

Flash Fiction in the English Language Classroom: A Tool for Teaching Reading and Writing Skills

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Abstract

Flash fiction has emerged as a popular form of storytelling in the rapidly evolving digital media age. The brevity of its form is attractive to the younger generations in the current fast-paced world. Readers are no longer just the consumers of the narrative form but have also become its producers. Hence, it is only fitting that flash fiction is also given its due place in the classroom as an effective tool for teaching reading, writing, and enhancing language skills. This paper examines the nature of flash fiction and pedagogical strategies for its effective use in the English language classroom at the school level, in Classes 8 and beyond.

Keywords: Flash fiction, narrative form, micro-fiction, pedagogical strategies, reading skills, writing skills.

Introduction

*'I want to be a sailor,'
the six-year-old declared.*

*'But aren't you scared
of water?'* Teacher asked

*'That's why I'll never let the
ship sink.'*

(#sailor by Sultana Varawala, *Terribly Tiny Tales*)

Students are eager storytellers, and when they are younger, even more so. The narrative instinct is prompted by the desire to share their experiences of the world around them. As they advance to their teens,

they acquire a certain reflectiveness, which needs to be nurtured for verbal articulation and expression. The English teacher or any language teacher needs to tap into this instinct to enhance the students' skills for language learning, reading and writing.

For a long time, the print medium and textbooks have had an exclusive monopoly over the world of literacy and education, with stories from well-known writers reproduced in textbooks being one of the most popular methods of teaching language through literature. However, the ubiquitous presence of the internet in our lives and the rapid proliferation of digital technology have ensured that we, as teachers, re-think our curriculum and teaching strategies. As we do so, we need to harness the various forms and writing cultures that the arrival of the new media has spawned. Literature itself is a social activity, and literature has always been meant to be shared.

The production of literature meant exclusively for the internet and social media/online media platforms has led to a democratisation of literature in which the readers are not just the consumers but also the writers and producers. The internet provides instant outreach to the readers and prompt feedback to the writers. The era of online publishing has thus effectively ended the gate-keeping that surrounded print literature till about a decade ago. Today, multiple online sites publish flash fiction, and some like *Flash Fiction Online*, *Everyday Fiction*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, etc., even pay the writers for publishing with them. Flash fiction has been aligning very well with podcasts and internet broadcast formats. Some flash fiction platforms or even writers have become so famous online that their collections have also been taken out in print volumes, for example, *Terribly Tiny Tales*.

Evidence proves that interaction with social media enhances creativity in students. In a study of students conducted by *The National Literacy Trust* of United States, it was observed that those who were active bloggers or were on social media enjoyed writing better and were more confident of their writing skills as compared to others (Harris & Dilts, 2015, as cited in Sharma, 2022). At the same time, the internet is also notorious for allowing liberties with language in the name of brevity. For example, the initial 140-character limit on Twitter led to abbreviations, run-ons and fragments, problems with capitalization, incorrect grammar usage, and punctuation, to name a few. The shorthand approach and lack

of formality in the internet language often make it inappropriate for academic and professional writing (Sharma, 2022).

However, the language on the internet has been continuously evolving, too. This paper argues that while flash fiction itself is a product of the internet, it is a genre that respects language and at the same time experiments with it to bring certain playfulness, as seen in the microfiction or *The Terribly Tiny Tale* by Sultana Varawala cited at the beginning of this paper. As such, it attracts the younger generation, making it an effective tool for usage in the classroom. The task cut out for the English teacher is to enable the students to develop proficiency in different kinds of language for different internet writing skills yet retain the essential purity of language.

Flash Fiction: Definition and Structure

The idea of flash fiction or microfiction, a story or poem written in minimal words, is as old as literature itself. It is also difficult to define since it has existed in every era in different forms and styles, with “its origins lying in the short narrative format, including the short story, fable or even parable” (Raj & Gupta, 2022, p.209). However, the present Internet-linked flash fiction form as we know it today was duly recognised as a distinct evolving sub-genre only by 2010 according to Kerr (Gethins & Dasur, 2016). This sub-genre was due to the convergence of digital technologies and social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and blogging sites, which enabled instant online publication.

As a broad term of reference, a story written under a thousand words can be considered flash fiction, but this does not define the genre in its truest sense. The difference between the short story and flash fiction is that while the former focuses on specific aspects of life and depicts it through a proper assemblage and development of plot, structure and characters, the latter tends to be primarily anecdotal. Hence, flash fiction becomes a broad term for stories ranging from six words to a thousand words, further qualified as per their length by various adjuncts such as ultra-short, micro, sudden, postcard, furious, fast, quick, skinny, minute, and so on. While anything less than a hundred words is microfiction, flash fiction can range from a hundred to a thousand words. Microfiction/flash fiction often appears as a hybrid genre, one part poetry and one part prose, as seen in *The Terribly Tiny Tales* or the Instagram poetry of

Akhil Katyal.

Because of the shortness of its length, the complex interplay of characters and plot development cannot be expected in flash fiction. The objective of flash fiction is to entertain by taking the reader by surprise. However, despite the shortness of its format, each work of flash fiction offers a complete narrative with a beginning, middle and end (Gurley, 2000). Moreover, it does have a basic setting, a minimal plot and at least one character. There are three key points in writing flash fiction: an opening in the middle of the action, creating a crisis and implied resolution (Batchelor, 2012). Thus, the best flash fiction is the slice-of-life story that continues to haunt readers for a long time, even though it has taken them only a few minutes to read.

