

## **Teaching and Learning Vocabulary through Short Stories**

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### **Abstract**

Second language learning starts with learning and using its words. When learners know how to use the basic or common words of the target language, they can communicate better and thus master the receptive and productive skills of the language. In the light of this interpretation, English instructors started using literary works to expand the learners' vocabulary and achieve the learning outcomes. In this regard, the use of short stories for vocabulary acquisition and instruction is an effective strategy that help both learners and teachers achieve their goals and purposes. This study is descriptive delving into the utilization of short stories in teaching and learning vocabulary. For language learners, their level is determined by the words that they know, both their meaning and use. In addition, it is not enough to know the dictionary meaning of the words alone. Words have two levels of meaning: literal and emotive meaning. Literal meaning is the denotative or surface meaning that learners learn from dictionaries. On the other hand, emotive meaning is the connotations or implications that the words signify. They are also called textual and contextual meaning. The study suggests that both levels should be taught as both are used in both written and spoken discourses.

Keywords: Language Skills, Material Adaptation, Short Story, Vocabulary Teaching and Learning

### **Introduction**

As a medium of communication, language is an important tool for people to contact and interact with each other in their daily activities. Today, learning English language has become a crucial need due to its presence in all aspects of our contemporary life. In this sense, English is used as a global language in the major areas of the 21st century. This encourages young and foreign people to start learning that language. Moreover, English language instructors use different techniques to help language learners master the four skills that are: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Recently, English instructors started using literature to help students expand their vocabulary and to achieve the learning outcomes. In this regard, learning and teaching vocabulary through the utilization of short stories is an effective strategy for both vocabulary acquisition and instruction. As

Abdalrahman (2021) states “literature helps learners learn the meaning of the words in context” (p.4). Respectively, short stories should be used to motivate learners to enrich their word bank and master the accuracy of meaning and use of the words, used in speaking and writing. Learners must also know the exact meaning and usage of the words if they want to understand English textbooks, via reading, and native speakers, via listening. Thus, words are the essential and integral part in the proficiency and fluency of the language skills. Words are used by people to express their emotions and give voice to their thoughts.

Instructors and learners have difficulty in the instruction and acquisition of English vocabulary. Part of the challenge lies in the undeniable fact that learners have different learning styles. By the same token, language instructors also have different teaching styles when considering teaching vocabulary. In this study, short stories are introduced as an effective material for both teaching and learning vocabulary. Consequently, this study is of great value for language learners and teachers to see the benefits of using short stories in improving students’ vocabulary. Construing the advantages of English short stories, they are good and accurate samples for applying and practicing the theoretical aspects of language learned from linguistic courses. Therefore, language instructors should try to apply the linguistic rules to literary texts.

The purpose of this study is to help teachers and students be acquainted with instructing and acquiring vocabulary through short stories. It also tries to show how short stories are good materials for language classrooms for achieving the targeted purpose. The findings can be used as a guide, dependently or independently, by the students and teachers as they will ponder upon many techniques in vocabulary expansion. To achieve the purpose of this research paper and address the use of short stories in language learning and instruction, this project aims to answer the following three questions:

- What are the benefits of using short stories in teaching and learning vocabulary?
- Can short stories be effective in both learning and teaching vocabulary?
- What are the challenges of using short stories in the ELT?

### **Teaching and Learning Vocabulary through Short Stories**

Lexical expansion is the core in being accurate and fluent in the four skills of language. Without knowing, understanding, and learning the accurate use of the words, effective communication will not take place. The introduction of short stories in the ELT classrooms has gained the attention of language and literary scholars. Short stories are vital tools for vocabulary instruction because they are a good source of inspiration and aspiration. Words can heal people if used positively and wound them if used negatively. In other words, the vocabulary that speakers and writers use can create a positive communication or a negative one, miscommunication, based on the words used by speakers

or writers to express themselves. Due to this fact, teaching vocabulary through short stories has different goals and purposes. On the one hand, the instructor will evoke and provoke the learner through some specific words used in the tale and instill a feeling of pleasure and beauty. The joys of such an experience motivate the students to read more and engage them in contextualizing the meaning of the text. Linking the text and its context encourages the students to learn not only the dictionary meaning, literal or denotative, of the words, but also the implications and associations, connotative or emotive meaning, that these words suggest. As a result, language instructors can teach figurative language whenever emotive meaning of the words is involved. They can teach simile, metaphor, metonymy, personification, synecdoche, imagery, irony, and symbols. All of these will inspire them to learn different uses of words not just depending on denotative meaning alone.

