
Use of Short Stories in Language Learning

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to explore the understanding of English teachers on the use of traditional short stories in language learning and find out the impacts of extensive reading of culturally embedded short stories in consolidating students' language learning. Phenomenological research design was adopted to carry out this study in which 8 English teachers represented 4 from public and 4 from institutional secondary schools were selected from Kirtipur Municipality of Kathmandu district through purposive non-random sampling procedure. In-depth-interview and classroom observation were used to collect data for this study. The findings of this study show that the language functions and vocabulary could be improved through short stories; language skills could be cultivated with the help of reading short stories; higher order thinking skills are developed reading short stories; and they would get entertainment, motivation and refreshment.

Keywords: Traditional short stories, culturally embedded, phenomenological, language functions, and extensive reading

Introduction

Traditional short stories are the main resources for English as second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) learners to improve their all-round language learning. Traditional short stories are defined as a brief prose narrative regarding the adventurous stories of men, gods, demons, accounts of daily events, the jokes and gossips with an intense episodic anecdotal effect (Azhikode, 1977). It is argued that children who have read short stories can develop more sophisticated language structures, accumulate more background information and have more interests in learning to read (Bower, 1976; Chomsky, 197; Cohen, 1968; Durkin, 1966 as cited in Morrow, 1985). Young learners are to be provided with reading materials to read pleurably at their own level as many books as they can without the pressure of testing and marking. High interest story books provide a foundation for language learning which goes a long way to bridge the gap between L1 and L2 learning contexts. Green and Brook (2000, as cited in Melissa et al. 2016) argue that “stories are encoded through a cognitive pathway that often leads to different outcomes than argument or environ” (p. 239). The plots of the short story help young children to be very critical and creative. Rocha (2005) argues that use of short stories in language teaching help the learners develop their higher

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order thinking skills, such as application, analysis, and evaluation. They can grasp content knowledge, vocabulary, and grammatical pattern very smoothly if they keep on reading a massive number of short stories. According to Bloom's taxonomy (1956) there are six dimensions of cognitive process, viz. remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Bloom's taxonomy can be categorized into higher order thinking skills and lower order thinking skills. Analyzing, evaluating and creating are known as higher order thinking skills whereas remembering, understanding and applying are called lower order thinking skills.

In course of reading each of the characterization, they imagine as if they are themselves playing the roles of the character in the story. More importantly, the faculty of wonder will be advanced by reading highly detective and suspicious short stories. Good story books provide strong intrinsic motivation for children. These types of books with fascinating stories put emphasis on meaning rather than form (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983).

In fact, young learners are socialized through the reading of the different types of traditional and modern short stories. Children can be socialized through extensive reading of traditional short stories (Bell, 2001). Some of the allegorical short stories help them to be socialized through the personified characters. The young learners prefer reading such allegorical short stories which are full of fun, humor, and tricky episodes. The young learners are those children who have been studying at school level. In extensive reading, the learners are given sufficient time to read as many books as they can without caring for the contents and aspects of language, such as vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. Second language learning can be more effective if the learners are motivated to read short stories since they are easy, short and interesting with a few characters and single plot. Furthermore, they can read a short story in a single sitting. They can read not only for information and knowledge, but also for entertainment. The nature of extensive reading will vary with students' motivation and institutional resources in which they can read a large quantity of materials either short stories or novels, newspaper and magazine articles or other professional reading. The culture of reading refers to students' engagement on reading individually and independently (Akindele, 2012). Reading culture of short stories helps the learners become competent in using English language to share their ideas with their friends and teachers in the class. One of the fundamental conditions of the successful extensive reading is that students should understand the reading materials comfortably and delightfully.

The students do not pick up all of the information and data that are available in the short stories; however they subconsciously internalize vocabulary, spelling, mechanics, grammatical patterns and meaning. Therefore, the subject matter of reading materials should be highly fascinating and relevant for the young readers since they are pleasure seekers rather than reality oriented. The interests and background knowledge of the readers

play a vital role to comprehend at a reasonable rate and keep on involving them in the reading materials.

