

## Introduction

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## Introduction

»Brevity is the soul of wit« – Polonius' famous dictum in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (2, ii) also applies to SHORTIES. Short narrative texts are valuable material for the language classroom because they are short and narrative – and often witty.

In contrast to Polonius' follow-up statement to King Claudius and Hamlet's mother Gertrude »I will be brief. Your noble son is mad«, shorties are anything but »mad«. They are flexible in use, can comfortably be dealt with in a single lesson, appear in a multitude of forms, can bridge the gap between coursebooks and »Literature with a capital 'L'«, are increasing their popularity in the digital era, can promote all language competences, fulfil anthropological and psychological needs, and are an omnipresent phenomenon in everyday life. Man's desire to tell or listen to stories has even caused the American philosopher Walter Fisher to relabel man: from *homo sapiens* to *homo narrans*.

But where is *homo narrans* – or the *storytelling animal* (Alasdair MacIntyre) – in the classroom? Given this multivalency, it is astonishing that shorties have been neglected in foreign language teaching. The traditional *short story* has always been an integral part of language learning. Yet the *short short stories* may have been regarded too short to be accepted as aesthetically dignified literature worth being treated in the classroom.

It seems high time to plead for the inclusion of *flash fiction* in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language). This style of fictional literature of extreme brevity appears in a huge number of varieties – from realist, surreal, hyperrealist forms to psychological, impressionist, essayistic types up to satirical, social-critical, or parabolic texts. As there is no widely accepted definition of the length of this genre, any narrative text between 6 and 1,000 words may be subsumed among the categories of flash fiction or shorties. Dramatic and lyrical texts can, of course, also be very short, but will not be treated as shorties here.

This book, as all edited volumes in the SELT (Studies in English Language Teaching) series, follows a **triple aim**:

1. Linking TEFL with related academic disciplines
2. Balancing TEFL research and classroom practice
3. Combining theory, methodology and exemplary lessons

This triple aim is reflected in the **three-part structure** of this volume. In Part A (Theory), the topic of shorties and flash fiction is investigated from the perspectives of three academic disciplines, i.e. from the viewpoints of TEFL, literary

studies and linguistics. Part B (Methodology) assembles six contributions on selected texts, media and techniques. Nine concrete lesson plans can be found in Part C (Classroom). These lessons were designed by lecturer and students at university, then conducted and assessed by 13 teachers at German schools, and finally revised by the editor. Each of these nine chapters is divided into genre (brief background information on the text type), procedure (source, synopsis, competences, topics, level, time, phases of the lesson), materials (texts, worksheets, board sketches), solutions (expected answers), and bibliography.

**Part A** is introduced by the **TEFL** perspective. **Engelbert Thaler** gives 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? (Methods). With regard to the basic issues of selection, methodology and objectives, he draws a triple conclusion: After 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. Teachers should strike a fair balance between analytical and creative procedures. With the help of shorties, narrative competence concerning receptive and productive skills should be promoted.

The perspective of **literary studies** is adopted by **Timo Müller**. He focuses on the formal features and the didactic potential of the short short story in general. After a brief historical overview, he situates the short short story in relation to other genres, discusses the reading strategies it demands, and illustrates his findings by the example of Joseph Bruchac's story »The Ship« (1973). Here he reveals the specific combination of individualization and generalization that characterizes the genre of the short short story and makes it useful for classroom use.

**Anita Fetzer** shows the perspective of **linguistics**. She examines the form and function of small stories in the research fields of sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, presents analyses of small stories in media communication, and adapts the small form to learning scenarios. It becomes clear that small stories are not only an interesting sociolinguistic phenomenon, but provide valuable tools for teaching the grammar of spoken and written English, refining the (mental) lexicon and enhancing discourse competence.

**Part B** is introduced by **Carola Surkamp**. She explores **mini-sagas** through **drama-based activities**. She realizes that so far suggestions for classroom activities involving mini-sagas have predominantly approached the genre in a written and narrative way. Short narrative texts, however, can also be approached by acting them out. Therefore she examines the questions of where precisely the potential of a drama-based approach to mini-sagas lies, which techniques are suitable for the scenic interpretation of the text, and how drama activities can be prepared and evaluated.

**Petra Kirchoff** recommends **Twitterfiction**. First she describes this new literary format, in which authors can use exactly 140 Unicode characters as well as auditive and audiovisual media to tell a story, continue one or just share their ideas with other users. Then she demonstrates that teaching Twitterfiction in English classes is rewarding for many reasons. Students encounter new linguistic forms like acronyms and abbreviations and poetic language in a new format, which conveys immediacy and possibly communicational authenticity. Additionally, Twitterfiction can serve as an excellent starting point for discussing ethical issues in the use of the social media.

