

The Road to Reader Return: Employing Flash Fiction in EFL Education

オストマン・ディビッド

Introduction: The digital challenge

Educators employing literature in foreign-language curricula are no strangers to angst. Beginning with a reconsideration of the role of literature in EFL/ESL education beginning in the 1980's and 90's (Carter, 2015), much pedagogical soul-searching has involved discussions centered not only around *which* literary texts to employ (i.e., full texts, excerpts, graded readers, etc.), but also *how* to optimally integrate them in the context of the foreign-language classroom. While continued discourse in this area is both welcome and warranted, it is the objective of this paper to draw attention to a developing phenomenon that has yet to be seriously addressed: *that the readers themselves are changing*.

Evidence for this change is anecdotal and widespread, summarized by N. Katherine Hayles' (2010) observations: "Everywhere I went, I heard teachers reporting similar stories: 'I can't get my students to read long novels anymore, so I've taken to assigning short stories'; 'My students won't read long books, so now I assign chapters and excerpts'" (p. 72). Unsurprisingly, young foreign-language learners similarly balk at the prospect of reading English literature, as noted by Habegger-Conti (2015), who conducted research to find that enrollment in high-school EFL Literature and Culture classes declined 22% *over four years* (2009-14). She records the explanation of

one English teacher: “They don’t want to read books” (p. 107).

What is behind the general shift away from English literature? There is mounting evidence to suggest that technology-related changes in L1 reading habits are producing foreign-language learners who are increasingly unfamiliar with not only the reading of narrative literature *in their native languages*, but also the habit of, and by extension the ability to, engage in critical-thinking-based deep-reading of texts. As readers shift from print-based media to that on digital hand-held devices, researchers have discovered the concern that increased exposure to digital mediums, with their emphasis on shallow (i.e., faster) processing of text, may work to inhibit deep comprehension (Lauterman & Ackerman, 2014; Wolf et al., 2009). Rather than enhancing reader comprehension skills, initial research supports an understanding of digital processing of texts as detrimental to comprehension (Duncan, McGeown, Griffiths, Stothard & Dobai, 2015; Pfof, Dörfler & Artelt, 2013). The result are learners who avoid long-form, time-consuming literary works. As teacher Jeremy Adams (2019) titled his *Los Angeles Times* editorial: “*My high school students don’t read anymore. I think I know why: When the smart phone entered the classroom, ‘serious reading’ departed.*”

For ESL/EFL educators employing narrative literature as a medium of instruction, the future appears unpromising. Future language learners can be expected to come to the classroom with limited understanding of literary styles, reduced attention spans, and under-developed ability to engage in deep reading. For the effective implementation of narrative literature in a foreign language, these are considerable impediments to overcome, and yet to fail to do so entails depriving English language learners of a medium crucial to gaining an advanced appreciation of the language. What can be done?

Hemingway in a sentence

If language learners enter foreign-language programs lacking critical reading skills, educators must work together to address such deficiencies or abandon the task. This research endeavors to present a progressive pedagogy involving flash narratives through which foreign-language teachers may gradually introduce learners to increasingly longer works of narrative prose. Flash stories are defined by Thomas and Shapard (2006) as narratives within 750 words, and of sufficient brevity so that the reader “shouldn’t have to turn the page more than once” (p. 12). Alternately referred to as sudden fiction, micro, and simply *very short stories*, they represent authentic, stand-alone works of literature. This paper argues for the expediency and efficacy of employing flash literature as a valuable (and underutilized) pedagogical tool to be employed in the development of critical thinking skills that learners may lack. Flash stories may also serve as a bridge to lengthier narratives. As an example, in order to prepare students for Ernest Hemingway’s short story *Hills Like White Elephants*, then in light of developing digital trends, an instructor may begin with his famous six-word flash narrative:

For sale: baby shoes, never worn.

This paper is written with two principal objectives. First, it presents the challenges faced by instructors who, in a digital world, opt for literature-based foreign-language instruction. If the negative effects of digital media observed in students are to be reversed, they must first be understood and treated with *the same urgency as are questions pertaining to literature selection and pedagogy*. Second, this paper argues for the increased use of flash narratives in foreign-language instruction to address the harmful effects of digital technologies. It describes the attributes and characteristics of short-form

literature that may be adapted to existing foreign-language-literature-based curricula in order to prepare students for lengthier, deeper pieces of literature.

