DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 425 646 FL 025 566

AUTHOR Marcus, Sybil
TITLE Enhancing Discussion through Short Stories.
PUB DATE 1998-03-00
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (32nd, Seattle, WA, March 17-21, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; College Instruction; *Discussion (Teaching Technique); *English (Second Language); Higher Education; Instructional Materials; Literature Appreciation; Media Selection; *Oral Language; Second Language Instruction; *Short Stories; Skill Development; *Speech Skills

ABSTRACT

A teacher of English in a college-level intensive English language program describes a method for stimulating speech in high-intermediate and advanced students, using short stories. It is argued that in short stories, the themes are universal, and even shy students are willing to discuss this form of literature in class. Criteria for selecting stories are suggested: a theme that captures students' imagination; sufficient complexity to have varied interpretations; appeal for a cross-section of students; and rich vocabulary. The story should be written originally in English, and should range between two and twelve pages in length, depending on student experience. Reading the story is a homework assignment, and class discussion begins with a question about where the student's sympathies lie in the story and continues with clarification of any student misunderstandings of the plot. Discussion of cross-cultural topics and related social issues often ensues. Variation in narrative technique from story to story is recommended, and selection of some humorous stories among the serious is also encouraged. A list of stories addressing social issues, focusing on youth and age, using different writing styles, and including humor, with brief descriptions, is appended. (MSE)

Enhancing Discussion Through Short Stories

TESOL 1998

Presented by Sybil Marcus
English Language Program
University of California
Berkeley Extension
1995 University Avenue
Berkeley, CA 94720
Telephone (510) 642-9833
E-mail SWM @ unx. berkeley edu

In this paper I hope to show how high-intermediate and advanced students may be stimulated to speak freely and articulately through the use of short stories. Before beginning, let me fill you in on where I teach and the kinds of students I have. I work in the English Language Program at UC Berkeley Extension. We are an intensive program with students from all over the world who come to us for at least one eight-week session. A large percentage of our students spend multiple sessions with us. Many of our students plan on entering U.S. universities or are here to learn English for their professional advancement back home. I teach the upper levels, which translates into their having a TOEFL score of about 500 at the lower end of the scale and 600 and above at the higher end. In my high-level oral communications class which meets three times a week for two hours a session for eight weeks, a paramount element of the course is the short story which is used as the basis for discussion. I also teach two elective classes in which short stories feature prominently. They are a literature class and a reading, discussion, and vocabulary class. These meet twice weekly, also for two hours a session. Although I focus on high-level students, the principles that apply to this level can be as successfully applied to high-intermediate students as well. What I do would work equally well for courses which run through a semester or even as long as a year.

I want to state up front that I am an unapologetic proponent of using short stories to advance oral skills since the beauty of literature is that its themes are for the most part universal and so even the shyest students soon find their tongues loosened as they strive to express their visceral reactions to a story they have just read.

However,since the majority of my students are not literature specialists either in English or their native language, I take great pains in choosing the short stories. The key to stimulating the students' interest is to find a short story that captures their imagination and is of sufficient complexity as to afford a variety of interpretations. It's crucial to have a story whose theme/s will appeal to a cross-section of students with differing backgrounds, interests and specialties. One also wants, of course, to have a story with a rich enough vocabulary and/or style to offer the students a sense of challenge and achievement when they have pondered and discussed its depths. That doesn't mean that every student will immediately take to your choice, but I am constantly rewarded by students who say they didn't particularly like a story at the first reading, but after

engaging in the class discussion, they have been converted to its merits. Many stories at first glance may seem interesting and workable, but when I think about filling a two-hour lesson with them I begin to quail because there simply isn't enough there to chew on. I frequently read as many as 50 stories before finding even one that I decide to use.

One qualification I always adhere to is that the story originally be written in English. This is because I want the students to be exposed to the heartbeat of the English language with its unique nuances and cadences. Also, in unearthing the cultural underpinnings of a story, they increase their understanding of a society different from their own.

Another tangible benefit of using a short story to promote discussion is that students will already be armed with a ready-made vocabulary which they have just read in the story and they will also come with the advantage of having thought about a carefully formulated set of ideas, expressed imaginatively, which they are free to take issue with, agree with, or use as a springboard for responses which tie in with their life experiences.

I usually assign the story as homework. I stress that the students must, of course, read the story once, but if possible I urge them to read it twice. The first time they will read it to get an idea of the plot and also to grapple with whatever vocabulary or other language problems present themselves, while the second reading will grant them the more pleasurable luxury of contemplating the themes and inner connections of the story. The biggest challenge is to hook them with the first reading. So I tend to start students off with a story that is quite short in length (between one to two pages), is not too demanding stylistically and thematically, and has accessible vocabulary. This approach helps ease them into literature and gives them confidence to face the more complex and longer stories (up to 12 pages) which follow later in the course.

