

Using Short Stories in Teaching English for Engineering Students

Dr. K. Ponnari Lakshmi

Head of the English Department

Narasaraopeta Engineering College

Narasaraopet

India

Abstract

It is an indisputable fact that English language proficiency and communicative competence are indispensable for all the students to excel in the professional and personal fronts. Language Teaching through Literature has become a topic of research in the 20th century. Many researchers accept that literature is great tool to teach language to the foreign learners. But a few are sceptical about the use of Literature in enriching the Language Proficiency of the students. They raised some objections against the use of literature in schools and colleges due to overcrowded classes, overloaded syllabus and limited time. The answer for this is the short story which lends itself to effective classroom use for the integration of multiple skills due to its brevity, variety, simplicity and short narrative. Its benefits are manifold while using it in the classroom. It involves the learners emotionally, critically and intellectually captivating their attention. This paper examines the use of short stories in teaching English language to the engineering students and the advantages of using short story in the classes. It suggests the selection criteria of the short story in terms of the age of the students and how to make the students work with the material. While showing how to exploit a short story to develop language skills, a series of class room activities are discussed for the benefit of the language teachers taking a short story 'The Power of a Plate of Rice' as an example. Short stories serve the purpose of teaching not only language skills but also multiple other skills like creative thinking, imagination, problem solving skills, team spirit, confidence, cultural tolerance and empathy.

Key words: Literature, Short story, Brief, multiple skills, Selection, Effective in class room,

Using Stories in Teaching English

In learning any language stories play a vital role be it mother tongue or a foreign language learning. Children love both reading and listening stories as they transport them in to a fairy land where everything is beautiful, strange and sometimes unnatural and unrealistic. Stories grip them and they identify themselves with the characters. The grownups are no exception and they too like stories either in the books or in the form of films or TV serials. So stories are not just for children but for all of us. So stories can be used as a great tool to teach foreign language for they provide the teachers with rich and abundant variety.

Stories not only help us learn language but also guide us in our life. In a country like India learning and teaching values, ethics and morals take place since our child hood through stories. Stories are effective in socialization. They help us in developing problem solving skills as they pose many important questions in our life. They give suggestions to cope with problems. They are ideal in language learning as well as learning the culture of foreign lands. Learning through stories is also interesting and fun.

The focus of the paper is on teaching English to Engineering students. These students are less motivated to language learning and to motivate them is a Herculean task. Their concentration and focus is on learning technology but they require English language proficiency and communicative competence for procuring jobs in multinational companies and to sustain and excel in their careers. They are easily bored and very sensitive about their identity. They value friendship and their peer approval is more important to them than the attention of the lecturer. They have great capacity to learn and potentiality for creativity. So the major task for the teacher is to capture their passion for learning and sustain it in the language classes. The teachers have to keep an open mind and should be flexible to accommodate to the needs of all students as the levels of the students vary and also improve and update their skills time to time. The teacher also should exercise caution while dealing with the students and should not categorize them as good students and bad students. Language teaching should be linked up with the everyday interests of the students and teacher should act as a facilitator by not just following the question and answer method but eliciting student's responses to the texts in their own creative and imaginative way.

Selecting good teaching material suitable to the needs of the graduate students is also a great responsibility of the teacher because some stories with slang, foreign words and with an alien culture and with a dialect particular to one group of people are not suitable to cater to the needs of the students. While selecting the texts that can be used in the class rooms the

interests, language proficiency, age should be taken into consideration in order not to bore the students. When the students fail to understand the text it is difficult to sustain their interest in the classes. So the teacher should consider the readability of the text before incorporating them in the curriculum. Hill points out three criteria for choosing a text: 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.

Another reason for using stories just as a part of curriculum is that the engineering students have only three lessons of fifty minute session per week. And short stories can be easily taught within that time limit because of their brevity. According to Collie and Slater Using of literature in language teaching is very advantageous for it offers four benefits: authentic material, cultural enrichment language advancement, and personal growth. Many researchers agree that language skills can be acquired by the incorporation of short stories in the curriculum.

The Advantages of Using Short Stories:

- Short stories are interesting, motivating, challenging and also enjoyable.
- They allow exposure to new vocabulary in varied interesting and motivating contexts.
- They help learning grammatical structures in an interesting way.
- They boost the creativity and imagination of the students.
- They simulate the imagination and develop prediction techniques.
- They expose the students to everyday English.
- They reinforce the thinking strategies like comparing, classifying and planning.
- They provoke a response of sadness, mirth, excitement and anticipation which help to develop positive thinking and emotional intelligence in the learners.
- As they are brief they can be completed within an hour in the class.
- They can be used for all levels like basic, intermediate and advanced.
- They give rise to team building activities like group discussions and debates in the classes.
- They are a rich source for learning human societies and different communities and complex cultures offering a great insight into life.

