



Teaching Short Stories to Students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at Tertiary Level

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Abstract

Tertiary English Language teachers often tend to focus on teaching vocational English skills, improving students' grammatical structure, vocabulary and other standard forms of linguistic expression. Unabridged and authentic literary texts are seldom introduced to the language classroom, either because most teachers see literature as difficult or inappropriate for teaching English (Savvidou, 2004), or that foreign students at the tertiary level are not interested in pure academic and literary discussion of English literature, which they feel no direct relation to their everyday experience (Williams, 1983). Yet, the mastery of English language skills means much more than just linguistic accuracy. EFL learners should be given opportunities to develop cultural sensitivity and reading strategies towards various text types, including literary texts. In light of this, the aim of this paper is to suggest ways in which English teachers could integrate literature into a language class. In this paper, I will use "The Snow Child", a two-page fractured fairytale from Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), as an example to demonstrate how short stories can be taught in an EFL class. I will outline my teaching treatment for the short story, which has been tried out in EFL classes with positive results. The paper will illustrate how Angela Carter's fractured fairy tale can be taught and explored through a reader-centred approach. Follow up writing activities for consolidation will be provided as well.

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Keywords: Angela Carter; fractured fairytale; reader-response approach; teaching literature

1. Introduction

Traditionally, English language and literature are perceived as two distinct subjects. To many, EFL teachers and students included, English language learning is about the mastery of the basic mechanics of everyday, ordinary English speech and writing, whereas literature is a form of high art. It is often viewed as hard, sophisticated, and "has no immediately apparent applicability to anything in the students' experience" (Williams, 1983, p. 327). It was not until recent decades that literature began to gain attention among EFL teachers.

While it is now commonly agreed that "the use of literature in the EFL classroom can provide a powerful pedagogical tool in learners' linguistic development" (Savvidou, 2004), recent research has revealed that teachers do not seem to feel comfortable teaching literature in class. It is found that teachers have a high tendency to employ the mechanistic paraphrastic approach and the information-based

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approach when teaching the literature component in English to students (Huang and Embi, 2007). For example, during literature lessons, the teacher will have the entire literary text read aloud to the whole class again and again. Next, the teacher will paraphrase certain technical or unfamiliar terms with simple words and give plain explanation of the text. Then, to check students' understanding of the literary texts, the teacher will ask students to work on comprehension exercises and elicit responses from students through close-ended questions. Not surprisingly, such traditional, teacher-centred literature lessons mostly end with disappointing results. Teachers are labeled as "dull and less creative" (Huang and Embi, 2007, p. 2), whereas students are seen to be "passive" and are "unable to respond critically" (Huang and Embi, 2007, p. 2).

In fact, learning and teaching literature in the EFL classroom can be both enjoyable and meaningful, so long as the English teacher uses the reader-response approach and design learning activities that are meaning-driven, reader-centred and unthreatening. In this paper, I will use 'The Snow Child', a short fairy tale from Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), as an example to show how literary texts can be used to develop reading interest, as well as improve EFL students' English language skills in the tertiary EFL classroom setting. I will first briefly introduce the background of Angela Carter, the author, and her work. Next, step-by-step, I will provide a plot synopsis of "The Snow Child", key text features, together with my interpretation and response to the story. When teachers are given hands-on information on how to make meaning with Angela Carter's short story, I will then outline suggested pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities that can help students to maintain a high level of interest throughout the learning process.

2. Background of Angela Carter and her fairy tales

Angela Carter (1940 - 1992) is an established 20th-century British writer of novels, short stories, non-fiction, radio plays, film scripts, poetry, children's fiction and journalism. She was also the winner of the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in 1967, the Somerset Maugham Award in 1968, and the joint-winner of the James Tait Black Memorial Award in 1984 (Clapp, 2006). Among the many genres she wrote, Carter is particularly well-known for her feminist adaptations of fairy tales. Unwilling to take the fairytale genre as innocent and comforting, in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), Carter unearths the latent content and reveals the violently sexual nature hidden in traditional stories. Fairy tales such as "Snow White", "The Sleeping Beauty", "Bluebeard", and "The Little Red Riding Hood" are subversively retold – sleeping beauty becomes a vampire, Red Riding Hood transforms herself into a wolf, and Alice is an untamed werewolf. Being hailed as a 'Fairy Godmother' and 'the white witch of English literature' (Cited in Gamble, 2001, p. 110 - 111), Carter has now become one of the most studied modern writers on college and university syllabuses. The criticism of her work can be found in academic disciplines such as literary theory, gender studies, film theory, cultural theory and philosophy (Gamble, 2001). In the following, I will focus on discussing the plot development and text features of one of Carter's most renowned fairy tales, "The Snow Child".

