

Jacqueline Costello

PROMOTING LITERACY THROUGH LITERATURE: READING AND WRITING IN ESL COMPOSITION

As those teaching them soon discover, ESL composition courses present a variety of challenges to students and instructors alike. Non-native speakers need special schooling not only in grammar and syntax but also in the cultural assumptions of the American academy and in the rhetorical conventions of English discourse, which often differ markedly from their native patterns of composition. Now that universities across the country have reinstated the traditional requirements that were largely abandoned during the turbulent seventies, we are confronted with yet another responsibility in ESL writing classes—to prepare these students for the often alien concepts that structure the typical liberal arts course.

To provide our non-native speakers, who come from widely divergent linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds, with the tools necessary for meeting these liberal arts requirements, we must design composition courses that combine reading, writing, grammar, aspects of American culture, and methods for developing the analytic skills expected in upper-level courses. As a number of scholars have argued, making literary texts a component of the ESL curriculum provides multiple opportunities for addressing these

Jacqueline Costello, professor of English and director of the Writing Skills Workshop at Queens College, CUNY, has also taught at New York University, William Paterson College, and Lingnan College in Hong Kong. In addition to published articles on composition and literature, she is coauthor of the Random House Writing Course for ESL Students (1985) and Forms of Literature (Random, 1989).

© *Journal of Basic Writing*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1990

various concerns. Povey, and Marquardt observe that literary texts offer both elegant examples of linguistic forms and insights into the culture from which they spring. McKay explains that “reading necessitates the ability to interact with a text by decoding the language and comprehending the concepts presented” (530), while the exploration of literary texts not only “constitutes real content” (Gajdusek, 229) but also acts as a stimulus for writing and exposition (Spack, 1985). Moreover, discussion of a literary work with readers from diverse backgrounds is a lesson in cultural relativity that heightens cultural awareness and sensitivity (McGroarty & Galvin, 1985).

Despite the growing body of research attesting to the benefits of incorporating literature into our ESL syllabi, literary texts have apparently not enjoyed the resurgence of attention we might expect (Gajdusek, 227). One explanation for this failure is that the ordinary problems of reading literature are unavoidably compounded for ESL students. There is, for example, the common tendency to translate a work into their native language: I have seen whole pages of textbooks covered with a word-by-word decoding that makes it impossible for a student to sense overall meaning or to segment passages into smaller units of specific information. Furthermore, many of these students bring an understandable anxiety to their reading assignments, and the cultural assumptions that dictate a given piece may arouse unconscious resistance and hostility, further impeding their comprehension. To take one such case, some of my Asian students have had initial difficulty with Sherwood Anderson’s “Unforgotten” (entitled “Discovery of a Father” in some anthologized versions) because Anderson’s criticism of his father made them profoundly uncomfortable: in their cultures, one would not publicly express disapproval of one’s parent. Moreover, many students from non-Western cultures are perplexed by the existential quest for self that informs so much of our twentieth-century literature. In their worlds, the self derives significance not in the quest for an autonomy to be found in some nebulous realm beyond the boundaries of culture but from its place in the group, and the harmony of this group supersedes individual notions and needs. Additionally, students from preindustrial nations may be profoundly inhibited in their approach to literary interpretation because, until recently, texts in their societies were exclusively sacred documents (Osterloh, 78). Indeed, our insistence on originality and analysis is perturbing to many homogeneous groups, and our celebration of open-mindedness and relativistic thinking is apt to collide with the values of a fundamentalist community (Bizzell, 453).

Linguistic and cultural handicaps notwithstanding, my own experience has consistently demonstrated that literature is an invaluable adjunct to ESL composition, especially when teaching units are built on reading selections that are contemporary and challenging. And as reading comprehension improves, so does mastery of grammar, rhetoric, and Western culture. Students who are reading literature must go beyond the simple gathering of information from a piece of writing in the target language. They are asked to analyze the literary selection not only for its content but also for its aesthetic qualities and its relevance to their own lives.

