



TEACHING WRITING SKILLS THROUGH MICRO- FICTION - MAKING EVERY WORD COUNT

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ABSTRACT

The more you say, the less people remember.

The fewer the words, the greater the profit. François Fénelon

English teachers are constantly on a quest for various innovative strategies to motivate and encourage learners to enhance their language skills. Often it is observed that some learners may manage to speak English with moderate proficiency but when it comes to writing skills, they fall abysmally short. Hence the authors chose to use a tool that would appeal to today's youth and at the same time make the writing task an enjoyable one. Modern day learners with their digital literacy and proficiency with technology, find it more interesting to read "short-short –stories" or micro fiction rather than the longer versions such as novels. Famous classics in literature are often embellished with vivid metaphors and various figures of speech but the beauty of flash fiction lies in its brevity, it is short on words but long on impact and intensity. It is in this context that Micro fiction finds its relevance since it can be effectively used by teachers to get their students to fine tune their writing, focus on style, vocabulary, hone their self editing skills and do all this in an enriching and enjoyable manner.

Key Words: *Micro fiction, flash fiction, writing skills, speaking skills*

INTRODUCTION:

The ability to convey much while using few, well chosen words is an art worth mastering. Writing and speaking involve conveying a message. To ensure that the reader or listener understands what was meant, one can be more user- friendly by avoiding redundancies and

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wordiness. In the words of Thomas Jefferson, the most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do.

Engineering students are required to have effective written and spoken communication skills to improve their chances of employability. Micro fiction can be used as a tool to help them enjoy learning how to choose their words carefully and make every word count. Micro fiction, a subset of Flash fiction which is also known as ‘sudden fiction’, ‘postcard fiction’ and ‘miniatures’ is actually a story under 1000 words. This tool can be tailored to suit the needs of different groups of learners and situations. The idea behind writing such mini compositions echoes Hemingway’s iceberg theory which believes in showing only the surface to its readers while the rest of it remains unrevealed or implicit allowing its readers to interpret it in their own way. Writing with this minimalistic approach is not only challenging but also very thought- provoking. In the words of Grant Faulkner “This form speaks to the singularity of stray moments by calling attention to the spectral blank spaces around them.” 1

By the end of the First Year, an Engineering student of Osmania University is expected to be equipped to write effective Reports, Resumes, Statement of purpose, personal and business letters. He/she should be able to expand an idea or proverb into a paragraph and also par down a passage to a third (précis) or one tenth (abstract) of its length. However, many students lack these important skills. Many students even find it difficult to convey their ideas in brief, error free letters. Their rambling style calls to mind a quote by Mark Twain: "I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead."

Therefore, this paper focuses on how Micro fiction could be a used to enable students to express themselves briefly but powerfully and strengthen their communication skills. This tool which has multiple benefits in one’s personal and professional life can be employed in various ways and settings for instance viz. in the English Theory classroom, the English Language Lab and even as an activity in a Literary Club. The students could learn about Business communication and its components: accuracy, brevity and clarity by reading examples of and even trying their hand at writing flash fiction. This can lead to greater student participation and enhanced levels of interest.

Task based approach

Task 1

The teacher can design this writing task such that in the Theory Class, learners can work in pairs or in small groups of three depending on the seating arrangement in the class and set out to write a story in 50 words or far less. At first the task may appear to be tough therefore the teacher would need to provide guidelines to write flash fiction. For instance the students



could be asked to choose a theme and then develop it into a Micro fiction of about 50 to 100 words. This exercise can be enriched by choosing topics based on Human Values (like Friendship, Honesty) and Life Skills (Time and Stress Management, Team Work etc.) The stages involve: (i) brainstorming to choose a theme (ii) building a story around it (iii) writing the first draft without being preoccupied about the number of words (iv) rewriting and tailoring the length by trimming away all repetitions, redundancies, flowery language and work at achieving a story that is pithy, witty, compact and concise. Since Micro-fiction has to be penned down in fewer words a writer has to ensure that it is crisp and catchy.

Task 2

The teacher can give the students one of the stories easily available on social media and ask them to expand the underlying idea in not more than 100 words. One example is the story given below which has been shared on WhatsApp:

She, a renowned artist and a strict mother, often scolded her six year old son for he could never draw a line straight. As he breathed slowly into the ventilator, she begged him to make one more crooked line on the ECG.

Learners need to be analytical, sensitive and creative to expand this kind of content. In this process they can enrich their vocabulary and work on their compositional skills, since they need to write accurately, coherently, with brevity and clarity. Hosea Ballou rightly points out that “Brevity and conciseness are the parents of correction” while the importance of Clarity is brought out by David Belasco: If you can’t write your idea on the back of my calling card, you don’t have a clear idea. (Singh: 2006)²

Such an exercise serves to achieve more than one goal viz. developing writing skills as well as being responsive to the finer feelings and emotions of life.

