

Introduction

»Brevity is the soul of wit« – Polonius' famous dictum in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (2, ii) also applies to SHORTIES. Short narrative texts are valuable material for the language classroom because they are short and narrative – and often witty.

In contrast to Polonius' follow-up statement to King Claudius and Hamlet's mother Gertrude »I will be brief. Your noble son is mad«, shorties are anything but »mad«. They are flexible in use, can comfortably be dealt with in a single lesson, appear in a multitude of forms, can bridge the gap between coursebooks and »Literature with a capital 'L'«, are increasing their popularity in the digital era, can promote all language competences, fulfil anthropological and psychological needs, and are an omnipresent phenomenon in everyday life. Man's desire to tell or listen to stories has even caused the American philosopher Walter Fisher to relabel man: from *homo sapiens* to *homo narrans*.

But where is *homo narrans* – or the *storytelling animal* (Alasdair MacIntyre) – in the classroom? Given this multivalency, it is astonishing that shorties have been neglected in foreign language teaching. The traditional *short story* has always been an integral part of language learning. Yet the *short short stories* may have been regarded too short to be accepted as aesthetically dignified literature worth being treated in the classroom.

It seems high time to plead for the inclusion of *flash fiction* in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language). This style of fictional literature of extreme brevity appears in a huge number of varieties – from realist, surreal, hyperrealist forms to psychological, impressionist, essayistic types up to satirical, social-critical, or parabolic texts. As there is no widely accepted definition of the length of this genre, any narrative text between 6 and 1,000 words may be subsumed among the categories of flash fiction or shorties. Dramatic and lyrical texts can, of course, also be very short, but will not be treated as shorties here.

This book, as all edited volumes in the SELT (Studies in English Language Teaching) series, follows a **triple aim**:

1. Linking TEFL with related academic disciplines
2. Balancing TEFL research and classroom practice
3. Combining theory, methodology and exemplary lessons

This triple aim is reflected in the **three-part structure** of this volume. In Part A (Theory), the topic of shorties and flash fiction is investigated from the perspectives of three academic disciplines, i.e. from the viewpoints of TEFL, literary

studies and linguistics. Part B (Methodology) assembles six contributions on selected texts, media and techniques. Nine concrete lesson plans can be found in Part C (Classroom). These lessons were designed by lecturer and students at university, then conducted and assessed by 13 teachers at German schools, and finally revised by the editor. Each of these nine chapters is divided into genre (brief background information on the text type), procedure (source, synopsis, competences, topics, level, time, phases of the lesson), materials (texts, worksheets, board sketches), solutions (expected answers), and bibliography.

Part A is introduced by the **TEFL** perspective. **Engelbert Thaler** gives a few answers to the six W and one H questions: What? (Definition) Why? (Rationale) When? (Level) Where? (Venues) Which? (Types) What for? (Objectives) How? (Methods). With regard to the basic issues of selection, methodology and objectives, he draws a triple conclusion: After the short story has long been accepted as a popular genre in TEFL, it is high time to use shorter short stories and flash fiction as well. Teachers should strike a fair balance between analytical and creative procedures. With the help of shorties, narrative competence concerning receptive and productive skills should be promoted.

The perspective of **literary studies** is adopted by **Timo Müller**. He focuses on the formal features and the didactic potential of the short short story in general. After a brief historical overview, he situates the short short story in relation to other genres, discusses the reading strategies it demands, and illustrates his findings by the example of Joseph Bruchac's story »The Ship« (1973). Here he reveals the specific combination of individualization and generalization that characterizes the genre of the short short story and makes it useful for classroom use.

Anita Fetzer shows the perspective of **linguistics**. She examines the form and function of small stories in the research fields of sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, presents analyses of small stories in media communication, and adapts the small form to learning scenarios. It becomes clear that small stories are not only an interesting sociolinguistic phenomenon, but provide valuable tools for teaching the grammar of spoken and written English, refining the (mental) lexicon and enhancing discourse competence.

Part B is introduced by **Carola Surkamp**. She explores **mini-sagas** through **drama-based activities**. She realizes that so far suggestions for classroom activities involving mini-sagas have predominantly approached the genre in a written and narrative way. Short narrative texts, however, can also be approached by acting them out. Therefore she examines the questions of where precisely the potential of a drama-based approach to mini-sagas lies, which techniques are suitable for the scenic interpretation of the text, and how drama activities can be prepared and evaluated.

