

Mysteries for college ESL students: why and how

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Abstract

Mysteries, which are generally based on social and financial dilemmas and conflicts, can be a rich source of material for language classes and can be very motivating for students. They can provide a basis for language work as well as for improving ESL students' understanding of cultural differences in the English-speaking world. This paper presents a case study which used two such mystery stories to help students develop their linguistic competence and their reading skills. Instruction focused on the symbolism used in both stories and the characterization of the major protagonists with the view to encourage discussion among the students. The results suggest that literary fiction is a ready-made authentic material which helps improve ESL students' language proficiency. Using mysteries can provide an alternative to some ESL courses which, more often than not, focus on piece-meal four skills training. The favorable results found in this study can act as small pointers to choosing appropriate materials for conducting ESL classes at university level.

Introduction

The reading of a literary work involves students not only in assimilating information, but also in the direct experience of processing the information that the work contains. It exposes students to good models of writing which as Fulwiler (1989:3) notes opens up new possibilities for students, most of whom spend too much time reading the safe, cautious, convention-bound writing found within the academy. The usefulness of such texts is also recognised by Horowitz (1990) who considers the teaching of literature to be the best reading/writing combination for language training. He goes on to explain that writing about literature resembles the writing required in other college courses. However, since literary texts are generally "less explicitly contextualized, more consciously patterned, multileveled, and less linear than those whose purpose is to convey information or even to use information to persuade" (Gajdusek, 1988:229), they are likely to expose students to a completely different experience. Thus, their exploitation requires from teachers an appreciation of the demands they may impose on their audience.

“Literature” in all its simplicity is the pleasure of reading and the appreciation of writing (Yang, 1999). This must come before it can provide a confrontation with life and help students make a personal discovery (Bushman and Bushman, 1994). It would, therefore, follow that not every student, is ready to confront the works of Milton, Lawrence, and the like: students may initially be intimidated by literature with a capital ‘L’. This would appear especially true for ESL students. Yet, given the potential of literary texts to provide students with a model for writing and a basis for the understanding of a foreign cultures, there would appear to be a tension between what ESL students are ready to deal with in terms of language and the type of reading from which they could most benefit. To address this conflict it would seem that texts for ESL classes need to be selected on the grounds that they are more suited to help students develop linguistic rather than literary competence. There have been increasing attempts to adopt this approach of teaching language through literature (dubbed language arts) in recent years. For example, a recent curriculum reform document on second language learning in Hong Kong proposes “greater use of literary and imaginative texts as a means to develop learners’ creativity and promote purposeful communication in English” (Curriculum Development Council, November 2000:4).

Lazar (1993) proposes a number of reasons for using literary texts in ESL classrooms: the texts are motivating, they provide opportunities for meaningful language practice, and grounds for the development of interpretative abilities. In short, they provide a basis for educating the whole person. Lazar (ibid.) argues for the use of texts dealing with issues that will resonate with students’ own experiences and be appropriate for their level of reading comprehension. She lists several cultural aspects to consider when selecting literary texts for use with L2 students such as social structures, idioms, customs, political and social background, and humor.

Spack (1985:703) suggests that the study of literature provides real content for an ESL course, resulting in the “production of the kinds of academic texts students need to write for college courses”. The study of literature conveys important concepts about structure in all writing, including its style. Understanding what they are reading can raise students’ awareness of the need to consider the reader’s point of view. Vandrick (1996) supports the use of literature for all college ESL students; not only do ESL students learn about other cultures from popular fiction, but they may have a chance of recognizing themselves or someone very much like them in traditional literature. They can easily relate to some of the material and therefore are more able to respond to it in a meaningful way. Cook (1996) further points out

that the excitement of discovery between and among students and their teachers builds on their perspective when they read, discuss, analyze, and evaluate meaningful literary texts. Like Vandrick, Cook agrees that students enjoy learning and writing about their learning experiences when the classroom context is comfortable, challenging and meaningful.

Therefore, the appropriateness of a given work and the interest and ability of students must be considered when selecting literary texts. Twentieth century mysteries filled with excitement and intrigue, a range of characters, and a story line which is gradually revealed, would appear to satisfy the needs of an ESL English class. Perhaps more so than any other form of fiction, the mystery genre crosses the ordinary boundaries of “class, gender, and education” (Lehman, 1989, xi). Gertrude Stein (cited by Lehman, *ibid.*:23) called detective novels “the only really modern novel form”. Certainly the genre has attracted renowned writers. In the course of their careers, at least twelve Nobel literature laureates and twenty-eight Pulitzer honorees have written mysteries (Winn, 1977).

The study of this popular genre can promote the integration of previously isolated levels of cultural awareness, while in-class guided reading, analysis, and evaluation of mysteries can reinforce and deepen students’ appreciation of traditional literary techniques and modes (Gray, 1993). In most literature courses, the dominant tradition has been that of teaching literature with teachers putting the literary work on center stage, and asking students to write one-draft essays or papers about it. Yet, as long ago as 1986, Fulwiler suggested that there should be more student involvement in discussion in the course, so teachers can begin to empathize with young learners, champion their voices, and question the necessity of absolute and often arbitrary standards of performance and behavior” (Fulwiler, 1986:9).

