

Short Story as a Medium of Teaching English in a Multi-intellectual Classroom

Abstract

Teaching English language in a multi-cultural classroom is a challenging job for a teacher as he/she is required to take into account the cultural, emotional and intellectual background of all the students for effective learning.

My paper is intensively focused on the role of short stories as a learning tool in teaching and learning English in a multicultural and multi-intellectual classroom of college education (especially in government colleges in Rajasthan). Reading short stories can be used as an effective strategy to obtain oral language proficiency among second language learners.

Keywords: Teaching English Language, Short-Stories, Multicultural, Multi-Intellectual Classroom.

Introduction

Culture refers to the traditions, rituals, beliefs and values that are shared amongst a group of people. Multiculturalism is the sharing of many cultures in a society and multicultural classroom is the type of classroom that embraces diversity and supports the teaching of knowledge based on the advantageous view point that cultural differences and family background could help effective learning of students from diverse background.

My paper is all about the role of short stories for development of various language skills like vocabulary enhancement, language proficiency, fostering positive attitude, knowledge of different cultures. This paper is more concerned about the students in government colleges of Rajasthan. In Rajasthan government colleges 90% students belong to rural background and they are not even able to speak and write even a single sentence in English. So to justify my topic i have taken up two short stories, Kabuliwala of Rabindranath Tagore and Idgah of Munshi Premchand.

Today more than ever students are coming into college education with insufficient language knowledge especially in government colleges. A classroom has a variety of students as all students come from different families so their cultural, emotional, and intellectual levels vary. Reading gives the students daily practice they need in order to advance their language skills. It will enable them to express themselves more clearly.

Review of Literature

Munira Said Al Siyabi (2017) online published a paper Integrating True Short Stories into English Classes: The case of foundation in Oman in the journal English Language Teaching: vol.10, No.3, 2017 published by Canadian Center of Science and Education. On the basis of the study data collected through a survey and participation observation of 19 level d students in Oman he reported that short stories during English class was an interesting experience and had good potential as a tool to improve English language skills. The meaningful context created by the true stories made it easier for the teacher to conduct and run the class.

Venu Mehta (2013), in his research paper Literature Oriented Multicultural Education in India (<http://files.eric.ed.gov>) studied fostering values of multiculturalism in learners through folktale-oriented task based literature that focuses on the adolescent age group.

Maria Moles(2006), in The Effect of Multicultural Literature in the classroom (commons.emich.edu) conducted a study to examine the importance of multicultural literature for the development of vocabulary, stimulating imagination, facilitating empathy, increased knowledge of one's own heritage and fostering self-concepts and identity.

All these research studied have been taken as references while writing this paper. But the focus on multicultural and multi-intellectual classrooms especially students who belong to rural areas in government colleges in Rajasthan makes this paper different from other researches.

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Objectives of the Study

According to Samovar and Porter (1994) culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, role, spatial relations, concept of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generation through individual and group striving. And something that incorporates ideas, beliefs or people from different countries and cultural background and multicultural when people of different culture come together to celebrate their different traditions.

Multicultural education (www.nameorg.org) is a means to ensure the highest levels of academic achievements for all students. It prepares students to work actively toward structural equality in organisation and institutions by providing the knowledge, dispositions and skill for the redistribution of power among diverse group so that they can face this world and understand their responsibility. It values cultural differences and affirms the pluralism that students, their communities and teachers reflect. It challenges all forms of discrimination in schools and society through the promotion of democratic principles of social justice. It also helps students develop a positive self confidence by providing knowledge about the histories, cultures and contribution of divers groups.

Multicultural education advocates the belief that students and their life histories and their experiences should be placed at the centre of the teaching and learning process and that pedagogy should occur in a context that is familiar to all students. It will lead to the development of multiple thinking. In addition, teachers and students must critically analyse the similarities and dissimilarities in their communities, society and the world. Multicultural education attempts to offer all students an equitable educational opportunity, while at the same time, encouraging students to critique society in the interest of social justice.

We, being government college teachers in Rajasthan, generally have students from rural background, from below poverty line to middle class. Only 1-2% of them are from English medium schools. But we can take into account all the categories of students to understand perspectives of multicultural classrooms in a better way. So my paper focuses on a multicultural classroom which consists of students from different family and social backgrounds. My paper explores the role of short stories in teaching English in a multicultural classroom.

