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Children and Parents: A Thematic Approach to Adult Education

■ The article describes how the author created the curriculum for an advanced class of adult students at an Intensive English Program (IEP), and how she piloted the course during an 8-week summer program. The level of this class of 20 students from 9 different countries was distinctly above the usual 7 levels practiced at the IEP. Thus, there was no guidance, no texts, and no curriculum set for the course. Choosing the thematic approach suggested by Stoller and Grabe (1997), and settling on the theme of children and parents as presented in literature, the writer takes us through ways of creating background knowledge, keeping momentum, integrating all 4 skills, and approaching language learning through individual and interactive strategies.

Children

*They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you, yet they
belong not to you.*

*You may give them your love but not your
thoughts.*

For they have their own thoughts.

*You may house their bodies but not their
souls,*

*For their souls dwell in the house of tomor-
row, which you cannot visit, not even in
your dreams.*

*You may strive to be like them, but seek not
to make them like you.*

*For life goes not backward nor carries with
yesterday.*

*You are the bows from which your children
as living arrows are sent forth.*

*The archer sees the mark upon the path of
the infinite, and He bends you with His
might that His arrows may go swift and
far.*

*Let your bending in the archer's hand be for
gladness;*

*For even as He loves the arrow that flies, so
He loves also the bow that is stable.*

(From *The Prophet* by Khalil Gibran)

Motivation for the Course

The poem by Khalil Gibran was brought to my attention by a Lebanese student who participated in the advanced ESL course that I piloted during a summer course at CESL (The Center of English as a Second Language) at the University of Arizona. The poem poignantly illustrates the complex relationship between parents and children—a relationship that became the central theme of our class during that particular summer.

It was the usual sweltering summer of Tucson, Arizona, and I was teaching summer school at CESL. Being exhausted from the overload I had taught during the spring semester, I was hoping to repeat the intermediate course that I had already taught several times. Needless to say, I felt rather unhinged and disheartened when, instead of the tried-and-true that I had hoped for, I was assigned an upper-level advanced course—something completely new to me.

CESL is a preacademic intensive English language program at the University of Arizona. Students at CESL arrive from about 60 countries, the most prominently featured groups being those from Mexico, the Middle East, and Japan. Most students at CESL hope to complete the preacademic curriculum and continue their academic work at an American University, not necessarily the University of Arizona. Students take classes for 22 hours a

week for two 8-week sessions each semester. The entire program consists of 7 levels. In the 3 beginning levels, the four language skills are emphasized but not isolated. In other words, the approach is integrated, each skill playing its part in the totality of language development. Thus, while a class might have been called “Writing,” it was clear that other skills, such as listening, reading, speaking, vocabulary development, and structure practice would also be included.

Students are originally placed in their proficiency level according to their results on the Comprehensive English Language Test (CELT). At the end of each 8-week session, they move on to the next proficiency level, provided their grades meet the required grade point average and their instructor recommends promotion. Table 1 outlines the process.

Occasionally, however, those who have gone through the 7 levels and wish to stay on an extra 8 weeks, or those who score above the norm on the CELT, are placed in a level 80 class, which stretches them beyond the ordinary 7-layer curriculum. It was such a group that was assigned to me that particular summer. Since a level 80 course went beyond the boundaries of the normal curriculum, no specific goals had been set for it. The idea was to discover what the interest of the students might be, what their needs were, and how

they could progress toward richer and more meaningful language.

No text had been assigned for the course, although several were suggested. I certainly felt ambivalent about the project. On the one hand, such a course was clearly an exciting challenge, but on the other hand, I was, to say the least, quite uncertain about how to go about setting up the curriculum. My experience as an ESL/EFL professional was paradoxically both limited and extensive. I had personally learned English as a second language. I had also been a speaker and learner of several other languages. These experiences, no doubt, increased my facility for coping with unexpected language-related situations. I had taught many levels of EFL to adolescents for a great many years and had worked as a teacher educator in several countries, but I had never had to construct a curriculum for adult students. Altogether, my experience with adult language learners, who were not teachers, was quite narrow. I did, however, have extensive background in literary studies.

