

**University of Texas at El Paso**

---

**From the Selected Works of Kate Mangelsdorf**

---

1998

## Literature in the ESL Classroom: Reading, Reflection, and Change"

Kate Mangelsdorf, *University of Texas at El Paso*



Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/kate\\_mangelsdorf/8/](https://works.bepress.com/kate_mangelsdorf/8/)

- Walkerdine, V. (1985). On the regulation of speaking and silence: Subjectivity, class, and gender in contemporary schooling. In C. Steedman, C. Urwin, & V. Walkerdine (Eds.), *Language, gender and childhood* (pp. 203-241). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Weller, K. (1991). Freire and a feminist pedagogy of difference. *Harvard Educational Review*, 61, 449-474.

Adult ESL: Politics, Pedagogy, & Participation in Classroom & Community Programs. Ed. Tracy Smoke. Erlbaum, 1998

---

8

### *Literature in the ESL Classroom: Reading, Reflection, and Change*

Kate Mangelsdorf

*The University of Texas at El Paso*

Luis (this is not the student's real name), a 26-year-old student from Mexico enrolled in a developmental writing class, responded in his journal to an autobiographical essay by David Vecsey (1994) called "Old at Seventeen" (I have reproduced the original grammar and spelling):

I agree with the author of this reading when he says that he felt he was no longer a child and that he knew that he was a teen-ager, because that's the most important thing about growing up. The fact that the author miss his own self as a child it's an idea that makes him think and look older. The story remind me of my old days, it seems as if I was rewriting my own story. I remember when I was a child, a daredevil, nothing could stop me from getting adventure, action, killing, thrilling emotions. The days seem to be endless from day to night all was laughs, fun, and adventure, but one day I woke up with a different attitude, a different view of the world, simply another me. It seems that I was sleep in a dream of pure fun and unexpectedly woke up in the middle of nowhere. Then I began to question my self, who am I, what am I doing here, where am I going? what am I going to do? then I realize that I was no longer a child I was a teenager that had to grow older and keep the memories on the past and start to live my own life. Is sad to know that now you are on your own and have to keep moving without looking backwards.

Luis's response to "Old at Seventeen" illustrates how literature in ESL classes can be beneficial. First, his interpretation of the essay took into

consideration the writer's rhetorical strategies. For instance, Luis noted that the narrator's nostalgia for his childhood made him "think and look older," an allusion to the narrator's self-consciously mature voice. This attention to rhetorical strategies could help Luis improve his own writing. Also, Luis's reading of the essay led him to construct a version of his own childhood—"It seems as if I were rewriting my own story." In this story, he recreated his younger and older selves. This recreation gave him the opportunity to better understand his own process of maturation.

In this chapter, I argue that we can use literature in ESL classrooms to help students acquire language and the insight into one's self and one's context that language brings. First I discuss the benefits of using literature in ESL classrooms, and then I suggest strategies and texts for using literature in a variety of contexts.

## WHY LITERATURE?

Clearly, one advantage to a curriculum that includes literature is that students can be given the chance to read interesting and challenging material. Reading, as a major component of both first and second language acquisition, positively influences speaking, listening, and writing skills. In particular, reading a variety of texts of interest to the reader promotes language acquisition (Krashen, 1993). Thorough reading, students improve their vocabulary and enrich their repertoire of rhetorical strategies.

But why read *literature* with our students?<sup>1</sup> Given the time limitations of a particular course and ESL students' need to succeed in their other college classes, why not focus entirely on nonliterary texts that students might read in other courses or in their professional worlds, such as textbooks, manuals, or reports? In most teaching situations, this isn't as practical as it might at first seem. For one, students come from a variety of disciplines, each with their own method of creating and communicating knowledge. Such heterogeneity would make it difficult to engage students with texts from each of their disciplines. Even if we were able to deal with the variety of disciplines represented in each class, our own lack of knowledge about the conventions of each discipline would limit our effectiveness. Spack (1988) wrote, "English teachers cannot and should not be held responsible for teaching writing in the disciplines. The best we can accomplish is to create programs in which students can learn

<sup>1</sup>What constitutes "literature" is open to interpretation. In this chapter I'm using the term to mean poetry, fiction, plays, and essays. The range of material is broad, ranging from texts in the traditional literary canon to ones that are marginalized or outside of the canon, including works from popular American culture.

general inquiry strategies, rhetorical principles, and tasks that can transfer to other course work" (pp. 40-41).