Teaching vocabulary should serve the development of the four language skills. Ghanbari and Marzban (2014, p. 3855) mention that “vocabulary can lead the learners to be more confident in using the language.” Basically, the words that students learn in classrooms help them to read and listen, and to speak and write better. Learners should practice by using the new words that they are learning. Words are dead if not used, the common saying. Once they are used, they become alive. Wei and Attan (2013, p. 1) claim that “upon knowing a sufficient number of words, learners would be able to chain these words together to construct meaning for communication.” The ‘chain of these words’ is mastered in two different ways. First, teachers should advise their students to learn the basic sentence patterns. Or at least teach them the basic grammar. Second, the language instructors must guide their learners regarding the exposure to the native language materials. In this regard, short stories or adapted short stories into animations or movies work best here. As Barton (2001, p. 88) mentions “And, the more they read, the more their vocabularies will grow.” When students have enough words, they will be able to read more. Once they do this, they will learn and understand better. Without enough words, comprehension is not going to happen. Vanisree and Charyulu (2015) insert that “vocabulary creates opportunities for the learners to communicate effectively in English. It also helps the learners to absorb the value expressed in literature and also stimulates the interest in the extensive reading of literature” (p.39). Again, students learn new words if they are exposed to authentic materials. According to Wei and Attan (2013, p. 2), when students are exposed to a plethora of input, this will contribute to “vocabulary gain.” Based on what these scholars have written, the instruction of vocabulary works to strengthen both receptive and productive skills.

Literary texts are imaginative and creative writings. The invented language in these works opens unlimited opportunities for language instructors to choose suitable materials for their students. Mart (2016, p. 82) explains that “literature is a rich source of meaningful input for language learners, and it is useful to enhance language proficiency.” Teachers can benefit from the ‘rich source of meaningful input’ of literature in their material adaptation.

When integrating literary genres in ELT, material adaptation is very crucial. Teachers should consider the level of their students and their interests. Students can show their interest in the selection of the materials. They can be given more than one choice. In case, if they do not like one short story, they will choose another one. Material selection based on learners' level and interest serves five distinct purposes. First, learners show more engagement in learning. As a result, they participate more, will be more active and energetic. Second, the first benefit works to encourage them better. Engagement will lead to more encouragement. Third, learners feel motivated once they are engaged and encouraged positively. Fourth, the above-mentioned will work to stimulate them in the process of learning the language. And they will use all their efforts to show better. Finally, students will learn how to synthesize. They acquire specific skills to link different ideas and create something new. Short stories are like a cycle. They have beginning, middle, and end. In this cycle, learners will read what is going to happen to this character. By linking the events from the start to the end, they will learn how to synthesize the ideas in the tale. Altun (2018, p. 119) adds that "literary texts use more connectives for connecting ideas." There are learners who suffer from not knowing how to put the words in the correct order. These students also do not like studying the rules of grammar. For such learners, short stories are the best medium where they will learn the order of words, and later the order of the sentences into a coherent shape.

Recently, there is a new teaching method called Short Story Based Language Teaching (SSLBT). According to Khatib and Seyyedrezaei (2017, p. 12), using this method in ELT has many benefits. They state that one of the advantages of the method is "building up extensive vocabulary." If the stories are selected wisely, students will not leave any word in the work unexamined. They will search its meaning and relate it to the other words, unconsciously, to explore the expansion of the idea or event through the other words, like a chain. Short stories help teachers to do this 'chain' in many ways. Through the utilization of short stories, language instructors can help the students learn some strategies to expand the store of their words.