Digital media, shallow processing, and the dismal trajectory of reading trends

Current research grapples to understand the impact of the rise of digitally processed media on people, particularly youth. It does so amidst trends of growing usage, particularly amongst younger generations. According to a 2018 survey, 99.3% of Japanese high-school students reported daily connecting to the Internet on their smartphones a staggering 217.2 minutes (Government of Japan Department of Statistics, 2019). Far from an anomaly, these numbers represent continuing yearly increases, with peak usage not yet in sight. While comparable statistics regarding reading of print media for high-school subjects are unavailable, it is reasonable to assume that as screen times increase, book time suffers.

The public is well aware of the deleterious impact of technology on the social and communicative abilities of young people, but what of the effects on the reading brain? What might the developmental consequences over time be for the adolescent brain engaged with technology for three hours every day? In a multi-decade study employing longitudinal datasets over various domains, Lorenz-Spreen, Mønsted, Hövel, & Lehmann (2019) constructed a mathematical model to consider the effects on reader attention spans of prolonged exposure to real-time news feeds, instant social media platforms, and incessant competition for reader attention. They conclude:

Our modeling suggests that shorter attention cycles are mainly driven by increasing information flows, represented as content production and consumption rates... Thus, in our modeling framework, producing and consuming more content results in shortening of

attention spans for individual topics and higher turnover rates between popular cultural items. In other words, *the ever-present competition for recency and the abundance of information leads to the squeezing of more topics into the same time intervals* [emphasis added] as the result of limitations of the available collective attention. (p. 6)

The consequence of prolonged exposure to instantaneous, real-time, short-form digital media locked in competition for reader attention, unsurprisingly, is an *observable shortening of said attention*.

Herein lies an irony: while to all appearances young learners are empirically reading fewer printed books, magazines and newspapers, they may actually be processing as many or more words on screens. In 2009, University of California at San Diego researchers Bohn and Short reported that the volume of words consumed over various media by Americans had reached 10,845 trillion words annually in 2008—*an average of about 100,000 words per day!* However, the grammatical and lexical character of a 280-character tweet or a click-inducing headline may fundamentally differ from that of longer-form printed prose. Furthermore, while the daily word count of young readers may be equivalent to that found in many novels, the way in which they read—a spasmodic, skimming of texts—differs from the continuous and sustained concentration required for reading of a work by Steinbeck, Fitzgerald, or Melville.

Nor are older generations of readers immune to this inability to focus. In describing the shocking realization that her ability to process long sentences from a literary work of the first half of the 20th century (Herman Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game* [*Magister Ludi*]) had significantly degraded, Wolf (2018) explained: "The rapid speed to which I had become accustomed while reading my daily gigabytes of material did not allow me to slow down

enough to grasp whatever Hesse was conveying” (p. 98). Furthermore, in investigating compositional differences between early-twentieth-century novels and contemporary bestsellers, Wolf noted a decrease in the average length of sentences, with noticeable reductions in usage of clauses and phrases per sentence. Writers, consciously or unconsciously, are crafting their sentences to match the declining capacities of readers.

While one might be tempted to praise the 21st century reader for being able to process more information over less time, the truth is *we are cheating*. According to Liu and colleagues (2005; 2016), digital readers are increasingly employing the strategies of browsing and keyword spotting to expedite the reading process. While such skimming is not without value—such strategies are probably essential in today’s digital environment—speed reading a piece of literature is likely a waste of time. As Guardian contributor Evan Maloney (2009) notes, a skimming of Charles Dicken’s 1859 classic *A Tale of Two Cities* would produce the following:

*Best times/worst times, age wisdom/foolishness, epoch belief/incredulity,
season Light/Darkness, spring hope, winter despair.*

This brings us to the question of how prolonged consumption of digital media may be affecting reader abilities to critically analyze, comprehend, and reflect meaningfully on complex literary texts. Recent evidence increasingly suggests that the reading strategies indicated by Liu negatively impact reading comprehension of print-based information. Referred to by Annisette and Lafreniere (2017) as the *Shallowing Hypothesis*, digital readers who increasingly engage in text grazing, may be doing so to the detriment of the development of sustained reader attention and comprehension. Lauterman and Ackerman (2014) connect exposure to digital media with overconfidence in reading comprehension.

