

Shorties in English Language Teaching

»We lack the optimism of the 19th century to believe that the world could be captured on 500 pages; that is why we choose the short form« (Jorge Luis Borges). This paradoxical aphorism by the great Argentinian writer draws our attention to the genre of *shorties*.

The following paper attempts to give a few answers to the six W and one H questions:

- What? ▶ Definition
- Why? ▶ Rationale
- When? ▶ Level
- Where? ▶ Venues
- Which? ▶ Types
- What for? ▶ Objectives
- How? ▶ Methodology

1 Definition

For Sale: Baby Shoes, Never Worn.

This untitled text, which comprises only six words, is said to originate from Ernest Hemingway. It may be the most famous example of *shorties*, i.e. short narrative texts. There is no widely accepted definition of the length of this genre, and the maximum number of words mentioned in various sources varies between 50 and 1,000 words (e.g. Nischik 1997). Although dramatic or poetic texts can, of course, also be very short, they are not subsumed under this term here.

In English, the term *flash fiction* has become established for literary texts of extreme shortness. Prose below 1,000 words is also called sudden fiction, microfiction, micro-story, mini-fiction, skinny fiction, ultra-short stories, short short, postcard fiction, prose poetry or short short story. Shorties can look back on a long tradition, from Aesop's fables and Buddhist Zen stories to Vonegut and Cage in the Anglo-American realm, or the Germans Brecht and von Doderer (also cf. Müller in this volume).

2 Rationale

Why should we make use of shorties in our classrooms? To state the obvious, short narrative forms are good teaching material because they are short and narrative. Behind this pleonastic triviality, several benefits of shorties can be detected (Thaler 2008, 2012):

- They are flexible in use.
- They can comfortably be dealt with in a single lesson.
- There is a multitude of forms beyond the classic short story: from traditional simple forms (fairy tales, fables) to more complex narrative genres (short stories) and modern media forms (news stories, hyperfiction).
- The popularity of shorties is increasing. The rise of the Internet has enhanced an awareness of flash fiction, with websites and webzines such as *Flash*, *Flash Fiction Online* or *Flash Fiction Magazine* being devoted exclusively to this genre. Its succinct and punchy form seems perfectly in line with the online reader, and the ubiquitous hand-held devices are also ideal content delivery systems for short fiction.
- Stories fulfil anthropological, psychological and social needs. Shorties serve a variety of functions: a means of making sense of an individual's experiences, a medium of communication and community, a form of entertainment, a source of solace, a fundamental need (beginning, middle, end). »So while we live with the anxiety that our lives may have one of these key attributes but not the other (they come to an end, but they do not make sense), we comfort ourselves with narratives, which have both these desiderata: they have beginnings, middles and ends, and they make sense« (Toolan 2001: 14).
- They may bridge the gap between the texts in the familiar coursebooks used throughout the first years of instruction on the one hand, and »Literature with a capital 'L'«, i.e. writing of recognized artistic value, on the other.
- A short short story usually has a powerful effect. »Its brevity and condensed resonance make sure it lingers in the mind and heart. It has the power of a poem but with greater clarity and accessibility« (Wells, cited in Burke 2011).
- Shorties are usually characterized by discursive openness. Against the background of the reader-response theory, the aesthetic densification within a minimal space opens up ample scope for diverse reactions and interpretations by the learners. »A short story is a story on which one has to work a long time until it is short« (Vicente Aleixandre).
- Telling stories is an omnipresent phenomenon in everyday life, the media ... and the classroom.

3 Level

At what age should teaching shorties start? Some people argue that literary texts cannot be integrated into the classroom until students have reached a level advanced enough for them to grasp the full meaning. Such an attitude seems restricted if we do not exclude »literature with a small 'l'«, and believe that appreciating literature has to be gradually developed in a long process (Thaler 2008). In particular shorties can be made use of at all levels – from beginners to intermediate pupils and finally advanced students. The age and level of a group has to be considered, of course, in terms of teaching goals, classroom procedures and types of shorties.

Beginners in the primary classroom enjoy short and funny texts such as fairy tales, jokes or picture books. The methods employed must take into account the developmental stage of the learners by including playful and holistic learning, accompanied by movement and music. A technique often tried and tested is storytelling – or at least story-reading. The aim in primary classrooms cannot be a critical analysis of texts but enabling children a first contact with literature, which promotes basic language skills, is fun and enhances the motivation to learn English.

