

# Teaching Young Adult Literature in Advanced ESL Classes

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This paper discusses the benefits and strategies of teaching Young Adult Literature in Advanced ESL classes, focusing on developing literacy and introducing culture. Teachers can use Young Adult books to enlarge the students' vocabulary, introduce authentic expressions, and scaffold the students' writing. Teaching strategies include cloze tests, prompt sentences and imitated writing. Teachers can, through class discussions, reading groups, and reflective writing, teach Young Adult books to help ESL students develop a deep, yet personal, insight on some socio-cultural issues present in the United States

## Introduction

The benefits of using literature in the ESL classroom have long been proven and recognized by ESL teachers and researchers in three core areas. First, reading literature is beneficial to language development (Johnson & Louis, 1987; Morgan, 1998; Myonghee, 2004; Sage, 1987). Literary texts are also rich resources of accurate diction, diverse sentence patterns, and passionate narratives (Ghosn, 2002). Second, reading literature enhances ESL students' knowledge of culture and society, which is too complicated to be captured by any single piece of expository writing (Edmondson, 1995/6). Third, reading literature fosters critical thinking by offering readers multiple perspectives, especially in books dealing with issues such as immigration, cultural differences, social upheavals, et cetera. It is an exciting medium to explore and yet safe enough to draw back and consider the alternatives.

Young Adult Literature is a promising candidate to be used in the ESL classroom. It is often written in simple, modern English (Monseau, 2000); covers a wide variety of topics that are relevant to ESL students' lives (Stover, 2001); and contains short enough chapters to accommodate ESL students' reading habits and ability levels (Cummins, 1994). Regardless of these attractive aspects, researchers including Myonghee Kim (2004), Aly Anwar Amer (2003), and Peter Morgan (1998) have been asking the question of how to exploit its unique values and features so that ESL students can learn more than the plot of the story. This article discusses the specific strategies to teach Young Adult literature in advance level ESL classes, focusing on developing literacy and introducing culture.

## Young Adult Literature and Finding Young Adult Literature Books

Young Adult books are commonly used and often favored by both teachers and students in secondary schools in the United States. They speak to young adults at a very personal level by putting real-life situations into a simpler context. They deal with situations and circumstances that are pertinent to young adults, such as coming of age, relationships, growth and development, and self-discovery. They are typically written in the first person, using contemporary language, and following linear storylines. Every year a large number of Young Adult books are written by authors from all walks of life. This not only makes them easily available, but also gives readers a large selection. More importantly, some Young Adult books are considerably relevant to ESL students since they were written by authors who share similar experiences or have dealt with being immigrants in the United States.

Every four or five years The National Council of Teaching English (NCTE) publishes an annotated book called *Books for You*, which offers teachers and librarians "a comprehensive annotated list" of Young Adult books. Typically, more than a thousand Young Adult books are included and annotated in thematically arranged chapters to produce an overview of the field while remaining organized so teachers and ESL readers can easily browse books they may be interested in, from art to

## Using Young Adult Literature Books to Develop Literacy

Well-written and targeted at young readers, Young Adult books are rich resources of accurate diction, diverse sentence patterns, and passionate narratives. Furthermore, these elements are organically connected to each other so improvement in one area triggers growth overall. According to Cummins (2003), discrete language skills, such as vocabulary and grammar, can be developed in isolation but cannot lead to academic proficiency unless learners were actively engaged in situations where those individual skills were integrated by an authentic media. Young Adult books are considered just such a medium by researchers (Myonghee, 2004; Reid, 2002). For example, the book *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* by Alvin Schwartz (1981) was used in my class to teach students how to tell stories concisely. The following paragraph is an excerpt from the book:

One time a preacher went to see if he could put a haunt to rest at a house in his settlement. The house had been haunted for about ten years. Several people had tried to stay there all night, but they always would get scared out by the haunt. So this preacher took his Bible and went to the house—went on in, built himself a good fire, and lit a lamp. Sat there reading the Bible. Then just before midnight he heard something start up in the cellar-walking back and forth, back and forth. Then it sounded like somebody was trying to scream and got choked off. Then there was a lot of thrashing around and struggling, and finally everything got quiet. (p.29)

Besides teaching the meaning of individual words and phrases, such as “haunt,” “back and forth,” “thrashing,” and so on, teachers can make students aware of many useful expressions, e.g. “get scared by,” “something started up,” “get choked off,” just to name a few. To enhance students’ language output, teachers can give students prompt sentences as cues and ask them to produce new sentences by using designated phrases. I often use how/why questions as the style of prompt sentence to reinforce students’ contextual knowledge. I also connect similar phrases to contrast and clarify students’ understanding. For example, I introduced “start-up” when I taught “start up.” Students then learned that a business that has just “started up” is a “start-up company,” and “start up” usually is followed by a noun.

