



Teaching Small Literature- Sentence Craft

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Abstract

Literature in second language learning without doubt is a very important element in promoting language learning and other generic skills such as thinking skills. Literary materials are good for language learning because they are easily obtained and contain almost every aspect of language knowledge which can easily be exploited by teachers to produce effective language instruction. Language aspects from the texts can be used as prototypes to model learning of grammatical forms and structures. The model can be analyzed, imitated and produced creatively in compositions. However, teachers seldom use sentence models from great writings since they are more interested in teaching the story and literary devices rather than language knowledge which is critically needed by students. In general, the objectives of teaching literature in EFL setting should include teaching of grammar especially the sentence craft of great writers. Students can learn to build better sentences through imitating model sentence of great writers and subsequently replicating the sentence in their own writing. Using rich sentences from literature texts as model for sentence construction, teachers can help students learn the structures of the greats by dissecting them to show forms, functions, patterns and meaning.

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1. Problem Statements

Constructing quality sentences requires sound language knowledge and creativity. Many of us write the way we speak; sentences that we write are actually our utterances. Students often write sentences the way they speak sentences, unaware of the differences in writing and conversational utterances. In the Malaysian context, the majority of rural students are influenced by their L1 which is shown in sentences they produce in writing or speaking. The quality of sentences is poor since the environment of learning the language is also poor. The situation worsens because teachers do not address the problem of constructing quality sentences in their lesson. English lessons merely consist of learning grammar and language skills in isolation without having specific outcomes for sentence crafting. In cases where teachers do teach sentence construction, the models of sentences used as examples are very limited and insufficient, even though there is no limit in materials for learning especially using literary materials and the only issue is to find suitable materials to suit the level of students and learning outcomes.

Literature component in the Malaysian school syllabus is intended to increase the exposure of students to the English language. However, most teachers did not exploit the literature text in teaching language knowledge. For example Hwang and Embi (2007) reports the absence of activities that reach out for the development of students' language proficiency. Since the students level of proficiency was low and they were not able to respond when the focus was on the topic and many researchers perceived this as students were being passive since they were unable to respond critically to teachers and consequently teachers labeled the literature class as dull and less creative (Gurnam, 2003). It is important that the approach seeks greater unification between language and literature. Carter (1988) asserts that the language-based approach helps students to focus attention on the way as to how the language is used. Lazar (1993) points out language-based approaches see literary texts as resources that cater for language practice through series of language activities rather than studying literature for the purpose of acquiring facts and information.

Teachers usually use instructional materials to aid teaching and learning, however selecting relevant instructional materials is usually a problem. Many teachers end up using

frustrational materials instead of instructional and as consequent the materials hinders learning instead of helping teaching and learning. Struggling readers share the same problems which are weak comprehension, lack of interest and confidence (Arvidson and Blanco, 2004). The students get frustrated because the material is too tough to digest and similarly teachers get frustrated because they have to put too much energy in order to meet the objectives. For example, in reading, teachers usually need to resort to translating the whole text because students do not comprehend the vocabulary, sentences and key ideas of the text used, thus defeat the purpose of teaching literature or reading skills. Selecting a suitable instructional material is the first step towards successful learning. One of the main challenges in learning literature is the text itself which mismatches between readability and students' language ability. The selection of text remains big issue since teachers usually disagree on the type of texts that should be taught although they generally agree that the texts should promote intellectual development, independent thinking, interesting and meet certain cultural and aesthetic standards (Agee, 1998).

Similarly in teaching sentence knowledge and skills, teachers seldom use selected sentences from literature components for students to learn, imitate and apply in their own writing. The teaching of sentence knowledge is limited only in the teaching of grammar and sometimes the choices of sentences used may be too simple and may not challenge students to produce creative sentences. Model sentences from great writers will benefit the students in learning the craft of sentence writing from the best. Initially, selecting graded texts will greatly help before selecting works from great writers such as Hemingway or Steinbeck. It is important to select suitable text to fit the purpose and suitable model for the type of sentences the teachers want the students to imitate. Imitations require skills such as analysis which differentiate different sentence parts and dissecting which opens up the sentences.