Petra Kirchoff recommends **Twitterfiction**. First she describes this new literary format, in which authors can use exactly 140 Unicode characters as well as auditive and audiovisual media to tell a story, continue one or just share their ideas with other users. Then she demonstrates that teaching Twitterfiction in English classes is rewarding for many reasons. Students encounter new linguistic forms like acronyms and abbreviations and poetic language in a new format, which conveys immediacy and possibly communicational authenticity. Additionally, Twitterfiction can serve as an excellent starting point for discussing ethical issues in the use of the social media.

Senem Aydin discusses the potential of **picturebooks** to depict the **refugee** experience and raise students' awareness about experiences like persecution, flight and migration. She makes clear that such stories can contribute to students' linguistic, literary, intercultural and affective development. After she has pointed out relevant criteria for selecting suitable stories, she gives us numerous storytelling suggestions for Sarah Garland's picturebook »Azzi in Between«. Her conclusion includes a selected list of recommended picturebooks on migration.

Stephanie Schaidt draws our attention to **metafictive picturebooks**. As this genre constantly transgresses boundaries and plays with literary conventions, it is a rich resource for the EFL classroom. Due to their multilayered nature, metafictive picturebooks can be used with students of different ages and levels of language proficiency. After defining the genre, the author identifies seven metafictive strategies, which she illustrates with numerous examples of self-referential picturebooks. She states convincing reasons why we should use them in the language classroom, and finally suggests several pre-, while- and post-reading activities.

Katrin Stadlinger-Kessel convinces us that students' imagination can be fired by six words, i.e. the shortest short story on record. She presents inspiring suggestions for a 45-minute lesson on **Hemingway's famous short** at an upper-intermediate level. What is most striking here is the contrast between the factual wording of a classified ad and the emotional impact behind it. This is one of the reasons why people find this story so compelling and why it resonates with students, too. For the teacher, there may be another big advantage of dealing with it in class: no preparation is necessary in terms of photocopied materials, the only things needed are a blackboard and chalk.

Bernard Brown claims that short texts are motivating for our students and allow the teacher to integrate them into a well-rounded lesson, using the texts as a »diving board« for other communicative and interactive activities. He suggests several **techniques** such as mazes, corrupted texts, just one word, remov-

ing punctuation and capital letters, three-in-one, matching and sequencing, and student created gapped texts.

Part C comprises nine contributions, which demonstrate how certain sub-genres of shorties can be employed in the English language classroom:

- Take a closer look at the genre of **proverb**, and its wicked relative, the **perverb**. Students do not only become familiar with the English equivalents of their L1 proverbs, but deepen their knowledge of rhetorical devices, and even create their own perverbs, i.e. anti-proverbs.

- Do you know this **anecdote** about F.D. Roosevelt, the only US President to serve more than two terms, who indulged in some inappropriate small talk at a social function (»I murdered my grandmother«) and received a witty answer from one of his guests? Your students can practise their phatic communication skills, and even promote their power of quick-witted repartee.

- In a similar vein, **urban myths** sound »too good to be true«. Do you believe in the story of the criminals who called the police on their own? Or of the clown statue that only the children see? Urban legends like those are modern folk tales narrating stories which are presumably real, but odd, and supposedly happened to a friend of a friend.

- **Fables** are represented by James Thurber, regarded by many to be America's greatest humorist of the 20th century, and his masterpiece *The Unicorn in the Garden*. In this fable (is it one?), an apparently clever wife tries to send her apparently mad husband to an insane asylum. But, as the saying goes, you shouldn't count your boobies – or chickens – before they are hatched.

- If you were the heroine in the **fairy tale** of *The Princess and the Tin Box*, you would without any doubt fall for the poorest, yet strongest and most handsome prince, wouldn't you? After all, you are an experienced reader who knows that »money can't buy me love«. Modern-day princesses in such fairy tale-fable-parody mash-ups, however, may go for alternative endings – and morals.

- Why not **joke** your way through grammar? After all, grammar is the difference between knowing your crap and knowing you're crap.

- Sparkling humour can also be found in **mini-sagas**, but the two examples treated in this volume deal with rather serious issues (bullying, capital punishment). Students may be encouraged to create their own mini-sagas – or, if 50 words are not enough, some *55 fiction*, or a *drabble* (100 words).

- **Nasreddin stories** are centred on the wise Sufi scholar of the same name, who may – or may not – have lived somewhere in the Middle East in the 13th century. Seeming odd, impudent and absurd at first glance, his actions and statements gradually reveal trickster humour and philosophical wit.

