

## ENHANCING ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS INTEGRATIVELY THROUGH SHORT STORIES

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### Abstract

Short stories for language development are deeply rooted elsewhere in any language syllabus. Its relevance is manifold. People have an inherent interest in listening to stories. The short stories have the power to take the students to the target culture directly from the classroom. It works as a crucial factor in enhancing language skills in different ways. This article is an outcome of an experimental study conducted for a month on the 12<sup>th</sup> graders where they were engaged in different creative and critical-thinking activities along with various tasks that ranged from knowledge level to application level. The sole purpose was to build up their confidence in speaking in the classroom as well as develop all their language skills simultaneously. With the start of the class in August 2021, the students' speaking skill and their confidence in speaking in the class was tested. The test was abruptly followed by a presentation of a short story from their culture. The students were engaged in different tasks related to the story. The PowerPoint slides, handouts with the story, and tasks on photocopy were used as tools whenever needed. A one-month class exclusively on speaking skills through sharing stories was found to be very helpful in developing confidence in the learners. The result was very satisfactory. A large number of students became responsive in the class. The proficiency level was not satisfactory; however, their effort to speak in the class showed a very positive sign in language development.

**Keywords:** short stories/relevance/language enhancement/language proficiency

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Story-telling is an old tradition that has existed since the dawn of time in every culture. It is as old as speech (Atta-Alla, 2012). In the past, story-telling was often taken as the surest weapon to teach moral lessons to the younger generation. Green (2004) claims that some writers' knowledge comes in the form of stories. Social etiquette was instilled through it. They learned their values and beliefs through stories. There used to be some elder people in every society who had a good narrating skill which was used to develop a sense of discipline. The stories often had the power to create an obligation for the society members to follow their traditions. According to Bruner (2002) in his article- *Making stories: Law, literature, life*, storytelling is universal, perhaps the dominant form of discourse. In the same way, Schell (2004) states that our daily communication with others and our understanding of history rely heavily on storytelling and story-tellers. Zacher (2006) in – *'I know about the Holocaust'* supports the finding that when people hear or read stories, they create their own identities and compare their ideas to those of others. Hence, it appears desirable to apply stories in the classroom for language development.

#### 1.1. Why Short Stories

Teaching a second language through short stories can be a good strategy for classroom purposes. It can be used with all levels, all ages and all classes. Further, a language syllabus without a story, or, simply without children's literature, can rarely be seen. The purpose of bringing stories to the classroom varies from context to context. However, they can be summed up in the following points.

### 1.1.1. Inherent interest

Almost all social members of the world have a culture of telling stories and listening to them. Generally, elder members of the family narrate stories to the younger ones. Through them, they inherit cultural values, norms, beliefs, and many others. They are also taught to develop a sense of what is right or wrong socially and culturally. Story-telling may function as a guiding principle for children. Hence, right from the beginning, people have an inherent interest in listening to stories.

### 1.1.2. Shortness

Shortness is the main feature of a story that necessitates its importance in language-related skill development. Since it is short, it is easy to apply in the classroom. Teachers can manage their classes in the stipulated time.

### 1.1.3. Joyful

Atta-Alla (2012) acknowledges the use of story in the classroom for having inherent characteristics of joyfulness. He advocates for its implementation since it is enjoyable for both teachers and learners. Storytelling emphasizes a positive, collaborative, and supportive classroom learning environment in which English language learners could develop skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It decreases the students' affective filter and encourages their imagination and cooperation.

This article is based on an experiment applied to a 12<sup>th</sup> grader being taught English language course where stories were used as tools for development of language skills, especially speaking and writing.

## 1.2. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the article were:

- (a) To use short stories in the language classroom as an approach to develop language proficiency;
- (b) To develop confidence in speaking; and
- (c) To enhance their creative and critical thinking to make them responsive in the class.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

When I reviewed the works by few researchers on impact of teaching stories in the language classroom, they gave me a quite meaningful insight about the importance of teaching short stories for the enhancement of language development.

### 2.1. Integration of Language Skills through Short Stories

According to *Wagner (1985)*, integrating the language arts means providing natural learning situations in which listening, speaking, reading, and writing can be developed together for real purposes and real audiences. Simply, teaching language learning means an application of a holistic approach. Students are physically, psychologically, and mentally involved in the language learning process. They grasp the language system implicitly. Linguistic competence, on the other hand, keeps growing up automatically. It is a kind of natural way of learning because the learners are involved in listening, speaking, reading, writing, creative thinking, critical thinking, and others. In this context, *Darr and Jing (2006)* support the idea of teaching language skills integratively. They claim that the students' expressive power can best be developed both through speaking and writing.

The portion of literature presented above shows the essentiality of teaching short stories in the language classroom; however, they appear to have missed 'how aspect'. Here in my work, I have exclusively tried to work on different ways of presenting stories, creating different engaging tasks following the stories, designing different engaging tasks, balancing the focus on different language skills and aspects, and developing confidence in them to be responsive. I have tried to bridge up the gap by exploring different classroom procedures.

