TEACHING NOVELS TO IMPROVE EFL SKILLS: USEFUL TIPS

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The teaching of novels in the EFL classroom requires strategies and approaches which can account for the distinctive features of long fiction.

Moreover, in EEL learning situations, the instructor needs to take into consideration that the students are non-native speakers of English. Thus, the study of novels may involve an approach to texts as linguistic resources as well as cultural artefacts. Theoretically, a novel is a literary genre which consists of three interrelated components: the story, the language, and the style of presentation. Thus, initially, the teaching of novels should be concerned with enabling students to experience novels, and later enable them to describe and eventually account for the experience by making critical comments.

Therefore, the following issues should be carefully investigated:

1. The considerable length of many novels and the students’ way of coping with it
2. The complexity and volume of unfamiliar vocabulary in the novels
3. The design of a stage by stage procedure of tasks and activities to use with novels

An efficient novel reading experience will reveal indicative clues to the discovery of the theme, characterization, symbolism, and relevant features of long fiction. The researcher aims to propose a variety of strategies to make the teaching of the novel enjoyable and an academically enriching experience. These strategies include the design and implementation of motivation building techniques which facilitate overall comprehension, interpretation, and cultural orientation. These techniques can also be devised in a manner to train the students to read for meaning rather than details at the first stage, and later provide the students with auxiliary assistance such as glossaries and lists of definition of literary terms. Other significant factors which can make novel reading a rewarding and enjoyable experience in the classroom concern suitable text selection, allocation of sufficient time for the reading of novels, and finally preparing students for a total intellectual and emotional involvement in the literary experience of novel reading. In addition, the teaching of novels can also serve as a tool to familiarize students with the diversity of cultural presentations.

Keywords: Strategies and approaches, Fiction, Genre, Stage procedure, Theme, Characterization, Symbolism, Cultural orientation, Literary terms.

TEACHING NOVELS TO IMPROVE EFL SKILLS: TEN USEFUL TIPS

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of novels in the literature classroom requires strategies and approaches which can account for the distinctive features of long fiction. Moreover, in EEL learning situations, the
instructor needs to take into consideration that the students are non-native speakers of English. Thus, the study of novels may involve an approach to texts as linguistic resources as well as cultural artifacts. Theoretically, a novel is a literary genre which consists of three interrelated components: the story, the language, and the style of presentation. Thus, initially, the teaching of novels should be concerned with enabling students to experience novels, and later to enable them to describe and eventually account for the experience by making critical comments.

**DISCUSSION**

The teaching of novels is a very rewarding experience because as a distinct literary genre, the novel does not over-simplify the complexities of life and emotions and can thus engage the intellectual capacity of mature students whose linguistic ability is almost equal to their intellectual aspirations. The rationale for the integration of language and literature has aptly been emphasized by Elliot (1990). Firstly, he believes that:

> Students who are mature language users need material of a high motivational value in order to make significant progress. They need to develop a feeling for the language as something living which they are able to use, if they wish, to express their own thoughts and feelings. The second assumption is that literature provides students with an incomparably rich source of authentic material over a wide range of registers; students can gain access to this material by developing literary competence and then they should effectively internalize the language eventually. (quoted in Yang, P. 134)

The teaching of the novel, however, requires a very delicate and calculated approach because the following pressing issues should be carefully investigated:

1. The considerable length of many novels and the students’ way of coping with it
2. The complexity and volume of unfamiliar vocabulary in the novels
3. The design of a stage by stage procedure of tasks and activities to use with novels

An efficient novel reading experience will reveal indicative clues to the discovery of the theme, characterization, symbolism, and relevant features of long fiction. The researcher aims to propose a variety of strategies to make the teaching of the novel enjoyable and an academically enriching experience. These strategies include the design and implementation of motivation building techniques which facilitate overall comprehension, interpretation, and cultural orientation. These techniques can also be devised in a manner to train the students to read for meaning rather than details at the first stage, and later provide the students with auxiliary assistance such as glossaries and lists of definition of literary terms. Other significant factors which can make novel reading a rewarding and enjoyable experience in the classroom concern suitable text selection, allocation of sufficient time for the reading of novels, and finally preparing students for a total intellectual and emotional involvement in the literary experience of novel reading.