Extensive reading of short fictions either traditional or modern ones provides the young readers with required input for good writing (Kadel, 2020). Reading and writing skills are complementary. If the learners are exposed to relevant ample reading materials, they will internalize vocabulary, language functions, and aspect of grammar subconsciously along with the contents of the text thereby enhancing mechanics, aspect of grammar, coherence, cohesion, topic sentences and supporting sentences which are the components of writing skills. These inputs should be contextually meaningful and comprehensive so as to embrace them in their writing skills. The reading inputs should be relevant and interesting to their everyday activities. Furthermore, extensive reading helps the L1 and L2 learners in developing language skills and language functions. Rao (2008 as cited in Kadel, 2020) argues that the principles of extensive reading are improvement of the features of writing, developing vocabulary, and grammatical structures. Reading short stories help the second language learners increase vocabulary which is deemed as “building block” of a language (Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013 as cited in Ge, 2015). In fact, extensive reading of short stories facilitates the young learners to internalize new vocabularies and new syntactic patterns of the target language unconsciously. English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL), learners need a certain amount of vocabulary in the target language in order to learn language skills and aspects of language effectively (Nation, 2001, as cited in Ge, 2015). Vocabulary is regarded as the flesh of any language without which language cannot be acquired. Reading the traditional and modern short stories can provide them with adequate number of new vocabularies of the target language.

There are four genres of literary text, viz. poem, drama, fiction, and essay. A literary text can stimulate the ESL/EFL learners in the language acquisition process by providing them authentic context. In addition, it provides them the real world experiences through the relationships between people and society (Kirkgoz, 2012). A fiction includes novels and short stories. Short stories can be used as a source of input, a powerful foundation for developing creative writing for ESL/EFL learners since short stories provide them insight and make them think in a more imaginative way. Broadly speaking a short story can be read in a single sitting within from half an hour to 3 hours with approximately less than half dozen of characters.

There are two types of short stories, viz. modern short stories and traditional short stories. Abrams (2000) argues that traditional short stories comprise myths, legends, fables, parables, fairy tales and folk tales. Asia is the home of innumerable short stories right from days of Vedic and earlier civilizations like Hebrews, the Chinese, the Hindus, the Greeks and Arabs who have rich culture of storytelling (Azhikode, 1977). Upanishads, Itihasas, Purans, Buddhist Jatakas, Panchatantra of BishnuSarma, Brihatkatha of Gunadhya,

Kathsaritsagara of Somadeva and Dasakumaricharitha of Dandin are to be considered as the great repositories and reservoirs of tales (Azhikode, 1977). According to Lazar (1993), the main reasons of including short stories in the second and foreign language learning syllabus are: as follows:

- They are very motivating.
- They are authentic materials.
- They have general educational values.
- They are found in many syllabuses.
- They help students to understand another culture.
- They are stimulus for language acquisition.
- They develop students' interpretative abilities.
- Students enjoy them and they are fun.
- They are highly valued and have a high status.
- They expand students' language awareness.
- They encourage students to talk about their opinions and feelings.

Short stories are the powerful sources to help the ESL/EFL learners consolidate and practice grammar, vocabulary, values and beliefs (King, 2001). The student-centered technique can be employed in course of unfolding the series of activities, such as setting, plot, and characterization while teaching and learning short stories. The miraculous and magical advancement of ICT brings ample opportunities to share the teaching and learning materials for the learners. The young learners can have access of any type of digitalized short stories if they are online at home. They can share hard copy of short stories, and animated form through the digital engines, such as YouTube, Google scholar, Science hub, etc. ICT is a diverse set of technological tools and resources used to communicate, to create, disseminate, store, and manage information (Alkamel & Chouthaiwale, 2018). The learners can use ICT in exploring, collecting and downloading, sharing the short stories for their learning.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were as follows:

1. To explore the understanding of English teachers regarding the use of traditional short stories for language learning.
2. To find out the impact of extensive reading of culturally embedded traditional short stories in consolidating students' language learning.

