

## SHORT-STORIES-ORIENTED STRATEGY (SSOS) FOR FOSTERING CULTURAL AWARENESS IN EFL CLASSROOMS: BENEFITS AND APPLICATIONS



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### ***Abstract:***

Recent trends in teaching English to EFL learners call for an integrated method that brings together distinct academic subjects within the constraints of teaching academic language skills. The use of short literary texts to emphasize and foster the cultural aspects of the English language is one of the most preferred and valid strategies in EFL settings, due to its potency and potential efficiency in providing an authentic model for language teaching and learning. Through an integrated approach, EFL teachers can use a short-story-oriented strategy (SSOS) to promote language development, foster cultural competence, and improve students' cognitive skills.

**Keywords:** Short-Stories-Oriented Strategy (SSOS); EFL students; short stories; cultural awareness, benefits and applications

### **Introduction:**

The use of literature in EFL classes began with the Grammar-Translation Method, which was believed to suit ELT students. The use of literature for EFL students in traditional pedagogical settings was based mainly on translating literary texts from the target language into their native language. The shortcomings of traditional language approaches have led ELT teachers to seek an alternative that is more effective and integrative. With the use of new teaching methods such as the Direct Method and the Communicative Method, which focus on structure and

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vocabulary, the focus has shifted to communication in English teaching and learning.

Today, the essential goal of EFL teaching has changed. As literature gains greater significance in teaching English, teachers are shifting their focus to new strategies to fully integrate literature into EFL classes for academic purposes, which can significantly enhance students' cultural competence, critical thinking, and reading skills. Nowadays, educators are constantly seeking new strategies and methods for using such a learning/teaching tool to develop their students' abilities, particularly in productive reading and writing skills.

Among the wide range of literary devices, the short story stands out as a compelling vehicle for effectively achieving language teaching and learning objectives. Because of their genuine input for language learning, literary narratives, in general, and short literary narratives in particular, can develop high-quality linguistic productive and receptive skills, consistent with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching.

That said, the Short-Stories-Oriented Strategy (SSOS) is among the teaching strategies that remain underutilized and often out of reach in various English for Academic Purposes subjects. Therefore, the present work focuses on the relevance, advantages, and various applications of SSOS for teaching the cultural aspects of a given content and context through a set of activities that enhance the usefulness of the aforementioned short story in understanding cultural differences. Following this line, it is essential to assume that the primary role of culture in EFL classrooms has undergone a transformative shift due to the many facets of the predominant interrelatedness of language, culture, and society in which it operates (Halil 2023: p.743).

### **1. Short-Stories-Oriented Strategy (SSOS)**

Various pedagogical and methodological endeavors to integrate the linguistic and pragmatic features of language teaching have paved the way for literature to become a successful pedagogical tool, widely recognized and used in teaching English as a foreign language. For that matter, and due to the wide range of literary products among which the teacher can adopt for their classes in their attempt to teach language, history, or culture, or the three together. Teachers should eventually consider which literary genre best suits their classes, taking many requirements into account. In terms of language, length, and readability,

teachers and students find short stories more accessible in content than poems and less time-consuming than novels or plays. Additionally, the brevity of short stories allows for meeting students' needs and makes their literary reading classes more enjoyable.

Researchers and practitioners in the field of teaching literature in EFL classrooms have extensively discussed the effectiveness of using short literary texts as reading material. It is therefore perceived by students as one of the most fulfilling and satisfying literary devices among the longer fictional genres. More often than not, reluctant students are more likely to read a short story than a novel. Given its authenticity and brevity, teachers also agree on the utility of this genre in literature classes and as a tool for interdisciplinary study. For that reason, as an integrated approach to merging culture and literature, the teacher can use short stories effectively to foster cultural competence, raise cultural awareness, or enhance students' cognitive skills.

One of the many crucial and critical features of short fiction is its universality and cultural diversity. In other words, people around the world, across different ages and backgrounds, have experienced a wide range of stories they can easily relate to or understand logically. Going back through the ages, the short story can be traced in prose to the eighteenth century, or even further to Boccaccio and the Arabian Nights. However, in the mid-nineteenth century, the short story took on a new role in prose. Authors like Poe, Hawthorne, Henry James, Crane, and Melville in America, Eyre and Kipling in England, and De Maupassant, Flaubert, and Balzac in France wrote outstanding short stories that speak to the mores and precepts of their peoples and cultures.

