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Literature and Current Events: A Theme-Based Approach to Teaching Reading, Writing, and Critical-Thinking Skills to Nonnative Speakers of English

- To improve reading fluency and comprehension and to acquire vocabulary, ESL students must be exposed to a wide variety of readings, particularly continuous text. Recently, there has been renewed interest in literature as a valuable tool in teaching English as a Second Language. Therefore, as a supplemental reading assignment, two instructors of advanced-level students in an Intensive English Program (IEP) collaborated on a theme-based approach to teaching reading, writing, and critical thinking using *The Tortilla Curtain* by T. C. Boyle and a news survey of relevant articles. The choice of this particular novel proved timely because of its connection to current events and the abundance of media reports and political debates regarding illegal immigration and the rights of undocumented immigrants. Students explored issues related to immigration, racism, and social justice. This thematic approach helped the students develop reading fluency and comprehension and improve their vocabulary and critical-thinking skills.

Introduction

As a supplemental reading assignment for two advanced ESL reading/writing courses in the American Language Institute at California State University, Long Beach, two instructors had their students read *The Tortilla Curtain* by T. C. Boyle (Penguin Books, 1995). This novel and related articles were used in addition to the regularly assigned writing textbooks.

The Intensive English Program (IEP) has standard objectives for each of the six levels that all instructors must follow. Skill-area textbooks are selected by the academic coordinators and the curriculum coordinators with input from instructors. In the advanced levels, the writing textbooks include readings, so no separate reading textbooks are assigned. The assigned textbooks must be used; however, the department encourages and supports instructors' optional use of

outside reading materials and activities to enrich the assigned curriculum. Based on positive student feedback (from student evaluations and comments), the department supports instructors' creative endeavors to enrich the established curricula. In a sense, the curriculum becomes more dynamic when instructors adopt a nonfiction or fiction book while connecting its theme(s) to real-life events presented in the media. A "living" authentic textbook evolves, one that students help create through a variety of related activities.

Students read the novel outside the classroom as homework; therefore, reading the novel itself did not take up valuable class time. However, class time was devoted to student-led book discussions, timed analytical essays, and discussion of related articles. Although the two instructors worked separately with their students, they collaborated on the requirements for the journal writing and book-club meetings. Initially, both instructors had planned to combine classes for book-club discussions; however, students elected to hold book-club meetings separately. The smaller, more intimate group discussions were more comfortable for the ESL students, allowing them to express their views more freely. One student in Level 6 said, "The discussions allowed me to express my feelings toward people from other countries and to understand why people leave their countries and go to another one." The instructors also shared newspaper and magazine articles related to the themes presented in the novel. They met regularly to debrief each other on how the project was progressing. Choosing an appropriate book is a very crucial, yet difficult, part of teaching literature. If the novel selected is too easy, the students may become bored and less enthusiastic about reading. On the other hand, if the selection is too difficult, students may feel overwhelmed and reluctant to read. It is essential for students to understand what they have read and to read frequently.

ESL students are often reluctant to read fiction or nonfiction books because they are intimidated by their perceived lack of language skills, by the unfamiliar vocabulary, by the language structures they encounter, and by the sheer prospect of reading a long novel. One student in Level 5 commented that she was initially discouraged about reading a long novel because she was reading so slowly and had to look up a lot of words. However, once she got caught up in the book after a couple of chapters and after participating in the first book discussion, she found that she was able to read faster and became less dependent on her dictionary. At the end of the semester, she said she really enjoyed reading a "whole" book and was happy to discover she could understand "about 80%" of what she read. By providing them the opportunity to read a carefully selected, high-interest, level-appropriate novel, ESL students are exposed to longer, connected literary material than a regular "sheltered" and more confined textbook would offer. Furthermore, by connecting themes from the chosen text to current events in the media such as newspaper and magazine articles, television news reports, and the like, ESL students develop an increased awareness of culture, language, and the world outside the classroom.

Supplemental activities that integrate the text with current events enliven the ESL classroom. Ideas from the novel, related articles, and television news reports and programs serve as a springboard for book discussions, news article analysis, analytical essays, and dialectical journals. This thematic approach weaves a common thread throughout the entire course. By exploring common

themes that arise from the novel and current events throughout the semester, students connect concepts they learn in class with the world outside the ESL classroom. Immersion in a longer, connected text (the novel) allows students to encounter once-unfamiliar vocabulary, structures, and literary devices again and again. Repeated and sustained exposure is necessary to aid fluency and understanding. During the course of the semester, students develop a vocabulary and concept “bank.” The ideas and language in this “bank” are recycled in various activities that promote authentic, dynamic, and natural communication. For example, during a discussion about the proposal for a wall along the U.S. border with Mexico, students were able to articulate their ideas clearly because they had a frame of reference. The class was divided on the issue, but each side had solid evidence from articles, news reports, and the novel to support the students’ views. Moreover, they had become familiar with vocabulary related to this issue. When discussing the controversy surrounding day laborers, students in Level 6 were able to use vocabulary such as *ordinance*, *loiter*, *labor pool*, *shun*, and *soliciting work* to express their views. The following is a journal entry from a Korean student in Level 5 that illustrates the student’s use of newly acquired vocabulary and reaction to ideas from the novel:

