

Research Article

Book club and creative writing workshop in the ESL university classroom

El club de lectura y el taller de escritura creativa en el aula universitaria de inglés como segunda lengua

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Abstract

Introduction: *La Casa de las Lenguas*, a language centre at the University of La Rioja (Spain), offers the course “Let’s Read” designed as a book club that allows students to read and discuss short stories in English by authors from different countries and periods. Creative writing workshops are used alongside a more conventional approach to literature in the university course “Contemporary Narrative in English.” **Methodology:** This article aims to use the experience gained from teaching these courses to propose a combination of an English language book club with a creative writing workshop in the ESL university classroom. This university teaching experience is designed both to enhance language proficiency in English and to foster creativity and critical thinking. **Results:** Sessions are designed to work on the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English. Activities include an introduction to the author and their socio-cultural context, the reading/listening of the selected text, reading comprehension exercises, guided discussions, and creative writing tasks. **Discussion and conclusions:** The experience gained suggests that the benefits of this proposal include students’ improvement in language skills, greater motivation to learn a foreign language and engage in its culture, and the cultivation of creativity and critical thinking.

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Keywords: book club; creative writing; language centre; higher education; ESL; short story; critical thinking; learning motivation.

Resumen

Introducción: La Casa de las Lenguas de la Universidad de La Rioja (España) ofrece el curso “Let’s Read,” diseñado como un club de lectura que permite a los estudiantes leer y comentar relatos en inglés de autores de diferentes países y épocas. Los talleres de escritura creativa se utilizan junto con un enfoque literario más convencional en la asignatura del Grado en Estudios Ingleses “Narrativa actual en lengua inglesa.” **Metodología:** Este artículo utiliza la experiencia adquirida impartiendo estos cursos para proponer el uso conjunto del club de lectura en inglés con el taller de escritura creativa en el aula universitaria de ESL. Esta experiencia está diseñada para mejorar el dominio del inglés y fomentar la creatividad y el pensamiento crítico. **Resultados:** Las sesiones están diseñadas para trabajar las competencias orales y escritas en inglés. Las actividades constan de: introducción al autor y su contexto sociocultural, lectura/escucha del texto, ejercicios de comprensión lectora, debates guiados y tareas de escritura creativa. **Discusión y conclusiones:** Los beneficios de esta propuesta incluyen la mejora de las habilidades lingüísticas de los estudiantes, una mayor motivación para aprender una lengua extranjera e involucrarse en su cultura, y el cultivo de la creatividad y el pensamiento crítico.

Palabras clave: club de lectura; escritura creativa; centro de idiomas; educación superior; ESL; relato breve; pensamiento crítico; motivación del aprendizaje.

1. Introduction

Reading and discussing literary texts has traditionally not been considered a function of Language Centres. Although:

roles, functions and purposes [...] are as diverse as the centres themselves [...] their common purposes include the development of applied linguistics, the improvement of language education and the implementation (sometimes the development and monitoring) of language policy in the institution, nation or region that they serve (Ingram, 2001, p. 173).

La Casa de las Lenguas, a Language Centre based at the University of La Rioja (Spain) is an exception in this respect, though. Since its foundation in 2022, this language centre has committed to teaching literature as well as L2 languages. Hence, alongside a language programme that comprises six levels of English, French, Italian, and German as Second Language courses divided into two semesters, *La Casa de las Lenguas* also offers the programme “Let’s,” which includes two additional courses: “Let’s Chat” and “Let’s Read.” The latter is designed as a book club in English with two independent parts respectively offered in the first and second semesters of each academic year and organized in fortnightly 90-minute sessions. Our experience of the past two academic years teaching this course is that students who take the first part in the first semester also enroll for the second part in the second semester, which shows the appeal the course “Let’s Read” has for students of English as a Second Language.

The main objectives of the course “Let’s Read” are twofold: a) to enhance students’ language skills in English through their engagement with literary texts, and b) to improve students’ knowledge and understanding of the literature written in English and of its socio-historical context. Although achieving the first of these two objectives is logically the main motivation

of *La Casa de las Lenguas* to include this course as part of the English learning programme, the second objective greatly contributes to and enriches the learning outcomes of language centre students of English as a Second Language.

Literature is a powerful tool to improve language skills, especially reading comprehension, speaking, and writing, as several studies (Kern, 2002; Van, 2009; Shantha Naik, 2011; Noaman, 2013; Babaee & Wan Yahya, 2014; Bobkina & Domínguez Romero, 2014) have evinced. In the course “Let’s Read” students are asked to read three novels, which are later discussed in class on predetermined dates. For the rest of the sessions, short stories are chosen. During the first semester, students explore works by contemporary authors, including Canadian authors Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro, US writers Chuck Palahniuk and Ray Bradbury, English writer Julian Barnes, and Irish writers Anne Enright and Claire Keegan. The second semester is meant to introduce students to classical authors, aiming to foster familiarity with significant figures in the history of the literature written in English in the 19th and 20th centuries. To do so, students read stories by Edgar Allan Poe, Oscar Wilde, O. Henry, Virginia Woolf, Kate Chopin, and Katherine Mansfield. The methodological approach to the texts remains consistent throughout the course. Students read the selected stories in class as they listen to the audiobooks featuring professional English-speaking narrators, as combining reading and listening enables students to enhance their oral and written fluency skills in English (Rasinski, 1990). Students participate next in guided discussions led by the instructor, addressing questions that prompt in-depth explorations of each story, by examining narratological, social, cultural, and ethical issues present in the texts.