A full understanding of shorties may take place at more advanced levels. All reading techniques can be trained, a profound analysis may be attempted, creative writing and other forms of creating can become more sophisticated. So the initial question may be answered by pleading for »literature for all ages«.

4 Venues

Where can you teach and learn about shorties? The most obvious, yet not the only, place for teaching literature is the classroom, with all the students sitting at their desks and reading the same story. However, one may imagine further options:

- Reading corner (in the classroom)
- Classroom library
- School library
- Literature workshops
- At home
- Public places
- Internet reading
- Mobile-assisted reading

5 Types

Fortunately there is a wealth of diverse forms of shorties for the teacher to choose from (e.g. Allen 1997; Garner 2011; Nischik 1983; Nischik 2005; Reiserer 2014; in particular Thomas et al. 2015; Thomas et al. 1992). The following table lists 28 of these types, before some of them are illustrated by sample texts.

Types of Shorties			
jokes	puns	riddles	fairy tales
fables	(anti-) proverbs	quotations / aphorisms	anecdotes
flash fiction	folk tales	urban myths	mini-sagas
Nasreddin stories	letters	epitaphs	ads
failures	prayers	fumblerules	parables
Zen kōans	six-word stories	drabble	twitterature
symbol stories	funny definitions	Murphy's laws	short stories

Table 1: Types of shorties

- Anecdotes

Lady Astor once remarked to Winston Churchill at a dinner party:
 »If I were your wife I would poison your tea.«
 Without showing any agitation Churchill replied:
 »If I were your husband I would drink it.«

- Mini-sagas

A *mini-saga* consists of exactly 50 words (plus title). If 55 words are required, the text is called *55 fiction*, with 100 words, it is a *drabble*.

Like mother, like son
 1955
 Dear Mummy,
 I hate this boarding school. Food awful, prefects bully me. Please take me home.
 Love, David

Dear David,
Nonsense! Chin up. – Mother
1997

Dear David,
I hate this Home. Food awful, nurses treat me like a child. Fetch me immediately. – Mother

Dear Mother,
Nonsense! Chin up. – David

- Six-word stories

Strangers. Friends. Best friends. Lovers. Strangers.

- Jokes

On a group of beautiful deserted islands in the middle of nowhere, the following people are stranded:

- 2 Italian men and 1 Italian woman
- 2 French men and 1 French woman
- 2 German men and 1 German woman
- 2 English men and 1 English woman
- 2 Irish men and 1 Irish woman

One month later on these absolutely stunning deserted islands in the middle of nowhere, the following things have occurred:

One Italian man killed the other Italian man for the Italian woman.

The two French men and the French woman are living happily together in ménage-a-trois.

The two German men have a strict weekly schedule of alternating visits with the German woman.

The two English men are waiting for someone to introduce them to the English woman.

The two Irishmen divided the island into North and South, and set up a distillery. They do not remember if sex is in the picture because it gets sort of foggy after the first few litres of coconut whiskey. But they're satisfied because at least the English aren't having any fun.

- Puzzles

What do you say to King Kong when he gets married? (*Kong-ratulations*)

- Anti-proverbs

All's well that ends. (*Reduction*)

A barking dog never bites, but a lot of dogs don't know this proverb. (*Supplement*)

The best things in life are for a fee. (*Substitution*)

Marriages are made in heaven knows what state of mind. (*Synthesis*)

- Twisted quotes

Somebody is boring me; I think it's me. (Dylan Thomas)

- Answers to children's letters

Dear Pamela,

Santa only brings presents. I'm afraid I cannot take away your baby brother. – Love, Santa

- Fumblersrules

1. Don't use no double negatives.
2. Reserve the apostrophe for its proper use and omit it when its not needed.
3. Do not put statements in the negative form.
4. Verbs has to agree with their subjects.
5. No sentence fragments.

- Howlers

Shakespeare was born in 1564, supposedly on his birthday. He lived in Windsor with his merry wives, writing tragedies, comedies and errors, all in Islamic pentameter. Romeo and Juliet are an example of heroic couplet. The next great author, John Milton, wrote *Paradise Lost*. Then his wife died and he wrote *Paradise Regained*.

6 Objectives

Drawing on two dominant paradigms in TEFL, i.e. CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) and ICC (Intercultural Communicative Competence), the goal of teaching literature in class may be called LCC: Literary Communicative Competence (Thaler 2008). Such an objective also applies to shorties and comprises the three domains of knowledge, attitudes and various skills, i.e. reading, understanding (analysing, interpreting), and creating. These three domains as well as the three skills must be seen against the background of communication. They should not be treated as separate dimensions, but foster shorties-based communication and negotiation of meaning.

