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DEVELOPING READING SKILLS THROUGH THE SHORT STORY*

Judith Anne Lucas

The short story is probably the most pleasurable of the literary genres for young people. A good story can be understood and appreciated at many different levels. Secondary students often find poetry, drama and novels very demanding and difficult in proportion to the pleasure they derive from them. The short story on the other hand can provide as much intellectual stimulation as the other genres but it is much easier to appreciate. It has a beginning and an end, the satisfying familiarity of narrative and is a complete experience in itself. Its brevity and story line hold the interest of young readers without taxing their patience. In fact it is because of its length that it so readily lends itself to the teaching of the reading skills that students need in their study of literature. It is particularly appropriate in the Singaporean context where literature periods are limited and where pupils need more experience before attempting novels. Teachers may also find short stories easier and more interesting to teach and a good introduction to the demands of the novel.

The good teacher encourages students to read first for pleasure and then helps them to develop appropriate reading skills. The acquisition of such skills further increases the pleasure of reading. The important questions for the teacher therefore are: "What should be taught?" and "How should it be taught?" There is nothing more deadening to the spirit than a story that is too difficult or a badly taught literature lesson. Too many generations of students have had stories destroyed for them by over zealous or poorly trained

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teachers who insisted on applying standards of critical analysis that were more appropriate at the tertiary level. At the secondary level, the teaching objectives should reflect the need for the gradual and sequential development of reading skills as well as the development of good reading habits.

It is therefore crucial for the teacher to assess her students accurately in terms of their fluency in English, their interests and their reading ability. Most teachers learn how to assess their classes through experience and can decide on the appropriateness of a particular story after a quick reading.

However, I would like to suggest a relatively simple procedure that will help a teacher to develop confident and accurate judgement. One of the most important considerations in selecting stories is the level of reading difficulty in comparison to the overall proficiency of the students. It is also preferable for students to read stories written for their chronological and developmental ages rather than watered down versions of classics. The advantage is that the language is natural and appropriate to the plot, theme and characterization.

In the past, there was great emphasis on using texts which had been simplified in vocabulary and syntax... Today there is a strong trend away from simplified or edited material toward texts which exhibit the complexity typical of unsimplified written English... A number of reading formulas exist, none of which has proved to be very accurate. The most successful procedure for determining the level of reading difficulty is the cloze test.¹

This test is familiar to those who teach English as a foreign or second language. It can also be used to determine the relative difficulty students might have with a particular story or novel.

The teacher first selects several stories of varying levels of difficulty that meet her requirements in terms of student interest and content that is illustrative of the structural elements she wishes to emphasize. A narrative passage of about 250 words should be taken

from each story. The first and last sentences must be left intact. Then beginning with the second sentence, delete every fifth word in the passage. The deleted words are replaced with an underscored blank. When the fifth word is a number, the sixth should be used instead. It is usually a good idea to use a practice passage first and the test should not be timed.² When scoring, only the exact word used in the passage should be accepted. This not only simplifies marking but avoids confusion about appropriate grammar and usage, which is important to the non-native speaker Singaporean teacher.

The correspondence of the cloze scores to the various levels of reading is as follows³:

Levels of Reading	Cloze Test Percentage Scores
Independent level	Above 53%
Instructional level	Between 44% and 53%
Frustration level	Below 44%

Anderson defines the independent level as students being able to read on their own without difficulty; at the instructional level, students can read but need assistance and instruction from the teacher; and at the frustration level students become hopelessly bogged down even with the teacher's help. It appears logical that stories selected to be used for intensive classroom study should be in the range of 50 and above for most students. Stories for extensive reading should be at the independent level.

As classroom time in Singapore is very limited, it is not suggested that every story be pre-tested using the cloze procedure. However, it will sharpen the teacher's awareness of the appropriate reading level of her class and should be used when in doubt.

It is not my intention here to suggest specific short stories for the secondary one through four literature classes. I prefer to share my ideas on selecting appropriate stories, setting teaching priorities and choosing appropriate methods. There is also not a shortage of stories which are suitable for secondary students and the individual teacher is more familiar

with the interests and reading ability of her class. An appropriate selection might include a combination of stories by well-known local and foreign writers and stories written specially for adolescents.

