

Simplified Literature in the Intermediate ESL Classroom

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In recent years, the benefits of sustained silent reading (SSR) for pleasure have become an increasing focus of second language acquisition research. The emphasis has been on the benefits of students choosing their own books to read at home. While there is some merit in this, SSR also poses some problems for both the learner and the teacher. Finding suitable material can be a challenge, and it is difficult to verify that students are actually doing the reading and doing it in such a way that they gain optimum benefit from it. At the same time, a good deal of the reading that teachers traditionally expect of students in class follows the narrow and not entirely motivating formula of pre-reading activities, silent reading (usually a short story), a comprehension check, vocabulary work, and grammar exercises. In other words, it consists of bottom-up processing activities that are not particularly communicative in nature and that may well be one of the reasons students inwardly groan when reading is on the agenda.

According to Dubin and Bycina (1991), "an active ESL/EFL academic reading class should emphasize both reading to learn (activities that stress comprehension of subject matter content) and learning by doing (activities that call for utilization of the ideas of the text)" (p. 200). It is the latter, crucial step of critical reading in which learners have the opportunity to evaluate information that is often neglected in classroom practice. If we insist on using reading as an end in itself rather than as a means to an end (i.e., communication), then we are not creating an opportunity for our students to interact with the text and derive pleasure from the experience.

Current SLA research suggests that schema building, interaction, and integration of skills are important components of the learning process

(Hawkins, 1991). Simplified readers for intermediate level ESL students offer an opportunity to include all of these components in a manner that is both meaningful and motivating. Several series of books on the market are suitable for this purpose, including Oxford's *Bookworms* and Penguin's *Readers* series, the former having accompanying cassette tapes and the latter sometimes corresponding to recent movies (e.g., *Rain Man*). Both series have books suitable for a variety of levels, with selections ranging from classics to contemporary popular literature. (Please refer to the Appendix for a selected list of such literature and its publishers.)

In these simplified novels, the continuity of reading, discussing, and writing about issues *over time* serves to pique student interest and can transform reading from the prevalent classroom practice of simply studying short stories and articles that frequently have no logical connection to each other into a meaningful, holistic, and integrated learning project.

Brown (1994) argues against simplified texts, claiming that "Simplifying, or 'doctoring up' an existing short story or description is... not only unnecessary but also a disservice to students who are thereby deprived of original material with its natural redundancy, humor, wit, and other captivating features" (p. 299). He goes on to say that enough *simple* texts are available to preempt our need to resort to *simplified* texts. However, if we apply this viewpoint to novels, we deny our intermediate students access to much of the literature available to native speakers. It would be unreasonable, even cruel, to introduce this group of learners to the original works of Jane Austen and expect them to make much sense of what they read. However, exposing them to the simplified version of novels such as *Sense And Sensibility* provides the rare opportunity to explore a full-length plot with all its twists and turns.

Furthermore, because simplified novels pare down descriptions of characters and events to a minimum, they provide a virtual invitation for students to "fill the gaps" and flesh out descriptions from their own perspectives. In simplified literature, the author's viewpoint is not imposed on the reader to the usual extent, thereby allowing readers the chance to define the book in a way that might not have been possible with the unabridged original text.

Because I view reading as an interactive, communicative activity rather than as an end in itself, I suggest that teachers select books that are *at*, as opposed to *slightly above*, their students' current reading levels. When students have to grapple with the intricacies of plot in order to interpret the text and then use the information for communicative purposes, exposing them to a plethora of unfamiliar vocabulary or complex structures can interfere with the process and frustrate student attempts.

By providing comprehensible reading material, we are giving them the opportunity to succeed and do what most of us do with books in the first place: read them for pleasure. This in itself can be an intrinsically motivating and intensely satisfying experience.

In order to motivate students and ensure that meaningful communication occurs, the most beneficial approach is to explain at the outset that they will be reading a simplified book, and that the aim of the process is to interact orally with each other in response to what they read. Many students are daunted by the prospect of reading an entire book, simplified or not, so when they first get their simplified class readers, the opening activity needs to be motivating, relatively easy, and brief.

For example, students can be placed in groups to scan for information about the general features of the book (author, publisher, etc.), and the teacher can give some background information about the author. Often this can be as interesting as the book itself. (Consider the case of Gaston Leroux, author of *The Phantom of the Opera*, who had a morbid fascination with death and the occult after discovering that he had been born in a mortuary when his mother had gone into labor unexpectedly during the course of a long journey.)

Students can also examine the cover picture and attempt to predict what the book will be about. The synopsis on the back cover can be copied and cut out phrase by phrase for students to reassemble into a paragraph in pairs. In this manner, by the end of the first hour students will have activated their schemata and worked interactively using integrated skills. They are now psychologically ready to start reading the book proper.