2. Sentence Knowledge

Sentence is made up of smaller units such as morphemes, words, phrases, clauses and kernel sentences. Like a building rising block by block, sentence unfolds one block at a time. The quality of sentences largely determines the quality of these smaller blocks. The goal of this sentence building activities is to help students realize the language units used to build each block. Thus it is prerequisite for teachers to evaluate the students knowledge of sentence such as SV, SVO and other aspects of grammar before starting a sentence-craft program.

3. Teaching the Crafts

Sentence craft requires learners to apply the tools of analysis in helping them to dissect sentences before they can imitate and apply sentences of the same pattern. Analysis of sentences enables students to be aware of similar sentence patterns which can be imitated before they can apply the sentence structures of the great writers in their writing. Analysis of sentences helps students to master various sentence blocks and consciously picking up crafted sentence patterns which are digested and reinforced through imitation, the same way they learn to speak in natural setting, picking up pieces of language blocks naturally.

In learning, when students imitate models to reflect the craft of the greats such as Steinbeck, they resemble students of art course in imitating a Picasso painting to copy its style, a music student learning to sound like Mozart. In any endeavor, artistic or otherwise, in building a skyscraper, or in building a sentence, all imitative processes are akin to creative processes and a model sentence is a starting point and also the objective of the process. A model enables a student to copy from the great writer and learn from it and at the same time contribute his/her idea in proposing an idea. In imitating model sentences, students borrow something (structure) and contribute something (content), through a merging of imitation and creation. Imitation is, in short, a channel to originality, a link to creation. A baby learns to speak sentences by imitating the sentences of people around him or her.

In teaching the craft, it is important for teachers to gauge the students' level of sentence knowledge. It is necessary for teachers to start with graded materials such as graded books, to evaluate students' readiness and subsequently use sentences of great writers. Complete work by great writers is good instructional material because the meaning of sentences is easily understood from the contexts of the story. It is possible for teacher to teach all the sentences from the entire book since it has all the relevant knowledge of grammatical items to be modeled.

The grammatical aspects which are important for learning sentence craft are the same as in learning grammar. The terms used to define sentence parts can be very confusing thus it is important for students to understand specifically the working definitions used in analyzing the sentences. In general in learning vocabulary, the terms are words – nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, preposition, particle, determiners and pronouns. In learning sentence knowledge, the terms are phrases, noun phrase (NP) functioning as subject and objects, verb phrase (VP) or predicate, prepositional phrase (PP) functioning as adjectival or adverbial, predicative phrase and adverbial phrase (AdvP) and adjective phrase (AdjP). In learning clauses, the terms are kernel sentences, independent, dependent clauses, adjective clause, adverbial clause and noun clause. Finally in sentence knowledge, the terms defining sentence structure are SV (ADVP), SVO(ADVP) and SVOO(ADVP).

The hallmark of the approach is the integration of literature and grammar, and through repeated analysis of variety of crafted sentences, and systematic analysis of sentence-models

or patterns for imitation. Sentence-craft practice includes four sentence manipulation activities: dissecting (recognition), analysis, transforming and generating, and imitating.

This paper uses *The Pearl* by Steinbeck (1994) to show examples of crafted sentences by this great writer. It is selected because it was one of the class readers used by the Malaysian schools in 2000 until it was changed in 2010. Many studies were conducted to investigate the effectiveness of literature in enhancing language acquisition among Malaysian students and in general the finding showed that there were no significant effects on the achievement of the students. If meta-analysis were conducted on the studies done during this time, in general most of them focused on motivation, teachers' approach and so forth but not interested in exploiting of literature materials in teaching of language knowledge or grammar using literary texts as examples. Teaching suggestions for each part of the instructional sequence for teaching the sentence-craft activities will be discussed in turn. The analysis focuses on the construction of his complex sentences in order to help students to follow great writer's sentence writing styles.

