

An Integrated Approach to Teaching Creative Writing

By Darren Elliott

To some extent, academic and business English texts follow certain rhetorical patterns that learners can be taught to emulate. By utilizing authentic, formulaic language and fixed expressions, the teacher can create a scaffold for the learner to write their own original business emails or persuasive essays. On the other hand, finding and utilizing appropriate models is more challenging when teaching creative writing. Narrative fiction may appear to follow certain rules, but in reality, there are far more ways to write a short story than an academic paper.

Traditionally, foreign language departments in Japanese universities were populated by specialists in either linguistics or literature. In recent years, however, market forces and government policies have combined to shift the focus towards language learning, evidenced by the increasing number of language centers, TEFL-qualified instructors, and international faculty (Wadden & Hale, 2019). As a result, authentic L2 literature study is being overtaken in popularity by extensive reading (ER) in many contexts. According to T. Robb (personal communication, March 30, 2020), there has been a significant rise in the usage of MReader (an online system for recording ER activity), from 97 schools in 2014 to 156 in 2019 – more than 10 percent of the tertiary institutions in the country. In addition, ER implementation is not restricted to language majors but is also gaining a foothold in STEM and other contexts (Yamashita, 2013; Matsuda et al., 2018).

In ER, the reader is expected to read a large volume of self-selected material at an easily comprehensible linguistic level, and there is certainly growing evidence (see Nakanishi's 2015 meta-study) to suggest that this technique is effective in raising both language proficiency and learner motivation. Whilst I believe that ER has great value, in this article, I will argue that English literature still has a place in the language classroom, and that an integrated reading and writing approach can bring a deeper understanding within reach for many language learners. I contend that reading and re-reading short authentic fiction, reacting to it, and replicating it, can improve a learner's proficiency as both a writer and a reader.

In this article, I will demonstrate the use of authentic short fiction to assist learners in producing their own English language literature. Student reflections, gathered at the end of the course, are included throughout the article to show the students' perceptions of this process.

Context

I work for the language center of a private university in central Japan. The majority of our work focuses on first-year required classes for students from each of our university's departments. Our university operates a quarter system, with classes meeting twice a week for eight weeks each quarter. The language center sets goals (as can-do statements) and guidelines for each class but also encourages teacher autonomy in assessment methods and material selection.

The class I would like to discuss in this article is a first-year literacy class from the Department of British and America Studies. The institution requires an ER component and the production of a writing portfolio, with the intention of integrating reading and writing and building towards the short story as a product in quarter four. Throughout quarters one to three learners read and react to short stories emotionally and intellectually as a class. In quarter four they return to these now familiar short stories and assess them structurally and stylistically, in order to produce their own short fiction.

Task vs. Extensive Reading

Any authentic L2 text can be utilized to teach and practice a foreign language. Thus, any text is a suitable base for a task. In ER, on the other hand, the comprehensibility of the text is key – it should be simple enough for the learner to read without the support of a dictionary – and the only task is to read as much as possible. Yet, to some extent, ER approaches reading purely as a vehicle for language input and lacks quality control and critical engagement with the text.

Balancing these two approaches leaves the teacher with something of a dilemma. Authentic literature is not easily accessible to language learners, and yet oversimplifying tasks and activities fails to exploit the rich language and cultural content it contains to the fullest extent. The teacher needs to compromise by finding more accessible authentic literature and by scaffolding more challenging tasks.

Material Selection and Readability

There are a number of factors that influence readability, and I took these into account in selecting the short stories we used for material in this class. As the teacher makes his or her text selection, I would suggest that the following aspects of the short story are important to consider.

Firstly, the cultural schema. Contemporary stories that lean towards the universal, rather than the culturally specific, are more accessible and relatable. However, cultural context can afford many learning opportunities. It is always wise to activate schemata before approaching a longer text – pre-teaching historical, geographical, linguistic, or cultural points that will enable learners to better appreciate the text – but if the teacher does select a more culturally "alien" story, this becomes particularly important.

