

LITERATURE IN EFL CLASSES FOR MEXICAN STUDENTS

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Before getting into specifics of what literature is most useful for Mexican students, it would be wise to decide where literature belongs in the English as a second or foreign language curriculum. There are those who still maintain that it belongs nowhere at all, but this attitude was held principally by the structuralists who created and/or espoused the audiolingual approach. Furthermore, the upsurge of the cognitive/affective approach has brought with it new recognition of the value of literature in language learning.

The objection to the teaching of literature was based partially on a reaction to the heavy literature base encountered in the grammar-translation approach with "appreciation of the literature of another people" as the aim of the course, and partially on the insistence that language study should concentrate only on the spoken language, the more vernacular the better. Literature was considered suspect because literary language was regarded as unnatural, and even contradictory to some cherished beliefs about syntax and semantics. Sentence patterns and word frequency lists were the Jazz Chants of the day—though some irreverent skeptics observed that English speakers must be very fond of infrequently used words because they used them so often. The syntax of fiction has proved to be a paper tiger only in its idiomatic sense of a threat without substance, not in its seeming more literal sense of something perilous on paper. It would be to small purpose to outline the linguistic arguments over recent years which have established not only the respectability but even the desirability of using literature to teach language; suffice it to say that, through the efforts of such scholars as William Marquardt (1967), John Povey (1967 and 1985), Sandra McKay (1983),

Henry Widdowson (1975 and 1981), and many others, literature in ESL/EFL has been legitimized.

The other aspect of literature in ESL/EFL, that which considers literature as a conveyor of culture, has never suffered as much scorn from the audiolinguists as has the linguistic aspect, though the importance of culture itself was diminished in that era. The resurgence of culture as an integral part of language learning has brought with it a stronger focus on literature.

Assuredly, all of this legitimacy does not mean "anything goes. Different literary works belong to different levels of proficiency, to different age groups, and even to different native language and culture backgrounds.

Literature—that is, complete literary works, unsimplified, written for educated adults who are native speakers of the language—is clearly not suitable for students of low-level proficiency. For them "readings" are more appropriate—that is, short, original pieces written for a given level of proficiency, or carefully chosen selections from simply written materials which fit the linguistic goals of the class. But for the advanced student who is ready for the challenge of language variety and for the richness of cultural understanding which is engendered by literary study, the question is not whether literature should be studied, but which literature should be studied.

There are many generalities which place limitations on the literature to be offered to any second or foreign language learner, regardless of the student's native language or culture. Clearly, works that are written in such an abstruse manner that only the bravest native speakers will venture to interpret them should be avoided in the ESL/EFL classroom whether the abstruseness is due to syntax, semantics, or semiotics. The poetry of John Donne or Ezra Pound is often out of bounds for non-native speakers, but so

is much prose. What sadist (or masochist) would assign Finnegan's Wake to non-native speakers? Or even Faulkner's The Bear, or some of Donald Barthelme's stories? Any selection offered must have reasonable vocabulary—not simple, just not illusory; its sentence structure can and should be varied and imaginative, but not distorted; and its imagery should be clear to the readers, not some obscure connection from the hidden recesses of the author's mind.

Does all this circumscription eliminate literature altogether? Not at all. The vast majority of time-tested literature remains, and with it illustrations of the complexities of the culture of the people who speak the language in which the literature is written. The selection of which works are to be taught must always be based on the demography of the class, with suitability of language the first consideration and cultural content the second. After settling the question of linguistic appropriateness, there are still two bases for selection on cultural grounds: material that is included because the cultural outlook is shared by the members of the class and will therefore be understood and appreciated, and material in which cultural values differ from those of the students and therefore need to be introduced to them for better understanding of the literature and its people. Some of each cultural type should be included in the curriculum. The works best suited to the advanced adult Mexican student of American literature for either of the above reasons will be considered here.

But here I feel constrained to make a disclaimer as to my expertise on the subject. My doctorate is in literature and in the 1940's I taught my first class, which was to nonnative speakers of English, a practice which I have continued to the present; it is not for my expertise in literature in ESL that I apologize, but for my knowledge of the Mexican culture and character. I speak from

years of reading and observing as a visitor, a resident, and a foreign student in Mexico, as well as several years as an in-law in a Mexican family, but still I speak as an outsider, and no outsider can know what it is to be Mexican. Furthermore, this close acquaintance was, for the most part, many years in the past and Mexico has changed a great deal; I may not have kept up with the changes. So if I err in my delineations, please attribute it to my foreignness, forgive me, and accept my good intentions and my good will. One thing I have learned from my reading is that no foreigner is ever as hard on the Mexicans as the Mexicans are on themselves.