**Senem Aydin** discusses the potential of **picturebooks** to depict the **refugee** experience and raise students' awareness about experiences like persecution, flight and migration. She makes clear that such stories can contribute to students' linguistic, literary, intercultural and affective development. After she has pointed out relevant criteria for selecting suitable stories, she gives us numerous storytelling suggestions for Sarah Garland's picturebook »Azzi in Between«. Her conclusion includes a selected list of recommended picturebooks on migration.

**Stephanie Schaidt** draws our attention to **metafictive picturebooks**. As this genre constantly transgresses boundaries and plays with literary conventions, it is a rich resource for the EFL classroom. Due to their multilayered nature, metafictional picturebooks can be used with students of different ages and levels of language proficiency. After defining the genre, the author identifies seven metafictional strategies, which she illustrates with numerous examples of self-referential picturebooks. She states convincing reasons why we should use them in the language classroom, and finally suggests several pre-, while- and post-reading activities.

**Katrin Stadlinger-Kessel** convinces us that students' imagination can be fired by six words, i.e. the shortest short story on record. She presents inspiring suggestions for a 45-minute lesson on **Hemingway's famous short** at an upper-intermediate level. What is most striking here is the contrast between the factual wording of a classified ad and the emotional impact behind it. This is one of the reasons why people find this story so compelling and why it resonates with students, too. For the teacher, there may be another big advantage of dealing with it in class: no preparation is necessary in terms of photocopied materials, the only things needed are a blackboard and chalk.

**Bernard Brown** claims that short texts are motivating for our students and allow the teacher to integrate them into a well-rounded lesson, using the texts as a »diving board« for other communicative and interactive activities. He suggests several **techniques** such as mazes, corrupted texts, just one word, remov-

ing punctuation and capital letters, three-in-one, matching and sequencing, and student created gapped texts.

**Part C** comprises nine contributions, which demonstrate how certain sub-genres of shorties can be employed in the English language classroom:

- Take a closer look at the genre of **proverb**, and its wicked relative, the **perverb**. Students do not only become familiar with the English equivalents of their L1 proverbs, but deepen their knowledge of rhetorical devices, and even create their own perverbs, i.e. anti-proverbs.

- Do you know this **anecdote** about F.D. Roosevelt, the only US President to serve more than two terms, who indulged in some inappropriate small talk at a social function (»I murdered my grandmother«) and received a witty answer from one of his guests? Your students can practise their phatic communication skills, and even promote their power of quick-witted repartee.

- In a similar vein, **urban myths** sound »too good to be true«. Do you believe in the story of the criminals who called the police on their own? Or of the clown statue that only the children see? Urban legends like those are modern folk tales narrating stories which are presumably real, but odd, and supposedly happened to a friend of a friend.

- **Fables** are represented by James Thurber, regarded by many to be America's greatest humorist of the 20th century, and his masterpiece *The Unicorn in the Garden*. In this fable (is it one?), an apparently clever wife tries to send her apparently mad husband to an insane asylum. But, as the saying goes, you shouldn't count your boobies – or chickens – before they are hatched.

- If you were the heroine in the **fairy tale** of *The Princess and the Tin Box*, you would without any doubt fall for the poorest, yet strongest and most handsome prince, wouldn't you? After all, you are an experienced reader who knows that »money can't buy me love«. Modern-day princesses in such fairy tale-fable-parody mash-ups, however, may go for alternative endings – and morals.

- Why not **joke** your way through grammar? After all, grammar is the difference between knowing your crap and knowing you're crap.

- Sparkling humour can also be found in **mini-sagas**, but the two examples treated in this volume deal with rather serious issues (bullying, capital punishment). Students may be encouraged to create their own mini-sagas – or, if 50 words are not enough, some *55 fiction*, or a *drabble* (100 words).

- **Nasreddin stories** are centred on the wise Sufi scholar of the same name, who may – or may not – have lived somewhere in the Middle East in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Seeming odd, impudent and absurd at first glance, his actions and statements gradually reveal trickster humour and philosophical wit.

- Finally, **picture books** are exemplified by the wonderful 32-page illustrated text *It's a Book*, which may be read as a delightful manifesto on behalf of print

in the digital age. A mouse, a jackass and a monkey discover a new thing – a book! It does not need a mouse or a password, and it cannot text, tweet, or toot. Why not? »Because it's a book«. Apart from enjoying this lovely book on a book, students can consolidate their vocabulary by playing Bingo or doing a vocab relay contest.

»Brevity is the soul of wit«: Let us not imitate Polonius, whose speech is self-contradictory. He wastes plenty of time denouncing the time wasted by rhetorical speechifying. Literary scholars regard Polonius as the least brief and one of the least witty characters in the play, and Sigmund Freud aptly referred to him as »the old chatterbox«. So let's be brief: Enjoy these short contributions on shorties!