Citing Lauterman and Ackerman, Delgado, Vargas, Ackerman, and Salmerón (2018) conducted a meta-analysis to conclude that “[I]gnoring the evidence of a robust screen inferiority effect may mislead political and educational decisions, and even worse, it could prevent readers from fully benefiting from their reading comprehension abilities and keep children from developing these skills in the first place” (p. 36). This conclusion echoes concerns voiced by child literacy researcher Maryanne Wolf (2007): “I fear that many of our children are in danger of becoming just what Socrates warned us against—a society of decoders of information, whose false sense of knowing distracts them from a deeper development of their intellectual potential” (p. 226). The specter of young readers voraciously consuming information while understanding little of what they read eerily mirrors computer-based indexing of information, which A. I. researcher Noriko Arai (2017) explains as follows: “[M]odern AIs do not read, do not understand. They only disguise as if they do” (8:43).

Reasons to teach narrative literature in the 21st century

The arguments for the teaching literature in foreign-language education are 1) its value as an authentic text (see Hall, 2005; Kramsch & Kramsch, 2000; Schultz, 2002), 2) its ability to facilitate cultural understanding (see Carter & Long, 1991a; Kramsch & Widdowson, 1998; Lazar, 2005; Sell, 2005), 3) its role in developing critical thinking abilities and facilitating personal growth (see Carter & Long, 1991b; Collie & Slater, 1987; Lazar, 2005), and, 4) the applicability of literature in developing language skills (see Hall, 2015; Povey, 1972; Van, 2009). While these arguments are forceful, their importance for foreign language instruction needs to be revisited in light of the challenges faced by foreign language instructors in today’s digital

world. This paper draws on research in the fields of narrative studies, psychology, and neuroscience to propose, in addition to the benefits listed above, the following arguments for using literature in ESL classrooms:

1. Literature develops learners' empathic perspectives.
2. Literature is experiential.
3. Studying literature is therapeutic for the computerized brain.

Narrative literature for perspective-taking

In its simplest sense, a narrative is “a story or a description of a series of events” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019) typically containing: 1) a beginning, middle, and end, 2) a plot, and 3) action (Riessman, 2008). Close reading of narratives is linked with the phenomenon of *reader transportation* (i.e., reader immersion), which Green and Brock (2000) define as “the extent that individuals are absorbed into a story or transplanted into a narrative world” (p. 701). With the narrative form readers suspend disbelief (Brock, Strange & Green, 2002; Green, Garst & Brock, 2004). They often retain information at a higher rate than when reading expository texts (Marsh & Fazio, 2006; Zwaan, 1994). Reader transportation is aided by *character identification*, “a cognitive state in which the reader takes on character perspectives” (Ostman, 2019). Authors assist the reader's identification with characters through various strategies, including the creation of character suffering, situations in which the character is in danger, and the creation of states of need or desire from which the character works towards resolution (Dixon, 2013). Reader transportation and character identification are crucial aspects of *narrative empathy*, which Keen (2013) defines as “the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition”

(“narrative empathy,” para 1).

The narrative form is perhaps unique in its ability to transport readers to stand in the shoes of another person and view the world from an alternate perspective. The ability to engage in perspective-taking (a component of cognitive empathy) has been extensively studied in the field of psychology (see Hogan 1969; Hollin, 1994). Goldie (2000) describes it as “a process by which a person centrally imagines the narrative (including the thoughts, feelings, and emotions) of another person” (p. 195). While many mammals “read” visual cues to imagine the mental states of others (see Provinelli, Nelson & Boysen, 1992), humans have an ability to engage in perspective-taking that surpasses other primates (de Waal, 2009), such that we regularly imagine the mental states of characters in stories *who need not even exist*.

When readers take the time to engage with narratives, when they are transported and forge bonds with characters, they naturally develop a concern for the welfare of the characters, sharing emotions, and experiencing elation at the climax of the characters’ journeys. From perspective-taking comes understanding—of others’ emotional states, their life situations, and, of paramount importance, what the world feels like *in their shoes*. It is for this reason that frequent readers of fiction have been shown to score higher on empathy instruments (Mar, Oatley, Hirsh, dela Paz & Peterson, 2006). Wolf (2018) writes:

Only those books [great literary works] prepared me not to leave the coal miners and farmers in my tiny Midwestern town but to understand each of those still dear people and the world outside Elderado, Illinois, in whole new ways. Words, stories, books allowed me to have not so much a quiet eye—never, perhaps, my forte when I was young—but a widened gaze at worlds I could never have

imagined from my very small vantage point over Walnut Street, where I met Emily Dickinson, Charlotte Bronte, and Margaret Mitchell for the first time. (p. 88)

While Wolf's experience may be familiar to many readers of generations who came of age before the digital revolution, it is *largely foreign to learners of today*. This alone, is a compelling reason to present learners (L1 and L2) with opportunities to step outside themselves and into the lives of others.