A comparison of two prominent literary genres, the short story and the novel, provide a backdrop for discussion of individual works. Aurora M. Ocampo has outlined the history of the Mexican short story, and described its form and thrust as it exists today (Ocampo, 1976). This treatment of the genre might have been written about the American short story with equal accuracy. Ms. Ocampo also lists the conflicts that are most common to the Mexican short story, as well as to the Mexican novel, "...los conflictos que motivan la conducta humana: la incomunicación, la enajenación, la soledad, la injusticia, la libertad, el amor, la búsqueda de identidad, la necesidad de renovación, la liberación por la palabra, el presentimiento de un mundo mejor." The same human-motivating conflicts exist in the American short story: lack of communication, alienation, loneliness, injustice, liberty, love, the search for identity, the need for renewal, liberation through speech, the misgivings about a better world—are to be found in the short stories and novels of the United States. So the Mexican student who is using literature as part of his path to knowledge of the American language and culture begins with a common ground of literary concepts as the basis for his study. His experiences differ in many ways. For example, the urban novel set in

New York City is distinguishable from the urban novel set in Mexico City because New York City is different from Mexico City, and the people are different. Both cities are mammoth complexes containing masses of people, wealth and poverty, beauty and squalor, among other similarities, but the sights are not the same, the very essence of the cities is different. A 1984 article in the National Geographic on Mexico City had a poignant commentary on that metropolis:

Yet even traffic jams have a curiously Mexican quality. At stoplights drivers can buy newspapers, bouquets of flowers, or rugs, or watch fire-eaters perform for tips.

Along the streets and shops, hand-lettered signs tempt, warn, and proclaim in a personal way: "Have a beautiful nose without surgery." "No parking-tires punctured gratis." "It is agreeable to be important, but it is more important to be agreeable." "If God permits, here will be located a vegetarian restaurant." "The middle class will save our country." (McDowell, 1984)

What does the New Yorker's traffic jam offer him? Certainly not such a varied scene, or so much food for thought. The New Yorker's life is somehow different from that of the Mexico City dweller for many nebulous reasons, not the least of which is temporal orientation, which, Stewart says (1972), for the American is toward the future, and for the Latin American is toward the present. This separation of orientation also explains the discrepancy in views of work and play. Stewart says that Americans separate work and play:

Work is pursued for a living. It is what a man must do and he is not necessarily supposed to enjoy it.

Play, on the other hand, is relief from the drudgery and regularity of work and is enjoyable in its own right although many Americans engage in recreation with the same seriousness of purpose expended on work. The American overseas often finds this distinction between work and play absent in the men with whom he associates. His counterpart may appear to take work very casually...In Latin America the American who calls upon a businessman encounters difficulties in expeditiously concluding his agenda. The Latin makes the meeting into a social event and, hence, does not feel compelled to be brief and businesslike in his conversation. Essentially, the Latin does not make the distinction between work and play (or business and play).

So it is that despite the overall similarities which make genres and conflicts presented in them almost identical, the scenes, the atmospheres, the characters and their world views are different and need explication.

It is patently impossible to outline the Mexican culture and character and then find American works that fit for one reason or another. The only reasonable approach is to select works that are linguistically within the capability of the students and to consider each from the standpoint of its interest to Mexican students, based on its cultural values. The procedure that I will follow consists of an analysis of several works in the light of their suitability for adult Mexican students of EFL.