After the teacher has selected a story she must think in terms of the preparation that is required before teaching it. It is necessary to read and reread a story until it is thoroughly familiar. Then the points that the story makes and the literary aspects it demonstrates should be listed. Lastly, the teacher must select aspects of the story that are suited to the ability level of the class. It is wise to avoid 'over-teaching' a story as it becomes boring to teacher and pupils alike. Therefore, the teacher should choose several stories to illustrate each concept she is teaching.

Dunning and Howes identify four basic principles for teaching short stories that are worth considering.

1. Limit the aims in teaching any one story.
2. Focus teaching on the text of the story.
3. Progress from concrete to abstract, from text to extra-textual, as students move beyond the simple narrative level.
4. Approach the issue of quality in short stories openly and honestly.⁴

Limiting Aims. The brevity of the short story is one of its chief assets in secondary schools. Most stories can be taught in one or two class periods and should be. Stories should never be dragged out to fill time, so the teacher must limit her aims in teaching any one story. It is better to deal with only one or two stylistic or structural elements. Therefore, stories have to be carefully selected so that they are valid examples of point of view, characterization or whatever else is to be discussed. In many classes, well-intentioned teachers attempt 'to teach too much'. Students are overwhelmed by terms such as symbol, allusion, purposeful rhythmic patterns, foreshadowing, flashback and the like. At the lower secondary level, it is better to read as many short stories as possible that have been chosen to provide contrast and purposeful discussion of basic elements. Limiting aims improves the chances that the

skills of reading literature are taught thoroughly. When the students master the basics the discerning teacher moves them on to more esoteric analysis. At this point I might mention again that one learns to read best by reading and that as many stories as possible should be covered in both extensive and intensive reading.

Focussing on the Text. It is important for students to realize that everything they need or want to know about a short story is usually in the text. I have observed a tendency in classes for teachers to be more concerned with teaching facts about a story than the story itself. It is also easier perhaps to make pronouncements about a story and then to have the students hunt for the appropriate fact. It is not good teaching. We have all been taught by our lecturers and professors that learning occurs best inductively, from the observation of instances that lead to a generalization.

Having students discover something through examples requires artful teaching. First, the teacher must decide on a precise area to be examined...Then planning becomes more exact; examples must be found and ordered. What parts of the text will you stop on? Which example will you consider first? What questions will you ask? In the classroom itself, timing is of the essence: When is the best moment to move from instances to generalization about style? How many examples of irony should be provided before generalization is appropriate? How often must students feel the implications of first person short stories before a thesis about first-person point of view will have reality? How many instances of the traditional plotted story should students experience before they are asked to describe its characteristics?⁵

Focussing on the text does not necessarily mean focussing on the teacher, however. Interest is sustained and heightened by group-centred discussion. Group activities require planning and practice and well-guided and thought-out topics and questions. Teachers who have avoided working with small groups are usually surprised at the speed with which students become adept at it. It is also probably the only method

guaranteed to encourage the participation of all class members. The teacher should be wary of ancillary activities that stray far away from the story. She may develop students who are very glib at role-playing or discussing their feelings but still poor readers at the end of the course. It may seem artificial to some to separate language and literature classes and activities but the fact is that there are very few periods for literature and we must set our objectives realistically.

Many unsuccessful literature classes seem to be due as much to poor *student* preparation as they are to poor teacher preparation. I feel that stories should be read for pleasure first. It is unsatisfactory to 'teach' a story that students have not read. In order to develop the habit, I suggest beginning a short story unit with a number of very short, short stories. At the secondary level I would also read some aloud so that my voice could colour the words and develop the mood.⁶ Next, I would ask the students to write brief plot summaries individually or as small group assignments. The summary, of course, immediately focusses them on the text. Several students would be asked to read their summaries aloud before more ambitious discussions were begun. This technique discourages the usual vague replies that make it difficult to sustain the interest level that the story itself has engendered. This is also a useful assignment for homework as long as the summaries are kept brief. They should not become an end in themselves and thereby detract from the pleasurable aspects of reading.⁷

Progress from Concrete to Abstract. There are many secondary students who will never be able to progress beyond reading at the simple narrative level. This is not to say that a well planned and executed literature programme cannot help them. We will have done our jobs well if we have encouraged them to enjoy reading for relaxation, enjoyment and information. The reading skills they have developed will last a life time, hopefully, tested by constant use.

