

Critical thinking in a flash: a case study of an EFL university course

Magdalena Zinkgräf y Paola Formiga

Escuela Superior de Idiomas, Universidad Nacional del Comahue

This paper presents the methodology used in an EFL university course within the Teacher- and Translator- training programmes at Universidad del Comahue to foster critical thinking of literary canons, themes and styles through the use of microfiction.

From 2006 to 2008, on-line or printed micro-tales were used to prompt English V learners to experience the thrills of this singular literary genre and to reflect upon the impact it may have on their beliefs about literature, on their outlook on life and on the perceptions they have of their own selves. The “adventure”, whose aim was to give learners brief and authentic, un-reviewed raw material to be evaluated by them in the format of reviews, ended up providing both teachers and students with the chance to explore an array of contentious issues stemming from fragments of characters’ lives.

Each piece of microfiction meant a whole different story to each learner, and, therefore, yet another challenge to face in the course. Plunging into the genre implied the revision of the canons of what literature is supposed to be like, their beliefs of what a story is thought to present, and their expectations as to what the reader’s task comprises. With each new narrative, highly controversial topics were raised, innovative perspectives on narrating were presented and multiple versions of the story were offered.

1. The teaching context

Learners taking English V at the English Teacher- and Translator- Training programmes, at the School of Languages, Universidad del Comahue, are expected to produce language much in the same way as a native speaker would, which is why the course develops all four macro-skills at a proficient level. This paper focuses not only on the development of the target skills in review-writing but also on the related reading and speaking skills involved in the tasks that the experience presented. Review writing was one of the axes around which the course was organised since the genre presupposes competent use of the foreign language as regards expressing subtleties and shades of meaning through appropriate recourse to adjectives and adverbs, as well as complex and elaborate grammatical structures as intrinsic features to the style and discoursal function of reviews.

Around 30 learners take this final language course and, as they do, they are also working on their literature courses (which add up to five in the case of the teacher-trainees’ programme

and three for translator-trainees), which provides them with sufficient background knowledge for the analysis of short short stories.

Arguably, microfiction presents these advanced-level learners with the linguistic challenge of a genre aimed at native-speakers of the foreign language, especially due to the density of meanings conveyed in so few words. Both the triggering genre (flash fiction) and the target writing format (reviews) combine to defy our learners' developing linguistic skills while at the same time shaking off their preconceptions as regards literature and canons.

2. The stories

Because of the aim of the experience, stories were selected from North American on-line quarterly publications, such as *Smokelong Quarterly*, which regularly provided us with a renewed stock of demanding narratives that confronted learners with a myriad of innovative styles, controversial topics and shocking format structures. Some stories were also selected from anthologies like *Flash Fiction*, *Sudden Fiction*, *Micro Fiction*, *Motel and Other Stories*, and *In Brief*.

The realistic themes, frequently bordering the obscure and mysterious, are the central issue of the accounts we chose for the experience, each contributing to the genre in the startling yet moving fashion in which it deals with what is transitory and ephemeral, and with what losses imply. The three main criteria that governed our selection of stories were: a) a relative linguistic simplicity; b) length and c) controversial topics. Fictions needed to be linguistically challenging, though simple enough for learners to understand (if too many words were unknown to our learners, these stories were discarded). The stories selected were of about 700-1000 words, long enough to contain sufficient clues, yet not too long that they could not be read in a flash to turn to the other tasks that ensued. The third parameter involved the controversy of the topics explored, which were to be contentious without being offensive for an EFL context.

Every year about more than ten microfictions were analysed through different methodologies and with different purposes. Initially, they were meant to provoke critical thinking that would lead to the assessment of the features of the narrative, and thus, to the writing of a review. Towards the end of each yearly experience, stories also became part of the evaluation process in the course. In Table 1 the different stories analysed during the last two years have been included.

