

## THE USE OF SHORT-STORY IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO THE STUDENTS OF PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

### DEVLET LİSELERİNDE İNGİLİZCE ÖĞRETİMİNDE KISA ÖYKÜ KULLANIMI

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**ABSTRACT:** Although the studies on the use of literature in teaching English have been increasing abroad, in our country, particularly in public high schools, only English grammar is being taught. The students who are expected to memorise these rules cannot use English. The aim of this study is to exhibit why and how short-story can be used in order to teach English effectively and efficiently.

**Keywords:** teaching English, public high schools, short-story, graphic organizer

**ÖZET:** İngilizceyi etkili ve işlevsel olarak öğretebilmek için dil eğitiminde yazın kullanımıyla ilgili çalışmalar ve uygulamalar giderek yaygınlaşmaktadır. Ancak, ülkemizde özellikle devlet liselerinde, İngilizce derslerinde hala yalnızca İngilizce dilbilgisi kuralları öğretilmekte; bu kuralları ezberlemeleri beklenen öğrencilerse İngilizceyi kullanamamaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, öğrencilerin İngilizceyi etkili ve işlevsel bir biçimde kullanabilmeleri için kısa öykünün niçin ve nasıl kullanılmasını gerektiğini göstermektir.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** ingilizce öğretimi, devlet liseleri, kısa öykü, şemalaştırma

### 1. INTRODUCTION

For a long time, literature has not been included in the curriculum of teaching English since teaching a foreign language has been regarded as a matter of linguistics. “In sixties and seventies, in fact, there was a distinct reaction against the use of any literary English at all in the classroom, but now the pendulum has swung the other way ...” (Hill, 1994, p.7). As is mentioned by Jennifer Hill, there is a growing interest for the use of literature in EFL / ESL classes in recent years, and there are studies on how to use literature in EFL/ESL classes in the world; however, in Turkey, in public high schools, except for super high schools and Anatolian high schools, literature in English classes has been neglected.

The teachers of English in the above-mentioned schools concentrate on teaching grammar. After the explanation of the rules of grammar, teachers give their students mechanical drills, and the students are obliged to make the drills consisting of unrelated sentences. The students, therefore, memorise the rules. As for reading, special course hours are not devoted to develop the reading skills of the students. In classes, the passages in the course books, which are usually far from motivating the students, are studied. First, the vocabulary is given, and the students have to memorise them. Then, the teacher asks factual questions about the passage. The answers to the questions are easily seen in the passage. So, the students do not have to infer anything from the passage. Almost nothing is done to develop the students’ writing and speaking skills (1). In these schools, a series entitled *An English Course for Turks* published by the Ministry of National Education is used. Of this series, we have examined *An English Course for Turks: Intermediate 2(Lise 1)* (Dikmen, Özgüler, Gürman & Salman, 2003). Each lesson in the book introduces a new structure. Each lesson consists of a number of dialogues, a STUDY THESE section which presents the new structure in tables,

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(1) The problem described here is based on our observations in public high schools during the courses of ‘Practise Teaching’ and ‘School Experience.’

exercises, and a reading passage prepared to teach the new structure. In the *Work Book* (Özgüler ve Gürman, 2003), there are writing activities. However, they are all guided activities aiming at consolidating the new structure. As is seen, the book focuses on the structure, which justifies what we have observed in these schools. As is seen, teaching English is teacher-centred, and the students in these schools only memorise linguistic forms (grammar and vocabulary), instead of internalising them. As a result of such education, when the students are required to write or speak, they cannot produce anything. The aim of this study, therefore, is to illustrate why and how short-story can be used to teach English in public high schools so that the students can use English effectively and efficiently.