Literary texts have the potential to work as Spack suggested: to help students make the transfer from their English classes to their content courses. With literary texts, students can learn to write about other sources by practicing note-taking, paraphrasing, summarizing, and documenting techniques. They can learn library research by exploring, through traditional written sources or on the internet, how other readers have responded to a particular author or work.

Through reading literary texts, students can also better understand the complicated interactions among writer, reader, and text. Zamel (1992) noted that "reading has as much to do with what the reader brings to the text and how the reader interacts with the text as with the text itself" (p. 467). Despite what many reading textbooks still advocate, reading isn't a matter of locating a single, main idea. Reader-response theorists, for instance, locate the meaning of the text primarily in the reader's mind, whereas social constructivists locate meaning primarily in the discourse community in which readers reside. Although such theoretical concerns might seem irrelevant to the ESL classroom, they have generated a richer awareness of the reading process, a process that can be taught to students through particular reading strategies.

One reading strategy is getting students to connect their own experiences and belief systems with the text they are reading. To do this, students can learn to activate their own background knowledge about a topic before, during, and after they read. Having students answer questions about the topic is an easy way to teach students to do this. For instance, the textbook in which "Old at Seventeen" appears, *Interactions* (Moseley & Harris, 1994), contains a series of questions or ideas for students to respond to before, during, and after they read. This strategy is easily transferred to nonliterary texts.

Reading literature can also help students make sense out of texts on difficult or unfamiliar topics. Tierney and Pearson (1983/1988) described how readers (and writers) do this:

What drives reading and writing is [the] desire to make sense of what is happening—to make things cohere. . . . The reader accomplishes that fit by filling in gaps (it must be early in the morning) or making unced connections (he must have become angry because they lost the game). All readers, like all writers, ought to strive for this fit between the whole and the parts and among the parts. (p. 265)

The reading process, like the writing process, is recursive in that readers monitor and alter their sense of the meaning of the text as they continue

to read. The ambiguity of many literary texts necessitates this type of monitoring, because unlike more straightforward material, such as textbooks, many literary texts demand that readers untangle the meaning as they read. Why does Marguarite, in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), stop talking? Why does Esperanza, of Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1989), want to change her name? When readers work at understanding texts such as these, they're practicing important meaning-building techniques.

Through reading literature, students can also come to a better understanding of the reading process. Traditionally, reading has been taught as information retrieval. Worksheets and multiple-choice tests reinforce the idea that reading is primarily the decoding of individual words, leading ESL students to approach the text with dictionary in hand. Literary texts can easily explode such limiting notions of reading because they lend themselves to multiple interpretations. By encouraging such multiple interpretations, teachers model for their students a reading process that involves a critical engagement with a text in a collaborative context. As Louise Rosenblatt (1983) explained:

A free exchange of ideas will lead each student to scrutinize his own sense of the literary work in the light of others' opinions. The very fact that other students stress aspects that he may have ignored, or report a different impression, will suggest that perhaps he has not done justice to the text. He will turn to it again in order to point out the elements that evoked his response and to see what can justify the other students' responses. (p. 110)

By stressing the interpretive, collaborative nature of reading, teachers can help students understand how texts are written and understood in other disciplines.

Literature can be a valuable tool for learning in a participatory, problem-posing classroom. Auerbach and McGrail (1991), drawing on the pedagogical theory of Paulo Freire, defined a problem-posing curriculum: "The teacher poses problems based on students' reality and guides them through a process of dialogue and critical reflection on that reality from which they generate their own group alternatives for dealing with the problems" (p. 101).

