

Teaching English literature / Shorties: Flash fiction in English language teaching (a review)

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Let me start by saying this is not just a training manual for English teachers interested in the teaching of literature in primary and secondary school or university but any language teacher interested in the teaching of literature. The examples are from English literature, but can easily be substituted by equivalent examples from literature in other languages, although the English literature examples are frequently fascinating.

The book encompasses a comprehensive comparative study of theories of literature and is divided into five broad areas: the basis (definitions of literature and why study it), competences that students should acquire through literature classes, the different genres of literature and finally the relationship between literature and modern media and how to assess students' LCC (Literary Communicative Competence).

In Thaler's opinion the study of literature is a relatively new field. Although literary criticism ('lit.crit.' to the lovers of abbreviations) has been around since the 19th century, the domain of literature has been dramatically expanded by the growth in media, offering new styles and approaches to literature and in particular the spectacular growth of online reading.

As a result literary criticism has been transmuted and to a degree replaced what scholars describe as literary communicative competence.

Thaler sees the study of literature in the classroom as an aid to support language learning. It reinforces the basic skills and competences of reading, writing, listening and speaking. It expands linguistic domains of lexis, grammar and pragmatics. Reading books from other countries

increases intercultural understanding and, above all, literature can provide personal enrichment and, as a change from classroom routine, can offer motivational value. It also allows personal expression through exchanges of opinion and preference.

Thaler is an enthusiast of reading spaces – classroom corners with bookshelves and beanbags, reading rooms and libraries. He also likes the idea of class and school book clubs where a book is chosen monthly for everyone to read and come together to discuss. It is also interesting that for Thaler, although recognising the importance of e-books and e-reading, the print book is still the most important and the library or the bookshelf is its home. For students who don't have reading resources at home, the school library can be really important.

What types of books should we read though? And do we have to read all of the book we choose? In an age of CLIL where more and more courses are being taught in a foreign language, especially English, it is important to read not just classical literature in the forms of novels and essays but also scientific works and books about geography and history. Even at elementary and lower levels more and more works are becoming available in simplified editions.

So a variety of reading linked to academic study

and personal interest is useful.

However, it is always necessary to read or study a whole work in order to arouse interest in literature. As Kharkovskaya et al. point out in their article on minitexts, short texts from different sources can be just as valuable in developing reading skills in a foreign language as complete works. This is the topic of Thaler's other teacher's guide, *Shorties* which explores the phenomenon of what he calls 'flash fiction', the literature of adverts of tweets of emails and very short stories like Richard Brautigan's *The Scarlatti Tilt* (2012): *'It's hard to live in a studio apartment in San Jose with a man who's learning to play the violin. That's what she told the police when she handed them the empty revolver.'*

These 35 words can be the basis of a full lesson, discussing and analysing plot, character, location, how the police got involved and outcomes. As well as analysis 'shorties' lend themselves to other activities. Thaler uses the '12 procedures' typology outlined in Alan Maley's Cambridge University Press 1995 book *Short and Sweet*.

These include techniques like expanding by adding more sentences, reducing by removing words, drawing it, matching different short text with titles, choosing the best text for a particular outlet, comparing, re-ordering jumbled lines, rewriting in a different mode (e.g. the police report), interpretation of the unsaid, creating a new

text from the words they have studied, analysis of plot and character and language and, finally, using the story as a basis for project work (e.g. crime stories).

So far, we have looked at literature and short texts but there is also poetry. In contrast to reading there is also the art of storytelling. Thaler's *Teaching English Literature* encompasses both these skills. In doing so he explores how to develop reading skills through picture books, short and long poems and training students in how to tell stories and anecdotes out loud. Each example is supported by a lesson plan and one of the strengths of both books is the quality of these texts. Although they are in English and mainly from British and American sources it is easy to see how a teacher of French or Spanish or Russian could find similar examples in the language they teach to use in class.

One thing we have alluded to but not mentioned in detail is the influence of the electronic world on literature. Books can be downloaded and read on *Amazon* and equivalent services, poems and books can be listened to and read online. *YouTube* contains interviews, dramatic readings and features about the literature being read and studied and often students can watch the 'Film of the book', movie adaptations of major stories. All these offer support resources to readers although some teachers may criticise them as 'distractors.'

Nevertheless these are now important media in the world of literature and of learning and teaching and need to be seriously considered and exploited. Comparison between a book and its film adaptation can be a very valuable exercise.

Teaching English Literature and *Shorties* both contain practical activities with, in *Teaching English Literature*, an answer key at the end. This is a gift for English teachers, as are the extracts on which the activities are based. However, the clarity of presentation makes it easy for teachers of other languages to take the activities and adapt them to the texts they are using in class.

Like many of my colleagues I too studied set books at school. In French it was Corneille's *Le Cid*, Moliere's *Le Malade Imaginaire* and Madame de Sevigne's letters. What do I remember? A visit to see a performance of *Le Cid* at the Institut Francais in London and mocking *Le Cid* as he stomped off stage at the end of 'ô rage! ô désespoir! ô vieillesse ennemie', acting in *Le Malade Imaginaire* in the school play (I played the tailor) and nothing at all of Madame de Sevigne. Today I speak French reasonably fluently, read *Le Monde* and have spent time in France and Francophone countries but literature? Nul points! With the resources and the variety of approaches available to teachers today might it have been different? I would hope so.

At the beginning of *Teaching English Literature*

Thaler cites Christine Nuttall's dictum '*reading is like an infectious disease – it is caught not taught*' (Nuttall, C. 2005, *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language*, Macmillan Teacher Education Series, London Macmillan). As he writes, '*But teachers can create the virus and by providing a literature rich environment, make it grow.*' He sets out in both books to provide a clear structural analysis of literature teaching theory and

practice and to offer examples of widely differing types of literature and activities to exploit them. As a combination of literature teaching theory and best practice for foreign language students it is clear, concise and of value as a daily reference for teachers interested in teaching literature or having to teach it as a set book. I would love to have had it when teaching Hemingway or even learning Racine.