Our experience has shown that by the end of the semester students not only acquire a better knowledge of English—especially of the vocabulary extracted from the texts themselves and the lexicon used in the in-class discussions— but also prove to be more fluent in their speaking skills after having participated in those discussions. They also deepen their knowledge and understanding of classical texts and authors and get to know contemporary writers of different backgrounds and nationalities, including some Nobel Prize winners, previously unfamiliar to them. For, apart from selected examples of literature produced in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, students also have the opportunity to read texts from other English-speaking countries such as Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, or India.

Interesting and successful as the course “Let’s Read” has proved to be, this teaching experience has shown that creativity and critical thinking also need to be encouraged in the classroom. This is precisely one of the main objectives of “Contemporary Narrative in English,” an optional course that is offered as part of the Literature and Communication in English academic itinerary of the degree in English studies at the University of La Rioja in the second semester of the fourth year.² The course focuses on some of the most relevant modes and genres used by contemporary writers, such as Gothic, magical realism, science fiction, trauma, and crime. Students are familiarized with the origins, socio-historical background, and most significant features of each mode and genre through the analysis and interpretation of selected novels and short stories.

Alongside the teaching of the contents of the syllabus, in the past two academic years, emphasis has also been laid on fostering students’ creativity and critical thinking using project-based learning. This teaching-learning method offers a more dynamic approach to the study

² Creativity and critical thinking are also encouraged in other optional courses of this degree using project-based learning, such as the course “Audiovisual and Literary Communication in the Anglo-Saxon World,” where students write the script, act in, shoot, and direct a different short film in English each academic year. The results of this experience over the years have been published in, for example, José Díaz-Cuesta (2012, 2018), Díaz-Cuesta and Carlos Villar Flor (2024).

of literature and helps students acquire a deeper knowledge of literary texts themselves, the way they are constructed and interpreted, and their subtleties and nuances of style. A collaborative creative writing workshop was established to a) come up with the Spanish translation of a contemporary short story, and b) provide an alternative ending to one of the short stories in the syllabus. All students enjoyed their participation in both activities. For the translation of the short story, students had to face challenges and come up with solutions to some of the text complexities of which they had been unaware when reading and analyzing the short story in a more conventional way. Likewise, writing an alternative ending for another short story taught students more about the writer's style and choices than any theoretical session would have.

Using our experience with both the language centre course "Let's Read" and the university course "Contemporary Narrative in English," this article aims to bring together the benefits of the book club in English with the creative writing literary workshop through a set of carefully thought and contrasted activities to be implemented in the ESL university classroom in order to both enhance university students' language proficiency in English and foster their creativity and critical thinking. Before dealing with the activities themselves, some space is dedicated to establishing the theoretical framework for the whole study and to formulating the convenience to introduce literary texts – and more specifically short stories – into the English as a Second Language university classroom.

2. Theoretical framework and methodology

Studies have already stated the significance and utility of incorporating literature into the ESL classroom, not only as a translation tool within the framework of the Grammar-Translation Method (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011) but also as a storytelling strategy for young learners (Morgan & Rinvoluceri, 1988; Ioannou-Georgiou & Ramírez, 2011; Mutiarani & Izzah, 2015). The use of the short story as a literary genre in a book club is also sufficiently justified. Some authors (Wright, 1995; Erkaya, 2005; Rahman & Arju, 2013; among others) argue that short stories allow students to strengthen their language skills and motivate them to get familiar with literary and narratological elements, learn about different cultures and develop critical thinking and writing strategies. For instance, studies such as the one carried out by Nimer Abu Zahra and Mohammed Farrah (2016) show that students respond positively to foreign language learning with short stories that develop their language skills, imagination, creativity, and social and cultural awareness.

Moreover, the peculiarities of the short story make this literary genre particularly suitable for 90-minute sessions, as the length of the short story allows students to get a complete reading experience in each session. Unlike most novels, a short story can be read from beginning to end in a single session. Consequently, far from being disappointed, when the session ends students have the feeling that they have fulfilled a task, which gives them a sense of completion and fosters their motivation. In other words, short stories are advantageous for the ESL classroom because they are "short and self-contained; they generally require less contextualization than longer fiction, or, in a different way, drama, and they are generally less linguistically complex than poetry" (Parkinson & Thomas, 2000, p. 80). Besides, the possibility of reading a short story per session allows the instructor to select a variety of texts so that different tastes and interests can be met.