Breaking free from the constraints of traditional literary classes to adopt liberating, innovative language-teaching practices has led to the introduction of a humanistic, literature-based language-teaching method. The Short-Stories-Oriented Strategy is among the recent literature-based language teaching approaches supported not only by literature teachers but also by teachers of other ELT subjects. Indeed, the essence of using short stories as an alternative means of teaching language skills lies in enhancing students' linguistic competence and fostering their exploration, imagination, creativity, and enjoyment of short fiction. Therefore, adopting short literary texts will help develop learners' communicative competence, cultural awareness, and pragmatic skills, as well as advance

their critical reading and thinking skills, all at once (Khatib & Seyyedrezaei, 2013).

A short story is the preferred text for most English language learners. In literature classes, students find reading a novel a lengthy and torturous activity that cannot be completed in one sitting. The same goes for the difficult, deviating, and confusing figurative language of poetry that necessitates a long time to decipher and to grasp. The dramatic text, however, shares some of the short stories' traits, such as length and clarity of language, yet its unperformable nature hinders its usefulness. Beyond their difficulty, complexity, and limited coverage, these three genres require different reading and analysis techniques than those used for the short story.

Culturally sustaining or culturally relevant pedagogy is of high significance for EFL learners. English language teachers should be aware of the wide range of possibilities from which they can adopt an appropriate strategy for their culture-based pedagogy (Halil, p. 745). When setting objectives to improve cultural learning, short stories provide an effective medium for exploring diverse cultural themes and addressing different needs. This authentic short narrative plays a major role in raising the learners' cultural awareness of an existing difference that requires attention, understanding, and respect. Actually, the inherent cultural differences language learners will encounter must be uncovered so they are fully aware of existing and coexisting cultural differences, helping them avoid misunderstandings and cultural miscommunication.

Language learners are, most often than not, motivated by reading and telling stories. The latter encourages English learners to activate their metacognitive skills, which are primarily 'cognition about cognition', or 'thinking about one's thinking', as well as non-technical soft skills that are part of their essential culture. Other meta skills can also be triggered when you start reading short stories. Young (1996) confirms that critical thinking can be easily addressed through this genre, which not only entertains but also develops learners' critical reasoning as they are exposed to cultural diversity.

## **2. Short Stories' Selection Measures**

Story selection is one of the very significant roles of the teacher for their English language learners. Since short stories vary in length, the teacher must choose a story that is short enough to cover within a class session. Students, most of the time, prefer short texts because they are

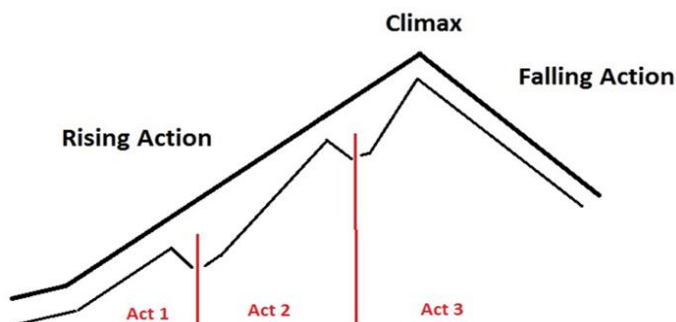
confident about their ability to read, understand, and enjoy, and most importantly, finish such short literary texts. This sense of accomplishment would give them a feeling of achievement and fulfilment.

According to Arikan Ardo's (2005) research, students find reading short stories simpler than reading other literary narratives. Thus, there are several reasons and advantages for selecting short stories in ELT classrooms. According to Poe, a short story is “a narrative that can be read at one sitting of about one-half hour to two hours, and that is limited to a certain unique or single effect, to which every detail is subordinate.” (Arikan, 2005, as cited in Abrams, 1970, p. 158). Its shorter length compared to novels makes it more manageable for both teachers and students. Therefore, readers of all ability levels can finish reading it within a single discussion. Campbell (2007) provides an excellent argument for this issue, claiming that;

The short story is an eminently teachable genre, because it is short, it can be read in class where teachers can provide support for struggling readers if needed. Short stories can be read in one sitting. Rather than facing a classroom of students in which less than half have read the assigned chapters of the novel chosen from the required reading list, short stories allow me to join with my students in reading and then closely examining a short story. Virtually all the literature elements used in novels can be analyzed more easily and efficiently with short stories, in a way that includes the varied readers in today's classrooms. (01)

