

# **Enhancing Reading and Speaking Skills in EFL Through Multicultural Children's Short Stories**

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# ENHANCING READING AND SPEAKING SKILLS IN EFL THROUGH MULTICULTURAL CHILDREN'S SHORT STORIES

## Abstract

This study proposes a model for integrating multicultural children's short stories as an extension activity or as a supplement to in-class instruction to develop college students' reading and speaking skills in English as a foreign language (EFL), together with cultural awareness. It gives the advantages of using multicultural children's short stories; criteria for selecting multicultural children's short stories; examples of multicultural children's short stories and examples of websites where the instructor can find multicultural children's short stories; reading and speaking skills that can be developed with multicultural children's short stories; and instructional stages with multicultural children's short stories. Reading and speaking tests can be used to measure students' skill level before and after instruction. A questionnaire-survey can be also used to assess improvement in the students' multicultural awareness as a result of using multicultural children's short stories.

**Keywords:** *multicultural, short stories, children's stories, children's literature, reading, listening, EFL*

## 1. Introduction

Multicultural literature refers to literature about people from diverse linguistic, cultural, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds. It includes literature about a large ethnic group such as Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Turkish, Iranian, or African people; literature about a small ethnic group such as Black Americans, Native American Indians, Amish and Mennonite groups in the USA; Maoris in New Zealand or aborigines of Australia. It also refers to literature about a minority within a larger society such as ethnic Chinese or Spanish people in San Francisco, Berbers (Amazigh), Turkmen, Kurdish, or Armenian people in Arab countries. It covers issues related to feminism, gender equity, poverty, racism, religious beliefs or conflicts, social life, customs, and others. Nowadays, a wide range of multicultural literary works representing all genres (poetry, short stories, fables, novels, fiction and plays), topics, and cultures in the form of printed books, ebooks, audiobooks, movies, videos, and mobile Apps are readily available for

students of all ages and in all languages. Authentic, translated, abridged, unabridged and simplified multicultural literary works are also available.

Multicultural literature is important for people of all backgrounds and ages, but it is of special value for first and second language teachers and students, as it offers students opportunities for reading about cultural themes, characters, and issues from a variety of cultures, lands, and backgrounds (Napoli, 2007). It encourages students to read, show respect for all cultures (York, 2008). It enables students from one culture to "learn, know, celebrate, and promote their own cultures," and it enables people from mainstream cultures to better understand diverse people or peoples of minority cultures (Gilton, 2012). Landt (2006) added that multicultural literature can familiarize students with a broader view of the world; it opens many doors and windows in their minds and exposes them to the similarities and differences among a wide range of people who have fought for similar causes. It also affects how the students' view themselves and how they view the world and provides them of a tool for reflection and a means of personal enrichment. It enables students to see a wide range of perspectives and gain insight into cultural and global issues and helps them to discern stereotypes, prejudices and misunderstandings by revealing biases and intolerance.

Due to the importance of exposing students to multicultural literature, integration of multicultural literature in the classroom has become a hot topic in this day and age. A review of the literature has shown numerous studies that proposed curricula and instructional activities or investigated the integration of multicultural literature in the first and second language classroom. For example, in Greek state schools, English teaching has been repositioned from a foreign language orientation towards a multicultural one. The English (MATE) paradigm is being used to develop students' multicultural awareness (Fay, Lytra and Ntavaliagkou, 2010).

In a study with 4<sup>th</sup> grade students, four variants of the Mulan story and the Walt Disney's "Mulan" video were taught. The teaching strategy focused on using different versions of the same story to help the students build their schema; checking the story's authenticity; helping the students understand the characters' world in the story; encouraging them to see the world from the characters' perspective; relating self to the story; critiquing character portrayal in the story and in popular media, and encouraging the students to talk, respond and write while reading multicultural stories. This teaching strategy resulted in critical understanding, empathetic understanding, and conceptual understanding of the stories under study on the part of the students (Louie, 2006).

Another study by Bui & Fagan (2013) used the Integrated Reading Comprehension Strategy, together with multicultural literature and cooperative learning with 49 5<sup>th</sup> grade students coming from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Findings showed that students' word recognition, reading comprehension, and story retelling mean scores significantly increased due to exposure to the culturally responsive teaching framework.