1. Dissecting

The first step of sentence dissecting is to recognize parts of sentences by segmentation or parsing the sentence into different parts such as subject, predicate, object adverbials and adjectival. Here students need to understand the deep structure and surface structure which enable them to understand the bases of language units before they are being transformed. In this stage students should be able to determine the different types of sentence structure and the purpose is to break down the imitation task into manageable steps by isolating the sentence parts of the model crafted sentence in the following steps.

- i. Subject + Predicate (Complement or VP)
- ii. Predicate – parse into different segments
- iii. Recognize the Main verb and its adverbials.
- iv. Use question prompts – Which (adjectival), Who/what (subject/Object), where, when, how, why (adverbial)

For example, In *Kino /awakened in the near dark*, firstly, the sentence is segmented (using a stroke) into Subject + Predicate (Complement or VP), *Kino /awakened in the near dark*, secondly the predicate is segmented into different parts (e.g. objects and adverbs) for example, *awakened/ in the near dark/* and these different parts can actually be indentified using question prompts for example, Who or What – *Kino*, did What – *awakened*, and When – *in the near dark*.

In sentence, *A thin, timid dog came close and, at a soft word from Kino, curled up, arranged its tail neatly over its feet, and laid its chin delicately on the pile*, the sentence is segmented (using a stroke) into Subject + Predicate (Complement or VP) *A thin, timid dog /came close and, at a soft word from Kino, curled up, arranged its tail neatly over its feet, and laid its chin delicately on the pile/* secondly the predicate is segmented into different parts (e.g. objects and adverbs) for example, */came /close /and,/ at a soft word from Kino/, curled up/, arranged /its tail/ neatly/ over its feet/, and /laid /its chin/ delicately /on the pile/* and these different parts can actually be indentified using question prompts for example, Who or What – *A thin, timid dog*, did What – *came*, and Where – *close*, did What *curled up*, When - *at a soft word from Kino*, did What *arranged its tail*, How - *neatly over its feet*, did What - *laid its chin*, How – *delicately*, Where - *on the pile*.

2. Analyzing

In making analysis, two additional steps are required; recognize kernel sentences and the sentence structure. For examples,

i. *A thin, timid dog came close and, at a soft word from Kino, curled up, arranged its tail neatly over its feet, and laid its chin delicately on the pile* has the following kernel sentences

- a. A thin, timid dog came close
- b. A thin, timid dog curled up, at a soft word from Kino
- c. A thin, timid dog arranged its tail neatly over its feet
- d. A thin, timid dog laid its chin delicately on the pile.

From these kernel sentences, students are shown how they transform and generate the crafted sentence.

ii. *The dawn /came quickly now, /a wash, /a glow, /a lightness, /and/ then /an explosion of fire /as the sun arose out of the Gulf./* can have the following sentences.

- a. The dawn /came quickly now, /
- b. a wash came quickly now /
- c. a glow came quickly now, /
- d. a lightness came quickly now, /
- e. an explosion of fire came quickly now

The deleted parts of the surface structure are reconstructed to give students the idea of the initial sentences before they are being transformed.

iii. *Kino/ watched/ with the detachment of God/ while a dusty ant frantically tried to escape the sand trap an ant lion had dug for him*, consists of the following kernel sentences.

- a. Kino/ watched/ with the detachment of God/
- b. a dusty ant frantically tried to escape the sand trap that
- c. an ant lion had dug for him./

iv. *This doctor /was of a race which for nearly four hundred years had beaten and starved and robbed and despised Kino's race, and frightened it too, / so that the indigene came humbly to the door,* consists of the following kernel sentences.