As has already been stated, our proposal aims to bring together the benefits of using short stories in a book club in English and those of the creative writing workshop in the ESL

university classroom. Consequently, some space should be dedicated to defining the terms “book club” and “creative writing workshop” and to clarifying how each of them is used in our proposal. The term “book club” has “at least four established meanings” in English. It can equally refer to

- “‘book-distribution institutions’ that offer(ed) an alternative to traditional book buying in bricks-and-mortar bookstores”;
- “reading groups [...] whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book,” have a “reading and meeting schedule,” and hold “periodic discussions” on the selected text(s);
- “bibliophile societies [...] formed for the printing of works which would not, because of their specialized nature, be published as commercial ventures”; and
- “subscription library structures and/or literary societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,”

whose “members had access to libraries [...] for borrowing books or for reading them on club premises” (Norrick-Rühl, 2019, p. 5-6). In this article, the term “book club” is used to refer to any reading group that gathers periodically to read and discuss selected literary texts. Book clubs have been used as a means “to engage culturally and linguistically diverse learners in reading, writing and talking about books” (Kong & Fitch, 2002-2003, p. 352). Historically, book clubs “also functioned as spaces for community-building and organizing, as well as venues in which non-mainstream ideologies could be circulated and explored” (Long, 2021, p. 4). Today, book clubs allow for their members to engage with literary texts in a “more personal, more collaborative, less teacher-directed, and less text-driven [way] than in the traditional seminar classroom (Addington, 2001, p. 212).

On the other hand, in a recent publication on the use of creative writing in Primary Education, edited by the Ministry of Education and Professional Training of Spain, a creative writing workshop is defined as

- a methodology to work on competence in linguistic communication and literature,
- a way of looking closely into words,
- a learning system that promotes creative, imaginative, aesthetic, and cultural skills, and
- a reflective space where thought is generated (2022, p. 7).

These four definitions are very closely related as they emphasize the reflective experience inherent in literature through which we learn to see the world from different perspectives, and, eventually, come to understand and get to know ourselves better. In other words, if literature helps us understand the world around us, creative writing provides us with the tools to explore and critically reflect on our own world.³

³ Creative writing in educational institutions has traditionally been classified as a “luxury, something expendable” (Canagarajah, 2022, p. 16), though, and, in countries like Spain, it is still not that common to see courses on Creative Writing at university levels.

The benefits of implementing creative writing in the classroom seem evident. Studies show that, after completing a creative writing literary workshop, students believe that they have improved in aspects such as intertextual transfer techniques, development of linguistic and literary skills, and awareness of education in values and cooperative attitudes, among others (Morote Peñalver, 2014, p. 18-19). Moreover, literary writing also helps “students’ moral development, critical thinking, communicative abilities, and rhetorical sensibility” (Canagarajah, 2022, p. 17), apart from allowing students “to creatively and expressively craft their voices” (Iida & Chamcharatsri, 2022, p. 190) or find their identities (Zhao, 2014; Spiro, 2014; Chin, 2014).

Creativity has also proven beneficial in the teaching/learning of English as a Second Language, especially to engage students in the improvement of their written production, often considered the most complex skill in a new language (Avramenko et al., 2018, p. 58). Using creative writing in the ESL classroom not only enhances students’ learning by developing their linguistic skills and “eliminat[ing] monotonous aspects in learning,” but also engages language teachers by “stimulat[ing] professional development” and “contribut[ing] to personal growth” (Avramenko et al., 2018, p. 60). Indeed, the roles of student and teacher in the ESL classroom have evolved and changed, which implies that students now “become active partners in individualised and interactive learning processes,” while teachers progressively “become guides, advisers and facilitators of those learning processes” instead of “authoritative ‘truth-tellers’” (Stepanek, 2015, p. 98).

All in all, the integration of literature and creative activities in the ESL classroom facilitates the development of identities and voices for both students and teachers, while simultaneously refining linguistic proficiency in English. In other words, this dual approach not only enhances language skills but also fosters personal and expressive growth within the learning environment. In the next section a detailed proposal of activities that combine techniques used in the book club and the creative writing literary workshop as a productive teaching/learning tool to be implemented in the ESL university classroom is developed.

3. Book club and creative writing in the ESL university classroom

The activities proposed in this section are based on the experience gained from teaching the courses “Let’s Read” and “Contemporary Narrative in English” for two academic years. Activities are grouped in ninety-minute sessions having a similar structure. All sessions begin with introductory pre-reading activities, as well as some deepening and analytical activities, once the story has been read. Then, creative writing activities are proposed so that students can dive deeper into the stories and develop their critical thinking and creative skills, focusing mainly on the analysis and creation of characters, as these are “among the most important elements in a piece of writing” (Donovan, 2011, p. 33). This action plan is based on the ideas presented by Atsushi Iida and Bee Chamcharatsri, who argue that approaching creative writing from a given text can “promote [students’] creative and critical thinking [...] [and] also foster vocabulary, learning and linguistic awareness” (2022, p. 190). To present a successful learning experience, the following four stories have been chosen: Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” (1894), O. Henry’s “The Gift of the Magi” (1905), Virginia Woolf’s “The Legacy” (1940), and Roald Dahl’s “The Way Up to Heaven” (1954).