Another alternative is "nativization," or the re-writing of a text with localized reference points. As teachers working in Turkish universities, Erten and Razi (2009) took a short story set in New York and simply changed the names of people, places, and foods to Turkish ones, finding that this alone was sufficient to increase comprehension and reading fluency in their Turkish students. In my class students performed this task themselves, by adapting the rural Ugandan story *The Winner* to a Japanese context.

The second important factor in comprehension is the plot structure. Linear, chronologically organized stories are easier for language learners to follow. Familiar folktales or fairy tales are often an excellent starting point to show important plot phases such as exposition, inciting incident, climax, and resolution. I recommend Yorke (2013) or Booker (2005) for more detailed and thorough investigations of plot structures.

The third story feature to take into account is the character relationship structure. The number of characters and the complexity of their relationship will certainly affect the readability of a story. It is also easier for students to keep track of the characters if they are distinct from one another. Readers can distinguish and separate characters by name, gender, personality traits, and physical characteristics. Both plot and character relationships can be mapped graphically while reading to facilitate understanding.

Although these factors should be considered carefully by the teacher when selecting texts, it is only to ensure that the stories are accessible to the students. Initially at least, learners should not be distracted by too much complexity. First readings should be “point-driven” (Vipond & Hunt, 1984), in search of the message or deeper meaning of the story.

From Reading to Writing

In the class under discussion, learners are asked to produce two texts per quarter, and each writing task is connected to a short story thematically. For example, after reading Shirley Jackson’s classic American Gothic tale of a traditional ritual, students write a descriptive essay on a Japanese festival or tradition. Vonnegut’s dystopian society serves as a prompt for a persuasive essay arguing for or against equality (same-sex marriage or animal testing are popular topics). Students also conduct discussions based on each of the short stories and thematically related news articles.

Table 1. Short Stories and Related Tasks

Short Story	Theme	Connected Writing Tasks
<i>The Winner</i> - Barbara Kimenyi	Family	'nativisation', compare and contrast essay (Ugandan / Japanese family life)
<i>Separate Ways</i> - Higuchi Ichiyo	Love	letter to an advice columnist, with response
<i>The Lottery</i> - Shirley Jackson	Superstition	descriptive essay (a Japanese festival or cultural event)
<i>Taste</i> - Roald Dahl	Honesty	complaint letter
<i>Harrison Bergeron</i> - Kurt Vonnegut	Equality	persuasive essay (animal rights, same-sex marriage, affirmative action)
<i>Robbie</i> - Isaac Asimov	Technology	cause and effect essay (how a particular technology has changed / will change the world)
<i>The Monkey's Paw</i> - O. Henry		plot structure, descriptive writing
<i>The Last Night of the World</i> - Ray Bradbury		advancing the plot and creating character with dialogue

In the fourth and final quarter, however, the emphasis switches to creative writing and short stories written by the students. At this stage, we return to the short stories we have been reading and analyze the stylistic features in more depth.

Expectations

It is important to recognize the strengths and limitations of the learners you are working with. My students are first-year students, and this short story will be the longest thing they have ever written. In addition, they are eighteen years old and may have a limited life experience. And, realistically, some people are naturally more creative or imaginative than others. This is a typical reaction from a student struggling to start an original short story:

K's Reflection Task

I have not written any story before and it was difficult to think of an idea. I always came up with an idea from what I watched and read and it was difficult to think of an original.

Inevitably, many students’ initial ideas will be drawn from popular fiction (TV, film, or folktales). With this in mind, there is still a lot that students can achieve. It is important to focus on what elements of writing can feasibly be taught and what a reasonably proficient student may be able to put into practice.

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Plot

As mentioned previously, short stories with linear narratives and easily deconstructed plot structures are a valuable resource, providing a model for learners’ writing. We revisited each of the short stories we had already read but in particular to Kurt Vonnegut’s short story *Harrison Bergeron* for its clear examples of a five-act structure. After this task, each of the learners was able to produce their own skeletal plots and to present them to one another for feedback before embarking on early drafts of their story. In order to hone the plots of the writer’s short stories, we practiced the “elevator pitch” – a summary of the main character and story in the time it takes to go from the basement to the seventh floor. In a role play, the screenwriters pitched to the producers and received notes on the strengths and weaknesses of their stories. This was viewed positively by the learners:

A's Reflection Task

The most useful thing was the elevator pitch. We practiced telling our short story to my partner for between 30 seconds and 1 minute, but it was so difficult to summarise clearly in a short time.