Flash Fiction in the Classroom

Preparing to Teach

Since flash fiction is a new literary genre, teachers must prepare independently before bringing it to the classroom. The origins of flash fiction lie in the internet, which is also the best place for teachers to find resources and teaching tools. Several free blogs, such as—lindsayannlearning.com, booktrust.org.uk, and learningblogs@nytimes.com—offers useful tips for teaching and writing flash fiction. Flash fiction websites (mostly with free access) such as *Flash Fiction Online* and *Everyday Flash Fiction* are storehouses of flash fiction. Abha Iyengar, one of the foremost Indian flash fiction writers, has also published print volumes of her flash fiction collections, such as *Flash Bites* (2012), *Kintsugi: Flash Fiction First Volume I* (2021), *Skin: Flash Fiction First Volume II* (2021), *The Full Platter: A Collection of Short-Short Tales* (2021); most of these are available as e-books on Kindle.

To begin with, the teacher can curate a selection of readings that would take the students less than five minutes to complete reading. Shorter pieces are more likely to be quickly lapped up, and they become entry points for discussion on the craft and theme of the narrative. A great way to introduce flash fiction in the classroom can be a discussion on this iconic six-word piece of microfiction ascribed to Ernest Hemingway:

For sale, baby shoes, never worn...

Or even,

Sorry soldier, shoes sold in pairs. (Independent)

The density of ideas contained in both pieces should activate the students to think about the possibilities of how less can be more and the alignment of words. The students should be prompted to infer all that is implied and left unsaid in the story, drawing them to think about the plot and theme of the above pieces. Teachers may also encourage the students to visualize the context of these stories and lead the students to hear the voices contained therein. As part of the phonemic awareness strategy, the internal rhythm and play of words, the alliterative use of the 's' sound can be pointed out. Punctuation is the key to flash fiction, as seen in the microfiction at the beginning of this paper.

Flash fiction is fast gaining ground amongst Indian writers. In an online webinar (organized by Karim City College, 2020, August 18), writers such as Abha Iyengar, Damyanti Biswas, Sara Chansarkar, Jose Verghese and Murali Kamma expressed the belief that in the times to come, it is flash fiction which will keep the flag of literature flying high. The following piece of flash fiction by Abha Iyengar (No. of words: 253) is reproduced here with the permission of the writer:

Red Dress of Gold

She lies there, breathing in short gasps.

My grandmother is dying. I have been with her for a month now, wanting to make her last days as comfortable as possible.

I lean close as she speaks, her voice rasps like sandpaper against wood. There is a room at the end of the passage. Did I know of it? Then I should take the key from under her pillow and open it. I would find her wedding dress wrapped in tissue in a trunk there. I must bring it to her.

I leave her side and walk with curious trepidation towards this room. As I open it, the dark mustiness makes my head reel. I walk towards the huge, black trunk in the centre and raise its heavy iron lid. In this monstrosity lies just one dress wrapped in tissue. It is a red and gold frock which could be worn only by a small child!

My hands shake as I place the dress on her body, and she runs her fingers over it.

"1918 ..." she whispers, "I was just five ... and your grandfather six ... we didn't know we were getting married ... thought it was a game ... the lights and the elephants, the jewellery and the sweets ... it was like a festival ..."

and this dress ... I loved it ..."

She is lost now. "Take it, it's yours," she says. I am a forty-two-year-old single mother wearing shorts and sneakers, but she does not care.

Abha Iyengar, *Flash Bites* (Authors Press, 2013)

Other than the Indian context and the social theme, which is the story's highlight, the crispness of the sentences and the writer's craft are exemplary. Teachers can mine the story for the atmosphere that it creates with the aid of word pictures, literary devices, syntax, the characters, the denotations and connotations and the more significant questions that such a story raises. The students can also be asked to identify the keywords and phrases that jump out and the key moments leading to the story's twist.

A few suggested questions:

- Identify the phrases that immediately establish the situation in the story.
- What is the suspense in the story?
- What is the significance of the red dress of gold?
- Identify the twist in the story.
- Make a list of the adjectival phrases.
- Identify the literary devices—similes, metaphors.

Writing Flash Fiction

Reading samples of flash fiction prepares the student for writing. The teacher may set out a graded writing task as follows:

- Writing under 20 words
- Writing under 100 words
- Writing under 300 words

A discussion of plot, theme, characters and mood can follow each stage. It is also imperative for the students to explain the choices they have made in adhering to the word limit. Flash fiction writing is an excellent way to improve language skills and understand the significance of editing and the difference between long and short writing.

For the initial writing exercise, the teacher can also provide some prompts:

- Mother said she would be going to the market...
- Sakshi's plane was taxiing down the runway..
- Excuse me, but did you just drop...
- Hello! Is that...
- But listen to me, Maya...

The teacher can also specify themes or characters around the stories' development. Another activity could be picking up characters or events from other longer stories part of the course or otherwise and developing them as flash fiction. These activities can be done in pairs as well. Overwriting in the initial stages is natural; however, while discussing the students' work, the teacher can guide them to eliminate unnecessary ideas and wordiness.

Finally, the students can be helped to publish their stories in real time on online platforms. An excellent way to encourage all the participants in this exercise is to create a special school blog or use an existing one.

Conclusion

Riding on the back of digital media, flash fiction is here to stay. Therefore, language teachers must be responsive to all forms of literary articulations and embrace them productively as stimulating challenges for the classroom.

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