

BRINGING LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS INTO EFL CLASSROOMS

Insights from Research
and Classroom Practice

Edited by

Nugrahenny T. Zacharias
and Christine Manara

Bringing Literature and Linguistics
into EFL Classrooms:
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This book first published 2011

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-3185-9, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-3185-7

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Nugrahenny T. Zacharias and Christine Manara	

Part I: Bringing Multiculturalism into EFL Classroom

Chapter One.....	5
“It’s like um...I can’t explain...whatever”: Multiculturalism and My-culturalism in English Classes Roby Marlina	

Chapter Two	17
Narratives: A Dialogue with the Intercultural-self Christine Manara	

Chapter Three	33
Teaching Culture through a Global Perspective: Insights from an Action- Research Project using Selected Multilingual Narratives Nugrahenny T. Zacharias	

Chapter Four	53
Barathi Mukerjee’s “Management of Grief” and the Teaching of it: Promoting Multicultural Education in an EFL Teacher Education’s Prose Class Purwanti Kusumaningtyas	

Part II: Bringing Literature into EFL Classroom

Chapter Five	67
Empowerment in Action: Creative Writing by Asian Teachers for Asian Learners Alan Maley and Jayakaran Mukundan	

Chapter Six.....	77
What Happens When Students Do Creative Writing? Vishnu S Rai	
Chapter Seven.....	91
Using Short Stories in Reading Class to Improve Students' Critical Thinking Skill Yuli Christiana Yoesdi	
Chapter Eight.....	101
Short Stories Use in Language Skills Classes: Students' Interest and Perception Purindungan Partele	
Part III: Bringing Linguistics into EFL Classroom	
Chapter Nine.....	119
Bringing Thriller into EFL Classes: Helping Learners to Better Cope with Life Lany Kristono	
Chapter Ten.....	133
Corpus-based Study of the School English in the EFL Students' Writing Rendy Setiawan Husada	
Chapter Eleven.....	153
Using a Newspaper Corpus to Create English Language Teaching and Learning Materials Aneska Aziz	
Chapter Twelve.....	165
Pessimism and Optimism in Some Critical Approaches to Language Studies Joseph Ernest Manibu	
Contributors.....	183

CHAPTER SEVEN

USING SHORT STORIES IN READING CLASS TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING SKILL

YULI CHRISTIANA YOEDO

Introduction

The English Department at Petra Christian University (PCU) realizes the importance of literature in improving students' critical thinking in Reading classes. One of the skills courses that aim to improve critical thinking is the *Extended Reading Text*, which is offered in semester two. This course uses short story as a tool to achieve this goal. Another reason for using short story in this course is to introduce students to some classic literary works. It is hoped that through this course learners will build their interest in literature. The use of short story is preferable due to its short length. Sometimes, the length of the text discourages learners' motivation to read in a Foreign Language. Since short story is a creative writing type of text, it may also bring a creative sense of reading in the classroom. It is, therefore, a powerful tool to introduce critical thinking in a creative way. In this globalization era, critical thinking is an important skill for learners to be able to participate in a global competition arena. Critical thinking enables learners to be selective and evaluative on ideas or influences that are being imposed to them.

One topic that the course tries to promote is gender issues. Therefore, the short stories entitled *Father's Sin* and *The Mother* are chosen for this purpose. These stories present the issue of gender equality told from the male authors' perspective. The idea of gender equality is not always talked about from the women's perspective but also from men's perspective. Both short stories are written by writers who come from cultures that still holds a patriarchal system. Thus, the writers attempting to express equality

between men and women are expected to further motivate students to become agents of change.

In addition, students can learn from the discussion of *Father's Sin* that the balance between career and family is very much needed, especially in this era of globalization. Without it, success will be difficult to maintain. The prominent writer in this short story named Mr. Yee Min-soo depicts this issue in the story. From the discussion of *Father's Sin* and *The Mother*, students also learn that the imbalance of the treatment towards men and women can hinder the progress of a nation (see Sudjono, 2008, p. 35).