Our students' oral language skills are not developed enough to support the curriculum and objectives we teachers are pushing so hard. They require formal language instruction before they can be expected to become fluent readers, writers and thinkers. My paper is focused intensively on the role of reading short stories.

Children have an innate love of stories. Stories teach us about life, about ourselves and about others. Storytelling is a unique way of developing an understanding, respect and appreciation for other

cultures, and can promote a positive attitude to people from different lands, races and religions. Storytelling:

1. Can enhance intercultural understanding and communication
2. Offers insight into different traditions and values
3. Reveals differences and commonalities of culture around the world
4. Help children conceive new ideas
5. Allow children to experience diverse cultures
6. Allow children to explore their own cultural roots
7. Increase children's willingness to communicate thoughts and feelings
8. Encourage active participation
9. Encourage use of imagination and creativity
10. Increase verbal proficiency

Vocabulary Enhancement through Short-stories

Stories can be used to improve students' vocabulary and reading proficiency. It is one of the best ways to increase vocabulary and to consolidate our understanding of grammar. While reading we come across many new words and phrases in context and also see some grammatical structures. With repeated exposure to the same vocabulary and language patterns, we find they begin to make their way into our spoken English as well. Knowledge of vocabulary determines and decides the level of a foreign language learner. Therefore, a deliberate and structured approach needs to be taken for enriching vocabulary. It helps a learner to explore the beauty of the language through a great variety of new words. Wilkins advocates that learning vocabulary is as important as learning grammar. Whether the learner has achieved near native speaking level or not, can be judged based upon whether he/she can use and say collocations well. It is argued that lexical competence is at the heart of communicative competence. Allen also emphasizes this view stating that "lexical problems frequently interfere with communications; communications breaks down when people do not use the right words"(p.05). Vocabulary has not been a particular subject for students to learn but it is to be taught within lessons of reading, speaking and writing. Students can be asked to look up the meaning of the word in a dictionary. Teachers can promote the use of dictionaries, thesauruses and spelling investigations to extend the range of words used. Teacher can also ask them to maintain a vocabulary notebook in which they can write unfamiliar words or new discovered words with their meanings.

Lao and Krashen (2000) studied the comparison between a group of students that read literary texts and a second group that was asked to read non literary text. He noticed that the group that read literary text showed improvement in vocabulary and reading. Thus such activities can also be introduced in our classrooms where we have students from diverse social, cultural and intellectual background. For example, students can be asked to:

1. Note down hard words and adjectives.
2. Guess the meaning of the word suggested by the teacher from the text

Language Proficiency

Muyskens suggests that for the two decades, instructors have used literary texts for “language practice, reading comprehension and possible aesthetic appreciation” (p.413). The literary texts may be utilized for the “development of knowledge of world literature, practice in reading and discussing creative works, and the introduction of literary concepts, genres and terminologies-e.g. recognition of figures of speech, levels of meaning and other stylistic features” (p.413). Students gain insight into literature and get to know a world familiar or unfamiliar to them due to the cultural aspects of the stories, and take a voyage from the literary texts to their own minds to find meanings for ideas that lead to the development of critical thinking.

Murdoch 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” (p.9). He says that stories can be used to reinforce ELT by discussing activities such as writing and acting out dialogues. For example, students can be assigned following activities:

1. Write a dialogue between two characters like Mini and Kabuliwala, Mini and her father (from the story Kabuliwala), Hamid and his friends, Hamid and his grandmother (from the story Idgah).
2. Summarize the story in your own words
3. Write the theme of the story.
4. What have you learned from the story.

Bloom in 1956 introduced thinking skills, called Bloom’s Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain, which includes both lower-order and high-order thinking. Depending on the students’ level of proficiency, teachers can activate students’ lower-order or higher-order thinking. Story reading involves seeing relationships between events, drawing inferences, analysing events, synthesizing evidence and evaluating both the content of the text and the language used to express ideas contained within it. It also involves activation of high order thinking skills, develops students’ ability to express an opinion, argue their case, initiate and sum-up ideas and illustrate opinions with examples. It gives them an opportunity their likes and dislikes, beliefs and forces them to use a more complex set of structures and a more advanced range of vocabulary. Young discusses the use of short stories to induce critical thinking in college students. He believes that “stories have two crucial advantages over traditional content..... (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”(p.90).

