

**Pedagogic Value of ‘An Anthology of Short Stories’: A Course, Taught to Postgraduates
at National University of Modern Languages (Peshawar’s Campus)**

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Abstract

This study was carried out to evaluate the pedagogical appropriateness of the prescribed course. For the pedagogical analysis of the course, the theoretical framework of the investigation included four components: instructional objectives, content analysis, teaching method and strategies, and assessment. The instructional objectives were analyzed against the revised Bloomian taxonomy, and contents of the course were evaluated against the following parameters: intent, content, target, effect, critique, and response. Data was collected from two types of respondents—teachers and students—through semi-structured interviews, using convenient sampling. The collected data were analyzed qualitatively. Along with that, a few short stories from the anthology were analyzed following the criterion mentioned for content analysis. The study deduced that the course lacked in explicit mention of the objectives. Despite some reservations of the respondents, the contents of the course were found pedagogically appropriate for the said level. In the end, the paper offers a few suggestions, keeping in view the responses, to enhance pedagogical appropriateness of the course.

Keywords: Pedagogical Analysis, Stylistics, ELT, Short Story, Bloom’s Taxonomy

Introduction

Literature plays an important role in the emotional and intellectual growth of humans. Custodio and Sutton opine that literature can open horizons of possibility, allowing students to question, interpret, connect, and explore. So pedagogy of literature is an important area of academics. In like manner, Thaler claims that teachers, teaching literature, “have many specific disciplinary and cognitive goals, but their most general, foundational goals are developmental. [They] want [their] students to grow intellectually, to mature personally, to develop socially and to become more sophisticated emotionally” (14).

Also, some experts in the field believe that students of literature experience “vicarious identification and emotional transport” (Chambers and Gregory 15). Similarly, Collie and Slater justify teaching literature for three reasons: cultural enrichment, language enrichment, and personal involvement (3). The views of these scholars establish the utility of literature as an academic subject. Moreover, it might be inferred that the chief concern of literature as an academic field is personal and emotional growth and introduction to the target culture through its literature.

On the other hand, Widdowson has highlighted the linguistic intent of teaching literature, insisting that “literature as a subject has as its principal aim the development of the capacity for individual response to language use” (76). In another place, he extends the range of the same argument by contending that “the study of literature is primarily a study of language use and as such it is not a separate activity from language learning but as an aspect of the same activity” (83). This argument is the quintessence of his stylistic approach to the study of literature.

Literature is a generic construct, encompassing a penumbra of various modes or genres of fictional expression. Amongst these genres such as novel, drama and poetry, short fiction or short story is a chief reserve for observing both life and language. Sage observes that characters’ actions in short fiction are a depiction of real and symbolic acts that occur in quotidian life. He further voices that the “world of short fiction both mirrors and illuminates human lives” (Sage 43). Correspondingly,

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he opines that its brevity reduces students’ burden of reading as well as eases teachers’ task of completing the course within the stipulated time. Another inevitable feature of short fiction or short story is its universal appeal. In other words, students all over the world have experienced stories and can relate to them.

Moreover, short fiction, like all other types of literature, makes a contribution to the development of cognitive analytical abilities by bringing the whole self to bear on a compressed account of a situation in a single place and moment. Observing the educational benefits of short stories, Ariogul professes that they broaden students’ worldview about different cultures and ethnicities, motivate them for reading, provide them with creative texts for personal exploration, satiate their aesthetic appetite, enhance their critical thinking skills, ignite their creativity and develop their understanding of foreign culture(s).

That said, it seems indispensable to explain the concept of pedagogic analysis and give reason(s) for analyzing pedagogical of a text. Bhowmik et al define pedagogic analysis as “the analysis of a given content material in any subject and on any topic carried out well in the spirit of the science of teaching (Pedagogy)” (1). To put it differently, pedagogic analysis is a systematic and logical dissection of the course or curriculum into its structural elements from the perspective of the teacher for its better and effective transaction, as it is accentuated that “pedagogical analysis offers enormous potential for improving the delivery of information in all form[s] of education” (Bhowmik et al. 3). Pedagogic appraisal thus intends to divide the course contents into meaningful constituents, anticipate appropriate and measurable educational objectives for each component, identify the requisites in the curricular area, design apt learning activities by the defined objectives, and anticipate stratagems for formative and summative assessments. In line with this argument, the present study intends to measure the pedagogical value of *An Anthology of Short Stories*—a course taught to first-semester students at the postgraduate level (MA English) at the National University of Modern Languages. The intention is to see whether this course can be aligned to the socio-cultural milieu of the students.

