Teaching Novels in EFL/ESL Classes

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Abstract

This article presents pedagogical reasons for teaching novels in EFL/ESL classes, basic criteria for choosing appropriate novels, and practical suggestions for teaching them. The article also cites significant research supporting this pedagogy.

Introduction

If we accept that novels can contribute to our students' knowledge of English, and if we agree that a novel requires a fair amount of time and effort to read but can also be engrossing and enjoyable, then it is important for us to choose carefully the novels we will teach. This article presents pedagogical reasons for teaching novels in EFL/ESL classes, basic criteria for choosing appropriate novels, and practical suggestions for teaching them.

Why teach novels?

Many scholars have presented compelling arguments for teaching novels in EFL/ESL classes. They argue that we should teach novels because

1. They are enjoyable to read.
2. They are authentic.
3. They help students understand another culture.
4. They are a stimulus for language acquisition.
5. They develop students' interpretative abilities.
6. They expand students' language awareness.
7. They encourage students to talk about their opinions and feelings.
8. They foster personal involvement in the language learning process.

What novels should we choose? What are "good" novels?

Lists of "good" novels, in particular those for EFL/ESL learners, vary. Scholars themselves offer various definitions of what a good novel is. For example, Gardner writes that a good novel "seeks, without pandering, to satisfy and please. It is intellectually and emotionally significant." (1983, p. 40) Lazar claims that a good novel "addresses itself to complex situations and adult dilemmas. It engages our students intellectually, emotionally, and linguistically…" (1990, p. 204) On the other hand, Martino and Block state that a suitable novel for the classroom "should be one that forces students to ask questions." (1992, p. 15)

The work of these scholars as well as others can lead us to formulate a criteria for choosing novels. Most agree that a novel that is appropriate for second-language learners has

1. Linguistic accessibility (syntax, punctuation, vocabulary, etc. do not hinder reading)
2. Literary accessibility (e.g., a traditional narrative will more likely be successful than an overly descriptive, overlong, or experimental work)
3. Cultural accessibility (how bound is the novel to its culture?)
4. Storytelling quality (is the book a page-turner?)

Four novels that satisfy these criteria, from Intermediate to Advanced levels, are:

1. *Danny, the Champion of the World* by Roald Dahl

2. *Valley of the Dolls* by Jacqueline Susann
3. *The Godfather* by Mario Puzo
4. *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote (classified as a "non-fiction novel")

How do we determine linguistic accessibility?

Web-based bookshop Amazon now features readability scores (Text Stats) for many of its titles. Although these scores are designed to reflect the readability of texts for *native speakers*, they can be used to estimate the readability of texts for non-native speakers as well. Kellermann, in her study on reading in a foreign language, notes that a foreign narrative's readability largely depends on how free it is from "lexical and grammatical traps." (1981, p. 88)

Amazon uses the Fog, Flesch, and Flesch-Kincaid indices, which produce scores linked to the absence of these lexical and grammatical "traps." Each index gauges a text on its number of complex words, the average number of syllables per word, and the average number of words per sentence. Amazon also allows you to see the relative readability of texts in a given category (e.g., women's literature, science fiction and fantasy, true crime, etc.).

For books not listed on Amazon, the teacher will need to determine readability manually. Kathy Shrock's Guide for Educations (http://school.discoveryeducation.com/schrockguide/fry/fry.html) provides guidance on how to do this.

Practical matters concerning the teaching of novels

Once a novel has been selected, it must not simply be assigned to students as is sometimes done in mainstream literature courses. Rather, the instructor should do the following:

- Reread the novel and highlight and annotate important and potentially difficult passages before assigning it.

- Use a reading schedule.

- Have students lead class discussions (this will allow you to quickly assess how well they are comprehending the novel).

- Exploit the creative possibilities of each novel (bring in period music, historic photographs, film versions on DVD).

- Require the use of a high-quality dictionary.

- Promote careful, annotated reading of the text.

- Have students keep a reading journal. Berthoff (1981) suggests having students keep a double-entry notebook. Students select a quote from the reading and write it on the left-hand page. On the opposite page they write their response to it. The response may include an explanation of what the quote says and why the student chose it.

- As much as you can, select a novel that will be a pleasurable reading experience for your students.

- Do not pass out study sheets until students have finished reading the novel.

- Be enthusiastic about the novels you teach.

Conclusion

It may be best to close on how students feel about the reading of narrative texts (short stories,

novels) in contrast to informational texts (articles, essays, histories, etc.). Aebersold and Field (1997, p. 158) report the following statements in their book on the teaching of reading in second language classes.

> When reading a story the reader shares the writer's thoughts and feelings as the reader thinks and tries to predict about the future or the conclusion while he is attracted, but reading informational texts wouldn't attract the reader after he gets what's needed from the information written. Besides, that information doesn't move the reader's feelings and emotions, and doesn't motivate the reader toward thinking and predicting.
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> —   Hani Halawa, Jordan
>
> When I read a story, I will read it carefully. I want to know when and where the story happened. And I must understand the characteristics of every protagonist in the story. Then I can imagine the plot of this story and follow the development of this story. I think I will enjoy reading a story.
> When I read an informational article, I will just read the main point of this informational article. I want to know what happened and

what was the result. I just get
some information from the
article.

— Kuei-lan Lee, Taiwan

It must finally be mentioned that students feel a
special pride when they finish reading a novel.
This feeling is not usually experienced with other
texts (e.g., course books), and it can be a
significant factor in motivating students to read
more (learn more). If you have chosen your novel
well, you will almost certainly get requests from
your students for other good novels to read.

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Extensive discussion of these points can be found in Brumfit and Carter (1986), Lazar (1993), Ur (1996), Aebersold and Field (1997), Collie and Slater (1997), and McKay (2001).
[2] The Fog index defines a complex word as having three or more syllables.

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