## 2. THE ADVANTAGES OF USING LITERATURE IN TEACHING ENGLISH

Language is not only langue, but also parole (Sell, 1995, p.12). Teaching a foreign language, therefore, is an act of teaching and developing the reading, speaking, writing and listening skills of students as well as introducing the culture of the society within which the target language is spoken so that our students can understand what language actually means, instead of what it tells. Roger Sell (1995, p.8) points out that “From the point of view of language education, the most important implication is that a knowledge of linguistic form – of words and grammar- is not enough. For the purposes of both comprehension and production, a learner also needs to develop a fully internalised grasp of the social and cultural environments within which the language in question is actually used”. He adds as well that “We know what the language means because, in certain types of context and language use within the culture, certain signifieds are associated with certain signifiers, and because language is used in certain ways in certain situational contexts” (Sell, 1995, p.9). In order to develop students’ comprehension and production skills, literary works seem to be the most suitable materials. Jennifer Hill (1994) mentions the reasons for using literature as extensive reading as follows:

- . the possibility of internalising the language and reinforcing points previously learned
  - . a genuine language context and a focal point for the students in their own efforts to communicate
  - . motivation
- Literature study can also provide a range of texts and an introduction to the many different varieties of English (p. 7).

The same reasons are true for intensive reading as well.

Similarly William Littlewood (2000) emphasizes the importance of the use of literature in EFL classes as follows:

A major problem of language teaching in the classroom is the creation of an authentic situation for language. A language classroom, especially one outside the community of native speakers, is isolated from the context of events and situations which produce natural language. In the case of literature, language creates its own context. The actual situation of the reader becomes immaterial as he or she takes on what D. W. Harding calls ‘the role of the onlooker’, looking on the events created by language. These events create, in turn, a context of situation for the language of the book and enable it to transcend the artificial classroom situation (p. 179).

Since the students in Turkey are far from the societies in which English is used as a native language, they do not have any opportunities to see various uses of English. In this case, literary works are precious sources to exhibit the various uses of English.

### **3. WHY SHORT-STORY?**

Although the use of literature is beneficial for students, some objections may be raised against its use in public high schools due to overcrowded classes, overloaded syllabus and limited time. These are, of course, really important problems met in public high schools in Turkey. Nevertheless, literary works should be included in the syllabus of teaching English when we think of the advantages of using literature in classroom. Taking the above-mentioned problems into consideration, it can be said that the deviated and figurative language of poetry, and the length of novel may create problems in such classes. Drama<sup>1</sup> can be used in classes, but it will be difficult to act out a play in crowded classes within limited course hours. So, among literary forms, short-story seems to be the most suitable one to use in public high schools.

The answer to the question of why short-story is the most suitable literary form to use in English classes lies in Edgar Allan Poe's definition of short-story. He defines it "as a narrative that can be read at one sitting of from one-half hour to two hours, and that is limited to 'a certain unique or single effect,' to which every detail is subordinate" (Abrams, 1970, p. 158). Since it is short, and aims at giving a 'single effect', there is usually one plot, a few characters; there is no detailed description of setting. So, it is easy for the students to follow the story line of the work.

The aim of using short-story in teaching English is to encourage the students to use what they have previously learnt, and therefore, it is a student-centred teaching. However, the role of the teacher is of great importance. The teacher must choose a suitable text to use in class, and should help her/his students understand the story with various activities. In the following part of this study, what criteria should be considered in choosing the text, and what activities may be used in teaching a short-story will be explained.

### **4. CHOOSING THE TEXT**

As is mentioned above, of literary genres, short-story seems to be the most suitable one to use in crowded classes due to its shortness. However, there is no strict rule to determine the length of short-stories; as well as very short stories, there are longer ones. Therefore, it is the duty of the teacher to choose a story short enough to handle within course hours. The shortness of the text is important for the students because they will see that they can read, understand and finish something in English, and it will give the students a feeling of achievement and self-confidence.

Beside the length of the work, there are some other important criteria that must be considered while choosing the text. Hill (1994, p. 15) points out the basic criteria to be kept in mind while choosing a literary text as follows:

- .the needs and abilities of the students
- .the linguistic and stylistic level of the text
- .the amount of background information required for a true appreciation of the material.

