

Writing Short Stories and Novels as Part of Classroom Activity - Student Preparation

T. Deivasigamani, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of English
Department of English, Annamalai University
drtenglishau@gmail.com

M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Faculty, Bethany International University, Singapore
Former Professor-cum-Deputy Director
Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, Govt. of India
thirumalaibiu@gmail.com

Creativity and Imagination

The word *creative* is usually defined as “resulting from originality of thought, expression, etc.” (<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/creative>). Merriam-Webster dictionary suggests that the word *creative* means “marked by the ability or power to create”. It also suggests that the word means “having the quality of something created rather than imitated” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/creative?src=search-dict-box>)

We need to point out that there is some imitation when one creates a story in any form – short story, novel, drama, etc. But this imitation is not simple reproduction of what is seen or heard or assumed to have happened in the world, etc. Story writers do observe the world and may imitate elements of what goes on in this world among all beings. Yet, the writing or narrating orally is never wholly a literal repetition of what goes on in the world. Some “creative” or “imaginative” or “interpretive” elements are added to make the story attractive to the readers or listeners. This is where the writing skill, when it comes to writing a story, comes to play an important role.

How do we acquire such a skill, how do we make our teachers and students acquire this skill?

Literary Forms

Every literary form has its own special features and these features are dynamic. These could vary from time to time, from author to author, and from one form of literature to another. These need to be first understood and then, through practice, acquired by all who would like to become creative writers of stories/novels/novellas/drama/poetry, etc. While it is true that individuals may

have their own natural instincts for and inclinations toward writing a particular literary form and also inherent ability to create, practice is always a useful beginning step for most of us.

Acquisition of Literary Skills

Preparations to acquire literary skills include the acquisition of a variety of elements. To begin with, we should have the mechanical skill of writing English without grammatical errors. This is indeed a tricky step. For most of us English is not our mother tongue or first language (language acquired from early childhood without going through any conscious effort to acquire the language). For example, our students should have the mastery of using tense in an appropriate manner. They should know how to use the gender distinctions in English. Pronoun classifications in English and in most Indian languages may differ. Nouns have gender distinctions in Hindi, but not in English.

Preparations Before Commencing Writing Stories and Novels

Teachers of creative writing need to master the following and help their students to master these as well. We do not recommend that creative writing should begin only after adequate mastery of English and its subtle uses, etc. Mastering a language is a life-long process. Especially when it comes to mastering a second or foreign language, we all will continue to learn the second/foreign language throughout our life.

Place of Sentence Construction

We need to teach our students interested in creative writing how to correct their grammatical errors and how to improve their language use. Apart from skill in correcting grammatical errors, our students should focus on the length of the sentences. Indian students and Indian teachers have the tendency to write long sentences. As students, we all might have felt great and superior when we were able to write long sentences. Each author develops his or her own style. Their style certainly depends on their sentence production, apart from other elements of language use. However, for most of us, it is better if we learn to write in a style that enables readers to understand what we write about. Longer sentences certainly could be a technique to reveal the condition of the characters, what mood they are in, etc. Yet, anxiety, suffering, pain and so on could also be easily portrayed using shorter sentences. Complex and long compound sentences do not guarantee reflecting the state in which the characters are in. In addition, writing frequently using complex sentences and long compound sentences could lead to many grammatical errors.

Plain English

Plain English is a concept that will help our students to practice creating stories. Some of the features of Plain English suggested by by Dayananda, J. Y. include the following: Write short sentences. Write short paragraphs. Use simple everyday words, rather than fancy ones. Use Active

Voice rather than Passive Voice. Use lesser number of compound and complex sentences. Use simple sentences with one main verb. Prefer specific words over general words. Listen to your sentences in your head as you write, and do not write anything that you could not comfortably say. (Dayananda, J. Y. 1986. Plain English in the United States. *English Today*. 2 (1), 13-16.)

As Thirumalai (2002) points out, “The English taught, spoken, and written in the Third World countries is often not plain, simple, and straightforward. As in the Indian sub-continent, it is derived, more often than not, from the English style spoken and written a century ago, in some instances. We certainly need to emphasize grammatical correctness in learning English, but it is equally important to cultivate in our learners a sensitivity and skill to use natural, simple, and straightforward English. Indian newspapers in English and the radio news broadcasts should take the initiative in simplifying the usage.”

Choice of Words

Choice of words is an important skill that our students need to master when they want to write a story or a novel. There are synonyms abundantly available in English and also in our mother tongues. For example, for the adjective *beautiful*, we have the following synonyms listed in dictionaries. While the meaning for the word *beautiful* is “pleasing the senses or mind aesthetically”, the same sense (to a large extent) is expressed through the following words as well: “attractive, pretty, handsome, good-looking, nice-looking, pleasing, alluring” (https://www.google.com/search?q=synonyms+for+beautiful&rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS794US795&oq=synonyms&aqs=chrome.2.69i57j0i5.15269j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8). Some of the synonyms for the adjective *amazing* include the following:

“astonishing, astounding, surprising, bewildering, stunning, staggering, shocking, startling, stupefying, breathtaking, perplexing, confounding, dismaying” etc.

(https://www.google.com/search?q=synonyms+for+amazing&rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS794US795&oq=synonyms&aqs=chrome.3.69i59j69i57j0i4.10242j0j9&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)

Having some knowledge of synonyms will certainly make the story more appealing.