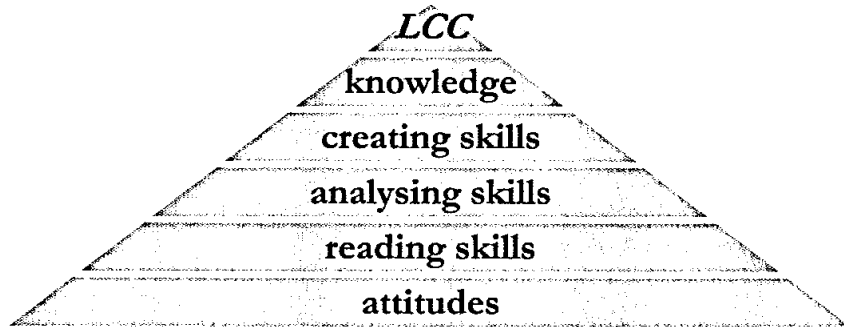


Table 2: LCC

7 Methodology

If the proper text has been selected, and the suitable objectives targeted, the question as to the appropriate method arises.

7.1 Text-adapted Procedure

Each text type and each shorty calls for an individual procedure. For example with jokes, omitting the punch-line during the first reading / telling is to be recommended, asking the students to speculate on the ending. With the inter-cultural joke (see above), only the introductory situation should be read out, the rest is covered, and learners have to propose »educated guesses«; it is funny to realize how close their answers come to the original statements. A general discussion on country-specific stereotypes should round off the sequence.

7.2 Formal-structural Analysis

Even very short texts may be analysed with the help of some of the common literary terms:

- Events, actions
- Characters
- Setting: time, place
- Structure
- Narrator
- Point of view

The limited number of words forces some of those categories to be unspecified or difficult to assess – and these indeterminacies are meant to invite readers to various interpretations.

7.3 Herringbone Technique

A useful technique for analysing a short text is the herringbone technique. This graphic organizer, which resembles a fish skeleton, provides students with a structural pattern by asking of the main idea the six questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

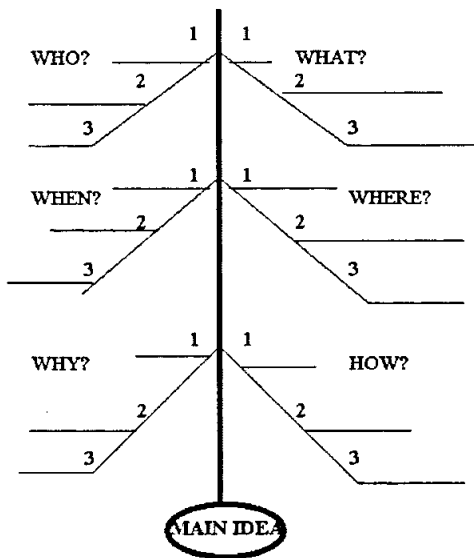


Table 3: Herringbone technique

7.4 Maley's 12 Procedures

Alan Maley (1995) proposes »twelve generalizable procedures for texts« in an inspiring book with the telling name »Short and Sweet«.

Maley's 12 Procedures	
<i>Procedures</i>	<i>Examples</i>
1. Expansion	Add one or more sentences
2. Reduction	Remove specified items (e.g. adjectives)
3. Media transfer	Transfer it into visuals (e.g. pictures)
4. Matching	Match text with a title
5. Selection / ranking	Choose the best text for a certain purpose (e.g. inclusion in a teen mag)
6. Comparison / contrast	Identify rhetorical devices common to both texts
7. Reconstruction	Reorder jumbled lines

8. Reformulation	Rewrite in a different mood
9. Interpretation	What does the text not say?
10. Creating text	Use 10 words from the text and write s.th. new
11. Analysis	Study the use of tenses
12. Project work	Use the text for an advertising campaign

Table 4: Generalizable text procedures (Maley 1995)

7.5 Socratic Dialogue

We recently had the pleasure of sitting in on an intriguing classroom lesson held by a visiting teacher on a flash fiction story by Richard Brautigan. Not more than two sentences consisting of only 35 words were analysed by teacher and students for 45 minutes – in an exciting and artful negotiation of meaning interplay full of unexpected twists.

The Scarlatti Tilt

»It's hard to live in a studio apartment in San Jose with a man who's learning to play the violin.« That's what she told the police when she handed them the empty revolver.