When I first met the class on a typically hot Tucson, Arizona, summer morning, I had still not made up my mind about which direction to take, but I came prepared with a text on a universal subject that I thought might capture everyone’s interest and attention. The text was “Family” by Ian Robertson (1999). I

Table 1
Proficiency Levels in the Preacademic Curriculum

<i>Level of proficiency</i>	<i>CESL levels</i>	<i>Strategies and procedures</i>
Beginning	Levels 10, 20, 30	Emphasis is on skills—reading, writing, speaking, listening
Intermediate	Levels 40, 50	Emphasis is on communication
Advanced	Levels 60, 70	Emphasis is on academic skills and critical reading
Exceeding advanced proficiency	Level 80, rarely offered, not part of the normal curriculum	Emphasis on extensive reading and critical thinking

had chosen excerpts from this rather lengthy article on interfamily relations, and I soon discovered that what interested my students most was the subject of relationships between parents and their children. Amazingly enough, almost everyone in this diverse group had one thing in common: with the exception of four students, they were all parents! They had, of course, all been children. In other words, my choice of this universal topic seemed appropriate and of great interest to the group. Some of the issues raised during the animated discussion that first lesson were the following:

- What makes a good parent?
- Why are parent/child relationships frequently so complicated?
- Do children owe their parents special loyalty?
- Is it legitimate for parents to see their children as personal accomplishments?
- Why are relationships between parents and children different from all other relationships?
- Can children ever accept their parents as just people?

There were 20 students in the class: 2 Japanese women in their 30s, 1 Turkish grandmother, 5 businessmen from Saudi Arabia, 4 middle-aged Mexican women, a married couple in their 30s from Korea, 1 18-year-old Lebanese student, 1 rather elderly gentleman from Germany, a 30-something wife of an Arizona faculty member from France, 1 Greek young man from Cyprus, and 2 young men from Turkey. The class was to meet for 2 hours, 5 days a week, for a period of 8 weeks. It was an unusual CESL class, since only the 2 Japanese women, the young man from Lebanon, and the young men from Turkey and Greece were actually planning on university studies in the United States. The other class participants were there simply to improve their English for either personal or professional/business reasons. Only 6 members of the class had actually completed the 7 CESL levels. The others were placed in the

class as a result of their high scores on the CELT.

My rudimentary needs assessment (described below) informed me that most of my students wanted to increase their vocabulary, improve their speaking abilities, and engage in more extensive reading.

The Process of Designing the Course

When I first met the class, I began with a rather loosely structured needs-assessment formula that I have invariably found useful. Here is how it works:

- I dictate a sentence opening that states, “For me this course will be a success if _____.”
- Students complete the sentence in any way they wish.
- I collect their sentences in a bag.
- All students draw a sentence from the bag. If they should happen to draw their own, they put it back and draw another.
- Students mingle cocktail party-style. They talk to other students about the sentence that they have pulled and compare it to their own ideas on the subject.
- I circulate among the students, and on the sly, so to speak, discover just what their needs and expectations are. I have found that students talk much more readily about their own needs when they can do so while comparing their own requests with those of another student’s wishes.

I followed the needs assessment with a reading and discussion of the article I had brought. The lively exchange during that first meeting quickly convinced me to use the discussion questions above as my topics and to organize the course around the central theme of “Parents and Children.” It is, however, prudent to remember that the best-laid plans, in life and particularly in the classroom, can fail and disappoint. At one stage during this first lesson, I invited students to speak about their own families, and I came pretty close to

courting disaster. As it happened, the fellow from Cyprus had had members of his family abused by Turks, and the lady from Korea was an orphan with a traumatic background in foster-family care. Luckily for me, the Turkish grandmother rose to the occasion. She told a story of intermarriage and love between Turks and Greeks, as well as her own story, which traced a difficult childhood to a very happy marriage and a rich family life. Her story lowered tempers and brought us all back on an even keel. This was really the moment when the group became a community of learners.

I had used the thematic approach, as described by Stoller and Grabe (1997), in several of my content-based classes and had always found it both motivating and beneficial (Hess, 2004). The scheme suggested by this approach offers a program built around *themes*, rooted in *texts*, illuminated through *topics*, stitched together by *threads*, internalized through *tasks*, and moved along by *transitions*. *Themes* are broad-based, language-rich subjects of interest. These extensive subjects can be expanded into many topics. For example, if the theme were “Education,” we could extend it into topics such as “private schools versus public schools,” “standardized testing,” “school uniforms,” “teacher education,” or “single-sex schools.”

My *theme* for this particular course spoke its name during our first meeting. It was clearly to become the relationships between parents and children. *Texts* are all the language-based materials used to promote language learning. A written piece is a text, as is a film, a recording, a picture, or an object that brings about language learning. For this particular course, I chose literary texts, which I thought would promote and elicit a great deal of intuitive language, expand vocabulary, promote extensive reading, and bring about thoughtful discussion. I also chose two full-length films to serve as reinforcement tools, and I frequently used objects as cues for schemata building.

Tasks, essentials of the 6 Ts approach, are the strategies through which a teacher intro-

duces, activates, and reinforces knowledge. A group report, a poster project, a dictation, a discussion, group work, board work, or ranking activities are all tasks. During this particular course, my most successful tasks were the walkabout, the group discussions, and the visualizations, all of which are illustrated below. I had not always used all of Stoller and Grabe’s 6 Ts, but I had found their template positive and constructive as a basic design. I refer the reader to the Appendix for a closer look at the implementation of my modified version of the 6 Ts process.

