Using Flash Fiction to Promote ESL Students' Reading and Writing Achievement

Diyah Wulandari
Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia
diyahw@gmail.com

Abstract: Most ESL students still meet difficulties in applying writing and reading in their class activities despite the many efforts taken by educators. One way to overcome this academic predicament is by facilitating reading and writing classes in ESL using flash fiction. Flash fiction, which is characterized by its brief presentation and authentic contents, offers some advantages for ESL teachers to make use of it to increase students' reading and writing skills. This paper provides reviews of concepts that underlies the use of flash fiction in promoting students's reading proficiency and critical thinking, henceforth, spurring their own creation of imaginative works by modeling a very short structure and style elements in well-scaffolded activities.

Keyword: Flash fiction, reading, writing, ESL, upper intermediate students

Literature is considered valuable authetic material for it is not fashioned for the specific purpose of teaching a language (Collie & Slater, 1987: 3). Students have to cope with language intended for native speakers, thus, they gain additional familiarity with many different linguistic uses, forms, and conventions of the written mode: with irony, exposition, argument, narration, and so on (ibid: 4).

Leal, as quoted by Kweldju (2012: 347), claimed that characters in a book can assume almost the same potential for influencing the reader as real people. Hence, it is quite successful in dealing with students' intrinsic motivation in reading class due to their appeal to students' curiosity and motivation to finish reading. Such practices will generate with students' excitement and make them use their imaginative powers in ways which are helpful for the development of their communicative skills (Khatib & Nourzadeh, 2011: 260), which the traditional textbooks cannot do.

However, authentic texts used in beginner and intermediate level language classrooms are usually journalistic readings and/or short realia items such as advertisements and TV guides but not authentic literary texts (Sonmez, 2007). Traditional textbooks are still predicted upon a "one-size-fits-all" approach to language instruction and tie grammar competency and form to literary and expository texts; almost by default, resulting classroom instruction tends to be more teacher-centered, text driven, and content-based, where topics under discussion stand in direct relation to the grammatical dictates of a given chapter rather than futher communication (Alden, 2006: 246).

Although it is quite a success how literary texts engages students with its authentic charm mirroring life and the world (Alden, 2006; Alemi, 2011; Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014; Erkaya, 2005; Irene, 2015; McKay, 1982; Miller, 2003; Rahimi, 2014; Sonmez, 2007), very often the reading class is only for reading and discussion. However, the discussion using literature so far has induced the critical thinking which is an essential trigger for students' developing their thoughts into writing. Tung & Chang (2009: 291) assert that literature reading is a complex process that requires readers to recall, retrieve, and reflect on their prior experiences or memories to construct meaning of the text. Students' activities in reading, including "examining the text, the authors' purposes and style, and their own interpretations of the texts they are

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reading" (Tankersley as quoted by Karimova, 2013: 451), act as a great source as pre-writing activities. This habit of mind bridges students' contrastive rhetoric patterns (Kaplan as quoted by Cahyono, 2001: 43), especially the ones with oriental pattern, to train their analysis.

Figure 1. Kaplan's rhetoric patterns
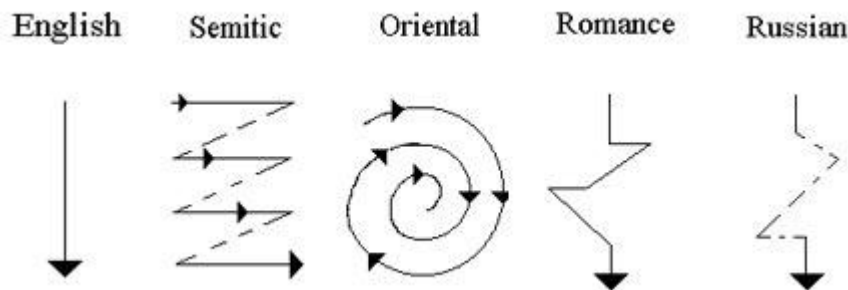
Nevertheless, "there is no doubt that writing is the most difficult skill for L2 learners to master" (Richards & Renandya, 2002: 303). Most students think literature is something that has to be written by some poets, artists, or people who have the calling or the soul to write a masterpiece. Thus, they do not have the confidence to write literary works. This mental block prevents them to create anything at all. The psychological barrier becomes heavier due to teachers' expectation to students' end result of a composition, regardless the process they have made in creating it. Unless students seen as creators of language –when they were allowed to focus on content and message, and when their own individual intrinsic motives were put at the center of learning (Brown, 2001: 335)– they will not start writing their own ideas.

