



## Six-Word Novels: Their Evolution and Exploitation in Language Teaching

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### Abstract

*The English language is the most sought after language in the present day scenario, especially for engineers. In technical institutions language is taught by adopting Communicative Language Teaching and Task-Based Learning methodology. Language is learnt through various tasks in technical contexts. When these are taught in a more general context the response is better. Hence the paper aims at teaching language through a different context to the engineering students. Further, in a fast-moving world that survives through social media and the internet, an attempt has been made to pull out a genre that is prevalent in social media. The study is on employing Six-Word novels to teach the English language to engineering students.*

**Keywords:** Six-Word Novels, Evolution and Exploitation, Language Teaching.

### Introduction - Evolution of Six-word Novels

Six-word novels are a type of flash fiction. Flash fictions are novels that are written with a predetermined length or number of words. These are called sudden fiction which has been written with 1000 words, 750 words and 100 words. Six-word novels, as the name suggests are short stories that are written with just six words. It was supposed to be introduced by Ernest Hemingway according to the urban legend that was circulated till 2012. In 2012 (Frederick A Wright), an article was written where it was found that there was no proof connecting the shorter story with Hemingway. The story that was attributed to Hemingway runs as “Baby shoes for sale: Never worn.” The article established that a different version of the story was found in the newspaper published in 1912 when Hemingway was just 12-13 years of age.

These six-word novels were revived by Larry Smith on Jan. 6, 2006, under the name Six-word memoirs (<https://sixwordmemoirs.com>). He created a website along with Rachel Fershleiser and called for the readers to write their memoirs in six words. The collection of which was published under the title, *Not Quite What I Was Planning: Six-Word Memoirs from Writers Famous & Obscure*. It was the first of the six-word memoir book series and was published in 2008. Around thousand stories contributed by both popular and unknown personalities were included in it. The next book on love and heartbreak was published in 2009. A separate platform was opened for the teens by Smith in 2008. The popularity of this genre spread widely and it was used in hospitals, awareness campaigns and by teachers.



The publisher Harper Collins has published a teacher's guide to using Six-word memoirs as a teaching tool. Second grade teachers and college teachers were suggested to use this as a teaching tool. A lesson plan for books 1 and 2 is found on the website. This genre is taken up for the present study on teaching language through literature.

### **Background to the study**

As Kavitharaj (2017) says teaching language through literature can be enjoyable and fun. Further, it can enhance the writing style of the learners. Selecting an appropriate literary work to teach language is equally important. Further, the literary text should pique the interest of the learners and it should be relevant to them. As Jewett (2017) points out reading an entire novel can be boring, and time-consuming and the present-day learner might feel exhausted, despite its interesting content. Looking at the advantages, a text that is a story at the same time is small and will fit the demand of the language teachers and the learners. One such literary genre is the shorter short stories, namely the Six-word novels.

### **Objectives**

1. A study of the origin and growth of six-word novels and their impact on the present-day learners.
2. An attempt is made to fathom the possibilities of teaching language through the shortest form of stories with limited diction.

### **Hypothesis**

1. Language through literature would be more fun and contextual and makes learning easier.
2. Employing Six-word novels helps students learn vocabulary and grammar better.
3. Six-word novels can be used to improve the writing skills of learners.

### **Research Questions**

1. Can the short stories' shortest form be used to teach a language?
2. What aspect of language can be taught using Six-word novels?

### **Methodology**

Two groups were identified from the same age group, in this case, learners of the control group and experimental group were selected from first-year BE students. The Control group was taught vocabulary, grammar and writing in a general way, wherein the concepts were taught directly without any link to literature. The experimental group was taught language through six-word novels. Later on, this group was made to answer a questionnaire about their learning capabilities and the effectiveness of learning a language through literature. Later on, an assessment activity was done were given for both the groups to gauge the retention capacity of the learners after a period of one week.

In the experimental group, learners were exposed to six-word novels and the platform was made open for discussion and interpretation. The learners were made to guess the meanings of the words and their usage along with the form of the words. They were then made to employ the learned words in sentences and similar six-word novels. Likewise,



learners were also made to identify the sentence structures, subject-verb agreement, different forms of the words and punctuation in the samples given to them.