## 3. METHOD

I worked on an experimental research for four weeks involving twelfth graders so as to see the outcome of stories as tools in the classroom. The stories selected for the experiment were in due consistency with their interest, age, and culture. The whole class was sampled one which comprised 90 students, out of which eighty plus was most regular. Two stories were orally delivered, and five of the other stories were presented

in the written form.

I told a story. Assuming the story would be interesting for all of them, I made a keen observation of them while the story was being told. I just ended the story at the climax and asked them to guess what might have happened. I got them get engaged orally. Then, I gave another story on paper to each of them and asked them to complete the vocabulary-related exercises and comprehension level question answers. Next, I applied creative and critical thinking where they had an oral discussion on certain issues of the story, and even they made some critical comments on the story. The tasks were designed in such a way that they were involved in different language skills at a time.

#### 4. EXPERIMENT

In my first class with 12 graders, I asked them to share their experiences about class 11. For a few minutes, none of them showed any signal to respond to my query. Then a boy out of 87 came and shared his experiences, followed by two students.

I asked them if they liked listening to stories. Upon their positive response, the story went like this.

##### The first sample:

###### **Beheaded Body and a Deserted Girl**

In a small village by the forest side, there lived a poor family with a father, mother, and daughter. They were caring and loving. All of a sudden, the mother died and the father married another woman who was not kind to the stepdaughter. In her husband's absence, she often tortured her. Sensing everything unbearable, once she planned to quit her home, and that she did in a mid-night. Silently, she went towards the jungle, moved on and on until she reached an unimaginably gigantic castle of which the main entrance opened upon her reach over there. The moment she stepped into the castle, all the light systems started working automatically. With her shivering body, she entered the room, where she found a table on which the slain head of a man was smiling. Feeling terrified, she felt like running back. No sooner had she raised her feet to run away, than the voice from the slain head came. The head requested her not to get panic as there was no danger there for her. The head requested her to take her seat and asked if she liked coffee. She was offered everything one by one. This was done by the beheaded body as instructed.....

I kept the story incomplete, and asked them to make up the remaining part of the story of their own way, and tell it to their class. They had 15 minutes time to make up the story. Only two of them made up the remaining part of the story and told it to the class. As a next-day assignment, I asked them to complete it on paper in their own way. But it is better if they could conclude with a good message. The next day, 23 students came with the task completed. Among them, only seven students spoke in the class; the rest just handed me their notes. After examining their notes, I asked two questions: one for those who wrote the story but did not feel comfortable narrating in the classroom and the other for those who had not completed the assignment.

The questions were like these:

*Why do you not speak in the class? (Question for those who had completed the story)*

*Why did you not complete the story? (Question for those who had not completed the story)*

Here goes the response.

*S1: afraid to speak in the classroom.*

*S2: I am from a public school. So poor in English!*

*S3: not feeling comfortable there in front of you!*

*S4: writing is easier than speaking in class!*

*S5: feeling nervous!*

*S6: when any mistake, they laugh.*

From their responses, I generalized the common issues, such as lack of confidence, lack of motivation, no culture of discussion in the class, not much language exposure, and poor English background. After pondering over these issues, I planned to work on stories in the class.

I gave them the next sample to make the class more interactive and better responsive.

**A second sample of the story:**



A



B



C

I began the story by showing my class pictures of three animals: a jackal, a lion, and a goat. I just told the summary of the story first. Then, I stuck the picture of the lion in the cave, the goat under a tree, and the jackal on a small hill. Then I told the simple story, asking questions along the way. Here is an example:

Teacher This is a story about a jackal, a lion, and an elephant. Am I right?

Students: No, sir.

Teacher: The lion and the jackal lived in the village and the goat lived in the jungle. Is that so?

Students: No, sir. The lion and the jackal lived in the forest but the goat lived in a village.

Teacher: Who lived in the cave? Where was the jackal when the goat was standing under the tree?

Students: (the students responded on the basis of what I had told them)

Hence, deliberately putting wrong information for them to correct and asking questions from the story helped me complete the story.

By asking lots of questions and using pictures, I told the story to the group. Since I chose an easy story, most of the students were able to follow it. This gave them confidence, which they needed because they soon had to tell the story themselves. Once the story was finished, I invited my students to tell me the story again in English: one told the first line, another told the second, and so on. As they told the story, I wrote keywords and some key verbs in the past tense ('lived', 'liked', 'wanted to eat', 'killed') on the board. I reminded everyone that we use the past tense to tell stories.

Then I put students into groups of four or five. I told them that one student would start the story, the next would continue, and so on. The groups started to tell the story, and as they spoke, I walked around the room listening to make sure that they understood the task and to see how they were performing the task and speaking in English. For this activity, it was important that the students tried to speak in English and tried to use the vocabulary that I made them aware of when I told the story.