- a) This doctor /was of a race
- b) a race had beaten Kino's race for nearly four hundred years
- c) a race starved Kino's race for nearly four hundred years
- d) a race robbed Kino's race which for nearly four hundred years
- e) a race despised Kino's race for nearly four hundred years
- f) a race which frightened it for nearly four hundred years too, /
- g) the indigene came humbly to the door. /

In analysis stage, other analysis of vocabulary, phrases and clauses can also be exploited to give better understanding of the sentence. For example, Noun Phrase such as *the near dark, Complimentizer - to see what the fat lazy doctor was going to do for a poor baby with a scorpion's sting.* Noun Phrase Compliments such as *the little splash of morning waves on the beach, the hungry pigs of the town, NP + RC + PrepP - the place where the brush houses stopped and the city of stone and plaster began, the city of harsh outer walls and inner cool gardens where a little water played and the bougainvillea crusted the walls with purple and brick-red and white, the secret gardens the singing of caged birds and heard the splash of cooling water on hot flagstones.*

In learning new vocabulary, knowing the different functions of a word is very important. For example *down* – has three functions such as preposition, adverb and particle. These words can be understood easily in context of the story. Gerundives such as *filtered, lay (past forms), fastened, strewn, broken and opened.*

Examples of relative clauses also known as adjectival clause because of the functions they do are *the bed where the frilly pearl oysters lay fastened to the rubbly bottom, a bottom strewn with shells of broken, opened oysters, Kino's canoe, which was the one thing of value he owned in the world, the bed that had raised the King of Spain to be a great power in Europe in past years, had helped to pay for his wars, and had decorated the churches for his soul's sake, The man who looked out at him.* Examples of Adverbial clauses such as *because it was simple and didn't cost anything, while a dusty ant frantically tried to escape the sand trap an ant lion had dug for him, while a dusty ant frantically tried to escape the sand trap an ant lion had dug for him.*

Examples of Null subject such as *There was no certainty in seeing, no proof that what you saw was there or was not there. and In Kino's head there was a song now, clear and soft, and if he had been able to speak of it, he would have called it the Song of the Family.*

Examples of descriptive sentences are *This doctor was of a race which for nearly four hundred years had beaten and starved and robbed and despised Kino's race, and frightened it too, so that the indigene came humbly to the door. It was a morning like other mornings and yet perfect among mornings. Across the brush fence were other brush houses, and the smoke came from them too, and the sound of breakfast, but those were other songs, their pigs were other pigs, their wives were not Juana. She put Coyotito back in his hanging box and then she combed her black hair and braided it in two braids and tied the ends with thin green ribbon.*

Examples of Gerundives are *The scurrying procession came at last to the big gate in the wall of the doctor's house. They could hear the splashing water and the singing of caged birds and the sweep of the long brooms on the flagstones.*

Examples in the use of commas are *They knew his ignorance, his cruelty, his avarice, his appetites, his sins. And The dawn came quickly now, a wash, a glow, a lightness, and then an explosion of fire as the sun arose out of the Gulf.*

3. Transforming Sentences

Given model sentence students learn to rephrase the sentence. This practice enables students to find out the ways a sentence can be constructed. They can combine short sentences to match the structure of the model. The kernel sentences are 3 combine to show the original crafted sentence. For example, *This doctor /was of a race + a race had beaten Kino's race for nearly four hundred years* becomes *This doctor /was of a race which had beaten Kino's race for nearly four hundred years* by substituting relative pronoun.

4. Imitating

After dissecting, analysis and transforming model sentences, students are ready to imitate some of the sentences. The purpose is to practice using structures from great writers' written sentences to internalize those structures for use independently. Finally after enough imitating, they can apply any model sentences in composing their own topics.

4. Conclusion

Literature texts provide important language learning input which is important for language acquisition. The language aspects such as phrases and clauses are easily learned from the context of the story told by the author and in addition the style of using these language aspects may also be picked up easily with the help of teachers explaining the use of the styles. These

skills of the great writers would most probably be left out by teachers if they do not carefully plan their lessons. Sentence craft of great writers provides acrobatic training in composing sentences which include sentence crafting techniques such as analyzing, dissecting, transforming and imitating.

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