Methodology

This study is based on phenomenological research design. Critical perspective is introduced to stimulate teachers' perceptions on the language learning through reading short stories. Eight English teachers who have been teaching in secondary level were selected from 4 community and 4 institutional secondary schools located in Kirtipur municipality of Kathmandu district since they are pretty convenient for data collection. The rules and regulations as well as mode of teaching and learning are different in the public and institutional schools. Moreover, 8 English teachers at least one English teacher from each public and institutional school were selected through purposive non-random sampling procedure as a sample for this study. In-depth-interview and classroom observation were used as tools to collect data.

In order to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity, respondents were given pseudonyms as T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, and T8. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in English. The guideline questions were prepared for administering in-depth-interview to the respondents. The recorded interviews were transcribed into written text. To maintain the trustworthiness and authenticity of the raw data, member check was used (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). The human rights of each respondent were respected and appreciated in course of conducting the in-depth-interviews with the respondents. The confidentiality and anonymity were maintained in this study.

Results and Discussion

Five themes were developed based on elicited data from the respondents in this study.

Improve Language Function through Short Stories

It is very advantageous to incorporate simple short stories like fables, folk tales, and fairy tales in English curricula of basic level in order to help the students acquire English language for the children. If the learners of this level are prescribed a substantial number of such short stories in their syllabuses, they can acquire English effectively and naturally as their L1. I have observed eight classes of English teachers regarding English Language Teaching (ELT) situation in Kirtipur Municipality. I found that majority of English teachers followed Grammar Translation (GT) method and structural approach while teaching English as EFL. One of the respondents T2 argued that

the existing English curricula of basic level should be revamped in such a way that even the learners can be motivated to read the prescribed course books; but they are to be pressurized to read each topic every day due to the lack of appropriate contents in the syllabus. If the prescribed contents of course syllabuses are available in the internet, they can read on line as well as off-line by downloading them.

It is argued that short stories are self-motivating with full of pleasure and fun to study (Lazar, 1993). This is the age of Information Communication Technology (ICT), so learners should not be deprived from ICT. They should be allowed to play with ICT in order to develop the language functions through simple short stories. The roles of characters in the short stories help them familiarize with the language functions. Even the subject teacher can provide them such stories as much as possible to develop language functions like request, order, suggestion, make offer, describe, etc. The EFL learners cannot acquire language functions through the GT methods and other methods which were developed in Europe and America.

In this regard, one of the respondents T4 claimed that “if the learners are provided electronic version as well as hard copy of such short stories which resemble their cultures, they can learn language functions as they acquired their home language”. The culturally embedded short stories provide the young learners with the real world experiences through the relationships between people and society (Kirkgoz, 2012). The curriculum designers should take into account that culturally integrated teaching items are very facilitating to acquire the language functions for ESL and EFL learners. In this regard, reading short stories can help the young learners develop more sophisticated language structures, accumulate more background information of the target language and ignite more interest in learning to read (Bower, 1976; Chomsky, 197; Cohen, 1968; Durkin, 1966 as cited in Morrow, 1985).

Cultivate Language Skills through Short Stories

Culturally embedded traditional short stories facilitate the young EFL learners to develop their language skills. In this regard, one of the respondents T6 asserted that “extensive reading of short stories helps the young learners develop their four language skills, viz. listening, speaking, reading and writing skills”. Particularly, reading of short stories assists them in developing writing skills. Having read huge number of short stories, they would be familiar with using mechanics, such as colon, semi-colon, comma, quotation marks, and signs of exclamation and interrogation appropriately. If the learners get substantial exposure to reading of short stories through electronic as well as written versions, they can develop language skills, viz. listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.

In the similar vein, T3 argued that “readings of short stories really make the students exciting and refreshed. In addition, they prefer to share their own feelings and experiences to each other like the characters in the stories which promote their language skills intuitively”. The animated short stories help them consolidate their listening and reading skills. More importantly, reading of short stories really benefits the young ESL learners to develop their writing skills.