The best place to begin is at the beginning, not necessarily in the time a work was written but in the time of the action. There is much in the colonial period that is shared by the U.S. and Mexico. Both were periods of great hardship for the Europeans, both had

adventurous as well as religious aspects which persist in the present-day culture of each country, but are manifest in different ways. Hawthorne serves well as an initiation into American literature, in spite of his archaic style. Though he lived in the nineteenth century, the stories and novels he wrote were, for the most part, set in the early time of the Puritans. The differences in British and Spanish colonies lay mainly in two factors: 1) the British settlers, mostly non-military, brought their families and mixed little with the natives they encountered in the new land, while the Spaniards, mostly soldiers, came alone and began to mix with the natives; and 2) Puritanism and Catholicism, though sects of the same religion, were poles apart. Still, there was much shared by the believers in the two groups. Hawthorne's often repeated theme of the sinfulness of all human beings and the accompanying guilt, found in "Young Goodman Brown," "The Minister's Black Veil," "Ethan Brand," The Scarlet Letter, and others, is close to the Mexican culture in which religion has always played a strong part. Yet despite the strength of religion in Mexican culture, there has also been a recognition of the need for separation of church and state—a need that brought about many years of conflict in Mexico (Turner, 1967) possibly even more severe than that in England from which the Puritans had fled. The Puritan attitude toward sin and punishment as represented in Hawthorne's works give rise to discussion of reasons for separation of church and state, a concept with which the Mexicans can identify, although reasons for the separation were different in the two countries.

Also in Hawthorne is the element of the supernatural, left to the imagination of the reader. Perhaps a half-belief, at least, in the dark side of nature is universal, so the Mexican, too, is willing to suspend his disbelief for the sake of the excitement. The same factor creates a bridge for the Mexican reader of Edgar Allan Poe.

All in all, the values in Hawthorne's portrayal of colonial America are easy for the Mexican to accept; the setting and the ways of the Puritan probably are new and require guidance. The Mexican affinity for Hawthorne may be seen in the 1953 dramatic adaptation of Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter" by Octavio Paz.

A later nineteenth century writer, Mark Twain, offers much to interest the Mexican student. "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" will serve as an example. For one thing, like most of his work, this story is humorous; fine—there is certainly nothing wrong with the Mexican's sense of humor. We have evidence of that fact in Spanish literature all the way back to Don Quixote and beyond. After all, there is much of the 'pícaro' in Huckleberry Finn, and also in the intricate machinations of the unseen perpetrator of the action in Hadleyburg. The humor is based on the human characteristics of greed, envy, pride, and selfishness, which are common to all mankind, even Mexicans. The theme of the essentiality of testing such virtues as honesty in order to make them real and give them strength may come as a surprise, but it is not difficult to understand. Henry James, a contemporary of Twain, also wrote some works that Mexicans can and do appreciate, especially in his less prolix works. James was fascinated by the contrast in the European: polished, aesthetic, sophisticated, but corrupt: and the American: rough, ignorant, but honest. Mexicans, like Americans, in the nineteenth century went through a period of growing pains, looking to Europe—France more than Spain or England—in matters intellectual and artistic, not yet trusting our own tastes and products, so James' work was not repudiated in its own time and is still acceptable on both sides of the Rio Grande—or Rio Bravo, if you prefer. In Daisy Miller James portrays a spoiled young American girl out of her element among the American expatriates of Switzerland and Rome. Her foolish

insistence on behaving in the same way that she had in Schenectady shocks the sense of propriety in Mexicans as it did the Swiss, the Italians, and the expatriates in the novel. Certainly the Mexicans can appreciate the concept of "when in Rome, do as the Romans do." Generations of American tourists in Mexico have taught them respect for that idea. Where the Mexican student needs guidance is in seeing Daisy as the innocent that James intended; a natural, vibrant girl without proper guidance.

Daisy is, after all, self-reliant because she has had to be. According to Stewart, Mexicans do not truly understand the American value of self-reliance. He said,

The meaning of the value is neither translatable nor self-evident in other cultures. For example, in the Spanish of Latin America, self-reliance is translated as "independence" and carries the suggestion of political and social freedom as well as the implication of solitary action, but the idea of the self as the source and sole limiting factor is missing. These ideas are not congenial to the Latin who has a strong attachment to his family and immediate group. Dependence is not deplored by him as it is by Americans (Stewart, 1972). He may be right, but I do not believe that the American attitude is one of detachment from one's family or immediate group. Still, as the concept of self-reliance is vital to the understanding of the American character, I strongly recommend Emerson's essay titled "Self-Reliance," even though it makes rather difficult reading for the nonnative speaker. The essay makes quite clear what self-reliance is: it encompasses independence, but its core is belief in self and the courage to act on one's own initiative. He also clarifies why Americans value it.

