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An Effective Way to Use Short Stories in the Language Classroom

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Introduction

Language teachers are always looking for good materials for their reading classes. It goes without saying that something interesting and stimulating for learners would be the best. From this point of view, short stories are basically thought as comparatively easy material for teachers and learners to handle, comparing to poetry or long novels, as argued by Parkinson & Thomas and Showalter. In fact, according to some scholars and teachers, poetry has been thought rather difficult for students to understand, but short stories are comparatively familiar to them. So in this paper, using short stories in the language classroom will be examined with some concrete lesson plans. How can teachers use short stories effectively and meaningfully in a language classroom? What kinds of teaching can teachers do with those materials?

1 Benefits of using short stories

What are benefits of using short stories in a language classroom? Parkinson and Thomas point out their advantages as follows, especially, comparing to poetry.

While poetry may appear (at least initially) to be the most problematic of the genres that we are considering in this section of the book, short stories are probably regarded by both teachers and learners as the most straightforward. (80)

According to them, short stories are easier than poetry to understand, and

learners can easily finish reading through the end, comparing to novels. Both aspects sound reasonable. In other words, short stories can be thought of as being good materials because of their understandability and length. Similarly, Elaine Showalter also recommends using short stories in the class as follows.

Another genre that has gained in popularity in the literature curriculum is the short story. Especially in the United States, where the short story has claims to be an American genre, teaching short fiction offers an excellent opportunity to introduce students to the complex interactions of region, race, gender, class, and narrative technique. (88)

So students can learn several aspects of culture as well as the language itself, following her opinion. In addition, Showalter points out the familiarity with the genre of short stories, like Parkinson and Thomas. "Because they find the narrative familiar, and because they identify with the characters, students respond more readily to fiction than to other genres." (89) In this sentence she uses "fiction", which includes novels and short stories, but short stories enable students to be involved in literature smoothly for her, as I have already introduced. In fact, she feels there is greater difficulty in using novels. She asks the following questions, especially about using a technique of close reading for novels.

Is close reading best taught with an entire novel? And is the novel best taught through close reading? What about plot, character, structure, literary history and tradition? The novel seems to present teachers with especially difficult decisions and priorities. (90)

Close reading means reading sentences carefully concerning about or focused on words, phrases or grammatical aspects. So it is almost the same way as Intensive Reading. In Japan close reading is usually thought as grammar-translation method. In the above comments she feels that close reading would not be the best way for teaching novels. Thinking about this

point, as a result, it can be said that she concludes that it is easier and more valuable for her to use short stories in the classroom than other materials, like novels or long stories because of its accessibility. In other words, short stories could be available, even if teachers use close reading style, as well as other styles to teach. So through short stories teachers can use several approaches and make their students do many activities. Furthermore, Showalter mentions the advantage of using the short story in her class like the following:

I find that one of the great advantages of teaching the American short story is its adaptability to a course structure. Not only are the stories a manageable length, but teaching them chronologically means that students grasp much of the history of literary influence within the boundaries of the syllabus. (92)

So, short stories are easy to handle for Showalter in her classroom. We can accept that a short story would be expanded as potential teaching material, especially for teaching aspects she mentioned above, including language itself. No one would deny its effectiveness if this point is really guaranteed. Through this way, students would be involved in literature more and more, which may enable them to study with interests, according to her. Besides her, several practical approaches for short stories have already been reported by several other scholars or teachers. Therefore, some of them will be introduced next and examined in detail. In the next section, some concrete ways to use short stories, especially Hemingway's works, are examined.

2 Using Hemingway's short stories in the classroom

Simpson and Scholes use Hemingway's short stories as their sample materials to use in the classroom. They have different approaches, so I will introduce both of them in detail in this section. Simpson uses it as the tool of constructing paragraphs, while Scholes does it to prove that there are several steps to read and understand literature.