On the other hand, Lee, as quoted by Sonmez (2007), claims that language learners are linguistically incapable of understanding literary texts until they reach the advanced level proficiency. In line with that, Alden (2006: 245) asserts that since students analyzing L2 literature are still language learners lacking L2 vocabularies, achieving higher levels of proficiency and in-depth comprehension of literature is more easily said than done. She emphasizes intermediate-level language students can describe and, as they progress, begin to make more complex statements, state opinions, and formulate hypotheses, but they cannot yet sustain communication at that level.

Nonetheless, findings indicate that beginner level foreign language learners can also benefit from reading authentic literary texts and that authentic texts have an impact on developing learner's communicative competence (Rice, Shanahan as quoted by Sonmez, 2007). Bernhardt (loc.cit.), provides evidence that grammar skills and linguistic ability accounts only for 30% of second language reading performance. Thus, "language development, which is attributable as one of the factors that affects second language writing" (Cahyono, 2001: 47), should not be a problem for students once they are exposed to literature since it contains original expressions of language which are used by and for native speakers and writers of the language.

Only in recent years educators have attempted to integrate reading and writing using literature in their classrooms (Temizkan, 2011; Da Silva, 2001; Adam & Babiker, 2015; Hiew, 2010; Ghazemi, 2011; Elhabiri, 2013; Berkner, 2004). One way to overcome this academic predicament is by integrating reading and writing classes in ESL using flash fiction. Flash fiction, which is characterized by its brief presentation and authentic contents, offers some advantages for ESL teachers to make use of it to increase students' reading and writing skills. Providing various flash fictions written by different authors believed to introduce the learners

to different writing styles; and this will, in turn, insight learners and encourage them to develop their own writing styles (op.cit.).

This paper provides reviews of concepts that underlies the use of flash fiction in promoting students's reading proficiency and, henceforth, "spurring their own creation of imaginative works" (McKay, 1992: 529) by modeling a very short structure and style elements in well-scaffolded activities.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND DISCUSSIONS

Stern, as quoted by Adam & Babiker (2015: 110), asserts that literature can be a rich and inspiring source for writing, as a model and as a subject matter. Students' works are often inspired by the latest writer they read and contemplate, whether they do it with the class or privately. They may firstly benchmark the writer's works, thus their own work will closely resemble the writers in terms of the theme, organization or style. Eventually students will find their own style of writing along with the gradual reading and writing habits. As a subject matter literature can be displayed by the students as the demonstration of their original thinking, interpretation or analysis all of which may have evolved from or have been inspired by the literary works they have read.

Kweldju (2012: 340) points out that the extensive reading course was taught to the students for: improving their English proficiency, helping them become enthusiastic readers, developing their character, and helping them become better citizens of Indonesia and fellow citizens of the world. Nonetheless, in ESL context, exposure to natural texts is scarce unless the school provides a lot of reading materials for outside classroom activities, especially reading for enjoyment (Mukminatien, 2012: 98). Flash fiction can be a powerful tool to brigde the scarcity of authentic exposure and enjoyment for reading to synchronize it with the academic purposes.

One of the important things that contribute to successful teaching of ESL is selecting texts for the classes. Students' need something livelier, something more authentic that will grab their attention instantly and stick to their mind longer, better than regular course textbooks. Flash fiction is a great choice that will seize students' attention very quickly and motivate them due to its brevity and simplicity. Thus, it encourages students' that they, too, have the ability to create a very short story like that. Not surprisingly, most students would rather try writing one-page flash than a twenty-five-page traditional story (Shapard, 2012: 48).

Flash Fiction: A Literary Work

Given the name flash fiction is indeed very short; shorter than short stories. Faulkner (2013) defined it as being a story under 1,000 words. It can be as short as 100-150 words for that matter. It can be as short as six words, like the short flash fiction often attributed to Hemingway: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." (Gaffney, 2012).