In addition, the teaching of novels can also serve as a tool to familiarize students with the diversity of cultural presentations. The above mentioned objectives can be achieved by the implement of effective strategies designed for in-class and out of class activities. These strategies can be further categorized as pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities. One important factor in this regard is the issue of text selection. As Gillian Lazar (1990) has proposed, "the text should be sufficiently challenging without being so difficult as to be
demotivating…. [It] should also be within the students' grasp, in terms of their linguistic, intellectual, and emotional capacities" (P. 206). Once the appropriate text, based on the linguistic level of complexity, modernity, appeal, has been chosen by the teacher, taking into account the students' level of proficiency and interest, the mentioned strategies can be implemented.

IN-CLASS AND OUT OF CLASS STRATEGIES

1. Pre-reading activities, including pre-teaching vocabulary; preparing questions relevant to the assigned text and thinking about major issues of the text.

Willi Real (2003) puts a lot emphasis on this stage, believing that it involves, "pre-teaching for the sequence as a whole…. If you want to interpret any part of the novel, for example the first chapter to begin with, you have to know the context of the whole. This is true of thematic as well as of formal aspects, e.g. in interpreting examples of foreshadowings". He further adds,

pre-reading is also desirable from a didactic point of view since, for example, this procedure makes it possible to use a large variety of written tasks for homework (e.g. attempts at analysis), which calls for additional activities by the students that could help to prepare the individual lessons: therefore homework tasks do not only follow the individual lessons, they also become an integral part of the next" and lastly "the students should be experienced readers in the foreign language, who should have practiced a lot of extensive reading, for example in dealing with long stories, dramas, shorter novels or full-length examples of fiction. In addition, in reading a novel on their own, the pupils should be encouraged to read for gist, not for detail. (2003)

At this stage, various tasks can be suggested. One task can be pre-reading vocabulary work. The teacher can make a list of relevant vocabulary items and orally and in written forms, explain their denotative and connotative meanings. This task will facilitate the comprehension process and can also be useful in the introduction of the necessary cultural background and even initiate the issues of theme. Another relevant activity can be preparing a brief cloze-type exercise to enable the students to guess meaning from the context. In selecting vocabulary, items which contain vital or emotional clues should be chosen.

A useful accompanying task can be preparing questions relevant to the text assigned. A selective list of pre-reading questions and discussion topics can be given to the students at this stage. This list can stimulate a motivated reading at home. It can further aid the comprehension of the text. It will also serve to prepare the students' capacity for developing independent literary critical skills. One important task at this stage is to propose to the students to think about major issues of the text. Instead of telling the students what there is in the text, the teacher can stimulate their imaginative power by inviting them to contemplate on the related issues and thematic significance.

These pre-reading tasks can well prepare the students for a guided comprehension of the text. If time permits, it is advisable to encourage students to read the text at least two times: once for comprehension and another time for literary interpretation and critical analysis. Linda Gajduesk (1988) summarizes the goals of at least twice reading of the text as follows: "the first time to gain an overall sense of the piece and enjoy the story, a second time to look for answers
to problems and questions prepared for them in anticipation of the factual and analytical work this is to follow” (P. 238).

2. While reading Activities, including encouraging students' participation in text analysis; helping students discover significant features of the text; and providing cultural background and orientation.

Of various useful tasks, an important one can be encouraging the students' participation in the comprehensive and critical analysis of the text. This may involve the students' reading the significant parts of the text aloud to the class. Willi Real suggests the following extensive tasks:

- using the question-and-answer technique (closed questions); true-false-statements; fill-in-exercise (e.g. a gapped summary of an episode which does not refer to lexical or grammatical problems but where relevant items of information have to be filled in); multiple-choice-tests; summaries; putting one/some sentence(s) in the wrong place; the students find and correct it/them; scrambled sentences: put in five sentences which are irrelevant; scrambled sentences: have them put in the correct order by practicing and listening comprehension only; mixing up two different summaries: have the students correct them; (2003)

After the textual comprehension of text has been checked, attempts at textual analysis can follow. The teacher can also participate in the recitation of the climatic parts of the novel. The teacher can further stimulate class discussion by referring to the questions of pre-reading stage. As the students cooperate in the analysis of the text and explore significant issues and ideas of the text, the teacher may identify key words, concepts and background information which might have complication for students.

