

Harry Potter Magic and Literature Circle Success: Turning Around an EFL Reading and Composition Course ¹

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...a faint whispering was coming from the books...he looked along the bottom shelf for an interesting [one]. A large black and silver volume caught his eye. He pulled it out with difficulty, because it was very heavy, and, balancing it on one knee, let it fall open.

A piercing, bloodcurdling shriek split the silence—the book was screaming (Rowling, 1997, p. 206)!

Introduction

Literature and ESL/EFL Teaching

In the 1980's, literature made steady and impressive inroads into ESL/EFL curriculums. (See Spack, 1985 for more in-depth history of literature in ESL/EFL pre-1980's and Gonzalez & Lista, 2000 for a more recent look at this history). Since then much has been written about its benefits. Literature presents authentic prose, engaging material, and motivation for students; it provides material for analytical and critical thinking. It gives cultural information (Long, 1986; McCloskey, 1998). Literature has been heralded as superior to other artificially contrived ESL/EFL texts for modeling authentic language usage and for helping with second language acquisition (Littlewood, 1986; Long, 1986). It can be drawn upon for academic composition and reading courses, as well general English language courses for conversation and listening. Long argues that even in courses of English for Special Purposes, literature is more "natural" and thus, superior to tiresome texts (Long, 1986, p. 58). Literature, of course, is not without its detractors. Cook (1986) points to the unsuitability of literature for second language learners and states that "the mastery of literary texts has little bearing on the learner's needs to understand or produce more functional or written forms of the language" (p.150). (See Gonzalez & Lista, 2000 for commentary on supposed problems with using literature for language teaching). Nonetheless, for the purpose of this paper, I will begin by accepting the premise that literature is beneficial for helping ESL/EFL students learn English.

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Literature Selection Criteria and "Harry Potter"

ESL/EFL researchers in the use of literature for second language learning emphasize the importance of selecting "suitable" literature for students (Littlewood, 1986, p.180; Roberts, 1993). McCloskey (1998) explains that in selecting literature for ESL/EFL reading, material must be linguistically accessible, able to maintain student interest, be culturally relevant, and relevant to the curriculum. Further, Roberts (1993) recommends the instructor clarify his/her own teaching purpose for wanting students to read.

Given these criteria, and considering my teaching situation, specifically my particular student population and what I want them to accomplish, plus factors of time (see comments below on finding time for teaching literature in a writing class), and logistics of getting the book from the United States, Harry Potter¹ has proven to be an excellent choice. (Note: in the past I have used other novels successfully with other EFL/ESL classes. And with my current Mexican university students I had tried a different novel before Harry Potter, but met with mixed results.)

The course I teach is academic composition and reading. The university students in my classes are non-readers and with little experience in writing. However, they have all entered my classes with a TOFEL score of 450. Most of them are orally proficient in English (this is due in part to their proximity—a two hour drive—and regular travel to the U.S.), yet many of them lack ability in reading or writing English. Indeed, most of the students admit never having completed reading a whole book in any language, let alone a foreign one (source: informal survey). However, because they are able and required to read two and three page essays, the type used in freshman composition anthologies, plus given their familiarity with story telling (i.e. the narrative) in Spanish, I assessed that linguistically these students would be able to handle the novel Harry Potter. Harry Potter is a narrative written for an adolescent readership (see McKay, 1986 for further discussion on advantages to using literature for young adults) but enjoyed by adults alike ("Magician for Millions," 1999; Nash J., 2000; "What the World," 2001). I first tried a couple of pages on my students to see if they could understand what they read, and once they demonstrated that the language was no problem, I only had to convince them that they could and would read 300+ pages of it. It was the length, not the language that would be challenging to them.

Relevancy to the Curriculum and Teacher's Purpose

Reading Harry Potter is relevant to our curriculum, one of academic composition and reading, because of what we do with the novel. We write about Harry Potter and analyze the book in ways that cause students to use the rhetorical modes that they must master, given in our syllabi. They are asked to compare and contrast different characters in the book, explain the causes and effects of Harry's parents' deaths and his scar, define magic, and analyze the author's solutions to characters' problems. Spack (1985) points to the value in having composition students write about such events and situations that they encounter in a piece of literature as opposed to the

aesthetically uninteresting task of having to read rhetorical models and mimic their patterns. “[Students’] own writing in response to such assignments is unlikely to be communicative either in purpose or in product. By studying literature, on the other hand, students can learn that written texts are meant to be read, reflected on, and responded to” (p. 720).