Learning some concrete phrases is only the first step. To achieve proficiency, students must be familiar with the overall characteristics of a story. I used the excerpted paragraph to illustrate the narrative structure of a story. My students were asked to pay special attention to phrases and structures including “one time,” “had been,” “so,” “then,” and “finally,” to get a sense how these words lay a clear, linear structure to engage readers. Writing skills like this, along with the creation of suspension (the repetition of the phrase “back and forth”), are highly appreciated by ESL students, who often need to retell a story or recount their experiences in daily dialogue and in writing. Next, I asked them to write a story by following the style of the story they just read, which then served as an example to elicit and scaffold the writing process. I found this approach effective in motivating reluctant writers as well as keeping average writers focused.

## Using Young Adult Literature Books to Introduce American Culture and Society

Young Adult books are a good collection of stories and events, contemporary as well as historical. To ensure a strong adolescent readership, narrations are often built upon the perspective of one main character, usually a young adult who is experiencing the pains of growing up. This makes reading Young Adult books a drastically different experience from that of reading explanatory articles, the most commonly seen type of literature in ESL reading. A good Young Adult book not only informs ESL students the situation and development of an event; it also connects readers to the event to gain an insight, rather than an overview, of American culture and society, especially on aspects closely related to young people. Students who read *Out of the Dust* (1999) can learn much more than what the Dust-bowl was in the Great Depression of the 1930s. *Stotan* (2003) is not just a book about high school swimming in the United States. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham – 1963* (2000) vividly and hilariously presents those “bumpy years” from the eyes of a fourth grader.

The book I mentioned above, *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*, is a good starting point to explore the lives of American people and their feelings toward some cultural clichés such as the black cat, big toe, and the dark, deep closet. By connecting

religion, superstition and folktales together, I led my students to explore hidden facets of American culture. I first assigned students from different cultures into several reading groups, around five students per group. By sharing their reading experiences, students realized how differently people approach and respond to the same story. To make this more relevant, later, students are asked to reflect on their own culture to look for parallels. For example, I ask them what they considered as the scariest sound on a dark night in comparison to a thrashing sound starting up in the cellar. A writing assignment was then given so they have to elaborate and do research to find the social and historical contexts of the event.

Young Adult books written in the first person perspective breaks social, cultural, gender and other such barriers. They offer ESL students a kaleidoscopic view to see the issue from multiple points of view that they may not otherwise have had access to in their own lives. It is entertaining and eye-opening to see how other people think, interpret, and act on a variety of things, especially those things that ESL students are familiar with. For example, when taught *Stargirl* (2000), I asked my students to pay more attention to the following paragraph:

When she came by our table, I got my first good look at her face. She wasn't gorgeous, wasn't ugly. A sprinkle of freckles crossed the bridge of her nose. Mostly, she looked like a hundred other girls in school, except for two things, she wore no makeup, and her eyes were the biggest I had ever seen, like deer's eyes caught in headlights. She twirled as she went past, her flaring skirt brushing my pant leg, and then she marched out of the lunchroom.

The book *Stargirl* is a good collection of events that take place in a typical American high school, including the school radio station, basketball tournament, cheerleading, prom, and more. This was the moment when Nick, the male protagonist, met his first love—Stargirl. My students were impressed by the accuracy and conciseness of the narration. Moreover, the experience of an American middle-class high school student meeting his first love revitalized many of my students' passion to learn English. They never realized English could be so touching and personal before reading this.

I used the excerpted paragraph as an example to help my students build a schematic, which in turn scaffolded their writing in similar subjects. Engaged and motivated, they were asked to write a short, free-response paper and share it in class. I then asked them to write a paragraph or two describing a face that had left the deepest impression on them when they went to high school. The writing instructions included: "write one or two features of that face in detail and tell readers the reason of the choice, introduce the context of the encounter, and insert the author's experiences and responses in writing." The majority of my students not only found a voice in their own writing with which to relive their life-changing moments, but also realized how smooth the writing process could be if they already had an idea of how things were organized and laid out.

Students then compared and contrasted their writing with that of the book. I asked them to find cultural items or social events that were uniquely American. Later, we went through the list in discussion. It was worth noting that reading had instilled in the students a working knowledge of American high school culture. This answered a lot of questions they once had, for example, the academic life of a student and their extracurricular activities. This knowledge cannot be comprehensively imparted by typical Americans or be as emotionally touching by nonfictional writing alone. Learning how to read Young Adult books opens a door for ESL students to understand American culture and society from the perspective of an insider, an opportunity appreciated by the majority of ESL learners.

## Conclusion

The simple yet beautiful language used in Young Adult books, in addition to the cultural content, is one of the most conspicuous features utilized by ESL teachers. In fact, ways to engage the advanced levels of ESL students to read these books are certainly more than what have been discussed above. Teachers in English education have done a considerable number of studies and many of their findings can be applied in the ESL classroom. At the same time, a teacher must have extensive knowledge of the Young Adult books, or at least be familiar with different topics and genres. Also, the teacher should be supportive, encouraging, sensitive, and dedicated, because their students face a tremendous challenge when reading through a book written in a foreign language.

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## Links

- Websites such as Alan Review (<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/>) and Amazon (<http://www.amazon.com/>) are also good places to search and locate Young Adult books.