Description of the Course

The first two units of the course introduce the basic concepts and chronological development of the genre short story. Besides the introductory section, the course covers eleven authors: Oscar Wilde, Thomas Hardy, D. H. Lawrence, Herbert George Wells, E. M. Forster, Katherine Mansfield, Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe, and O’ Henry. There are two stories by each writer in this anthology, except the last two authors who have one story to each of their names. The anthology lacks an introduction to the author(s) of the stories. The course entails divergent cultural backdrops: there are three American, one Bengali, one Russian, and six British authors in this anthology. Regarding chronological diversity, it has been observed that most of them belong to the second half of the nineteenth century; moreover, all of them, save H.G. Wells, had passed away before the First World War. The most vivid disproportion in this anthology is that of gender: there is only one female author—Katherine Mansfield. Out of the twenty short stories, four stories—two by H.G. Wells and two by E. M. Forster—belong to the science fiction genre.

Methodology

Conceptual Framework

Pedagogical evaluation of this course is based on the model proposed by Bhowmik et al. They suggest four components of pedagogical analysis: instructional objectives for the content, content analysis, teaching methods and strategies, and appropriate evaluation devices. To analyze instructional objectives, the researcher adopted the revised Bloomian taxonomy of instructional objectives (Anderson and Krathwohl). This taxonomy comprises three domains of learning and accordingly three categories of objectives: (1) cognitive, (2) effective, and (3) psychomotor domains. The study focuses on the first two domains only because the third domain is related to physical abilities. The second component, content analysis, includes the analysis of the author’s intention for producing a text, subject and theme, effect, target, and critique of the text. The third and fourth components are not compared to any external criterion. The analysis emerges from the data collected through interviews of the course instructor and the students.

Data Collection

The study was qualitative. The sample of this study was “a sample of convenience” (Marczyk, DeMatteo, and Festinger 84). The methodology comprises two parts: the semi-structured interview

and textual analysis of the selected short stories. The data were collected through interviews from two types of respondents: a teacher and students. An interview is an apt tool for data collection for providing an in-depth analysis of respondents’ attitudes. The interview encompasses the following aspects of pedagogic analysis: objectives, content, appropriateness, effect, structure, critique, language, teaching method, and assessment. Since the course under-discussion is taught at the National University of Modern Language (NUML), there is one instructor who has been teaching this course for the last five years; therefore, there was only one respondent to provide data on the questions for teachers. Likewise, the sample for this study consists of 26 first semester students (19 male and 7 female) of the Master of Arts in English. Their age varied from 19 to 28 years.

Moreover, due to temporal and spatial limitations, the researchers analyze only three stories: “The Devoted Friend” by Oscar Wilde, “A Cup of Tea” by Katherine Mansfield, and “The Machine Stops” by E. M. Forster.

Findings

Course developers have not mentioned any aims or objectives of this course in the anthology though it is an essential part. Both the teacher and the students responded that there was no mention of the objectives of the course in the anthology (Q1, Appendix 1). However, they believed that there might be a slight indication of the implicit intention of the course. According to the teacher, this course has the dual purpose of developing an understanding of life and literature. The students expressed varied responses in this regard. Nonetheless, their responses can be clustered thematically into three categories: understanding of life, understanding different literary periods of English literature, and understanding of the genre (i.e. short story).

About themes (Q2, Appendix 1) of the stories, the teacher spoke for students rather than for herself. She believed that they understood the themes which they had encountered in their lives, for example, hatred, love, jealousy; but themes related to supernatural phenomena were usually difficult to understand. The learners’ responses were not much different from that of the instructor. The majority (85%) of them understood the themes of the story. However, the students’ response was about the anthology as a whole; it was not about the individual stories. One reason for such a response might be the teaching strategy: the teacher would state the theme of the story first, and then she would teach the respective story.

