

Realbooks: Literature as Content In ESL Classrooms

■ ESL instructors at Los Angeles City College have developed a literature-based curriculum for their intermediate and advanced students. This paper examines this curriculum as well as the theoretical premises which inform it. The theoretical support for teaching literature in the ESL classroom comes from a variety of sources: Stephen Krashen, Frank Smith, George Dillon, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Augustine. This paper also examines the work of Brinton, Snow, and Wesche as well as Collie and Slater, who have directly addressed the classroom issue of literature as ESL content.

Finally, this paper discusses how literary texts like *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, *Rumble Fish*, and *The Red Pony* are incorporated into the community college ESL reading and writing curriculum and ends with some insights derived from this literature focus. Questions which still need to be examined are discussed.

In the past decade, reading has become a central focus in theoretical discussions in and out of the classroom. In critical theory, deconstructive, reader-response, and hermeneutic theorists have foregrounded the activity of reading. In linguistics, Stephen Krashen (1985) has formulated the reading hypothesis to explain how learners develop writing competence. In cognitive psychology, Frank Smith (1988) has demonstrated just what it means to "read like a writer" (p. 25).

As ESL teachers, we have studied this theoretical material and have attempted to develop appropriate pedagogical translations. During the past decade, the faculty of Los Angeles City College has developed a curriculum founded on the assumption that literature provides a powerful medium for ESL instruction. The first part of this paper examines those theoretical tenets that have most influenced our pedagogical decisions to foreground the use of literature in our ESL classes. The second part of this paper describes the curricular implications of these tenets.

Stephen Krashen and Frank Smith

Much has already been written about ways that Krashen's input hypothesis speaks to the ESL classroom. We have been interested in applying to our ESL classrooms Krashen's concept of comprehensible input. Krashen's notions translate into an ESL classroom in which discipline-specific materials are used to provide students with an enriched linguistic context inside which both language acquisition and language learning can take place. As a result, our curricular focus has been to immerse our students in engaging literary texts and to encourage our students to respond to what these texts have to say to them.

Our approach suggests that we enrich the context around which a particular literary text is examined in the classroom. To engage our students in the reading of literature, we have concluded, is to facilitate comprehension of written English. Krashen provides theoretical justification for his concept of teaching in enriched literary contexts:

First, since the input is concentrated around one subject matter, the acquirer has the advantage of a familiar extra-linguistic context. ... Familiarity with context can be a tremendous facilitator of comprehension and thus language acquisition. The more one reads in one area, for example, the more one learns about the area, and the easier one finds subsequent reading in that area. In addition, each topic has its own vocabulary, and to some extent its own style. ... (Krashen, 1985, p. 73)

Enriching the context around which a particular issue is examined has allowed our students to improve their ways of both reading and writing. If, for example, they are studying "nature versus nurture," we encourage the building of readings, both literary and expository, that respond to each other. Some of our teachers focus on a particular theme like nature-nurture throughout their course; others focus on a particular genre (children's literature, the American Western, etc.) to develop this theme. In all of these teaching instances, though, we encourage our students to continually reconsider what a particular issue or genre means to them. Revision becomes both a reading and a writing activity. Structural and stylistic features of written English are investigated along the way.

This focus on enriched contexts in the teaching of ESL reading and writing is further supported by composition studies which have examined schema theory and top-down writing perspectives. George Dillon (1981) speaks for a composition pedagogy that sees language learners as constantly re-examining the knowledge which they bring to texts. Students, he argues, do not bring single parts of this knowl-

edge to reading and writing but complex, interconnected verbal relationships (schemata) to textual understanding. Further, all readers, Dillon contends, move from a general understanding of a text to an understanding of its particularities; that is, readers and writers always move from the "top down." These language learning givens drive all of Dillon's classroom speculations. In regard to vocabulary teaching, for example, he concludes that it "should be taught by examining words in fairly large contexts and discussing the way the word plus the networks of meaning surrounding it contribute to the construction of meanings that are greater, more particular, than the sum of the series of individual words" (p. 154).