Novels have dominated the world of literary fiction. So little attention given to works as brief as a flash fiction. However, great writers have been writing very short stories since long before novels. Petronius wrote short-shorts in ancient Rome, and Marie de France wrote them in medieval times (Shapard, 2012: 47). But in twentieth century, he continues, many writers, including Borges, Cortazar, Walser, Kafka, Buzzati, Calvino, Dinesen, and Kawabata, chose to return to very short works. Did they constitute a quiet renaissance of very short fiction that is only now, thanks to vast power of the Internet, flowering from Greenland to Indonesia with nanos, micros, suddens, and flashes (loc.cit.). Such evocative, fragmentary brevity makes this Twitter and Facebook era perfect for flash fiction (Faulkner, 2013).
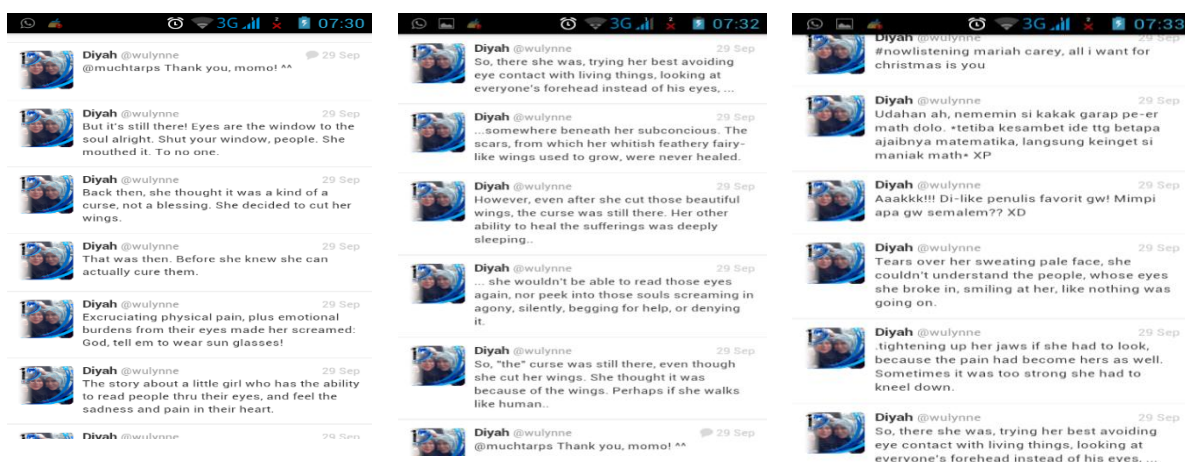
Figure 2. Twitter Flash Fiction, reading direction: bottom-up

Townsend (2015) stated that the tension in flash fiction between what is said and unsaid, and the stunning language that emerges from the form's roots in ancient fables and its kinship to poetry, these are the ineffable qualities that the students must be shown, not told.

The Advantages of Using Flash Fiction in Teaching Reading and Writing

Writing, as well as speaking, is highly needed in daily life. Students will need it for academic purposes, pragmatically. Learning both skills using flash fiction will give more benefits to students applying what they learn in reading it and try their best to create their own version. The skills they learn in flash fiction will be used throughout their lives: for academic essays and papers, and later for memos at work. They will use them to write love letters or notes to their sick grandmother. Good writing skills opens doors (Townsend, 2015).

Tompkins points out, as quoted by Adam & Babiker (2015: 110), that there are seven reasons for requiring the students to write stories and poetry: to foster artistic expressions, to explore the functions and value of writing, to stimulate imagination, to clarify thinking, to search for identity and to learn to read and write.

Generating ideas can be such a value that we can get from flash fiction. The tendency of the nowadays habit related to social media life –people tweeting, uploading daily status, writing simple things on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram almost everyday, including writers who often use the social media to help them blurt out sparks of ideas– can induce the trails of more ideas and stories. Even better, sharing it in public, viz. in social media, they get fast replies, retweet, and likes from their followers who have the same passion in the field. More responses mean more ideas and stories to build. It can also be an embryo of a longer story, even a novel. It all started in flashes of thoughts. Everything can be made stories in a flash.
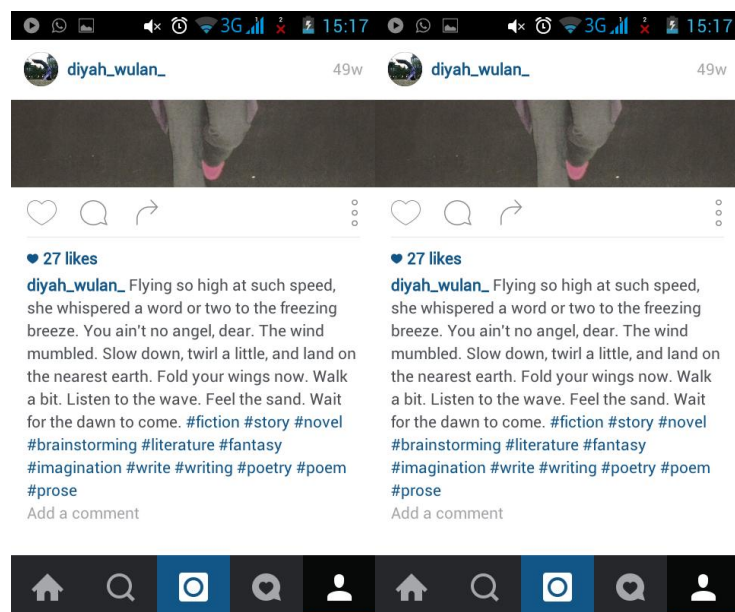
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Figure 3. Instagram Flash Fiction (Wulandari, 2015)