Next, both the instructor and half of the students found “The Devoted Friend” the easiest short story in the anthology for its simple language, easy diction, and common subject—friendship. Some (23%) of the students believed that “The Rose and the Nightingale” was the easiest short story (Q3, Appendix 1). Again, this story is written in simple diction on very conventional themes prevalent in society—love, sacrifice, materialism, pity, and ingratitude. Other respondents mentioned different short stories, responding to the question about the easiest story in the anthology. However, simple language and familiar themes are the points of convergence in their responses.

Further, both the teacher and the students found “The Machine Sops” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” the most difficult stories (Q4, Appendix 1). Apart from these two stories, some students mentioned other stories as well. For instance, the list included “The Celestial Omnibus”, “The Three Strangers”, “The Blind Man” and “The Black Cat”. They found the stories difficult because of either diction and language or unfamiliar themes.

Correspondingly, the instructor as well as the learners enlisted three short stories containing the most difficult vocabulary: “The Fall of the House of Usher”, “The Machine Stop” and “The Withered Arm” (Q5, Appendix 1). The students added one more to the list: “The Celestial Omnibus”. This means that vocabulary is a prominent hindrance in understanding the short stories.

Next, the teacher voiced that the course does not contain anything objectionable by the social norms of the students’ culture; but even if there is anything taboo in their culture, being the students of literature, they should be tolerant and broadminded for such ideas (Q6, Appendix 1). Almost half of the students agreed with the instructor in this regard, saying there was nothing culturally or ideologically inappropriate in these stories. The rest of them, on the other hand, viewed this phenomenon differently, naming a couple of stories to be culturally inappropriate. They felt uncomfortable reading “The Blind Man”—some undercurrents of homosexuality—and “The Withered Arm”—Rhoda’s illegitimate relationship and having a son outside marriage. Overall, the response was a mixed one.

Concerning the relatability of the stories, the course instructor related “The Rose and the Nightingale” to her life, whereas the students related different stories to their respective lives. However, the most relatable story on the list was “The Devoted Friend”, which was related by 15 students to their lives; the others included “The Rose and the Nightingale”, “A Cup of Tea”, “The Rocking-Horse Winner” and “The Blind Man” (Q7, Appendix 1). This sheds light on the diversity of human experiences. Moreover, the students referred to different stories for learning diverse lessons of life (Q8, Appendix 1). Some of them learned that fortune is also a deterrent for success, but one should also believe in oneself (see “The Rocking Horse Winner”). “The Rose and Nightingale” taught them lessons of sacrifice, pity, and selfless love; “The Devoted Friend”, about exploitation in the name of friendship; and “The Machine Stops” reduced dependency on machines.

Next, the instructor expressed that the course would sensitize them towards life; moreover, it would enhance their understanding of the British cultural life (Q9, Appendix 1). The students agreed with her response. The immediate marks of the course include expressing feeling in a better way, reading of the text more consciously and cautiously, weighing actions more than words. Equally, they improved their understanding of human nature, becoming more pragmatic and rendering more importance to human beings and relationships than to machines.

Both the teacher and the students exhibited their understanding of the organisation of the contents to some extent by recognizing the chronological arrangement of the readings (Q10, Appendix 1). It is the regional-cum-chronological organization of the content—organizing the readings chronologically under broader regional categories. The respondents did not highlight the regional factor in the organization of the content. Considering the thematic organization of the contents, they believed that the course did not follow the principle of the difficulty level of the content—teaching from simple to complex. This is true with one exception that the first two stories are the easiest, as discussed earlier.

Although the anthology does not include any introduction to the book or the authors, both the teacher and the students responded affirmatively to the question of whether an introduction to the author(s) helped them in understanding their short stories (Q11, Appendix 1). The teacher starts with the introduction to the author and even to the story. She believes that understanding a literary composition depends upon understanding the age and circumstances in which the author produces the same. Moreover, she voiced that giving the central idea of the story could develop their interest in the story. The students also found an introduction to the author effective and helpful in comprehending the stories. However, both kinds of respondents expressed their concern regarding the length of the course and felt it to be difficult to peruse and complete the anthology of twenty short stories within the stipulated time, some of which are as long as twelve thousand words (see “The Machine Stops”). They suggested that fifteen short stories would suffice for this course (Q12, Appendix 1).