We have translated this top-down notion of language instruction to the ESL classroom where vocabulary is consistently seen in its verbal contexts, not only in its sentence and paragraph relationships but in the word's relationship to the entire text. We thus encourage students to respond to how a word is used and reused in the changing contexts of the literary text they are examining. In our view, it is the literary text which provides students with probably the richest source of verbal context. When students encounter a word in the literary work it is enriched in a complex of meaning-generating relationships. It exists in relation to not only an abstract definition, but a network of cognitive-specific interstices. Furthermore, the familiar narrative schema, the most common rhetorical pattern in fiction, helps students comprehend what they are reading.

As ESL teachers, we have also responded in several ways to Frank Smith's (1988) psychological justification for why reading and writing are profoundly interconnected activities. Smith has provided us with a wealth of discussion regarding just what literary texts our ESL students will respond to favorably. Smith describes the reading-writing interconnection in this way:

To read like a writer we engage vicariously in what the author is writing. We anticipate what the author will say, so that the author is in effect writing on our behalf, not simply showing us how something is done but doing it with us ... bit by bit, one thing at a time, but incalculably over the passage of time, the learner learns through reading like a writer to write like a writer (p. 25).

Clearly, in order for reading to enrich writing, readers must respond to the voices that the text discloses, to be shown by these voices other ways of writing. If the encounter between reader and text manifests a degree of intimacy, then readers will develop more enriched writing voices because they will want to embrace what the text has to say, often in the way it is said. In our ESL classrooms, we encourage our students to respond in several ways to what the text is saying to them—to the authors' and characters' motivations in order for them

to see the ways in which they are like or unlike them. Our intent throughout each ESL course is to engage our students with the topic in question, and we have found that an incidental, yet intended, result of this encounter is our students' improved writing and reading strategies.

Influences from Classical and Critical Theory

Some of us are responding to the ESL classroom from our knowledge of literary and rhetorical theory rather than a linguistic and psychological perspective. Interestingly, the conclusions many critical theorists have come to are similar to those made by Krashen and Smith. Our knowledge of classical pedagogy shows the significant role that imitation played for theorists like Quintilian and Augustine. Appropriating the classical Greek educational model, both Quintilian and Augustine speak for the importance of learners to read and respond to the texts of their culture. In Roman education, children from the age of seven read and analyzed texts like the *Illiad* and the *Aeneid* in order to become better readers and writers. In the classical mind-set, invention always preceded and informed arrangement; that is, what writers had to say determined the way they said it. In his *On Christian Doctrine* (397-426 A.D./1958), Augustine echoes much recent language theory:

For we know many men ignorant of the rules of eloquence who are more eloquent than many men who have learned them or heard of the disputations and sayings of the eloquent. For boys do not need the art of grammar which teaches correct speech if they have the opportunity to grow up and live among men who speak correctly. Without knowing many of the names of the errors, they criticize and avoid anything erroneous they hear spoken on the basis of their own habits of speech. ... (p. 120).

In the ESL classroom, our intent is to see reading as the powerful medium by which our students acquire eloquence, or facility in the reading and writing of texts. Rather than just using the *Illiad/Aeneid* sources for this literacy development, we face a more complicated task because so many more texts are available to us and to our students. Yet we maintain Augustine's attitude toward the activity of reading: that through this particular experience, a reader's facility with the language of texts develops.

Recently, critical theorists have also turned to the theory of hermeneutics to explain what it is that readers and writers do. Philosophers like Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975) conclude that hermeneutics (interpreting the unknown or strange in texts) is not merely the technical activity of textual scholars but the fundamental way by

which any reader interprets texts. For Gadamer, textual understanding becomes the significant meaning making activity of the human being. Because texts can be preserved intact through the ages (unlike buildings and pictorial art works), Gadamer sees reading as a heightened, exacting interpretive activity. It is this concept of reading as a special and powerful mode of understanding that many of us have brought to the ESL classroom. And in particular, it is the literary text which can foreground the value of active interpretative reading.

Why Literature?

Why read literature? Our experience as ESL teachers has shown consistently that particularly at the intermediate level, narratives speak powerfully to our students. And our intuition has theoretical justification. Dillon (1981) shows that among language users "there is a preference for or bias toward narrative" (p. 65). Narratives are what children first learning to read are drawn to, and it is narratives that seem to dominate the ways that humans organize experience. Further, literature speaks about human concerns that often transcend their cultural contexts. Our second language students can thus more fluently respond to what the text says and to how its meaning can be applied to their own lives. If textual understanding involves some degree of self-understanding, then reading literature allows our ESL students the optimal opportunity to understand themselves and, along the way, to understand the possibilities for using the English language.