The vocabulary and sentence structure of the short-story to be studied must be suitable to the level of the students. The short-stories with archaic, slang, foreign words, and allusions, having sentences imitating the speech of a particular locality or ignorant people or foreigners must be avoided. Similarly, very long sentences are difficult for students to understand. As students will not understand these sentences and words, they will get bored and not read the work. Therefore, before giving the short-story, the teacher should decide the readability of the text. There are graded or simplified stories on the markets. Teacher may think that their sentence structure and vocabulary are suitable to the level of students. Even though the linguistic level of

these stories is appropriate, there is controversy concerning the use of graded or simplified materials. Penny Ur thinks (1996) that "... the use of 'authentic' text with less proficient learners is often frustrating and counter-productive" (p.150); therefore, she recommends the use of simplified text with less proficient readers (1996, p. 150). Jeremy Harmer (2001) suggests simplified books as extensive reading materials, claiming that "Such books succeed because the writers or adaptors work within specific lists of allowed words and grammar. This means that students at the appropriate level can read them with ease and confidence. At their best such books, despite the limitations on language, can speak to the reader through the creation of atmosphere and/or compelling plot lines" (p. 210). On the other hand, Christopher Brumfit (1985) mentions some drawbacks of graded materials as follows:

Colour and humour may be far more important than word level, information control may prevent readers from doing what all native-speaking readers do -allow approximate meanings..., and much EFL publishing policy may lead to the conclusion that foreign readers are ignorant, stupid and illiterate in their mother tongues. Readers for EFL/ESL need redundancy, need interest, need to be more difficult than learners can cope with linguistically, but not too much more, and above all need to be written by people who can write well. Otherwise they likely to train foreign learners in how *not* to read (p. 99).

Lilian Rönqvist and Roger Sell (1995) claim that "Even though a simplified text may be interesting enough from the point of view of content, pupils will sometimes complain that its language is boring and unenjoyable" (p. 45). Besides, if one of the aims of using short-story in class is to give the students a feeling of achievement and self confidence, we think, simplified or graded materials will not achieve it. This is because the students will be aware of the fact that the text they are reading is not written for native speakers, but for foreign language learners. Therefore, we recommend the use of authentic short-stories such as "The Unicorn in the Garden" by James Thurber (1995), instead of graded materials. "The Unicorn in the Garden" is a humorous story short enough to handle within the course hours, and its linguistic level is appropriate for the students of public high schools; moreover, it has other criteria to be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Cultural elements in a short-story should be taken into consideration while choosing the text. On the markets, there are the translations of Turkish stories. These translations are not suitable, since they do not reflect the culture of the target language. Furthermore, there are some short-stories by English or American writers set in countries other than England and the United States, and reflecting the culture of these countries. These stories will not be recommended to use in class, since the aim of using short-story is not to develop cross-cultural understanding with other countries, but, as mentioned above, to introduce the culture within which the language is spoken. Nevertheless, if a short-story is heavily loaded with the elements of the culture of English or American society, in this case, the students have to cope with these elements and they will not understand and probably enjoy the text. Therefore, these texts will not be suitable to use in class, either. So, the teacher should choose a short-story with minimised cultural values and attitudes, and explain them before studying the work.

Like all the other literary forms, a short-story may be realistic, naturalistic, fantastic, allegorical, modernist or post-modernist. Allegorical, modernist or post-modernist short-stories will be difficult for students as these short-stories will require detailed background knowledge. When modernist or post-modernist short-stories are chosen, students will not understand the psychological realities or other experimental elements in them, and will get bored. Thus, the teacher should choose a text, the story line of which can easily be followed by students.

A short-story may be about an experience, an action, a meeting, a conversation, the events of a day, or the revelation of a character or characters. M. H. Abrams (1970) divides short-stories into two as “story of incident” and “story of character” and defines them as follows:

In “story of incident”, the focus of interest is on the course and outcome of the events, as in Poe’s *The Gold Bug* or other tales of detection, in the stories of O. Henry, ... “Stories of character” focus on the revelation of a state of mind and motivation, or of moral qualities. In some stories of character by the Russian master the form, Chekhov, nothing more happens than an encounter and conversation between two people (p. 158).

Of the two, story of incident seems to be more appropriate to use in English classes because the students will be curious about the outcome of the events, curiosity will make them read and finish the work.