Regarding its linguistic impact, the instructor believed that the course improved their two skills: reading and writing (Q13, Appendix 1). The students also agreed with her but in different ratios. All of them believed that the course improved their reading skill, but half of them exclaimed that the anthology did not improve their writing skill. Only six students agreed in favor of speaking, and twenty against it. Twenty-three of them rendered their response in negative for listening skills. Overall, they perceived that the course improved their reading and writing skills.

The teacher practiced lecturing method of instruction: This included giving an introduction to the author, the theme(s) of the story, writing the names of the characters, describing the plot diagrammatically, and then reading and analyzing the text. (Q14, Appendix 1). The students also gave a similar response to the same question. Her philosophy of teaching entailed that providing preliminary information about an author or a story is an essential part of teaching methodology and that simplifying things for the learners even at the master level is as important as it is at junior levels. Next, the students, being satisfied with the current teaching method, suggested nothing (Q15, Appendix 1). However, the teacher suggested the inclusion of audio-visual aids in the teaching strategies to improve the latter.

Contrary to the annual system practiced in Pakistan, assessment in the semester system consists of at least four components: assignment(s), presentation, test, mid- and final term papers. The instructor expressed her displeasure regarding the quality of assignments (Q16, Appendix 1). She insisted that assignments were not an effective means of assessment since the learner usually plagiarise the content from the internet and other sources. When asked for any suggestion to improve

the current assessment system (Q17, Appendix 1), she expressed her contentment with the system because she enjoyed liberty in assessing the students. There was no compulsion on her apart from the two written exams: mid-term and final term. On the other hand, the learners suggested the inclusion of multiple-choice questions, focusing on text reading. Else, they too contented themselves with the current system.

Content Analysis

In the light of both the teacher’s and the students’ responses, three stories have been shortlisted for content analysis: (1) “The Devoted Friend” by Oscar Wilde, (2) “A Cup of Tea” by Katherine Mansfield, and (3) “The Machine Stops” by E. M. Forster.

The two main characters in "The Devoted Friend" are a poor man known as little Hans and Hugh, a rich miller. Miller claims to be a devoted friend of little Hans. In truth, he selfishly takes advantage of little Hans at every opportunity. Little Hans always does everything that the Miller asks him to do because he does not want to lose the Miller's friendship or offend him. Little Hans' desire to remain the Miller's friend ultimately proves fatal for him, resulting in the former's death.

Since the story was written in a fairy tale style for his sons, Wilde’s intention might be to entertain. The subject of the story is selfish and insincere friendship. The story projects many themes such as friendship, innocence, trust, selfishness and self-importance. The Water-rat sermons the Duck and Green Linnet on the value of true friendship saying “Indeed, I know of nothing in the world that is either nobler or rarer than a devoted friendship” (Wilde 41). Likewise, the theme of selfishness prevails throughout the story. The Water-rat expects his “devoted friend to be devoted to” (Wilde 41) him only. Hugh, the Miller, is an epitome of selfishness and self-importance. He visits Little Hans in springs and summers when the latter’s garden is replete with fresh flowers, and he never returns without usurping something from Hans’ garden in the name of their friendship. But he never visits Hans in winters, knowing that the latter may borrow something from him. Miller believes “when people are in trouble they should be left alone, and not be bothered by visitors” (Wilde 42).

Owing to the manipulative behavior of the Miller and inexhaustible innocence of Little Hans, the story appeals to the hearts of readers. It kindles the feeling of pity and sympathy for the latter character. Moreover, its universal themes are one of the reasons that make comprehension of the story easy for the students. The language of the story is easy and simple. It contains no bombastic diction or complex sentence structures. Coming to the stylistic features of the story, one may observe the dominant use of irony. Preferring speech to action, the Miller articulates that “Lots of people act well...but very few people talk well, which shows that talking is much the more difficult thing of the two, and much the finer thing also” (Wilde 43).