In designing this particular course, I knew that I would have to find high-interest texts that provided a challenge but that were not totally overwhelming. I wanted the course to provide texts and tasks that were meaningful and that could be related to student lives. Thus, I knew that I would be making extensive use of schemata, those building blocks of cognition that allow us to recognize events and concepts. Schema can be changed when new experience is added to our prior knowledge. I wanted to introduce each text by allowing students to use their own lives as reference and location, and I wanted to structure the kinds of tasks that would allow my students to relive their own experience through the texts. I hoped that they would be able to examine and express their own life stories as they entered the texts. I also wanted to create an interactive community of learners in which students would feel free to articulate their views and to interact with others. Another objective was that I meet my students’ very specific goal of vocabulary expansion and oral-communication improvement, and, of course, I wanted meaningful and engaging practice of all four skills.

The Curricular Context

Since my chosen theme “Parents and Children” held such universal appeal, I had no trouble finding texts, and, after some deliberation, I settled on literature as the most abundant source of interesting content. I have always been an inveterate reader, and litera-

ture, as Holten (1977) reminds us, is “quintessential content” for language teaching (p. 377). When choosing texts, I decided to work with a variety of genres. I chose a poem, a story, a drama, and a novel. The decision to choose such a variety of genres was based on the communicative possibilities embedded in each. The poem chosen was short and concentrated. It served well as an introductory text because of its minimal language and its maximal interpretative possibilities. With the reading and discussion of the poem, students had generous time for rich self-expression. Such a process was also continued through the short story—especially because the particular story was indeed very short. The drama worked well as a follow-up genre because its illusion of “here and now” provided colloquial use of language, while the novel, the genre with which I chose to conclude the unit, gave ample opportunity for the practice of all four skills as well as for the combination of intensive and extensive reading. I moved from short intensive texts to progressively longer ones, so that we were able to do most of our reading in class during the early sessions and move to more and more extensive out-of-class reading as the course progressed.

Choosing the Texts

The poem I chose was “My Papa’s Waltz” by Theodore Roethke. The story was to be “Papa’s Parrot” by Cynthia Rylant. The drama was *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller, and for the novel, I selected the American classic, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee.

The Poem. In “My Papa’s Waltz” a little boy swings in a baffled delirium between enchantment and trepidation. He clings to a father, who whirls him around in a wild dance. While doing so, the inebriated father beats time on the little boy’s head and allows his belt buckle to scrape the child’s face. “Such waltzing,” says the author, “was not easy.”

The Story. In the story “Papa’s Parrot,” Harry is embarrassed by his father, a sweet-shop owner. The story reaches its climax when Harry’s father suffers a sudden heart

attack. Harry assumes a grown-up role as he takes over his father’s responsibilities and comes to understand the profound love he feels for his father.

The Play. In Arthur Miller’s famous play *All My Sons*, the deceptively calm atmosphere of neighborhood pleasantness is shattered by the revelations of a father’s corruption and a son’s rightful wrath.

The Novel. The American classic *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a story of childhood in a small Alabama town in the 1930s. It portrays a family’s struggle with social norms, single parenthood, and race relations. At the heart of the book is a remarkable rendering of a profoundly wise father.

Sample of Curriculum Products

The Topics. Since all the texts were familiar to me, and since time was short, I rather quickly settled on topics. I simply chose the issues raised by the students during my first meeting with them, and I found these topics readily reflected in the texts I had chosen. The topics were:

- What makes a good parent?
- Why are parent/child relationships frequently so complicated?
- Do children owe their parents a special loyalty?
- Is it legitimate for parents to see their children as personal accomplishments?
- Why are relationships between parents and children different from all other relationships?
- Can children ever accept their parents as just people?

The Tasks. When choosing tasks, I selected strategies that would serve communicative competence in all four skills. I attempted to structure the kind of routines that I could use with equal facility and efficacy throughout all of the texts. Throughout the entire process I attempted to keep in mind the needs of my students—vocabulary expansion, as well as speaking and extensive reading fluency. I set-

tled on the activities listed below, all of which can be seen in the examples that follow.