In line with the above beliefs, this paper explores the use of mystery novels in an ESL classroom. It describes the focus of the teaching which was on two content areas, those of symbolism and characterization, in two Agatha Christie mysteries. The strength of this approach of selecting the same genre written by a single author and with a number of characters appearing in both texts, was that it limited the conceptual demands placed on students who were able to build on the knowledge acquired through reading the first mystery as they read and discussed the second.

The main aim of the part of the course being discussed here was to have students read the mysteries and discuss them in class, so maximizing their

opportunities for reading and speaking through discussion activities. The lessons were not geared toward a lecture-driven setting, but a more communicative one which allowed the students to read literary texts for the purpose of practicing their language skills (Carter and Long, 1991). This paper presents the student responses to the selected texts and in particular to the special use of imagery in them. It then goes on to evaluate the benefits accrued by the students through the extensive reading of these texts.

The study

The texts

The novels selected for the class were considered appropriate in terms of students' interests as well as their language structure and vocabulary. The books were *A Murder Is Announced* (1950) and *They Do It With Mirrors* (1952) by Agatha Christie, featuring Miss Marple and her police allies. The same characters who appear across both books manifest a development in that they mature both mentally and physically across the two novels, and the environment in which they operate changes over time. By focusing on the same characters and understanding their world and the places they visit, students were able to develop a sense of continuity, and free themselves from the need to struggle through background knowledge each time they picked up a new piece, as they would probably have to in other literature courses. Reading a single writer's work allowed students to see the development of a writing style and the views of a writer, and the change of the values and physical environments projected - which in itself is essential to the appreciation of literature. The similarities between the selected novels provided grounds for discussion on comparison and contrast and for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the texts. All the activities in the course were designed to improve students' language proficiency and through extensive reading to help the students improve their all-round language skills (Hafiz and Tudor, 1989).

Despite their complex development, the outline of these two stories is simple: a desire for money prompts the murderers to kill. The murderer, the host/ess of a major establishment, is full of charity and takes care of the needy, but he/she kills in cold blood those under his/her care simply to prevent a money scheme from being exposed.

The class

The class was an ESL Freshman English class taught by the author in spring 1998 at a university in Memphis, Tennessee. Most of the students (16 males and 4 females) had more than eight years of English training in their home countries (2 Brazilians, 4 Taiwanese, 2 Hongkongers, 5 Japanese, 1 Mainland Chinese, 3 Koreans, 2 Malaysians, and 1 Thai) and their TOEFL scores ranged from 500 to 517. They had been in the USA for five to eight months before attending this class. Despite the language experience these students might have gained in those months, these students shared a profile similar to that of most university students in their country of origin.

Like other freshmen at the university, these students enrolled in a 15-week Freshman English class which trained students' English proficiency through the use of literary texts. The prescribed text was *The Norton Reader* (9th Edition), an anthology of short stories and essays. In addition, the class read the two Agatha Christie novels. The class met three hours a week for one semester. Students were asked to read the novels in their own time for about an hour every day (about 12 pages); they were to finish reading one novel in three to four weeks. The students were given a list of items to pay attention to when reading which included the description of certain objects, the attire and habits of some of the characters, the layout of certain buildings. Students were advised to underline passages which they thought were crucial to the development of the story. All these instructions aimed at helping students better understand the text for language input.

The class spent 30-45 minutes on discussion of the novel every week. There were four stages in this novel-reading exercise. In stage one (weeks 1-7), the instructor discussed the progress of the plot with the students, clarified ambiguous points, characterized the major protagonists in the stories and hinted at areas students were to pay attention to in the reading assignment for the following week. In stage two (weeks 8-10) students were asked to re-read passages describing the house and food in both novels; class discussion focused on how these two were related to the upcoming murders. In stage three (weeks 11-13), students focused their reading on the working woman characters and how they would categorize and characterize these women. Class discussion also focused on how these women intensified the development of the stories. In stage four (weeks 14-15), students evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of these two novels, and discussed the extent to which reading and discussing these two novels benefited them in terms of language proficiency.

The rest of the weekly 3-hour lecture focused on *The Norton Reader*; the instructor mainly lectured on the texts provided. All freshman students wrote six uniform essays modelled on the passages read from the anthology. The average grade for these six essays became the students' final grade for the course.

Sample focus one: symbols of death

In one session, students were asked to analyze how well the houses represented the people living in them. The aim of this activity was to examine students' micro-reading skills and see if they could find relevant passages for their arguments, draw on their world experience and exchange comments with each other. The students worked in groups and the instructor elicited from them the functions of a house. Students commented that a house was synonymous with protection and sanctuary. They continued by saying that in a house, one was supposed to trust and be protected by loved ones but in these two stories, the victims were killed by their loved ones. One student commented that Christie was tapping an anxiety every human being felt at some level towards lovers, friends, or relatives, or rather, towards their own individuality.