Another essayist whose work is valuable for the Mexican's

understanding of the American character is Emerson's friend and protege, Henry David Thoreau. Both "Walden" and "Civil Disobedience" give a view that is shared by the Mexican. In "Walden" we see the return to nature, the appreciation of the primitive as opposed to the civilized, that Rousseau made so popular in Mexican art forms for many years. Thoreau could hardly be seen as that Rousseau ideal, the Noble Savage, in light of Thoreau's intellectuality and literary creativity, yet his temporary seclusion from society, living off the land, and doing all his own work shows an appreciation for the noble primitive which the Mexican can share. However, it is in "Civil Disobedience" that the Mexican finds more with which to identify. The Independence, the Reformation, and the Revolution are not only a part of Mexican history—they are also a part of the Mexican spirit. The right of the people to stand up against unjust laws is cherished by the Mexicans, though they may be a little puzzled by Thoreau's insistence on non-violence.

Stephen Crane's Red Badge of Courage is a novel that takes place in the midst of civil war, a scene as real to the Mexican as to the American. The depiction of war as unromantic and horrible is not new to the Mexican; I have been haunted for years by Orozco's painting, labeled "War," of a sword in an eye. But the theme of fear, not to be seen as cowardice but as a very natural human phenomenon, with bravery won through experience may be a new phenomenon that will lead to discussion with the Mexican student.

Pure machismo—that is Ernest Hemingway. In an interview, the English poet Stephen Spender once said of Hemingway,

Another time, my first wife and I met him and Marty Gellhorn in Paris. They invited us to lunch, someplace where there were steaks and chips, things like that,

but my wife ordered sweetbread. Also she wouldn't drink. So Hemingway said, "Your wife is yellow, that's what it is, she's yellow. Marty was like that, and do you know what I did? I used to take her to the morgue in Madrid every morning before breakfast." Well, the morgue in Madrid before breakfast really must have been something.

Hemingway said of me, "You're okay. All that's wrong with you is that you're too squeamish." So he would describe modern war. He'd say, "If you think of a modern war from the point of view of a pilot, the city that he's bombing isn't all those people whom you like to worry about, people who are going to suffer—it's just a mathematical problem. It's like shading in a circle with dark areas where you drop your bombs. You mustn't think of it in a sentimental way at all." At that same meeting in Paris, he told me again I was squeamish, and then he said, "This is something you ought to look at, it will do you good." He produced a packet of about 30 photographs of the most horrible murders, which he carried around in his pockets. This toughened one up in some way. He told me that what motivated him—really while he was in Spain, wasn't so much enthusiasm about the Republic, but to test his won courage. He said, "Only if you actually go into battle, and bullets are screeching all around you, can you know whether you're a coward or not." He had to prove to himself that he wasn't a coward ... Physical courage to him was a kind of absolute value.

This interview gives the impression that Hemingway was determined to outdo the Spaniards at their own game. This need to prove

oneself, the value of physical bravery over mental activity or more humanistic emotions, evinces itself in a number of Hemingway's works, but in none more forcefully than in "The Short Unhappy Life Francis Macomber." The lion Safari which serves as background to this extraordinary story provides the test of bravery which Macomber fails. The three reactions to his failure, Macomber's own, his wife's, and the guide's, fail to cover this reader's reaction: total sympathy for Macomber, disgust for the guide, and utter contempt for the wife. But Hemingway is possibly a man's writer, and certainly writes more from the Latin point of view than from the Anglo. The popularity in Mexico of Hemingway's favorite sport, the bullfight, attests to this. The Mexican student—though I doubt that any could be found with a pocketful of pictures of horrible murders—probably requires less guidance through most of Hemingway's work than does the American.

In Joyce Carol Oates' story, "Where Are You Going? Where Have You Been?" the author presents a young girl, feeling unappreciated by her parents and in a hurry to grow up. She allows herself too much license and finds herself faced with almost certain rape, and quite possibly death, a situation she had never imagined. The blame may fall on the parents, for their lack of communication and control, on the girl, for her shallowness and flaunting of convention; on the boy, for his cruel lack of concern for the girl; or on the society which seems to engender the situation. How will the Mexican approach the problem? Edward Hall commented on the Latin American attitude toward the sexes:

In Latin America, however, the technical props which support formal virtue are still firm and elaborate. Americans have come to hold the view that the controls exist in the person and not in the situation. The Latin countries to the south make a different assumption.