Short story for Language Skills Development

The Short story “The Power of a Plate of Rice” is written by Ifeoma Okoye an African writer in simple diction. This is the story of Cheta Adu who is an utterly helpless victim of Gender Discrimination. She works in a school where Mr. Azia is the principal. He doesn't like women teachers. He has not paid Cheta Adu for four months because she has taken leave with no prior intimation. She is a mathematics teacher and has two sons and her husband died in an accident. Her mother -in-law is also a widow, lives with her. Her son Rapulu has fallen ill and she has no money either for his medical treatment or for his food. She begs the headmaster Mr. Aziza to release her salary but he denied issuing her salary bill. One day she follows him to his quarters and eats the food arranged for him on the table without asking his permission. Finally Mr. Aziza releases her salary. The story is quite intriguing capturing the attention of the students with its living picture of people, places and events. It also teaches students how to fight for the rights without violence but with nonviolence, persuasion and perseverance.

Reading:

Reading is a very important skill of learning foreign language. The learners do not get an opportunity to speak or interact with native speakers. So short story provides them a chance to learn and interact with the foreigners. Short stories are too amusing and grip the interest of the learners and the learners involve giving more time and effort to comprehend the story.

While reading the Short Stories the learners get a chance to acquaint with new vocabulary. Short stories help students in building their vocabulary as the meanings can be understood in the context. While reading the story a kind of tension builds up in the readers mind and they also try to predict what would happen in the end. Some texts with their hidden meaning provide the students an opportunity to read between the lines and interpret the story in a new imaginative way.

Vocabulary by Theme:

To enhance vocabulary, a few words in the text which convey anger like: Smouldering, bellowed, strode can be selected and the learners can be made to write synonyms and antonyms for the words and an exercise of matching Synonyms with Antonyms can also be given.

S.No	Word	Meaning	Synonym	Antonym
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1	Smouldering	Show of feel a barely suppressed intense emotion	Anger, outburst, conniption	Calm, peace, contentment,
2	Bellowed	Emit a loud, deep roar typically in pain or anger.	Bark, cry, howl, bawl, yell, shriek,	
3	Strode	Long decisive step	Drill, march, pace parade, pound,	Amble, meander, stroll, wander
4	Nagged	Consistently ask someone to do something which they are reluctant to do	Chide, condemn, castigate, blast, denounce, reprimand	Easy, nice, helpful
5	Tantrums	An uncontrolled outburst of anger and frustration	Flareup, outburst, temper	Happiness, peace, contentment
6	Animosity	Strong hostility	Malice, bitterness, hate, antipathy, rancor	Friendliness, rapport, respect, love, sympathy

Learners can be given a vocabulary puzzle to solve which is designed from the prescribed text. Meanings of the words are given below. The students should identify the textual word and fill the grid.

K	S	P	A	R	S	E	L	Y	I
J	O	S	T	L	E	L	I	A	N
S	G	A	I	N	O	I	T	M	T
	L	U	T	A	C	T	I	C	I
O	U	T	O	G	P	E	E	R	M
O	B	U	D	G	E	N	W	Y	I
P	U	T	O	E	G	G	O	D	D
E	T	O	E	D	O	Z	E	D	A
D	T	A	N	T	R	U	M	S	T
M	I	N	D	S	T	I	F	L	E

1. Change opinion
2. Sudden bursts of ill temper
3. Look searchingly
4. Suppress
5. Slept
6. Took out with a spoon
7. Pushed and shoved
8. Target
9. Frighten someone
10. A kind of vegetable
11. Meagrely
12. Method
13. Privileged
14. Shouted Loudly
15. Jogging

Key: 1. Budge 2. Tantrums 3. Peer 4. Stifle 5. Dozed 6. Scooped 7. Jostled 8. Butt
9. Intimidate 10. Yam 11. Sparsely 12. Tactic 13. Elite 14. Bellowed 15. Trotting

Vocabulary by Idiom:

Idiomatic expressions add richness and colour to the text. They are peculiar to one language and the learners can be asked to use these idioms in their own sentences. And find out similar idiomatic expressions in their mother tongue.