At this stage, group work is proposed by Nathalie Hess, in a book entitled *Headstarts*. She believes in every group there should be:

- a chairperson who is responsible for the work of the group;
- a secretary who makes notes to be used by the speaker;
- a dictionary keeper who looks up all the missing words;
- a monitor who is to make sure that every group member makes use of the target language;
- a spokesperson who explains the results achieved by the work of the group. (P. 11)

Helping students discover significant feature of the text (i.e. conflict, climax, theme, etc.) is another important task suggested at this stage. While pre-reading activities achieve the goal of focusing on essential background information and vocabulary items, a factual in-class work clarifies the essential details of the novel such as: who, where, when, what (happens). This stage may lead to the analysis of the aspects of the literary text such as structure, theme, and style and so on. It is important to allow the students to discover significant events and aspects themselves.

A relevant task at this point is helping students with cultural background information. As a number of critics have mentioned, the issue of cultural orientation is an important objective in teaching literature:

Exploration of a literary text with readers from another culture is an exercise in cultural activity, a response to the call for 'cultural
Stimulating the students' interest in the story is another important task. One should remember that the primary purpose of a literary text is not just to convey factual information about the event of the novel, but to involve the reader in direct experience. In addition, the objectives of any literature class should not focus only on the comprehension and analysis of a particular text assigned for the class, but also to equip the students with the necessary skills and abilities to approach other literary texts themselves effectively and enable them to interpret and appreciate them independently.

3. Post-reading Activities, including helping students with relevant and applicable critical interpretations; encouraging debates and discussions on major issues of the text, i.e. point of view, characterization, plot and action

A key task at this stage of experiencing a novel is helping students with relevant and applicable critical interpretations. This task can lead the students towards more mature critical analysis. According to Gajdusek (1988), "having established the facts, students can now begin to ask why and to develop their own attitude towards the characters, values and situations of the story, in short to move beyond information to involvement and experience … " (P. 224).

Encouraging debates and discussion on major issues of the text can be initiated by focusing on the fundamental elements of the novel:

1. Point of view
2. Character and characterization
3. Setting
4. Plot and action.

POINT OF VIEW

i. In modern and contemporary novels, it is particularly important to address the question of "who is speaking (narrating the story) and in what ways the narrator's identity influences our reading of the story" (Gajdusek, 1988, P. 239). In the case of the first person narrator, one should consider the degree of the reliability of such narrator. Depending on the degree of the first person narrator's involvement in the action, the degree of the narrator's reliability varies. The teacher should make this point known to the students that "our understanding of the personality and motives of the first person will constitute an important part of our experience of the story" (Gajdusek, P. 239).

ii. In the case of the third person point of view, the narrator is not part of the world of the novel, thus he stands more or less objectively outside of it. The third person point of view may be omniscient third person (telling the story with equal insight into all characters and events) or limited third person (telling the story from the vantage point of one particular character). A useful class activity at this point can be to ask students to
rewrite a scene from the point of view of other characters in the text and to read and compare results.

II. Characterization

I. Characters affect the world the novel revolves around; therefore, it is of crucial importance to teach the students how to achieve an effective character analysis. A useful activity can be asking the students to role-play by putting themselves in the situation of major or minor characters. As a group work, students can also participate in the analysis of various characters by describing their personality and assigning relevant definition and modifiers to them. Some terms which are helpful here are 'round or flat, dynamic or static characters' and similar terms which define variation in characterization.

III. Setting

The analysis of the time of the story can be discussed as it regards the general historical time and the specific time when the action takes place. At this stage students can be assigned to research about the historical period the story. As to the specific time, students can investigate the text for data. Does the story mention a date? What details in the story lead to pinpointing the time in the story? Again, if necessary, the teacher may act as a cultural informant and provide a very brief comment on the historical and social situations of the novel. In addition to providing the necessary cultural background for the students, the teacher should also refer to historical, political and economic circumstances which form the context of the novel as well as trying to elicit the complicated sets of social and literary values underlying it.

Here, guiding the students to find evidence from the text itself is very significant and vital to their acquirement of an adequate ability in developing literary criticism and appreciation.

The issue of the place of the story can be dealt with in a similar way. Again general and specific locality should be determined. Clues to nations, regional, or local identity should be explored by investigating particular scenes of the novel and discovering the number of different sets or scenes in which the action takes place. The key to an efficient treatment of the issue of place is finding textual support and evidence.