Literary texts that reflect students' lives outside the classroom can serve as stimuli for problem posing. For instance, students who are recent immigrants to the United States might read texts about the experiences of other immigrants. By reading texts that are close to their lives, readers' worlds can be validated, challenged, or even transformed. Problem-posing can also occur with texts that don't correspond closely to students' lives, as Luis' experience reading "Old at Seventeen" demonstrates. "Old at

Seventeen" was written from the perspective of a 17-year-old American boy, presumably from an affluent background (a country club is referred to). The boy writes about how he's reluctant to go sledding, seeing it as a childish adventure. In contrast to the narrator, Luis was older (26), from another culture (Mexican), from a lower economic class, and more familiar with the desert than with snow. Nonetheless, this essay precipitated in Luis a growth in self-understanding that resulted from his engagement with the text.

Literary texts can also help students, especially immigrant students, respond to the pressures of acculturation. Rodby (1990) described a "kaleidoscopic" sense of the self, a description that rejects the idea of a unified cultural identity. Drawing on Bakhtin's and Vygotsky's theories of the development of the self, Rodby pointed out that, for ESL students, writing in English results in "a dialectic of identity and difference" as students encounter "an arena of different discourses" (p. 48). To Rodby, students need to create "a self which is made in a world language" (p. 49)—a self created not in the mother tongue nor in English, but one that embraces both languages and cultures. Literature can help students accomplish this by modeling a kaleidoscopic self. Rodby used the example of Tony in *Bless Me, Ultima* (Anaya, 1972), who struggles to come to terms with the Mexican and American cultures. Another example of a kaleidoscopic self is given in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), which concerns an Indian woman's experiences in the United States. Texts such as these demonstrate different ways the self can develop in multicultural situations.

#### WRITING AND COLLABORATION

Students will benefit most from literature if it's taught in a classroom that stresses integration of skills, in particular writing in combination with reading. To teach literature without the benefit of writing cheats students of the rich connections between these two activities. Zamel (1992) noted that "writing teaches reading" because it allows readers to discover and make concrete their ideas about a text. Indeed, the reading process and the writing process are parallel processes of constructing and communicating meaning: When we read, we compose the text in our head, just as we compose a text when we write.

Reading journals and learning logs are an ideal way to connect writing with the reading of literature. An unstructured reading journal allows students to respond to the reading without specific prompts, enabling them to follow the flow of their thoughts. (Luis' response to "Old at Seventeen" was in an unstructured journal.) Students can be encouraged to write what they liked or didn't like about the material, to connect the

reading to their own lives, or to explore a central idea or character. Learning logs are a more structured type of journal in which students use specified prompts or response techniques. For instance, students can be directed to write about a certain passage in the text or to compare and contrast certain characters. Students can also keep a double-entry log in which they record specific passages on one side of the page and react to the passage on the other side of the page (Berthoff, 1981). Because of the double-entry format, students are more conscious of the dialectical nature of reading—the give and take that occurs between reader and writer.

When devising journal assignments, teachers should allow students the freedom to choose the method of responding to writing that suits them best. One way to do this is to assign different types of journal techniques early in the course, and then allow students to select the technique that they prefer. Students could also take turns writing prompts for each other for learning logs. Another method of encouraging student interaction is to have students keep dialogue journals, in which they write about a text to a specific audience—the teacher, another student, or someone outside of the classroom. Dialogue journals work particularly well in classrooms in which students can write to each other online on classroom bulletin boards.

Dialogue journals are an effective way of ensuring that reading literature is a social, not individual, process. We might think of the act of reading as inherently individual because we (usually) read silently, to ourselves. Although the act of reading might not be social, the act of interpretation is. We can make our classrooms interpretive communities in which students generate and exchange ideas about what they have read. To enrich students' experiences with texts, we can provide them with opportunities to talk about their ideas in a noncritical atmosphere. In addition to whole-class discussions, students can form small groups in which they discuss an aspect of the reading and then report to the rest of their classmates about their ideas. Students can also collaborate with each other on written responses to texts, whether informal (as in a journal) or formal (as in an essay).