In light of recent trends, the argument for including narratives in language instruction takes on an air of immediacy. In examining changes in perspective-taking generated empathic concern in American college students from 1979-2009, Konrath (2013) reports that “we found that both types of empathy were dramatically declining over time, about 40% on average when considered together. Moreover, we found that these declines really began around the year 2000” (p. 9). The cause: impossible to say with certainty; the suspect: social media and the emerging world of the digital self. In the present environment, the use of narrative literature may not just be desirable, it may be crucial in helping learners develop the empathy necessary to live as responsible members of society.

The experiential value of literature

Italo Calvino (1988) wrote: “Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a combination of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined? Each life is an encyclopedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable” (p. 124). Calvino's insights preceded the psychological and neuroscientific studies that have greatly expanded our understanding of how the brain interprets literary experiences. Oatley

(1999; 2016) argues that narrative should be understood as a medium “that runs on the minds of readers just as computer simulations run on computers” (1999, p. 101). According to this thinking, as a story progresses the reader’s simulation of events depicted in the narrative leads to an empathic co-experiencing of character thoughts and emotions, resulting in what Mar and Oatley (2008) refer to as *simulated social experience*. Neuroscientific research done with fMRI scanners has shown that reading activates areas of the brain associated with the physical performance of actions (Speer, Reynolds, Swallow & Zacks, 2009). Zwaan (2004) notes that the neurons activated through social interactions and those activated through reading about social situations are largely the same. While research into this area continues, current evidence supports the postulation that the *brain draws little distinction* between physical experience and simulated experience. Oatley (2011) writes:

Reading stories can actually improve your social skills by helping you better understand other human beings. The process of entering imagined worlds of fiction builds empathy and improves your ability to take another person’s point of view. It can even change your personality. The seemingly solitary act of holing up with a book, then, is actually an exercise in human interaction. It can hone your social brain, so that when you put your book down you may be better prepared for camaraderie, collaboration, even love. (“Reading fiction can strengthen your social ties and even change your personality,” para. 3)

Narratives offer readers opportunities to experiences, learn from, and practice social interactions to which, by virtue of their geographical location or socio-economic status, they do not ordinarily encounter.

Just as today's readers exhibit lower levels of empathy, they also engage in typical life experiences to a lesser degree than previous generations, and later in life. In *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Lukianoff and Haidt (2018) document the growing phenomenon of American children foregoing activities, such as free outdoor play, in favor of indoor time involving digital devices. According to these authors, American youth surrender many normal experiences and delay others until later in life. Literary narratives may help young learners experience what their daily lives decreasingly provide.

Flash narratives: Therapy for the digitally-addicted brain

The first sections of this paper focused on the deleterious effects of digital media on readers' ability to engage in sustained, focused, and contemplative reading. As the reading of native print-based narratives declines, so do the interpretive abilities of young readers to engage with foreign-language narratives. With reduced attention spans, minimal experience with long-form literary works, and a tendency to skim, it becomes less and less reasonable to ask such learners to run the marathon presented by English novels, or even short stories of modest length. Foreign-language educators need a literary medium that can ameliorate the negative effects of prolonged exposure to digital media—the flash narrative. Consider the following flash story—*Barnes* by Edmundo Paz Soldán (1992):

It was all a mistake, Barnes understood, locked in his jail cell. He would proudly stick to the truth. Later, however, in a dim room, blinding light in his eyes, the interrogation began, accusations about assassinating the president, and he pondered his mediocrity, the massive insignificance of his life—and feeling the vain, useless weight

of importance for the first time, said, yes, he had indeed killed the president. Whereupon he was accused of planting the bomb that killed two hundred eighty-seven soldiers in Tarapacá's regiment; all he could do was laugh with contempt, embracing the blame. Later, he confessed without pause to sabotaging the gas line, which left Bolivia wrecked economically, to having started the fire consuming ninety-two percent of Cochabamba's forested parks; to exploding the four LAB jets mid-flight. They would execute him by firing squad at sunrise the next day, they announced. Indeed they should do so: a man like him, he agreed, had no right to live. (pp. 100101)

