

Teaching Short Stories at the University Level through Practical Techniques : The Role of the Critical Essay

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Abstract

Among various techniques available in teaching the short story, this study focuses particularly on the critical essay writing as a pedagogical tool. The main objective is to explore whether this technique enhances students' writing skills and improves their usage of language structures. In order to analyze the data, a T-test was employed to compare the results of two groups of undergraduate students. The first one is the experimental group; it consists of 65 participants. The second group is the control one, it also consists of 65 students. The former experienced the critical essay technique while the latter did not. Both groups were given a pre-test before the application of the technique. Eventually, a post-test was given for both groups in order to observe any changes in their written performance. The results of the comparison revealed that students who were exposed to the technique showed higher grades in the test. There was also an increased attention in their writing to sentence structure and punctuation. The findings suggest that the critical essay can be a valuable tool to enhance students' academic writing.

Keywords: (short story, teaching techniques, critical essay, writing performance).

تدريس القصص القصيرة على المستوى الجامعي عبر تقنيات عملية دور المقالة النقدية

الباحثة. بتول عبدعلي صالح

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الملخص

من بين التقنيات المتعددة المستعملة في تدريس القصة القصيرة، تركز هذه الدراسة على كتابة المقالة النقدية بوصفها أداة تربوية فاعلة. تهدف الدراسة إلى التحقق من مدى إسهام هذه التقنية في تعزيز المهارات الكتابية لدى طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية وتنمية استعمالهم للبنى اللغوية. ولغرض تحليل البيانات، تم تطبيق اختبار (t-test) للمقارنة بين نتائج مجموعتين من طلبة المرحلة الجامعية؛ تكونت المجموعة التجريبية من ٦٥ طالباً خضعوا لتطبيق تقنية المقالة النقدية، في حين ضمت المجموعة الضابطة ٦٥ طالباً لم يتعرضوا لهذه التقنية. خضعت المجموعتان لاختبار قبلي لقياس مستوى الأداء الكتابي قبل التجربة، ثم أُجري اختبار بعدي للمجموعتين لملاحظة التغيرات التي طرأت على كتاباتهم. أظهرت نتائج المقارنة تفوق الطلبة الذين تعرضوا لتقنية المقالة النقدية في درجات الاختبار البعدي، فضلاً عن ملاحظة زيادة وعيهم ببناء الجملة واستعمال علامات الترقيم. وتشير هذه النتائج إلى أن كتابة المقالة النقدية يمكن أن تُعد أداة فعّالة في تعزيز الكتابة الأكاديمية لدى طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (القصة القصيرة، تقنيات التدريس، المقالة النقدية، الاداء الكتابي).

1.Introduction

Literature has long been recognized as a rich resource for language teaching in EFL classrooms. It functions as a pedagogical tool that offers special opportunities to enhance linguistic abilities and critical thinking skills. Among different literary genres, the short story has a unique value. Its prosaic form is more familiar to students. Its narrative nature has a special appeal as everybody can be easily engaged with the storyteller's art. Furthermore, the short story's length

makes it more convenient to be handled in the classroom where time is limited. Its brevity makes it easier for teachers and students to examine various of its aspects within a unified framework. Moreover, the number and variety of short stories available provide students with the opportunity to be introduced to different techniques and ideas. Thus, students are equipped with a rich source to develop their language and interpretation (Rohrberger et al., 1968).

2. The Short Story Genre

Human enchantment with storytelling is as old as civilization itself. During the course of history and across different cultures, there has always been a human attraction to learn about the lives, actions, and emotions of others. This interest is fulfilled either through direct personal observation or tales of other people's observations. "Tell me a story" is a phrase that reflects a universal desire that is not limited to children. It extends to adults across different cultures and in all ages. In the past, storytelling appeared in diverse forms, it was shaped by the traditions of each community. (Dickinson, 1961).

The short story reveals something about how people respond to life. However, the limited space and means of expression available for the shortest story, it provides only brief encounters. The short story presents only fragments of a life such as a dramatic moment or a fleeting experience. In this situation, the reader is able to form a certain impression of the character, but never a full portrait. The short story offers characters similar to those we meet briefly in real life. For example, a stranger we talk to one time, a travel companion, someone we cross paths with for a short while and then never see again. (Sims, 1991).