- Finally, **picture books** are exemplified by the wonderful 32-page illustrated text *It's a Book*, which may be read as a delightful manifesto on behalf of print

in the digital age. A mouse, a jackass and a monkey discover a new thing – a book! It does not need a mouse or a password, and it cannot text, tweet, or toot. Why not? »Because it's a book«. Apart from enjoying this lovely book on a book, students can consolidate their vocabulary by playing Bingo or doing a vocab relay contest.

»Brevity is the soul of wit«: Let us not imitate Polonius, whose speech is self-contradictory. He wastes plenty of time denouncing the time wasted by rhetorical speechifying. Literary scholars regard Polonius as the least brief and one of the least witty characters in the play, and Sigmund Freud aptly referred to him as »the old chatterbox«. So let's be brief: Enjoy these short contributions on shorties!

A. Theory

Engelbert Thaler

Shorties in English Language Teaching

»We lack the optimism of the 19th century to believe that the world could be captured on 500 pages; that is why we choose the short form« (Jorge Luis Borges). This paradoxical aphorism by the great Argentinian writer draws our attention to the genre of *shorties*.

The following paper attempts to give a few answers to the six W and one H questions:

- What? ▶ Definition
- Why? ▶ Rationale
- When? ▶ Level
- Where? ▶ Venues
- Which? ▶ Types
- What for? ▶ Objectives
- How? ▶ Methodology

1 Definition

For Sale: Baby Shoes, Never Worn.

This untitled text, which comprises only six words, is said to originate from Ernest Hemingway. It may be the most famous example of *shorties*, i.e. short narrative texts. There is no widely accepted definition of the length of this genre, and the maximum number of words mentioned in various sources varies between 50 and 1,000 words (e.g. Nischik 1997). Although dramatic or poetic texts can, of course, also be very short, they are not subsumed under this term here.

In English, the term *flash fiction* has become established for literary texts of extreme shortness. Prose below 1,000 words is also called sudden fiction, microfiction, micro-story, mini-fiction, skinny fiction, ultra-short stories, short short, postcard fiction, prose poetry or short short story. Shorties can look back on a long tradition, from Aesop's fables and Buddhist Zen stories to Vonegut and Cage in the Anglo-American realm, or the Germans Brecht and von Doderer (also cf. Müller in this volume).

2 Rationale

Why should we make use of shorties in our classrooms? To state the obvious, short narrative forms are good teaching material because they are short and narrative. Behind this pleonastic triviality, several benefits of shorties can be detected (Thaler 2008, 2012):

- They are flexible in use.
- They can comfortably be dealt with in a single lesson.
- There is a multitude of forms beyond the classic short story: from traditional simple forms (fairy tales, fables) to more complex narrative genres (short stories) and modern media forms (news stories, hyperfiction).
- The popularity of shorties is increasing. The rise of the Internet has enhanced an awareness of flash fiction, with websites and webzines such as *Flash*, *Flash Fiction Online* or *Flash Fiction Magazine* being devoted exclusively to this genre. Its succinct and punchy form seems perfectly in line with the online reader, and the ubiquitous hand-held devices are also ideal content delivery systems for short fiction.
- Stories fulfil anthropological, psychological and social needs. Shorties serve a variety of functions: a means of making sense of an individual's experiences, a medium of communication and community, a form of entertainment, a source of solace, a fundamental need (beginning, middle, end). »So while we live with the anxiety that our lives may have one of these key attributes but not the other (they come to an end, but they do not make sense), we comfort ourselves with narratives, which have both these desiderata: they have beginnings, middles and ends, and they make sense« (Toolan 2001: 14).
- They may bridge the gap between the texts in the familiar coursebooks used throughout the first years of instruction on the one hand, and »Literature with a capital 'L'«, i.e. writing of recognized artistic value, on the other.
- A short short story usually has a powerful effect. »Its brevity and condensed resonance make sure it lingers in the mind and heart. It has the power of a poem but with greater clarity and accessibility« (Wells, cited in Burke 2011).
- Shorties are usually characterized by discursive openness. Against the background of the reader-response theory, the aesthetic densification within a minimal space opens up ample scope for diverse reactions and interpretations by the learners. »A short story is a story on which one has to work a long time until it is short« (Vicente Aleixandre).
- Telling stories is an omnipresent phenomenon in everyday life, the media ... and the classroom.