2007	2008
1. "Can-Can" by Arturo Vivante	1. "Oblivious" by Gary Cadwallader
2. "Oblivious" by Gary Cadwallader	2. "We" by Patricia Parkinson
3. "Selective Memory" by Mary McCluskey	3. "Everything" by CB Anderson
4. "On the way to work" by Stephen Elliot	4. "Thief" by Robley Wilson, Jr.
5. "November" by Ursula Hegi	5. "Disappearances" by Jeff Vande Zande
6. "The Haircut" by Mary Morrison	6. "Mayumi and Kenzo" by Robert Shapard
7. "This is what you left behind" by Tod Goldberg	7. "Seconds Are Ticking By" by Nik Perring
8. "Neighbors" by Curtis Smith	8. "Waiting" by Peggy McNally
9. "Prow" by Claudia Smith	9. "Real Estate" by Bonnie ZoBell
10. "Disappearances" by Jeff Vande Zande	10. "One Night Out" by Ashley Kaufman
	11. "Tuesday" by Lindsay Hunter
	12. "Two minute silence" by Sarah Hilary
	13. "The Color of Moths" by Holly Selph
	14. "Bare Ana" by Robert Shapard
	15. "Why This Isn't A Good Story to Tell" by Shellie Zacharia
	16. "Constructing Birds" by Jo Horsman

Table 1: Narratives explored throughout the last two years

3. Critical thinking

Although there are many authors who have put forward definitions of what is implied in the term 'critical thinking', Schafersman's words (1991) better serve our purpose,

"critical thinking is reasonable, reflective, responsible, and skillful thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do. A person who thinks critically can ask appropriate questions, gather relevant information, efficiently and creatively sort through this information, reason logically from this information, and come to reliable and trustworthy conclusions about the world that enable one to live and act successfully in it (p. 3)."

If broken down into its different constituent parts, this characterization presents a range of interesting aspects essential to our discussion. On the one hand, this new way of thinking is based on the use of reason and reflection as the basic steps towards decision-making. The author further characterises what can be done to achieve 'critical thinking', starting from questioning reality, moving on to gathering information through our senses, to later processing the data obtained logically to draw conclusions from solid evidence through logical thinking processes.

We believe that, for our learners to reach this end-state, the following steps were necessary in order to develop their critical thinking capacities:

- a) confronting their preconceptions with samples which did not accommodate to them;
- b) acknowledging the difference between these two ways of perceiving stories;

- c) accepting new traits as possible characteristics of the genre, thus leading to a broader, more open-minded approach and
- d) practising this approach through assessing, in this new light, innovative samples of microfiction and conveying their views in the writing of reviews.

4. Developing critical thinking

Our ulterior aim was to get learners to voice an opinion of a short short story read in class, and the first narratives they were presented with were “Can-Can” (Vivante in *Flash Fiction*) in 2007 and “Oblivious” (Cadwallader 2007) in 2008. However, for learners to form an opinion, they needed to confront their own standards of what a short-story was. In both years the first approach posed quite a challenge especially because learners could not find a plot, in the sense that they failed to recognise a sequence of events taking place in the narration. It was equally difficult for them to identify the theme developed in the fiction.

Many felt that there was no setting (according to them) and that no actions took place. The fact that they were asked about their opinion on these fictions did not contribute to their restlessness. A simple question like “Did you like the story?” brought up a whole discussion on whether those actually were instances of the genre!

Through their complaints, learners struggled to lay bare their preconceptions in terms of what a short story “ought to” be like, and how these concepts had been challenged by the experience with micro-fiction. In this way, they went through the first two steps of our approach, i.e. confronting their views and their limitations, and acknowledging the difference between traditionally held views and the recently challenged, new canons. This sequence took place on a recurrent basis, since every now and then learners would be faced with a narrative that defied yet another of their views.

One such story was *Oblivious*, where very few clues like the black in the garments worn by the character and his girlfriend, the dark tarnish of the pews and the reminiscent mood that triggers the young man’s recollections, immerse the reader in the atmosphere of a funeral service held for the character’s mother. Unaware of the importance of these hints, learners’ interpretations were geared towards the traumatising events recalled and not towards their condition of memories. Through group discussion in class, students pooled their different impressions and pieced together the puzzle proposed by the short short story. This activity was a necessary step in the presentation of each microfiction to ensure everyone shared the same understanding of the topic, setting and events in each narrative, especially during the first half of the academic year.