Because many of us in composition share Ross Winterowd's belief that narrative is the "deep structure" of language and culture (165-66), that is, because the formal and informal narratives we produce at once reflect and shape our perceptions of reality, narrative literature seems a natural component of the ESL curriculum. As Kermode argues, human beings depend on narrative to create an illusion of order: "To make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems" (7). However different the backgrounds of our students may be, storytelling is common to all cultures, all times.

For these reasons, short stories and autobiographical essays may be the most productive way to launch a semester's work. Because stories told by a first-person narrator convey a strong sense of immediacy and authenticity, I most often begin with selections such as Sherwood Anderson's "Unforgotten," Delmore Schwartz's "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing," and excerpts from Russell Baker's *Growing Up*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*, and Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory*. As Oster contends, "Stories told from a single, limited point of view or through the eyes of one character make excellent vehicles for demonstrating the extent to which limited knowledge or an emotional stake in the events colors a character's vision" (85). Narratives like these also encourage students to explore their own pasts and compare their experiences to those of the characters they read about, to consider ways in which they might structure their memories, and to discover how much content they already have.

Moreover, each of these selections highlights a crucial question: how can we comprehend all the implications of an event, an emotion, even a conversation at the same time as it is unfolding before us? The answer, Freud contends, is that we cannot. Rather than making sense of an experience while in the heat of living it, we discover meaning after the fact, in the calm of recollecting it. Freud

calls this psychological process *nachträglichkeit*, translated as “belatedness,” “deferred action,” or “deferred revision,” which explains the way in which an individual revises experiences, impressions, and memories at later dates to accommodate subsequent experiences or new stages of development. To cite a literary example, the narrator of Anderson’s “Unforgotten” presents a portrait of his father that changes quite powerfully at tale’s end, and the altered impression of the father is occasioned by a single significant event, an event that *rewrites* much of what has preceded it. By foregrounding this idea that all interpretation is belated vision/revision, I hope to convey to my students the inherent instability of meaning(s)—in life and in art—and thus urge them to rethink, reread, rewrite.

Although my introductions to the readings are deliberately minimal, ensuring only that students have sufficient background knowledge of textual content, preinvolvement can be generated quickly by asking the class to speculate about a provocative title or by reading a brief excerpt aloud and discussing the expectations it arouses. To illustrate the way a typical unit unfolds, I will take our study of Tillie Olsen’s “I Stand Here Ironing” as representative. I begin by reading the opening and the penultimate paragraph aloud:

I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron.

“I wish you would manage the time to come in and talk with me about your daughter. I’m sure you can help me understand her. She’s a youngster who needs help and whom I’m deeply interested in helping.”

“Who needs help.” . . . Even if I came, what good would it do? You think because I am her mother I have a key, or that in some way you could use me as a key? She has lived for nineteen years. There is all that life that has happened outside of me, beyond me. . . .

I will never total it all. I will never come in to say: She was a child seldom smiled at. Her father left me when she was a year old. I had to work her first six years when there was work or I sent her home and to his relatives. There were years she had care she hated. She was dark and thin and foreign-looking in a world where the prestige went to blondness and curly hair and dimples, she was slow where glibness was prized. She was a child of anxious, not proud, love. We were poor and could not afford for her the soil of easy growth. I was a young mother, I was a distracted mother. There were the other children pushing up, demanding. Her

younger sister seemed all that she was not. There were years she did not want me to touch her. She kept too much in herself, her life was such she had to keep too much in herself. My wisdom came too late. She has much to her and probably little will come of it. She is a child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear.

The class then jots down observations about what they have heard. Based on these observations, what can they infer about characters, plot, structure, and style? This prereading exercise gives students a sense of what is to come and directs their attention to the story's essential components, helping them to approach the text in a more sure-footed manner.