IV. Plot and action

Some important terms which deal with the plot of the novel are: structure, conflict, climax, and resolution, and similar terms related to the action of the story. The class may discuss who or what conflict is and how the conflict leads to the climax and eventually to the resolution of the story. The discussion on the plot and action may lead to the analysis of the theme which expresses a significant relationship demonstrated by the elements of the story; theme should be expressed in one or two complete sentences. One useful step in class-activity to define the theme, begins by first eliciting from the class the topics that the story touches upon, and eventually to arrive at an idea which is somehow universally true and recognizable by the style, language and diction of the story. An investigation of the style and the figurative language and structure can further reveal new levels of thematic meaning. By analyzing the importance of imagery, metaphor, symbols and similar relevant terms, the teacher can draw the students' attention to how they relate or reinforce something important in the novel. A useful activity here
is to propose some pre-reading questions concerning the style of the novel, so the students may search the text for stylistic particulars and details beforehand.

4. Follow-up Activities, including written responses and critical and literary appreciation
   Students should be able to carry an interaction with a literary text beyond the oral class discussions to develop their literary criticism competence. According to Willi Real, "follow-up tasks have become very popular in class. Many modern novels have got an open ending, so that the question arises: how may the text go on?"

   By using such creative activities the pupils have to be careful to develop ideas which are in accordance with the original texts or which at least do not contradict them" (2003).

   A useful task is to require students to prepare creative relevant written responses and reaction reports. This combination of concentration on literary and writing skills will advance students' writing abilities as well as their literary competence. This opportunity also allows the students to express their independent attitude and opinions about the significant issues of the novel. Writing tasks at this stage may vary. Students may be encouraged to keep a novel journal. They may also be asked to write a few paragraphs or short essays to evaluate the literary text critically.

CONCLUSION

As Karin A Wurst has aptly put it, the ultimate goal of any learning experience is for the students 'to be actively involved, … [and] engage in such higher-order thinking tasks as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Within this context, it is proposed that strategies promoting active learning be defined as instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing" (2008, P.58).

An important objective in every literature class is to encourage the students to discover the subtlety and multiplicity of ideas and meanings of the literary texts. Furthermore, the teacher should attempt to involve the students in the relevant communication concerning the significant issues of the text. The teacher's role in a novel class is a facilitator who guides the students as they draw inferences and form critical views and approaches.

The key to teaching literature is to make students enjoy, understand and appreciate the literary text. With these aims in mind, a novel class can become a delightful, and at the same time, an instructive session, improving students linguistic proficiency and literary competence. Besides, there can be introduced ten useful tips to complete teaching literature more realistic and meaningful. These ten useful tips are:

1. Create a literature classroom that enhances learning meaningfully with friendly framework of attitudes and values.
2. Create and send a clear message about literature in target language.
3. Teach famous novels that have genuine importance, and let your students know how and why.
4. Let the students see the story, structure and themes of different novels in the course material they are learning. Emphasize the "why" and the "how".
5. Teach in a very friendly manner and introduce and explains new vocabulary in context before students use it formally in text. The teachers should also try to put their emphasis on the definition as well as key words which are related to the literature.

6. Apply multisensory teaching.

7. The multisensory teaching technology relates to the different usages and applications of many different ways of teaching and learning novel strategies that promote learning in a wide variety of steps.

8. At this point, teachers should encourage students to participate in labs, do projects field studies, role play, and perform demonstrations and simulations.

9. Encourage students by giving them opportunity to verbalize, explain, summarize, express personal reactions, ask and answer questions and participate in discussions related to literature.

10. Use clear, simple and well organized visual references and teaching aids, if they are available, such as maps, charts, and diagrams. Make use of the blackboard, overheads, and if it is possible, use computer. Teacher should highlight and put in an order the organized information by using different and attractive colorful board markers.

11. Give special attention to recognize information and skills that are practiced to the point of automaticity as well as fluency with frequent regular assignments to practice these skills. We should recognize our student’s capacity to do homework of the novels automaticity. We should tell our students in the early period of the semester that how we will evaluate their work and assess them for the whole semester.

12. Always offer flexible alternative tasks and involve students in the novel-reading process.

It is very useful if we always offer our learners multiple kinds of assignments and tests. We must permanently evaluate them with a range of ways to learn and to express their understanding. We should give them the gift of time, de-emphasize the role of time and speed in assignment and test. We should also support literature learners who have appropriately documented a disability with students’ services through providing modifications, such as alternative test environment, methods of evaluations and time of tests.

Finally, as Brindley (2002) points out ``we need to find out more about the ways in which tests and other assessments are used. Only through the systematic exploration of such questions will it eventually be possible to improve the quality of teaching literature information that language assessment provide.``

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REFERENCES