Once the learners were comfortable with formulaic plot structures, the more adept were able to subvert it – particularly by playing with chronology. Here is one student’s feedback on her peer’s writing:

M's Reflection Task

I enjoyed U's story the most because in her story, time does not go straight. The past and the future switch several times. I wrote my story just along with time, but she

uses "time goes back to three years ago..." or something like that. It's unique for me and I think that kind of technique makes (a) story more interesting and attractive.

An interesting task at this stage is to have students swap papers and draw a four panel comic version of their partner's story. This can quite quickly show the writer if the story actually reads in the way it is intended to.

Person & Perspective

In my experience, students tend to write their early drafts in the third person. It is important to discuss the effect that choice has on a story. Most of the stories we read are written in the third person, but Roald Dahl narrates *Taste* in the first person. Tasks here were to rewrite sections of the model short stories (or their own) from another character's perspective. Students were initially surprised by what they had seen as an automatic writing choice in their own work, then took ownership to write a story from a more considered perspective. Writers were better able to justify their writing decisions after these tasks:

A's Reflection Task

I wrote in the first person because I wanted to focus on Yuki mainly and write change of her feeling.

Y's Reflection Task

I wanted to express my hero as a mysterious person, so I wrote the story from the heroine's eye. I chose the third person because I wanted to explain the situation naturally. My story is the reminiscence of the heroine, so I used past tense in almost all scenes.

Internal Logic & Tonal Consistency

It doesn't matter if something is possible in our world, provided it is consistent with the explicit or implicit rules of the world in the story. Even in fantasy worlds, characters must have believable motivations for their actions. Students are required to explain why their characters acted in certain ways. Writers must also be aware of the tone or mood they are trying to set. It can be very interesting to shift tone in the middle of a story, but this has to be handled deftly.

"Show, Don't Tell"

"Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass." — Anton Chekhov

Writers need to allow their characters to convey their emotional states through action and dialogue. Students tend to struggle with this at first, but each of the writers in our collection of short stories takes a different approach. Vonnegut uses reporting verbs to express the emotions of the characters. Dahl is masterful in his physical descriptions as a display for personal traits. Asimov, interestingly, is clinically direct – a useful reminder that "telling" can also work. Once again, the students return to the stories and find descriptive passages and dialogues that reveal characters' emotions without being explicit. One of the learners reported her reaction to Harrison Bergeron thus:

Y's Reflection Task

I think Harrison Bergeron had the strongest effect on me. It told me a lot of things. It was composed of many conversations, so I was drawn to the story. When I wrote my short story, I read it again as reference. It is a good example of "Show, don't tell". I could understand necessary things from the conversations and enjoyed guessing the characters' feeling.

Conclusion

Although it is not unusual to see language learning divided into the "four skills" of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, it is neither possible nor desirable to teach that way in reality. In this article, I have tried to show a way in which reading and writing instruction can complement one another, by using authentic literature as both a source and a product. I hope, too, that the importance of curriculum design is clear. Many of these activities would fill a lesson, but each task and text becomes more powerful through reuse and recycling in different ways and at different points throughout the course. The planning and execution of such a course does require effort on the part of both student and teacher, as writers require multiple drafts, probing questions, and plenty of well-chosen examples. However, the student's reflective tasks demonstrate increased confidence in their writing, and a better understanding of how to develop a story. This final comment shows a typical feeling of growth:

A's Reflection Task

In my first drafts, the situations of the story changed suddenly. Since my story was heart warming through the relationships between a girl and others, I needed to add some emotions. However, at first I just wrote down some situations changing. It was kind of boring. Then, I realised that relationships between people were not so easy, actually. To make my story more real, I added more emotions and struggling in each person. Through these processes, I could complete my final version. I was happy to see that I could describe the transaction of girl's feeling. In other words, I could describe how the girl grew up in my story.

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