

Some Novel Ideas:

Using Authentic Novels in Community College ESL Classes

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The use of authentic reading materials has been widely recognized as important. However, many instructors are apprehensive about the difficulties of using a full-length novel in an ESL class. Despite the real difficulties, there are significant benefits to using authentic young-adult and adult novels with community college ESL students, and if support is built into the process, the task becomes manageable. This paper describes the benefits of reading full-length fiction, the criteria used in selecting novels, the methods used to provide support, and examples of works used at each level.

For many community college ESL students, the inner lives of the people around them remain a mystery. A well-chosen novel can give our students deeper access to American culture than they are able to achieve in their daily lives. The novelist's craft is to create a world, a complete cultural setting in which the action takes place. A novel takes students into the minds of characters as they react to their cultural context. In addition to this cultural motive, novels provide an ideal context in which to increase vocabulary. Vocabulary is experienced in a rich context and will often recur over the course of a novel-length work, providing the repeated exposure that a learner needs to gain control of a word's connotations and denotations.

Perhaps even more important than specific cultural and lexical inputs is the ability of a shared reading experience to create continuity and community in the classroom. Cities across the country have made use of the power of a shared experience in

programs like One City, One Book. We also can draw on this power to give our students a feeling of belonging and of sharing emotions at a deep level. Finally, students experience a real sense of accomplishment when they read a real book all the way through and realize that they have understood it. Reading short stories, passages in a textbook, or short selections from newspapers and magazines cannot create the same sense of ownership and achievement.

Each teacher will have her own standards for what she wants to accomplish through extensive reading assignments, but based on the purposes expressed above, I have arrived at four criteria that guide the novels I choose to assign. The first is that the work should have been written in the 20th (or 21st) century, and generally after 1950. While I am sure there are benefits to reading Melville or Hawthorne, my purpose is not to introduce students to the heritage of American literature but rather to give them insight into contemporary culture. Also, the barriers of language and style in older books seem too great to deal with in the context of a one-semester ESL course.

For the same reasons, I try to limit myself to works written in and set in the United States. With young adult novels in particular this is sometimes an issue since many young adult novels are set in “exotic” cultures. I try to find works that contain universal themes rather than emphasizing particular ethnic-identity issues. Other instructors may make different choices, depending on the make-up of their classes.

I also favor books that are well-known so that students not only have a shared experience in class but also join in the shared experience of many of their peers. At lower levels, this may mean reading a book that American students read in junior

high school, or it may mean that an adult student reads a book that her children are reading in school. If there happens to be a film version of the story, so much the better—it reaffirms the cultural relevance of the work we are reading and it also makes an enjoyable follow-up to the reading.

The final criterion that governs my choice of novels is that the book should address mature themes. I look for novels that deal with issues such as sexuality, war, discrimination, and personal identity. While our students may read at a 4th grade level in English, they are adults facing with adult issues in their lives, and the choice of reading materials should reflect that fact.

Probably the most important factor in making a reading experience successful is providing adequate support as students read. If a teacher simply hands students a novel-length work and tells them to read it by the end of the semester, students will be discouraged and demoralized. “Read a book and write a book report” may destroy the sense of engagement or enjoyment.

At lower levels, I break the book up into weekly assignments of a chapter or two. Students are required to read the weekly assignment before class. A quick quiz at the beginning of class keeps them on track. Then, I read aloud the entire chapter that they have read independently. The combination of independent silent reading with listening a second time to the same material gives students two opportunities to comprehend the story. Their pre-reading enables them to follow along intelligently while the read-aloud clarifies points that may have confused them.

A question that often arises is: Wouldn’t it be better to have the students do the read-aloud? My answer is a firm No. Listening to one another struggle through

difficult passages is painful and unproductive. I give students plenty of opportunity to read aloud when we read short passages from the textbook. But the novel is a bit of theater, and to be worthwhile, it must be read well. The teacher's understanding of the story is conveyed through her intonation and pacing. So first students read silently, and then they listen and follow along, making connections between written and oral input.

In addition, we discuss each chapter after we read. I usually ask students to discuss in pairs or small groups before they share with the class to ensure involvement by everyone. The discussion allows the students to correct any misconceptions before going on, so each week's reading and discussion makes the next week's assignment more approachable. The discussion questions also model the kind of thinking that a skilled reader should be doing, asking for connections to earlier chapters, to real life, and to predictions about what will happen next.