3. Plot synopsis of *The Snow Child*

"The Snow Child" is adapted from the classic fairy tale of "Snow White". At the beginning of the story, a Count and his wife are riding horses in the snow. As the Count sees a raven and some bloodstain on the white snow, he wishes he could have a girl whose skin is as white as snow, mouth as red as blood and hair as black as a raven's feather. Suddenly, his dream girl appears in front of his eyes, all naked. The Count then takes her onto his horse.

Jealous of the snow child, the Countess thinks of different ways to get rid of the girl – she drops her glove and asks the girl to fetch it; she intentionally throws her brooch into the ice-cold pond and orders the girl to dive in and get it. Yet each time as the child is about to obey her order, the Count gets in the way and stops the child from following the Countess's request. What is more, the Countess's boots jump from her feet onto the snow child's legs, leaving the Countess's feet naked, unclothed and cold. Next, they come to a rose bush. The Countess tells the girl to pick a rose for her. As the girl picks the flower, she pricks her finger, it bleeds, she faints and dies.

What happens then is that the Count gets off the horse and rapes the dead child in front of his wife. When he finishes, the corpse melts away like ice, leaving only a raven's feather, a bloodstain on the snow and a rose. The Countess puts the clothing back onto herself, and the Count gives her the rose. Yet as she touches the rose, she drops it instantly because it bites her.

4. Text features

One of the most apparent features manifested in Angela Carter's "The Snow Child" is the narrative structure (namely the introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution) and motif the text employs. Same as the traditional pattern of fairy tales, "The Snow Child" is a fairy tale told by the third person omniscient narrator. The story has no historical actuality. Definite time, venue and names of the characters are absent. Simple, archetypal characters like the beautiful, innocent maiden as the victim, the Count as the sadistic male, and the jealous, scheming Countess as the stepmother occur in the text. In addition, as in most fairy tales, the repetitive plot, fantasy and illogical scenarios are taken as 'normal' by the characters. Magical transformations such as snow turning into a child and the child melting into ice-water appear in a surrealistic setting. All these features remind readers of the typical fairy tales they have come across beforehand.

What is intriguing is that while the text imitates the narrative style of fairy tales, adult wit is added. The language and content are so explicitly sexual and violent that the story is hardly suitable for children. Like a dark, inverted version of *Snow White*, themes such as child abandonment, rivalry between women, incest, rape, murder are unearthed. The unequal gender relations between men and women are polarized and amplified – the male is in the subject position. He has the power to imagine and create a "child of his desire", "a masculine fantasy" (Bacchilega, 1999, p. 37) which he can deflower anytime and any way he wants. He also has the power to dress and undress his wife, i.e. the Countess as he wishes. The female characters, on the other hand, are portrayed as inferior, pathetic sexual objects that are born to please their male master. For example, when the Count rapes the unconscious child, the powerless Countess sits on the mare, keeps quiet, watches narrowly and does nothing to stop the abuse. Then, once the sexual whim of the Count is fulfilled, the snow child melts and disappears, because she is not valuable to the male any more. Also, in the male-controlled world, the two women cannot co-exist in the story. As rivals, only one of them can win the attention and love of the man. To survive, they must fight against each other, and until one of them dies can the other have peace. That is why the Countess has to try very hard to get rid of the snow child, fearing that the girl might replace her. Apart from sexual politics, Carter's short story is also full of rich, enigmatic symbolism, which can be interpreted in different ways. For instance, the rose that pricks both the snow child and the Countess can be read as a symbol of virginity or femininity, depending on how one looks at it.