My purpose for having them read a novel is mostly to expose them to the pleasure of reading, something many of them are unfamiliar with, and to build their confidence in their ability to read whole novels in English. Many ESL/EFL instructors recommend using collections of short stories to initiate their students into reading literature (McCloskey, 1998; Spack, 1985). However, from my experience, full-length novels are in some ways easier and better than, say a 300 page collection of short stories. By reading a complete novel, the reader gets to know and see one set of characters evolve through the book; the style of the author becomes familiar and comfortable; a longer commitment to the book, to its characters and conflicts, is made; and at the end, there is great satisfaction at having read the whole thing—all 309 pages, as in the case of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone.

Maintaining Student Interest and Cultural Relevancy

When I first decided upon this novel, I wasn’t sure whether these students would really like it, whether it could maintain student interest. But I decided that if Harry Potter had such a phenomenal popularity worldwide (“Why Harry’s Hot,” 2000), and the book was about being a student, maybe it would interest my students, too. When I told them we were going to read this 300+ page book, after the initial groans and expressions of disbelief and complaint, they asked, “Who is Harry Potter?” Literally not one student in three classes had heard of him. I had been counting on his fame for motivating them to read, but they were unaware of “Potter-frenzy” (Ibid.). I could only assure them that “this guy” was “in.” And even if they didn’t like the book, the movie would be out in a year, so they could go to the movie with the satisfaction that they had read the book. Conveniently, a couple of weeks into Harry Potter, the local newspaper reported on the success of Harry Potter worldwide (Garza, 2000), and my students began to believe me. Furthermore, it didn’t take long into the book for students to appreciate Rowling’s style.

When I first knew I was going to read the Harry Potter book, and when I found out it was a book written for kids I really was not sure whether I wanted to read or not....I started reading Harry Potter and I realized that the book was so incredible for all ages...any adult [would] find it interesting. I seriously felt like I was really there watching everything and that I even met the characters. That is a great writer (student Daniela González Pedrero, spring 2001).

As to the cultural relevancy of the book, Harry Potter is about being a student, and the pleasures and toils of student life are easy for other students to relate to. That it is set in England hasn’t been as much as a problem as I thought it might. There are British English expressions—“Blimey!”—and names for things—“Christmas pudding and crackers”—that I have to translate for my students into American English. But this adds to an awareness of the style and expression of the author, aspects that readers of literature

learn to note and appreciate.

There are universal themes and literary symbols: brave youth conquering the dark forces of evil, ethnic conflict between pure and non-purebloods, withdrawal of a sword from an ancient hat, and the magical rescue of a Cinderella character. These parallels to life and literature are not lost on my Mexican university students. On the contrary, they comfortably slide into Harry's life in the wizard world, applauding him and his friends in their banal quarrels with wizard professors as well as their deadly encounters with trolls. And sometimes it's the unexpected details in the book that the students relate to: "I identify with Hagrid because I like exotic pet. When I was 12, I had a tarantula that was from the desert of Sonora, her name was Frida, but my mom didn't like her and I was force to give away. It's the same experience Hagrid went trough [sic]," writes student Gustavo Ulloa Ortiz.

Classroom Application

Teaching the Novel

Literature can connect to such readers, too, because literary works of art transcend their immediate contexts and have much to say to all readers, including first generation college students who start out nonreaders. The key, however, is *teaching*, for as Graff (Graff 143, cited by Morgan, 1993) emphasizes repeatedly in his history of the profession, literature does *not* teach, itself, and the persisting assumption that it somehow does, at least at the introductory level, has been a detriment for generations (italics by Morgan, 1993, p. 493).