Simpson introduces how to use Hemingway's story in his book, *Language*

Through Literature (1997). In this book the way to use Hemingway's short story, especially interchapters which Simpson regards as short stories, in *In Our Time*, is introduced as his concrete and practical example. Interchapter V has only 11 sentences, and is about a soldier who is killed in the rain. Simpson mixes up these sentences and makes students think of the correct order using their imagination or logical thinking. He collects many data and answers learners actually did in the classroom, and then he analyzes the results from a language point of view. According to the result, learners cannot make the same order as Hemingway actually did. In other words, nobody can make the correct answer, original order of the story, except Hemingway. This proves that literature is not always logical or true, judging from the language point of view. So learners can know the fact that there exists a different view of language processing, through this story.

Inspired by this idea, I also have tried this activity in my writing class, which is for 1st year university students, using Simpson's trial and the same Hemingway's work he used. The purpose of this activity is to allow for an alternate form of reasoning, even an illogical one, as I have pointed out above, and show students what the literal approach for writing is. However, I have not taught this in the exact same way as Simpson, and I have modified the procedure a little and adapted his idea to my class as follows.

At first, I distribute a sheet of paper containing printed sentences of Hemingway's Interchapter V which have already been randomized in the same order as from Simpson's book. I announce that the task and aim of this activity is to rearrange those sentences and make them into the correct and original order. I give my students about 15 minutes to think, of the correct order of the sentences individually. Some students start to use their dictionaries for reference. Basically, I have noticed that they are eager to find some clues like conjunctions or pronouns as a discourse marker. I then have students make small groups to discuss and exchange their own and individual ideas. Then, I give one more direction for each group, which is to decide their unified ideas approved by all the members in a group. So it is my observation that they start to compare eagerly, and some of them really earnestly insist on their own

individual correctness and try to persuade members in a group. After a while, I stop the discussion because of time limitation for the lesson, and have the leader of each group write their unified ideas, in a sense, the result through discussion on a blackboard, and explain why they think so. In other words, the process of making orders becomes clear and is shared with all the learners in the classroom. Finally, I distribute one more sheet of paper in which two sample paragraphs are written. One is Hemingway's original, and the other is the most likely answer, according to Simpson's examination. Again, students think about and discuss it to decide which one is Hemingway's original, comparing those two paragraphs.

These are the steps to use Hemingway's work in my classroom. The key point is to make students involved in this activity enthusiastically. Because they compete and are eager to insist on their correctness, the entire atmosphere of the classroom is so alive. I actually have observed that students earnestly read and discuss them so well. Instead of that, if I just say, "Let's read this short story!" or "This is homework to read," without suggesting to them to carry out problem solving process like the above, these energetic discussions would never happen in the classroom. Though Simpson did not mention these procedures to make classroom alive, this positive attitude of the students should be counted as an important element, when conducting the lesson. Though this is a general opinion, an English lesson using literature is judged as a boring one because some teachers just do force students to translate the literary material into Japanese. However, this activity using Hemingway's work as rearranging the order is quite the opposite, as shown here.

To sum up, this activity using Hemingway's short story is not only for the chance to think about the logic of the paragraph, but also to allow students to consider and develop a feel for literature's way of reasoning with such a strong interest. Therefore, through this activity, they can feel attractiveness to compare literary materials with non-literary materials, which can be composed following a logical order. So this activity proves that teachers can use literature effectively if they find an appropriate way to use it. Paul Simpson and I really could indicate this point with Hemingway's short story.

On the contrary, unlike Simpson, Scholes uses Hemingway's short story to explain that three different phases are needed to understand literature. In his book, *Textual Power*, he describes those phases for reading literature. They are *Reading*, *Interpretation* and *Criticism*. The description of these three phases described by Scholes can be most succinctly summarized as before examining his approaches using Hemingway's work.

In reading we produce text within text; in interpreting we produce text upon text; and in criticizing we produce text against text. (24)

To explain those phases, he uses Interchapter VII in *In Our Time*. First, he shows the first phase as the teaching of reading, *text within text*.

... In teaching Interchapter VII, I would begin by asking where this text becomes a story. ... Such questions as those I have sketched out here constitute one way to initiate a discussion of what we do when we "read" – ... (26-27)

As for Scholes, reading as *text within text*, means to create the story, following the information in the text closely. To make students understand this process well, he also suggests the three phases.