These discussion sessions anticipated the following stages in our critical thinking cycle. A whole debate was in order as to what exactly these types of stories were and why they so particularly shocked learners! Slowly guided by questions oriented at characterising micro-fiction, learners gradually came round to reconsidering the canonical format of a short story, to accepting that it could be –and had in fact been- modified, and to reformulating that format to include new and different variations on the genre.

For instance, with each new encounter with another microfiction in our project, learners were requested to a) explore what was going on, b) create an identity for the characters, which in turn contributed to the following issue, and c) identify which metaphysical, philosophical, religious, and/or everyday themes were dealt with. One of the most problematic features related to characterisation, for learners failed to generalise threads of behaviour in protagonists to fabricate the character/s the author intended to delineate. With gradual training, learners struggled to compose a stereotypical identity out of the loose personality traits provided piecemeal-fashion in the narratives. In this way, the concept of ‘character’ was re-conceived to embrace alternative features and aspects, the vague traces of which can only be perceived in micro-tales through careful analysis.

During this third phase, learners continuously revised their views on short short stories and, though reticently at first, welcomed “the shocking news” in order to approach flash fiction from a different, more open-minded and less- judgmental stance.

If we assume, with Schafersman (1991), that “[I]ndividuals who think critically can think for themselves: they can identify problems, gather relevant information, analyze information in a proper way, and come to reliable conclusions by themselves [...] (p. 6), what these learners were actually doing was perceiving their preconceptions as limited and unfit for the new canons, i.e. identifying their limited views as problematic, collecting data of what the hallmarks of microfiction in this day and age were, to finally accept an array of possible traits as characteristic of this newly reformulated genre.

One further element that is essential to critical thinking is undergoing the whole process “without relying on others to do this for them” (Schafersman 1991 6). Review-writing was supposed to contribute to this stage in the process, especially since

“Writing forces students to organize their thoughts, contemplate their topic, evaluate their data in a logical fashion, and present their conclusions in a persuasive manner. Good writing is the epitome of good critical thinking.”
(Schafersman 1991 7)

For the writing of reviews, they needed to find the words and linguistic means to express the shock, and the ground-breaking experiences of reading the narratives. Critical thinking was present as well in the feedback provided: after careful analysis of learners' reviews, possible misunderstandings or alternative views were suggested through open questions and through the highlighting of certain words and expressions in the narrative which might hold the key to a certain interpretation. The feedback learners received tended to point, on the one hand, to mistakes related to word choice, grammar and discourse organisation, while other alternative readings of the short-short were hinted at as options to consider. Learners were invited to consider these possible interpretations and to gather information in the micro-tale to support or challenge that stance.

4. Conclusion

This critical approach to microfiction resulted in revised standards of narratives and a more comprehensive attitude to stories' features. Moreover, the magically shocking and lingering ambience with which the microtales imbued teachers and learners alike counted as one of the most important gains. The fact that students could finally be open to the different life-experiences transmitted in the short shorts proves that a certain understanding had been reached and an enriching interaction had taken place between stories and readers at some point. The process resulted in more empathetic readers, whose interpretations were directly related to their personal lives.

One further accomplishment is that of the sense of achievement students ended with, after the harsh, challenging and cyclic process of fortnightly reading a narrative and writing about their individual opinions through their own linguistically developed devices. As they became aware of their improving capacities these learners were empowered not only as EFL students but also as writers.

Moreover, during 2007 the whole adventure was concluded with the submission of some reviews to *Smokelong Quarterly* for their possible inclusion in the online publication. Learners pre-selected their own production and submitted those they considered best samples of their production to the journal. In February, the editorial board awarded one student's review of the story "Prow" by Claudia Smith with its publication. This end-product attached a renewed sense of purpose to the process.

On the whole, when we initially set out to traverse this "critical" path, we were mainly concerned with learners' approach to micro-fiction. The impact spread over far more aspects

of their lives as responsible citizens and human beings than was expected, which rendered the experience both an academic and a humanistic success.