5. Understanding and interpretation of *The Snow Child*

Carter's "The Snow Child" is a disruptive adaptation of Brothers Grimm's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). Reading it from a feminist perspective, one can interpret the short story as a note of caution and resistance against the patriarchal social construct. Through exaggerating the sexist

characteristics in conventional fairy tales, it shows readers the hidden danger of reinforcing the message to children that physical attractiveness is an important asset for women to achieve and maintain. Having said so, because of the pornographic content and highly sexualized language, it may take readers some time to accept Carter's version. Apart from difficult issues such as masculine evil and sadomasochism, the fairy tale is also overwhelmed with ambiguous and intricate imagery. Nonetheless, as Bruhl and Gamer (2001) point out, the discomfort in reading and understanding the literary text does not necessarily have to be negative. Readers are free to construct meaning from their own experience. As long as Carter's short story is used effectively in the classroom, the discomfort can be converted into reading pleasure, which attracts students' attention and raise their awareness towards gender issues. Difficult as it may seem, it can work as "a means of reminding students that they have seen stories like this before" (Bruhl and Gamer, p. 155), that the Disney or the 'Shrek' version gets classified as entertainment, while Carter's less acceptable adaptation gets dismissed as feminist. It will stimulate students to take an active role in learning, reflecting and looking again at how it is that these texts (the Disney version, the 'Shrek' version, Carter's rewriting, as well as Grimm's fairy tales) actually work.

Furthermore, since most students are familiar with the fairytale genre, it is expected that Carter's subversive rewriting will arouse their interest and curiosity. The obscure text will provide a good platform for free interpretation and discussion among students, which thereby facilitates students' personal expression and creates opportunities for practicing linguistic and communicative skills. A short story like "The Snow Child" can be a good start for a student-centred literature class, in which students can develop their own responses and sensitivities towards literary texts, as well as "submit their individual or collective judgments for approval either to their peers or to the teacher" (Carter and Long, 1991, p. 25).

6. Methodological strategies in teaching *The Snow Child*

Considering EFL learners' reading ability as well as the rich and obscure imagery in the tiny tale, in the lesson, it would be more interesting to employ mainly the reader-response approach (Hirvela, 1996). In other words, instead of playing the secondary role to the text in the response process, students will be the ones who bring "forces into play" (Hirvela, 1996, p. 130) when they read the literary text. The personal response and interpretation they share with the class will be "a reflection of themselves as well as the text" (Hirvela, 1996, p. 130).

6.1. Teaching treatment for the pre-reading

To help students gain a better understanding of the crucial elements in fairy tales, before the close reading of "The Snow Child", the teacher can play a short clip extracted from Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) to refresh their memory about the classic fairy tale. Then, the teacher may ask students to work in pairs, share and jot down the impressions they have of fairy tales – students can be encouraged to discuss:

1. what they think a fairy tale is;
2. whether they like fairy tales or not;
3. their favourite fairy tales and protagonists, if any;
4. whether fairy tales are suitable for children as well as adults in EFL classes;
5. whether the genre reflects experience of what happens in the real world;
6. whether fairy tales represent events which are true to their experience,
7. whether there are any interesting adaptations they have read and watched on TV.

Then, the teacher can put students in groups of four to five. Each group will be asked to discuss one question: What are the common features of fairy tales? After the discussion, the group will then be asked to give a brief account of what they have come up with. It is believed that such pre-reading activities will “draw out what they already know, think or feel about a topic and help [to] relate the text to their personal experiences” (Kennedy, 1999, p. 47).

6.2. *Teaching treatment for the reading*

As Parkinson and Thomas suggest (2000), instead of giving a standard interpretation of the text at the beginning, teaching can start with the story itself. Students can be encouraged to explore what they find significant in the text. First of all, students can be asked to have a close reading of “The Snow Child”, which is only two pages long. After that, students will write a summary of events in the tale in 100 words. If they like, they can also summarize the story in the format of flow chart(s) and/or diagrams. Next, students can work in pairs and compare what they have written in the summary. Note that there should not be a model answer for the summarizing exercise, nor should it be reduced to a test of students’ spelling, grammar and punctuation. Rather, the summarizing exercise should be a channel for students to describe freely what they see and feel as significant and special about Angela Carter’s fairy tale. Then, to motivate students to get more deeply involved with the short story, the teacher can ask students to get into groups of four to five again and discuss with their group-mates these thought-provoking questions:

1. What do you think is the central theme of the fairy tale?
2. What is the author trying to say through the tale?
3. What do you think the rose symbolize?
4. Why did the snow child melt in the end?