In a third study, Goughnour (2013) found that sophomore English class students exposed to more pieces of literature integrated into the English curriculum, supplemented with videos and clips from MTV or YouTube, new worksheets and graphic organizers related to literature, blog topics, journal reflections, a new speech connect, a new research speech, role playing, small group activities, large group discussion, and emphasis on key topics about diversity enjoyed and appreciated their multicultural literature experience which was incorporated in their English class. The students gained confidence through working in small groups and as a result of expressing their own opinions. Goughnour concluded that inclusion of more multicultural literature along with more discussion about diversity allowed students in English classes to feel more connected to what they were reading in the classroom, to each other, and to the instructor.

Furthermore, undergraduate students exposed to multicultural literature were better able to conceptualize ways for improving multicultural social justice (Gibson and Parks, 2014).

Despite the importance of integrating multicultural literature in language teaching and learning, there is a dearth of studies that investigate the effect of integrating multicultural children's short stories in second language learning environments. In Saudi Arabia, students majoring in English-Arabic translation are not being exposed to multicultural literature in the college curriculum. Since culture is an essential component of translation and EFL teaching and learning, the present study proposes a model for integrating multicultural children's short stories as an extension activity or as a supplement to in-class instruction to develop college students' reading and speaking skills in English, together with multicultural awareness. In more detail, the study aims at: (i) giving the advantages of using multicultural children's short stories in the EFL college classroom; (ii) listing criteria for selecting multicultural children's short stories; (iii) giving some examples of multicultural children's short stories and of websites where the instructor can find multicultural children's short stories; (iv) showing instructional stages

with multicultural children's short stories; (v) defining the reading and speaking skills that can be developed with multicultural children's short stories; (vi) showing the instructor's role in the proposed teaching strategy; and (vii) how reading and speaking skills can be tested and multicultural awareness assessed.

The model presented by this study will be of special importance for EFL college instructors at COLT who do not know much about multicultural literature and how to teach it, as it gives guidelines for selecting, teaching and assessing multicultural children's short stories. Reading and responding to multicultural children's short stories will help the students connect to the multicultural world they live in, help them accept and respect diversity and appreciate their own cultural heritage better. Kelley (2008) pointed out that multicultural literature is a passport to foreign cultures. It introduces the students to social life and customs of other societies. It can be a vehicle for developing an understanding of complex concepts related to multicultural issues (Davis, Brown, Liedel-Rice and Soeder 2005).

Furthermore, many multicultural children's short stories can be found online and downloaded for free. Several versions of the same short story might be available. Whether online or on paper, the stories can be read anywhere, anytime and as many times as the students wish. Being slow readers, and with a limited proficiency level, EFL freshman college students at COLT will be motivated to read them. They will not find them tedious and frustrating to read as it is the case with long novels, because they are short, and they can finish reading them in a short time.

## **2. Subjects**

The model targets EFL freshman students majoring in translation at the College of Languages and Translation (COLT), King Saud University, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia who are enrolled in their first reading course (4 hours) and their first speaking course (3 hours) in the translation program. Students majoring in translation at COLT take 4 levels of listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary building and grammar courses in the first four semesters of the translation program, before they start taking specialized linguistics, interpreting and translation courses of which literary translation is an essential course. Before they were admitted to COLT, all the students had studied EFL for 6 years in junior and senior high schools (one course per year).

All the subjects share the same Arabic and Islamic cultures and the Saudi sub-culture. They all have access to the Internet on campus, and most own a laptop, an iPad or a tablet and a smart mobile phone. Even if few do not have any of those, they can access the Internet from the college computer lab. All freshman students at COLT can search the Internet from a laptop or on a smart phone.

### 3. Materials and tasks

The instructor and/or the students can search for multicultural short stories from Indian, Chinese, African, Latin American cultures by using "*multicultural short stories*" "*multicultural literature*" or "*multicultural children's literature*" as search terms. They can search Google, Google Play, or Apple Store and eBook libraries such as Wattpad, Kobo, Aldiko Book Reads or free-ebooks.net. They can also search specialized multicultural children's short story websites such as:

- *Multicultural children's literature:*  
[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=multicultural+children%27s+literature](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=multicultural+children%27s+literature)
- *10 Great Multicultural Children's Books:*  
[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=multicultural+children%27s+literature](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=multicultural+children%27s+literature)
- *Indian short stories:*  
<http://www.induswomanwriting.com/Indian-Short-Stories.html>
- *Activity village from China:*  
<http://www.activityvillage.co.uk/stories-from-china>
- *African short stories:*  
[https://www.google.com.sa/search?q=free+African+short+stories+for+kids&oq=free+African+short+stories+for+kids&gs\\_l=serp.12...5840.8270.0.10976.8.8.0.0.0.437.1575.0j1j3j1j1.6.0.msedr...0...1c.1.61.serp..3.5.1133.jxDDEFHuie0](https://www.google.com.sa/search?q=free+African+short+stories+for+kids&oq=free+African+short+stories+for+kids&gs_l=serp.12...5840.8270.0.10976.8.8.0.0.0.437.1575.0j1j3j1j1.6.0.msedr...0...1c.1.61.serp..3.5.1133.jxDDEFHuie0)
- *African fables:*  
<https://mamaafrika.wordpress.com/category/fables-and-folktales/>