Throw tantrums – sudden bursts of ill temper

Blazing in fury- hot in anger

Barked at me- shout loudly at some one

Lay the table- set the dishes on the dining table

His jaw dropped- shocked in surprise

Writing:

Short Story is a great and powerful tool to improve the writing skills of the students. The lecturer can give a number of questions to the students and ask them to write answers for those questions. This helps the students understand the theme and style of the story and he

can also develop his analytical and interpretational skills their creativity is boosted while they write. The tests that the students are given are not just fact-based questions which serve to evaluate the comprehension of the students but they should be open -ended questions which provoke the critical thinking abilities of the students. The writing assignments based on the short story enhances the involvement of the students in the text while encouraging them to explore the text. So the writing tasks as follow-up activities help better learning and comprehension and help to recall the text for a long term. So in the writing assignments the students can be asked to:

- Write a review on the story 'The Power of a Plate of Rice'.
- Write the theme of the story in one or two sentences.
- Summarise the story 'The Power of a Plate of Rice'.
- Prepare a list of questions based on the story.
- Suggest a different ending to the story 'The Power of a Plate of Rice'.
- If you were in Cheta Adu's condition what kind of action would you have taken?
- Do you think the title is appropriate?
- Describe the conditions at Cheta Adu' house.
- Where does the opening part of the story take place?
- What drastic action does Cheta Adu take to save her son?
- Can you suggest any other action to Cheta Adu?

Listening and Speaking:

The teacher can design a number of activities for improving the listening and speaking skills of the students. Activities like role play, group discussions, oral reading, improvisation are a few of the activities that can be helpful in developing the language proficiency along with the pronunciation. While the teacher reads the story he/she follows pace, pitch, rhythm, intonation and stress and the learners can improve their pronunciation listening from the teacher. Online sources can also be used and the story cd both audio and video if available can be played in the class.

In an activity the teacher can make the students into two groups and ask them to prepare arguments for and against Cheta Adu. Group Discussion on Gender Discrimination can also be initiated along with a debate.

Make the students Role play the characters of Cheta Adu and Mr.Aziza as these are the two main characters in the story. This gets the students emotionally involved in the story and it helps them to understand the theme, characterisation, and tone, verbal and non-verbal clues of the text.

Conclusion:

The objective is to help the students speak fluently in the target language for which short story is the best tool for the language teachers. If selected and exploited appropriately Short story can enhance the language proficiency of the learners and is very helpful in foreign language classes. The short stories offer the elements both literary and cultural along with the linguistic focus. This tool also helps the teacher design the activities for reading, writing, speaking, listening and vocabulary development. Fluency though a difficult skill can be easily acquired as short stories provide the learners a great opportunity to improve their communicative competence.

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Appendix-1

THE POWER OF A PLATE OF RICE

Ifeoma Okoye

I walked hurriedly to Mr.Aziza's office, breathing heavily in steadily rising anger. The January sun was blazing in fury, taking undue advantage of the temporary withdrawal of the seasonal harmattan. As I arrived at the office, which was at the end of the administrative block, I remembered one of the mother's precepts: 'Do nothing in anger. Wait till your anger melts like thick palm oil placed under the sun.' mother was a philosopher of sorts. Poor woman. She died before I could reward her for all the sacrifices she made on my behalf forgoing many comforts just so that I could get some education, and for carrying the financial

burden of the family during my father's protracted illness and even after his premature death. In deference to mother I stood by Mr. Aziza's door for a few seconds, trying to stifle my anger, but failing woefully. Only an angel or an idiot would remain calm in my situation.

At last I knocked on the mottled green door.

'come in'.

Mr. Aziza's authoritative voice hit me like a blow, startling me. I opened the door and walked in, my anger still smouldering.

Mr. Aziza, the principal of the secondary school where I was teaching, was seated behind a medium-sized desk made of cheap white wood and thickly coated with varnish. Books, files, letter trays and loose sheets of paper jostled for a place on the desk. He raised his coconut-shaped head, closed the file he was reading, removed his plastic framed spectacles and peered at me.

'yes, Mrs. Cheta Adu. What do you want?' his voice was on the defensive and the look on his ridged face was intimidating.

I took a deep breath. 'the Bursar has just told me, Sir, that you told him to withdraw my salary'.

We were paid irregularly. Although it was the end of January, the salary in question was for the October of the previous year. Four months without any salary and yet we went to work regularly.