A man is thought of as being incapable of resisting his libidinal impulses in the face of a woman if the situation is such that he can succeed. Women are conceived of as frail creatures who could not possibly stand up to any man. Thus the situation has to be controlled with the full force of custom (Hall, 1959).

If this interpretation of the Latin American attitude is to be taken at face value, then rape is inevitable simply because the opportunity exists, and the girl is hardly to be blamed, because she is a mere female, and the boy is only doing what comes naturally. However, this has not been the Latin reaction to the story in classes I have taught. Perhaps the comment is merely out of date. Mexican students, like American students, have been irritated by the girl's foolishness, angry with the neglect of the parents, disturbed by the situation, but absolutely horrified by the boy's attitude and actions. Much has changed in social attitudes since Hall made this statement in 1959, both in the U.S. and in Mexico. Hall acknowledges that things are changing. He adds,

Obviously any change in the sexual manners of South America will have to hinge on a new conception of the nature of man and woman. This may already be coming about as more and more Latin women are being brought into contact with men in other than purely formal relationships. A stenographer working in an office in daily contact with men is viewed very differently from the old-style well chaperoned girl.

Stenographer. Even in 1959 this limitation of career opportunities for women in Latin America was out of step with the times. But remember what Stewart, another anthropologist, said in 1972 about the American attitude toward work and play: "Work is what a man must do"-- he never mentioned women. Apparently women work for

some other reason, or have other alternatives. Actually, I find that Latin and Anglo attitudes toward the role of women in society are quite similar: there are those who feel threatened by and abhor the career woman, and others who accept her without discrimination. Even women seem to be faced with this dichotomy. Though I do not classify comic strips as literature, I do recognize them as barometers of current attitudes, and I turn for illustration of my point to Mafalda, a comic strip very popular in the Spanish-speaking world. In one sequence, the "home-and-family" girl, Susanita, chats with the future career woman, Mafalda. When she grows up, Susanita wants to be a wife and mommy, with a son who is destined to be a doctor. Susanita's head is full of the status and possessions she will enjoy when she grows up and becomes the wife of a rich man and the mother of a doctor, while the modernist Mafalda wants to change the world for the better—the better as she sees it. In response to Mafalda's admonition that today's woman must do more than have children, she must also contribute to progress, do important things, Susanita is inspired to cooperate: she will learn to play bridge. The satire is hard to miss, and as Anglo as it is Latin. Therefore it is clear that literature based on the differences in the sexes need not be avoided in the Mexican classroom.

I have spoken principally of short stories and novels, but poems, plays, and essays are also good material for our purpose. Poetry, because it deals principally with human emotions, is rarely a cross-cultural problem; the subjects, situations, and sensations expressed are usually universal. If the language of a poem is comprehensible, then it will probably meet requirements for reading and discussion.

Plays are particularly suitable for foreign language study because of their immediacy and the oral nature of the content.

All can be visualized in the reading of a play, and this visualization makes it more real and more comprehensible. However, not all plays are equally suitable. I would avoid Edward Albee's contributions to the Theater of the Absurd as the requisite explanations may not be worth the effort. The Kaufman and Hart comedy The Man Who Came to Dinner, on the other hand, presents few cultural problems. The farcical humor, common in Spanish drama, is appreciated by the Mexicans, and the characters are readily recognized. The arrogant know-it-all who sees himself as master of all he surveys and exhibits total disregard for those around him is a character hardly original with Kaufman and Hart, though their rendition of him is a masterpiece. Such a character is to be found in many literary works in Western civilization, though he manifests himself in many ways. The situation in this play is amusing, but it is the characters and their reactions to one another that make the play, and the behavior of these characters is as familiar in Mexico as it is in the U.S.

Essays, by their very nature, tend to be self-explanatory and easy to follow. They may be informative, suasive, humorous, or whatever. So long as they are not dull, they provide good material.

I have run rapidly through the field of American literature, attempting to dissect a few of its flowers for classroom consideration. The procedures to follow outlined here provide a background for the measurement of other works. I hope you will find them useful.

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