I usually find it helpful for students to read one chapter in advance of where we are in class, as this provides them with the opportunity to read first at their own pace. In class, I read aloud each chapter of a book, usually in one chapter segments. Since students have already done silent reading at home, they can now follow along while being exposed to a native speaker's stress and intonation patterns. Following this second reading, I ask the students to orally summarize passages from the book in response to my questions. This is a necessary step because although students often have little trouble understanding a text at the sentence and paragraph levels, comprehending the intricacies of plot can prove far more difficult. It is therefore vital to check for understanding before proceeding on to more cognitively demanding activities.

At this stage, all the students are now in possession of the same information. This is a time of discovery, unpredictability, and risk taking, as students in small groups interact with each other to share their interpretations of information. It is important that the same format is not followed for

each chapter, since this would reduce class activities to a predictable, formulaic experience. Suggested activities at this stage include those requiring students to express an opinion, manipulate information, and do some limited vocabulary study.

In the early chapters of a book, graphic organizers can be useful for correlating information about characters and plot. However, I frequently ban the use of paper and pencil altogether, thereby giving the students no other recourse than to talk to each other. Such discussion provides an authentic opportunity to use modals and conditionals as students express what they think certain characters should do, or what they themselves would do in similar circumstances. Studying proverbs and idioms and deciding which may be relevant to a particular scene or character can also create a great deal of discussion as students work together to problem solve.

If there is an accompanying movie, students can read the chapter in the book before watching the corresponding scene, as this tends to assist their comprehension. Fifteen minutes of viewing is often sufficient, as it is difficult for students to maintain the requisite high level of concentration much beyond that. Teachers wishing to have their students view the entire movie might consider having students identify differences between the movie and the book, and engaging them in discussions concerning why the movie industry chose to make these changes.

When the class has made sufficient progress through the book, giving a team quiz based on factual and lexical information encountered is a motivating activity. This is also an informal way of assessing student understanding. A more formal approach to assessment may be in the form of a plot summary written by the teacher and administered as a dictation or a cloze exercise.

Written activities might include having students write a letter from the point of view of one of the characters to another, write a diary entry from a given character's point of view, write (and act out) a script for one of the scenes in the book, or predict what the characters will be doing ten years hence. Other interesting activities might include casting well-known actors and actresses for the main parts, renaming the book, and discussing the moral of the story.

Reading literature, then, is not simply about finding information from texts but about involving the readers in a direct experience through which they will naturally make connections between what they have read and their existing knowledge. Yet these connections are fashioned by each individual's unique cultural background, and it is this interaction that provides the occasion for genuine discovery. Students are intrinsically motivated by the teacher having enough faith in their language abilities to trust them

with a “real” book. When we encourage them to read between the lines, make interpretations, and offer opinions, we create a classroom atmosphere free from the concepts of correct and incorrect. Students are able to express and support their own ideas and feelings, and teaching gives way to truly meaningful communicative learning.

References

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- Dubin, F., & Bycina, D. (1991). Academic reading and the ESL/EFL teacher. In M. Celce-Murcia, (Ed.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (pp. 328-346). Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
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- McGovern, K. (Adapter). (1994). *Leonore Fleischer's "Rain Man"*. London: The Penguin Group.
- Oxford Bookworms. T. Hedge, (Series Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Penguin Readers. D. Strange, (Series Ed.). London: The Penguin Group.

Appendix

Selected Publishers of Simplified Literature for Adult ESL Learners

Educational Design, Inc. (<http://www.educationaldesign.com>)

345 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10002 • (800) 221-9372

- The Classics Series (Grades 1-5 reading level)

Oxford University Press (<http://www.oup-usa.org/esl>)

198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016 • (800) 451-7556

- Oxford Bookworms (Beginning - Intermediate)
- Oxford Bookworms Green Series (Beginning – Low Intermediate)
- Storylines (Beginning – Low Intermediate)
- Oxford Progressive Readers (Intermediate – Advanced)

Pearson Educational ESL (<http://www.pearson.com>)

1330 Ave. of the Americas, New York, NY 10019 • (800) 221-9372

- Penguin Readers (Beginning – Advanced)
- Longman Originals (High Beginning – Low Intermediate)
- Longman Classics (Low Intermediate – High Intermediate)

Saddleback Educational, Inc. (<http://www.sdlback.com>)

Three Watson Street, Irvine, CA 92618 • (714) 540-4010

- Saddleback Classics (Fry Readability Level 4.0)
- Illustrated Classics (Fry Readability Level 3.8 - 4.8)
- Adapted Classics (Fry Readability Level 5.0 – 7.0)