Bearing in mind the criteria discussed so far, the teacher may choose a humorous story as the one mentioned above, or a short-story, the major character of which is a child or teenager such as “Samuel” by Grace Paley (1995). Sandra Lee McKay (2001, p. 322) and Wilga Rivers (1968, p. 230) point out that students read and enjoy a text if the subject-matter of the text is relevant to their life experience and interests. Teachers need not to select the material from the canons of famous writers. There are short-stories written for teenagers. Although they are written for native speakers, “one way or another, they are directly relevant to the life experience, thoughts, emotions, and dreams of young people” (Rönnqvist and Sell 1995, p. 44). Thus, the short-stories for teenagers are important sources for teachers.

## 5. HOW TO USE SHORT-STORY

In this part, “Samuel” by Grace Paley (1995) will be used in order to illustrate the activities to be suggested. The story is about Samuel and his friends playing in the subway. The female passengers look at them anxiously while the male passengers remember their childhood. A lady warns them, but the children do not mind her. Then, a well-intentioned man pulls the emergency cord. Samuel falls down because of the sudden break, and dies. His mother gives birth to other boys. However, none of them resembles Samuel.

After the choice of the text, the teacher should produce activities to help the students understand the text. The short-story to be studied must be assigned to the students previously. This is because while reading a text for the first time, students focus on the structural meaning. “Understanding structural meaning is, of course, a prerequisite to penetrating any text” (Rivers and Temperley, 1978, p. 204). However, each student’s reading and understanding speed is not the same, and the course hours are limited in public high schools. If the students read the chosen text beforehand, they will understand the surface meaning or, at least, have an idea about the subject matter of the story. For the best use of the allocated time, the students must read the text before the class meeting. Before reading the text in class, the teacher should give very brief information about the writer in order that the students can see the writer in the context of her/his time.

After the information about the writer, as pre-reading activities, the teacher may ask questions about daily life of the students. These questions, of course, must be related with the subject matter of the short-story. In our example, the teacher may ask his/her students what games they play, where they usually play, if they have ever seen a subway. Following these general questions, the teacher tells that the subway train in this story is travelling from Manhattan to the Bronx, and explains the tracks and trains of the subway system. By doing so, the teacher provides a schema for a better understanding of the text. Besides providing a schema, the teacher achieves two important aims in terms of language teaching as well: creating a real context to make the students speak, and introducing the culture of the target culture.

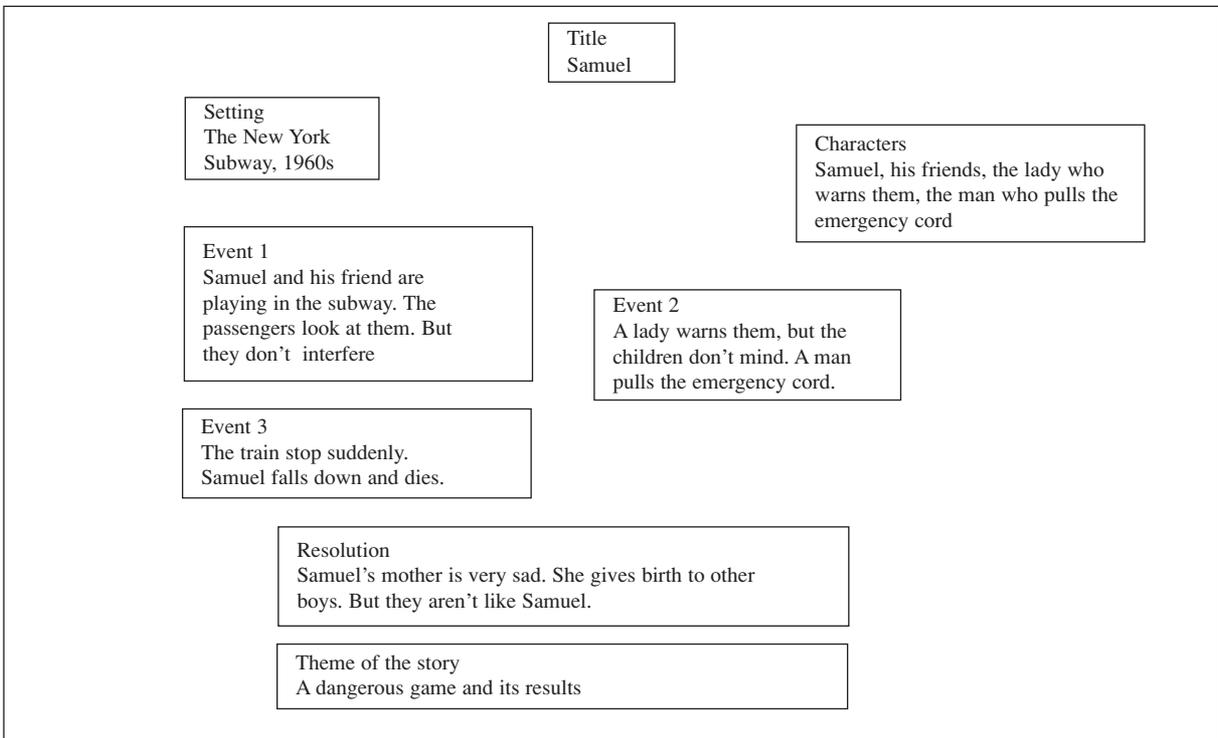
After the pre-reading activities, while reading the text in class, the students may find some sentences long or difficult to understand or there may really be a long and complicated sentence. It is because, no matter how the teacher tries, it is difficult to find a work free from a complicated sentence. In this case, the teacher should help the students, either paraphrasing or acting out or drawing. Otherwise the students will be frustrated by the language of the literary work.