3 Level

At what age should teaching shorties start? Some people argue that literary texts cannot be integrated into the classroom until students have reached a level advanced enough for them to grasp the full meaning. Such an attitude seems restricted if we do not exclude »literature with a small 'l'«, and believe that appreciating literature has to be gradually developed in a long process (Thaler 2008). In particular shorties can be made use of at all levels – from beginners to intermediate pupils and finally advanced students. The age and level of a group has to be considered, of course, in terms of teaching goals, classroom procedures and types of shorties.

Beginners in the primary classroom enjoy short and funny texts such as fairy tales, jokes or picture books. The methods employed must take into account the developmental stage of the learners by including playful and holistic learning, accompanied by movement and music. A technique often tried and tested is storytelling – or at least story-reading. The aim in primary classrooms cannot be a critical analysis of texts but enabling children a first contact with literature, which promotes basic language skills, is fun and enhances the motivation to learn English.

A full understanding of shorties may take place at more advanced levels. All reading techniques can be trained, a profound analysis may be attempted, creative writing and other forms of creating can become more sophisticated. So the initial question may be answered by pleading for »literature for all ages«.

4 Venues

Where can you teach and learn about shorties? The most obvious, yet not the only, place for teaching literature is the classroom, with all the students sitting at their desks and reading the same story. However, one may imagine further options:

- Reading corner (in the classroom)
- Classroom library
- School library
- Literature workshops
- At home
- Public places
- Internet reading
- Mobile-assisted reading

5 Types

Fortunately there is a wealth of diverse forms of shorties for the teacher to choose from (e.g. Allen 1997; Garner 2011; Nischik 1983; Nischik 2005; Reiser 2014; in particular Thomas et al. 2015; Thomas et al. 1992). The following table lists 28 of these types, before some of them are illustrated by sample texts.

Types of Shorties			
jokes	puns	riddles	fairy tales
fables	(anti-) proverbs	quotations / aphorisms	anecdotes
flash fiction	folk tales	urban myths	mini-sagas
Nasreddin stories	letters	epitaphs	ads
failures	prayers	fumblerules	parables
Zen kōans	six-word stories	drabble	twitterature
symbol stories	funny definitions	Murphy's laws	short stories

Table 1: Types of shorties

- Anecdotes

Lady Astor once remarked to Winston Churchill at a dinner party:
 »If I were your wife I would poison your tea.«
 Without showing any agitation Churchill replied:
 »If I were your husband I would drink it.«

- Mini-sagas

A *mini-saga* consists of exactly 50 words (plus title). If 55 words are required, the text is called *55 fiction*, with 100 words, it is a *drabble*.

Like mother, like son
 1955
 Dear Mummy,
 I hate this boarding school. Food awful, prefects bully me. Please take me home.
 Love, David

Dear David,
Nonsense! Chin up. – Mother
1997

Dear David,
I hate this Home. Food awful, nurses treat me like a child. Fetch me immediately. – Mother

Dear Mother,
Nonsense! Chin up. – David

- Six-word stories

Strangers. Friends. Best friends. Lovers. Strangers.

- Jokes

On a group of beautiful deserted islands in the middle of nowhere, the following people are stranded:

2 Italian men and 1 Italian woman

2 French men and 1 French woman

2 German men and 1 German woman

2 English men and 1 English woman

2 Irish men and 1 Irish woman

One month later on these absolutely stunning deserted islands in the middle of nowhere, the following things have occurred:

One Italian man killed the other Italian man for the Italian woman.

The two French men and the French woman are living happily together in *ménage-a-trois*.

The two German men have a strict weekly schedule of alternating visits with the German woman.

The two English men are waiting for someone to introduce them to the English woman.

The two Irishmen divided the island into North and South, and set up a distillery. They do not remember if sex is in the picture because it gets sort of foggy after the first few litres of coconut whiskey. But they're satisfied because at least the English aren't having any fun.

- Puzzles

What do you say to King Kong when he gets married? (*Kong-ratulations*)

- Anti-proverbs

All's well that ends. (*Reduction*)

A barking dog never bites, but a lot of dogs don't know this proverb. (*Supplement*)

The best things in life are for a fee. (*Substitution*)

Marriages are made in heaven knows what state of mind. (*Synthesis*)

- Twisted quotes

Somebody is boring me; I think it's me. (Dylan Thomas)

- Answers to children's letters

Dear Pamela,

Santa only brings presents. I'm afraid I cannot take away your baby brother. – Love, Santa

- Fumblerrules

1. Don't use no double negatives.
2. Reserve the apostrophe for its proper use and omit it when its not needed.
3. Do not put statements in the negative form.
4. Verbs has to agree with their subjects.
5. No sentence fragments.