3. Characteristics of the Short Story

As a distinct literary genre, the short story possesses certain characteristics that distinguish it significantly from other forms of prose fiction.

3.1 Brevity

Brevity is one of the most important and outstanding traits of the short story. It refers to the limited space allowed for the story. Brevity is not only about the number of words in a text. However, it is a structural and aesthetic principle that defines the nature of the form. Thus, the short story is limited within a narrow textual frame. As a result, it demands a distinct approach to narrative construction, one which prefers focus, compression, and immediacy.

Edgar Allen Poe, as cited in (Simoviic', 2014), considered the short story as a superior literary form. It is able to achieve a complete and unified experience within a limited time frame. He asserts that a short story should be read in one uninterrupted sitting. This session typically lasts "from a half-hour to one or two hours." This constant engagement helps to preserve what he called "the unity of effect." According to Poe, if the reader remains concentrated from the beginning to the end of the story, then "the soul of the reader is at the writer's control." This means that the writer is able to guide the reader's intellectual and emotional reaction without the external distractions. He believed this concentrated experience is essential to establish a strong impression. He explained that pauses during reading may destroy the unity of effect. This is because the worldly interests that intervene during the pauses would affect the impression of the story. Therefore, the short story's brevity enables it to maintain intensity and coherence. It allows the writer to accomplish the fullness of his intention, which results in a more powerful and controlled artistic effect (Simoviic', 2014).

3.2 Economy

Another important characteristic that distinguishes the short story genre is economy. Due to its limited length, the short story cannot contain unnecessary elaboration or irrelevant details. The structure of a well-written short story is precise. Every element in the story serves a clear function and contributes to the story's purpose, otherwise it is

removed. Therefore, the reader's attention remains focused and would not drift away from the essence of the story (Dawson, 1909).

The writer of a short story may rely on suggestion and implication as strategies to achieve narrative economy. Since it is not possible to present gradual development of a character, the short story captures an individual in a state of revelation, crisis, or sudden insight. In this case, the writer must be able to make fragments of experience suggest the complexity of a larger slice of life. (Hawthorn, 1997).

3.3 Unity

One important strength of the short story is its commitment to a single incident that stands for the entire emotional and thematic weight of the narrative. It depends on one decisive moment to represent the full experience. This focused structure provides the reader with a unified effect without unnecessary background about the story. Just as one can admire a rose for its color and fragrance without tracing the full process of its growth, the short story invites readers to appreciate the emotional experience of a single episode. Therefore, every element in the story serves the chosen moment, which ensures that nothing interrupts the cohesion of the story's central vision. An effective writing is that which leads directly to the heart of the matter without unnecessary explanation or distraction. Based on this, unity can be understood as a foundational principle that governs every aspect of the story's construction. It requires that every element in the story serves a singular concentrated purpose (Dawson, 1909).

3.4 Selective

Selectivity is a defining trait of expression in the short story. It shapes the story's structure and style. The form is shaped by a careful choice of a single idea or image that feels complete and itself. A strong short story takes a brief and striking moment and enables it to represent larger reality. This fragment is not random; it is selected because of its ability to point towards a complicated human condition through a fleeting insight. In this case, the writer has to determine which aspects

of the character or situation carry the greatest importance and focus on those alone. Therefore, a carefully chosen part can reveal and evoke the whole (Hawthorn,1997).

3.5 Emphasis

Emphasis in the short story can be understood as a structural quality. The short story requires careful selection and placement of details because of its limited narrative space. Thus, details are arranged in a way that allows them to function with the greatest possible strength within the narrative. This structural precision produces a form in which meaning is concentrated rather than spread loosely across the text. The parts of the story are closely connected and carefully managed that no element can be removed without a noticeable gap. In this sense, emphasis emerges from the story's resistance to redundancy, as the short story allows no detail to remain neutral or unnecessary. Each component is required to participate actively in shaping the intended effect (Notestein &Dunn, 1914).

4. Techniques of Teaching the Short Story

The short story as a literary genre can be considered as a valuable authentic material for teaching language. It provides a significant source of teaching and learning materials in the EFL context. It is a creative product that supplies students with authentic language which enables them to be familiar with a variety of its forms and conventions. Furthermore, the brevity and simplicity of its structure offer a better opportunity of understanding, which allows students to develop their linguistic and interpretive skills (Pathan, 2013).