### Discussion

Students were given a collection of 20 Six-word novels selected for vocabulary building. The selection of the stories was done based on their pliability to teach grammar, vocabulary and writing skills. There were at least 6 stories with new words or with new usage, 6 stories with punctuation marks, and 6 stories with different sentence structures in the selected stories. The class was divided into a group of five with 8 or nine members per group. Each group was given at least three stories one each for grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure. Students were made to read them and time was given for them to interpret them as a whole class. During the interpretation, students were asked to guess the meaning of the new words. Once the interpretation was over, the learners were asked to find out similar words with the same meaning for the stories given to them. They were also asked to make sentences on their own with the new words that they have learnt. This was also done for the set of similar words collected by them. At the end of the given time, each group was made to read out their sentences and their new words. Likewise, as a group, students were made to identify punctuation marks and explain their purpose as a team. Finally, the learners were asked to write their six-word novels. Some examples that were given to the students are as follows

- **My headstone was a participation trophy (doctor 1979)**
- **“Can I scratch out my existence?” (where did all go)**
- **“Freeze! Don’t move!”**  
**“I’m just...”**  
**Bang! (iliococcygeus)**
- **“Eventually, cemeteries grow. Cremations become popular.” (razzilox)**

For vocabulary activity, students were given a six-word novel (My headstone was a participation trophy). The word headstone was not familiar to many students; they came out with gravestones and tombstones for synonyms. They also made sentences using all three words. Learners were strictly advised to have different sentences for the words in the respective groups. The learners were also made to identify the various punctuation marks and give an explanation for the same for the given stories. They were also made to rewrite them with different punctuation marks. The change in the meaning of the punctuation marks was changed was noted. The third activity for the group was to write similar six-word stories with the same sentence pattern.

The response was comparatively better in the experimental group. Later on, during the assessment activity (choose the best option for the 15 words that they have learnt), students from the experimental group did well. Out of 46 students, nearly 35 of them were able to choose the correct answer for 14 words. On the other hand, in the control group, only 20 students out of 56 were able to choose the correct answers for 14 words. The learners in the



experimental group revealed that they found the session more interesting and interactive than the normal classes. They wanted to have more classes in such a manner.

### **Limitations**

Learning and teaching language through literature is interesting to both the teachers and learners especially when the sample literary content is an interesting story. Though this shortest genre was interesting, it had its limitations when it was made available to teach language. The selection of appropriate stories for the activity requires more attention and time. It gives little room for teaching all aspects of language. Since the content is less, only the basic sentence structures can be taught. Likewise, when it comes to writing skills also, there is not enough scope to teach learners paragraphs and other writing forms using these shorter stories as models.

### **Results and Conclusion**

1. Can the short stories' shortest form be used to teach a language?

Yes. These stories can be used to teach language.

2. What aspect of language can be taught using Six-word novels?

The present study found that only a few aspects of language can be taught using Six-word novels like vocabulary, sentence structure, punctuation and basic writing skills.

The current study revealed that Six-word novels are very popular among students. Students enjoy the learning sessions as these samples prove interesting, and challenging and it takes lesser time. Naturally, learners of the digital world are captured by its impact. The retention of the lexis is also more as the students were able to remember more words compared to the control group. Likewise, students enjoyed employing short and basic sentence structures while hitherto they went for long and complicated sentence structures. It is an apt activity to engage the learners for more than three to four sessions. Furthermore, slow learners found it helpful due to its basic sentence structure. It helped them to gain confidence to write in English using simple sentence structures. Fast learners were also fascinated by the brevity of the content and its effectiveness, they also tried writing effective Six-word stories. Another interesting factor that added to the learning was that the learner's creativity was triggered.

The study concludes that learning a language through literature is fun and interesting. Likewise, Six-word novels are not only entertaining it are also effective when adopted to teach language. At the same time due to its short form and limited words it lends itself to teaching only a few aspects of language namely lexis, grammar and writing skills. Even in these three aspects, the scope is limited. Still, it can be used to teach language as it grasps the learner's attention and retains it for more time due to its style that reflects that of digital learners. Further, its brevity and easy accessibility assist the teachers to introduce it to the learners. Similarly, it also helps the learners to grasp it soon as it requires less time. Though there are a few limitations, its advantages outweigh its limitations, hence it can be adapted to teach language effectively.



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