My aim is to get their thoughts rolling so that they will come to class eager to talk about their initial reactions. To achieve this, I usually ask them to consider a very general question relating to the story, which they must think about prior to the first class discussion. The question is of so general a nature that it doesn't rely on the students having to understand the plot's intricacies, let alone any subtleties of theme. For example, I may begin the session with *Can-Can*, a very short story by Arturo Vivante, which centers on a marriage which has gone stale, the husband's subsequent adultery, and his wife's unusual way of dealing with her suspicions that he has a mistress. For starters I might ask them if they sympathize more with the husband or the wife and to say why. Depending on the size of the class, the initial discussion can be done in groups or as a whole class.

More often than not the students' answers to this question will enable me to move from the general to the specifics of the text. Once the ice has been broken and every student has had his or her say, it is timely to consider the simpler elements of plot. *Can-Can* happens to have a very straightforward plot and I spend a short time asking direct questions concerning particular aspects of the story. This allows me to iron out any confusion students may have regarding the plot.

After all the elements of the plot are considered, I can orchestrate a discussion about the more complex themes the story espouses. It is here, in my experience, that the most rewarding and thoughtful discussions take place. For example, in *Can-Can,* a central scene in the story is when the wife unexpectedly kicks up her legs and does the can-can as a gesture of defiance to her husband, who is on the verge of departing for an assignation with his mistress, a rendezvous he believes his wife is unaware of. I quote:

"This wasn't the way a husband expected his wife - whom he was about to leave at home to go to another woman - to behave at all, he thought. He expected her to be sewing or washing, not doing the can-can, for God's sake. Yes, doing something uninteresting and unattractive, like darning children's clothes. She had no stockings on, no shoes, and her legs looked very white and smooth, secret, as though he had never touched them or come near them. Her feet, swinging up and down high in the air, seemed to be nodding to him. She held her skirt bunched up, attractively. Why was she doing that of all times *now*? He lingered. Her eyes had mockery in them, and she laughed ... She was still dancing as he left the house."

In this scene the eroticism of the language mirrors the eroticism of the can-can itself. And the feelings and associations that are aroused in the husband are in ironic contrast to his thoughts about how he usually views his wife. Students enjoy the challenge of dissecting the language and seeing how Vivante weaves together imagery, symbolism, and irony here. When we look at this passage in conjunction with another in the story where the wife reveals her desire always to have her husband close at hand, we can talk about the expectations the husband and wife have of each other in marriage and the ramifications of these expectations. Also, learning to analyze the story and its language awakens in students a deeper appreciation for the intricacies of successful writing and gives them the tools to unlock the layers of meaning that any worthwhile story, however simple on the surface, must contain. This in turn is, as I stress to them, a very transferable skill, which is crucial to reading and understanding all manner of nonliterary texts.

After we have talked about theme and analyzed language, I usually branch out once more into the more general arena of speculation where everyone feels comfortable. For example, I might ask the class to discuss whether they think the couple's marriage will survive the crisis, and if so, whether it might possibly be the stronger for it. This allows students the latitude to express themselves as freely as they like without the constraints of the text. So that even students who didn't fully understand all the implications of the story are now on firm ground because they need only extrapolate from their life experience or their code of ethics, in order to answer the question.

Then there remains the exploration of the cross-cultural component that virtually every story offers. So I might ask them to discuss in groups how adultery is viewed in their country. Naturally, this works particularly well when several different nationalities and cultures are represented. I have heard some wonderfully heated discussions on this subject over the years, not to mention personal accounts of marital straying and the reasons and justifications for this! This topic has assumed an even more timely aspect in

view of the saturation media coverage of President Clinton's alleged pecadillos and there are a plethora of newspaper and magazine articles that can be used to broaden the scope of any class discussion on this issue.

I might go one step further and conduct a debate on a related topic such as arguing the statement: Adultery is a crime and should be punished accordingly. I usually set up the debate fairly informally by dividing the class into two sections, and giving each section about fifteen minutes to come up with as many reasons as possible which support its stand. Then the two sides face each other and I act as a moderator, getting them started. I encourage them to rebut each other's arguments as frequently and informally as possible, either by bringing up the points they have already formulated in the prior group discussion or by reacting spontaneously to their opponents' statements. Some students find this one of the most enjoyable oral activities of the class.