- Walkabout discussions and slip exchanges—In this strategy, discussion questions were posted around the walls of the classroom. Walking about in pairs or trios, students talked about the posted topics. At the conclusion of this phase, each student removed a question slip from the wall. Students approached a partner to ask and answer a question; slips were exchanged, and the activity continued as long as interest was high.
- Repetition and review activities—These activities were particularly important with the use of a longer work, but they also served to highlight a shorter text.
- Role-plays and dramatizations—These activities allowed for direct use of both text or role-plays, which encouraged interpretation, adaptation, and performance.
- Writing activities that would lead to discussions or writing techniques that would summarize discussions—The primary of these was the quick-write, which permitted free-flowing thought on paper.
- Pair and group work, which included the pair/share strategy—These were used throughout the unit.
- Visualizations—These could be teacher-directed while students, with closed eyes, created a mental picture that they shared with the class.
- Separation of sight and sound in the use of video—I used this strategy throughout my work with both the drama and the novel.
- Voting to express opinion—This particular strategy allowed students who were not quite ready to express themselves in the teacher-fronted framework to nevertheless express their opinions. It worked particularly well if a vote were taken again after an issue had been discussed.

I will spell out the first two lessons in

some detail, but as several of the tasks are repeated, later lessons will be described more generally. I spent the first 2 days (4 hours) on the poem, the next 3 on the story, the following week on the play, and the remaining 6 weeks on the novel (see Appendix).

The Poem

Schema Segment

We have learned from Piaget (1952) and Vygotsky (1962) that new information is absorbed much more readily if we somehow connect it to previously acquired knowledge. Schemata formation thus forms an integral part of any entrance to a new topic. To introduce the poem “My Papa’s Waltz,” I brought an empty J&B whiskey bottle to class and asked my students to think on paper. What did they associate with such a bottle?

I allowed them to think and scribble for about 7 minutes, at which time I asked them to join a partner to compare and contrast ideas. They told each other what they had written and why they had written it. They were to listen carefully to their partner because soon they would be asked to pass on their partner’s information to someone else.

In the next phase, each pair joined another pair, and in these configurations of four, partners related to an audience of three the information they had gained in the previous segment. I encouraged the original supplier of the information to listen carefully as his or her partner reported, and to add or change as was necessary. At the completion of this phase, we were ready for whole-class discussion and participation.

While one student took notes on the board, I solicited reactions from all the groups. The contributions were interesting. The Japanese group spoke about the tendencies of businessmen to drink after work for relaxation. Others mentioned parties and orgies; some spoke about health issues; still others went into stories of Alcoholics Anonymous. One woman spoke of cooking with alcohol. One of the Arab students mentioned the Arabic origin of the word as well as

the Moslem prohibition on drinking. Somebody brought up the American Prohibition. Although this was a lively discussion, which lasted an entire 1st hour and elicited complete participation, I would like to offer a caveat. Discussing alcoholism in such a diverse class can be problematic, and were I to do this introduction again, I would probably choose another angle. At one moment, there was considerable anger in the group as one of the Saudi students raised his voice in accusation of Western culture's promotion of the forbidden beverage, and I had to tread lightly to avoid collision.

The Listening, Analysis, and Discussion Segment

At the opening of the 2nd hour, I provided students a copy of the poem and told them that I would read it three times, and that each time they would be assigned a different task. The first time, they were just to relax and listen. The second time, I asked them to underline anything that they found puzzling or interesting. We stopped after the second reading, and they talked. First, they talked in pairs about what they had underlined, and then they shared that information with the whole class. Some questions that came up were:

- Why is the small boy dizzy in the first stanza?
- Why is it so hard to waltz?
- Why is the mother angry?
- What does “unfrown” mean?
- What does “knuckle” mean?
- Is the father beating his son?

I clarified any vocabulary difficulties but otherwise refrained from giving direct answers, preferring to allow student hunches to play out.

During the third reading, I asked students to think about whether this was more a happy or a sad poem. When I finished reading, I asked for a vote—“happy” or “sad.” Many more voted for “happy,” and representatives

from each side explained why and how they had made their decision. At the conclusion of these explanations, several students changed their votes from “happy” to “sad,” and there were new explanations.

In the next phase, students divided a page into two columns labeled “positive” and “negative.” Their task was to find expressions in the poem to place on either side. Discussion followed.

We were close to the end of the 2nd hour. For homework I assigned four questions, which were to be answered in writing.

The Homework Questions

The reader will note that the homework assignments tend to be more linguistically demanding than the class work. I believe strongly that all students should be able to follow an in-class assignment with ease and pleasure. However, since students have ample time at home for consultation and reference to dictionaries, I make such work more challenging.

- Do you think that the father in the poem is a good father? Why or why not?
- Read the poem out loud to yourself. Do you think that the rhyme and the rhythm of the poem in any way add to its meaning?
- What do we learn about the mother and the relationship between the parents in the poem?
- Do you think that the child in the poem loves his father? Why or why not? Find some words or phrases in the poem that would back up your interpretation.

The following day, when students returned to class, they read the poem to each other in pairs.