From the novel:

He’d wanted to shout an indictment—“That’s him! That’s the one!”—but something held him back. What, exactly, he didn’t know. Misplaced sympathy? Guilt? Pity? It was a wasted opportunity because Jack was there to see for himself how blameless Delaney was—the man was a nuisance, a bum, a panhandler. If anything, Delaney was the victim, his twenty dollars separated from him through a kind of extortion, and emotional sleight of hand that preyed on his good nature and fellow feeling. (p. 109)

Student’s reaction:

As I think about Delaney, I am *ambivalent* toward him. I want to blame him for his *inhumane* action because Candido was seriously hurt. Then Delaney just *abandoned* him. On the other hand, I understand him well. When I was in Korea, I saw increasing number of *migrant* workers in my neighborhood. At that time, I was uncomfortable, but I didn’t know why. I still don’t know. When I saw unfair labor practice for foreigners, I used to raise my voice as that’s a shame. Meantime, the fact of growing number of those workers irritates me unconsciously. Maybe I’m a *double-faced* person.

Many native speakers broaden their minds, vocabulary, and understanding and develop their cultural literacy by participating in dynamic book groups and by discussing current events. By integrating similar activities in the ESL classroom, instructors can encourage students to do the same while also helping students become less fearful about reading longer novels.

Reading independently and later discussing the assigned section with other students help the comprehension and the critical-thinking processes. Doing so enhances the students’ attitude toward independent reading and their understanding of reading as an important part of academic success. At the end of the semester, many students in both classes commented that the

assignments were challenging, and they had developed not only their reading comprehension and writing skills, but also their time-management skills. Instructors informed their students that once they were matriculated in the university, students would have a high volume of reading to tackle. Reading the novel in addition to their other course work prepared them for the rigorous demands of university course work. Moreover, using literature in the ESL/EFL classroom increases students' exposure to English and helps them to build their vocabularies, especially through the recycling of concepts and vocabulary found in the novel. Using a novel enriches the typically textbook-centered ESL classroom. Although many textbook series are designed to be innovative, many of the readings are short, and the activities and exercises may become predictable, repetitive, and even artificial.

The selection of this particular novel proved timely given its connection to current events and media reports. Issues central to the story were immigration (specifically illegal immigration), the struggle of migrant workers in the US, and racism. Tying the novel to current events made the act of reading more meaningful because students were encouraged to connect concepts and themes from the novel with events that were taking place in the real world. On their own, many students contributed news clips about issues raised in the novel that they shared with the class. Students were also able to make connections with their own experience and observations, which they shared during class discussions, in their dialectical journal entries, and in their essays. Regularly scheduled book discussions encouraged students to interact with each other, expanded their language awareness, improved their communication skills, and motivated them to be more active readers. During the course of the semester, they interacted not only with the text but also with each other in animated discussions. Students in both levels often commented that they looked forward to the group discussions. As one student in Level 5 stated, "The book discussions made us read and we were able to share our ideas. The book discussions were very interesting and exciting."

Objective

Using a novel and adopting a thematic approach to reading and writing assignments for the entire semester help ESL students develop fluency and critical-thinking skills. All reading, writing, and discussion tasks are tailored to a particular theme from a supplemental fiction or nonfiction book. Providing up-to-date readings from periodicals and activities that connect the novel or nonfiction book to the "real world" makes reading and writing tasks more meaningful and authentic. Assignments and tasks are designed to help students in the following ways:

- Increase students' reading fluency and comprehension skills;
- Enhance their ability to deal with longer, connected text as opposed to textbook reading assignments, which are not usually connected by a sustained theme or plot;
- Increase their passive (reading) vocabulary because reading a novel or a continuous text deters students from stopping to check the dictionary for every unfamiliar word;

- Identify main ideas and key concepts in the novel and connect them with “real world” events and issues;
- Conduct a media search to find topics related to the themes and ideas from the novel;
- Respond to written source material in discussions and various writing tasks, allowing students the opportunity to express their feelings and opinions about the issues presented in the novel, news reports, and articles.