The Synopsis of *Father's Sin*

Father's Sin tells about the life of a famous Korean writer named Mr. Yee Min-soo. The author with an international reputation is so exalted because he has dedicated his life to the world of writing at the expense of personal enjoyment and happiness of his family. On the contrary, he is not appreciated at all by his own wife. His desire to get back together with his family is rejected by his wife because of the following reasons.

First, he is an irresponsible man. After they get married and has children with her, he does not even bother to provide food for them. He does not even know about his children's births. Moreover, as a father he does not try to establish good communication with his children or show affection to them. He delegates all his responsibilities as a father to his wife. He also does not fulfill his responsibility as a husband. In other words, he makes his wife's life unbearable. He promises to take care of his sick father but he passes his responsibilities to his wife. He also has promised to support his stepmother and his stepbrothers after the death of his father but he does not keep his promise.

Second, he is a good pretender. One time he did not want to receive her friends at home. He seemed very friendly at first but later, he told his wife that he actually did not like them. He forced his wife to serve his guests with unfriendly manner. To make his plan (to expell the guessts from the house) work well, he slapped his wife in front of them so they left.

Third, he is disrespectful to his wife. He treats his wife as an object. He does not try to listen to her or know her needs. Instead, she must always serve him and fulfill his desire, like a slave. Moreover, he never gives her a chance to get involved in the decision-making process in their household.

Fourth, he continually cheats on his wife. Until the end of his life, he is still having a relationship with another woman. With his smart way of talking to impress people, it is easy for him to attract beautiful women.

Fifth, he is a selfish husband. During his married life, he spends most of his energy chasing his dream and neglects his family. He comes and goes as he pleases. When he is wealthy, he spends his money for himself. But, when he is poor and sick, he returns home and expects his family to take care of him. In his heyday, it is difficult for his children to see him.

Sixth, he is a cunning man. In order to find his family, he has a well-known newspaper reporter, whose newspaper's circulation is over a million each day, to help him. That means about millions of people read his newspaper daily. The newspaper reporter will report the latest news about him and how he has finally returned to his family after his long Bohemian life. So, the attention of the entire world will fall on him and his family. If his family refuses him, the entire world will curse them. Thus, his family is forced to accept him. In fact, he returns to his family because he has been abandoned by his lovers. In short, without money and without women he makes a way to return home.

Seventh, he is a coward. Actually he is the one who is afraid of telling his father that he disagrees with him. In other words, he does not dare to argue with his father. On the contrary, he makes his wife argue with his father. As a result, his father hates her very much.

Eighth, he is more concerned with other people than his own family. For example, when he does not have money to entertain his friends, he tells his wife to buy wine. His wife has to try to make his friends happy by buying them the wine although her children are starving.

His wife's explosive anger is actually a pile of her suppressed anger. Previously, the wife does not dare to protest all the arbitrariness of her husband towards her. Finally she can show her anger because she realizes her submissive behavior does not bring any good to the family. Moreover, she realizes that her husband actually has abandoned his family from his life.

In the end, the wife is willing to accept the writer in her house because of these two considerations. First, she wants to maintain the reputation of his son. As a businessman her son must maintain his reputation as a dutiful son. If he does not accept his father, the public will hate him and of course, this will negatively impact his business. Second, she would like to get an explanation from her husband about everything that has happened in their family life.

The synopsis of *The Mother*

A short story entitled *The Mother* tells about the sufferings, both mental and physical, of an Egyptian woman. This woman named Nagiyya is sick and her illness is getting better because her husband, Khalifa, does not immediately take her to the hospital. Her husband's indifference and brutality makes Nagiyya suffer inwardly. Both kinds of sufferings cause anger. Failure to vent her anger to the husband, Nagiyya vents her anger to her daughter and her old father-in-law. When she is in good health, Nagiyya always cares about them, working hard in the field and at home. She is angry with her husband and father-in-law since they do not want to do the household chores. In other words, she feels neglected.