'yes, I did, Mrs. Cheta Adu'. Mr. Aziza's small narrow eyes pierced me like a lethal weapon. As one teacher had put it, he paralysed his prey with his eyes before dealing a death blow to them.

'what have I done, Sir?' I asked, trying to load the word 'Sir,' with as much sarcasm as I could indicate how I felt inside.

Mr. Aziza fingered his bulbous nose, a part of his body which had been the butt of many a teacher's joke. He was known to love food more than anything else, and one female teacher had once said that most of what he ate went into his nose.

'you were away from school without permission for four days last week', Mr. Aziza finally declared.

My anger, which a few minutes ago had reduced to a simmer, suddenly began to bubble like a pot of ogbono soup when the fire under it is poked.

I said as calmly as I could, ‘in those four days, Sir, I almost lost my baby. I had already explained the circumstances to you. My baby became very ill suddenly. I had to rush into hospital. for those four days, Sir, he battled for his life’.

‘and so?’ Mr.Aziza intoned.

Some one knocked at the door and I turned to see the second vice principal’s bearded face appear as he opened it. ‘I will be back,’ a thin lipped, hair-fringed mouth said with and disappeared. The appearance of the bearded face was like a comic scene in Shakespearean tragedy . Christmas and the New Year, a salaried worker was left with little money for the rest of January. And for those who had children in school, paying school fee and buying books and school uniforms for the new school year often became a nightmare. This year was worse for me because I and all other teachers in the school were last paid in September the year before.

‘I am a widow, Sir ,’I pleaded with Mr.Aziza.’I am the sole bread-winner for my family. Times are hard. My children cannot survive till the end of February without my next salary.’

Mr.Aziza said, ‘I don’t want to know, Mrs. Cheta Adu. My decision is final’.

He stood up, hitched his trousers up with his elbows, and walked to a window on his right and peered out of it. He was a small, wry man, the type my mother often told me to beware of.

Helpless, I stood watching him, a man known for his inflexibility. I knew from my colleagues’ experiences that taking my case to the State Schools Management Board would be futile as Mr.Aziza had ingratiated himself with the powerful and high-ranking officers of the board. As the principal of one of the elite schools in the state, he had helped them to get their children admitted into his school even when the spoilt one’s amongst them did not pass the entrance examination. I also knew that taking Mr.Aziza to court was out of question. Where would I get the money for the lawyer? Besides, civil cases had been known to lasts for months or even years because of unnecessary and often deliberate court adjournments.

Mr.Aziza walked back to his chair and sat down.

I looked hard at him and, without saying anything more, left his office. In a taxi taking me home, I thought about nothing else but Mr.Aziza. this was the second time I had found myself at his mercy. The first time was when, five years ago, I was transferred to his school from a secondary school in Onitsha where I was teaching before my marriage. On reading the

letter posting me to his school-I had delivered it to him personally-he had flung it at me and had declared, I 'don't want any more female teachers in my school especially married ones .

'What have we done?' I had wanted to know.

'You' re a lazy lot,' he had said. 'you always find excuses to be away from school. Today it's this child of yours becoming illwho must be taken to hospital and tomorrow it's the funeral of one relation or another.'

When he officially refused to give me a place in his school, I resorted to a tactic I had used successfully before. I kept calling at his office every day, often without uttering a word, until I broke his resistance and made him accept me. This time, however I had the feeling that he would not budge, no matter what I did.

When I arrived home after five in the evening my mother-in-law was walking up and down in front of my flat with my two year old son, Rapulu, tied on her back, and four year old Dulue trailing behind her.

'You're late, Cheta, ' my mother-in-law said. 'I was beginning to think you were not going to come home.'. She looked weary and worried.

'Sorry, mama, I have some problems at school,' I walked to her after hugging Dulue, who. Had trotted to me. 'and how is Rap?' I asked.

'He 's ill'.

I placed the back of hand on my younger son's forehead. It was piping hot.

'You are not going to be ill again, Rapulu?' I said under my breath. Aloud I asked, 'how long has he been running a temperature, mama?'

' A short while after you left for school in the morning,' my mother-in-law replied.

i helped her untie Rapulu from her back and took him in, Dulue trotting behindme.i stripped rapulu of his clothes, put him on the settee, fetched a bowl of cold water anda towel and began to sponge him down. He yelled and kicked, but I ignored him. Dulue, with his thumb in his mouth, kept on mumbling that he was hungry, while my mother-in-law stood speechless, watching me.