The justification for using literature in the ESL classroom also comes from two other sources: Collie and Slater (1987) and Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989). Collie and Slater emphasize that literature addresses basic human concerns which transcend cultural and generational gaps, so that literature can "speak directly to a reader in another country or a different period of history" (p. 3). What the second language learner specifically learns in this reading experience is "an understanding of life in the country where that language is spoken" (p. 4). They further contend that literary texts contain the structures, functions, and discourse features of the language in its natural context. Finally, Collie and Slater emphasize that literature-based ESL classrooms encourage students to develop complex reading strategies which serve them in the reading of other types of academic material—guessing meaning from context, making inferences based on linguistic clues, and so forth.

Brinton, Snow, and Wesche make similar points regarding how the use of content in the ESL classroom makes the learning experience more authentic: "Content-based instruction aims at eliminating the artificial separation between language instruction and subject matter classes which exist in most educational settings" (p. 2). Further, they note that content is an effective teaching medium because it

often "builds on the students' previous learning experiences" (p. 2). Literature as content deals with life experiences, and students, both ESL and native English-speakers alike, are encouraged to respond to some aspect of the literary experience which is familiar to them. These authors finally suggest that a content-based ESL curriculum creates an environment conducive to language acquisition: "Classroom experience and second language acquisition theory both tell us that rich second language input in its relevant contexts is the key, where the attention of the learner is focused mostly on the meaning before we analyze the text's discourse and grammatical structures."

Community College Realbooks ESL Program

The ESL program offered by the English Department at Los Angeles City College evolved gradually, its changes reflecting philosophical shifts in second language teaching. In the 20 years that the department has offered the intermediate and advanced levels of ESL, it has been department policy to allow instructors freedom of choice in texts and approaches with an emphasis on outcomes.

Today as in the past the department allows for a variety of approaches. Some instructors use one text for the entire semester, basing all writing assignments upon it and supplementing with additional photocopied handouts. Others adopt a reading-for-pleasure "shot-gun" approach and choose three or four books without any necessary thematic connection which they think will interest and involve students. Still others choose books which are thematically related to each other. The most carefully structured approach relies on an expository reader about United States' culture as a bridge between authentic texts: a chapter or two of the textbook is then followed by a "realbook" (the departmental nomenclature) concerned with the same subtheme (e.g., American cultural values).

Course Descriptions: Intermediate ESL

Students in the lower intermediate class can read four texts in one semester. They don't always know this. Coming from a beginning program where the emphasis has been on grammar, or testing into the lower intermediate class upon entry to college, they are often justifiably nervous at the prospect of so much reading. Some have never read a full-length book before in English. The instructor explains during the first meeting and stresses throughout the semester that there is probably no better way—other than complete immersion—to acquire the language, vocabulary, and grammatical structures necessary for standard speech and writing. Students are reassured that formal study of language will be a part of the course but that the majority of the class will consist of reading, writing, and speaking in English for the purpose of developing greater fluency.

After a week or more of getting acquainted exercises—introductions, perhaps writing a paragraph introducing a classmate to the class, and writing an introductory letter to the teacher (who responds with a letter of her own in which she quotes some of the more interesting student observations), students bring the first book, Scott O'Dell's *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (1960) to class. Before starting the book, the instructor tells students a little about the culture and fate of the Chumash Indians. (A class may go to the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles and view the Native American artifact collection there.) Then she shows them the first 15 minutes of the film based on the book and perhaps asks them to write about what they saw. The emphasis for this and other "quickwriting" assignments is on communication of thoughts and impressions to the instructor; writing a lot—fluency—is emphasized over grammatical correctness.