The students can download selected short stories from the internet, read them online or on their smart phone. They can also print them for later reading. Some examples of those are:

- *The Amazing Gazelle* (a story from Zanzibar)
- *The Prisoner by Neeharika Pathuri* (a short story from India)
- *The Strange Tale of Doctor Dog* (a Chinese short story)
- *How the Desert Came to Be* (a short story from Ghana, Africa).

#### **4. Criteria for Selecting Multicultural Children's Short stories**

Both simplified and authentic multicultural children's short stories can be used depending on the students' proficiency level and culture of interest to them. The story's readability level, i.e., difficulty of the vocabulary items and grammatical structures, sentence length and complexity of the story structure, should be taken into consideration. To assess the short story's readability level and to find out whether it is suitable for the students, the instructor can read the short story or parts of it before assigning it to them. Smallwood (1998) added that multicultural children's short stories characterized by economy of words, stunning illustrations, intriguing and quickly moving plots, and global themes can be selected.

If a story is translated from Chinese, Spanish or any other foreign language into English, the instructor should make sure that the story uses correct English grammatical structures and usage.

As for the content of multicultural short stories, (Kelley, 2008) and Louie (2006) and Salas, Lucido & Canales (2002) set several criteria that can be applied to multicultural children's short stories such as: (i) Use realistic picture storybooks that depict social life, customs, and current ideology of a particular culture. (ii) Different versions or editions of the same story can be used to help the students to build schema; (iii) The short story should provide accurate and authentic descriptions of the culture it represents and should be rich in cultural details. (iv) The characters in the short story should be authentic, not stereotyped and should be balanced in their physical, emotional, and social qualities. (v) The themes and values in the short story should be consistent with the target culture. (vi) The story setting should be consistent with a past or present time frame. (vii) The illustrations, gender roles, and information about the culture in the short story should be accurate.

#### **5. Instructional strategy with multicultural children's short stories**

Instruction with multicultural children's short stories can be subdivided into three phases: (i) A pre-reading phase; (ii) a reading phase; and (iii) a post-reading phase. Each of which is described below:

### ***Pre-reading Phase***

At least one week before the class session, the instructor divides the students into small groups of 3 or 4 students and assign them the same story or different stories from a particular culture. The instructor sets goals for reading the short story, tells the students what they need to do and focus on, and gives pre-questions to help them focus on the story element (characters, theme, setting, plot) and cultural elements (themes) they need to explore. She/he sets a time limit or deadline for completing the tasks. Two weeks can be allocated to reading the short story, speaking about it, responding to it and commenting on it.

### ***Reading Phase***

The students **read** the selected story out of class, on their own, and read about the country that the story represents. First, they skim through the story page online to find out the title, author and publication date, if available. Second, they skim and scan the whole short story for the general theme of the story. Third, they read in detail paying attention to the elements of the story: Main theme, characters, setting, plot, style and tone and figurative language. They look up the meanings of difficult words from the dictionary. While reading the story, they can identify the story element (theme, characters, setting ... etc.), highlight or underline place names, as well as the cultural elements of the story. They can also prepare questions while reading. Students are given at least a week to prepare and perform the tasks.

### ***Post-reading Phase:***

In class, the students practice the following speaking skills: They give an oral presentation (speaking) consisting of a summary of the story individually, in pairs or in small groups where each student talks about part of the story, another one talks about the next part and so on. Groups of two or more students can also dramatize the story with costumes, pictures, video clips and accessories, if needed. Following the presentation or dramatization, their classmates ask clarification questions about the short story and discuss its elements.

Class time may not be enough for all the students to present. Therefore, presentations should be concise, students should be well-prepared and everything should move on fast and smoothly. Some students can present a story in this class session, others can present another story in the next class



session and so on, but they should all feel that they can be called upon to present any time.

At first the students might be shy and hesitant to speak in front of the class. Gradually, they will gain confidence with encouragement, public speaking tips, contests among the groups, and allowing them to speak freely without picking on their mistakes in public.