The same feelings experienced by Hafiza, Nagiyya's daughter. She is angry with her husband and parents for giving her excessive burden. She gets angry with her husband since he does not pay attention to her and their baby. He does not want to take care of their baby although Hafiza is busy doing the household chores or taking care of her sick mother. Unlike Nagiyya, Hafiza does not dare to show her anger to anyone. Instead, she only dares to imagine another man's sweet attitude.

Eventually Nagiyya is escorted to hospital by Hafiza. The idea for taking Nagiyya to the hospital is in fact indirectly comes from her son-in-law, Hafiza's husband, who is tired of Nagiyya's condition. Together with her baby, Hafiza manages to take Nagiyya to Kasrai-Aini hospital in Cairo by train. However, the suffering of both women is not yet over. As they arrived there, the hospital does not accept Nagiyya. Fortunately, after pretending to faint in the street, the hospital immediately takes Nagiyya in.

Feminism in *Father's Sin* and *The Mother*

In both short stories we see the influence of the patriarchal system on the attitudes of male characters towards female characters. We also see that the suffering of the female characters is caused by the privileges owned by the male characters. In this case, men have the power of law, economy, emotion, and libido (Kramarae, 1993, p. 397-8).

Having the power of law means having the right to make important decisions. Men are entitled to take decisions without involving their wives. Then, the wives should submit to their husbands' decisions. In this case, we can see how Nagiyya is not allowed to be treated in the hospital before getting approval from her husband. Many times the wife of Mr. Yee Min-soo, who has never been involved in the decision-making process, suffers because of her husband's decision.

Having the power of economy means that men are supposed to be the breadwinners. That is why men have no obligation to do the household chores since it does not generate any income (see Bhasin and Khan, 1995, p. 27-8). It is assumed that if they do the household chores, men will have no energy to perform well the next day at work (Dini, 1989, p. 89). Hafiza's husband is an excellent example. He does not take the initiative to help his wife do the household chores. He might think that taking care of his baby and taking his mother-in-law to the hospital in Cairo are not profitable in terms of money. In other words, he cannot make money by doing those activities. If a wife decides to work, she still has to do or be responsible for the household chores, while the husband does not have to. In this case, the woman has two jobs (a paid job as a career woman and an unpaid job as a house wife). The wives in both short stories experience this kind of unfair treatments.

It is considered acceptable for men to show their emotion (but, not for women). One example, when Mr. Yee Min-soo slaps his wife in front of his friends, he is not to blame. On the contrary, they blame his wife because she serves drinks with a sullen face. We can also see how the son of Mr. Yee Min-soo rebukes his wife although she does nothing wrong.

In addition to the above three privileges, men also have the right to satisfy their libido. They can find another woman if their wives cannot satisfy them and the society accepts this as a reasonable behavior. We see how Mr. Yee Min-soo moves from one woman to another woman to satisfy his sexual lust wherever and whenever he wants. At this point, he is not thinking of his wife's sexual satisfaction.

Men have all these privileges since they are considered more valuable than women (Williams, 2000, p. 6; Hellwig, 1997, p. 14). They have the right to be served but not necessarily have to serve their spouse. Even the society gives negative assessment if a wife does not serve her husband well (Dini, 1989, p. 268). That is why, the wife of Mr. Yee Min-soo always serves her husband, especially in front of her husband's friends although he does not deserve it.

Through their works, both writers wish to motivate all women to fight against male domination by speaking out or taking action to liberate themselves. In *Father's Sin*, the wife of Mr. Yee Min-soo does not dare to protest against her husband. That is why she is not appreciated by her husband. In *The Mother* for example, since Nagiyya dares to speak out about her condition, she is finally taken to the hospital. Meanwhile, her daughter continues to suffer because she does not dare to speak out. These stories suggest women to fight for themselves because, as being stated by Leclerc, oppression cannot be fought by doing nothing. Instead, it should

be resisted by speaking out or doing action (Leclere, 2000, p. vi; Hellwig, 1997, p. 13-6).

