Linda Yael  
Workshop: Using short stories in the language classroom

Abstract

This workshop gets participants to experience for themselves an alternative technique for using short stories in the language class, not for testing comprehension, but aimed at engaging reluctant readers. The participants are then invited to reflect upon the technique used. This is followed by a guided discussion regarding further techniques and the purposes of each. Although the story presented is aimed at adults, the techniques can also be applied with other age groups.

Summary

Why are our students and/or trainees often put off reading? Might this not be because we generally treat reading as an activity to be rigidly directed, more often than not used for the purpose of testing comprehension, rather than for fostering the enjoyment of reading (reading for experience, in Louise Rosenblatt’s terms, quoted in Smith)?

This workshop, by the use of loop input, exposes the participants to an alternative technique for presenting short stories in class, with the aim of later raising their awareness by reflecting on what they have done and on the assumptions underlying the technique, leading on to a discussion of other techniques, and their purposes. (By loop input I mean learning through first experiencing, later reflecting on the experience).

I have chosen a short story by Roald Dahl, The Landlady. The ‘preparation’ consists of cutting the story at points where suspense is created – in a manner not unlike that used in television thriller serials – in order to
heighten the suspense, and of inserting questions to be discussed in pairs or small groups. These questions are designed, not to test comprehension, but to serve as clues in leading the reader towards the outcome. The participants receive handouts, one at a time, with the chunks of story, whereas the questions are put up on overhead transparencies, one set at a time, and only after having read the relevant extract.

The aim of this technique is, for reluctant readers, that they should find it easier to follow the thread, partly through having the text presented in more manageable, less intimidating, chunks, and also by the questions focussing on hypothesis forming, i.e. guided inferencing activities. It is expected that they will want to prove or disprove their hypotheses by reading on.

Once this first stage is completed, the participants are asked to work in small groups to reflect on how the story was prepared, and on the rationale informing the preparation. The full set of questions is put up or handed out, to facilitate their task. After a short feedback stage, they are requested to re-group, and to propose further techniques for using stories in class. They are asked to choose a spokesperson for each group.

Following a feedback stage in which the different groups report their ideas, I put up a transparency with a series of possible techniques, explaining that it is only a sample. These include jigsaw reading, ordering a jumbled story, classifying and ordering extracts into two different stories, etc. The participants are then asked to work again in groups, to discuss the different possible uses of each technique. A transparency containing the techniques previously listed, as well as their possible uses, is used to round up the discussion.

In a brief final stage, participants are asked to reflect upon the session itself, filling out a short survey form asking about their expectations when
attending workshops, and to what extent their expectations have been met in this case.

References

- Dahl, R. (1979) *Tales of the Unexpected* Penguin UK

Biographical note

I teach at the Balseiro Institute, National University of Cuyo, Bariloche, and at a local teacher-training college. I am also an UCLES Oral Examiner. During 1994-95 I taught for the British Council in Madrid. At present I am working on a Master's at NILE / University of East Anglia.