Tasks, Assignments, and Activities

The instructors required students to do the following:

Obtain the assigned book, *The Tortilla Curtain*, from a bookstore (not from a library) by a specific date. The instructors deliberately required the purchase of the book to give the students the freedom to annotate the book as they pleased.

In groups of two or three, students were assigned sections of the book for which they had to lead a discussion every two weeks.

All students were to read one section every two weeks.

Dialectical Journals (RVJs—Reading/Vocabulary Journals)

For each RVJ assignment, students cited five passages from the novel and analyzed them. In split-page journal entries, they wrote their reactions to each selection and attempted to relate what they had read to their background knowledge, observations, and experience. In a separate vocabulary section, they also selected five vocabulary words or phrases to study. For each vocabulary entry, students provided the grammatical part of speech, the context in which they found the word or phrase, an appropriate definition for that particular context, any related word forms, and an original sentence that demonstrated their understanding of the vocabulary. The following are student RVJ reaction entries:

From the novel:

“I want one of those houses,” she said. “A clean white one made out of lumber that smells like the mountains, with a gas range and a refrigerator, and maybe a little yard so you can plant a garden and make a place for the chickens. That’s what you promised me, didn’t you?” (pp. 28-29)

Student’s reaction:

America must have had a lot of hopes before she was across the border. Although her husband, Candido, promised her happy and luxury life, she can’t live even under a roof. I can’t imagine her situation. If I were America, I would regret that I followed him. If she stayed her country, she didn’t need to worry about food, a living place, and money. At least she wasn’t homeless. I wonder that illegal immigrants are usually like them (America and Candido). Don’t they have their homes? Do they live in the bush? I know they have a problem about the language, and they may have discrimination, If there are a lot of people like them, they need help to live a human life.

From the novel:
Everybody had a right to live. (p. 159)

Student's reaction:

Recently we watched a lot of news which talk about illegal immigrant. Be the foreigner here, I really want to say leave a way for hard-working people. We know the US is the strongest in this world. The US already has got the best benefit. The US is so lucky so I think the US should share something with other country. The US should spend more money on your country. I think the US can handle well the issue of illegal immigrant if the US saves money from attack the other country and intervenes in other country's business. The illegal immigrants always do the work that American don't want to do. No matter how dangerous it is, they just want to earn some money for their family which couldn't enough for America one life. The US worried about the safety and criminal if the US admitted the illegal immigrants work here. It won't be a big deal and there are a lot of examples that the US can reference in this world. I really hope base on safety, the US can give them chances.

Group Book Discussion

In pairs, students led a book-club discussion. Each team presented an oral summary of its assigned chapters and drafted reading-comprehension and critical-thinking questions to ask its classmates. For this activity, the class sat around a cluster of tables for a "round-table" discussion to encourage everyone to participate. Discussions were animated given the controversial issues that arose from reading the novel. Some of the most stimulating topics concerned machismo, gender roles, labor, justice, inequality, stereotyping, and racism. Students learned to express their opinions and support them with "evidence" from the novel, news articles, and from their individual experience and observations. They also became more proficient at expressing their agreement or disagreement with the opinions of their classmates. Initially, students were shy about expressing their opinions, but after the first book discussion, they did not hesitate to contradict or validate each other's views. When shyer students contributed their views, they were encouraged and praised by their classmates.

News Survey

The topics that arose from reading the novel were easily explored in various media. Television news reports, as well as newspaper and magazine articles, sparked discussion and debate and provided students with relevant information to use as concrete support in their writing assignments. Instructors and students clipped dozens of articles from a variety of sources, including *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *UCLA Magazine*. Using authentic materials to supplement the novel enhanced students' understanding.

Reading-Response Handouts

Students answered vocabulary, reading-comprehension, and critical-thinking questions based on various articles. A class discussion explored their

reactions to the assigned articles. The following is a student's response to a comprehension question posed by the instructor about the article "Inside America's Secret Workforce: Inside the Life of the Migrants Next Door" by Nathan Thornburgh (2006, February, *Time*, 167, 34-45):

Question:

What is the attitude of authorities (police, the government) and citizens of your country toward illegal immigrants? How are these immigrants treated?

Student's answer:

Because sometimes news may report the bad part of illegal immigrants, like involved the dealing of sex or violence, etc.... Therefore, citizens may think they are the reason that caused chaos. What's more, the government and police will strengthen the management of immigrants and this caused illegal immigrants to feel troublesome. But even though a part of people still hold negative attitude toward them, some humanistic groups also help them if these illegal immigrants have a difficulty of life. Under this circumstance, I believe their situation would become better than before.