References

- Anderson, C.B. 2006. "Everything", in *Smokelong Quarterly*, Issue 14, at <http://smokelong.com/flash/4015.asp>
- Cadwallader , G. 2007. "Oblivious" in *Smokelong Quarterly*, Issue 17 at <http://smokelong.com/flash/5604.asp>
- Elliot, S. 2006. "On the Way to work", in *Smokelong Quarterly*, Issue 15, at <http://smokelong.com/flash/4240.asp>
- Goldberg, T. 2007. "This is what you left behind", in *Smokelong Quarterly*, Issue 16, at <http://smokelong.com/flash/4240.asp>
- Hegi, U. 1996."November", in Stern, J.(Ed.), *Micro Fiction: An anthology of really short stories*, pp.90-1.
- Hilary, S. 2008. "Two minute silence", in *Smokelong Quarterly*, Issue 22 at <http://smokelong.com/flash/sarahhillary22.asp>
- Horsman, J. 2008. "Constructing birds," in *Smokelong Quarterly*, Issue 22, at <http://smokelong.com/flash/jomortimer22.asp>
- Hunter, L. 2008. "Tuesday", in *Smokelong Quarterly*, Issue 21 at <http://smokelong.com/flash/7888.asp>
- Kaufman, A. 2008. "One night out", in *Smokelong Quarterly*, Issue 22, at <http://smokelong.com/flash/ashleykaufman22.asp>
- Kitchen, J. & M. Paumier Jones (Eds.) 1999. *In Brief*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- McCluskey, M. 2007. "Selective Memory" in *Smokelong Quarterly*, Issue 17 <http://smokelong.com/flash/5417.asp>
- McNally, P. "Waiting", in Stern, J.(Ed.), *Micro Fiction: An anthology of really short stories*, pp.118-9.
- Morris, M. 1992. "The Haircut", in Thomas, Thomas and Hazuka (Eds.), *Flash Fiction: Very short stories*, pp.114-116.
- Parkinson, P. 2008. "We" in *Smokelong Quarterly*, Issue 20, at <http://smokelong.com/flash/6997.asp>
- Perring, N. 2008. "Seconds are ticking by", in *Smokelong Quarterly*, Issue 20 at <http://smokelong.com/flash/7412.asp>

- Schafersman, S. 1991. "An Introduction to critical thinking", at <http://www.freeinquiry.com/critical-thinking.html>
- Selph, H. 2007. "The color of moths", in *Smokelong Quarterly*, Issue 16, at <http://smokelong.com/flash/5278.asp>
- Shapard, R. 2005. "Bare Ana" in *Motel and Other Stories*, Ridgway: Predator Press.
- Shapard, R. and J. Thomas (eds.). 1986. *Sudden Fiction: American Short Short Stories*. Layton, U.T.: Gibbs M. Smith;
- Shapard, R. (Ed.) 2005. *Motel and Other Stories*, Ridgeway: Predator Press.
- Shapard, R. and J. Thomas. 1989. *Sudden fiction international: Sixty short-short stories*. Introduction by Charles Baxter. New York: Norton.
- Smith, Curtis. 2007. "Neighbors" in *Smokelong Quarterly*, Issue 18, at <http://smokelong.com/flash/6416.asp>
- Smith, C. 2007. "Prow", in *Smokelong Quarterly*, Issue 17, June at <http://smokelong.com/flash/5505.asp>
- Stern, J. 1996. *Micro fiction: an anthology of really short stories*. New York: Norton.
- Thomas, J., D. Thomas and T. Hazuka. (eds.) 1992. *Flash fiction: Very short stories*. New York: Norton
- Vande Zande, J. 2007. "Disappearances", in *Smokelong Quarterly*, Issue 16, at <http://smokelong.com/flash/4740.asp>
- Verdú, M. A. 2007. Review of "Prow" at <http://smokelong.com/news/labels/Issue%2017.html>
- Vivante, A, "Can-Can" in Shapard and Thomas (Eds.), *Sudden Fiction*, pp. 5-6
- Wilson, R. Jr., 1986. "Thief", in Shapard and Thomas (Eds.), *Sudden Fiction*, pp. 168-170.
- Zacharia, S. 2008. "Why this isn't a good story to tell", in *Smokelong Quarterly*, Issue 21, at <http://smokelong.com/flash/8022.asp>
- ZoBell, B., 2008. "Real Estate", in *Smokelong Quarterly*, Issue 21, at <http://smokelong.com/flash/7756.asp>