Another possible activity is the reenactment of a portion of the story in the students' own words. So, again with regard to *Can-Can,* I might put them into pairs and get them to compose and act out an imaginary dialogue between the husband and wife on his return from his meeting with his mistress. Students like the theatrical nature of the activity and it gives me a chance to work with them on inflection, rhythm, and pronunciation at the same time. I encourage them to incorporate if possible some of the vocabulary which appears in the story as well as to come up with whatever words or expressions seem appropriate for the situation.

Earlier I mentioned how crucial it is to chose a story sufficiently meaty as to enable students to ponder and chew on a theme that engages them fully. Now I want to tell you about the kinds of stories which have worked particularly well for me. It would be helpful here if we simultaneously look at the handout for specific examples which fit each category.

Social issues such as adultery, abortion, race, war, euthanasia, violence against women, immigration, and the right to privacy always arouse heated discussions. The added advantage of dealing with such topical themes is that there are always current newspaper and magazine articles which can be read as well as television and movie clips that can be used in tandem with the story. In this way students are exposed to both an imaginative and a journalistic way of looking at a particular subject.

As a subsection of social issues I also like to look at the problems encountered at different ends of the age spectrum.

When it comes to style, I love comparing and contrasting such spare and minimalist writers as Ernest Hemingway and Sandra Cisneros on the one hand with the lushly written stories of D.H.Lawrence and John Updike on the other. In an attempt to expose students to a variety of writing styles I like to give them a taste of stream of consciousness writing and the wry story "The New Dress" by Virginia Woolf is a not too complicated rendering of this technique.

And because I want to give my students a greater understanding of this country, I try to find writers that explore the different social strata. So we may look at working-class America through Raymond Carver's eyes, while another time we will immerse ourselves in the affluent milieu that John Cheever's characters inhabit.

I also like to choose stories where the narrative technique differs. For example, a story told in the first person or via a limited omniscient narrator will necessarily be very subjective and the reader accordingly needs to be aware of the limitations in the point of view of the narrator, whereas a story told by an omniscient narrator has a more global perspective of the characters.

And, most importantly, I try to leaven the preponderance of serious stories with humorous ones. Humor is an essential component of the class. This is an area where I have the most difficulty since coming up with stories that are both complex and funny is no easy task. Most stories which at first reading strike me as funny, prove to have only one gag and are therefore not substantial enough to use as the basis for an extended discussion. I should be most grateful if any of you would share with me the name of any funny short story that you think has worked or might work particularly well in class.

If you are interested in an easy way to get hold of many of the stories I have mentioned, including *Can-Can*, as well as quite a few I have not, they may be found in a literature textbook I wrote in 1995 called *A World of Fiction* by Sybil Marcus, published by Addison-Wesley. Each of the twenty chapters centers on an individual story and offers explanations and questions on plot, theme, style, and language, as well as questions relating to value judgments and cross-cultural experiences and subjects for debate. The final section contains a number of essay questions to help refine writing skills.

This concludes my presentation. I'd like to thank you for your attention and would be happy to take any questions, or listen to any comments or suggestions from you.

Handout for Enhancing Discussion Through Short Stories

Compiled by Sybil Marcus
English Language Program
University of California
Berkeley Extension
1995 University Avenue
Berkeley, CA 94720
Telephone 510 - 642 - 9833
E-mail SWM @ unx. berkeley edu

Note: The stories with an asterisk can be found in *A World of Fiction* by Sybil Marcus, published by Addison-Wesley, 1995.

Social Issues

* *Can-Can* by Arturo Vivante - a very short story dealing with adultery. Makes for a good discussion regarding our expectations regarding marriage and the morality or otherwise of adultery, The story offers a chance to look at symbolism, irony, and imagery.

The Abortion by Alice Walker - a complex examination of the effects of an abortion on the marriage of the central character. Leads to a discussion of the pros and cons of abortion. The story enables us to look at the developing personality of the protagonist over a substantial period of time.

* *Like a Winding Sheet* by Ann Petry - a story which manages to weave the themes of racism, inhuman factory conditions, and wife beating in a masterly fashion. Lively discussions can be held on all three topics. Great imagery in the story. Paragraphs can be analyzed for imagery affecting all the senses.

* *Dry September* by William Faulkner - a masterpiece in which the story builds up to a horrifying lynching, while Faulkner simultaneously examines the psychology of the accusers. One can look closely at how the author uses the crackling summer heat to create atmosphere and intensify themes.

Terminal by Nadine Gordimer - a very short story in which the moral ambiguities of euthanasia are examined. The topic is perfect for all manner of discussion and I also usually bring in articles relating to the topic.

What he was Like by William Maxwell - a tale about a daughter's reactions on reading her father's diaries after he has died. Fascinating issues of privacy are raised as well as the fact that we are creatures of multiple personae, some of them hidden.