Task 3

Micro fiction can also be used in the English Language Lab; for instance, as a Group Task to improve the learners’ speaking skills. This will provide ample opportunity for collaborative learning since it provides learners an opportunity to work together, discuss various aspects of the given Micro fiction and thus have a richer understanding of it. The groups will be required to delve into the story, ponder about the possible underlying meanings and give their own interpretations. For example the famous short story attributed to Earnest Hemingway (For sale: baby shoes, never worn) can be interpreted by each group member depending on their experiential knowledge. Possible analysis about the six word story may include the following:



- i) The baby might have died and its unused shoes are being sold since seeing them is a constant reminder and a source of great pain to its mother.
- ii) The shoes might have been misplaced and found long after they could be used by the child who has now outgrown them
- iii) The baby's mother did not like these shoes which were gifted to the child and she thought someone else could benefit from them.
- iv) The internal conflict of the mother to give or not to give away her baby's little shoes. In this process, the learners can discuss about various facets of the story such as the plot, conflict, characters, setting and theme.

Task 4

Another strategy that could be gainfully employed is to present a well chosen picture that could be used for Picture Perception since this improves both speaking and writing skills. Here, the learners are required to observe the picture for 40 seconds, discuss it with their team mates, build a story line, write it in about 50 words in four minutes, and then present it before the class. This task involves not only enhancement of language skills but also brings into play analytical skills, out of the box thinking, time management, team work and so on. The interesting part of this exercise is that it uses Picture Perception as a means to focus attention on writing Micro fiction within the given word and time limit.

Task 5

Another strategy to use Micro- fiction in the English Language Lab is to link it to the Just a Minute (JAM) activity. This will need to be performed individually by providing a sample of a Micro fiction such as: They took his father and only returned a flag. The learner will have to promptly understand the theme and the metaphors (if any) and present it to the class, in a creative manner that is bereft of any irrelevant frills.

Flash writing is not new. It has its roots in fables of the past. As William Nelles points out, "Such short verbal forms as the parable, exemplum, fabliau, and fable have been widely and more or less continuously practiced for millennia."³ Aesops fables and Panchatantra are good examples and the teacher could use them in the English Theory Class as well as in the English Language Lab for writing and speaking activities. They could also be used by the teacher to impart human values such as honesty, courage, kindness, hard work.



Most professional institutions have Literary Clubs. Such bodies can hold competitions inviting students to write Micro fiction to enhance their writing skills and showcase their creativity and the ability to be pithy but powerful since many of these students have a flair for writing. The authors' students have self-published a collection of their writings Next Text which displays various elements of good writing. "Flashes of insight, cracks of wit, and twists of logic and quirks of language"⁴ which is how Anna Maria Shua's stories have been described, could well describe their attempts at writing on a wide variety of topics.

What topics can be chosen in an attempt to write Micro fiction? In the words of Sylvia Plath, "Everything in life is writeable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it and the imagination to improvise."⁵ Consequently, the members of the Club can present their creative works on a given theme or themes. Like the members of a book lovers club that meet and share their views on books they have read, these students can also share with their class, examples of Micro fiction which they have come across. Writing can be a lonely activity but when Micro fiction is attempted as a collaborative activity it can serve to encourage and inspire one another.

CONCLUSION

"It is my ambition to say in ten sentences what others say in a whole book." Friedrich Nietzsche

Micro fiction is a useful and handy tool since the target audience i.e. today's youth, have less time at their disposal and short attention spans. Flash fiction meets their needs since it is less time consuming, conveys much, encourages them to think and gives wings to their imagination.

Teaching language skills in an innovative way is a challenging task especially when students pursuing professional courses pay less attention to language skills compared to their core engineering subjects. However, in truth, it is these skills enable them to express themselves clearly and succinctly. In fact, professional writing demands an avoidance of loose and flabby writing by trimming away superfluous words and expressions. Such a goal is difficult to achieve overnight and hence the language teacher plays a crucial role in guiding the learners to develop these essential skills by exposing them to the Micro fiction genre since it is many benefits. Some of them include instilling in learners a sense of discipline, learning to think out of the box in multiple genres and generating creative content. Perhaps one of the most important aspects of this activity is that it is an enjoyable, stimulating, educational challenge.

'Making every word count' can indeed be the mantra for improving and enhancing writing skills in the personal and professional arenas of the learners' lives.



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