TEACHING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH SHORT FICTION: CRITICAL READING AND LITERARY MEDIATION IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

Prasanta Chakravarty

Ph.D., SUNY

Buffalo, USA

Abstract. This methodological article explores the use of short literary fiction in university English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction to develop interpretive reading, intercultural reflection and evidence-based discussion. It synthesizes work on literature in language education, intercultural communicative competence, reader response, critical literacy and CEFR mediation. A four-phase teaching sequence is developed around close reading, viewpoint comparison, mediated discussion and reflective production. Sample activities focus on narrative voice, culturally situated assumptions, competing interpretations and textual evidence, without treating literary characters as representatives of entire cultures. The article proposes an assessment framework and outlines ethical and pedagogical limitations. Its claims are conceptual and illustrative; no classroom experiment or learner outcome data are reported.

Keywords: literature in EFL, short fiction, intercultural competence, critical literacy, literary mediation, close reading, reader response.

INTRODUCTION

Literary texts create opportunities for language learners to encounter voices, social relationships and situations that do not fit neatly into textbook dialogues. A short story can place everyday vocabulary alongside ambiguity, irony and unfamiliar cultural assumptions. These qualities are sometimes treated as obstacles to comprehension. Yet under suitable conditions they can become resources for close reading, interpretation and discussion. The educational issue is not simply whether literature belongs in the English as a foreign language classroom, but how teachers organize its interpretation.

Contemporary language education increasingly values the ability to communicate across differences and to mediate meaning when participants do not share the same experiences. Such capacity cannot be reduced to memorizing facts about an English-speaking country. Literature offers complex representations of social experience in which characters may misread one another, narrators may conceal information and apparently familiar expressions may carry distinct emotional significance. Exploring these tensions requires learners to support interpretations with textual evidence and to reconsider assumptions.

This article proposes a teaching sequence for short fiction in university EFL courses. The goal is to connect linguistic development with critical reading and intercultural reflection without essentializing national or ethnic identities. The guiding questions concern text selection, classroom task design, the relation between personal response and defensible interpretation, and assessment of mediation. The article is a conceptual and methodological synthesis rather than a report of empirical intervention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature-based language teaching has a substantial pedagogical tradition. Lazar (1993) argues for classroom activities in which literary language provides both linguistic material and opportunities for engagement. Carter and Long (1991) distinguish complementary emphases on language, cultural knowledge and personal growth. These perspectives remain useful, but they should not become separate and inflexible teaching models: a single passage can support grammatical noticing, ethical interpretation and the discussion of divergent responses.

Paran (2008), in an evidence-based review of literature in instructed foreign-language learning, emphasizes that the value of literary study depends partly on teaching approach and the kinds of tasks that learners undertake. This finding cautions against assuming that simply assigning a story will improve proficiency or intercultural understanding. The pedagogy must make its target processes visible. Asking learners to identify the narrator, locate an interpretive clue and compare readings is more meaningful than testing only plot recall.

Byram (1997) conceptualizes intercultural communicative competence as involving attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. From this perspective, students should not be asked to imitate supposedly typical native-speaker behavior. They should learn to compare situated meanings, recognize the partiality of their assumptions and respond to difference reflectively. Fictional representations can support this work if teachers distinguish artistic construction from sociological evidence.

Rosenblatt (1978) understands reading as a transaction between reader and text, making space for the learner's response without assuming that any interpretation is equally supported. A productive classroom can move from an initial personal reaction to a discussion of narrative details that sustain, complicate or contradict it. This movement provides an educational basis for combining affective engagement with the discipline of close reading.

Critical literacy further asks whose viewpoints are authorized and whose experiences remain marginal within a text. Luke (2012) presents critical literacy as connected with questions of discourse, knowledge and power. For EFL instruction this does not require imposing a single political interpretation. It means enabling students to interrogate narrative selection, characterization and silence, and to articulate how different readers may evaluate the same scene.