Activities such as those just described remind us that literature is a valuable tool for enhancing second language acquisition. In my view, we need to *use* literature, not *teach* literature. It's easy for instructors, especially those who were once English majors, to begin discussing literary periods, symbols, or plot devices. Although topics such as these might be helpful in clarifying a particular point, they should not become the center of the curriculum. Instead, literature should be used as a stimulus for inquiry in a classroom that stresses the interconnectedness of reading and writing and the social nature of negotiating meaning.

### A SAMPLE LESSON

Here is a sample lesson showing one way that literature can be used for the purposes described previously. The course is a first-year ESL composition class with students from a variety of cultures. About half of the students are immigrants; the rest of the students will return to their native countries once they receive their university degrees. The literary text being considered is a selection from Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). The narrator in the passage is Lindo Jong, a middle-aged woman who came to the United States from China as a young woman. In this passage, Lindo Jong tells her daughter, Waverly, how she met Waverly's father in an English class soon after they had both arrived in the United States. Lindo has been goaded by her sister An-mei to get married. Following is a section of this passage (the students receive a longer version):

Sometimes I wonder why I wanted to catch a marriage with your father. I think An-mei put the thought in my mind. She said, "In the movies, boys and girls are always passing notes in class. That's how they fall into trouble. You need to start trouble to get this man to realize his intentions. Otherwise, you will be an old lady before it comes to his mind."

That evening An-mei and I went to work and searched through strips of fortune cookie papers, trying to find the right instructions to give to your father. . . . I knew the right one when I read it. It said: "A house is not home when a spouse is not at home." I did not laugh. I wrapped up this saying in a pancake, bending the cookie with all my heart.

After school the next afternoon, I put my hand in my purse and then made a look, as if a mouse had bitten my hand. "What's this?" I cried. Then I pulled out the cookie and handed it to your father. "Eh! So many cookies, just to see them makes me sick. You take this cookie."

I knew even then he had a nature that did not waste anything. He opened the cookie and he crunched it in his mouth, and then read the piece of paper.

"What does it say?" I asked. I tried to act as if it did not matter. And when he still did not speak, I said, "Translate, please."

We were walking in Portsmouth Square and already the fog had blown in and I was very cold in my thin coat. So I hoped your father would hurry and ask me to marry him. But instead, he kept his serious look and said, "I don't know this word 'spouse.' Tonight I will look in my dictionary. Then I can tell you the meaning tomorrow."

The next day he asked me in English, "Lindo, can you spouse me?" and I laughed at him and said he used that word incorrectly. So he came back and made a Confucius joke, that if the words were wrong, then his intentions must also be wrong. We scolded and joked with each other all day long like this, and that is how we decided to get married. (Tan, 1989, pp. 301–302)

An important reading comprehension strategy is connecting a reader's background knowledge to the text under consideration. This passage lends itself to such a strategy. Many students can easily understand the awkwardness of finding a mate when traditional cultural customs are no longer appropriate, and students learning English can sympathize with the confusion over the word *spouse* that is at the heart of the story. To help them connect their own experiences with the text, students could respond to questions such as the following before, during, or after they read:

- Compare and contrast the traditions for finding a mate in your native culture and in the American culture. Which tradition do you prefer?
- Describe a time when a word in English that you didn't know led to a confusing situation.
- Have you been told how your parents met and married? If so, relate the story.
- Why might family members tell children about how their parents met and married?
- What is your ideal mate? What is one of your classmates' ideal mate? How does your ideal mate compare and contrast with your classmate's? What might explain the similarities and differences?

To enrich the reading process, students could respond to these questions in class or small-group discussions as well as in learning logs.

This passage from *The Joy Luck Club* could also be used to refine students' reading processes. Questions such as the following can strengthen students' ability to make sense of the text as they read:

- As you were first reading this passage, did you ever become confused? If so, what confused you? What was your strategy for dealing with this confusion? For instance, did you reread the confusing part, consult a dictionary, or return to the confusing part after you read the whole piece?
- Is there any part of the piece that you still don't understand? If so, spend 5 minutes writing what you think it might mean. Then show the passage to one of your classmates and explain your ideas about it. Ask your classmate for his or her ideas.
- Write a short summary of this passage for someone who hasn't read it.
- Pick out two or three of the most important sentences in this passage. Explain why they're important.
- Why does the author use so much dialogue in her story?

