

The Impact of Information-Gap, Opinion-Gap, and Reasoning-Gap Tasks on Students' Comprehension of Short Stories

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching English has gone through prominent changes within the last few years. Kelly's (1969) informative survey of language teaching over twenty-five centuries demonstrated some elemental accounts of foreign language instruction. As other languages began to be taught in educational institutions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) was adopted as the major means for teaching foreign languages. The introduction of literature in classrooms is a critical issue. Teachers may have a limited amount of classroom time available. Content-related choices are inevitable since language learning is considered to be the main goal of EFL teaching. Recently, there have been a number of significant developments in the field of language acquisition research that might result in a new use for short stories in language education. The use of short stories as a potential core for language teaching in EFL classrooms has become possible and, in fact, might be beneficial to students' language development, since it might facilitate students' linguistic, social, cultural and personal development through tasks. The manner in which short stories caters to these new paradigms in language acquisition studies and how it can be integrated into an effective task-based curriculum, however, are questions that remain somewhat unanswered in the case of EFL research.

The major features of task-based instruction are as follows (Ellis, 2003):

1. Natural or naturalistic use of language,
2. Learners-centered rather than teacher controlled learning,
3. Focus on form (attention to form occurs within the context of performing the task; intervention while retaining naturalness),
4. Tasks serve as the means for achieving natural use of language,
5. Traditional approaches are ineffective.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND PURPOSE

Teaching short stories may be dealt with in a traditional way and students majoring in English literature may find it demanding to appreciate the short stories since they have to pass a course entitled English short stories. One of the ways through which they can understand English short stories is the application of tasks to teach them. Through tasks, the students' focal attention will be on meaning transfer (Ellis, 2003).

OBJECTIVES AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Teaching English short stories at universities is to some extent carried out traditionally. The main purpose for carrying out this study, therefore, is to examine how teachers can enhance the students' appreciation of English short stories through applying tasks in their classrooms and to explore whether there is any crucial progress in this regard. University teachers may have difficulty teaching short stories and making their students appreciate them. In most cases, there may not be sufficient exercises to get students understand the underlying meanings and pragmatic intentions residing in short stories. The present investigation examined how teachers could motivate their students to appreciate English short stories.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS

RQ: Do information-gap, opinion-gap, and reasoning-gap tasks promote students' comprehension of short stories?

H0: Information-gap, opinion-gap, and reasoning-gap tasks do not promote students' comprehension of short stories.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Task-based language teaching gained popularity in the 1980s by Breen and Candlin (1980), Long (1985), and Prabhu (1987) in response to traditional language teaching approaches that involve teaching pre-selected language items in discrete isolated blocks. These approaches include the structural approach and the functional-notional approach (weak communicative language teaching) that separate structures, notions and functions as units of analysis to teach and expect the learner to synthesize them as needed for communicative purposes, and thus adopt synthetic syllabi (Wilkins, 1976) or type A syllabuses (White, 1988), categorized as focus on forms approaches by Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998). According to Long (2007), "focus on forms attempts the impossible, to impose a pre-set, external linguistic syllabus on learners, riding roughshod over individual differences in

readiness to learn, even within classes of students with the same overall proficiency. It is psycholinguistically untenable” (p. 121). The common Presentation Practice Production (PPP) paradigm has also been criticized for being incompatible with the learner’s internal syllabus and unrealistic for failing to cater for individualized learning. Nunan (2004) refers to tasks as important elements in syllabus design, classroom teaching and learner assessment. Nunan argues that a task underpins several significant research agendas, and it has influenced educational policymaking in both ESL and EFL settings. Breen (1987) states that a pedagogical task is any structured language learning endeavor which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task. Thus, a task refers to a range of workplans which makes language learning easy, starting from the simple and brief exercise type, to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision-making.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The researcher made use of two intact classes majoring in English literature. In each class, there were 30 students who were supposed to pass a two-credit course of English literary short stories at the end of the academic semester. The students were both male and female and their ages ranged from 24 to above 30. One of the classes was randomly selected as the experimental group that was provided with the three types of tasks: information-gap, opinion-gap, and reasoning-gap tasks. These tasks were introduced and used by the students to comprehend English literary short stories taught by their teacher. The other class that was used as the control group had 30 students who were taught the same English literary short stories through a non-TBI procedure.

INSTRUMENT AND MATERIALS

The researcher made a posttest based on the short stories read during the treatment period. The posttest contained 30 questions concerning the short stories. The validity of the test was .86. As for the short stories, the study made use of 10 short stories from different authors.

1. The Gift of the Magi (1905) by O. Henry
2. The Little Match Girl (1845) by Hans Christian Andersen
3. A Horseman in the Sky (1889) by Ambrose Bierce
4. An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge (1890, 1891) by Ambrose Bierce
5. A Dark Brown Dog (written 1893, published 1901) by Stephen Crane
6. The Monkey's Paw (1902) by W.W. Jacobs
7. The Cask of Amontillado (1846) by Edgar Allan Poe
8. Eve's Diary (1906) by Mark Twain
9. The Story of an Hour (1894, 1895) by Kate Chopin
10. The Luck of Roaring Camp (1868) by Bret Harte