The next story, “A Cup of Tea,” is the only story by a female writer--Katherine Mansfield— included in the course. In the story, Rosemary Fell, a rich young lady, goes shopping. On her way back to her car, she is approached by a poor girl, Miss Smith, who asks for some money to buy a cup of tea. Instead, Rosemary takes the poor girl to the former’s house to show that the rich are generous. Having eaten her fill at Rosemary’s house, Miss Smith starts narrating her story until Philip, Rosemary’s husband, arrives. He disapproves of Rosemary’s bringing a poor girl to their house; and seeing that she is unwilling to dismiss the poor girl, he plays on her jealousy, admiring the poor girl’s beauty. Very soon Rosemary, getting jealous of her, sends her away with three five-pound notes. Later, she tells her husband that the poor girl has left and will not dine with them. However, she still feels insecure about her appearance and asks Philip whether she is still pretty.

Katherine, in “A Cup of Tea”, highlights the themes of class consciousness, materialism, jealousy, and insecurity. There are some traces of feminism as well in this story. The theme of class consciousness is delineated quite vividly. The Fells are “rich, really rich, not just comfortably well off” (Mansfield 25). Rosemary likes to spend money extravagantly. If she “wanted to shop she would go to Paris” (25). She brings the little poor girl not out of pure generosity but out of adventurism. Even her husband does not like her bringing the poor girl to their house.

Correspondingly, when she resists to send Miss Smith away, Philip plays upon her jealousy and appreciates Miss Smith’s beauty (Mansfield 36). Rosemary starts feeling insecure about her appearance. Here, Mansfield sheds light upon females’ psyche. Woman does not compromise on anything that belittles her value, particularly her feminine beauty. Moreover, the bond of womanhood stirs Rosemary’s sympathy for Miss Smith. Rosemary articulates that “After all, why shouldn't you

come back with me? We're both women. If I'm the more fortunate, you ought to expect..." (Mansfield 31).

The story is a good pedagogic choice for introducing the students to a foreign culture due to its universal themes, feministic undercurrents, and linguistic simplicity. Such features facilitate comprehension. There are some sentence structures which may appear novel for the students, for example, "Sad were the lights in the houses opposite" (Mansfield 28). This sentence follows the inversion rule: Complement + Verb + Subject. The teacher can teach the students this structure.

The next story, "The Machine Stops" (1909) by E.M. Forster, belongs to the genre of science fiction. And even after a hundred years, the argument of the story is still fresh. Forster depicts a dystopian future society in it. Due to the unsuitable conditions on Earth's surface, people have started living underground in "the Machine". This underworld is ruled by the Machine. The two main characters, Vishti and her son Kuno, strive to maintain their relationship since every individual lives in complete isolation in the machine. Kuno mourns the human loss of interaction saying "It has robbed us of the sense of space and the sense of touch, it has blurred every human relation" (Forster 111). Travelling, though permissible, occurs the least. "Few traveled in these days, for, thanks to the advance of science, the earth was exactly alike all over" (Forster 106). The only means of communication is the machine. They have lost the sense of human face to face interaction (Forster 106).

Over the years, they elevate the Machine to the status of deity and began to worship it, establishing technopoly—a kind of religion (Forster 112). Kuno, however, is cognizant of the limitations of the Machine; he knows that the Machine is destined to eventually fail, and he consequently warns his mother about it (Forster 121). And a time comes when the Machine apocalyptically fails; the whole system collapses. The story portrays the collapse as "there came a day when, without the slightest warning, without any previous hint of feebleness, the entire communication-system broke down, all over the world, and the world, as they understood it, ended" (Forster 128).

In the preface to his *Collected Short Stories* (1947), Forster viewed that "The Machine Stops" is a response to one of the previous heavens of H. G. Wells, particularly the one delineated in *The Time Machine*. By this intention, Forster enlightens the reader on the subject that unrestrained dependency on technology will lead the human world to irrevocable catastrophe. Over-reliance on machines and technology leads to isolation and abolition of face to face interaction. The story appeals to readers' imagination as well as intellect. Length of the story, difficult theme, and complex sentence structure, difficult diction, and allusions make the story difficult for comprehension.

