Why To Use Short Stories in Speaking Classes?

Abbas Khorashadyzadeh¹*

¹ Department of English Language, Farhangian University, Birjand, Iran

Abstract

Foreign Language Teaching researchers are searching for effective ways of improving learners’ oral skills. This study wants to investigate the effects of reading short stories on EFL learners’ speaking and listening skills. To this aim, two groups of experimental (n=20) and control (n=20) were chosen out of 172 sophomores at teacher training center, Birjand, Iran for this experimental research. Interview was the determined instrument for gathering the scores of pretest. The control group followed its routine procedure in English classes. However, the task of reading simplified literary texts (short stories) was applied for the experimental group members during their English classes as assignment. For example, they were supposed to read the stories and summarize them in front of the mirror at their home and in front of the class in next session and answer their classmates’ questions. This experiment occurred in 9 sessions of classes. Then, all students in both groups answered the questions of the interviewer. The statistical analysis related to t-test was done on gathered raw scores. Data from this study demonstrate a significant role for reading simplified short stories in improving the speaking and listening skills of participants in the experimental group. The findings of this study may help the learners to enhance their independent English language learning and improve their oral skills by reading short stories. All steps of this study will also be beneficial for EFL teachers who are searching ways of improving speaking and listening of their students.

Key words: speaking skill, listening skill, literary texts, reading, short story

Introduction

The interaction and reciprocal, collaboration of literature and language teaching has been the subject of interest to many foreign language teaching researchers, especially in the 20th century. Using literature as a vehicle for the teaching of a second or foreign language has proved very beneficial to the EFL and ESL students’ learning experience.

Indeed, the short story as a multi-dimensional literary genre can be profitably used in the acquisition of various language skills. The short story's distinctive features, i.e., its brevity, modernity, and variety make it appealing and interesting to language learners. When the short story is chosen based on the students’ level of English proficiency, it can offer them adequate linguistic, intellectual, and emotional involvement and enrich their learning experience.

Besides, researchers are searching for effective ways of improving language skills of foreign learners. As the ultimate purpose of learning a foreign language is communication, we searched for new techniques that help learners to improve their oral skills, listening and speaking. Based on related literature, reading short stories are effective in written skills like reading and writing. But, there was a need to examine the effects of reading short stories on speaking and listening skills. So, the literature coming below, will mention the scholars’ and researchers’ ideas in books and articles related to our work.

Review of Literature

Researches on the role of short stories in TEFL

The use of literature to teach second/foreign languages can be traced back to over one century ago. In the nineteenth century, second/foreign languages were taught with the help of the Grammar Translation Method. Students would translate literary texts from the second/foreign language to their native language. When this method was replaced by methods that emphasized structures and vocabulary, literature was no longer used. Thus, neither the Direct Method nor the Audiolingual

* Abbas Khorashadyzadeh.
E-mail address: Khorashady_ab@yahoo.com
Method utilized literature to teach second/foreign languages. In the seventies, methods such as the Community Language Learning, (Suggestopedia), the Silent Way, Total Physical Response, and the Natural Approach did not utilize literature to teach second/foreign languages, and neither did the Notional-Functional Syllabus.

For the past two decades or so, literature has found its way back into the teaching of EFL; however, not the way it was used with the Grammar Translation method. Instructors have realized that literature can be used to reinforce the skills and complement language teaching. (Scher 1996) affirms that with students at the beginning and intermediate levels, instructors can use literary texts for “language practice, reading comprehension, and possible aesthetic appreciation” (Muyskens, 2003). In contrast, with advanced students literary texts may be utilized for the “development of knowledge of world literature, practice in reading and discussing creative work, and the introduction of literary concepts, genres, and terminologies—e.g., recognition of figures of speech, levels of meaning, and other stylistic features” hort stories allow instructors to teach the four skills to all levels of language proficiency, (Murdoch, 2002) indicates that “short stories can, if selected and exploited appropriately, provide quality text content which will greatly enhance ELT courses for learners at intermediate levels of proficiency”. He explains why stories should be used to reinforce ELT by discussing activities instructors can create such as writing and acting out dialogues. Also, (Oster, 1999) affirms that literature helps students to write more creatively.