Critical to the success of students reading literature is the method used (Carter, 1986; McCloskey, 1998; McKay, 1986; Morgan, 1993; Spack, 1985). Much debate and discussion surrounds the use of discrete-point grammar and vocabulary activities versus journal writing or discussion groups to stimulate students' personal responses and interaction with the text, respectively the "bottom-up" or "top-down" approaches to reading (England, 1998). Furthermore, caution is given against teaching superficial comprehension of literary texts and against teachers giving "correct" interpretations (Brumfit, 1986; Daniels, 1994; Long, 1986; McCloskey, 1998; McKay, 1986; Morgan, 1993; Spack, 1985).

Responding to literature is not a matter of basic understanding of the language of the text. It is the significance of the text that is important to the good reader, not its ability to be translated exactly (Brumfit, 1986, p.187).

Nevertheless, Carter argues that for foreign language students who are reading literature in English there is some merit, indeed, necessity, in using exercises that examine linguistic—lexical and grammatical—features of a text. These he calls

preliminary or pre-literary” activities that ultimately assist non-native students to understand and appreciate literature in English. (1986, p.111). He recommends the use of cloze, summarizing, plot predictions, and guided rewriting.

My classroom experience and understanding of my current students has led me to approach teaching the novel from the “bottom-up” and from the “top-down.” Like Carter, I use clozes and guided writing. For example, I use a type of cloze which raises students’ awareness of grammatical forms. I copy a page of the novel, white out the verbs, leaving numbered blanks, then give the students a list of the verbs, correspondingly numbered, in their root forms, and have them fill in the blanks, conjugating them correctly (Appendix A). At first glance, when my students see that the passage begins in the past tense, for example, they respond, “Oh easy, I know my past tense,” but then they are surprised when they are tripped up on different forms of the past aspect.

I also use clozes for vocabulary, again copying a page from the novel, whitening out certain vocabulary items, and then putting the missing words in a list, out of order, for them to select from to fill in the blanks.

My students are also asked respond to the content and author’s ideas in a novel, a more “top-down” approach; for this, I use journal writing. Over the years of teaching novels, I have used a variety of journaling techniques. In my current situation, in a computer lab with the novel Harry Potter, I have the students do what I call “fast freewrites” on topics or events related to the book. For example, seated at our computers, my students and myself, I ask everyone to write freely (see Elbow, 1973 for discussion on freewriting) for ten minutes about what they would do if they looked into “The Mirror of Erised” (Rowling, 1997), or what advice they would give to a new student if she had a professor like Professor Snape on her case (Ibid.).

Besides exercises like these, however, I have found that the students become most engaged, and independently so, in the novel when we use literature circles, as designed by Harvey Daniels (1994).

Literature Circles

Literature circles are small, temporary discussion groups who have chosen to read the same story, poem, or book. While reading each group-determined portion of the text (either in or outside of class), each member prepares to take specific responsibilities in the upcoming discussion, and everyone comes to the group with the notes needed to help perform that job. The circles have regular meetings, with discussion roles rotating each session (Daniels, 1994, p. 13).

The success of literature circles comes from the students having pre-assigned roles for which they prepare their part of the discussion before the group meets. The roles give the students purpose and perspective to their reading but do not limit them into looking for answers to test or comprehension questions. Daniels (1994) explains

These basic roles are designed to invite different cognitive perspectives on a text (drawing a response, reading a passage aloud, debating interpretations, connecting to one’s own life, creating a summary, tracking the scene, focusing on words, tuning in to one character.) We have found that successful roles

are a curious mixture of structure and openness.... Good roles are always open-ended—the opposite of the usual correct-answer worksheets, workbooks, and study questions (p. 25).

Daniels outlines nine different roles that can be assigned to students who are reading fiction (1994). However, for my students, given their age and willingness to expose themselves, I assign five roles: *Discussion director*—prepares general discussion questions to lead the group, *Literary luminary*—selects a few special sections of the text for the group to hear or read aloud, *Connector*—looks for connections between what the group has read and the “real world,” *Summarizer*—prepares a brief summary of the day’s reading, and *Vocabulary enricher*—notes down unfamiliar and new words, looks them up, and reports on them during the group discussion (Daniels, 1994). Daniels includes role sheets that are passed out to the students to prepare their parts (Appendix C). These I have used with my students and found that they are easy guides for the students to follow. The instructions given on each role sheet for its respective role are simple and clear. For example, one role is the Literary Luminary:

Literary Luminary: Your job is to locate a few special sections of the text that your group would like to hear read aloud. The idea is to help people remember some interesting, powerful, funny, puzzling, or important section of the text. You decide which passage or paragraphs are worth hearing, and then jot plans for how they should be shared. You can read passages aloud yourself, ask someone to read them, or have people read them silently and then discuss (A2).