... I would encourage the students to think of Hemingway's text as a *version* of events that might indeed seem quite different from another perspective. ... Another possibility is to rewrite the story from the point of view of Jesus ... A final possibility is to rewrite the story from the soldier's point of view. (28-29)

To rewrite the story from different angles will lead students to organize the entire map of the story. So, through this rewriting, students will be able to grasp the story well.

As the second step, Scholes introduces interpretation.

The teaching of interpretation – *text upon text* – must include the basic principles recognized by our institutional practice. ... Maybe, but what the author says can only be *read*. Interpretation lies on the other side of reading. Its domain is unsaid: the implied, perhaps, or even the repressed. (32-33)

So, interpretation requires readers to find hidden meanings in the text, which Scholes called *text upon text*. Especially, he thinks of the cultural aspect as an important clue. "In order to teach the interpretation of a literary text, we must be prepared to teach the cultural text as well. (33)" In other words, understanding cultural background enables readers, in our cases, students, to read the story in two dimensions.

Furthermore, Scholes suggests one more aspect, criticism. According to him, the value to teach criticism in the classroom is the following.

The ability to criticize is a function of critical maturity. It must be earned by study and thought. We cannot expect our students to find it easy or do it very well at first. But we must start them on this path of development by showing them critics in action and encouraging them to produce their own critical texts ... Criticism is "against" other text insofar as it resists them in the name of the critic's recognition of her or his own values. (38)

This phase is not acquired easily, rather hard. However, if students try and get the ability to read with criticism, their perspective to the world will be expanded through reading story, or the entire literature. Like this, these three steps for reading literature are practiced through Hemingway's short story. They are really literary approaches and can take readers into a deep point in the text. In addition, Scholes also points out the teachers' role for reading literature. There are two important aspects.

As teachers of literary text we have two major responsibilities. One is to devise ways for our students to perform these productive activities as

fruitfully as possible: to produce oral and written texts themselves in all three of these modes of textualization: *within*, *upon*, and *against*. Our other responsibility is to assist students in perceiving the potent aura of codification that surrounds every verbal text. Our job is not to produce "readings" for our students but to give them the tools for producing their own. (24)

The former point, three models for reading, *within*, *upon*, and *against*, has already been discussed, but the latter one needs to be complemented a little. As for Scholes, the teachers' role is not just a person who teaches something to students, but a person who encourages them to think independently and find their own ideas by themselves. This is a very important point, especially when teachers try to give them a chance to be autonomous learners. In this sense, my activity with Simpson's idea can be included as the concrete example as the latter.

Like this, Scholes suggests several reading aspects to us, and they are really valuable to read closely and think deeply for understanding the story. However, Scholes misses one important thing, compared to Simpson or Parkinson and Thomas, who treated short stories as a teaching material in the classroom. Though Scholes uses Hemingway's work as a reading material, his three aspects of reading mentioned in his book are all approaches for literary analysis. In short, Scholes does not refer to language points of view in comparison to the other scholars. So it is not easy to claim that Scholes' approaches could be effective for language learners, especially those who are in EFL or ESL situations. We should remember this point if we apply Scholes' way of teaching in our language classroom.

Conclusion

As I have already introduced in this paper, short stories are comparatively easy to access for both teachers and learners, and there are so many approaches to use them. To summarize this paper, at first, comparing to teaching poetry, the usability of short stories was examined. Especially, Showalter strongly

emphasized this point, as Parkinson and Thomas did. Then, as a concrete example, the ways to treat Hemingway's works, especially his short stories, were suggested. Though Simpson and Scholes did rather different approaches, both of them might be modified, depending on each teacher's situation, though I only did with Simpson's so far.

Therefore, it can be concluded that there are at least two different types of approaches to short stories to use in the language classroom; one is analyzing literary reasoning as Simpson does, the other is analyzing how we can read and understand the meaning of literature as Scholes advocates. For Japanese learners of English, both aspects will be needed when we read literature written in English, especially for the educational purposes of language learning. In this point, through Hemingway's work, we can experience both approaches, in which Hemingway's works, as a good sample of educational materials, are valuable for both language learning and literature.

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