Classroom Talk and Zone of Proximal Development

Basically, the idea of integrating reading and writing using flash fiction should lead to students' independently reading the short literary works and interdependently analyzing any inquiries, problems, or disagreements coming up from being intrigued by the fictions with their knowledgable peers. Anything they think of and feel while reading the writings can be the best sources of classroom talk which lead to students' critical thinking. Hence, teachers' roles as facilitators or mediators can work effectively if they acquire the arts of optimalizing students' zone of proximal development (ZPD), the area in which "students can solve problems under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, as quoted by Miller, 2003: 292). Discussions about the stories, for example, must lead to deeper and meaningful interpretation, reflection, and critical thinking of the students.

Donato and Brooks, as quoted by Alden (2006: 245), have called a meaningful connection of language goals and literature instruction which would require both the language acquisition and the literature specialists within one department to share their knowledge. However, they will need to skillfully deliver both to the students to optimize the ZPD environment and eliminate students' anxiety about literature, reading, and writing. Therefore, teacher training in delivering literature in classrooms is highly required to make them naturally acquire the techniques in creating a positive and encouraging atmosphere for the students to analyze and develop their critical thinking (Millers, 2003: 313).

In recent years, writing instruction has shifted from focusing on the finished product to focus on the process that students use to organized and express their ideas (Tompkins, 2001). Similarly, the teacher's role has changed from assigning and evaluating writing to working with students through the process of writing. Bright, as quoted by Berkner (2004: 8) asserts that the old emphasis on product over process began to be critized by researchers, and professional writers began to speak out on their own creative writing process.

Linda's class, as studied by Miller (2003: 293) on how teacher-mediated literature discussion can create a zone of proximal development that shapes students' habit of mind, maybe an excellent example of classroom talk. Instead of delivering blatant and classic instructions to students, she chose to work with them. She equally treated her students as if they are her peers and shared her own problems in analyzing texts to her students, asking

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genuine questions about things that puzzle her in the texts as a start-up. Desks in perfect circle, the singular role knowledge expert was changed into usual verbal behaviour: creating a "safe" atmosphere: emphaty, creative metaphors, collaboration.

Figure 4. An example of perfect circle, where the teacher plays an equal role and positioning

Stages in Teaching Flash Fiction for Reading and Writing

Basically, the ingredients of the writing process are rehearsal (or prewriting), drafting (or writing), and revision (Branscomb, 1986: 369). The discussion about flash fiction serves as the prewriting stage, the preparation for drafting. It shapes students' ZPD and critical thinking (Miller, 2003: 292; Tung & Chang, 2009: 291), thus students can listen to their own voice. It provides them with their own idea that waits to be written.

Prewriting stage can be done by having the students do some of the activities in the list (Brown, 2007: 404):

1. Reading a passage, poem or story
2. Skimming or scanning a passage
3. Brainstorming
4. Making lists or charts
5. Clustering or mind maps (building on one word using free association)
6. Posing thought provoking questions
7. Free writing

The next stages are the core of writing process, namely drafting and revision. Brown (2007: 404) outlines the strategies and skills pertaining to the process:

1. Getting started: letting ideas flow smoothly from mind to written word.
2. Optimal monitoring of one's writing (vocabulary, punctuation, editing and grammar are not important at this stage).
3. Peer reviewing: being open to comments and suggestions from classmates.
4. Using instructor's feedback: teacher guides student for further revision.
5. Editing: for grammatical errors.
6. Read aloud − Students read their virtually complete final draft to classmates and make corrections on cohesion, syntax, vocabulary, punctuation.
7. Proofreading − have others read work to double check for publishing quality.