We can explore this situation by engaging students in group and pair activity to read sections of texts and then let them give their opinions about characters in the texts, style of writing etc. For example, students are put in groups of five and each group is given a story to read. Then they can be given some questions:

Kabuliwala

1. Compare your childhood days with that of Mini’s childhood.
2. Is that possible to maintain relationship with any stranger like Kabuliwala? Try to justify.
3. Have you ever suffered that pang of separation which Kabuliwala has suffered?
4. Elaborate effect of time on human emotions as seen in the relationship between Mini and the Kabuliwala.

Idgah

1. What are the things we can learn from the story “idgah” by Premchand?
2. What should be the best way to celebrate any festival?
3. Do you think any other alternative of the situation Hamid was in?
4. How does our life of electronic gadgets different from that of our grandparents?

Fostering Positive Attitude and Moral Values

Stories are associated to daily life experiences, children’s feelings and emotions and memories, and to cultural and intercultural values which enrich and expand the classroom world. They also deal with variety of topics which directly relate to curricular contents; animals, family, traditions, environment, history, experiments etc. Teacher can remediate students who perform at a lower level of proficiency and accelerate those who perform at a higher level. A mixed ability class allows for more of a social mix but relies heavily on the expertise of the teacher in helping a wide range of students achieve their potential. There is the danger that the more able might not be stretched enough while the less able are neglected. Ireson and Hallam suggest that teachers need to recognize that a class has children with different strengths and weaknesses and develop at different rates. They have different preferences for learning and displaying their work. A classroom consists of a range of abilities and learning styles and preferences. All students show strengths at different times depending on the topic being studied and the learning style being used.

Cultural Awareness

Another benefit of using short story is the culture load in storytelling. Language and culture are inter-related. Stories help to stimulate students’ curiosity about the target culture and language. They are meant to convey a real philosophy of life to inculcate morals and culture. This is the medium of transferring the culture between the two worlds and that of generation.

Gottshall in the preface to his recent book *The Storytelling Animals* presents the view that “through stories we learn about human culture and psychology, without the potentially staggering costs of having to gain this experience firsthand” (p.28).

It is because stories help us rehearse how to deal with life’s potential problems that, across history and cultures, problems or complications have always been the defining characteristic of story. He writes that story saturates nearly every aspect of our everyday existence: imagination, dreams, day-dreams, children’s play, corporate cultures, national

myths and religious stories. According to Gottshall, the stories make societies work better by defining and inculcating a sense of morality. Thus the purpose of stories is to teach us about life, the job of our storytelling mind is to make sense of what happens in the world around us. To illustrate this point, some activities or questions can be asked to give their answers in their notebook:

1. What message do we get from the story? (Kabuliwala/Idgah)
2. Compare the relationship between Mini and the Kabuliwala, and you and your maid or any worker in your home.
3. Compare two symbolic father figures in the story Kabuliwala.
4. Compare bond of love between Mini and the Kabuliwala (Kabuliwala), and Hamid and his grandmother (Idgah).
5. What life is like for the community we live as compared to that of Kabuliwala. (Compare the morality of the people of both the times).
6. Compare relationships in our society to that of relationships in these two stories.

It appears that in the process of subjecting oneself to the story one opens oneself to the values that may be illustrated therein. Short story is the fanciful overlaid with glimpses of morality, through teachings that may portray traditions, customs, social and civic values. Though children may not be intrigued with the moral and cultural values in stories, they unconsciously assimilate these values by means of narration, reading and role playing. They fabricate interesting images in their minds when listening to a story. Thus storytelling acts as celebration of cultural diversity.

Conclusion

A typical activity involves students listening to a short story and then preparing to tell tales themselves. Then students can be asked some culture based questions to know their cultural awareness. Once students have done an activity like this, students can be invited to tell a short story in their own words without reading from a text. Like after reading Idgah of Munshi Premchand, students will be able to discuss and recall their own experiences of festivals: How they celebrate their festivals, what sweets and toys they like to purchase, how their family members enjoy or celebrate with them, what they do on particular festival, how can festivals be made more special by helping others etc. Thus

listening to students' experiences of festivals will give an ample space and opportunity to students to learn about multicultural approach in the class.

The state of the present day India is that our children are engrossed in playing games, scrolling facebook and whatsapp updates on electronic gadgets, neglecting family, parents' love and affection, grandparents' bedtime stories, siblings' childhood fun and society as well. Stories provide a great window into the world. The nature of stories is such that they often provide an alternative and more intimate way into a new culture than what factual texts can offer.

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