As Culler reminds us, “To read is always to read in relation to other texts, in relation to the codes that are the products of these texts and go to make up a culture” (17). So reading a story, an essay, a poem, a play, invariably involves an encounter with these interdependent codes of language, art, and the culture to which they belong. Obviously, this encounter differs for each individual, and the reader's own history may strongly affect his or her particular experience of the text at hand. To prompt students to express their own responses, associations, and difficulties, I ask them to do focused freewritings on specific aspects of a work before I have any opportunity—intentionally or otherwise—to color their readings. Their particular preconceptions and resistances to the cultural assumptions of a given text are likely to emerge in these informal writings. Reading their reactions aloud enables students to confront their respective cultural biases, to reflect upon the diversity of their responses, and to see how much they have, in fact, understood—despite their frequent protest to the contrary. They quickly observe that no two readers notice all the same details, raise identical questions, or echo exactly each other's interpretation. As the following excerpts from one group of student responses to “I Stand Here Ironing” suggest, each reader brings to a text his or her own repertoire of experiences with literature, life, and culture:

- Emily's story is a story of many separations.
- What really attracted me was the way the author brought the past into the present.
- I loved the way the story was written, but I think it is not very original. Let's remember “La Petite Madeleine” de Proust. By eating la petite Madeleine, Proust remembers his past and his youth.
- Emily was a child who was born in the wrong place, at the

wrong time. She was every girl who needed adults and warmth and the companionship of friends.

- The style is like an ancient Greek dramatic monologue, but here, as a contemporary story, there is not a *deus ex machina*.
- Ironing is probably the only time when the mother “totals it all,” talking to herself because there is no other time or person for her.
- At first, I wondered if an American could have this delicate affection and indirect expression of love for her children. But after I finished the story, I realized the essence of humanity was the same all over the globe.
- The story comes from a book called *Tell Me a Riddle*. It seems like a riddle, like the mother is trying to find the answers to the riddles of her life. And Emily is another riddle she can’t solve.
- The author makes her readers think further by ending the story with a question and a plea.
- In the beginning of the story, the author uses a flashback technique illustrated by the mother while she is ironing her daughter’s dress. This allows the author to introduce the mother’s present ideas regarding her past actions towards Emily. The author successfully uses both the main character and the image of the iron moving back and forth to represent the memories of the past in the present.
- In the end, the story is condensed in one paragraph to explain the mother’s treatment of the child, which was influenced by the time in which she lived and the problems she had to solve.

In addition to freewriting about various aspects of the text, students compose four or five questions about the work, and these questions often provide the foundation for an entire discussion period. Although many non-native students are self-conscious about their English and understandably reluctant to speak impromptu in class, they are usually quite willing to read aloud from their notebooks. Because discussion of a work flows largely from their own questions and informal writings, the class is far less teacher-centered and students respond accordingly.

Having students compose questions about a text serves yet another essential purpose. Asking questions in class is an integral part of the Western academic tradition, but to students from Asian cultures, for example, doing so may raise disquieting possibilities. Because they prize group harmony rather than individual expression, their cultures naturally discourage calling attention to oneself

by speaking out. Furthermore, if others think their question stupid, they lose face. Even more intimidating, if the teacher cannot “answer” the question, they cause her to lose face, an unhappy situation that reflects most negatively on the instigator. But a genuine spirit of inquiry can mitigate these fears: because every member of the class prepares questions about each of the readings, this practice become more familiar and less threatening. At the same time, students come to understand that the purpose of these questions is not to find the right answers but to approach a text from as many vantage points as possible. They also learn that the most interesting questions have no single answer. Here, for example, are some of the questions my students raised about “I Stand Here Ironing”:

- Why is “She was a beautiful baby” repeated twice in the beginning of the story?
- Who is the “you” the mother is speaking to?
- Why does the narrator ask herself so many questions? Why doesn’t she answer these questions?
- Why did the mother neglect her daughter so many times?
- Where does Emily’s gift for comedy come from?
- What is the significance of the title?
- Why is the mother ironing while she tells the story?
- Why does she compare her daughter to the dress she is ironing?
- What does she want for her daughter?