The Listening, Repetition Cloze Segment

We followed the reading with a listening/repetition exercise. I read a line from the poem while the whole class listened, and then I called the name of a student who

was to repeat the line verbatim. We followed the repetition with a cloze exercise that consisted of the gapped version of the poem. Students worked on this, first individually. Then, when they were stuck, they continued their work with a partner, and when the partners had exhausted their knowledge, they were finally to check their work with the text. Students were quite surprised to see how much of the poem they had absorbed by this time. A great many were able to recite the poem in its entirety.

The Discussion and Writing Segment and a Walkabout

I had posted the questions that had been assigned on the walls of our class, and students walked about in groups of three with their written homework assignment in hand, discussing their answers. A whole-class discussion ensued.

During the 2nd hour of this particular lesson, students worked in four groups. Their assignment was to talk about and then individually to write their thoughts regarding the following topics:

- Think about the family in this poem. Imagine the mother, the father, and the son. Do you think that the family has other children?
- How old do you think that the mother and father are?
- How long have they been married?
- Where does the family live? What is their level of education?
- What is their income?
- What work do the parents do?
- What is their everyday life like?
- Does anything in this poem remind you of something you have experienced, heard about, or read about?

I allowed 15 minutes for group discussion and 20 minutes for individual writing. It was followed by a lively class discussion and a completion of the work on this poem.

The Story

Schema

We began the story by talking first in pairs, later in groups, and finally with the whole class about experiences during which adults embarrassed children. I explained that such incidents could come from the students' own lives, from the lives of people they knew, or from other texts they might have read. I set a personal example by telling the story of how I, age 11 and the only nonworking family member during a particular summer, had to show the city we lived in to a visiting aunt. The aunt suffered from bladder problems, and as her guide, I had to inquire about the location of bathrooms in all the places we visited. My 11-year-old self suffered serious embarrassment. Over many giggles, students related their own stories. These were invariably engaging. We moved into "Papa's Parrot" with the notion that we were probably going to find a child who had been embarrassed by an adult. I had worried that this particular segment might cause too much embarrassment. Much to my delight, however, it turned out wonderfully. It seemed that, by now, we were thoroughly enjoying one another's company.

The first paragraph of a story is always fascinating, and I like to spend considerable time looking at it.

The First Paragraph

The first sentence of the paragraph begins with the phrase, "Though his father was fat..." Dictated, this phrase served as a prompt for a quick-write. Students completed the phrase by writing for 3 minutes. My quick-write rules demand writing during the entire time allotted. If students get stumped and cannot write, they may make loops until an idea comes, but pencil-chewing pauses are not allowed. We listened to the quick-writes, commented on their content, and I proceeded to reading the first paragraph. Here it is:

Though his father was fat and merely owned a candy and nut shop, Harry Tillian liked his papa. Harry stopped liking candy

and nuts when he was around seven, but in spite of this, Harry and Mr. Tillian had remained friends and were still friends the year Harry turned twelve. (p. 438)

It was a short but intense paragraph. I wanted the class to picture Mr. Tillian and his candy store, and I accomplished this through a visualization exercise. Students closed their eyes while I told them to enter the imagined candy store. They were to look at the shelves and look in the storage barrels. They were to envision Mr. Tillian behind the counter. Then I asked them to consider the following:

- How old is Mr. Tillian?
- How is he dressed?
- Does he have a beard?
- Is he frowning or smiling?

Now, let us see little Harry (around age 6) trooping into the store with all his friends.

- How does Mr. Tillian greet them?
- How do they react? How does Harry react?

Now let's switch scenes, to the 12-year-old Harry alone with his father in the candy store.

- What are they doing?
- How has the atmosphere changed?

When we completed the visualization, students stood and mingled. They shared their images with several partners. Later we assembled verbal pictures in the teacher-fronted class. The exercise worked well, but I believe it would have worked even better with some musical background, as music helps to stimulate imagination.

Reading and Discussion

We began reading the story. I handed out the questions that we were to use as the basis of our discussions during the next two lessons. Below are sample questions. They were to be answered in writing and were to be dis-

cussed in class as walkabout questions, in pairs, or in small groups.

- Why does the author think that it is important to point out that Mr. Tillian and his son were still friends at home even during the difficult times?
- Why do you think that we hear nothing about Harry's mom?
- Does the name "Tillian" tell you anything about Mr. Tillian's ethnicity? Do you think that Mr. Tillian is U.S.-born? Is Harry? Is this important to the story?
- Describe the visits of Harry and his friends to the shop. How do you think that Harry felt during these visits? How did his father feel?
- How do things become different at home? The author tells us that "at home things seemed all right." Are they really "all right"? Why or why not?
- Who thinks that "things seemed all right"? Why the word *seemed* instead of the word *were*?

We used the questions both in small-group and in whole-class group discussions. We answered several of the questions in writing, and we used others in a slip-exchange exercise. In this strategy, each student is given a question on a slip of paper. As students mingled, they approached a partner and asked their question. The partner answered, the slips were exchanged, and students moved on to new partners to repeat the strategy.