Youth and Age

Carnations by Katherine Mansfield - a comic look at budding adolescent sexuality among teenage girls. The story is laden with evocative imagery and at the same time the reader has to work at exploring the frequently implied sexual descriptions. Good for a discussion of atmosphere.

* *Teenage Wasteland* by Anne Tyler - a serious portrayal of adolescent angst. All students are eager to discuss how they want/ed to be treated by their parents during the difficult teenage years. This story, which is told through the eyes of the mother offers a chance to talk about point of view and how it affects the telling of the story.

* *The Model* by Bernard Malamud - a poignant story of how an old man desperately tries to recapture a last vestige of life by painting a nude model. Students can talk about how the elderly are treated in their cultures. The writing contains wonderful examples of inference.

Different Writing Styles

The minimalist writing style of writers like Ernest Hemingway - *Hills Like White Elephants* - which deals with abortion, Sandra Cisneros - *Geraldo No Last Name* - a vignette on the anonymous existence of the poor Mexican immigrant, and Raymond Carver - *I Could See the Smallest Things* - a grittily realistic portrait of a marital relationship.

The richly written stories of writers like D.H.Lawrence - *The Shadow in the Rose Garden* - a compelling story of how a mismatched couple from different backgrounds confront a secret from the wife's past while on their honeymoon, *John Cheever – *The Swimmer* – a multi-layered story of a rich man's fall from high society's grace – and John Updike – *Man and Daughter in the Cold* – a story of how a father rediscovers his relationship with his daughter as a result of a potentially fatal ski outing.

The stream of consciousness style as exemplified by Virginia Woolf - *The New Dress* - in which an insecure woman reflects on her life while feeling acutely embarrassed at a party. Her thoughts scatter in all directions, but the controlling hand of the writer anchors the story firmly and students enjoy the opportunity of coming to grips with this type of impressionistic writing.

Humor

* *The Catbird Seat* by James Thurber - a wonderfully funny story about the revenge of an office clerk on the woman who is brought in to modernize his firm. There are many aspects to be explored - the relationship between men and women, the effects of modernization, and the double standard as applied to aggressive men versus that applied to aggressive women.

* *My Oedipus Complex* by Frank O'Connor - a comic and moving semiautobiographical tale about the rite of passage of a young boy as he is forced to separate from his mother. It has many humorous devices which can be explored.

* *The Kugelmass Episode* by Woody Allen - a hilarious parody of Madam Bovary in which Woody Allen sends up his cast of characters in his uniquely funny way. A great story in which to examine the use of dialogue, verbal gags, anachronism, and male-female relationships. One can always illustrate Allen's humor with the aid of a movie clip. I particularly recommend using Allen's section of *New York Stories* called *Oedipus Wrecks* in conjunction with this story.

FL025566

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

ERIC

REPRODUCTION RELEASE

(Specific Document)

I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: Enhancing Discussion through Short Stories	
Author(s): SYBIL MARCUS	
Was this a TESOL presentation? ✓ yes ___ no If not, was it another conference presentation? Specify: ___	Publication Date: MARCH 1998

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, *Resources in Education* (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following three options and sign at the bottom of the page.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents	The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2A documents	The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2B documents
PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Sample TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) 1	PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Sample TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) 2A	PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Sample TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) 2B
Level 1 ↑ ☑	Level 2A ↑ ☐	Level 2B ↑ ☐
Check here for Level 1 release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic) *and* paper copy.	Check here for Level 2A release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only	Check here for Level 2B release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche only

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits.
If permission to reproduce is granted, but no box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries.

Sign here, → please

Signature: Sybil Marcus	Printed Name/Position/Title: SYBIL MARCUS INSTRUCTOR	
Organization/Address: U.C. BERKELEY EXTENSION 1995 University Ave Berkeley, CA 94720	Telephone: (510) 642-9833	FAX: 510-235-1700
	E-Mail Address: swm@unx.berkeley.edu	Date: 10.2.98

(over)

III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, or, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor:
Address:
Price:

IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant this reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name:
Address:

V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to the following ERIC Clearinghouse:

ERIC Clearinghouse on
Languages & Linguistics
1118 22nd Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20037

However, if solicited by the ERIC Facility, or if making an unsolicited contribution to ERIC, return this form (and the document being contributed) to:

ERIC Processing and Reference Facility
1100 West Street, 2nd Floor
Laurel, Maryland 20707-3598

Telephone: 301-497-4080
Toll Free: 800-799-3742
FAX: 301-953-0263
e-mail: ericfac@inet.ed.gov
WWW: http://ericfac.piccard.csc.com