Vanisree and Charyulu (2015) mention some of these 'strategies' as follows. Some of them are: "associated words, formation of words, formation of compound words, synonyms and antonyms, families of words, and idioms and collocations, etc." (p.41). The techniques are very important ones to teach vocabulary. The instructor can write a word and talk about it in a few different sentences. How can teachers use these to expand students' vocabulary? Well, it is better to give examples about each strategy. The first strategy is 'associated words.' For example, there are key words in stories where other words are related to them. One tale may be about a garden. In the story, learners see a lot of different words that directly or indirectly explain the word garden. Let us clarify here. In a short story, there is usually a good character, hero or protagonist, and a bad character, antagonist. Students can be taught about the words that describe the protagonist, and the

other words that describe the antagonist. This association is a good technique on how words are related and interrelated to each other. The second strategy is ‘formation of words.’ In morphology, it is called the process of word formation. Or how words are formed in a language. The instructor can deepen the discussion based on the students’ level. For elementary and intermediate levels, prefixes and suffixes are helpful. The instructor writes a prefix or suffix and ask the students to say the words that end in that prefix or suffix. Later, different meanings and uses should be explained. For example, there is the word gardener in the story. The word garden should be explained and then the gardener. It is to help the learners that these, prefixes and suffixes, do change the meaning of the word. Once the meaning is changed, the use of the word will change too. ‘Synonyms’ and ‘antonyms’ are two other strategies to help learners expand their vocabulary. Synonyms are of great value for elementary and intermediate learners especially for speaking and writing. Sometimes when a learner tries to speak or write, they will forget a word. But if they know a synonymous word, then they can immediately use it. Another good technique is using families of words. For instance, the instructor will write create and ask the students about its meaning and parts of speech. Once they give the correct meaning, they should use it in a sentence. Then the instructor can write creative, creator, creativity, recreate, created, creating, creation, and creature. These are all in the word family. The same should be done about all these words. That means the parts of speech, their meanings, and their uses in a sentence. Of course, idioms and collocations can be taught through highlighting or underlying or circling in a short story. Thus, all these strategies are very significant in Short Story Based Language Teaching to help the learners expand their vocabulary.

When students learn the basic or common words, it is a good idea to teach them the levels of meaning. They should know that there two levels of meaning: denotative and connotative. Abdalrahman (2021, p. 4) inserts that “in literary texts, learners should be acquainted with denotation and connotation, language goes beyond the surface meaning in literary texts.” Denotation is the explicit meaning while connotation is implicit. On the one hand, through the explicit meaning of the words, learners will understand what the story is about, from the textual level. On the other hand, through emotive meaning, they will learn about the contextual meaning that resides within the text via the implications, associations, and suggestions that the words create. Abdalrahman (2021) adds that emotive or connotative meaning is achieved when the words are “placed in their historical, socio-cultural, and political contexts” (4). Another technique of explaining the two levels of meaning is using figurative language. Familiarizing the learners with this will help them to ‘go beyond the dictionary meaning’ of the words and think about the implicit meaning. By the same token, linking the meaning of a text, short story, to its context, socio-cultural and political background, is of three stages. First, learners must learn and know the literal meaning. Second, they should understand the emotive or figurative meaning. If these two are achieved, then they will realize the contextual meaning resides under the surface

meaning. Vocabulary teaching is effective when the students are involved and motivated to depend on themselves. Indeed, instructors should help language learners to use their own techniques if needed. According to Ghanbari and Marzban (2014, p. 3855), the teaching of vocabulary is successful when the learners are “allowed to use their own strategies to learn the vocabulary.”