After the discussion, the groups can be invited to give a presentation of their interpretation(s) in front of the class. When all groups have finished their oral presentations, the teacher can share with the class his/her viewpoint. A brief account of Angela Carter’s life and work, historical and cultural settings of the tale can then be delivered to the class. The teacher may also guide students how the text can be read from a feminist perspective. If time allows, the teacher can ask students to recall any fairy tales (such as *Snow White* or *Sleeping Beauty*) that they may think of when reading Carter’s text. The teacher can then tell them the gruesome original versions of some classic fairy tales with students, tracing the background of these fairy tales as well as Carter’s “The Snow Child”.

6.3. *Teaching treatment for the post-reading (follow-up)*

After the lesson, EFL students can be given a writing task: first, they can choose a fairy tale that they would like to work on. Then, basing on the traditional narrative pattern and style of the fairy tale genre, students can rewrite the chosen fairy tale creatively in about 500 words. They can then post their creative work onto a discussion board online, so that they can read each other’s creative writing, express their ideas and share their views and comments about one another’s fairy tale.

7. Conclusion

Although teaching literature in the EFL classroom may require more preparation than teaching the straight-forward and conventional mechanics of English language, we cannot deny that the literature component in English, when used effectively, can be a useful resource not just for language learning, but also for cultivating students’ cultural and critical literacies. As Parker (2004) argues, the study

of literature can be justified as a “broad education in the humanities, as a way of teaching students how to think...as something to be enjoyed; as a form of art; as the site of some of humanity’s deepest ethical, political and philosophical questioning” (p. 42). I believe that the English curriculum, especially at the tertiary level, should not be limited to the study of functional aspects of English language, but should encompass life-wide learning and a broader appreciation of literature, so as to develop intellectual pursuits of EFL students.

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İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen üniversite öğrencilerine kısa öykü öğretimi

Öz

Yükseköğretim İngilizce dil öğretmenleri genellikle öğrencilerin gramer yapı, kelime ve dil ifadelerinin diğer standart yapı bilgilerini geliştiren mesleki İngilizce becerilerinin öğretimine yoğunlaşma eğilimi göstermektedirler. Çoğu öğretmenlerin edebiyatı İngilizce öğretimi açısından zor veya uygunsuz bulmaları (Savvidou, 2004) ya da yükseköğretim düzeyinde yabancı öğrencilerin kendi günlük deneyimleriyle birebir bağlantı olmadığını hissettikleri İngiliz edebiyatının edebi ve sade akademik tartışmasına ilgi duymamaları (Williams, 1983) nedeniyle, orijinal ve özgün edebi metinler nadiren dil sınıflarında sunulmaktadır. Buna rağmen İngilizce dil becerilerinde yeterlik sadece dil doğruluğundan çok daha fazlasını gerektirmektedir. İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenenlere kültürel duyarlılık ve edebi metinleri içeren çeşitli metin türlerine yönelik okuma stratejilerini geliştirmeleri için fırsatlar verilmelidir. Bu doğrultuda, bu çalışmanın amacı İngilizce öğretmenlerinin edebiyatı dil sınıfına dâhil etmenin yollarını önermektir. Bu çalışmada, Angela Carter'ın *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) eserinden iki sayfa olarak derlenmiş *The Snow Child* masalını İngilizcenin yabancı dil olarak öğretildiği sınıflarda kısa hikâyelerin nasıl öğretileceğini göstermek üzere örnek olarak kullanacağım. Çalışma Angela Carter'ın masalının okuyucu-merkezli yaklaşımla nasıl öğretileceği ve inceleneceğini örneklenecektir. Tekrar amaçlı tamamlayıcı yazma aktiviteleri de sunulacaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Angela Carter; derlenmiş masal; okuyucu-tepki yaklaşımı; edebiyat öğretimi

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