Enhancing Higher Order Thinking Skills through Short Stories

Short stories are essential for the young children to develop their metacognitive and cognitive abilities. According to Bloom's taxonomy (1956), analysis, evaluation and creation are the higher order thinking skills which are the main objectives of prescribing the curricula of basic levels. Young children can have ample opportunities to develop their higher order thinking skills through readings of simple short stories. In this regard, one of the respondents T5 stated

If the young children are prescribed appropriate short stories in their courses, their analysis, application and evaluation abilities can be developed through reading of fairy tales, folk tales, fables etc. Sometimes, mythological short stories are very useful for their cognitive development. They can apply the tricks, ideas, and intelligences in their day to day lives as the character applies in the critical situation in the short stories.

In fact, young children are very smart enough to copy and apply any behavior and action which they have read and viewed in the movies and books in their practical life. The next participant T7 stated

I think the subject teacher should provide the locally available short stories for the children to read during leisure period at school. They are found in the form of oral but not in written version. If such oral short stories are to be shared among them, they are very useful to develop their higher order thinking skills.

The traditional ELT methods and techniques emphasized to develop only the lower order thinking skills, such as, memorization and synthesizing the contents. Extensive reading of short stories help the learners develop their critical and creative thinking skills. In this regard, Lazar (1993) asserts that the short stories help the young learners in developing their interpretative abilities.

Provide Entertainment, Motivation and Refreshment

The young learners prefer to learn through pleasure and entertainment. Particularly, animated short stories are narrated humorously and artistically. The inanimate characters are given the human attributes in the allegorical short stories which are full of pleasure and exciting. In this regard, T4 argued :

The learners of basic level are spellbound while watching animated short stories and they are more excited to read simple comprehensive folk tales which are familiar to their culture and tradition. The short stories are to be made one of the important parts and parcels of the English curricula of the basic level. Even the rowdy and naughty students pay attention towards the plot and roles of each character in the story.

It can be inferred that short stories are the main resources for refreshment and pleasure to the ESL/EFL learners. There are a considerable numbers of oral folk and fairy tales of each indigenous language and culture. In this vein, one of the participants T8 stated :

The syllabus designers should take into account of incorporation of locally available short stories in the syllabuses of basic level to help the learners acquire target language smoothly. The locally available short stories can be translated into English focusing on the proficiency levels of the learners.

Short stories are full of motivating and interesting to read. The students feel enthusiastic to read the each incident in the story. In this regard, Lazar argues (1993) that learners are full of fun and humor while reading the short stores.

Improve Vocabulary and Language Aspect

Teaching and learning of any short fiction facilitates the ESL/EFL learners so as to acquire target language as their L1. Furthermore, reading of short stories helps young learners familiarize the various aspect of socialization as well as social phenomena of different places of different ages. In this regard, one of the respondents T5 claimed:

If the ESL/EFL learners are provided with latest traditional and modern short stories, they can read and watch through search engines of internet, such as Google, Google scholar, Wikipedia, libgen electronic library genesis etc. thereby acquiring substantial amount of vocabulary items since they are used and exposed to them contextual situation in the stories.

Literary texts are the best way to teach and learn language particularly vocabulary items of target language to ESL/EFL learners since vocabulary items are flesh of any language. In fact, Reading short stories help the second language learners to increase vocabulary which is deemed as “building block” of a language (Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013 as cited in Ge, 2015).

Grammar of English language can be developed through short stories in the curricula of the basic level specifically from four to eight grades since some of indigenous learners are taught through their mother-tongues up to grade three in mother tongued based multilingual education. Short stories are the powerful resources to help the ESL/EFL learners to consolidate and practice grammar, vocabulary, values and beliefs (King, 2001).

Conclusion

Traditional short stories are self-motivating materials which provide the young ESL/EFL learners with fun and pleasure while reading them. If the young learners develop extensive

reading culture through culturally embedded short stories, such as fables fairy tales, folk tales, and parables which help them develop their cognition and metacognition. Learners' higher order thinking skills can be developed through the reading culture of supernatural and allegorical short fiction during their leisure time. ESL/EFL learners can develop all the language skills, vocabulary, grammar and language functions of the target language effectively.

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