3.1. “The Story of an Hour” (90 min.)

“The Story of an Hour,” by US writer Kate Chopin, unfolds within the span of an hour in the life of Louise Mallard, more specifically from the moment she learns about her husband having

passed away in a train accident to her actual death. Since Louise suffers from a heart condition, her sister and brother-in-law take the utmost care to disclose the news of her husband's sudden death to her. Although initially overwhelmed by grief, Louise gradually comprehends what this implies, mainly her gaining freedom previously unbeknownst to her. It takes her no time to accept her feelings of extreme happiness about this new situation, but her joy is short-lived, as she finds out that her husband has returned home. The story concludes with Louise dying from a heart attack, precipitated by the shock of seeing her husband alive and the prospect of her having to return to her former life.

3.1.1. Activity 1: Pre-reading and warming up (10 min.)

Before reading the story, the instructor presents students with some background information concerning the author and her historical context to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of one of the main topics of the story: the role of women in marriage at the end of the 19th century. The instructor may initiate a brief inquiry into students' prior knowledge on this subject, encouraging discussion of some other relevant novels or short stories that they might have read. Next, students are presented with a three-minute video about the rights of women in the 19th century.⁴ Finally, students are asked to answer these questions:

- How were women's political rights restricted in 1832?
- What restrictions did married women have?

This introductory activity aims to equip students with some context about women in the 19th century, fostering a more informed historical discussion of the story. Watching the video also serves to practice students' listening comprehension skills in English.

3.1.2. Activity 2: Reading and Listening to the Story (6 min.)

Students read the story as they listen to the audiobook narrated by Claire Corbett in *BBC Classics: Ultimate Story Collection* (2021). They may underline words or expressions that are unfamiliar to them. These are later explained and contextualized, which allows students to learn new vocabulary and fully understand the plot of the story.

3.1.3. Activity 3: Discussion (10-15 min.)

This story fosters a discussion on topics such as marriage, the role of women, or freedom. The goal of this activity is to promote a discussion among students to express their opinions on these or other related topics of their own interest. The following questions may be used to guide the discussion:⁵

- What would you say the story is about?
- How important is it for the story that Mrs. Mallard suffers from a heart condition? How is this related to the ending?
- How does she feel when she first hears the news?
- Are Mrs. Mallard's feelings toward her husband totally negative?

⁴ The video is available on YouTube: <<https://tinyurl.com/3zyns59k>> (08/07/2024).

⁵ Some questions have been suggested by Sybil Marcus (1995, p. 17).

- What does the setting tell us about the themes of the story?
- What images and symbols do you find in the story (e.g., the open window, the “goddess of Victory”)?
- How is the ending ironic?
- What do you think the story aims to convey about marriage in the late 19th century?

This discussion serves to analyze the story and to encourage students to explore related themes. Students need to fully comprehend the story, its themes, and its main message to creatively work on it.

3.1.4. Activity 4: Writing Tweets (30 min.)

Since this is the first session and, therefore, the first contact some students may have with creative writing, this activity revolves around imagining what characters would write on their Twitter accounts about what has happened to them. This activity aims to see how students would bring to a contemporary setting both Louise Mallard’s feelings and thoughts during the hour in which she believes she has lost her husband, and those of Brently Mallard after his wife’s heart attack. Students can contribute to making the characters’ feelings more easily understandable to a present-day reader by updating the language, and even using hashtags. Besides, tweets only allow for 280 characters, which makes this activity especially suitable for first-time writers given its conciseness and brevity.⁶

If students so prefer, they can carry out this activity in pairs. After twenty minutes, or when all the groups have finished, tweets can be exchanged with those of other groups and discussed as a class activity.

3.1.5. Activity 5: The Story of the Next Hour (30 min.)

In this exercise, students are asked to imagine what happens after Mrs. Mallard’s passing. How does her family react? What are her husband’s feelings and thoughts? Since this is still the first session, students are asked to imagine and continue the original story “The Story of an Hour” by adding just a couple of paragraphs. This activity is a recurrent exercise for Creative Writing students and L2 students alike, regardless of their level (Bui & Luo, 2021), and may allow students to discern whether finishing the story with Mrs. Mallard’s heart attack makes a more powerful ending for the story, or if it would rather benefit from a couple of paragraphs more.

This exercise is slightly more challenging for students since they need to write something longer than a tweet, and it involves a set structure and more fluency in written English. At the end of the activity, the instructor asks for volunteers to share their proposed endings with the rest of the class. At the end of the session, students’ texts are collected so that the instructor may correct grammatical mistakes and provide some feedback.