Students also commented on how food functions were preludes to death. They noticed that both elaborated on meals and that unwholesome events were strong suggestions of impending death in these two stories. One of the students commented that in *A Murder is Announced*, the last party the murderer threw for her best friend before killing her was like richly feeding a dog before destroying it. Another student suggested that even when the characters in *They Do It With Mirrors* said dinner was an important function, the food on the table was unwholesome, silverware was mismatched, and people were not properly dressed. When so many things went wrong at dinner time, one could only expect further tragedy.

In another session, students examined the layout of the rooms and explained how the murders were carried out. The aim of this activity was to examine students' macro-reading skills and see if they could deduce similarities among differences. In groups, students successfully pointed out the same structure of the two murders inside the houses: in both murder scenes, activities were in progress in two different rooms, lights went out, guests tumbled, gunshots were fired, the murderer pretended to be in shock. Further similarities between these two novels were discussed in other sessions.

Sample focus two: single working women

In addition to the discussion of the plots, characterizations were studied. The aim of such activities was to let students classify the different characters in the novels, all of whom were of similar social and economic status. Doing so, students had to draw on their own worldview and even on their knowledge of people they actually knew. Students pointed out that many single women worked hard for their living in these two stories, just as modern career women do. They commented that although several women were portrayed as dim-witted in *A Murder Is Announced*, they were nonetheless the key characters, who had put their lives at stake and led to the apprehension of the murderer.

The instructor asked students to look closely at the deaths in the second novel. Students answered promptly that “no women died!” All five deceased were male: four adults and one teenager. Among them, all the adults were highly competent people. A female student commented that “the message is more than clear then: competent women are rising and men simply have to make way for them”. Her hasty comment was not unfounded; the class was told that Christie portrayed more successful woman characters after the 1950s.

In another session, students discussed whether Christie wanted to promote a stronger image of women. They were asked to research the women’s movements between 1920 and 1950 before class. Such an activity allowed students to re-evaluate their own opinions with secondary sources by contemplating library materials and using them to support their point of view. For example, a group of students echoed Shaw and Vanacker (1991) that the women in these two novels represented an anatomy of women’s motives, characters, and temptations, particularly when they were alone and had to act for themselves.

Student response

Since the class activities and assignments were aimed at promoting more use of authentic texts in the communicative learning environment, the focus was on linguistic gain, with literary training being of secondary importance. Such linguistic gain was reflected in students’ analysis of reading passages and class discussion. For example, their comments were more critical especially in the last one-third of the course.

At the end of the course, the class discussed and evaluated the usefulness of the reading. All students agreed that the initial reading was difficult because they had never read an English novel before and reading a 250-page English novel was intimidating. Over time, however, they found the reading easier and more interesting, especially after all the major characters in a book had appeared.

Students agreed that they had more opportunities to speak in class because the discussion based on the novels was more “substantial” than if they were required to answer grammar questions as they had done in their English classes in their own countries. “We never need to explain grammar in English to others, but we need to give accounts of facts in logical and chronological order in daily conversation. Discussing the plot of the novels offers such chances,” said one student, two others concurred. Other students agreed that answering grammar questions or making sentences in class was boring, but discussing a novel in class was like having a real conversation in their daily life (see also Yang, 2001). Although they also felt that they wrote with greater ease and that their writing had improved, they did not have substantial proof of this. As one student commented, “how good a piece of writing is depends on the reader’s view; sometimes the reader may be very subjective”. They also felt that writing became easier because they were able to apply the analytical skill they used when reading the novels. In short, they believed their improvement was due to the effort they made in reading and discussing the novels. It is to be expected that when there is more involvement in the task at hand, as in the case described, improvement can be seen.

Students also noted the value of reading two or more novels with the same major characters. After reading the first novel, students were able to follow the trains of thought of the detectives, and sometimes the murder’s mind in the second; they were eager to guess what would happen next. Before long, students found themselves reading faster and wanting to know if the ending was as they had surmised. It is conceivable that the mysteries stirred students’ interest and may even have encouraged the development of a reading habit.

Since mysteries do not over-simplify the subtleties or complexities of life, they can engage the entire personality of young adults whose linguistic ability may not yet equal their broader experience or personal maturity. Students’ interaction with the text can bring new insights to themselves and their classmates, and perhaps new levels of experience in the ESL classroom. To conclude, students who are mature language users, like the ESL university

students in this study, need materials of a high motivational value in order to make significant progress (Elliot, 1990). Mysteries provide elements which hold students' interest and language which is appropriate for their level; the reading and the discussion fulfill students' desire to express their feelings, thoughts and their need to interact, not just react, in the second language. They also provide students with an incomparably rich source of authentic material over a wide range of registers. Students thus can gain access to this material by developing their linguistic competence, so facilitating the process of internalising the language.

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