The Council of Europe (2020) expands language education through descriptors for mediation and plurilingual/pluricultural competence. Literary mediation may include explaining a passage to peers, reformulating an interpretation in accessible language, organizing competing arguments and identifying areas of agreement. This orientation supports the design of collaborative activities in which language is used to negotiate understanding rather than merely demonstrate the recall of predetermined answers.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

The study employs qualitative conceptual synthesis and instructional design. Its evidence base consists of widely used pedagogical and theoretical works on literature, reader response, intercultural communication and mediation. The teaching scenarios are invented for methodological illustration. There are no recorded lessons, learner surveys, proficiency tests or statistical analyses, and none are implied. The proposed model is intended for intermediate to upper-intermediate university EFL classes but may be adapted with appropriate scaffolding.

Text selection follows five criteria. A suitable story should be manageable in length, linguistically challenging but accessible with support, rich in perspective or interpretive uncertainty, open to more than one defensible reading, and teachable without reproducing harmful stereotypes as factual truths. Teachers should consider copyright, local curricular requirements and students' linguistic resources. Short excerpts from public-domain fiction or lawfully accessible editions can serve as alternatives to full texts.

The illustrative sequence uses a short story in which a narrator presents a social encounter incompletely, leaving a discrepancy between what a character believes and what readers may infer. This is a narrative scenario rather than a claim about a specific published story. By avoiding dependence on a single source text, the design can be applied to a range of English-language short fiction from different periods and regions. The teacher nevertheless must prepare text-specific evidence questions before the lesson.

Analysis distinguishes three outcomes: linguistic interpretation, literary reasoning and intercultural mediation. Linguistic interpretation refers to the recognition of contextual meanings, modality and evaluative language. Literary reasoning concerns focalization, irony, characterization and narrative gaps. Intercultural mediation involves explaining perspectives, responding respectfully to differences and revising a claim when new textual details emerge. These constructs guide the suggested activities and rubric, but they have not yet been psychometrically validated.

RESULTS AND PEDAGOGICAL ANALYSIS

The design yields a four-phase cycle. Phase one, orienting and noticing, begins with a brief pre-reading exchange about situations rather than national cultures. For example, learners may discuss how misunderstandings arise when people infer intention from limited evidence. The teacher introduces only the cultural and historical context indispensable for comprehension, then invites students to predict several possible interpretations. This step activates knowledge without prematurely deciding what the story must mean.

During initial reading, learners annotate linguistic signals of certainty, judgment and social distance. They identify words that describe action and words that evaluate it, distinguishing the narrator's view from direct speech and from possible implications. A productive prompt is: Which sentence allows us to infer that the narrator may be mistaken, and what alternative reading does it permit? This moves attention from vocabulary recognition toward language as a vehicle for literary perspective.

Phase two, close reading and interpretive comparison, organizes students into pairs that defend two plausible readings of a passage. Each pair must cite at least two textual features, such as a contrast in dialogue, a change in focalization or a discrepancy between reported thought and observable action. Students can be assigned a tentative position but should be allowed to revise it. The purpose is not to reward disagreement for its own sake; it is to make the evidence underlying competing interpretations explicit.

A perspective map can make narrative mediation concrete. Learners record what each character knows, what each character believes, what the narrator tells the reader and what remains uncertain. A blank cell signals an absence of evidence rather than an invitation to invent a cultural explanation. The teacher then asks how the reading would change if the scene were told by a different character. This counterfactual activity develops awareness of narrative construction while avoiding ungrounded statements about whole communities.

Phase three, collaborative literary mediation, requires students to explain an interpretation to a peer who has reached a different conclusion. They first summarize the other person's argument accurately, then add supporting or challenging details and finally formulate a qualified joint statement. Useful language frames include The passage suggests ..., One possible explanation is ..., and This interpretation is limited by .... Such forms make hedging and evidential reasoning functional rather than isolated grammar exercises.