Both writers seem to suggest that women need to be given the opportunity to become decision makers. In *Father's Sin*, we see that the wife of Mr. Yee Min-soo is able to make good decisions when the opportunity is open. Why are women not given the opportunity to make a decision? There is a general belief that women are unable to think logically as it is spoken by the Khalifa. Why does such perception still exist among people? It is because women are not given the opportunity to express their opinions. They are only required to be totally submissive to their husbands. If this condition (in which women are not given the opportunity to take important decisions) continually goes unchallenged, women's voice will always be absent from making the world a better home. In fact, women have potential important roles in improving the lives of their families, communities and countries. In *Father's Sin* for example, it is shown that the wife of Mr. Yee Min-soo is proved to be capable of making good decisions.

In its last section, the writer of *The Mother* presents a man named Hussein who is described to be respectful towards women. Hussein is described to be a much better character than Hafiza's husband. In this story, the writer depicts opposite treatments towards women by these two characters.

In thinking critically, it is important to continuously challenge ourselves, be critical to our own beliefs, accept opposing views and see things from other people's perspective (Barnet and Bedau, 1996, p. 4). That is why the activities improving critical thinking should cover individual and group activities. The following activities are designed for individual work.

One example, related to the short story entitled *Father's Sin*, students are asked to get information supporting the reading material directly from their acquaintances from Korea. This task can encourage student's interest and ability to build international networks. This kind of communication skill is absolutely necessary in the era of globalization (Sudjono, 2008, p. 3-5, 35). For the material dealing with feminism, students are given a question, such as: What do you think of emancipation in your country nowadays? Or students may ask their acquaintances to investigate, explore and interpret the short story together. Then, students have to share the information they get during the short-story discussion session in class. It is hoped that new questions arise from their discussion. The discussion also helps the students to explore their interpretation of *Father's Sin*. In this way, we motivate students to work independently.

Asking students to answer questions related to the reading material is still a useful technique to measure the students' comprehension on literary work. For example, questions related to the literary devices, such as repetition and simile will help students understand the writer's intention (see Rosenthal and Rowland, 1986, p. 176; Lye, 1997, p. 6). The questions that are given should encourage students to shape the knowledge they gain, examine motives and causes, or find the underlying assumptions (Colombo, Cullen and Lisle, 1995, p. 2). Questions that are imaginative, analytical and evaluative are appropriate to sharpen student's critical thinking skills (Barnet and Bedau, 1996, p. 4).

Some questions about *Father's Sin*

1. What does the title *Father's Sin* imply?
2. What do you think of Mr. Yee Min-soo as a writer?
3. What do you think of Mr. Yee Min-soo as a husband?
4. What do you think of Mr. Yee Min-soo as a father?
5. Why does the life of Mr. Yee Min-soo end tragically?
6. Is Mr. Yee Min-soo's decision to live in the slum right? Explain your answer.
7. Why can Mr. Yee Min-soo's son easily forgive his father?
8. Why is it difficult for Mr. Yee Min-soo's wife to forgive her husband?
9. Do you agree with her attitude? Explain your answer.
10. Why does Mr. Yee Min-soo leave his family?
11. Do you agree with his leaving the family? Explain your answer.
12. Why is it difficult for Mr. Yee Min-soo's son to see him?
13. What is Mr. Yee Min-soo's motive to return to his family?
14. What would you do if you were Mr. Yee Min-soo's wife?
15. What would you do if you were Mr. Yee Min-soo's son?
16. If you were Mr. Yee Min-soo, what would you do to balance your life?
17. If you were Mr. Yee Min-soo's wife, what would you do to create a harmony in your family?
18. Do you think what happens in the story may exist in real life?
19. What did you learn from this short story?
20. How are repetition and simile used in the short story?
21. Is there any conflict, either inner or outer, in the short story? Explain your answer.