Correct Descriptive Words for Cultural Items

One of the most difficult items is the mastery of the use of correct descriptive words for cultural items. Some creative writers tend to give the meaning in parentheses in English for a cultural word from non-English languages. Some authors such as R. K. Narayan have skillfully avoided this technique and used description instead. For beginners, for our students, it will be a difficult process to master, especially when we want them to write stories on what they see around and what they experienced. So, in the early stages we may allow them to not worry about the translation of cultural items in English, but simply use the native word in italics. Over the years they will gain greater confidence and they will choose their own style of presenting the cultural items. There are many Indian Writers in English and the model set by these authors may

be chosen by our students in the beginning stage. Let us remember that our story should be appealing to the mind and heart of our readers. This would require not a powerful story and powerful and elegant narration but also avoiding obstacles that come in the way of understanding what we want to communicate.

Wrong Spelling

Wrong spelling is a hindrance to understanding and enjoying the story. Wrong spelling will be a bad distraction. So, let our student writers develop the habit of checking with the dictionary to identify the original meaning of the word, phrase and idiom, etc. they want to use. We all assume that imagination will be impeded if we go for such help. We want to declare that “I will be an original writer; I do not need and should not use any help so that my imaginative power will not be impeded.” Spontaneity becomes the much sought after feature. Indeed, spontaneity is necessary and must be encouraged. But we also should remember that spontaneity can be cultivated and carefully guided to represent what we want to write. For example, Rabindranath Tagore and R. K. Narayan never heisted to correct and rewrite and reshape their stories.

Spontaneity

Spontaneity of content as well as language use is very important. Flow of thought should be spontaneous even as it should be created. Logical conclusions or end of the story is one aspect. But it is not absolutely important that we depend on logical conclusions. Authors have written their stories in such a way that the readers have the freedom to arrive at their own logical conclusion. Such endings will really make our students’ creative work more attractive. Perhaps we should ask our student writers to develop several endings to their stories and then choose what sounds more appealing from their point of view. Or they can ask their fellow students or teachers to help them choose the endings. Creative writing certainly is not a mechanical process, but it could be organized and systematized in some manner. Spontaneity of imagination is very important.

How About Writing Ten Sentences Every Day?

One of the things that our students and teachers, who want to write stories and novels, should do is writing at least 10 sentences on a single topic daily. They can choose their own topics. It can be a short story as well. But let the sentences be connected with connected flow of thought. This practice may look silly or useless. But, in reality, writing every day a connected piece will help them to develop their story-writing skill. Writing will improve their thinking in English, which is very important if we want to be a successful writer of short stories, short novels, novels, etc., for Indian Writing in English. Great writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, A. K. Ramanujan and others always set aside time to write their creative works. Inspiration is important, but regular writing is also important. Many young students show great interest in writing stories in English. They may also write some stories and feel happy about it. But they soon loose track of their goals. Unless we make it a habit to write what we want to write, we will not blossom to be writers. Our students must be encouraged to write on a regular

basis. They can show what they wrote to their teachers and some close friends. Teachers and fellow students should be prepared to say words of encouragement even when they offer some critical remarks.

Writing Conversations

Students need to practice how to write conversations between their characters in their stories. They are writing their stories in English as used in India or South Asia. Conventions of presenting conversations between characters may be glanced through the works of great authors of Indian Writing in English. At the same time, they should also try to learn the techniques of presenting dialogues between characters as well as interior monologues from short stories and novels in their own mother tongues. In native English, conversations may be presented in colloquial language. They can check leading novelists and playwrights of native English creative writers. Colloquial conversations are rarely focused upon Indian Writing in English. Use of cultural terms, use of Indian names, and other objects common to India such as food items bring in some “colloquial”. Developing a story with full of colloquial language is a tough job. Perhaps student writers should focus using more of plain English, cultural items, etc. to bring in a native atmosphere.

An important issue is how to use honorific and non-honorific expressions. We need to identify as part of preparing to write stories how authors of Indian Writing in English enable their characters to use appropriately honorific and non-honorific terms.

Revealing Emotions

It is very important to learn to reveal emotions in your writing. Apart from words and sentences, nonverbal communication plays a crucial part here. Overt expression of emotions, suppressed emotions, attempt to hide or imitate emotions, presenting false emotions, etc. need to be described. Laughter and smile, body touch, distance between individuals, scent, dress, and so on need to be expressed adequately so that the story is enjoyed, fully understood and appreciated. Nonverbal communication traits could differ from one ethnic group to another, from one caste group to another, and from practitioners of one religion to another set of practitioners of another religion. Sects and sectarian communication modes also need to be understood.

Keen Observation Is Needed

How do we get these things mastered by our students? Best path is to observe individuals and groups in a variety of environments around them. Students should be introduced to how novelists of mother tongue literature as well as Indian Writing in English express the emotions of characters in their novels. This is not a luxurious item; it is an essential feature of story-telling. Students will be able to note the features and then the class can discuss the relevance of these features. They can also develop narratives.

Some Additional Items We Need to Take Care of

There are several other items in which our students should be guided as part of their story-writing exercise. Some of these are listed below. We will take up these and other matters in our subsequent article.

- i. Punctuation, exclamatory and question marks
- ii. Use of hyphen
- iii. How to distinguish between genders and their language use
- iv. Description of the scene
- v. Description of the garments
- vi. Description of environment – social, natural, rural, urban, industrial, traffic, etc.

References

M. S. Thirumalai (2002). *An Introduction to TESOL: Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*. <http://languageinindia.com/april2002/tesolbook.html>

<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/creative>

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/creative?src=search-dict-box>

https://www.google.com/search?q=synonyms+for+beautiful&rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS794US795&oq=synonyms&aqs=chrome.2.69i57j0l5.15269j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8