⁶ Writing poems for Twitter is a recurrent activity in Creative Writing workshops (Donovan, 2011, p. 119). Bee Chamcharatsri argues that “poetry writing [...] is an appropriate genre for EFL students to write as it allows students to be playful and take more risk in experimentation with languages” (2022, p. 37). The same idea is also developed in David Hanauer (2014, pp. 14-15) and studied by Dan Disney (2012). It could be argued that the above-mentioned benefits can also apply to the writing of short messages in the form of tweets, as a similar choice of words is required, due to the limitation in the number of characters.

3.2. “The Gift of the Magi” (90 min.)

“The Gift of the Magi,” by US writer O. Henry, tells the Christmas tale of a married couple striving to find the best gifts possible for each other. Living in extreme poverty, Della and Jim need to sacrifice precious possessions to be able to afford presents. Della sells her long bright hair, her dearest possession, so that she can buy a chain for Jim’s watch. For his part, Jim sells his beloved watch to purchase a hairbrush for Della. Eventually, the couple ends up having nothing of value, but they consider their love and their life together as their ultimate wealth. This story is regarded as a Christmas classic because it encompasses the spirit of giving without expecting anything in return.

3.2.1. Activity 1: Pre-reading and warming up (10 min.)

Given the topic of the story, and without previous explanation of the plot, the session begins by discussing the topic of gifts. Students are divided into pairs so that, orally, they can discuss the topic of giving and receiving gifts, describing the best present they have ever received. Another possibility is to comment on the topic of sacrifice, selecting a moment of their lives in which they have had to sacrifice something dear to them to help another person. In case of not finding such a moment in their own lives, they are encouraged to put themselves in a fictional character’s shoes and invent a similar situation.

They would have around ten minutes to carry out this activity, while the instructor supervises and corrects some grammar or vocabulary errors, if necessary. The goal of this activity is that students go deeper into the topic of the story while they practice their speaking skills in English.

3.2.2. Activity 2: Reading and Listening to the Story (14 min.)

Next, students read the story while they listen to the audiobook, narrated by Don Gilet’s reading in *BBC Classics: Ultimate Story Collection* (2021). They may underline words or expressions that are unfamiliar to them. These are later explained and contextualized, which allows students to learn new vocabulary and fully understand the plot of the story.

3.2.3. Activity 3: Discussion (10-15 min.)

As in the previous session, the story is analysed before carrying out creative writing activities. Hence, the instructor guides the discussion with some questions, although students are encouraged to introduce other related topics. Some possible questions could be the following:

- In your own words, what would you say the story is about?
- What do you think some themes of the story are?
- What symbols do you find in the story?
- How much do we get about the characters? Is one more developed than the other?
- How much would the story change if told from Jim’s perspective?
- What is the relationship between Della and Jim like?
- How are the characters similar or different?

- Most of O. Henry's stories feature a twist. How does the author achieve this? Does he introduce any clue to warn the reader?
- Did you expect the story to end that way?
- How does the author introduce irony in the story?
- How important is the setting, both time and place?

The goal of these questions is to discuss different issues in the story, such as love, sacrifice, the physical and the intangible, for instance, and to talk about the characters themselves since they will be the focus of the next activity.

3.2.4. Activity 4: Diary entry (20 min.)

For this exercise, students try to get in the characters' shoes, as we had suggested they could do in the pre-reading activity. Students choose one of the two main characters, Della or Jim, and are asked to write an entry in the chosen character's fictional diary, which would explain their emotions and thoughts after the events that have happened. The objective of this activity is for students to further develop their creativity. Thanks to the previously mentioned discussion, they will already have ideas on how characters might be feeling.

Writing a first-person diary entry recreating someone else's voice allows students to steadily engage with creative writing. Besides, it can also motivate them to start their own diaries, which can help them with their creative writing skills by creating daily habits of writing (Donovan, 2012, p. 19), and eventually finding their own voice (Ward Jouve, 2001; Spiro, 2014).

3.2.5. Activity 5: Backstory (25 min.)

In this activity, students will continue exploring the character they have chosen, either Della or Jim. They will be asked to give their most precious possessions, Della's hair or Jim's watch, some backstory. Students may present the background of why Della's hair became so important to her, how Jim got his watch, or whom it used to belong to. Once again, the emphasis is on the characters, and this exercise would help students to understand them better, to know who they are and why they behave the way they do in O. Henry's story. Indeed, Malcolm Bradbury argues that "showing [the characters'] histories, backgrounds, backstories; their social and sexual roles, their hopes, doubts, conflicts and fates" is how they can be developed (2001, p. 112). By practicing with Della and Jim, students can understand how to create and develop characters, which they will be able to use when the time comes to write their own short stories.

When all students have finished their texts, or at least ten minutes before the end of the session, some of the stories they have created can be read and shared, if students so wish. It would also be important for the instructor to have a copy of each of the texts, mainly to correct mistakes in English and to provide some positive feedback on their writing style, etc.

3.3. "The Legacy" (90 min.)