Nonetheless, teachers can always improvise when applying them due to the uniqueness of each of their classes. It is just the messiness of the creative process that demands the frequent intervention of a teacher –to read, to listen, to encourage, to question, sometimes just to talk (Branscomb, 1986: 369). The sense of belonging to their own voice is essential for students so

that they continue their writing process (Brown, 2007: 396). Therefore, it is highly suggested that teachers not discourage students by "assigning writing infrequently, responding only by red-pencilling, appropriating students' final drafts for his own, noting in red what students' should have done (rather than reacting to what students actually did), and unwittingly causing them to drop their commitment to their writing" (op.cit.).

Instead of discouraging students by doing so, teachers can apply collaborative writing with students, proposed by Donald Graves (as quoted by Berkner, 2004: 13). One of Graves' many illustrations of the process is very inspiring (loc.cit.):

Leo Tolstoy, in his journal kept for the school he ran at Yasnaya Polyana, tells of a day when he asked the children to take out their papers to write. To his surprise the children said, "We're sick of writing, it's your turn." Tolstoy thought for a minute, and then decided the children might have something in their request. He sat down at his desk and asked, "Well, what should I write about?" The children said, "Write about a boy who steals." Excitedly the children gathered round his desk while the don of Russian intelligensia, admired writer of The Cossacks, began to compose. Immediately, these peasant children corrected him saying, "No, a boy wouldn't do this; he'd do that." "You know," said Tolstoy, "they were right." Tolstoy was so astonished at the children's insights that he wrote his memorable essay, "Are We to Teach the Peasant Children to Write, or Are They to Teach Us?"

Collaborative writing can be done by switching the role of writer with the students as the main writers, or thinkers. Sometimes the teacher should also show his real-time drafting process, so that students see his whole steps and thinking process while doing the writing. A conference process like this, or vice versa, allows students to freely ask whatever they are curious about. The conference teacher, who works orally, shoulder to shoulder with the students, can watch the development of each writer over a long period of time (Branscomb, 1986: 370).

It does not matter which stages teachers choose to use, combine, and improvise as long as they pay a careful attention on the function and impact to students' passion of writing. Being a creative and attentive teacher is how to be a facilitator who quickly adjust to any situations regarding the current dynamic condition of the students, (indoor/outdoor) classrooms, materials, anything related to his orchestration of the lesson.

Challenges in Teaching Flash Fiction for Reading and Writing

Jaffar (2004) stated that non-critical readers only see facts, but good readers bring their own understanding to the texts and add to their dimensions. With beginner and intermediate students, teachers must trigger students' critical thinking so that they figure out the implied meaning in the stories, "give them questions that teach" (Graves as quoted by Branscomb, 1986). If students are consistently exposed to think critically while reading, eventually they will pick up the habit. This will enhance students' zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky as quoted by Miller, 2003). Once they pick up the habit of mind, everything they can think of, they can create it. Creativity has no limits.

Running out of ideas can be frustrating for students, especially when it comes to writing. Randomly choosing dictions from paragraphs in books, newspaper, or dictionary, and then use them to create some paragraphs of their own by connecting those dictions might help them spare the dryness of ideas. Once the connection electrified, more stories spring up. Hence, they will keep digging their own wells, unstoppable.

Peer review is an established strategy for improving the quality of students' writing (Baker, 2016). However, it can be quite a challenge if teachers do not arrange the timing of the peer review, a structured feedback form, and student writers' revisions after engaging in peer

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review. These strategies force students to begin writing earlier in the semester, help the students offer formative feedback to their peers, and encourage students to substantially revise their drafts before submitting the final paper. This study reveals the importance of assessing the peer-review process.

Selecting Flash Fiction

According Alemi (2011: 178) there are several criteria that should be weighed to select literary texts for students: language proficiency, time availability, cultural competence, the brevity of texts, and personal involvement.

In line with that, Irene (2015: 76) points out factors to consider when selecting literary texts: age of students, gender, educational lives, social background, literary background, and the richness and meaningfulness of the texts for the students.

Ghasemi (2011: 267) asserts that almost all modern short stories have the following unique characteristics which make themespecially suitable to be used in reading comprehension classes: universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power, ambiguity; moreover each learner's interpretation has validity and an almost infinite fund of interactive discussion is guaranteed.

Whichever flash fiction teachers decide to choose, the shortest or the longer ones, it is important that they realize that the texts is not the ultimate factor to gain the objectives of the lesson. They need to keep in mind that classroom talk, ZPD, and other resources are of the same importance.