At this point, it is better to distinguish between the traditional and communicative approach of teaching vocabulary. Traditionally, students are given a list of words to be memorized. In fact, the memorization of words is not enough, but teachers should guide their students to learn the correct spelling of the words, their meanings, and their uses, or different uses. After gaining knowledge of the basic words, learners should be familiarized with parts of speech. This familiarization is important for two reasons. First, by knowing nouns, verbs and adjectives, students will be acquainted with the functions of the words that they have learnt. That means they will know whether the words are names, actions, or descriptions. Instructors can deepen the discussion about nouns and verbs. This is done by explaining the types of nouns. Are the nouns used in the short story proper or common nouns? Are they concrete or abstract? And are the verbs status verbs or action verbs? Second, the next step will be introducing sentence patterns, or how to put these words in the correct order. Through vocabulary discussion inside the classroom, students’ knowledge about the usage of words in the accurate position must be developed.

The advantages of using short stories in English language teaching and learning:

- Short stories are authentic materials.
- Linguistic rules should be applied to authentic materials.
- Short stories are engaging and evocative.
- They are stimulating and provocative.
- They portray different human conditions.
- They externalize the internal feelings and thoughts of characters.
- There are different levels of short stories.
- With short stories, teaching can be flexible.
- Morphology, implicitly, can be taught to show students see how words or new words are formed in languages.
- Short stories are about an event that happens to a character.
- Creating a graphic organizer can help students expand their vocabulary more.
- Students apply their own personal style when interacting with words, images, and

symbols.

- The elements of short stories can be taught as aid for vocabulary mastery.
- Learners will learn that words are used in different places to explain different emotional, intellectual, and social conditions.
- Through enough vocabulary, second language learners acquire the skills to embody their emotions and thoughts in the second language.
- Languages are identities, and the words paint the body and soul of the learner language.

### **The Challenges of Using Short Stories in ELT**

There are certain points that language instructors should consider when using literature, or specifically short stories, in ELT. In some literary texts, there is a lot of graphological deviation, so it is better to avoid these materials. The deviations can be in spelling of the words, sentence structure, capitalization, and punctuation. Sometimes authors have their own style of forming new words. In addition, the texts chosen should not have vernacular language or a lot of slang and informal language. This is since the learners will absorb these spellings, structures, and deviant styles as formal and academic style, especially for elementary and intermediate learners. All of these happen without realizing that literary language and formal language are two different registers. It happens that they claim that this is the right style because that author has used it somewhere in his/her work. So, most of the times learning without knowing and understanding the linguistic rules leads to confusion and creates problems for the learners. Therefore, it is the duty of language instructors to select the short stories carefully to avoid demotivation and anxiety from the language learners' part. Moreover, the content of the stories must match their age and interest. Above all, the meaning of the work should be suitable for them as cultures are different.

### **Recommendations for Teaching and Learning Vocabulary**

The researcher recommends 4000 Essential English Words, six volumes, as a self-study textbook for language learners. Language instructors can show their students how to start and what to do. For elementary and intermediate learners, they can guide them through explaining one or two units, then let them continue, as a self-study attempt to expand their vocabulary. Considering teaching vocabulary, how to Teach Vocabulary and Techniques in Teaching Vocabulary are two useful sources for language instructors. For the selection of the short stories, it is better to select the texts from contemporary literature, and children's literature can be a suitable choice. As for language learners, these series can be

used to achieve the goals mentioned above. Cambridge English Readers, Macmillan Readers, and The Oxford Bookworms Library and Dominoes are abridged short tales and they have six levels. To help learners know their levels before selecting a story, the Oxford bookworms provides an online test so that learners know their level and choose a text before start reading. On the website, the other details are provided about the test.

### Conclusion

Short stories can help language learners to improve their language skills. In terms of vocabulary expansion, stories are authentic materials, language instructors should expose their students to these materials, that stimulate learners to delve into both the form and content of the language utilized. By integrating short stories in the language courses, especially language skills, the environment of the class will be less abstract. When words are learned in their context, they can be absorbed better. By using short stories, instructors will teach vocabulary more proficiently and the four skills of language will be integrated at the same time.

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