There also will be a sufficient number of students who will not be satisfied with the literal level and who will progress quickly from concrete to abstract, from

text to extra-textual. These are the students who will hungrily discuss structure in terms of flashback and foreshadowing and tone and mood as they are governed by diction. Digression on the use of metaphor, imagery and the symbolic implications of the theme will be welcomed. These are the students we are probably best trained to teach.

Slower classes can be brought to this level only after they have acquired adequate language skills and have begun to enjoy reading in English. The Singaporean teacher should also remember that pressure or fear of examinations does not produce good readers who enjoy reading. Many native speakers of English are poor readers because they have either never acquired appropriate reading skills or have never developed a love for reading.

It is at a more advanced level that supplementary activities and enrichment exercises are most effective. The student is allowed to go beyond the text while still relating to it. He begins to see the story within a larger framework or context. The objective of this type of study is summarized by Dunning and Howes:

We want to develop in our students the power of abstraction, of generalization. We hope they will be able to apply general ideas to the reading they will do independently. We are not interested in making them into encyclopedias of particulars. It is not our ultimate aim that students understand connotation only...nor that they see the significance of the narrator as character only...But such particulars, practised and rehearsed, allow generalization to develop.⁸

Approaching the Issue of Quality. I happen to be a firm believer in comic books, gory adventures, nauseating melodramas and every other type of story that attracts young readers and encourages them to read. I also believe that good taste in literature has to be taught as it must be taught. There is a place for so-called trash literature. After all, most of *us* still enjoy reading adult trash. We read after all for different purposes (academic, economic, social, information, pleasure, etc) and this point should be stressed with our classes.

Our goal is to help young readers judge for themselves the relative quality of a story or any other piece of literature. We should avoid making such decisions for them. How often have you found yourself introducing a story by saying, 'I think you are going to like this,' or 'This is one of the best examples of ...'? Secondary students have a well developed sense of what they like and don't like. We must help them take the next step. When we ask why a student likes the story being told from a certain point of view, for example, we refer him to the text for his reasons. Teachers should not accept easy answers. 'Does the story seem more believable told from *that* point of view? What if it had been told in the first person instead?'

By covering as many stories as possible the teacher has opportunities to compare the use of dialogue, the approaches to characterization, implausible plots and the like and thereby to create dissatisfaction with stories that are not well done. We can help a student to realize that although the subject matter of a story may be very interesting to him, the characters may be too stereotyped or there may be an excess of coincidence. Again, *this is not done by providing the answers but by asking the correct questions.*

The study of literature is a civilising process through which we hope to develop the intellectual and emotional strength of our young. It is not the only means but still a very important one. In this country we have the additional responsibility of making good English readers out of children whose mother tongue is usually different. The short story is therefore an appropriate and stimulating introduction to the world of literature.

I have attempted to make a few suggestions about appropriate methods, the selection of suitable stories and the setting of priorities in teaching that might be worth trying in Singaporean classrooms. It is only a beginning but perhaps it will lead to more exchanges of ideas among teachers and eventually to the development of better readers in our secondary schools.

NOTES

- 1 C B Paulston and M N Bruder, *Teaching English as a Second Language: Techniques and Procedures* (Cambridge, Mass: Winthrop Publishers, 1976)
- 2 For further reference see: John Haskell, "Refining the Cloze Procedure for English as a Second Language," (*English Record*, Winter, 1974); John Oller, "Scoring Methods and Difficulty Levels for Cloze Tests of Proficiency in English as a Second Language," *Modern Language Journal*, LVI (March 1972), pp 151-158; and Jonathan Anderson, "Selecting a Suitable Reader: Procedures for Teachers to Assess Language Difficulty", *RELC Journal*, No. 2 (December 1971, pp 35-42.
- 3 Paulston and Bruder, p 161.
- 4 S Dunning and A B Howes, *Literature for Adolescents: Teaching Poems, Stories, Novels and Plays* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott Foresman, 1975).
- 5 Ibid., p 98.
- 6 N.B. In longer stories, read a section or two that illustrate an aspect of the story that will be highlighted in discussion.
- 7 For useful ideas on stories for specific teaching purposes and related methods see: Geraldine Murphy, *The Study of Literature in High School* (Waltham, Mass: Blaisdell Publishing Co., 1968).
- 8 Op cit., p 107.