A Sample of a Lesson Plan Using Flash Fiction

This section presents a sample of lesson plan using flash fiction that has been applied in a small ESL classes of upper intermediate students at Putra Indonesia English Course Malang. Other lesson plans with different materials have also been applied in beginner level students where students' success in creating very short fiction varied. This technique has also been applied to a non ESL reading and writing class at Forum Lingkar Pena (FLP) Malang (Malang Writing Forum). Their progress are quite satisfying due to the frequent reading and writing practices using flash fiction. Students' are to be encouraged that they will be able to write and publish their own flash fiction collection by the end of the semester. Some students have achieved awards from national writing competitions due to their progress while learning reading and writing using this technique.

The following is the sample lesson plan that can be applied in upper intermediate ESL classes.

 A. Pre-reading activity
1. Write the six word flash fiction: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn."
2. Ask students to copy the story and consider whether it is a story or not. Once they gain ideas about it, teachers can guide them by asking questions:
a. What does a story need in order to be a story?
b. What questions does this story leave you with?
c. What do you think is happening that is not written in this story?
d. Is the amount of the unwritten things interesting?
e. Do you think it is harder to write a short short story like this one or a longer work, like a novel? Why?
 B. Pre-writing activity 1

Begin by showing students some examples of classroom literary classic summed up in six words like (Brown & Schulten, 2013, with adaptation):

Evil step mother makes miserable life. *"Snow White"*

Kids sneaks around, get married, die. *"Romeo and Juliet"*

Grow, grow longer, beautiful golden hair! *"Rapunzel"*

C. Whilst- reading activites
1. Ask students to read longer flash fiction: *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Harris, 2006), see Appendix 1 for the text.
2. Have students to meet in pairs or small groups to futher discussion. List of questions they might discuss (Brown & Schulten, 2013):
   a. What do they know about the plot, characters, setting, and theme of the story?
   b. What questions does the text raise?
   c. What is unwritten?
   d. What literary devices do they notice?
   e. What individual words or phrases jump out? What denotations or connotations are important to note about individual words?
   f. How complete is the story? Why?
3. When students are finished, ask groups to share observations about the stories and follow up with these questions:
   a. How do you read them differently from the way you read a longer work?
   b. What do they give you that a longer work does not?

D. Pre-writing activity 2

Ask students questions to prepare them to rewrite/rephrase the story:
1. What would you if you were in Dr. Jekyll's position?
2. What would happen if Mr. Hyde didn't die?
3. Can you create a different ending for the story? For example?

E. While-writing activity
1. Give the students writing prompts (Shapard as quoted by Giddings, n.d.):
   a. Think of a character, a person that's not you, preferably unlike you (in age or gender or other ways).
   b. Jot awhile (2-3 minutes or more).
   c. Now answer these questions about the person:
   d. What does she or he want more than anything in the world? (Make it something specific, not abstract.) Again, jot awhile.
   e. Now (I regret to do this to you, or rather the character) I'm sorry to say that the character can't have it, it's simply not possible (whatever she or he wanted more than anything); the question is, Why not? Jot awhile.
   f. The last question may seem whimsical, in turning the tables, but it's not; let's say the character does get what she or he wanted after all, even though it was "impossible"–the question is, how did, or could, the character make it happen?"
2. Ask students to proofread their peers' works and give commentary to their peers about the works.
3. Ask students to edit and reedit their works.

F. Post-writing activity
1. Ask students to have their own portfolio of their flash fiction collection during the whole semester and are encouraged to publish it in the end of the semester to become professional flash fiction writers.
2. Give students homework, ask them to:
   a. Read online Grant Faulkner's article: *Going Long, Going Short*.

b. Read online David Gaffney's article: *Stories in the Pocket: How to Write Flash Fiction*
c. Find online resources that provide flash fiction link to read, write, and perhaps publish, too.
d. Find one flash fiction that you like the most and read it on the next class.

CONCLUSION

There has been a lot of techniques of teaching ESL. Burhans, as quoted by Branscomb (1986: 371), asserts that as writing teachers, we've tried everything the current traditional paradigm has to offer: teaching grammar, teaching literary analysis, teaching spelling, teaching the thesis statement, teaching phonics and CVC syllables, teaching the fixed methods of paragraph development, teaching the five paragraph theme. Teaching language through literature has been widely acknowledged and applied for many years, but it works well especially with language arts and native classes. As for ESL classes, many students still have to struggle with their skills. Using flash fiction for ESL classes is more propitious for the students in developing their skills, especially reading and writing, due to its nature of simplicity, brevity, and autheticity of the content. It motivates them to create very short stories, and later on boosts their confidence in developing more imaginative and longer ones.

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