In analogy to the *Socratic Method*, named after the great Greek philosopher Socrates, the teacher in a Socratic dialogue professes ignorance of the subject matter (Wilberding 2014). Such a form of inquiry, which is based on asking and answering questions, intends to stimulate critical thinking and illuminate ideas. Following a dialectical perspective, this technique examines the meaning of a short text by constantly doubting statements put forward by different individuals. It is founded in the conviction that there is no single right answer, all new knowledge is connected to prior knowledge, and asking one question should lead to asking further questions. Eventually such a dialogic approach can bring out deeply rooted conceptions implicit in the interlocutors' comments, and help them deepen their understanding of texts in general – which is the rationale of the so-called *Maieutic (Midwife) Method*.

7.6 Conventions of an Oral Story

Attempting to elicit deep structures, one may also resort to the sociolinguist William Labov, who has proposed six basic rules or conventions of an oral story (cf. Toolan 2001: 148; also see Fetzer in this volume). Studying this pattern may help us to understand how narrators encode information about the world on a personal level.

Oral Telling	
Abstract	What, in a nutshell, is this story about?
Orientation	Who, when, where?
Complicating action	What happened and then what happened?
Evaluation	So what?
Result (resolution)	What finally happened?
Coda	That's it, I've finished and am 'bridging' back to our present situation.

Table 5: Oral telling

7.7 Storytelling

Telling stories is a competence teachers should try to learn and develop – not only when teaching younger learners. In the classroom, storytelling can promote intercultural understanding, offer insights into universal life experiences, develop listening skills, encourage imagination, and promote a feeling of well-being (Thaler 2008).

Not everybody is a born storyteller, but everybody can do it at least for classroom purposes, and practice makes perfect. The more you tell stories, the better you will become at it, and the more your students – and you – will enjoy it. Master storytellers like Andrew Wright (1995) and Richard Martin (2000) have given us ample advice on how to captivate an audience with the right techniques (also see Ellis/Brewster 2002; Klippel 2000). Several suggestions on selecting the story, remembering the plot, starting the story, using performance techniques, and post-storytelling outcome can be found in Thaler (2008).

7.8 Storywriting

Shorties should not only be read, interpreted and told, but also written. Creative writing can serve a lot of linguistic, communicative, affective and social purposes (Beyer-Kessling 2002: 334; Holtwisch 1999: 418). These positive effects, however, only come into force if the students' imagination is activated by some stimuli, they are informed about types and structures of shorties (genre competence), and they are made aware of writing as a process.

This process of creative writing is divided by Froese (1999: 426 f.) into four phases: inspiration (collecting ideas), incubation (playful experimenting with material), illumination (writing), and verification (editing and publishing). Kieweg (2003) even suggests six stages: idea, structure, writing strategies, first draft, editing, final text. The first version of a text cannot be perfect, but must be edited as to form, content, addressee, or spelling.

It goes without saying that entering the classroom and requesting the students to produce some shorties will not work. Before they can start writing, they must get a stimulus and be put into the proper writing mood. Such a stimulus can take on six forms and trigger off various tasks (Table 6).

Writing Shorties	
<i>Stimulus</i>	<i>Task examples</i>
Complete text	Changing persons, times, places
Incomplete text	Enlarging a skeleton text
Missing text	Writing on a title
Text structure given	Parodying a fairy tale
Acoustic stimulus	Listening to music and writing about one's associations
Visual stimulus	Writing a story matching a photo

Table 6: Stimuli for writing shorties

Learners need help in the form of instructions, skeletons or schemes (e.g. Harm 1997) to gradually initiate, process and evaluate their ideas. A few suggestions on how to write flash fiction are offered by Popek (2002), e.g. invent a twist ending, use action verbs, and do cut-cut-cut. Gaffney (2012) emphasizes the following six points:

- Start in the middle.
- Don't use too many characters.
- Make sure the ending is not at the end.

- Sweat your title.
- Make your last line ring like a bell.
- Write long, then go short.

8 Conclusion

To focus on the three major categories of selection, methodology and objectives, a conclusion on shorties may read like this:

- a. Genre: The short story has long been accepted as a popular genre in TEFL. It is high time to use shorter short stories and flash fiction as well.
- b. Methodology: Teachers should strike a fair balance between analytical and creative procedures.
- c. Objective: With the help of shorties, narrative competence with regard to receptive and productive skills should be promoted.

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