An online discussion forum or a blog can be created. The instructor posts questions in the online discussion forum or blog and creates different threads or entries for each story. Pre-questions that require/help the students to identify the main theme and events of the story, setting, characters, style, and tone, and understand figurative language. The students summarize the whole short story under study and post short summaries in the forum. They post answers to the questions. They comment on each other's' responses. They discuss the elements of the short story under study in class and in the online discussion.

The students talk about, write about, reflect on and respond to the story while reading, and analyze it critically. They explore the cultural events in the short story. They respond to gender, feminism, and gender equity, war, terrorism, justice, freedom, violence, prejudice, abuse, challenging situations, disabilities, and child labor (Gopalakrishnan, 2010). They identify the values underlying the characters' conflict resolution strategies. They relate themselves to the story and critique how the characters are depicted in the story Louie, 2006). They compare the cultural elements in the short story with their own and compare the cultural elements of the different stories under study with each other.

The instructor encourages the students to read and complete the tasks. She/he gives feedback and comments on the students' performance. She/he should tolerate the students' mistakes and encourage them to use the language for communication and to express their views. As the students proceed further in the semester and as they learn more about the language and see correct examples posted by more proficient students, they will be able to correct their own mistakes. The instructor can correct mistakes indirectly by rephrasing faulty answers.

**Sample questions that can be asked about each short story**

*To identify the author, date, culture, ask:*

- Who is the author? Where is the author from?
- When was the short story written?

- Which culture does it represent?

*To identify the main themes, ask:*

- What is the theme, i.e., main idea of the story?
- What does the story's theme say about the world, human experience or human values?
- Why did the writer write the story?
- What message, moral or lesson do you learn or understand from the story?

*To identify the characters:*

- Make a list of all the characters in the story.
- Who is the main character in the story?

*To identify the setting ask:*

- Where does the story take place?
- What is the time period?
- Is the story about the past or present?

*To identify the plot, ask:*

- What are the series of events in the story?
- Are these events in chronological order? do they flash back or forward?
- What is the main conflict in the story?
- What is the turning point of the story?

*To identify the point of view of the narrator, ask:*

- Is it a subjective or objective point of view?
- Is the main character narrating the story, or is it an observer of the events?
- Does the narrator use the words "I" and "me"? Is it in the third person?

*To analyze style and tone of the story, ask:*

- Is the style formal or informal?
- Does the writer use slang, or standard language?
- What types of sentences does the writer use (fragments, simple, complex, or rhetorical)?
- What is the mood throughout the story? Is the tone sarcastic, humorous, sad...etc.?

*To identify any figurative language, ask:*

- Give some examples of the use of imagery (similes, metaphors, personification...etc.)?
- Is there symbolism? Give examples?

*To identify the cultural elements of the story, ask:*

- What does the story tell you about the customs and social life of India, China, Turkey, Ghana, Mexico, Spain...etc.?
- Which issues does the story tackle (gender equity, feminism, war, terrorism, refugees, justice, freedom, violence, prejudice, abuse, challenging situations, disabilities, child labor, immigration...etc.)?
- What are the main values, beliefs, and attitudes in the short story?
- Compare the cultural elements in this short story with your own?
- Compare the characters in the Indian short story with those in the African short story?
- Compare theme in the Chinese short story with that in the Mexican short story?

All, most or some of the above questions can be asked, as they may not apply to each and every story. The teacher can ask additional questions, if needed.

Moreover, the aims of the instructional activity and the above questions is not to make a detailed and profound literary analysis of the story under study, but to help the students comprehend the story elements and have a feel for the cultural aspects in it. There is no need to focus on each and every word.

### ***Further Instructional Guidelines***

The multicultural children's short story/stories selected should focus on one culture at a time. However, a single story or several stories from the same culture may be assigned to accommodate the different proficiency levels, needs and interests of the students. Questions posted in the online discussion forum should focus on the story under study only, not all the stories together as this will be confusing to the students and the bulk of tasks will be overwhelming to them.

When a story is assigned, students should not be left on their own and should not read the short story passively without having to perform a task specified by the instructor and without a deadline for finishing the tasks. They should be actively involved in reading, retelling, summarizing the short story in their own words, reflecting on the events and characters, asking

questions, commenting on their classmates' responses, stating their opinions, comparing and contrasting different short stories from different cultures under study. They should be actively involved in the discussing the posts, and answers to questions, in the online discussion forum.

Whatever the students do, whether in class or online, they have to be supervised by the instructor.