Each student takes the responsibility for his/her role and prepares it in conjunction with the reading for the next class. The roles are rotated from meeting to meeting, and once the students become accustomed to the responsibilities of each part, the sheets are dispensed with.

The teacher’s role, my part of the literature circle, is to stand back and let them think and discuss for themselves. I watch and am amazed as I see them carry out their own discussion with their own selected passages and ideas from the text. I also keep them in English; despite their high-level of oral English, when they become animated in these discussions, they will break into Spanish.

An example of how these literature circles have worked with my students is during one group meeting on the second novel, Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, the Connector (the person who finds connections between the text and the world outside) brought up the topic of receiving “a Howler” at school (Rowling, 1998, p. 87). Howlers are letters that are bright red and emit smoke. When you open them, they yell—“howl”—at you in a voice loud enough for all bystanders to hear. The mother of one of the students in the book sent a howler to her kid and the letter screamed at him, greatly embarrassing him in front of the whole school. “Now what would you do if a howler arrived from your mother right now, here, in front of everyone?” the group Connector asked his classmates. This prompted a lively discussion. Similar prompts and ideas come from my students, ones that they think up and point out.

Furthermore, I have noticed that when the Summarizer is doing his/her part, the others tend to jump in and help clarify certain points to the story. The students

collaborate and come to a general agreement on the details of the reading. This negotiation over meaning and collaboration amongst the students is the central purpose and rewarding result to using literature circles.

Getting the Students Started on the Novel and Fitting it Time-wise Into the Syllabus

Getting the students started on the novel and fitting it into the syllabus are concerns of many composition instructors who would like to incorporate a novel but shy away from it.

Pearson maintains that what is most important for a successful discussion group is to thoroughly train students in the various roles at the beginning of the group process (Pearson as quoted by Daniels, 1994, p. 155). Spack also argues for careful initiation into the discussion of literature with ESL students (1985). I, too, have found that it is essential during the first class period with a novel to lead everyone carefully into the book. I warm them up. I first ask them about a general theme or topic related to the title of the book or its cover. In the case of the first book of Harry Potter, I ask the students, "What is magic?" Then I do SSR (sustained silent reading) for ten minutes or to the end of a specific number of pages, six to ten depending on the novel, and model sitting there reading with them.

I lead a group discussion about these first pages, listing characters and details on the board as the class calls them out. I elicit unfamiliar vocabulary words, too, and as a class we define them. Generally I model an examination of those initial first pages in the same way they will also be doing in their literature circle roles.

At the end of this "teacher-led" intro into the novel—"Day 1 of the Novel," I call it—I make sure to point out that in ten minutes (or whatever the SSR allotted time was), all of them had finished reading the first six pages. Furthermore, "If you read six pages in ten minutes, how many will you be able to read in an hour?...Good! Then I want you to spend an hour before our next discussion of the book reading it, and have easily the next fifty pages done." This startles them, but they surprise themselves and do it.²

At the second or third meeting to discuss the book, I introduce the practice of literature circles and teach them about the role sheets. By then, they are into the novel, and the literature circles are easy to maintain. At this point the work becomes learner-centered and collaborative; I stand back and let them carry on the discussion without my input. Though I will at times insert activities or exercises that examine grammar points or call upon the students to fast-write on questions I have, I find that allowing the students to carry on in their own literature circles is such a positive experience for them that they benefit more by having the responsibility of literature discussion in their own hands.