Although the short story provides various opportunities for language teaching, there is no single technique that can satisfy the different needs of learners. Therefore, the teacher should reasonably select the appropriate techniques that are suitable for different learning styles and language levels of students. These techniques serve as the

vehicle through which students engage with texts, improve their interpretive abilities, and achieve the predetermined lessons objectives. Therefore, the teacher's chosen techniques should provide a balance between the analytical thinking and a sense of enjoyment, which enables the learners to experience literature intellectually and emotionally (Midhin, 2015).

4.1 Vocabulary Stock Technique

One effective teaching technique is to use the short story as a tool for building vocabulary-stock. Reading short stories allows students to encounter new words within meaningful and memorable situations. It is easier for students to remember the meanings of words when the vocabularies are presented within the story, because they are not just memorizing isolated items but they are engaged with language that represents real life situations, emotions, and actions. The teacher's role in this process is important in the sense that he can make the reading of a short story a productive vocabulary-learning experience. On one hand, the teacher can encourage students to be self-reliant in their reading by teaching them how to use context clues to guess the meaning, or guide them to use a dictionary or glossary when needed. On the other hand, the teacher can prepare students for unfamiliar vocabularies before reading the story. This might be done by providing direct explanations, offering a vocabulary list, or asking the students to connect new words with their own personal experience and background knowledge (Al-Asadi, 1999).

4.2 Grammatical Structure Technique

The short story can also be used as an effective and motivating linguistic material to teach grammar. Instead of learning grammar rules in isolation, students would better understand if they read the short story first and then discuss the grammatical structures they encounter within its narrative flow, because it provides students with real examples of grammar in context. The teacher can also help students to notice and understand the grammatical structures that might be

confusing or irregular. In this way, English grammar becomes easier to grasp and remember, because it is connected to the story. Within this technique, the teacher can ask students to rephrase or restate certain sentences. Such activities allow students to rework sentences and expressions, which deepen their understanding of unfamiliar syntactic forms and how language works. It is also possible to create quick grammar exercises based on the story itself to support grammar learning without distracting students from the main content of the story. Therefore, short stories are a great way to show how grammar creates tone, meaning, and emotions, because they are carefully written with specific words and sentence structures (Al-Asadi, 1999).

4.3 Story Grammar Technique

Another effective technique for teaching the short story is called Story Grammar, which is a strategy that helps students to understand the structure and meaning of the story. This technique is based on the idea that most stories follow a recognizable structure composed of common narrative elements such as character, conflict, theme, series of events, and a resolution. If students learn how to recognize and analyze these elements, they become equipped with the necessary tools to comprehend and interpret fiction. When students learn how to analyze stories by using this technique, they gain the confidence to interpret literature independently, without relying entirely on the teacher's opinions. Thus, they become able to express their thoughts, participate in analytical discussions, and interpret fiction more independently (Strong, 1996).

4.4 Prediction Technique

Prediction can also be considered as a useful teaching technique that changes passive learning into an active student-centered experience. When it is applied, the teacher should pause at certain important moments and ask students what might happen next in the story. This technique requires careful preparation before class to identify the effective points in the story for pausing and prediction. Different activities can be used to apply this technique, for example,

the teacher may ask students to suggest a different title they found suitable after they finish reading the story. Another activity is to pause after reading the first paragraph and ask them what they think will happen next. Through the reading process, they might be asked to predict the roles and future actions of different characters. When they finish reading, the teacher can ask open-ended questions to encourage different interpretations and probable outcomes (Chintha, 2020).

4.5 Writing Skill Technique

Using the short story to improve students' writing skills is another important technique. Since it has a clear structure and authentic meaningful language, the teacher can use it to help students learn how to organize their ideas and improve their writing ability. Teachers can use certain parts of the story to provide students with writing activities that focus on both grammar and meaning. For example, students might be asked to write correct sentences by using grammar rules from the story. Students may also rewrite certain parts of the story by using their own words, or summarize what they read following a chronological sequence of events. Such activities help them to understand how the story is built and how to express it using their own writing style. Since short stories are brief and concentrated, they provide better opportunities for students to comprehend, imitate, and learn from. In addition to improving language skills, short stories also help students to become more confident and express their ideas creatively (Al-Asadi, 1999).