Some questions about *The Mother*

1. After reading the title, what issues do you believe is going to be discussed in the article?
2. What does Hafiza usually do after work?
3. How does Khalifa treat his wife?
4. What do you think of Nagiyya's attitude towards Hafiza?
5. Why didn't Hafiza go home that night?
6. Why wasn't Nagiyya taken to the hospital since the beginning?
7. What would you do if you were:
 - Khalifa
 - Nagiyya
 - Hafiza
 - Omran
 - Hafiza's husband
8. Why does Nagiyya get angry with Omran?
9. Why does Hafiza get angry with her husband?
10. What should the husbands of Nagiyya and Hafiza do to resolve their wives' anger?
11. Is there any conflict, either inner or outer, in the short story? Explain your answer.
12. Did you find any simile? If yes, why does the writer use it?
13. Is there any repetition? If yes, what is its function?

In addition to the above questions, students are also assigned to compare and contrast both short stories. Students compare and contrast relevant points about one subject with corresponding aspects of another (Hirschberg and Hirschberg, 1997, p. 10). These tasks may boost their sensitivity to recognize the link of events that occur around them. Thus, they can anticipate the negative impacts and identify profitable opportunities.

The ability to summarize an argument accurately is another skill needed in critical thinking (Barnet and Bedau, 1996, p. 8). It helps students to clarify and simplify their own words, the main ideas, and supporting details (Rosenthal and Rowland, 1986, p. 150). From the students' summary, the teacher is able to check the student's comprehension. Writing a summary of both short stories may not be considered an easy task because of the following reasons. Firstly, both writers do not reveal their opinions explicitly. Secondly, students themselves have to examine for motives or causes, evaluate what is most important and detect the underlying assumptions (see Colombo, Cullen

and Lisle, 1995, p. 2). Thirdly, the two short stories are related to patriarchy, a concept that they are not familiar with.

Students may also have the opportunity to make changes to certain parts of the short story. This activity is helpful because students can express their feelings about the topic, stimulate their imagination and act as problem solvers to the issues raised in the story. To improve the quality of the changes, students are asked to provide reasons for the changes.

Another critical thinking skill is the ability to effectively present one's ideas (Barnet and Bedau, 1996, p. 8). Students are asked to present their ideas about the short story. The presentation material is a combination of the results of their talks along with their acquaintances, either from Korea or Egypt, and the analysis or evaluation of their own. This data processing task certainly requires them to think critically. The presentation session is followed by a question and answer session. In order to encourage students to participate, students who can provide excellent questions or help the presenter answer questions properly will get scores.

In addition to individual tasks, students are encouraged to work in groups. They can get involved in group discussion, role playing and poster making. Through these activities students can improvise, argue, question one another opinions and see things from other perspectives than their own. They can act in accordance with what is depicted in the short story or make some changes. Poster making task will enable students to illustrate their opinion, expressing their protests or propose some improvements or suggestions. This task is good to check students' comprehension. If students do not understand the reading material, it will be difficult for students to create a poster that illustrate the content of the story. To make this activity more interesting, teachers or students can vote for best posters to be displayed publicly.

Conclusion

What has been presented above is an attempt to improve the teaching and learning process of the Reading class in Petra Christian University. The ideas are expected to increase students' interest in reading English texts. Activities which are designed have been adjusted to the interests and abilities of students who come from various parts of Indonesia. There are several activities that have been carried out and received good responses from students. Activities tailored to the student's perspective and current trends are expected to improve student's critical thinking skills. The idea presented above may seem to be simple. However, this simple arrangement of activities is actually crucial in providing students some

achievable goals in the classroom. It boosts students' confidence in reading and, therefore, contributes to the effectiveness of teaching and learning reading.

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