Using novels in the language-learning classroom

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Using a novel with the English language learner provides a rich source of pedagogic activities. At the same time, it gives rise to its own set of difficulties—both practical and literary. In this article, I begin by attempting to identify some features of novels which provide unusual educational and linguistic opportunities for the learner. I then examine some of the difficulties both teachers and students may experience in using novels in the classroom and provide sample materials that I have devised in an attempt to overcome these problems. These activities were produced for one particular novel, The Great Gatsby *by F. Scott Fitzgerald, but I hope the principles underlying them would be applicable to most other novels as well.*

Why use novels?

Using a novel with the English language learner can provide teachers with unique opportunities for educational and linguistic development. But using a novel also creates particular problems for both teachers and students. We may ask, for example, how the teaching of the novel can be successfully integrated into a syllabus. Will our students be overwhelmed by too much new vocabulary? Are there specific literary skills we would wish our students to acquire when studying a novel? It seems vital, therefore, when devising a syllabus or materials for teaching a novel not only to try to anticipate the problems both learners and teachers experience, but also to try to identify those specific features of novels which provide unusual educational and linguistic opportunities for the learner, since these may help us understand more clearly how to overcome the difficulties.

What are some of the *reasons* for using a novel with students? To begin with, if a novel has been carefully selected so as to link in with students' interests, it may provide a more involving source for pedagogic activities than some of the pseudo-narratives that one sometimes finds in course books. A good novel addresses itself to complex situations and adult dilemmas. It engages our students intellectually, emotionally, and linguistically, and as such it can provide the basis for a motivating variety of classroom activities, ranging from extensive reading tasks to close textual analysis. Related to this is the fact that if the novel selected by the teacher does indeed motivate the learner, then students may feel a very satisfying sense of achievement at having successfully read and discussed a text

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which is not only authentic, but is also considered worthwhile by native speakers of English.

Using a novel can provide our students with a tantalizing glimpse of another culture—a glimpse which has the imaginative appeal of 'felt life', with all its nuances and contradictions. This glimpse can be a principal cause of student frustration too, since the cultural background knowledge required for even an elementary understanding of the novel might be too great. But more of this later.

Important as all of these reasons are, we should not lose sight of our students' primary reason for being in the classroom, which is after all to improve their English. In what ways can using a novel with students help to do this more effectively?

Sense-making activities

Widdowson (1984: 246) has drawn attention to that creative force which he labels 'language capacity'. By this he means 'the ability to exploit the resources for making meaning which are available in the language whether these have been codified or not'. It could be argued that in learning a language the learner is engaged, therefore, in a creative process of 'making meanings' and increasing his or her 'language capacity'.

There are particular features of the novel which provide students with opportunities to be engaged in the way that Widdowson describes. In reading a novel, learners are called upon extensively to engage in activities which demand that they form hypotheses and draw inferences. Take, for example, the question of determining what world values or beliefs the author is trying to communicate. Unless a novel is quite expressly autobiographical, it is frequently impossible to identify the narrator of the novel with the author and so the reader is obliged to infer what the views, feelings, and beliefs of the author might be (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983). This principle is underlined in those novels which seem to filter experience through the ideas of one particular character. In *The Great Gatsby,* for example, the story is told by Nick Carraway, who has an identity quite distinct from the author of the novel, F. Scott Fitzgerald. The attentive reader will not only question the reliability of the narrator's view of events, but will simultaneously try to draw conclusions about the views of the author, that shadowy presence behind the narrator.

Readers may also be called upon to make complicated inferences about the plot, since quite frequently the chronological sequence of events in the novel is distorted. Chapters One and Two, for example, may describe events which happen simultaneously, while a flashback detailing certain crucial events in the story may only be described at the end of the novel. This may mean that certain crucial relationships of cause and effect are never made explicit to the reader. The detective novel, for example, goes out of its way to conceal and distort relationships of cause and effect which have to be inferred by the reader until the final disclosure of 'whodunnit'. By actively encouraging our students to make predictions, draw inferences, and test out their hypotheses as they read, perhaps we will encourage them to extend their capacity for 'making meanings' in English.