The class is then assigned a second reading of the text and additional freewritings both to promote close reading and to help them realize that each reading of a given work is a new experience, a *different* reading, however subtle that difference may be. As McConochie remarks, “Writing assignments that prompt rereading and reflection help students to extend their understanding and thus their literary pleasure” (125). They come to see that one often cannot determine, in a first encounter, what elements of a particular work are significant. They learn that just as good writers revise their prose, so good readers are rereaders, who return to the text not to find out what happens but to discover how the author makes it happen. These subsequent readings commonly lead to a revision of earlier impressions, even as they suggest new answers and raise new questions.

The goal of these activities is not some privileged knowledge of the “true meaning” of a particular work, for that would reduce both the work and the reading to a single standard and purpose. Rather, I hope that students will become *active* readers who are engaged in a

recursive process: readers who are discovering the relationships between reading and writing, between literature and other forms of discourse, and who are beginning to see literary structures as elegant examples of common patterns of organizing experience. As Fish advises, the literary work should not be approached as an object whose properties the reader tries to apprehend with certainty, but rather as an experience of the reader, so that false starts, hesitations, errors, and changes of mind are not assumed to be the predictable failings of ill-equipped students but part of the experience, and thus part of the meaning, of that text (17).

Student responses to and questions about "I Stand Here Ironing" also create an opportunity to present relevant literary terms—narrator, point of view, imagery, dramatic monologue, rhetorical questions, and so on. Notebook exercises such as recasting part of a selection from a different point of view or filling in a "gap" in the story not only allow students to apply what they have learned but also foster imaginative and sympathetic involvement in the text. For instance, one student observed, "This story is something more than six typed pages. Once you read it, you get so involved with it that you read it over and over again. It wakes you up by troubling you," while another comment anticipated the writing assignment yet to come: "I was reading the story and I had two pictures in my mind. The speaker telling the story of her life and me telling the story of my life." These informal writings reveal their difficulties with vocabulary and syntax as well, which makes further contextualization possible, and they can be encouraged to use new vocabulary and syntactical patterns in both their notebooks and their essays. A number of students remarked on the rich, metaphorical language and frequently complex sentences of Olsen's narrator and clearly strove to incorporate original imagery in the essays generated by this story.

Our discussion of the reading is followed by a consideration of relevant grammatical structures. Since most narratives are written in the past tense, an examination of the differences among the past tenses and a review of those modals that express habitual past action are often in order. Because the students will probably be modeling their own personal narratives on the literary sample, they find the grammar pertinent. Indeed, every member of the class commented in some way on the time shifts in "I Stand Here Ironing": they realized that the author's skillful handling of the then and the now contributed significantly to the story's effect and admired such mastery—which made a review of verb tenses especially appropriate. Sentences culled from the story served as models for an analysis of the present perfect, past perfect, conditional, and subjunctive tenses:

Present Perfect

“She *has lived* for nineteen years. There is all that life that *has happened* outside of me, beyond me.”

“You must *have seen* it in her pantomimes.”

“I *have edged* away from it, that poisonous feeling between them . . .”

“But because I *have been dredging* the past, and all that compounds a human being is so heavy and meaningful in me, I cannot endure it tonight.”

The class quickly noted that the present perfect expresses an action that began at some time in the past, continues into the present, and may or may not extend into the future. As practice with this tense, I asked them to write in their notebooks about some of the strangest and most interesting experiences they *have had* in the time they *have been* in this country.

Past Perfect

“You didn’t know her all those years she was thought homely, or see her poring over her baby pictures, making me tell her over and over how beautiful she *had been*—and would be, I would tell her—and was now, to the seeing eye.”

“Where does it come from, that comedy? There was none of it in her when she came back to me that second time, after I *had had* to send her away again.”

“Months later she told me she *had taken* pennies from my purse to buy him candy.”

“Now suddenly she was Somebody, and as imprisoned in her difference as she *had been* in anonymity.”