In Virginia Woolf's short story "The Legacy," the narrative revolves around the character of Gilbert Clandon, a politician whose wife, Angela, has recently passed away in a traffic accident. Through Angela's diaries, which she has left behind, Gilbert begins to learn more about her life and the emotional depths he was previously unaware of. As he reads through

the diaries, Gilbert becomes particularly interested in the figure referred to as B.M., who appears to have been significant in Angela's life. The story culminates in Gilbert's discovery that B.M. was Angela's lover, and that she committed suicide after B.M. had taken his own life, driven by their profound but unfulfilled love for each other.

3.3.1. Activity 1: Pre-reading and warming up (10 min.)

One of the most interesting aspects of this story is how it is constructed and the techniques that are used to build suspense and offer discovery. Therefore, the aim of this session is for students to become aware of and familiarize themselves with the difference between the narratological notions of focalizer and narrator, as well as with the style used in Modernism. Woolf employs two typically modernist narrative devices – internal monologue and stream of consciousness – in this story to guide the reader through the characters' thoughts. A brief introduction to Modernism will follow, highlighting its characteristics and most prominent authors (namely, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce), with a focus on the stream of consciousness device.

For this introductory activity, a video from the University of Oregon (US) will be screened, which explains the stream of consciousness in detail and provides examples.⁷ During this exercise, students will not be required to complete any task but to absorb as much information as possible, paying special attention to the characteristics of this literary device, as students will discuss them at the end of the video. The goal of this activity is for students to familiarize themselves with the Modernist style, enabling them to identify examples of it later in the story.

3.3.2. Activity 2: Reading and Listening to the Story (18 min.)

For this session, students will follow the reading of the story by "Fireside Tale," available in YouTube.⁸ They may underline words or expressions that are unfamiliar to them. These are later explained and contextualized, which allows students to learn new vocabulary and fully understand the plot of the story.

3.3.3. Activity 3: Discussion (10-15 min.)

"The Legacy" is a short story that generates thought-provoking discussions, given the final twist where the reader discovers, alongside the protagonist, that Angela committed suicide to follow her lover. It is interesting to see if (or when) students could foresee the ending of the story, as well as their impression of the character of Gilbert Clandon. It is here when emphasis can be made on the distinction between focalizer and narrator, and on what that distinction entails in the construction of meaning, suspense, and surprise in the story. With this aim in mind, these and other similar issues can be discussed:⁹

- At what point in the story did you grasp the full significance of Angela's legacy? Were you quicker than Gilbert to understand what had happened? What earlier clues did you perhaps miss?
- What puzzles Gilbert Clandon about the circumstances surrounding his wife's death? What does Gilbert assume caused her death?

⁷ The video is available in YouTube: <<https://tinyurl.com/mwsvjkn9>> (08/07/2024)

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTHTsTJoan8&ab_channel=FiresideTales> (08/07/2024)

⁹ Some questions have been adapted from Marcus (1995, pp. 46-48).

- How does Gilbert initially account for Sissy Miller's extreme distress when she enters the room? What does he later remember about her?
- What does Gilbert assume is the cause of Sissy Miller's suggestion that he might need her help? Why is this so?
- How does Gilbert Clandon expect his wife to behave throughout their married life?

How does Angela Clandon change during their marriage?

- What is the role of B. M. in the story?
- How does Gilbert Clandon's limited point of view influence his perception of his wife, B. M., and Sissy Miller?
- How much does Gilbert's understanding of the events change by the end of the story?
- What might Angela's motive have been in leaving her diaries for Gilbert – revenge, honesty, an explanation? Do you think she was right to make sure Gilbert learnt the truth? Why/Why not?
- Why do you think the author decided to give that title to the story? What legacies do you find in the story?

In this case, the aim is that students can reflect on social issues (such as the role of women in marriage during the first half of the twentieth century, for instance), moral and ethical issues (like adultery and suicide) and narratological issues (such as the difference between narrator and focalizer). It might be interesting to compare this story with others previously read in this course, such as "The Story of an Hour," to relate the presentation of marriage and the role of women in each story, bearing in mind the forty-year gap between both publications.

3.3.4. Activity 4: Angela (20 min.)

This and the next creative writing activities proposed for this story revolve around expanding and complementing the original text. This activity focuses on Angela and the moments leading up to her death. Woolf presents the reader with the last entries of Angela's diary; however, this activity pays special attention to her last thoughts before stepping onto the busy road. The goal is that having seen several examples of internal monologues, students can replicate this technique writing a paragraph that shows the dilemma of Angela's emotions and thoughts considering suicide. This activity tests not only students' imagination and creativity, but also their ability to adapt to a given style and to use complex literary devices (Baughman, 2011).

Once they have finished, if time remains, volunteers may be asked to read their paragraphs aloud. The instructor, in any case, will collect the texts to provide all students with positive feedback.