Increasing language awareness

The struggle to 'make meaning' is further intensified in the novel because, as a fictional construct, it does not refer in any direct or obvious way to the 'real world'. (Widdowson, 1984: 165). In order to make any interpretations of what the novel is about, the reader is forced to pay more than usual attention to the kind of language used in the novel, in particular the clusters of words which reverberate throughout the text to create a web of interlocking meanings and multiple connotations. In *The Great Gatsby,* for example, the words 'dust', 'ashes', and 'powder' recur throughout the text, and come to take on a powerful symbolic meaning. By encouraging our students to identify which clusters of words seem to recur and how they are grouped together in a novel, we could draw their attention to the way in which symbolic meanings and the themes to which they give rise are communicated. We would also be increasing their general awareness of how language items acquire meaning by being part of an extended discourse, since to assign meaning to a particular word in a novel demands close analysis of how it fits into the overall lexical patterning of the text.

Teachers and learners often cite literary language as being particularly problematic because it does not adhere to accepted norms of use, but exploits and even distorts the accepted conventions in fresh and unexpected ways. In *The Great Gatsby,* for example, Gatsby's station wagon is described as 'scampering like a yellow bug' while 'his motorboats slit the waters of the Sound' *(The Great Gatsby,* p. 45). Both the words 'scamper' and 'slit' are collocated in an unusual way to create a particular effect. But even this unorthodox use of language can provide the basis for a series of useful learning activities. We could encourage our students to discover for themselves what the more usual collocations for these words are (perhaps by using dictionaries) and then to comment on what particular effect is being created by using them in this way. In other words, a close textual analysis of particular extracts from a novel, might help to alert our students not only to how particular meanings are conveyed by 'playing' with the conventions, but also to certain overall, generalizable features of language—in this case the nature of collocation.

Problems and solutions: practical

We turn now to an examination of the kinds of difficulties that both students and teachers experience when using a novel in the classroom. I have divided these into two broad categories. The first is what we might call *practical problems* and the second more specifically *literary problems.* After a brief discussion of each type of problem, I outline a few suggestions of how these problems can be addressed.

Length

Clearly it is important in choosing a novel for classroom use that the novel is short enough to be satisfactorily handled in the classroom time allocated. This implies that the novel chosen should be able to be comfortably integrated in the amount of time available per week, but should also be within the students' grasp, in terms of their linguistic, intellectual, and emotional capabilities. The text should be sufficiently challenging without being so difficult as to be demotivating.

Depending on the number of students and their linguistic and literary

competence, the teacher will need to decide whether classroom time or 'homework' time should be spent on the novel. With a very advanced group who are highly skilled readers, the teacher might consider asking them to read the entire novel in advance, before using it as the basis for classroom activities. But probably a more manageable and interesting approach is to assign students 'homework' reading of one chapter at a time, and then use the classroom time to work on activities devised around that particular chapter. The novel can thus be approached as an ongoing classroom project. The other advantage of this approach is that it divides the text into manageable pedagogic units, something of particular importance in dealing with what may be a very heavy load of vocabulary. A third approach, if time is rather short, is to divide the students into groups, and to get them to read different chapters over a period of a few weeks. Perhaps the whole class could begin by reading the first chapter, but the following week the second chapter could be read by a group of students, who would then have to report on it to the rest of the class. This has the added benefit of focusing student attention on details of plot as they have to provide either a summary or paraphrase of it to their classmates. A variation on this approach is for the teacher to provide brief summaries of less important chapters for the students, but to encourage them to read all the others.

Vocabulary

Experience has shown that even very advanced learners become discouraged if they have to stop frequently to look up the meanings of 'new' words in the dictionary. Even if the teacher exhorts students to 'read for gist' and not concentrate on vocabulary, some serious problems can result if they miss the meaning of crucial words or phrases. One possible way of circumventing this problem is for either the teacher or small groups of students in turn to prepare in advance of the assigned homework reading a list of words likely to be of difficulty in that chapter, together with synonyms or dictionary entries. This can then be referred to during the 'homework reading' if necessary. This kind of activity is also very helpful for developing students' dictionary skills, particularly if they are asked to make careful notes of colloquial or literary uses of particular words.

'Justifying' the use of the novel to students

One problem I have experienced initially with many students, is their perception that using a novel in the classroom will somehow detract from more serious classroom activities like learning grammar. It seems that the only way to counteract this view is to exploit the novel as a source of tasks and activities which conform more closely to student perceptions of what they need to learn. In fact, I would even go so far as to claim that such activities may sometimes prove to be a more involving and rigorous way of reviewing or even teaching grammar than doing the kinds of exercises which provide decontextualized examples of a particular grammar point.

As examples of this approach, here are a series of exercises that I have used with students based around the following extract from *The Great Gatsby*.