An important part of this story concerns Lindo Jong's efforts to adapt to a strange culture. In getting the right man to propose to her, she combines a traditional way (the fortune cookie) with an American way (passing a note to her intended). Her Chinese self and her American self are both apparent. Prompts such as the ones in the following list can help students become more aware of their own kaleidoscopic selves:

- In what ways does Lindo seem Chinese? In what ways does she seem American?
- Does Lindo seem to belong to one culture more than another? Why or why not?
- Does Lindo's future husband seem to belong to one culture more than another? Why or why not?
- To which cultures do you belong?
- Which cultural traditions do you abide by when doing the following: picking a mate, preparing a certain meal, talking to different family members, raising a child, being with friends?

In addition to doing informal writing in journals or learning logs, students can extend their responses to Tan's work with lengthier and more complex pieces. Collaboratively or individually, they can write and perform a play based on this passage, compose a story about Lindo and her husband in later years, or write love poems from the perspective of Lindo or her husband. They can compare Tan's piece with other writers' descriptions of finding partners, such as Gary Soto's essay "Finding a Wife" (Soto, 1986), which is about how Soto, a Latino, met and courted his Japanese-American wife. Students can write about their own attempts to find partners. A more academic writing assignment is a report comparing the process of finding spouses in different cultures.

#### SUGGESTED TEXTS

The list of literary texts appropriate for the ESL classroom is endless. The following suggestions are intended only as starting points.

Some of the most effective texts are an accepted part of the literary canon. Orwell's *1984* (1949) and *Animal Farm* (1946) engage students in issues concerning political power and free expression, whereas Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) brings out more metaphysical concerns. Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) raises questions concerning the role of religion in colonial conquest. Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) deals with the conflict between societal mores and individual needs. In addition to raising issues relevant to

students' lives, texts such as these use simple, clear language that is easily accessible for many ESL students.

Texts dealing with cultural conflicts are quite well suited for ESL students, especially those who are recent immigrants to the United States. Texts about immigrant experiences include Gish Jen's *Typical American* (1991), Gus Lee's *China Boy* (1991), Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (1991), Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), and Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973). Texts dealing with minority cultures in the United States include James Welch's *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979), N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), Brent Staples' *Parallel Time: Growing Up in Black and White* (1994), Malcolm X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (X & Haley, 1964), and Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991).

Many of the most useful resources of literature for ESL students are anthologies with a multicultural emphasis. Some of the best are Gillespie and Singleton's *Across Cultures: A Reader for Writers* (1991); Kirsznar and Mandell's *Common Ground: Reading and Writing about America's Cultures* (1994); Wiener and Bazerman's *Side by Side: A Multicultural Reader* (1993); Colombo, Cullen, and Lisle's *Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing* (1992); Verburb's *Ourselves Among Others: Cross-Cultural Readings for Writers* (1988); and Divakaruni's *Multitude: Cross-Cultural Readings for Writers* (1993).

### THE REAL LITERATURE IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

Using literature in the ESL classroom is an effective way of helping students at different levels of language proficiency to successfully create and communicate meaning. For this to happen, literature should be used as a tool to engage students in critical reading and writing activities. Ira Shor (1992) wrote that "texts [should] enter a student-centered process rather than students entering a text-centered discourse" (p. 245). To accomplish this, he recommended that students have a voice in deciding which texts should be read, have the right to state their opinions about the texts, and have the opportunity to connect the texts to their own contexts. Suggestions such as these remind us that literary texts are a means to an end, not an end unto themselves. Ultimately, the most important texts in the classroom are those produced by the students themselves.