3.3.5. Activity 5: Expanding on the Ending (25 min.)

This last task consists of expanding on the ending, imagining how Gilbert would act next. The objective is that students write two or three additional paragraphs developing Woolf's ending, to see if they think Gilbert would take responsibility for his actions or he would eventually

talk to Sissy Miller to complete the missing information, for example. Students need to try and replicate Woolf's writing style, adding examples of internal monologue and keeping the distinction between narrator and focalizer.

Following this activity, students are also asked to reflect on their classmates' texts by exchanging their final writings and analyzing them in pairs. Special attention is paid to both content and written expression.

3.4. "The Way Up to Heaven" (90 min.)

In "The Way Up to Heaven," Roald Dahl focuses on a married couple, the Fosters. Mrs Foster lives in constant fear of missing a train or plane, a fear often exacerbated by her husband, who deliberately delays her. Mrs Foster plans a trip to Paris to visit her daughter, and her husband nearly causes her to miss the plane by delaying her. At the airport, she learns of a delay, and she must travel the next day. The following day, Mr Foster again causes her distress by insisting on being dropped off at his club, which is in the opposite direction. He later claims to have forgotten a gift for their daughter, further delaying them. When Mrs Foster returns home to hurry him, she changes her mind and instructs the chauffeur to drive her directly to the airport leaving her husband behind. Mrs Foster spends several unforgettable weeks in Paris, frequently writing to her husband at his club, assuming he is there since the house is empty. Upon her return, she is surprised that her husband is not at the airport to meet her. When she arrives home, she learns that Mr Foster had been trapped in the lift and presumably died during her absence.

As with all the stories discussed in these sessions, this tale focuses on a married couple. This session will allow us to compare all the couples examined hitherto and delve deeper into a characteristic aspect of Dahl's writing: irony and humor.

3.4.1. Activity 1: Pre-reading and warming up (10 min.)

Students might already know Roald Dahl because of his having written stories for children, such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) or *Matilda* (1988), but they might not know his facet as a writer for adults or the fact that his poetry warrants particular attention. To introduce his poetic work, this initial activity involves reading one of his poems. The selected poem, "Television," is especially pertinent as it explores themes central to Dahl's broader body of work, notably the significance of reading in children's development.¹⁰ The poem serves as an introduction to Dahl's imaginative world and his distinctive comedic style, thereby preparing students for the subsequent reading of the selected story. Furthermore, the poem exposes students to the diverse possibilities of twentieth-century English poetry, with which students may not be familiar. It also encourages a discussion on the contemporary relevance of this mid-twentieth-century poem.

3.4.2. Activity 2: Reading and Listening to the Story (26 min.)

For "The Way Up to Heaven," students will listen to Lewis Kirk's version, available on YouTube.¹¹ They may underline words or expressions that are unfamiliar to them. These are later explained and contextualized, which allows students to learn new vocabulary and fully understand the plot of the story.

¹⁰ Dahl's poem is available here: <<https://allpoetry.com/poem/8503169-Television-by-Roald-Dahl>> (08/07/2024).

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eiPjUkJFrvU&ab_channel=LewisKirk> (08/07/2024)

3.4.3. Activity 3: Discussion (10-15 min.)

Although the following list of discussion topics might be provided for class consideration, if necessary, in this session students are encouraged to propose their own questions or explore themes that have piqued their interest:

- What would you say the story is about?
- How is Mrs Foster introduced in the story? And Mr Foster?
- How does the author make the reader sympathize with Mrs Foster?
- Do you think that Mr Foster is intentionally cruel with his wife?
- How do you interpret the ending of the story?
- Is the ending predictable or unpredictable?
- Would the ending be better if we knew what happened to Mrs Foster?
- What are Mrs Foster's feelings at the end of the story?
- What does the title refer to?

3.4.4. Activity 4: Mrs Foster (20 min.)

As some of the past activities have evinced, the emphasis of the proposed creative writing tasks lies on characters and character building. For this last creative writing task, the focus is on the character of Mrs Foster. Dahl's narration presents a vivid picture of Mrs Foster, but the ending of the story suggests that there is more to the character than meets the eye. Consequently, this activity is meant for students to expand on their understanding of the character of Mrs Foster, and to create a full sketch of her personality, based on the clues found in the story. Details might include a physical description, her background, education and career, her relationship with other characters (mainly Mr Foster, but also their daughter), and her personality traits (Donovan, 2011, p. 38; Bell, 2001, p. 92). This way, students will create a complete portrait of Mrs Foster presenting how each of them understands the character, which will serve as a warm-up for writing a short story based on her (Donovan, 2011, p. 38).

Students can design their sketches as they wish, either with a written description following the proposed scheme (including any other information they believe relevant) or with a more visual mind map that illustrates the character. Predictably, students will come up with a multifaceted character with several layers of depth and complexity.

