayed in the given paragraphs?
 8. How did man start his analysis of his clients?
- b) Say if the following statements are True or False:**
1. The astrologer did not have enough practice or experience to carry on with his trade.
 2. The astrologer's clients mostly agreed with his analysis.
 3. One anna per question was charged by the astrologer.
 4. The character analysis of the clients by the astrologer endeared them to him.
 5. The astrologer was a competent mind reader.

II. Vocabulary Extension Questions (for all levels):

a) Add suitable Prefixes to get the Antonyms of the given words.

___married, ___pleased, ___understood, ___satisfactory, ___comfortable

b) Match the Words in Column A with their meanings given in Column B

Column A	Column B
Resplendent	too noisy or loud
Flanked	spellbound
Vociferous	recognition and interpretation of sensory stimuli
Enchantment	hostile or threatening
Perception	arguing to bargain
Forbidding	ritual recitation of verbal charms or spells
Incantations	equipment
Haggling	brilliant and splendid in appearance
Gratified	surrounded by
Deserted	feeling glad or pleased
Paraphernalia	desolate and empty

III. Questions based on Parts of Speech

a) Fill in the blanks with appropriate tense forms of the words given as clues in brackets

1. It was nearly midnight when the astrologer _____ (reach) his home.

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2. The nuts vendor _____ (blow) out his flare.
3. The astrologer _____ (catch) a glimpse of his face by the match light.
4. The other man groaned on _____(hear) it.
5. His wife was _____(wait) for him at the door.

b) Fill in the Blanks with the appropriate forms of the given Words

NOUN	VERB	ADJECTIVE	ADVERB
_____	Represented	Representative	_____
Management	Managed	_____	_____
_____	_____	Silent	Silently
_____	Challenge	_____	Challengingly

c) Mention the function of the words underlined in the given sentences.

1. Punctually at midday he opened his bag and spread out his professional equipment.
2. He had to leave home without telling anyone.
3. The place was lit up shop lights.

d) Fill in the blanks with the correct articles

1. ____ nuts vendor blew out his flare and rose to go home.
2. ____ astrologer caught a glimpse of his face by ____ match light.
3. ____ knife passed though you once.
4. He was crushed under ____ lorry.

Roll Play & Inferential Questions based on the Story (for Advanced level Students)

1. Imagine yourself to be the Astrologer in the story and describe your immediate internal emotional turmoil when you accidentally meet your long lost adversary after a decade.

2. Is Astrology a Science or Art form? Enumerate your views in 100 words.
3. Create a Dialogue between the Astrologer and his wife about the past problems of the astrologer.

These are some language tasks that can be generated from the short story taken up for the study. Many other tasks can be designed if the teacher wishes to indulge advanced

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learners. Tasks based on reading skills such as summary, note-making and tasks based on speaking skills like extempore speech, role-play etc can also be designed with the teacher's prudence.

Conclusion

The use of short stories in teaching language skills is clearly a very helpful technique to teach English language skills in today's dynamic classrooms. As it is short, the short story makes the students' analyzing task and the teacher's instruction easier. Some indispensable features of the short story are its universal nature, easy interpretation, personal appeal and precise narration. Students from all over the world would have definitely experienced many of the events that are portrayed in these stories and can easily relate to them. Stories—whether they are fairy tales, folktales, legends, fables are based on real-life incidents, many times, experienced by students themselves. This greatly helps the learners appreciate and respect the cultural values of various social groups.

It would also do a lot of good if the learner is goaded emphatically into visualizing the stories as he/she reads the text. The learners should be encouraged to imagine how a character would say a certain line in a given context in the plot. Thus a learner can be made to have a sense of participation in what is happening in the text. There are other effective methods in

the teaching of English. Learners can be asked to bring their own contributions to class like newspaper clippings, articles, photographs, or any other material that they perceive to characterize the time they are living in and present their materials before the class. Such tasks will also assist them to communicate better and feel more at ease in learning the intricacies of English. The discussion in this paper expostulates that short stories can be used to provide different learning tasks associated with reading, listening, writing, speaking and grammar skills classes. In conclusion, the short story creates a meaningful context to teach different language skills such as vocabulary development and grammar concepts like parts of speech enhancing the students' interpretative strategies.