### REFERENCES

- Alvarez, J. (1991). *How the Garcia girls lost their accents*. New York: Plume.  
 Anaya, R. (1972). *Bless me, Ultima*. Berkeley, CA: Tonatuh International.  
 Anderson, S. (1919). *Winesburg, Ohio*. New York: Modern Library.

- Angelou, M. (1969). *I know why the caged bird sings*. New York: Bantam.  
 Auerbach, E., & McGrail, L. (1991). Rosa's challenge: Connecting classroom and community contexts. In S. Benesch (Ed.), *ESL in America: Myths and possibilities* (pp. 96-111). Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.  
 Berthoff, A. (1981). *The making of meaning*. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook.  
 Caher, W. (1927). *Death comes for the archbishop*. New York: Vintage.  
 Cisneros, S. (1989). *The house on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage.  
 Cisneros, S. (1991). *Woman hollering creek and other stories*. New York: Vintage.  
 Cofer, J. O. (1991). *Silent dancing: A partial remembrance of a Puerto Rican childhood*. Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press.  
 Colombo, G., Cullen, R., & Lisle, B. (Eds.). (1992). *Rereading America: Cultural contexts for critical thinking and writing* (2nd ed.). New York: Bedford/St. Martin's.  
 Divakaruni, C. B. (Ed.). (1993). *Multitude: Cross-cultural readings for writers*. New York: McGraw-Hill.  
 Gillespie, S., & Singleton, R. (Eds.). (1991). *Across cultures: A reader for writers*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.  
 Hemingway, E. (1952). *The old man and the sea*. New York: Scribner.  
 Houston, J. W. (1973). *Farewell to Manzanar*. Santa Barbara, CA: Capra Press.  
 Jen, G. (1991). *Typical American*. New York: Plume.  
 Kirsznar, L. G., & Mandell, S. R. (Eds.). (1994). *Common ground: Reading and writing about America's cultures*. New York: St. Martin's.  
 Krashen, S. (1993). *The power of reading*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited.  
 Lee, G. (1991). *China boy*. New York: Dutton.  
 Momaday, N. S. (1969). *The way to Rainy Mountain*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.  
 Moseley, A., & Harris, J. (Eds.). (1994). *Interactions: A thematic reader* (2nd ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.  
 Mulcheerjee, B. (1989). *Jasmine*. New York: Grove.  
 Orwell, G. (1946). *Animal farm*. New York: Harcourt Brace.  
 Orwell, G. (1949). 1984. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.  
 Roddy, J. (1990). The ESL writer and the kaleidoscopic self. *The Writing Instructor*, 10, 42-50.  
 Rosenblatt, L. (1983). *Literature as exploration* (4th ed.). New York: Modern Language Association.  
 Shor, I. (1992). *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.  
 Soto, G. (1986). *Small faces*. Houston, TX: Arte Publico.  
 Spack, R. (1988). Initiating ESL students into the academic discourse community: How far should we go? *TESOL Quarterly*, 22, 29-51.  
 Staples, B. (1994). *Parallel time: Growing up in black and white*. New York: Avon.  
 Tan, A. (1989). *The joy luck club*. New York: Ballantine.  
 Tierney, R. J., & Pearson, P. D. (1988). Toward a composing model of reading. In E. R. Kintgen, B. M. Kroll, & M. Rose (Eds.), *Perspectives on literacy* (pp. 261-272). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. (Reprinted from *Language Arts*, 1983, 60, 568-580)  
 Vecsey, D. (1994). Old at seventeen. In A. Moseley & J. Harris (Eds.), *Interactions: A thematic reader* (2nd ed., pp. 51-54). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.  
 Verburb, C. J. (Ed.). (1988). *Ourselves among others: Cross-cultural readings for writers*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's.  
 Welch, J. (1979). *The death of Jim Loney*. New York: Harper & Row.  
 Wiener, H. S., & Bazerman, C. (Eds.). (1993). *Side by side: A multicultural reader*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.  
 X. M., & Haley, A. (1964). *The autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Random House.  
 Zamel, V. (1992). Writing one's way into reading. *TESOL Quarterly*, 26, 463-485.