4.6 Critical Discussion Technique

Critical discussion based on the short story is an effective teaching technique that encourages students to read on their own. This discussion should be made after students have understood the main events and ideas of the story. At that point, they are ready to answer different questions about the elements such as style, plot, theme, and characters. When students understand the literal meaning of the short story, they can move to discuss the inferential level. At this level, they

begin to express their own interpretations about the story's themes, the behavior and motivations of the characters, the setting, and the author's point of view. Once students have achieved the literal and inferential level of understanding, they are ready to share their evaluations and opinions about the themes and cultural aspects of the story. The teacher's questions are important through the process, as he can help students to think more imaginatively about the story. In addition, critical discussion can tell the teacher how well students have understood the story. Furthermore, this discussion of the literary text orally helps students to develop their speaking skills, which makes this technique beneficial for both literary interpretation and language development (Al-Asadi, 1999).

4.7 Interpretive Abilities Technique

There are several activities that can reinforce students' interpretive abilities. For example, the teacher can give students multiple critical interpretations of the story and ask them to discuss and compare these ideas, then they try to produce their own interpretations. This process enhances their ability to identify and understand the main theme of the story. Additionally, students can be encouraged to consider how certain sets of words might carry symbolic associations, which urge them to think beyond the literal meaning. Another useful activity is to ask students to describe the characters, such as what they look like, how they act, and what roles they play in the story. These activities improve students' engagement with literature and help them to build their own understanding through discussion (Chintha, 2020).

Each of these techniques offers valuable strategies that help to engage students with the short story. However, the critical essay can be considered as a comprehensive technique that gathers all positive strengths of the previously mentioned techniques.

5. The Critical Essay Technique

The critical essay is a particular form of academic writing that requires more than a description or summary, it demands that students

think critically when they interpret literary texts. Thus, critical thinking is a central part of writing a critical essay, especially with the interpretation of literary texts. When students read a literary text, their engagement often begins with an emotional or instinctive reaction, such as feeling interested, confused, bored, annoyed, or pleased. But in academic writing, instant reacting is not enough. In order to write critically, students must examine these initial reactions through a process of reflection and self-questioning. They need to ask why they felt that way, what part of the text caused that feeling, and whether their opinion can be supported by evidence from the text (Barnet and Cain, 2014).

Critical thinking in literature requires students to look closely, make distinctions, and form judgments. Students are expected to take a step back and even question their own thoughts. They must ask whether their response makes sense, whether there is a reason to doubt it, and whether there are other ways of understanding the same part of the text. For example, if students feel that a story is unrealistic, they should not stop there. Instead, they should ask questions such as: what exactly seems unrealistic? Is being unrealistic always a weakness in literature? And if so, why? Such kinds of questions help students to explore the text more deeply and may lead them to a better understanding of what they read. This kind of thinking means that students are not only looking for evidence that supports their opinions, but also to expect objections and consider alternative interpretations. Sometimes, this process may lead to changing or adjusting the original idea. The student may end up with a completely different opinion. In this way, the critical essay becomes both a product and a practice of critical thinking. Ultimately, critical thinking is not just a skill but a mindset, it includes being open-minded, curious, and ready to work hard. It also includes the willingness to talk with others about ideas and explore questions deeply. In literature classes, writing a critical essay helps students to practice these habits. It encourages them to go beyond simple reactions and learn how to think and explain their ideas (Barnet & Cain, 2014).

6. Methodology

6.1 The Research Questions

1. Does the critical essay technique influence the students' written performance?
2. Does the critical essay technique enhance students' engagement with the short story?
3. What are the changes that can be observed in students' use of language structure after implementing the critical essay as a technique?

6.2 Data Collection

The data for this research were collected through an experimental procedure that involves two groups of EFL students. Each group consists of 65 participants. At the beginning, both groups were given a pre-test based on a short story they were studying. After this test, the experimental group of students were asked to write two critical essays related to the stories they were studying. Meanwhile, the control group continued their standard lessons without doing these essays. At the end of the experiment, a post-test was given for both groups. All the papers were graded and a comparison was conducted between the experimental group and the control group by using an independent samples t-test. On the other hand, another comparison was conducted between the pre-test and post-test grades within the experimental group by using a paired samples t-test. The test questions and the assignments of the critical essay were both based on the short stories students were already studying as a part of their regular coursework.