Discussion

Analyzing the participants' responses to the questions regarding aims and objectives of the course and critiquing a few short stories, it may be deduced that this course intends to enable students to understand life and its problems via vicarious experience; learn how to encounter and solve those problems; develop their taste for literature in general and the short story as a genre in particular; introduce them to different target cultures through their respective literatures. The other two unrealized objectives are developing intercultural competence and critical thinking of the learners. The course is characterized by the potential of cultivating these two skills; however, neither the instructor nor the student could realize it. The objectives mentioned by the respondents match level 2 (i.e. understand) of the cognitive domain and level 2 (i.e. respond) of the affective domain in Bloom's taxonomy of instructional objectives. Such objectives that may lead the learners to the topmost levels in both the domains of learning, maybe developed easily. The responses of the participants also revealed that the objectives realized by them were met to a great extent. For the students, science fiction was the only problematic sub-genre of the short story in this course.

Regarding the contents of the course, diversity could be observed concerning the length of short stories, subject and themes, level of ease and difficulty, and sub-genres. As mentioned earlier, the only kind of stories the students found difficult to comprehend was science fiction. There may be many reasons; some of them have been discussed earlier. First, they found science fiction to be difficult for the reason that they might have been introduced to this genre for the first time and did not have any taste for it. Second, the length of the story also matters. The science fiction stories included in the course, are lengthier than the other stories; it, moreover, seems difficult to read some of these

stories in one sitting—a prerequisite of the short story regarding its length. For instance, Forster's stories are very lengthy.

Third, another hindrance may be the theme of the stories. Themes which are universal and cross-cultural are easy to comprehend; conversely, themes related to the supernatural or specific culture or regions, are at times difficult to deal with. Fourth, the linguistic features of the story may encumber students' understanding of the same. Forster, for instance, has used complex sentences with many parenthetical phrases and clauses. Additionally, the diction of his short stories, compared to that of others, is also difficult. Difficult vocabulary may be one of the obstacles in understanding the stories. There is some correlation between the answers provided by both the teacher and the students for the questions about the most difficult story and the story with the most difficult vocabulary.

The teacher practices the method of lecturing for teaching this course. Her consistent reliance on such a method of spoon-feeding may have led to benumbing the students' critical thinking, for she explains everything for them. And the two important features, suggestiveness and ambiguity, of a literary text, are neglected. It is preferable that students at this level encounter challenges of reading a literary text. Furthermore, the teacher does not focus on linguistic or stylistic features of the stories while teaching this course. Instead, she focuses on the theme(s) or/and plot development.

The only purpose of the assessment of the learners is to verify whether or not the objectives of the course have been achieved. It implies that questions in the examination or the paper reflect the course objectives. Therefore, the questions in the previous paper (Appendix 2) also proved effectual in determining the instructional goals. Most of the questions asked to either identify or justify the theme(s) of the stories. This confirms the previous inference about the objectives that the course intends to enhance the learners understanding of life and literature in a broader perspective.

Conclusion

The above discussion leads to the conclusion that the course, despite a few apprehensions, is on the whole pedagogically appropriate for this level. Nonetheless, there are a few suggestions which, if incorporated, may improve pedagogic worth of the course and facilitate the learners in profiting from it. Little representation has been given to female writers: there is only one female against ten male authors. It is suggested that more female writers be included in the course. Next, the students, as well as the teacher, expressed their reservation about the length of the course. The teacher had reported twice to the authorities concerned that the course is lengthy, and it is difficult to cover the course in a sixteen-week long semester. The respondents opined that fifteen stories could easily be managed in one semester, so it is suggested that in some cases only one story by an author be sufficient.

Correspondingly, during investigation, it came to light that the students have benefitted from introductions to the authors. Thus including the introduction of the authors in the course may improve students' understanding. Last, but most importantly, a mention of instructional goals and objectives be made in the course so that both the instructor and students are clear about what to gain and look for in the course. Along with that, the content of the course has the potential of developing critical thinking and intercultural competence of the learners, so these two abilities are given due importance while designing the objectives of the course.

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