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Appendix

AN ASTROLOGER'S DAY

Punctually at midday he opened his bag and spread out his professional equipment, which consisted of a dozen cowrie shells, a square piece of cloth with obscure mystic charts on it, a notebook, and a bundle of palmyra writing. His forehead was resplendent with sacred ash and vermilion, and his eyes sparkled with a sharp abnormal gleam which was really an outcome of a continual searching look for customers, but which his simple clients took to be a prophetic light and felt comforted. The power of his eyes was considerably enhanced by their position placed as they were between the painted forehead and the dark whiskers which streamed down his cheeks: even a half-wit's eyes would sparkle in such a setting. To crown the effect he wound a saffron-coloured turban around his head. This colour scheme never failed.

People were attracted to him as bees are attracted to cosmos or dahlia stalks. He sat under the boughs of a spreading tamarind tree which flanked a path running through the Town Hall Park. It was a remarkable place in many ways: a surging crowd was always moving up and down this narrow road morning till night. A variety of trades and occupations was represented all along its way: medicine sellers, sellers of stolen hardware and junk, magicians, and, above all, an auctioneer of cheap cloth, who created enough din all day to attract the whole town.

Next to him in vociferousness came a vendor of fried groundnut, who gave his ware a fancy name each day, calling it " Bombay Ice-Cream " one day, and on the next " Delhi Almond," and on the third " Raja's Delicacy," and so on and so forth, and people flocked to him. A considerable portion of this crowd dallied before the astrologer too. The astrologer transacted his business by the light of a flare which crackled and smoked up above the groundnut heap nearby.

Half the enchantment of the place was due to the fact that it did not have the benefit of municipal lighting. The place was lit up by shop lights. One or two had hissing gaslights, some had naked flares stuck on poles, some were lit up by old cycle lamps, and one or two, like the

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astrologer's, managed without lights of their own. It was a bewildering criss-cross of light rays and moving shadows. This suited the astrologer very well, for the simple reason that he had not in the least intended to be an astrologer when he began life; and he knew no more of what was going to happen to others than he knew what was going to happen to himself next minute. He was as much a stranger to the stars as were his innocent customers. Yet he said things which pleased and astonished everyone: that was more a matter of study, practice, and shrewd guesswork.

All the same, it was as much an honest man's labour as any other, and he deserved the wages he carried home at the end of a day. He had left his village without any previous thought or plan. If he had continued there he would have carried on the work of his forefathers namely, tilling the land, living, marrying, and ripening in his cornfield and ancestral home. But that was not to be. He had to leave home without telling anyone, and he could not rest till he left it behind a couple of hundred miles. To a villager it is a great deal, as if an ocean flowed between.

He had a working analysis of mankind's troubles: marriage, money, and the tangles of human ties. Long practice had sharpened his perception. Within five minutes he understood what was wrong. He charged three piers per question, never opened his

mouth till the other had spoken for at least ten minutes, which provided him enough stuff for a dozen answers and advice.

When he told the person before him, gazing at his palm, "In many ways you are not getting the fullest results for your efforts," nine out of ten were disposed to agree with him. Or he questioned: "Is there any woman in your family, maybe even a distant relative, who is not well disposed towards you?" Or he gave an analysis of character: "Most of your troubles are due to your nature. How can you be otherwise with Saturn where he is? You have an impetuous nature and a rough exterior." This endeared him to their hearts immediately, for; even the mildest of us loves to think that he has a forbidding exterior.

The nuts vendor blew out his flare and rose to go home. This was a signal for the astrologer to bundle up too, since it left him in darkness except for a little shaft of green light which strayed in from somewhere and touched the ground before him. He picked up his cowrie shells and paraphernalia and was putting them back into his bag when the green shaft of light was blotted out; he looked up and saw a man standing before him. He sensed a possible client and said: "You look so careworn. It will do you good to sit down for a while and chat with me." The other grumbled some reply vaguely.