Summary Skills

Students wrote collaborative and individual summaries of various *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek*, and *Time* articles related to immigration policy and issues. This activity monitored their understanding of the main idea and key points of each article. Unfamiliar vocabulary from the articles was also addressed.

Cesar Chavez Day Essay

After reading biographical information about Cesar Chavez, students wrote a timed reflective essay on the following topic:

March 31st has been designated a state holiday—Cesar Chavez Day—to honor the United Farm Workers leader, who “made a difference” by helping migrant workers. You have just read an article about his life and legacy. Do you know anyone who has made a difference? What did that person do for the world? Explain what the person did that was so special and what you learned from his/her actions.

Argumentation Essay

On the same day that immigrant supporters across the country conducted marches, students wrote a 75-minute essay on the following topic:

This semester, we have read *The Tortilla Curtain* and have surveyed articles about undocumented immigrants. There is considerable controversy surrounding the issue of “illegal immigration” and immigrant rights. Recently, protesters have rallied in Los Angeles and in other cities around the country in support of undocumented immigrants and migrant workers. Meanwhile, some members of Congress and the Senate support harsher penalties for those who enter the country illegally. Some people

even advocate constructing a wall along the US border with Mexico to stem the flow of illegal immigration. Do you think undocumented (“illegal”) immigrants should be punished as some government representatives propose? Do you think undocumented workers should be granted work permits or citizenship? Explain why/why not. Should the US build a wall along the border? Explain. Use details from your background knowledge/readings, observations, and experience to support your response.

This essay topic fits the five-paragraph academic essay model. Students were encouraged to use outside source material as support for their essay, using appropriate citation.

Supplemental Support

- After students expressed concern about not understanding the Spanish words in the novel, a glossary of these words was given to the students in both classes before they read the assigned chapters. Understanding of this vocabulary enhanced students’ understanding of the events and the Mexican protagonists in the novel. Many of these words were recycled throughout the novel, making this vocabulary more familiar to the students.
- The film *El Norte*, which depicts the plight of an undocumented immigrant and his sister, was shown to students in both levels so that they could better visualize the struggles of the characters in *The Tortilla Curtain* and of the people in the news articles they had read.
- Instructors did a dramatic oral reading of the first chapter of the novel to spark student interest in the novel.
- Daily discussion of current events, especially those related to the themes in the novel, was conducted at the start of each class.
- Handouts about avoiding plagiarism and using proper citation helped students properly cite source material in writing assignments.
- TV clips about border security and immigration policy were provided by a student.

Findings

Although the students considered the novel to be challenging in terms of the language and vocabulary, they said they enjoyed reading it because of the issues it presented. They also felt empowered after reading a novel of such complexity. Student performance on various assessments such as dialectical journal entries, argumentation essays, news article responses, and summaries demonstrated that their reading comprehension had increased. Their ability to complete these assignments successfully and to meet deadlines indicated that their reading speed had also increased. Based on the comments they made in these assignments and book discussions, they demonstrated a clear understanding of the subject matter presented in the novel and in the related articles that they had read during the course of the semester. Assigning each team to present different sections of the novel encouraged students to become more engaged in and accountable for the book discussions. When we compared their participation in discussions and performance on the various writ-

ing activities at the beginning of the semester with later in the semester, we found that they became more comfortable discussing controversial topics and articulated their opinions more clearly. Connecting the themes from the novel to current events increased their familiarity with the subject matter and helped them articulate more informed opinions not only in discussions and debates but also in their writing assignments. Their discussions initially showed their ignorance about these issues but later reflected an increased awareness and understanding. At the end of the semester, when asked whether or not they would recommend using a novel and current-event approach in subsequent semesters, students unanimously supported the idea. When asked whether or not they would continue to read novels on their own, many students responded that they would. Some indicated that they were interested in reading other books by the same author.

Overall, the semester-long project proved to be worthwhile and rewarding based on student performance and their evaluations of the course. However, instructors should be aware that some students may initially resist or even protest reading a novel. To ensure success of this type of reading-intensive project, instructors must be enthusiastic coaches to encourage or even cajole students into becoming more active and engaged readers. Some students do not enjoy reading in their native language, nor do they enjoy reading fiction. However, by tying themes from a novel to real-life current events and by incorporating dynamic and challenging activities, ESL instructors can encourage their students to appreciate reading literature. A theme-based approach integrating literature and current events can enrich an already established curriculum by making language instruction more dynamic and relevant.

Authors

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Appendix A Current Events Texts

This is a chronological list of some of the relevant newspaper and magazine articles that students read during one semester:
Pawel, M. (2006, January 8). Farmworkers reap little as union strays from its roots. *Los Angeles Times*, p. A1, A28-30.