At higher levels, students are able to read more independently, and it is not necessary to read the entire novel aloud in class, though short sections may still be read aloud. However, support is still essential. The use of a reader's journal with directed questions offers students the guidance they need to read thoughtfully and to keep up with the reading. At high-intermediate to advanced levels, students can be assigned 50- to 100-page sections per week (stopping at meaningful points in the narrative), and can write 2 to 4 page response journals. The journal questions then become the jumping-off point for the class discussion. Asking them to discuss some of what they have already written about ensures that everyone is able to offer something, even if simply to report what they wrote. In addition, some class

discussion questions should go beyond merely reviewing what they have already written in their journals. The journals are a preparation, but not a substitute, for the class discussion. The journals also give the teacher insight to each student's level of comprehension and are useful preparation for writing a formal essay on the novel, if that is part of the course requirements.

The book that I use most often at our beginning level ESL reading class is *Little House on the Prairie* by Laura Ingalls Wilder. At first glance, this selection may not seem to fit all of the criteria detailed above. However, I use it for two reasons: 1) it is a story that most Americans are familiar with and 2.) it provides insight into the idea of the frontier that is essential to understanding the American character and values. In addition, students who have left their own home and family can identify with the Ingalls family in many ways. When Laura describes the loneliness of that first Christmas away from grandparents and cousins, students know exactly what she means.

The teacher needs to be sensitive to aspects of this book that might be perceived as racist, especially towards Native Americans. However, the book can be used as an opportunity to discuss prejudice as a regrettable but real part of American culture. The teacher can also note the ways in which Wilder actually undercuts the prejudice that was implicit in her society. For example, throughout the story, young Laura repeatedly asks Pa when he's going to show her a papoose. In her mind, a papoose seems almost like some sort of animal. In fact that idea is made explicit when she says that Pa had shown her fawns and other animals, and she expects him to show her a papoose as well. But when Laura actually sees Indian families, she is overcome by

the beauty of the babies, and she doesn't use the word "papoose" at all but rather "Indian babies." This can lead to a discussion of how the use of labels can dehumanize, and how this kind of labeling can be overcome.

My choice for an intermediate-level reading class is *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. Again, this choice is in part based on the fact that this book is very widely read by American middle-school or junior-high students. But the themes in this science-fiction type novel are very mature. College-age students are challenged to consider the relationship between sexual desire and love, and the fact that loss, pain and suffering are inevitable parts of a full life. The vocabulary is challenging, but the plot line is exciting, and students want to read quickly to find out what happens next. Often students read ahead of the assigned chapters—a sure sign that they are engaged in the story.

At a high-intermediate to low-advanced level, the novel *Big Fish* by Daniel Wallace is an excellent choice both for its themes and the richness of its symbolism and other literary devices. At only 180 pages and with short chapters, the novel is approachable, yet includes echoes of fairy tales, Bible stories, and American tall-tales, along with the use of magical realism.. The theme of a young man's struggle to understand and accept his father and to be accepted by him is a universal theme that students can identify with. A film of the same name makes for an interesting comparison, since the screenwriter makes many changes in details of the plot while retaining all the characteristics that makes the story so engaging. In addition, the complete screen-play is available online, opening up many possibilities.

Finally, in an advanced class (English 1A for International Students), students have had great success with *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd. Set in 1964 South Carolina at the height of the Civil Rights movement, the story offers valuable insights into the dark racist undercurrent of American society. It also makes an excellent companion to *Big Fish*, in that this novel focuses on issues of motherhood while *Big Fish* focuses on father and son issues. In addition, Kidd deals with questions of female empowerment and the damaging consequences of patriarchy. And yet the voice of the 14-year-old narrator gives the story a light, humorous tone. English 1A also requires a research paper, and it is easy to connect research topics to this novel, in essence having students retrace the research that the author might have done in writing her novel. Because this novel has been extremely popular in recent years, it allows students to become part of the dialogue of our popular culture.

Authentic novels can add depth to ESL reading classes and need not overwhelm learners if they read in a supportive context. Students will increase their vocabulary at the same time that they increase their cultural understanding and gain insight into their own concerns as young men and women. A well-chosen novel can be the focal-point of the course—long after they have forgotten exercises on main-ideas and inferences, students will warmly recall the experience of crossing the prairie or escaping from a life void of feeling. They will see themselves no longer as outsiders but as participants in the world of literature.