To be sure, the above example represents a text suitable for the advanced language learner (for examples of narratives employed for low-level learners see Ostman, 2016). Level notwithstanding, in 161 words, Paz Soldán provides readers with a complete, lexically rich narrative, uncut and authentic. As the above illustrates, flash stories can provide emotionally powerful, literary experiences and engage readers with minimal reading effort. While Hemingway's six-word "story" may border on the extreme, EFL/ESL educators can provide complete narratives as short as a paragraph, to be read and re-read. While experienced readers anticipate and enjoy authorial development of characters and events over pages and pages toward the story's climax, readers unfamiliar with long-form narratives often *do not*. Flash narratives embody brevity, which Anton Chekhov referred to as "the sister of talent" (1924, p. 170). The brevity of the Flash narrative ensures that the foreign language student accustomed to digital texts is presented with a manageable task. As previously discussed, readers adapted to reading digital texts often view long-form prose unfavorably in L1, and by extension in foreign languages. Reversing negative reader perceptions of foreign-lan-

guage literature may begin by providing readers with texts that are immediate, emotionally stimulating, and that almost instantaneously reward the effort to read.

Another benefit of flash narratives is their capacity to slow down reading speeds and allow for cognitive quietude. Literature has long been noted for its ability to disrupt reader experiencing of time through *defamiliarization* and *deautomization*—disjunctions in reader-experience resulting from literary elements such as literary foregrounding through use of alliteration, metaphor, and unusual syntax (see Miall & Kuiken, 1994; 2002). Disrupting reader rhythms results in what Koopman and Hakemulder (2015) refer to as *cognitive stillness*, “an attitude of detachment, allowing for contemplation to take place” (p. 80). In this way, literature holds the power to create the quiet space that is so lacking in a digital world. For foreign-language learners, even straight-forward narratives often require significantly longer time-periods to process than processing narratives in their own language. Beginning the journey towards appreciation of foreign language literature with selections that have 750 words or less allows the reader to focus on each line of prose: a task that is manageable.

A further benefit of brief narratives lies in their ability to stir the reader’s inclination to add “meat” to the bones provided by the story. Paz Soldán’s narrative naturally raises a number of questions: who *is* Barnes, and how did come to be arrested for a crime he did not commit? We wonder at the manner of “questioning” that destroys Barnes’ conviction of his innocence and self-esteem. Readers must also consider their own conduct in the face of such interrogations—*Could the interrogator break my spirit the way he did Barnes’?* When foreign language learners are presented with brief literary experiences, they may be willing to re-read, contemplate, and engage in

reflective perspective-taking.

Flash narratives may also simulate for readers a wide range of experiences they would not normally have. Lukianoff and Haidt (2018) note that a decline in unsupervised free play for American children—coinciding with the rise in smart phones—have decreased, or at least delayed. It may be that foreign language educators now face a new type of learner, one who, in addition to an underdeveloped ability to engage in perspective-taking, also draws from a shrinking well of personal experience. Here, too, flash narratives offer a constructive approach to “building” personal experience; they encourage the reader to co-experience the narrative’s events and share the protagonist’s perspectives.

Finally, flash narratives ensure that there is adequate time available for the development of critical thinking skills. With abbreviated prose and plot development, readers are afforded the cognitive space to consider cultural aspects of stories, as well as implications of the characters’ emotional states, motivations, and actions.

Grounded in research into current reading trends, this paper has presented the rationale for a short-fiction-based approach to utilizing literature in the ESL classroom. For further discussion of specific flash-fiction-based learning strategies, as well as quantitative and qualitative results from two experimental classes, see Ostman (2019).

Conclusion

Digital technology related changes in learners’ reading habits and learners’ decreasing exposure to print-based narrative texts necessitate that educators who attempt to incorporate literature into foreign language curricula reconsider their pedagogical approach, as well as curricular

content. Faced with learners who have limited exposure to narratives in their own language, habits of skimming and speed processing, underdeveloped abilities to engage in deep reading, perspective-taking and critical thinking, teachers must develop strategies to address their learners' deficiencies. Authentic flash narratives represent a progressive approach to address these deficiencies as well as to facilitate learners' simulation of alternate experiences through engaging with the perspectives of others.

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