The instructor then walks students through the first few chapters of the novel, reading aloud and pausing to discuss the events of the book. The next few chapters might be assigned for homework but students are told to read each chapter quickly several times and to consult the dictionary as little as possible. They are reassured that they do not have to understand everything they read or know every vocabulary word. All they must bring to class is general understanding of what has happened in the book. Some instructors may provide study guides with emphasis on the content points that the students should know, perhaps in the form of questions. Instructors develop their own materials for each realbook. Chapters or groups of chapters assigned for reading are often supplemented with study questions dealing with issues of content and motive, as well as inferencing. Instructors attempt to vary class activities and alternate reading aloud to the class with small group discussions. In the latter, students are assigned to groups of four, five, or six, with an attempt made to separate same-language speakers, if possible. They are encouraged to discuss the text in these groups and perhaps answer questions together. The teacher is available to clarify difficult points and spends some time with each group. Students who have a clear understanding of what they have read often explain the text to those who feel lost. This is clearly of benefit to both speaker and listener: The speaker gets practice in explaining the text in English, and the listener gets comprehensible input in a nonthreatening situation. Close friendships form in these groups. Often students have never spoken English before in any circumstance because of either fear or lack of opportunity.

After general discussion, the groups choose one question to answer in detail in a report to the class. They are told to use their own words in the explanation and not to simply read the words of the book. At first they may write down the answer, practice it with their group, and then present it to the class. Over the course of the semester, the emphasis shifts to taking notes and speaking more spontaneously

from them rather than reading. Shy students are not forced to talk, and the reports at first are given by the more assertive. Gradually, more and more students are willing to report.

The first chapters of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* are difficult for students, but the book becomes easier as students continue to read. Vocabulary, as in most authentic texts, is repeated by the author. It is worked with frequently in class and becomes part of the students' active lexicon. Discussions are supplemented by informal writing assignments, by letters to the instructor giving opinions about character, action, and situation. More of the film is seen each week.

This initial text may take four or five weeks to complete. By the time students have finished the book, they are quite capable of writing a long four-to-five page paper analyzing an aspect of the novel: Karana's relationship with animals, or the wisdom of her choice to leave the island in the end, or the skills she has that enable her to survive. These are formal papers comprising introduction, body and conclusion. Composing processes are discussed and revisions are allowed for content, organization, and language. Students read and react to each other's work.

Other books at the lower intermediate level might include three more children's books and a book for young adults: *Journey Home* (1978) by Yoshiko Uchida, the story of a family returning from a U.S. relocation camp at the end of World War II; *Martin Luther King, The Peaceful Warrior* (1968) by Ed Clayton, and S.E. Hinton's *Rumble Fish* (1975). The King biography is supplemented by videos; Francis Ford Coppola's film version of *Rumble Fish* is shown. The books need not be presented in order of difficulty but in order of time period covered. These books provide students with an introduction to U.S. history and culture. The first three give an overview of patterns of discrimination in U.S. history. On the other hand, *Rumble Fish* presents insight into a dysfunctional white family in which children have been driven to gang membership, a topic of great concern to immigrant students. While the overall picture of the country is not a cheerful one, each book stresses survival, courage, and compassion.

By the end of the class, students have often broken the dictionary habit, can infer meaning from context, have greatly increased their active vocabulary, and can write a formal academic paper.

The midlevel intermediate class continues this approach. Children's books are still used, but by now ongoing students, who have read at least one text at the lower level and often as many as four, are more at home with the process. Students who have tested into this level may be intimidated at first, but veteran students help them in their small discussion groups. The books many teachers use at the intermediate level are not significantly more complex than those of the lower intermediate, as students need time to consolidate reading skills and vocabulary. Those who do not need this time have usually

been referred to the high-intermediate course. There is little complaint about the emphasis on children's and young adult texts. The students have enough difficulty with content to realize that they are not ready for adult books, and they apparently find the issues dealt with in the children's books of sufficient interest.

Realbooks for this level might include the highly imaginative and fast-moving *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* (1986) by Robert C. O'Brien; James L. and Christopher Collier's *Jump Ship to Freedom* (1981), an exciting narrative of a young black slave's accidental involvement in some of the key events of U.S. constitutional history; *Homesick, My Own Story* (1982) in which author Jean Fritz describes her painful girlhood transition from China to the United States; and John Steinbeck's *The Red Pony* (1965) with its close study of family life in early 20th century California and its closing meditation on the thrill and heartbreak of the American frontier.