- Lin II, R. G. (2006, January 22). Hiring site draws protests. *Los Angeles Times*, p. B8.
- Bartletti, D. (2006, February 5). The border: Always two sides [photo]. *Los Angeles Times*, B12.
- Thornburgh, N. (2006, February 6). Inside America's secret workforce: Inside the life of the migrants next door. *Time*, 167, 34-45.
- Inside America's secret workforce [Letters to the editor]. (2006, February 22). *Time*, 167.
- Cart, J. (2006, March 3). In border battle, land and wildlife are casualties. *Los Angeles Times*, pp. A1, A22-23.
- Riccardi, N. (2006, March 5). Arizona torn on immigrants. *Los Angeles Times*, p. A20.
- Delson, J. (2006, March 6). Border battle in new turf for Costa Mesa mayor. *Los Angeles Times*, p. B5.
- Delson, J. (2006, March 11). Laborers shun Orange's job center for better pay on the streets. *Los Angeles Times*, p. B1.
- One border crosser dies in snow, 6 others rescued: In brief. (2006, March 12). *Los Angeles Times*, p. B4.
- Hanna, C. (2006, March 17). A real fence for a real problem. *Los Angeles Times*, p. B13.
- Brooks, R. (2006, March 17). Immigration—The game. *Los Angeles Times*, p. B13.
- Gaouette, N., and Curtius, M. (2006, March 17). Guest worker plan gets Senate boost. *Los Angeles Times*, p. A8.
- Singh, A. (2006, April). Hard labor. *UCLA Magazine*, pp. 20-24, 60.
- Pett, J. (2006, April 2). Border lines [Political cartoon]. *Los Angeles Times*, p. M2.
- Campo-Flores, A. (2006, April 10). Illegals under fire: America's divide. *Newsweek*, 147, 28-38.
- Gorman, A. (2006, April 15). Contractors often play a key role in the hiring of illegal immigrants. *Los Angeles Times*, pp. B1, B8.
- Boudreaux, R. (2006, April 16). The seeds of promise. *Los Angeles Times*, pp. A1, 12-15.
- McGray, D. (2006, April 23). Underground undergrads: The invisibles. *Los Angeles Times West*, pp.19-21, 40-43.

Appendix B

Readings and Themes From Previous Semesters

For Advanced-Level Students

The Freedom Writers' Diary by Erin Gruwell and the Freedom Writers (Broadway Books, 1999)

- Students explored issues that high school students encounter: teen pregnancy, gang violence, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, suicide, racism, and peer pressure.
- Students had a chance to meet the authors at a CSULB-sponsored event for Long Beach Reads One Book program. They were thrilled to meet the student authors and to have their copies of the book autographed.

- Recently released film adaptation was in production at the time this book was used.

The Lovely Bones by Alice Sebold (Little, Brown & Company, 2002)

- Students explored such issues as death and dying, crime and punishment, and the afterlife.
- Students designed their own book covers for the novel, which included a brief book review.
- Students did an Internet search about the author and read other book reviews.

The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan (Ivy Books, 1989)

- Students explored issues such as family relationships (especially relationships between mothers and daughters), cultural identity, and ethnic traditions.
- Given their traditional cultural backgrounds, students identified well with the historical and cultural references in the novel.
- Students shared their personal views while leading discussion groups.

For High-Intermediate-Level Students

Farewell to Manzanar by Jeanne Watasuki Houston (Bantam Books, 1995)

- Students explored issues such as racism, discrimination, internment camps, war, family values (filial piety), and post-9/11-related current events (Guantanamo Bay Detention Center).
- Students conducted a news and Internet search: Ansel Adams camp photos, author information, obituaries, and related articles.
- Asian students shared their insights about World War II and Japanese imperialism. A French student shared her insights about France's Vichy government.
- Interested students were given information about visiting the Manzanar Memorial.

For Intermediate-Level Students

Walk Two Moons by Sharon Creech (Scholastic, 1994)

- Students explored issues related to relationships, loss of a family member, and the individual's quest for truth.
- Students analyzed the various characters and literary devices in the novel.
- Students learned how to not judge others based on assumptions, which may not be true.

Island of the Blue Dolphins by Scott O'Dell (Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1960)

- Students explored issues such as loss, loneliness, courage and honor, family and relationships, customs and traditions, gender roles, and the environment.
- Students discussed historical facts related to the Chumash Indians, the Aleuts, and California history.
- Interested students had the opportunity to visit Santa Barbara, the gravesite of Karana, the protagonist in the fact-based novel.