Students observed that the past perfect tense points to one past time that preceded another past time and is commonly used to express time that came before a specific event in a past narrative. They also noticed that this tense often appears in sentences that have dependent clauses, and that the verb in the main clause is usually in the past tense. Their notebook assignment was to write about a memorable summer using both the simple past and the past perfect. (When I was seven, I started swimming lessons. After I had conquered my fear of putting my head under water, I was ready to learn. . . .)

Conditional and Subjunctive

“If I write my letter nicly [sic], I will have a star.”

“Even if I came, what good would it do?”

“Except that it would have made no difference if I had known.”

Students worked together to distinguish the different meanings in each of these three types of “if” sentences and to develop guidelines for using the conditional. As a follow-up exercise, the class was given a selection of “if clauses” to complete, all drawn from song titles and aphorisms (“If I were a rich man,” “If wishes were horses,” “If ever I would leave you,” and so on).

Finally, the formal writing assignment is designed to help students to internalize the literary aspects of the story by drawing on such devices and techniques in their own texts. “I Stand Here Ironing” leads to a dramatic monologue in which students recall and reflect on a period in their pasts. Following Olsen, students also begin their texts in the present (“I sit here drinking coffee . . .”), shift to the past, and return to the present once again. The more ambitious writers may try to weave back and forth from present to past as Olsen does. Whatever structure they favor, they are asked to imagine that they are speaking to a specific silent listener as they contrast what they once were, once thought, to what they now are, now think. This assignment encourages them to rediscover—indeed, revise—some aspect of their own pasts, and to reflect upon the extent to which that past has dictated their present. In addition to the practice with tenses and the implied cause/effect analysis, they have the opportunity to incorporate a number of literary techniques into their own repertoire: quoting characters, using questions for transitional purposes and repetition for emphasis, creating a controlling image, ending with a rhetorical question, following a circular structure.

Each unit culminates in reading the papers aloud, with students responding to each other’s writing with the same kind of observation and attentiveness that they applied to the professional sample. They are usually proud of their work and eager to make good papers even better through revision. Most important, they have learned that reading and writing are reciprocal activities, each commenting on and enriching the other.

Works Cited

- Bizzell, P. “William Perry and Liberal Education.” *College English* 46 (1984): 447–454.
- Culler, Jonathan. *The Pursuit of Signs*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981.
- Fish, Stanley. *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1972.

- Gajdusek, Linda. "Toward Wider Use of Literature in ESL: Why and How." *TESOL Quarterly* 22 (1988): 227-257.
- Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending*. New York: Oxford UP, 1966.
- Marquardt, William F. "Literature and Cross-Cultural Communication." *English Teaching Forum* 6.2 (1968): 8-10.
- McConochie, Jean. "'Musing on the Lamp-Flame': Teaching a Narrative Poem in a College-Level ESOL Class." *TESOL Quarterly* 19 (1985): 125-136.
- McGroarty, M. & J. L. Galvan. "Culture as an Issue in Second-Language Teaching." *Beyond Basics: Issues and Research in TESOL*. Ed. M. Celce-Murcia. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1985. 81-95.
- McKay, Sandra. "Literature in the ESL Classroom." *TESOL Quarterly* 16 (1982): 529-536.
- Olsen, Tillie. "I Stand Here Ironing." Excerpted from *Tell Me a Riddle*. New York: Delacorte, 1961.
- Oster, Judith. "Seeing With Different Eyes: Another View of Literature in the ESL Class." *TESOL Quarterly* 23 (1989): 85-103.
- Osterloh, K. "Intercultural Differences and Communicative Approaches to Foreign-Language Teaching in the Third World." *Culture Bound: Bridging the Culture Gap in Language Teaching*. Ed. J. M. Valdes. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987. 77-84.
- Povey, John F. "Literature in TESOL Programs: The Language and the Culture." *TESOL Quarterly* 1 (1967): 40-46.
- Spack, Ruth. "Literature, Reading, Writing, and the ESL Student." *TESOL Quarterly* 19 (1985): 703-725.
- Winterowd, W. Ross. *Contemporary Rhetoric: A Conceptual Background with Readings*. New York: Harcourt, 1975.