Presently, I remembered that I should have given Rapulu some fever medicine. I ran into the only bedroom in the flat and dashed out with a small bottle. Taking Rapulu in my hands I gave him a teaspoonful of bitter sweet medicine and began to sponge him again.

Mother-in-law soon dozed off. Poor woman she must have had a trying day. she was a widow too and I have brought to help me look after my children. Bless her, for what could have I

done if she had refused my offer? Another reason why I brought her to live with me was to save costs. I used to send her money every month to supplement the meagre proceeds from her forms.

We had a late lunch of yam and raw palm oil. It was the last piece of yam in the house. I skipped supper because I wanted to make sure that the garri and egusi soup which I had left would last for two nights.

The night was a long one. First I lay awake for fear that Rapulu might become worse, but fortunately the fever did not persist. Then I reviewed all that I had gone through since I lost Afam, my husband who was an only child, in a ghastly motor accident a little more than a year before. He was a brilliant banker. We were at the university together, he studying banking and I mathematics. As luck would have it, we were posted to the same state for our National Youth Service. We became engaged at the end of our service and married shortly after. He died a fortnight after our fifth wedding anniversary and ever since, my life had become an endless journey to the land of hardship and frustration. I had under great pressure, spent all our savings to give my husband what my people and his had called a befitting burial, and what I saw as a senseless waste of hard earned money.

For the better part of the night I worried over how I was going to pay the January rent, how I was going to feed my two sons and my mother-in-law, and what I was going to do if Rapulu became so ill that he had to be hospitalized again? I already owed two of my friends some money and could not see myself summoning up the courage to go to them again.

I borrowed money again and for two long weeks I managed to feed my family, sometimes going without meals myself. I became irritable, and students complained that I was being too hard on them. My good natured mother-in-law became equally touchy and nagged me incessantly. My two sons threw tantrums, spending a great deal of time crying. Soon I had no money left and no one to lend me more. I had reached a point when I had to do something drastic or allow my sons to die of hunger.

On the 23rd of February, after school hours, I went to Mr. Aziza's office and once again pleaded with him to pay me.

'You're wasting your time, Mrs. Cheta Adu,' he said. 'I never change my mind. You will receive your salary on the 28th of February and not even one day earlier.'

I left his office and waited for him in the outer room. At four o'clock he left his office. I followed him to his house, which was situated near the school main gate, and he turned

asked me why I was following him. I remained silent. He opened the door and walked in. quietly, I followed him into his sitting room and sat down without any invitation to do so. The room was sparsely furnished. A black-and-white Television stood on the top of the shelf next to a small transistor radio. Near them were a small dining table and a steel back chair.

Mr. Aziza lived alone. His wife and six children lived at Onitsha about 120kilometers away. Mr.Aziza turned and faced me' look , Mrs. Adu you'll achieve nothing by following me like a dog. You may stay here forever but you will not make me change my mind.' He disappeared through a door on the right.

Presently, his house boy walked in to the room and began to lay the table. The smell of jollof rice wafted around my nostrils, reactivating in me the hunger which had been suppressed by anger, depression, and desperation. The houseboy finished laying the table and left.

On impulse I left my chair, walked to the dining table and sat down on the chair beside it. Removing the lid on the plate, I started at the appetizing mound of jollof rice. Then I grabbed the spoon beside the plate and began to eat. I ate quickly and not only with relish, but also with vengeance and animosity.

I heard a door squeak and turned to see Mr. Aziza walk into the sitting room. His jaw dropped and his mouth remained open as he stared at me.

'What do you think you're doing, Mrs. Cheta Adu? He bellowed, finding his tongue at last. Desbelief was written all over his face.

I ignored the question and continued to help myself to the rice. I scooped a large piece of meat and some rice into my mouth, my cheeks bulging.

Mr. Aziza strode to the table, snatched the spoon from me with his right hand and with his left snatched the plate of rice away from me. It was almost empty by now. I rose from the chair and moved a little bit back from him, thinking he was going to hit me.

He faced me, his eyes deadly. 'Get out of my house, I say, getout!'

'Not until I receive my salary,' I said calmly. Desperation had given me a form of courage I had not experienced before. 'I'll wait for supper.'

Mr Aziza barked at me. 'Get out. Go to the Bursar. Tell him I said he can pay you now.

I said calmly, 'He'll not believe me. Why not give me a note for him?'

He scribbled a note, threw it at me and I grabbed it. Trying hard to suppress a smile, I said, 'Thank you, Sir,' and left the room, still chewing the rubbery meat in my mouth.