Concluding Activities

The following activities were first discussed in small-group and whole-class formats. Students chose to write about one of the topics at home. The compositions were read in class and posted on class walls for reactions and comments. Let me offer a word of warning here. One of my worst moments in this course occurred here. I had neglected to instruct students in what kind of commentary they were to write on the compositions of classmates. As a result, there was quite a bit of

faulty error correction as well as many negative comments. The next time we practiced the activity, I spent some time talking to students about positive feedback. I also provided a mock composition through which we practiced ways of stating positive reactions. These were the topics:

- In pairs, write the conversation between Harry and his father in the hospital. Pairs act it out.
- In the beginning of the story, Harry is very disturbed by his father's behavior. He writes a letter to a newspaper adviser. The adviser answers.
- Harry's father returns to the store but cannot work as much as before. Harry helps out but feels that he needs another job. Write three ads that Harry might answer.
- Harry feels that his dad needs the companionship of a woman. He writes a personal ad for his dad.

The Drama

As we moved on to a new text, we noted that we had up to this point dealt with young children but that our next selection would take us to relationships between grown children and their parents. The topics particularly suited to this play were the following:

- Do children owe their parents a special loyalty?
- Is it legitimate for parents to see their children as accomplishments?
- Why are relationships between parents and children different from all other relationships?

Schema

The stage set of this drama is in itself an important carrier of plot and tension. I wanted my students to see this scene clearly in their minds before we actually read Miller's detailed description of the backyard of the Keller house on a sunny, neighborly, relaxed Sunday morning in the 1950s. I invited stu-

dents to create a mental video, which they later described to each other in pairs and in small groups. We looked at the opening scene of the video edition of *All My Sons* and compared the director's vision with our own.

Strategies Used Throughout the Play Reading

I used the video edition of the play as an integral aspect of the unit. We frequently turned our backs on the video screen as we listened to a segment, following it in our books before viewing it. In pairs, we also acted out crucial scenes, especially when there was an important dialogue between two main characters. Such a dialogue, for example, occurred between Chris and his father in Act One. In this dialogue, Chris threatened to leave the business his father has planned for him to inherit. It was a highly dramatic moment. I read the dialogue, and students read it in pairs. They switched roles to read it again and moved on to another partner to repeat the process; only then did we view the scene on video. This strategy proved enormously successful. When we reached the viewing stage, students were already extremely familiar with the text and eagerly awaiting the performance aspect.

As in the previous texts, we used question strategies for both discussion and writing. Since this was our third text, and students had by now adjusted to the various strategies, I asked them to provide the questions for discussion. They did this in small groups. I collected their questions, edited them, and brought the list to class for them to work on. Students were quite delighted to discover their own work as an integral part of the curriculum. We used a cloze exercise for review and for vocabulary recycling.

As we progressed in the drama, we found particularly interesting lines from the play and decided which gesture and which voice quality should accompany each line. Should it be said loudly or softly? Should the characters who speak the lines move or stand still? Should they look at the person to whom they

speak? What should the speakers be doing with their hands? Should the actors who deliver the lines be sitting or standing? We read, we talked, we wrote, and we watched the video. I must note that this aspect of the course proved to be one of the most valuable and satisfying, as the diverse cultural backgrounds of the students offered fascinating aspects of the relationships to space, gesture, and time.

Keller at one point claims that his son Chris is his only accomplishment. This statement clearly led us to one of our topics. After Chris discovered his father's crimes, he stood ready to turn his former idol over to the law. It was a poignant moment that led to the discussion of our topics as well as to written commentary and much cultural divergence.

Symbolism in the Play as a Concluding Activity

Some of the names and incidents of the play cried out for interpretation. Joe Keller is both the loving father that the New Testament evoked through the name *Joseph* and the *killer* that is suggested by his last name. *Chris*, the righteous and only beloved son, seems to be a Christ figure. The *idyllic garden* of the opening scene with its broken apple tree was a clear portrayal of the paradise soon to be defiled through sin.

As a concluding activity, students looked through the play for signs of these allusions. Here students contributed much diverse and interesting cultural knowledge.

The Novel

We spent 6 weeks reading the 31 chapters of the novel. We read five chapters each week—one chapter each day. During the last week we read six chapters because the concluding chapter is a short one and an easy one to read, and because we had been building up to the dramatic conclusion offered us in the chapter.