In addition, stories can be used to improve students' vocabulary and reading. Students who read literary texts showed improvement in vocabulary and reading. As far as reading comprehension is concerned, the new vocabulary will help students with comprehension; however, it does not guarantee that students will understand the story High-intermediate and advanced students also profit from literary texts. What they read gives them the opportunity to come up with their own insights, helping them to speak the language in a more imaginative way. They become more creative since they are faced with their own point of view, that/those of the main character(s) of the story and those of their peers, according to (Oster, 1999). This thoughtful process leads to critical thinking. As Oster confirms, “Focusing on point of view in literature enlarges students’ vision and fosters critical thinking by dramatizing the various ways.

Therefore, when students read, they interact with the text. By interacting with the text, they interpret what they read. By interpreting what they read, they can work toward speaking English more creatively.

Since short stories usually have a beginning, middle and an end, they encourage students at all levels of language proficiency to continue reading them until the end to find out how the conflict is resolved. Elliott (1990), for example, affirms that literature motivates advanced students and is “motivationally effective if students can genuinely engage with its thoughts and emotions and appreciate its aesthetic qualities.

According to Kaur Naginder and Nalini Arumugam (2007), bringing the real world into the language class is necessary for EFL teachers. Goodman (1972: 117) suggested that:

The content of the reading materials must be within the interest, background an experience of the reader….The reader should have his own purpose for reading and it must be important to him.

Anderson (1967) stated the same idea that reading program can be successful if more reading material according to each child’s ability and interest levels is provided. Students practice the listening skills at the same time when they listen to their peers retell the stories. Furthermore, students can learn some grammar as well as other writing skills. They can write a summary of the stories, doing information transfer task in an outline or note form. Students can write about characters in the story that they like or dislike with the reasons why.

Reading short stories can be an input to practice other language skills. Firstly, short stories can be an input to oral skill practice. After finishing reading, students can be asked to narrate the story in their own words, to give chronological sequences of events in the story, to paraphrase or to give a summary of the story. Besides, students can do the role play, act out some parts of the story, or dramatize the characters in the story.

Besides, more varieties of short stories or giving more “choices” to read is better for motivating the students as Goodman (1972:117) stated that:

Readers should be encouraged to select material on the basis of their own criteria of interest and ease. Readers should be helped to feel confident that if the material isn’t making sense they may reject it.

Likewise, Tom Hutchinson & Alan Waters (2005) also stipulated that variety is the spice of learning and it is essential in keeping the mind alert for learning. In addition, students like to read something not too long with a straightforward storyline (Gower, 2005). This is perfectly true if teachers need to get positive result out of the students’ reading as Goodman (1972) once emphasized that the first rule in reading instruction is that readers must read without interruption.

Short stories can be exploited to practice many sub-skills in reading. Besides asking for the main theme of the story, teachers can ask students to “predict” the story they are going to read since “prediction” is considered a major factor in reading. Students should be encouraged to anticipate what is going to happen by reading the title, the first paragraph and to infer what the story will be about. Later on, students should be able to support their suppositions with evidence from the reading text (Goodman, 2007). Guessing the meaning of vocabulary from the immediate context, asking students to detect the cohesion and coherence device at sentence or paragraph levels can also be practiced. To make the reading task more challenging in the class, the teachers can use the technique of “Reading Puzzles” with the short stories.

Students need to enjoy learning the language as when there is “a mental block, caused by affective factors ... that
prevents input from reaching the language acquisition device” (Krashen, 1985:100), students will not receive the input fully and the learning process cannot be optimized. It is important to see what are the students’ perception rather than focusing on the teachers or instructors alone.

Erkaya (2005) adds that when using short stories, teachers can teach higher order thinking because short stories promote the use of all the four skills namely the listening, speaking, reading and writing and short stories are embedded with motivational benefits. When using short stories, the students will learn all the four skills at the same time. All these skills are needed for language learning and it is important for them to learn the skills.

According to Sivasubramaniam (2006), those of us who learned a foreign language through an exposure to its literature will always be willing to speak in support of its primacy and efficacy in foreign language teaching. This is to suggest that we have a deeper understanding of literature’s positive impact on our affective and emotional dimensions. Short stories, for example, help students to learn the four skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing—more effectively because of the motivational benefit embedded in the stories. In addition, with short stories, instructors can teach literary, cultural, and higher-order thinking aspects (Erkaya, 2005).