Selecting a long text, by contrast, generally sets up students for failure. High school students in Portland, Oregon, reported in a recent newspaper article that the primary criterion for selecting whole-class texts was that they be “long and boring” (Campbell, 2007, p. 12). As Tovani (2000) notes, “If we are constantly giving students text that is too hard for them to read, they may get through it, but probably not without cheating. Many of my students who are struggling readers feel defeated before they even begin” (40). What makes the short story a manageable narrative is its simple plot, often structured into three main acts: rising action, climax, and falling action, all set in one location. Here is the story plot structure that most stories follow:

**Figure 1: Streamlined Short Story Plot Diagram**



**The Source:** This diagram portrays the three acts that structure the uncomplicated short story plot. Taken from Tips on Writing a Great Short Story by C. Fawkes. <https://www.septembercfawkes.com/2020/03/tips-on-writing-great-short-story.html>

In addition to the length of the text, Hill (1994) points out two other basic criteria of choosing a short story. First, he argues that the text should be selected based on students' needs and abilities, taking into account the text's linguistic and stylistic levels (19). Then he requires background information to truly appreciate the material. To meet these readability criteria, instructors should select easy, simplified stories. According to Ur (1996, p.150), "... the use of authentic text with less proficient learners is often frustrating and counter-productive. Thus, less proficient readers should be given less complicated texts in order to approach the texts at the level of the students."

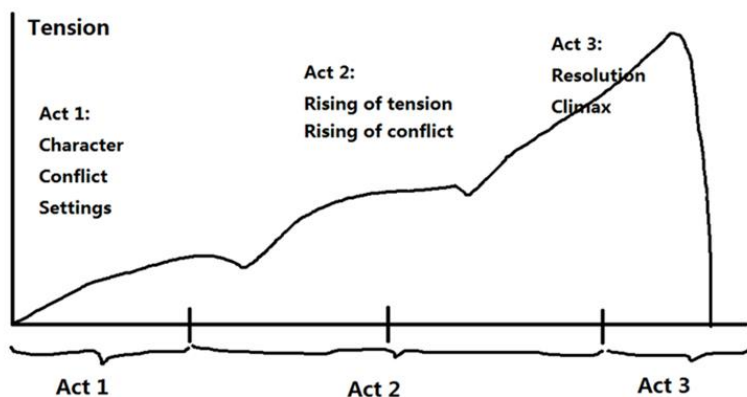
In addition to the above-mentioned criteria, Spack (1985) highlights the aspect of interest. According to him, choosing a text of interest is a very important step towards its readability. It is essential for the teacher to read and teach it, and for the student to read and understand it. Thus, by choosing interesting short stories according to students' preferences, stories with different themes and matters that fulfill different interests and tastes, instructors, as a result, will avoid "frustrational reading" (Schulz, 1981, p.44).

Short fiction's brevity is due to the limited use of literary elements. Unlike novels, short stories usually have a few characters. A suitable example is Stephen Crane's *The Open Boat*, which features four characters and a correspondent.

In addition to the very limited number of characters, the plot is another essential element in the story. Writers of such a genre attempt to create one plot merely, so that the reader can follow the storyline of the

work easily, and thus can be read in one sitting. *The Necklace*, by Guy De Maupassant, is a plain example of a one-plot story. The short story's few characters, one plot, and a simple setting capture and hold learners' attention, an important part of the learning process.

**Figure 2: Tension of Three-Act Structure**



**The Source:** This figure shows the tensions across the acts of a short story. From Own work, by UfofVincen, 11 May 2015. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tension\\_of\\_three\\_act\\_structure.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tension_of_three_act_structure.png)

### 3. Benefits and Applications of Short Stories

The use of short stories has enormous pedagogical benefits. Instructors, in this respect, who tend to use short stories in their EFL classes, should understand the benefits of this short literary narrative and plan classes accordingly in order to meet the needs of their students. The benefits of implementing short stories are varied and include, but are not limited to, motivational, linguistic, literary, cultural, historical, and higher-order thinking benefits (Sarıçoban, 2011, p. 161). On this line, Murdoch (2002) writes, "short stories can, if selected and exploited appropriately, provide quality text context, which will greatly enhance ELT courses for learners at intermediate levels of proficiency." (p. 9)

#### 3.1 The Benefits of Implementing SSOS

A short story is one of the most useful tools in vocabulary building. Loax Krashen (2002) compared a group of students reading literary short texts with another group reading non-literary texts at a University in Hong Kong. Hence, the first group showed much greater improvement in

vocabulary and reading than the second group (Pardede, p. 17). Elley (1989), Manson (2005), and Muller (2005) are also among the researchers who encourage the usage of the short story as a device for acquiring and improving vocabulary. Elley conducted a study on the utility of this tool involving 186 7-year-old pupils in New Zealand. The results revealed that the targeted pupils showed improved vocabulary acquisition not through reading, but through having someone read stories to them. This means that vocabulary plays a crucial role in the reading process. New terms help students understand the text and facilitate reading. Short texts are good for vocabulary building and for raising students' interest in and ability to read.