When most groups had finished telling the story, I told everyone to stop and asked them to tell the story again. This time, I asked them to choose different parts of the story, so that the person who began the previous time would not begin this time.

Groups began telling the story again and as they spoke, I moved around the room once more, listening to two or three groups. I noticed that they were better this time.

When most groups were ready to finish, I asked students to stop the activity, and I told them that they were better the second time they told the story. My students were pleased that they could tell a story. This strategy worked much better. The students showed to be developing their confidence slowly.

**My Reflection:**

*Did everyone have the opportunity to speak in English?*

*With support, were students able to tell a story? How would I do the activity differently next time?*

The next week, I gave them a piece of paper with another story that went like this.

### The third Sample of the story

#### Agony of a teacher

A teacher cum college student was working in a private school in a town far from his village. In a village, there lived his parents, and his most darling wife. That's all. His earning from the school, and few tuition classes were barely enough for him to pay the vampire college and greedy, unkind, and unsympathetic house owner. His own study on the one hand; his parents' desire and his better-half's expectation, on the other hand, were a kind of hitting on the back with a hot rod. The idiot corona caused him to be more restless. 'No earning; more expenditure ( AAMDANI ATHANI, KHARCHA RUPAIYA)'

His wife was waiting for him with a SONG in Maithili language-*Priyatam hamar kamauwa yau, kate kamebai dhauwa yau?* (*My adorable hubby, come back home, why earn so much money money leaving me alone at home?*). Upon arrival at his home, he experienced a hard hug by his wife. She made a cup of coffee for her HEART, and offered it with deep love. Then she groped her hand in his bag, found nothing. She turned sad but spoke nothing.

Oops, the poor teacher (*Becharaa maahtar*)! Anyway, Mr. husband understood her expectation, emotion, feeling, and the like, but could do nothing instantly. Next time, after the corona period, he went back to the town, worked hard, took many tuition classes from morning six to evening nine. He saved every single penny he earned. In a few months, he had more money, Packed it inside the envelope, and sent it to her. She opened secretly. That's exactly what she was expecting. She wrote back a letter to her hubby, thanked him for love and money, and asked why he didn't come. As her response, he :

*MAINE PAISO KE HAR NOTO PE APNA DIL RAKH DIYA HAI, TO FIR MERI JARURAT HI KYA?*  
(Her notaya kalbimi koydum, o zaman bana ne gerek var?)

The story printed on paper was sufficient for each student in the classroom. I asked them to read and respond to my questions. All these questions were from understanding and knowledge levels:

What profession does the male character have?

How many members are there in the story?

Why did the teacher's wife turn sad?

To make the class more engaging, I assigned a critical thinking task.

#### Points to discuss

If you were a boy, how would you handle the situation?

Do you think both the boy and the girl are right in their own situations? Justify.

Is the story written neutrally, or gender-biased?

This time, their participation was surprisingly unexpected. Even the never-speaking students showed their interest in responding to the issues. Some of them asked me to allow them to respond in Nepali, which I did not object to. The second issue appeared more conflicting since they seemed to have a sympathetic attitude towards their sex. Fifty plus students took part in the discussion. They tended to be more responsive. For the third question mentioned under 'Points of discussion', some students were confused, most of them did not respond, and few of them had their own justification.

They were assigned a single question for the next day. The question was -*Write a short story from the opposite perspective.*

## 5. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

I continued this process for a month. This experimental research remained much fruitful to me since it gave me insightful ideas about teaching stories for language development as a whole. Both oral and written stories were used as tools for the study. The motif of the study was to find the effectiveness of narrating short

stories followed by some creative and critical activities in enhancing language proficiency as a whole. The second target was to experiment on using short stories to develop their confidence in speaking in the classroom. During the study, lots of creative and critical activities following the stories were conducted. They included making up their own stories, completing the story, contributing to the chain story, giving their opinion on the relevant issues, summarizing, rewriting the same text from another perspective, dealing with the questions at an understanding and knowledge level.

I found that using short stories helps in enhancing language skills integratively. The benefits of using stories in the classroom are manifold. Responding to a story involves the learner emotionally, intellectually, and critically. Once the meaning in the given context is negotiated, the learner's focus moves to language in use and beyond that to literary interpretation and critical thinking skills in the form of inferences and deductions. The students were found to be building stock of vocabulary through reading and listening. What's more, reading was useful for improving their spoken competence. And the exposure to the target language engaged them to improve language acquisition and practice. Implicitly, the learners happened to build up confidence and turned to be more responsive. They were unhesitant to speak. They didn't feel shy to speak in the group. There was naturalness in their speech. Upon the completion of activities related to critical thinking, which they did after the second story, they were found to be more critical of every issue of the story. They tried to assimilate their understanding into their practical life.

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