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The astrologer pressed his invitation; whereupon the other thrust his palm under his nose, saying: "You call yourself an astrologer?" The astrologer felt challenged and said, tilting the other's palm towards the green shaft of light: "Yours is a nature . . ." "Oh, stop that," the other said. "Tell me something worthwhile. . . ."

Our friend felt piqued. "I charge only three pies per question, and what you get ought to be good enough for your money. . . ." At this the other withdrew his arm, took out an anna, and flung it out to him, saying: "I have some questions to ask. If I prove you are bluffing, you must return that anna to me with interest."

"If you find my answers satisfactory, will you give me five rupees?"

"No."

"Or will you give me eight annas?"

"All right, provided you give me twice as much if you are wrong," said the stranger. This pact was accepted after a little further argument. The astrologer sent up a prayer to heaven as the other lit a cheroot.

The astrologer caught a glimpse of his face by the matchlight. There was a pause as cars hooted on the road, jutka drivers swore at their horses, and the babble of the crowd agitated the semi-darkness of the park. The

other sat down, sucking his cheroot, puffing out, sat there ruthlessly.

The astrologer felt very uncomfortable. "Here, take your anna back. I am not used to such challenges. It is late for me today. . . ." He made preparations to bundle up. The other held his wrist and said: "You can't get out of it now. You dragged me in while I was passing." The astrologer shivered in his grip; and his voice shook and became faint. "Leave me today. I will speak to you tomorrow." The other thrust his palm in his face and said: "Challenge is challenge. Go on." The astrologer proceeded with his throat drying up: "There is a woman..."

"Stop," said the other. "I don't want all that. Shall I succeed in my present search or not? Answer this and go. Otherwise I will not let you go till you disgorge all your coins." The astrologer muttered a few incantations and replied: "All right. I will speak. But will you give me a rupee if what I say is convincing? Otherwise I will not open my mouth, and you may do what you like." After a good deal of haggling the other agreed. The astrologer said: "You were left for dead. Am I right? "

"Ah, tell me more."

"A knife has passed through you once?" said the astrologer.

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"Good fellow!" He bared his chest to show the scar. "What else?"

"And then you were pushed into a well nearby in the field. You were left for dead."

"I should have been dead if some passer-by had not chanced to peep into the well," exclaimed the other, overwhelmed by enthusiasm. "When shall I get at him?" he asked, clenching his fist.

"In the next world," answered the astrologer. "He died four months ago in a far-off town. You will never see any more of him." The other groaned on hearing it. The astrologer proceeded:

"Guru Nayak"

"You know my name!" the other said, taken aback.

"As I know all other things. Guru Nayak, listen carefully to what I have to say. Your village is two day's journey due north of this town. Take the next train and be gone. I see once again great danger to your life if you go from home." He took out a pinch of sacred ash and held it to him. "Rub it on your forehead and go home. Never travel southward again, and you will live to be a hundred."

"Why should I leave home again?" the other said reflectively. "I was only going

away now and then to look for him and to choke out his life if I met him." He shook his head regretfully. "He has escaped my hands. I hope at least he died as he deserved."

"Yes," said the astrologer. "He was crushed under a lorry." The other looked gratified to hear it.

The place was deserted by the time the astrologer picked up his articles and put them into his bag. The green shaft was also gone, leaving the place in darkness and silence. The stranger had gone off into the night, after giving the astrologer a handful of coins.

It was nearly midnight when the astrologer reached home. His wife was waiting for him at the door and demanded an explanation. He flung the coins at her and said : " Count them. One man gave all that."

"Twelve and a half annas," she said, counting. She was overjoyed. "I can buy some jaggery and coconut tomorrow. The child has been asking for sweets for so many days now. I will prepare some nice stuff for her."

"The swine has cheated me ! He promised me a rupee," said the astrologer. She looked up at him. "You look worried. What is wrong?"

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"Nothing."

After dinner, sitting on the pyol, he told her: "Do you know a great load is gone from me today? I thought I had the blood of a man on my hands all these years. That was the reason why I ran away from home, settled here, and married you. He is alive."

She gasped. "You tried to kill!"

"Yes, in our village, when I was a silly youngster. We drank, gambled, and quarreled badly one day, why think of it now? Time to sleep," he said, yawning, and stretched him on the pyol.