Students can extend mediation across languages by briefly discussing a difficult concept in a shared first language before producing an English explanation for the class. In multilingual groups, peers may instead offer examples and reformulations rather than translations. The objective is to make meaning accessible while preserving nuance. The presence of different linguistic resources should not be treated as evidence of deficient English proficiency; it can be organized as part of a plurilingual learning strategy.

Phase four, reflective production, culminates in a 350- to 500-word analytical response or an oral commentary supported by short notes. Learners answer a question about how the story constructs a misunderstanding, a conflict or an unreliable perspective. They must distinguish a personal association from a claim about the text, integrate at least three pieces of textual evidence and explain one reasonable alternative interpretation. A short reflection records which initial assumption changed during discussion and why.

An illustrative assessment rubric assigns 25 percent to accurate comprehension, 30 percent to textual evidence and literary reasoning, 20 percent to intercultural sensitivity, 15 percent to clarity of spoken or written English and 10 percent to collaborative mediation. The weights are proposed for curriculum design and have not been validated experimentally. Intercultural sensitivity is judged by observable discourse practices—qualification of generalizations, responsiveness to evidence and respect for competing viewpoints—not by a teacher's assessment of students' personal beliefs.

Scaffolding can be differentiated. At lower proficiency levels, the teacher can pre-teach a few essential expressions, provide short passages and model the interpretation of one narrative detail. More advanced learners may compare narrators, examine intertextual references or analyze the effect of an ending that withholds resolution. These adjustments preserve the central intellectual task: to examine how literary language constructs meaning and how readers justify their interpretations.

DISCUSSION

The model positions literary reading as an interaction among language, artistic form and social reflection. Its advantage over a fact-oriented cultural lesson is that students must work with incomplete, conflicting or unreliable perspectives. However, fiction should not become an unexamined source of information about a community. A character's values cannot be taken as a representative cultural profile, and a narrator's judgments may be part of the text's critical design. Teachers should explicitly reinforce this distinction.

The approach also requires careful management of discussion. Sensitive themes may generate disagreement or personal disclosures. An instructor should provide alternative response formats, avoid requiring students to speak for a national or religious identity, and evaluate reasoning rather than ideological conformity. Respectful disagreement can be taught through language frames that acknowledge uncertainty and reflect another speaker's position accurately. Such practices support inclusion without demanding unanimous interpretation.

Assessment is a further challenge. A fluent speaker can make unsupported assertions, while a less fluent reader may notice a decisive narrative detail. Rubrics should therefore separate language control from interpretive quality, and instructors should offer formative comments about the relationship between an observation and its evidence. Peer dialogue is useful when it helps students refine interpretations; it is not in itself evidence that intercultural competence has improved.

The current proposal remains limited to conceptual and task-level analysis. Its classroom effectiveness has not been measured, and the suggested activities may function differently across proficiency groups, curricula and literary traditions. Future studies should compare textual reasoning before and after instruction, examine recorded mediation episodes with appropriate consent, and evaluate written responses through

independent assessors. These methods could test whether the proposed cycle improves the quality of evidence use and perspective taking.

CONCLUSION

Short fiction can serve as a productive resource for EFL instruction when its literary qualities are treated as objects of inquiry rather than merely as illustrations of vocabulary or national culture. The four-phase model described here moves from contextual orientation to close reading, collaborative mediation and reflective production. Throughout the sequence, students are asked to identify narrative perspectives, support claims with textual details and acknowledge the limits of interpretation.

The proposal links literature-based teaching with intercultural communicative competence, critical literacy and the mediation-oriented perspective of the CEFR. Its potential contribution lies in an explicit instructional structure and an assessment focus on observable reasoning and communicative practices. Since the article offers no empirical outcome data, claims about effectiveness require future research in actual university language classrooms.

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Reviewer:

Basri Rashid

Ph.D.

The University of Nottingham (United Kingdom)