Despite the favorable arguments for doing literature in an academic English class, finding the time to fit a novel into an already heavy schedule can be daunting (Daniels, 1994, pp. 64-68). However, I have noticed that it actually takes less than 1/8 of the whole course time of a semester. That is, I spend six to eight class periods out of fifty-one that we meet in a semester. After the "Day 1" introduction into the book, we have one class period out of three per week, usually Mondays, devoted to the novel. Altogether, I spend eight class periods on Harry Potter: six for class discussions and related activities, one for

general review of the whole book, and one for an in-class exam on the book, which I count as a timed, in-class essay grade. These six to eight class periods on the novel do replace classes in which we would be analyzing, editing, discussing expository reading or writing assignments. However, given the nature of the work that we do with the novel, I feel this time is equally worthwhile spent, possibly more so, considering the active involvement the students show in their reading and discussion.

The Final Exam: A Win-Win Experience

There is a final exam written for the whole novel, and for the students and myself, it is a win-win experience. It is an exam of short essay questions, approximately fifteen, that encourages creative, critical thinking and writing. The students are given the whole set of essay questions in advance, a week or more before the exam, and told that they may study and prepare all the questions ahead of time (Appendix B). If they do study in advance, individually or in groups, they stand to "win" a very high grade, and I, the teacher also "wins" well-studied and critical thinking students.

Because there is one class period, fifty minutes, for the exam, the students are only asked to answer three of the fifteen short essay questions. But they don't know until the day of the exam which three. Each student at the beginning of the exam picks three questions of the original fifteen, randomly from a hat, to answer. The students write their answers knowing that they will be assessed for both content and English.

Thus, the novel is concluded on a suspenseful note, often accompanied by sighs of students' relief, as they draw their "lucky" exam questions. What they don't realize is that they are already lucky winners by having successfully completed a full-length novel in a second language.

Conclusion

EFL students in Academic English composition classes do benefit from the inclusion of popular fiction in their syllabus. Even for the short amount of time spent apart from their standard essay reading and writing, they acquire new experiences in reading. From this reading they find themselves responding to imaginative dilemmas and life uncertainties that literature inevitably probes. With the use of literature circles, students learn how to discuss and reflect on their reading. This activity creates confident English speaking students who can further communicate their ideas in written form. Thus, reading popular fiction does bring the EFL student to analytical thought and, finally, academic composition.

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Created from Harry Potter

"I know", Harry 1. _____ through the glass, though he wasn't sure the snake could 2. _____ him. "It must be really annoying."

The snake 3. _____ vigorously.

"Where do you come from, anyway?" Harry 4. _____.

The snake 5. _____ its tail at a little sign next to the glass. Harry 6. _____ at it. Boa Constrictor, Brazil.

7. "_____ it nice there?"

The boa constrictor jabbed its tail at the sign again and Harry 8. _____ on: This specimen 9. _____ in the zoo. "Oh, I see - so you 10. _____ never _____ to Brazil?"

As the snake 11. _____ its head, a deafening shout behind Harry 12. _____ both of them jump. "DUDLEY! MR. DURSLEY! COME AND LOOK AT THIS SNAKE! YOU WON'T BELIEVE WHAT IT'S DOING!"

Dudley 13. _____ waddling toward them as fast as he could.

"Out of the way, you," he 14. _____, punching Harry in the ribs. Caught by surprise, Harry 15. _____ hard on the floor. What 16. _____ next happened so fast no one 17. _____ how it happened - one second, Piers and Dudley 18. _____ right up close to the glass, the next, they 19. _____ back with howls of horror.

Harry 20. _____ and 21. _____; the glass front of the boa constrictor's tank 22. _____. The great snake 23. _____ itself rapidly, slithering out onto the floor. People throughout the reptile house 24. _____ and started running for the exits.

As the snake 25. _____ swiftly past him, Harry could 26. _____ a low, hissing voice said, "Brazil, here I come... Thanksss, amigo."

The keeper of the reptile house 27. _____ in shock.

Chapt. 2 Cloze Exercise: On the left side of the page, please fill in the blanks with the correct tense and form of the verbs. The base form of the verbs are given below.

1. to murmur
2. to hear
3. to nod

4. to ask
5. to job
6. to peer
7. BE
8. to read
9. to breed
10. BE
11. to shake
12. to make
13. to come
14. to say
15. to fall
16. to come
17. to see
18. to lean
19. to leap
20. to sit up
21. to gasp
22. to vanish
23. to uncoil
24. to scream
25. to slide
26. to swear
27. BE

Appendix B:

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone Exam Questions

You will be given three of the following questions to answer during one class period. Prepare an approx. 150+ word response to each of the following questions. Make sure you give evidence from the book to back up whatever you say.