## **6. Role of the instructor**

During all instructional phases, the instructor serves as a facilitator. She/he helps the students find and download relevant short stories that meet their proficiency level. She/he encourages the students to propose short stories of interest to them. She/he follows the students up to make sure they are reading and performing the required tasks. She/he welcomes and responds to inquiries while interacting with the students and should encourage them to fully participate in learning. His/her guidance is crucial in facilitating comprehension of short stories. She/he encourages and models the skills that the students need to acquire or practice. To encourage the students to read the short story and perform the tasks orally or in writing, the instructor can give extra credit and include the short story content on tests.

## **7. Assessment of the Instructional Strategy**

Reading and speaking tests can be used to assess students' skill level before and after instruction. At the beginning of the semester, i.e., before instruction with the multicultural children's short stories begins, the students should be given a pre-test and at the end of the semester, they should be given a post-test. Whether the same version or different versions are used for both, the test should consist of a short story that the students have never read before. Questions about the characters, theme, plot, setting, tone and style, figurative language, and cultural elements, i.e., the same reading skills that were practiced, should be asked. The students read the text and answer the questions in writing. Two hours can be allocated to the reading test. An answer key can be used to grade the students' answers. Students' reading pre- and post-test scores can be compared using a T-test to find out if there is a significant difference in reading skill as a result of reading the multicultural children's short stories.

A speaking pre- and post-test should be also given to the students. The speaking test should consist of a short story that the students have never seen before with questions that require the students to summarize the story and talk about its content, i.e., the same skills that were practiced. The students

take the speaking test in the language lab. They read the text, answer the questions, give a summary or re-tell the story orally. They record their responses using their MP3 players. One hour can be allocated to the speaking test. To score the speaking test, the instructor listens to the recordings one by one, gives marks to each question using a scoring rubric. Students' speaking pre- and post-test scores can be compared using a T-test to find out if there is a significant difference in speaking skill level, as a result of reading and talking about the multicultural children's short stories.

In addition, a questionnaire-survey can be used to assess the students' multicultural awareness before instruction. The same or a different questionnaire-survey can be used at the end of the semester to assess any increase in multicultural awareness as a result of using multicultural short stories. The students can be given open ended questions such as, but not limited, to the following:

- Which story did you like the best and why?
- What did you learn about the Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Turkish, native American or Spanish culture from the story that you have read.
- What are the similarities and differences between Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Turkish, native American or Spanish culture and Arabic Saudi culture/ Islamic culture?
- What did you learn about the Indian/Chinese/Mexican/African...etc. culture from the story that you have read?
- Did you like the short story? Why/why not?
- Which sort story did you like the best? Why?
- Which stories do you recommend for other students? Why?

Students' responses before and after instruction can be compared to find out what they have acquired, which multicultural short stories they have like and which they have not.

## **8. Effect of the Proposed Model on Skill Development and Cultural Awareness**

Findings of prior research studies by the author indicated that freshman students at COLT, who read supplementary American stories of their choice, with their instructor, where each student read a different story and gave an oral summary of it and posted the summary in an online course made higher gains in reading comprehension than those who did not (Al-Jarf, 2009). The same significant results were repeatedly obtained, over several semesters, whenever students read supplementary American stories of their choice and

posted summaries and answered questions on the content of the stories in an online course.

Likewise, sophomore students at COLT who received in-class instruction about British culture and performed online activities about British culture exhibited higher levels of cultural awareness than those who received in-class instruction only (Al-Jarf, 2006).

## **9. Conclusion**

The present study proposed a model for integrating multicultural children's short stories in the EFL classroom at COLT. The model gives guidelines for selecting, teaching and assessing multicultural children's short stories. EFL instructors at COLT may not be familiar with the multicultural children's short stories they want to teach to the students. In this case they need, as Dressel (2005) indicated, to become co-learners where the students' voices are dominant in the classroom environments. They can increase their own multicultural knowledge and teaching skills by following the guidelines herein, while teaching those multicultural short stories to the students. Instructors are also advised to proceed slowly from one story to another, try to identify the elements of the story and cultural aspects before going to class.

Other multicultural genres such as poetry, longer novels, movies, audiobooks, and mobile Apps can be used to develop EFL students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Students can share an online course, online discussion forum, a web-conference, or a Facebook page with students from another country such as Japan, China, Brazil, Russia or USA. Both groups can be engaged in collaborative cultural exchanges and discussions about their mainstream cultures. Such activities, collaborations and interactions between Saudi students and students from other countries are still open for further investigations by other researchers in the future.

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