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the researcher used two intact classes in which there were 60 students who were supposed to pass a two-credit course on English literary short stories. Randomly, a class was selected as the experimental group provided with the information-gap, opinion-gap, and reasoning-gap activities to comprehend English literary short stories. The other class that was chosen as the control group was taught the same English literary short stories through a non-TBI procedure. The teacher in the experimental group instructed the students in English literary short stories through the tasks already mentioned. For example, a short story was given to the students and they were asked to obtain as much information on the short story as possible. Then, each student participated in a discussion about the short story and provided his/her own information, opinions, and reasons for his/her comprehension of the short story. To give a vivid picture, through information-gap activity, students in the experimental group transferred given information about the short story to each other. Using reasoning-gap activity, students made attempts to derive some new information from given information through processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning about the short story. As for the control group, they were provided the same short stories. However, the teacher taught the short stories and the students learned the short stories as a result of her instruction. The students in both groups participated in their classes once a week. The whole experiment lasted

an academic semester. As regards the posttest, the teacher of both classes designed an achievement test to ascertain the facts about the students' comprehension English literary short stories they had just studied.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Table 4.1

Validity Statistics of the Posttest

No. of Raters	No. of Items	Content Validity Coefficient
4	30	.86

To estimate the content validity of the posttest, 4 available English literature professors were selected and through the following formula developed by Lawshe (1975), the content validity of the questionnaire was calculated: $CVR = (ne - N/2) / (N/2)$ where CVR = content validity ratio, ne= number of SME panelists indicating "essential", N = total number of SME panelists. This formula yields values which range from +1 to -1; positive values indicate that at least half the SMEs rated the item as essential. The mean CVR across items is used as an indicator of overall test content validity. This was sufficient for the researcher to administer the test to all 60 students.

4.3 Analysis of Inter-Rater Reliability for the Posttest

Table 4.2

Inter-Rater Reliability for the Posttest

	N	Pearson Correlation
Both Groups	60	0.87

All the participants of the study took part in the posttest of the study. Based on their scoring, the two raters had an agreement concerning their scoring. The Pearson-Product Correlation coefficient (0.87) shows consensus in the two raters' scoring procedure.

4.4 Analysis of both Groups' Performances on the Posttest

Table 4.3

Descriptive Statistics for Both Groups' Performances on the Posttest

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	30	19.7258	1.12411	.20327
Control	30	11.5031	2.54241	.46013

The results of the posttest revealed that the participants of the experimental group outperformed their counterparts in the control group. Therefore, it should be mentioned that the use of information-gap, opinion-gap, and reasoning-gap tasks had positive impacts on students' comprehension of short stories. The mean scores of both groups show that the experimental group had a much better comprehension of the short stories they had studied. It can be stated that the use of information-gap, opinion-gap, and reasoning-gap tasks was quite effective for the participants of the experimental group.

Table 4.4

Independent Samples Test (Posttest)

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed		26.260	.000	13.532	58	.000	.47955	5.03529	6.35471
Equal variances not assumed				13.532	53.539	.000	.47955	5.03218	6.36283

DISCUSSION

According to the results of the study, it was revealed that the use of information-gap, opinion-gap, and reasoning-gap activities to comprehend English literary short stories resulted in the students' successful comprehension of English literary short stories. Thus, the only hypothesis of the study which claimed that information-gap, opinion-gap, and reasoning-gap tasks do not promote students' comprehension of short stories was rejected. The findings of the present investigation confirmed the fact that TBLT proved fruitful since the students in the experimental group had a more successful learning experience by actively participating in performing tasks which lead to their higher levels of comprehending the short stories. Throughout the course of this study, the researcher clearly observed that information-gap, opinion-gap, and reasoning-gap activities provided the students in the experimental group with an environment in which they were really interested in what they were learning. Students will mainly focus on meaning rather than form. Thus, the grammar study will be incidental. Besides, it will facilitate the acquisition of the target language. What is more, when short stories are included in the atmosphere in the classroom, the cultural awareness of students will be enhanced, as well. Moreover, they will learn to put themselves in the characters' shoes in the short stories, they will have the chance to develop their critical thinking skills and as they will have a product after studying the short stories, the learning will be enduring and effective.

Conclusion

The present investigation made use of two intact classes in which there were 60 students who were supposed to pass a two-credit course on English literary short stories. Randomly, a class was selected as the experimental group provided with the information-gap, opinion-gap, and reasoning-gap activities to comprehend English literary short stories. The other class that was chosen as the control group was taught the same English literary short stories traditionally. The experimental group was instructed in English literary short stories through the tasks. The results of the posttest displayed that the participants of the experimental group outperformed their counterparts in the control group. Therefore, it should be mentioned that the use of information-gap, opinion-gap, and reasoning-gap activities had positive impacts on students' comprehending the short stories. A look at the mean scores of both groups shows that the experimental group had a much better appreciation of the English short stories they had studied. It can be stated that the use of

information-gap, opinion-gap, and reasoning-gap tasks was quite effective for the participants of the experimental group.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Utilizing information-gap, opinion-gap, and reasoning-gap activities to comprehend English literary short stories should be reconsidered. In most classes, there is a traditional way of teaching literary short stories. However, such an approach to teaching is not the only way of dealing with short stories. Tasks can help students engage in activities. Thus, teachers are recommended to apply task-based instruction in their teaching of short stories. In other words, teachers are encouraged to teach short stories by doing a series of tasks. The results of the present study revealed that the use of information-gap, opinion-gap, and reasoning-gap tasks could lead to the students' comprehending short stories and consequently promoted their literary ability. Therefore, authorities in syllabus and materials design can design such tasks to enhance students' capability in English literature.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This investigation made attempts to investigate the impact of information-gap, opinion-gap, and reasoning-gap tasks on students' comprehension of short stories. Thus, future investigations are suggested to capitalize on the other forms of English literature such drama and novels.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

1. The duration of the study treatment,
2. The selection of the participants,
3. The number of the participants.

WITH MY BEST WISHES TO ALL OF YOU

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