3.4.5. Activity 5: Different Settings (20 min.)

Once students are familiar with the new Mrs Foster, they will start to truly develop her character and find her own voice. As suggested by Bell (2001, p. 93), an interesting exercise to practice characterization is to place the character in different settings, to see how they would react and the conflicts they may encounter. Students will therefore be asked to create two separate pieces of their desired length, in which they present Mrs Foster in two different environments: a familiar one as might be the apartment of her daughter in Paris (showing how Mrs Foster would behave with her daughter and her grandchildren), and a more exotic one,

such as on a trip to the Canary Islands, for example. Students are free to choose these settings, as well as the characters who may accompany Mrs Foster in these creations, but the importance of the exercise lies in the creation of the character, so students can anticipate how she reacts in different environments.

3.4.6. Activity 6: Mrs Foster 2.0 (20 min.)

Now that students have become familiar with the character of Mrs Foster, however they understand her, students are ready to write a full story that has Mrs Foster as main character. They may choose to continue “The Way Up to Heaven,” designing what happens next in the story, whether Mrs Foster will go to prison, or what her life will be like once she is free of her husband. Alternatively, students may choose to present Mrs Foster’s life in Paris with her daughter or write a story that starts with her childhood and shows how Mrs Foster has become the character readers have encountered in Dahl’s story. The story of her engagement to Mr Foster might also be relevant and interesting for some students. In any case, they are encouraged to include some of the stylistic and narratological elements seen thus far in the course, such as stream of consciousness, or the difference between focalizer and narrator. Be it as it may, the purpose of this activity is that students fully understand the character they have created, based on Dahl’s, and are able to give her a voice and a story of her own. As twenty minutes may not be enough to finish, students are encouraged to continue at home. The next session could be devoted to sharing their stories and provide feedback for their classmates, if they so wish.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The idea to jointly use the book club and creative writing literary workshop devices in the ESL university classroom comes because of the experiences gained in teaching both the language centre course “Let’s Read” and the university course “Contemporary Narrative in English” for two consecutive academic years at the University of La Rioja.

The benefits of the book club in teaching English as a Second Language have been widely researched. Linguistically, students acquire a good knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary by working with real literary texts and become more fluent and confident using their speaking skills once they have actively participated in class discussions. Using those texts in the ESL language centre classroom has shown that students deepen their knowledge and understanding of literature and their appreciation of other cultures and nationalities, which increases motivation and favours important values like respect and tolerance.

On the other hand, adding creative writing literary workshops to a more conventional approach to the teaching of and learning about literature in the university classroom has proved a productive manner of stimulating creativity and encouraging critical thought. Students learn more about the intricacies of short story building and each writer’s style by producing texts themselves, as when asked to provide an alternative ending for a story, for example. Likewise, students acquire a deeper understanding of the texts themselves and their nuances when they face the challenge of translating them into their native language or L1.

This article explores the possibility and potential benefits of combining an English-language book club with a creative writing workshop in the ESL classroom to enhance students’ linguistic proficiency, creativity, and imagination. Reading, analyzing, and creatively working with short stories in English not only acquaints students with the literature written in this language, and fosters a deeper cultural appreciation of diverse English-speaking cultures. It also allows students to improve and perfect their L2 language skills through reading, writing,

listening, and orally discussing the stories in class. The experience gained suggests that the benefits of this proposal can be several, ranging from the improvement in language skills to the boost to students' motivation to learn a foreign language and engage in its culture, and to the cultivation of creativity and critical thinking. For all these reasons, this proposal for a combination of the English book club and the creative writing literary workshop in the ESL university classroom proves to be an efficient, innovative, and engaging approach to the teaching of English. This dual approach to the teaching/learning of English as a Second Language at a university level aims at enriching students' literary experiences and enhancing their linguistic and creative abilities.

The four ninety-minute sessions presented have a recurrent structure that includes warming-up or pre-reading activities that may contribute to providing students with some context for the topics, issues, language, style, etc. of the stories; a proactive reading/listening of the stories themselves that focuses on grammatical and lexical aspects of the text, as well as on prosody and pronunciation; class discussions on specific elements, characters, and their most relevant features more frequently, but also stylistic and narratological choices; and creative writing activities of increasing difficulty and more demanding scope as the course advances. Sessions have been planned for third- or fourth-year students in undergraduate university courses in English as a Second Language, but they could also be implemented in language centres with minor adaptations depending on students' linguistic level. The activities proposed focus on the analysis and construction of characters, an essential element of fiction, to provide students with a foundational understanding of character development in literature. These activities have been applied to four different short stories, but they could also be adapted to other texts, accommodating students' preferences, linguistic levels, and cultural backgrounds. Overall, the main objective is for these activities to be considered relevant and engaging by students, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of the instructional approach.

Further research is needed to assess whether these sessions successfully meet the intended objectives or whether there are areas that require some improvement. In any case, if the ESL university course were to be taught exclusively using this methodology, it would be necessary to incorporate a wider range of short stories, perhaps including authors representing other English-speaking countries and historical periods. While this proposal includes just four ninety-minute sessions, we believe that a ten-hour course would be more effective if we want students to get enough guidance to be able to create their own short stories. Achieving this goal would be the best way to foster university students' creativity and interest in the study of both literature and English as a Second Language.

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