Schema

Reading a beautifully written novel allows

readers to enter a whole other dimension—a parallel life, so to speak. If the reading is successful, readers will, while engrossed in the text, become the characters, live in the setting, experience the time frame, and feel the emotions of the textual world. Many of my students had been avid readers in their own languages, and I fervently wished to allow them the same pleasures in English. I am firmly convinced that one of the places where language learning turns into acquisition is the moment when readers lose themselves in books, and where the fictional experience is so strong that it begins to conquer linguistic barriers. This is the place where language learners are willing to skip words and continue grasping for meaning as they cover territory and uncover sense and sensibility. This is the place where new words are automatically acquired. As one of the Japanese ladies noted, "All one time, I just reading. Like Japanese. Just reading. I forget this English. This homework for class."

The reader will recall my noting that schemata is an important aspect of all entry into fiction, but it is particularly so when one approaches a long-term extensive reading project such as this novel. I wanted the entry to be as enticing as possible and decided to use not one but several schemata activities.

Schema One—Quick-Write. *To Kill a Mockingbird* emerges from childhood memories and is told through a double-voiced narration. Ostensibly, it is Scout, the child, who tells the story. However, the reader very soon recognizes the adult Scout, whose persona insistently hovers over the child-raconteur. To enter the spirit of the novel, my students began the project by remembering their own childhoods. We started with a quick-write. I dictated the following: "When I think about my childhood, I remember many things. One thing that I especially remember is . . ." Students wrote for about 10 minutes. They talked in pairs and finally shared memories in the teacher-fronted framework.

Schema Two—Memory Talk. In groups of three, students talked about games they had played as children. Later each trio joined

another group of three, and the groups reported to each other.

Schema Three—Notes for a Story. I told students that in the story we were about to read, we would find a widower, a ghost, a man accused of a crime he had not committed, three children, and a trial. I asked them what they thought might happen in such a story. In small groups, students first talked and took notes. They then reported their stories to the entire class.

Schema Four—The Back Cover. We read the promotional blurb of the back cover of the book. Students found all the words and phrases that told us that we were going to read a “good book.” They found “unforgettable novel,” made into an “Award-Winning Film,” “15 million copies in print,” “translated into 10 languages,” and “universal appeal.”

Schema Five—Talking to the Characters. I told my class a bit about each of the main characters and the setting. I let them know that the story took place in a small Southern town in the 1930s, and I gave them a brief synopsis of the main characters:

- *Atticus Finch*, a small-town lawyer with a great conscience. He is widowed and a father of two young children.
- *Scout* is 6 years old and tells the story.
- *Jem*, her brother, is 10 years old and likes to play football.
- *Calpurnia* is their cook.
- *Arthur Radley*, also known as *Boo*, is their neighbor. He was mistreated as a child and has not come out of his house for many years, and the children make up many stories about him.

I asked for 5 volunteers to come to the front of the class and assume the roles of these characters, telling them that it wouldn't hurt one bit. The class members could ask the characters any questions they wanted to, and those who had assumed the roles could answer in any way they wished. I began the exercise by asking the student who had taken on the role of Calpurnia to tell us how she liked working for the Finch family. Students

asked Jem why he liked football. They asked Scout why she had such a strange name. They asked Boo Radley why he didn't go out. They asked Atticus what he liked and what he disliked about being a father. They asked him if he had a girlfriend. The answers were invariably both interesting and amusing. The exercise worked well for question formation and led beautifully into the story.

Reading and Interpretation

We read the first paragraph of the book. As in the short story, I found the opening lines worthy of thought and study.

When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow. When it healed and Jem's fears of never being able to play football were assuaged, he was seldom self-conscious about his injury. (p. 3)

I told them that what the writer described in the opening paragraph was an event that would happen at the end of the book. Students guessed what might have happened to Jem, and we explained the meaning of the word “assuaged.” I skipped the somewhat detailed information on the next two pages and moved on to page 6, where we learned that the mother of the children had died, that their father held a rather prominent position in town, and that Jem was 4 years older than Scout. We also got the geography of the world in which the children lived.

When I was almost six and Jem was nearly ten, our summertime boundaries (with-in calling distance of Calpurnia) were Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose's house two doors to the north of us and the Radley place two doors to the south. We were never tempted to break them. The Radley place was inhabited by an unknown entity the mere description of whom was enough to make us behave for days on end; Mrs. Dubose was plain hell. (p. 6)

I invited a student to draw the map on the board of the passage described above.

We then proceeded to read the conversation that initiated Dill's arrival on pages 6 and 7. I read it first. Students read it in groups of three, taking on the roles of Jem, Scout, and Dill. They read it three times, each time taking on different roles. They made new group formations and repeated the exercise. We repeated the procedure in the dialogue between Atticus and Mr. Cunningham on pp. 21-22. I had chosen an in-depth reading of these two conversations because these two particular conversations had both been incorporated into the first scene of the film. At the conclusion of their group readings, the class viewed the particular scene. Combining the reading with the viewing of scenes in this way reinforced the content and recycled vocabulary and was, as I previously noted in the drama exercise, most successful.

