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The Short Story: A Tool for English Language Teaching

The choice of the shortest route to success in the teaching of English to Spanish speakers is a controversial matter, since new methods and teaching aids are continually being developed, each being replaced by the next, as though all adult or elderly foreign English speakers had acquired their knowledge spontaneously.

I believe that the real issue is the way the teaching is approached. The preconceived idea is that a mastery of grammar, vocabulary, spelling and pronunciation of a second language (English in this case) is enough for a person to be considered bilingual. Yet, why then do we so often come across an utterance—which is grammatically and semantically correct, and yet “not English”?

The answer is: because a language is a system of communication that responds to the needs of people who share not only a territory but also a history, a culture and who have an idiosyncrasy of their own. Therefore, before even attempting to teach a foreign language, one should begin by acquiring and transmitting awareness of the intrinsic differences between the idiosyncrasy of the prospective learner and that of the native speakers of the language he wishes to acquire.

If we apply this to a native Spanish speaker who wishes to learn English, we should begin by trying to identify the differences between the two languages, which will unerringly point to the idiosyncrasies of their native speakers. Long and clumsy sentence constructions are the natural consequence of this lack of awareness.

This leads us to a concept that sums up one of the intrinsic differences between Spanish and

English descendants. The Spaniards and “Latin Americans”¹ are garrulous, outspoken, and extroverted. The Spanish language, therefore, suits their temperament. They need to reaffirm everything they state—they are fond of long words and make a greater use of adjectival and adverbial phrases and clauses.

The English, on the other hand, are naturally shy, self-contained, detached.

As George Mikas wittily points out in *How to Be An Alien*, “On the Continent public orators try to learn to speak fluently and smoothly; in England they take a special course in Oxonian stuttering ... On the Continent learned persons love to show off their knowledge; in England only uneducated people show off their knowledge ...”

Thus, the English developed an onomatopoeic, even musical language with words very rich in connotations in order to suit their reticent nature thus allowing them to be accurate and precise but also capable of painting vivid word pictures in very short phrases. This quality of the English language is what I call “word economy,” its key difference with Spanish.

The point of this introduction is to show the enormous potentiality of the short story as a tool for English Language Teaching, if it is to be aimed at the acquisition of the language in every sense of the word.

The very nature of the short story calls for “word economy” that is, a careful choice of words, which will allow the author to convey full ideas, impressions, feelings, character traits with superb brevity—this not only requires a

¹ Latin American: latinoamericano, hispanoamericano, iberoamericano.

mastery of semantics but also of sentence structure. Furthermore, the short story calls for the student's perspicacity in "reading between the lines," an aspect that turns it invaluable for the development of their comprehension.

If we read Edgar Allan Poe's theory of the short story, we will find it easier to understand this concept. According to Poe, the short story calls for "three points of the greatest importance," namely (a) brevity, (b) concentration of interest, and (c) unity of effect.

As far as brevity is concerned, in a short story not a single word is left at random. "Every word tells, there is not a word that does not tell." This seemingly simple assertion should be the motto of every English teacher and learner, as it is to every short story writer because it represents the very essence of the English language.

Thus, words like *tap-tapping*, *thumping* or *groping*, for instance, could not be easily replaced by a single word in Spanish (nor do I believe a native speaker of Spanish would care to make the attempt, for word economy is not the essence of that language).

The use of prefixes and suffixes is another way of "economizing," especially when it comes to coining words which will give the exact idea

one wishes to transmit. Thus, in *The House At Pooh Corner* by A.A. Milne, Winnie The Pooh is said to "feel eleven o'clockish" whenever he wants an excuse for a little "smackerel of something." This way of expressing such ideas is very English and it would be practically impossible to find an equivalent for this in Spanish.

When Pooh meets Tigger (a new Animal in the Forest) in the dark, not knowing who he is talking to, asks Whatever-it-was to "come here." Here, Milne is showing us how the hyphen can be another useful tool in the coinage of words that can give a complete picture of a situation.

There is far more to be said about the infinite possibilities offered by this superb literary genre as an aid in the teaching of English, it is a question of discovering its potentialities. We may be said to be on the right path if both teachers and learners become *aware* of this fact. The same careful choice of words and sentence structure which is the key to the brevity that allows for concentration of interest and unity of effect in a short story, can be a key step towards the acquisition of the English language as a totality.