Following the reading of the text, the teacher may use a graphic organizer so that the students can comprehend the story better. A graphic organizer is “a visual aid that displays the chunks of information to be studied” (Crandall, Jaramillo, Olsen & Peyton, 2002, p. 2). A story map in particular will help students understand the components of the story. Crandall et al. (2002) describe a story map as follows: “A story map is one example of a graphic organizer. A story map breaks down the components of a story- characters, setting, and dialogue in a series of events or conflicts leading to a resolution-into chunks of text that can help students organize and comprehend the events of the story” p. 2). Crandall et al. (2002) explain the advantages of using graphic organizers as follows:

Graphic organizers can help teachers clarify their instructional goals. Teachers can ask themselves what they want their students to learn and how they can display this information graphically to help their students connect ideas...Discussions might take place as students clarify the connections, clear up misconceptions, and come to consensus on the structure of the map (p. 2).

Using a story map, teacher may encourage his/her students to infer meaning from the text, and is able to develop students’ reading and speaking skills. Below is an example of a story map.

### Story map



adapted from the story-map by Crandall et al.(2002, pp. 2-3)

Graphic organisers may be used to illustrate the relation between the characters or to find the peculiarities of the characters. Teachers may use ready-made graphic organizers existing on such web sites as <http://www.writedesignonline.com/organizers> or may create theirs according to their own purposes. The

teacher asking suitable questions helps students to fill the boxes in the organizer. So, the students have to infer answers to these questions from the work. These activities help students develop their reading and speaking skills.

After the analysis of the short-story, if the teacher wants s/he may bring the grammatical rules s/he has taught beforehand to the students' attention. By doing so, s/he may intensify these rules. Then, the teacher may step outside the work, and may ask questions relating the problems or themes in the work to real life experiences of the students; for example, if they have ever played dangerous games, if they have ever played in streets or railways, what they will do when they see children playing dangerous games, what was their mother's reaction when they injured themselves, if they have ever done something with good intentions and bad results. Since answers to these questions will not be right or wrong, the students will have a chance to speak more freely.

In order to develop the students' writing skills, the teacher may want his students to write a composition if they have had an experience similar to the subject matter of the work, or write another story using the characters in the story, or write a different ending to the work. Of course, different activities may be produced according to the purpose of the teacher to develop the students' language skills.

## 5. RESULT

Taking the discussion above into consideration, it can be said that short-story can be used to develop students' language skills. Therefore, we recommend the use of short-story in public high Schools supplement to course books. In this way, instead of students knowing the rules but not being able to use English, we can have students both comprehending and producing the language.

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