Short stories are the best choice for in-class, task-based reading sessions. By doing so, teachers can observe their students as readers rather than assigning homework, which the teacher cannot verify to confirm students' understanding and ability to find solutions independently (Kimberly, p. 04).

Short stories, again, allow educators to connect reading with writing tasks, what students read with what students write. Reading can be a very practical and fruitful way for good writing. By reading and delving deeper into the story, students can learn about the writing craft, from structure and the organization of ideas to the use of literary elements. Research shows that involving students in good writing models is important. Kimberly argues,

Connecting the short texts we read to the writing did changed the way the students in my classroom viewed literature. Students responded to the literature as writers. They talked about the literature using the language of writing craft. They connected their own struggles and celebrations as writers with the authors they read. I witnessed students beginning to see themselves as fellow writers with the authors we were reading. (p. 17)

Reading short fiction can enhance writing skills. Ouster (1989) affirms that literature helps students to write more creatively. In this case, the instructor can create a variety of writing activities. By selecting *White Fang* by Jack London, the teacher can assign the following writing activities:

- Write three sentences on the theme of the story.
- Summarize the story in one paragraph.
- Write a similar short story in which characters are human beings.

A short story is the best literary text by which instructors can introduce and elucidate the use of literary elements, from characters, setting, and plot, to conflict, climax, and resolution. Continuing on the same line, Gajdusek (1988) shows how literary elements can be introduced and best grasped by outlining the order of activities: pre-reading activities, factual in-class work, analysis, and extension activities, followed by the in-class reading process.

### **3.2 Suggested Reading Activities Using SSOS**

In the pre-reading activities, the teacher can ask for and provide a variety of creative activities that stimulate students' thinking. For example, before reading James Joyce's short story *Araby*, students should have an idea of the author; the instructor should provide a brief biography of the writer and an overview of the story's structure. Then, moving to the title, a brainstorming task can take place, a phase in which the teacher writes the title on the board and then asks questions to elicit creative responses. Asking learners questions:

- What comes to your mind?
- Can you figure out the meaning of the title and predict the plot?
- Do you think the story takes place in an Arabian country? Why or why not?

In the in-class activity, students should be introduced to the who, what, when, and where of the story, including the characters and setting. A set of different questions can be asked:

- Who is the main character of the story?
- Where does the story take place?
- When does the story happen?
- Who is the narrator?

In an attempt to focus on analysis and interpretation, which highlight fundamentally "involvement and experience", students have to contextualize the story, to be able to use their knowledge of the language to express their own ideas. Through a close reading and a good understanding of the text, the student would be required to connect the story to their own experience. In this vein, McKay (2001) notes that learners enjoy reading texts that are relevant to and similar to their life experiences and interests (322). For that matter, the teacher should thoughtfully select stories that deal with interesting and controversial issues for learners, such as love, hope, the generation gap, the future, happiness, and the like. Dividing learners into groups and giving them a

free choice of two or more short stories that tackle different themes to be discussed in class, such as *The Great Stone Face* by Nathaniel Hawthorne or *How I Met My Husband* by Alice Munro, will lead to lively discussions between groups.

An important feature of short fiction is its cultural basis. Through short stories, students can learn a great deal about different cultural aspects of any given society. In this respect, culture teaches students to tolerate and respect people's differences. Henning (1993) believes that culture should be integrated as a crucial part in teaching literature, "literature is one feature in the cultural domain that provides added value beyond the level of language acquisition. Literature helps students to expand their linguistic and cognitive skills, cultural knowledge, and sensitivity" (165). Among the various pedagogical advantages, short stories can be an effective way to introduce students to cultural mores. Furthermore, a short narrative is the best tool for enabling students to understand and appreciate cultures, societies, and ideologies different from their own, while encouraging personal growth and intellectual development (Carter & Long, 1991, pp. 2-4).