During the ensuing 5 weeks, the novel was read extensively at home. I assigned questions for each chapter. We used the questions for small-group discussions, for walkabout discussions, for whole-class speculation, and for shared writing activities. Students also contributed to the pool of questions. Below is a group of typical questions:

- Who is Dill? Why is he in Macomb? What does he contribute to the story line?
- There are several plots in this book—what are they? Consider the Tom Robinson story, the Myella Ewell story, the Dill story, the growing up story, the Boo Radley story. Are there any others?
- Describe the relationship between Atticus and his children.
- Explain the title of the book and talk about why you think that it has become an American classic.
- Describe the relationship between Jem and Scout.

Keeping the Momentum

A long text such as this novel, read extensively over a period of time, required a great

deal of interactive energy to keep its excitement going. Collie and Slater (1991) in their seminal resource book on the teaching of literature have noted that a text on its own is a rather cold and distancing medium, and that it is up to the teacher to give it the life and flavor that make it spring from the text. I have found the following activities of great help in promoting such textual vitality:

Snowball. One student started the story anywhere he or she wanted and assigned the next student to continue and keep it rolling.

The Adjective That Fits. On the board, we compiled a list of adjectives that usually describe good books: compelling, exciting, suspenseful, difficult, interesting, funny, surprising, thought provoking, educational. Students chose an adjective that suited this particular book and found a place in the book to justify their choice.

My Favorite. Students chose the page in the book that appealed most to them. They read it to the class and explained their choice.

A Page From the Diary of ____. Students chose any character and wrote a page in his or her diary.

A Letter From One Character to Another at Any Stage in the Story. *Example:* Aunt Alexandra writes a letter. She is worried about how her brother is bringing up his children. One group wrote Aunt Alexandra's letter, while another group answered as the psychologists.

Role-Plays to Be Acted Out as Pair Work by the Entire Class. *Example:* Scout complains to her father about treatment she receives in school in connection with the trial. She doesn't see why her dad has to do it since everyone says he will lose anyway. Atticus responds.

Concluding the Unit

As a concluding exercise for the entire unit, I have found the strategies below successful.

Quote Analysis. Students chose a quote from any of our readings. They paraphrased the quote. They explained who said the quote to whom, when, and why.

Testing. Throughout the unit, I gave brief quizzes, mostly assessing comprehension. The final exam consisted of a closed-book essay based on the topic we had worked with throughout the unit.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of the course, students were, as usual, asked to evaluate it. CESL students are given a standard evaluation form. My students rated the course very favorably. Many commented on reading and vocabulary improvement as well as greater ease of face-to-face communication, although some thought that we should have had more frequent vocabulary tests. All students stated that their ability to read longer texts had improved and that they would continue to read “good books” in English. All students said that they would recommend the course to a friend and that they mostly liked the group work and the pair work. What strikes me as an important aspect of the entire project is the simple practice of allowing students to talk in pairs or small groups before whole-group discussion. I have found this feature of my work an astonishingly important and successful strategy for language acquisition and lively classroom discussion. I have also found that thematic teaching to literary texts, as well as to other texts, is a tool that offers tremendous possibility for language acquisition and growth. Thematic organization allows for both intensive and extensive study of texts. It creates natural vocabulary recycling, and best of all, it makes for lively and interesting lessons. Looking back on the project, I believe that I missed out on an important aspect. I could have made this class more challenging by assigning a meaningful concluding paper. Topics that come to mind are: “Stories of an Ancestor,” “Important Lessons I Have Learned From My Family,” or “What I Would Like to Pass On to My Children.” Still, I do have to say that at the end of this particular class, I felt refreshed and revived and much less tired than I had been when I was first assigned the job. It had been an exhilarating 8 weeks.

In reviewing my original goals for the course, I found that I had indeed managed to locate high-interest texts that provided the challenge I had been looking for without crushing my students. These family-centered texts had provided meaning and used student experience. The activities had engaged student interest and provided plenty of opportunity for the acquisition and recycling of vocabulary. It had, all in all, become a summer to write about.

Author

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Appendix
Plan for Course
Theme: Parents and Children

	<i>Texts</i>	<i>Topics</i>
Week 1	“My Papa’s Waltz” “Papa’s Parrot”	What makes a good parent? Can children accept parents as just people?
Week 2	<i>All My Sons</i>	What makes a good parent? Why are parent/child relationships frequently so complicated? Do children owe their parents special loyalty? Is it legitimate for parents to see their children as personal accomplishments?
Week 3	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	What makes a good parent?
Week 4		Why are parent/child relationships frequently so complicated?
Week 5		Do children owe their parents special loyalty?
Week 6		Why and how are the relationships between parents and children different from all other relationships?
Week 7		Can children ever accept parents as just people?