Short story enables learners to practice the four basic language skills in the target language, to experience the culture of other nations, to acquire the target language in funny and enjoyable ways, and to have a chance to express their feelings and opinions. Besides, it is a rich resource for language learners who study a foreign language. Cognitive strategy such as oral summary enables learners to understand and produce new language by many different means and improve speaking. Summarizing according to O’Malley and Chamot (1995) is to make a mental, oral or written summary of new information gained through listening and reading. In addition, as Chastain (1988) pointed out, oral summary of story is related to the type of sustained speech of “talking to” process in which the speaker is addressing but not interacting with the listener and talk for a longer time and requires the least amount of language creation.

Researches on speaking and listening skills

Listening skills in language teaching have been neglected and shifted to a secondary position after speaking and writing. This is a surprising fact given that it is the skill that is most often used in communication. It is thought that about forty percent of our daily communication is spent on listening, thirty-five percent on speaking, sixteen percent on reading, and only nine percent on writing. Yet, in spite of its critical role in communication and language acquisition, listening comprehension remains one of the least understood processes in language learning. By now language practitioners have accepted that listening skills have to be taught like any other language skills.

Listening is a critical element in the competent language performance of adult ESL learners, whether they are communicating at school, at work, or in the community. Through the normal course of a day, listening is used nearly twice as much as speaking and four to five times as much as reading and writing (Rivers, 1981). In a recent study of Fortune 500 Corporations, Wolvin and Coakley (1991) found that listening was perceived to be crucial for communication at work with regards to entry-level employment, job success, general career competence, managerial competency, and effectiveness of relationships between supervisors and subordinates. Yet listening remains one of the least understood processes in language learning despite the recognition of the critical role it plays both in communication and in language acquisition (Morley, 1999). As language teaching has moved toward comprehension-based approaches, listening to learn has become an important element in the adult ESL classroom (Lund, 1990).

Listening is a demanding process, not only because of the complexity of the process itself, but also due to factors that characterize the listener, the speaker, the content of the message, and any visual support that accompanies the message (Brown & Yule, 1983). Interest in a topic increases the listener’s comprehension; the listener may tune out topics that are not of interest. A listener who is an active participant in a conversation generally has more background knowledge to facilitate understanding of the topic than a listener who is, in effect, eavesdropping on a conversation between two people whose communication has been recorded on an audiotape. Further, the ability to use negotiation skills, such as asking for clarification, repetition, or definition of points not understood; enable a listener to make sense of the incoming information.

Although once labeled a passive skill, listening is very much an active process of selecting and interpreting information from auditory and visual clues (Richards, 1983; Rubin, 1995).

What is known about the listening process and the factors that affect listening can be a guide when incorporating listening skill development into adult ESL classes.

There are numerous activities to choose from for developing listening skills. Lund (1990) has categorized them according to 9 responses that can be observed as comprehension checks:

1. Doing: the listener responds physically such as in TPR;
2. Choosing: the listener selects from alternatives such as pictures, objects, texts, or actions;
3. Transferring: the listener transforms the message such as drawing a route on map, or filling in a chart;
4. Answering: the listener answers about the text;
5. Condensing: the listener takes notes or makes an outline;
6. Extending: the listener goes beyond the text by continuing the story or solving a problem;
7. Duplicating: the listener simply repeats or translates the message;
8. Modeling: the listener performs a similar task, e.g., gives instructions to a coworker after listening to a model or;
9. Conversing: the listener is an active participant in a face-to-face conversation

Assisting learners in the development of listening comprehension is a challenge. It is a challenge that demands both the teacher’s and the learner’s attention because of the critical role that listening plays, not only in communication, but also in the acquisition of language. Knowledge of the listening process and factors that affect listening enable teachers to select or create listening texts and activities that meet the needs of their adult ESL learners. Teachers, then, must weave these listening activities into the curriculum to create a balance that mirrors the real-world integration of listening with speaking, reading, and writing.

Outside the classroom, listening is used twice as often as speaking, which in turn is used twice as much as reading and writing (Rivers, 1981). Inside the classroom, speaking and listening are the most often used skills (Brown, 1994). They are recognized as critical for functioning in an English language context, both by teachers and by learners. These skills are also logical instructional starting points when learners have low literacy levels (in English or their native language) or limited formal education, or when they come from language backgrounds with a non-Roman script or a predominantly oral tradition.

Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information (Brown, 1994; Burns & Joyce, 1997). Its form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it occurs, including the participants themselves, their collective experiences, the physical environment, and the purposes for speaking. It is often spontaneous, open-ended, and evolving. However, speech is not always unpredictable.

Speaking requires that learners not only know how to produce specific points of language such as grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary (linguistic competence), but also that they understand when, why, and in what ways to produce language (sociolinguistic competence). Finally, speech has its own skills, structures, and conventions different from written language (Burns & Joyce, 1997; Carter & McCarthy, 1995; Cohen, 1996). A good speaker synthesizes this array of skills and knowledge to succeed in a given speech act.

A speaker’s skills and speech habits have an impact on the success of any exchange (Van Duzer, 1997). Speakers must be able to anticipate and then produce the expected patterns of specific discourse situations. They must also manage discrete elements such as turn-taking, rephrasing, providing feedback, or redirecting (Burns & Joyce, 1997) skills and knowledge that instruction might address include the following:

- producing the sounds, stress patterns, rhythmic structures, and intonations of the language;
- using grammar structures accurately;
- assessing characteristics of the target audience, including shared knowledge or shared points of reference, status and power relations of participants, interest levels, or differences in perspectives;
- selecting vocabulary that is understandable and appropriate for the audience, the topic being discussed, and the setting in which the speech act occurs;
- applying strategies to enhance comprehensibility, such as emphasizing key words, rephrasing, or checking for listener comprehension;
- applying gestures or body language; and
- paying attention to the success of the interaction and adjusting components of speech such as vocabulary, rate of speech, and complexity of grammar structures to maximize listener comprehension and involvement (Brown, 1994).

Over the last two decades, it seems that listening skills teaching has been a neglected area in the English Language Teaching mainstream. In fact, there is a general belief that being able to speak, read, or write in a given L2 (second language) is a parameter to be able to claim that L2 learners are proficient in communicating in that language (Nunan, 1999). In view of this assumption, many L2 teachers have ignored the true importance that listening has as a source of oral input from which L2 learners can acquire the target language.

Nunan (1999) sustains that, in second language learning, listening has been given relative importance for it has been subsumed to the speaking skill as a means to accomplish speaking.

Similarly, Anderson and Lynch (1988) consider listening as an overlooked skill by L1 users. These authors claim that L1 speakers do not fully realise the importance and usefulness of listening for attaining effective communication. These speakers are not aware of the complexity of the listening process and its contribution to the development of speaking skills both in L1 and L2. The act of listening plays a vital part in the life of a human being.

Rivers and Temperley (1978), Oxford (1993), and Celce-Murcia (1995), among other researchers state that listening takes the greatest part of communication compared to the other three skills. In fact, 45% corresponds to listening, 30% to speaking, 16% to reading and 9% to writing (In Hedge, 2005).

In fact, there are two overlapping processes in L2 listening. On the one hand, L2 learners have to comprehend the input, that is, understand what is being said to them. On the other hand, learners should learn the L2 through the oral input (Rost, 2002). This theory partly belongs to Krashen’s input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) where he postulates that learners acquire language by being exposed to comprehensible input which contains structures that are beyond L2 learners’ current level of competence. In addition to comprehensible input, affective factors like motivation, self-reliance and anxiety are closely related.
to language acquisition.

To help L2 learners become effective listeners, then, it is necessary to understand the complex nature of the listening comprehension process. The acoustic signals listeners perceive are decoded to form words and “words are linked together to form phrases, phrases to form utterances and utterances are linked to form complete meaningful texts” (Nunan, 1999, p. 200). In so doing, listeners make use of different kinds of clues at hand to understand the speech in progress.

To achieve the goals of the present study, the following research questions were posed:

Q1. Does reading short stories have any significant effect on EFL learners’ speaking skills?
Q2. Does reading short stories have any significant effect on EFL learners’ listening skill?

To come up with reasonable results on the basis of the aforementioned research question, the following null hypotheses were proposed:

HO1. Reading short stories has no significant effect on EFL learners’ speaking skills.
HO1. Reading short stories has no significant effect on EFL learners’ listening skills.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were sophomores at teacher training center, Birjand, Iran. Two groups of experimental (n=20) and control (n=20) were chosen out of 172 sophomores. Half of each group were male and half were female.