1. **Define** magic. Use **Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone** to illustrate your definition.
2. **Analyze** the success of **Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone**. What is it (what are the features/aspects) about the book that makes it a best-seller?
3. Using as much **sensory description** as you can, and, in your own words, show your reader Hogwarts. (Note: your description should create an overall **dominant impression**.)
4. What **writing strategies** does Rowling use to make this book enjoyable? Exemplify and explain.
5. Narrate a brief time-line of events, selecting the ones you think are the most important in the book.
6. **Compare and contrast** any of the following pairs of characters.

— Profesor McGonagall & Professor Dumbledore	
— Draco Malfoy & Dudley Dursley	
— Hagrid & Snape	— Ron & Hermione
— Fluffy & Norbert	— Peeves & Filch

— _____ & _____

7. If you were to write the ending differently how would you do it? (Yes, you must think up an alternate ending even if you think Rowling's is perfect.)
8. Describe any tow magical devices or wizardly contraptions that one might find in a non-muggles world. What is each device used for? How might you use one if you had one in this world?
9. What's the cause and effect of the death of the Potters?
10. What is your favorite chapter in the book? Explain it briefly and why that you like this chapter the best. What does Rowling do so effectively to grab your interest in this one?
11. a) Not considering Harry, who is your favorite major character? Describe him/her and explain why s/he's your favorite. Major characters are Ron, Hermione, Dumbledore, McGonagall, Hagrid, Draco, Snape, & Voldemort.
b) Of the minor characters in the book who is your favorite? Describe him/her/it and explain why s7He/it's your favorite. (Minor characters would be anyone/thing who is NOT Harry, Ron, Hermione, Dumbledore, McGonagall, Hagrid, Draco, Voldemort.)
12. Give several examples of Rowling's use of humor in Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone. Discuss how she is humorous to the reader.
13. Explain the story behind the scar on Harry. How is it significant throughout the book?
14. Some districts in the U.S. have tried to ban Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone because the book allegedly encourages witchcraft and, therefore, Satanism. Argue for or against this stance.
15. **WILD CARD !**

Appendix C: Sample Role Sheet for Literature Circle Participant

DISCUSSION DIRECTOR

Name _____

Group _____

Book _____

Assignment p _____ p _____

Discussion Director: Your job is to develop a list of questions that your group might want to discuss about this part of the book. Don't worry about the small details: your task is to help people talk over the big ideas in the reading and share their reactions. Usually the best discussion questions come from your own thoughts, feelings, and concerns as you read, which you can list below, during or after your reading. Or you may use some of the general questions below to develop topics for your group.

Possible discussion questions or topics for today:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Sample questions:

- What was going through your mind while you read this?
- How did you feel while reading this part of the book?
- What was discussed in this section of the book?
- Can someone summarize briefly?
- Did today's reading remind you of any real-life experiences?
- What questions did you have when you finished this section?
- Did anything in this section of the book surprise you?
- What are the one or two most important ideas?
- Predict some things you think will be talked about next..

Topic to be carried over to tomorrow _____

From *Literature Circles: Voice and choice in the student-centered classroom* by Harvey Daniels.
Stenhouse Publishers, York, ME.

¹ I have used the first two volumes of J.K. Rowlings' books about Harry Potter: Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone and Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, respectively. For the purposes of this paper, however, unless I need to distinguish one volume from the other, I will refer to the use of these books in general as Harry Potter.

² I do also "motivate" my students to read by giving random reading quizzes. The reading quizzes are no more than three basic questions, from the assignment, which any student can answer if they did the reading. The points count for practically nothing, but to the students it gives that extra push to do the reading "just in case" for those points. I administer the quiz in the first five minutes of class, and often I'll ask for volunteer quiz writers, who then get the points automatically. This little threat of a possible reading quiz insures more than any other tactic I've used that they will do the reading. Though often, as in the case of Harry Potter, once engaged in the novel, the students do do the reading, without the incentive of quiz points.