By reading short stories, students will gain direct exposure to the culture of English-language speakers. At this level, students will start comparing their own culture to the one under study. Tracing the similarities and differences between two social and cultural backgrounds would reveal the essential diversity that emphasizes acceptance and respect rather than misinterpretation. In this vein, teachers should guide their students to read about cultures and accept cultural differences without comparing them to their own. The more they learn about other cultures, the more open and tolerant they will become.

*Eveline* by James Joyce is a good choice for students as a short story. In *Dubliners*, Joyce uses a more culturally and traditionally structured style, making the stories more accessible and comprehensible. *Dubliners* can be used in a class reading activity to raise students' cultural awareness while developing strong reading, speaking, and writing skills. The set of short narratives in this book provides deep insight into Dubliners' culture, traditions, and history during a particular period, making it a valuable resource for historical studies of Irish history, politics, and religion.

After reading, analyzing, and discussing the story in various creative ways, teachers have to think outside the box and introduce new

tasks. 'What if' creative writing prompts are to encourage students to change key parts of classic stories. By asking questions such as "What if Eveline went with Frank?" The students begin considering alternatives and scenarios to help them become inclusive and active thinkers. Connecting the story to the students' lives can be a very good idea. Students become aware that, like Eveline, they will be trapped or will have a similar experience. To connect these stories to their lives, they can write about leaving a familiar place for a new place and will ultimately discuss the power of familiarity and the frightening aspects of change.

The teacher can also have students write a scene differently by writing a short story about what would have happened if the student were one of the characters. Alternatively, as a more challenging task, students will write their own stories titled after their names. After writing their stories, the teacher can ask them to read their stories aloud in the classroom. Students love reading aloud. Reading aloud brings the text to life and helps improve students' pronunciation. In a circle-shaped class, students will find it very engaging to read and share their experiences, drawing on their Algerian culture, Islamic religion, and regional traditions.

The instructor can find an unlimited supply of universal short fiction, each imbued with different cultural themes. An example of that is *The Lottery* by Shirley Jackson. A story that explores the darker aspects of human nature, comparing intellect and superstition, and commenting on the juxtaposition between ancient and modern in American culture. Another terrific example from the Dark Continent that depicts African culture is Chinua Achebe's *Dead Men's Path*. A short story that explores the cultural conflict between modern ideals and traditional animist beliefs in Nigeria. Students may never hear of such cultures and traditions unless they read about them in fiction. Culture-based stories can build learners' knowledge of universal cultures. Moreover, they add amusement, curiosity, and eagerness for more stories that explore superstition, different religions, ways of thinking, animist beliefs, and so on.

In addition to fostering cultural competence and helping readers acquire cultural knowledge, short stories can go further by teaching historical issues, facts, and events. Frances Sword describes the use of short stories as a means of teaching world history: "Children learn about the Ancient Greeks from stories. Stories that the Greeks made up about the Greeks. Myth, fact, legend, it's a mish-mash...Because history is

stories” (Interview, 1994). Indeed, this short genre is a powerful teaching tool because it provides the conditions to enable interpreting and understanding the pronounced events.

There are many historical fictions that can be used to teach history. *A Horseman in the Sky* by Ambrose Bierce is a story about “real history” that captures the human experience of the Civil War. After reading, analyzing, and understanding this story, students could be asked to write a similar story by inventing an imaginary war, such as a soldier's survival story, or by creating an imaginative war, like World War M, where humans fight against Martians.

### **Conclusion**

The importance and benefits of using short stories in language teaching have a tremendous influence on the student's learning process. By introducing the short story in both literary and non-literary classes, instructors can, in addition to developing students' language learning and improving the four skills, enhance their cultural awareness and historical knowledge and foster higher-order thinking skills.

A short-stories-oriented strategy can be a very helpful approach in today's foreign language classes. The application of this strategy can help EFL learners to develop their critical reading and thinking skills, as well as other language skills. Using short stories offers other benefits for EFL students, such as learning about the target language culture or an English variety in writing. Therefore, integrating short stories into the literary curriculum will help EFL students become well-rounded, as these stories teach more than just the skills needed to learn English.

There are countless new and interesting ways to teach the short story. By thinking creatively, teachers can attract their students' attention and help them enjoy reading and reasoning. They can provide them with task-based or project-based activities that can be realized individually, in groups, or in pairs; asking provoking questions that raise hot discussions, or that lead to imaginative endings, and pushing students to think of a title for a certain story; or increasing positive comments and student interactions by making positive statements.

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