Instrumentation

Interview was the determined instrument for gathering the scores of pretest and posttest.

Procedure

The control group followed its routine procedure in English classes. However, the task of reading simplified literary texts (short stories) was applied for the experimental group members during their English classes as assignment. For example, they were supposed to read the stories and summarize them in front of the mirror at their home and in front of the class in next session and answer their classmates’ questions. This experiment occurred in 9 sessions of classes. Then, all students in both groups answered the questions of the interviewer.

Results and Discussion

Having collected the results of interviews in the pretest, the researchers analyzed the data for speaking skill employing independent t-test. The purpose of this analysis was to estimate the participants’ speaking ability before the study began. Table 1 shows the results for this analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exp.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14.46</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cont.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12.68</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the results of Table 1 show, there is no statistically significant difference [t (38) = .56, p = .06] between experimental (M = 14.46, SD = 2.21) and control (M = 12.68, SD = 2.06) groups with regard to speaking ability which confirms the homogeneity of the participants at the outset of the study.

To investigate the effect of study treatment, the participants’ speaking ability was assessed in posttests via t-test analysis. Table 2 shows the results for this analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exp.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18.87</td>
<td>5.36</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cont.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14.02</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the results of Table 2 show, there is a statistically significant difference [t (38) = 0.86, p = .00] between experimental (M = 18.87, SD = 5.36) and control (M = 14.02, SD = 5.11) group with . This difference indicates
that the participants in experimental group outperformed those in control group revealing the effect of reading short stories. Therefore, the first null hypothesis that reading short stories has no significant effect on EFL learners’ speaking skill is rejected.

To measure the effect of reading short stories on the participants’ listening skill, the researchers analyzed the data employing independent t-test. Tables 3 and 4 show the results for these analyses.

**TABLE 3:**

RESULTS OF T-TEST ANALYSIS FOR LISTENING SKILL (PRETEST)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exp.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14.07</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cont.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13.14</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the results of Table 3 show, there is no statistically significant difference \([t (38) = .62, p = .35]\) between experimental (\(M = 14.07, SD = 2.28\)) and control (\(M = 13.14, SD = 2.12\)) groups with regard to listening ability which confirms the homogeneity of the participants at the outset of the study.

To investigate the effect of study treatment, the participants’ listening ability was assessed in posttests via t-test analysis. Table 4 shows the results for this analysis.

**TABLE 4:**

RESULTS OF T-TEST ANALYSIS FOR LISTENING SKILL (POSTTEST)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exp.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17.96</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cont.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15.07</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the results of Table 3 show, there is a statistically significant difference \([t (38) = 0.89, p = .00]\) between experimental (\(M = 17.96, SD = 4.76\)) and control (\(M = 15.07, SD = 4.62\)) group with . This difference indicates that the participants in experimental group outperformed those in control group revealing the effect of reading short stories. Therefore, the second null hypothesis that reading short stories has no significant effect on EFL learners’ listening skill is also rejected.

**Conclusion**

As the findings of this study demonstrate, the technique of reading simplified short stories can enhance the learners’ speaking skill. The results also proved that being exposed to suitable literary texts has significant effect on EFL learners’ listening skill. It showed that learners’ speaking and listening ability (oral skills) in a second or foreign language can depend on their amount of exposure to written authentic or simplified literary texts like short stories. Meanwhile, the results of the present study indicated that the participants’ syntactic knowledge and vocabulary size can also be improved by this technique because the researchers considered several factors and criteria in scoring the interviews that grammar and vocabulary were mentioned there.

In addition, the results indicated that to achieve a better performance in oral skills like listening and speaking, written exercises as well as oral exercises can be effective in improving oral skills. It can be even more interesting to use their written skills for improving their oral skills.

Besides, the findings of this study may have some hints for English language teachers, educators and also the learners. It can be beneficial for teachers who are searching for effective ways of improving speaking and listening skills. They can apply this technique to teach, practice, and enhance the speaking and listening abilities of their learners. It is also helpful for learners who are seeking for cheap and available techniques of improving oral skills. It is cheap because there is no need to new technologies such as mobile, computer, data projection, etc. It requires just a small book or some papers. It is also available everywhere and easy to carry and use.

**Acknowledgement**

The researcher would like to thank Shahid Bahonar teacher training center (TTC), birjand, Iran for helping me in finding the participants of this study.

**References**