The format for the midlevel intermediate class is similar to that of the previous level: careful review of opening chapters, reading aloud, group discussion and reports, study guides, formal papers. Here, however, questions become more challenging. Now students are asked to demonstrate in a 15-minute quickwriting that they have read the assignment. Again the texts can be thematically related by issues such as family life, self-sacrifice, and exploration of U.S. cultural values.

In the high-intermediate level, adult books are introduced. Louis L'Amour's *The Californios* (1974) set in Malibu and Los Angeles, provides a look at mid 19th-century California history, with side glimpses at Chumash Indian and 19th-century Mexican culture. Jack Finney's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978), set in northern California, gives a detailed account of small-town 20th-century life in the context of a truly chilling invasion from outer space. One or both movies of the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* can be shown—the 50's version, an allegory of U.S. anticommunist paranoia, or the '80s film, a startling contrast in which human forces lose out to "pod people" in the end. *Ordinary People* (1976) by Judith Guest once again examines the dysfunctional family, not in the inner city low-income context of *Rumble Fish*, but in the affluent middle class. By the end of the semester students can read Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees* (1988). With this, they have graduated from popular fiction to "serious literature."

The format of group reports, letters, and formal papers can continue in the high-intermediate class. But there is more emphasis on editing—as not only fluency but the ability to correct surface errors become increasingly important. It is the combination of the two skills which will determine the students' placement the following semester: After the high-intermediate class, the student will be mainstreamed into either a lower level developmental class or the class which serves as the prerequisite for freshman writing. In the high intermediate

class, therefore, instructors start to add more examples of expository writing. Articles on writing and second language acquisition might form the introduction to the class followed by an assignment in which students interview successful language learners and write a paper reporting their results. Other expository pieces include articles on the frontier, the small town, the family.

At the end of the high-intermediate ESL class, students take the same departmental examination as the students from the lower developmental class for native English-speakers, a short narrative followed by directions to briefly summarize the selection and to relate it (in varying ways as specified by the question) to the students' own life. These are skills they have practiced in previous intermediate ESL classes. The majority of high-intermediate ESL students are ready by the semester's end for the course prerequisite to freshman writing. Many of these students complete the two semesters of freshman writing offered by the English department.

Insights and Questions

Our focus on authentic whole books (realbooks) has led to both interesting pedagogical insights as well as perplexing questions. Most importantly, we as a department have realized that the bulk of what our developmental writing teachers do in their composition courses for native English-speakers is to a large degree similar to what goes on in the ESL classroom. Both developmental composition teachers and ESL composition teachers encourage students to respond critically to longer texts, and we have found that the ideas that emerge from teaching all levels of writing enrich the teaching of all classes.

Because so many of us make literature the content of our composition courses, we confer each semester to revise the lists of realbooks used in all of our reading and writing courses. This list is an eclectic mix of popular, young adult, and children's literature as well as the occasional classic. Interspersed as well are theoretical texts like Frank Smith's (1988) *Joining the Literacy Club*. Why these texts work or don't work provide for enriching departmental discussions. Further, many of us compose and share materials for the books we use: pre-reading and prewriting questions, vocabulary activities, reading and small group activities, and essay questions.

We still have many unanswered questions. We continue to ask just how to appropriate Krashen's concept of comprehensible input to our reading and writing concerns. Should our courses have a thematic basis? Should they be organized around genres? Or is a less focused syllabus of titles for a particular course equally effective? We also ask whether the use of audio tapes of particular books is beneficial to our students, or whether it subverts the act of reading by providing a crutch. One of our instructors is even considering whether the use

of closed captions for viewing of films will enrich his students' understanding.

Though we as a department cannot provide others with a neat model for effective teaching, we do feel that we have found a pedagogy that has both theoretical and practical justification. The bulk of the students, at all levels of ESL instruction, end each course reading and writing more fluently and with more confidence. Finally, the questions that we continue to ask about our whole-books pedagogy are an insistent reminder to us all of the necessary ambiguity surrounding any significant language experience. This sense of mystery (often even messiness) emerging from the critical and creative uses of language is what we as teachers continue to experience in the classroom and what we are confident our ESL students are beginning to appreciate as they attempt to understand and use the English language. ■

Footnotes

A complete list of the realbooks used in various courses is available from the authors.

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