6.3 Data analysis

To evaluate the effectiveness of the critical essay as a technique in teaching short fiction, two statistical comparisons were conducted by using the t-test as the primary method. The first comparison was conducted between the control and experimental groups. This comparison employed an independent samples t-test to examine the difference in performance between these two groups, in order to determine if the students who are exposed to the critical essay

technique will show a statistically significant improvement over those who did not. The second comparison used a paired samples t-test within the experimental group to analyze their performance before and after the application of the technique to investigate their improvements through the experiment.

6.3.1 The Comparison between the Experimental Group and the Control Group

To examine the effect of using critical essay writing on students' performance, an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the post-test scores of the experimental and control groups. This test was chosen because it allows for the comparison of means between two independent groups, which in this case are the students who participated in the critical essay writing assignments and those who did not.

Table 1

The descriptive statistics for the post-test scores of both groups

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
post-test grade	Control	65	3.08	2.671	.331
	Experimental	65	5.82	3.082	.382

In group statistics table, the “n” symbol stands for the number of participants in each group (65 in the control group and 65 in the experimental group). The mean column values represent the average achievement scores for both groups. The mean score shows that the experimental group performed better than the control group ($5.82 > 3.08$). The standard deviation values indicate the amount of variation in scores within each group. The standard deviation column shows that the variation in the control group's scores is slightly smaller than that of the experimental group ($2.671 < 3.082$). To assess the statistical

significance of this difference, an independent samples t-test was conducted, and the results are shown in Table 2

Table 2 Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
post-test grade	Equal variances assumed	3.283	.072	-5.414	128	.000	-2.738	.506	-3.739	-1.738
	Equal variances not assumed			-5.414	125.469	.000	-2.738	.506	-3.740	-1.737

The independent samples test table shows that the F value is bigger than the alpha value ($3.283 > 0.05$). This means that the result of Sig. (2-tailed) in the first row should be considered. The value of Sig. (2-tailed) is .000, which is smaller than the alpha level (0.05). This indicates that the difference between the experimental and control groups in the post-test scores is statistically significant.

6.3.2 The Comparison between the Pre-test and the Post-test Scores within the Experimental Group

To identify the improvement within the experimental group itself, a paired samples t-test was conducted by comparing their scores in the pre-test and post-test. This comparison was used to determine whether students achieved noticeable progress after applying the critical essay writing technique.

Table 3 Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	E_pre-test grade	3.09	65	2.626	.326
	E_post-test grade	5.82	65	3.082	.382

The mean column values represent the average achievement scores in the pre-test and post-test. The mean score shows that students performed better in the post-test compared to the pre-test ($5.82 > 3.09$). The standard deviation values indicate the amount of variation in scores within each test. The standard deviation column shows that the variation in the pre-test scores is slightly smaller than that of the post-test ($2.626 < 3.082$). To assess the statistical significance of this difference, a paired samples t-test was conducted, and the results are shown in Table 4

Table 4 Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	E_pre-test grade - E_post- test grade	- 2.723	1.244	.154	-3.031	-2.415	- 17.650	64	.000

The paired samples test table shows that the value of Sig. (2-tailed) is .000, which is smaller than the alpha level (0.05). This indicates that the difference between the pre-test and post-test scores within the experimental group is statistically significant.

Results

The results of both statistical analyses indicate that the use of critical essay writing had a positive effect on students' performance in short fiction. The independent samples t-test showed a significant difference between the control and experimental groups in the post-test, suggesting that the students who practiced critical writing performed better than those who did not. Furthermore, the paired samples t-test confirmed that the experimental group experienced a meaningful improvement between the pre-test and post-test.

Conclusion

The study aimed to explore the impact of using the critical essay as a technique on EFL students' writing skills, their engagement with the literary text, and their use of language. The independent samples t-test showed that students who were exposed to the critical essay

technique achieved better grades than those who did not. Furthermore, the paired samples t-test showed that the experimental group achieved a meaningful improvement in their post-test results compared to their pre-test performance. There was also a notable development in their awareness about the sentences' grammatical construction and the proper use of punctuation. The technique also encouraged deeper interpretation and reflection which strengthened the students' engagement with the text. In conclusion, the results support the inclusion of the critical essay as an effective pedagogical technique to improve students' writing skills and interpretive abilities.

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