The young Greek, Michaelis, who ran the coffee joint beside the ashheaps was the principal witness at the inquest. He had slept through the heat until after five, when he strolled over to the garage, and found George Wilson sick in his office — really sick, pale as his own pale hair and shaking all over. Michaelis advised him to go to bed, but Wilson refused, saying that he'd miss a lot of business if he did. While his neighbour was trying to persuade him a violent racket broke out overead.

'I've got my wife locked in up there,' explained Wilson calmly. 'She's going to stay there till the day after tomorrow, and then we're going to move away.'

Michaelis was astonished; they had been neighbours for four years, and Wilson had never seemed faintly capable of such a statement. Generally he was one of these worn-out men: when he wasn't working, he sat on a chair in the doorway and stared at the people and the cars that passed along the road. When anyone spoke to him he invariably laughed in an agreeable, colourless way. He was his wife's man and not his own.

So naturally Michaelis tried to find out what had happened, but Wilson wouldn't say a word — instead he began to throw curious, suspicious glances at his visitor and ask him what he'd been doing at certain times on certain days. Just as the latter was getting uneasy, some workmen came past the door bound for his restaurant, and Michaelis took the opportunity to get away, intending to come back later. But he didn't. He supposed he forgot to, that's all. When he came outside again, a little after seven, he was reminded of the conversation because he heard Mrs Wilson's voice, loud and scolding, downstairs in the garage.

The Great Gatsby, pp. 142–143[1]

My grammatical aim here was to focus on direct and reported speech. After each stage, we discussed not only the tense changes that students needed to make when moving from direct to reported speech or back again, but also any stylistic changes necessary to account for the speaker or the person doing the reporting. At the end of this activity, we assembled a list of 'rules' for students to remember when transferring from one mode of speech to the other.

The student tasks consist of the following:

i. Imagine that you are writing a film script for *The Great Gatsby.* Write the scene between Michaelis and George Wilson as reported by Nick

ii. Imagine that Michaelis is now reporting the scene above to Nick. Write the conversation between Nick and Michaelis.
Remember that Michaelis is the owner of a coffee-shop. Do you think that he is likely to say 'when anyone spoke to George he invariably laughed in an agreeable, colourless way'. If not, why not?

iii. Imagine you are writing a police report of Michaelis' evidence. How would it differ from (**i**) and (**ii**)?

iv. Act out the scenes between Michaelis and a policeman, and between Michaelis and Nick. How would they differ?

v. Write down any 'rules' you have learned about direct and reported speech from doing this exercise. Have you learned any new verbs for reporting?

Another grammar-based activity which could be used successfully is that of using cloze tests. With selected extracts, the teacher could delete examples of a particular grammatical item, (e.g. tenses). Students would then have to provide the answers and compare their answers with the original.

Making the cultural background more accessible to students

A major difficulty for students reading a novel is that its cultural background may seem inaccessible to them, and may also interfere with their understanding of crucial elements within the text. I have found that it is best to deal with some of these difficulties before the students even begin reading the novel. When considering cultural background, it is important to include not only the historical, political, and economic facts which may form the background to the novel, but also the complicated set of social and literary values underlying it. In providing our students with some background information about a novel, our aim is surely not to compel them to produce a standard interpretation of the text. Rather we should encourage them to make interpretations which are relevant to themselves and their society, but which may be enriched and validated by useful information we might provide for them. Here are some activities helpful to achieving this aim:

—If facilities exist, students are asked to carry out some library research on subjects such as the following: the Prohibition, the Roaring Twenties, or the life of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Findings are then reported in groups, and students are asked to think about events in their own society at that time, and whether there were any differences. Alternatively, the teacher could provide relevant material for discussion in the form of reading or listening comprehension, which considers some of the themes relevant to *The Great Gatsby* including 'From Rags to Riches', 'The New World', 'The American Dream', and so on.

—Students jot down and then discuss any impressions they have of American life, however superficial, that they may have gleaned from films, T.V., newspapers, etc. The teacher can direct students towards issues which may otherwise be incomprehensible in the novel.

—In groups, students are asked to reach some kind of consensus about the characteristics of a hero, a heroine, a villain, etc. Are these characteristics likely to change in different historical periods and from country to country? What kind of characteristics would an American hero have?

Problems and solutions: literary

We turn now to what we may call more specifically literary problems—the kinds of difficulties our students face in responding to the novel as a literary work with particular distinguishing characteristics.

Understanding the story

It is obviously crucial for students to be able to follow the plot of the novel, even if this involves reconstructing a chronological and logical sequence of events from an often confused series of flashbacks. In order to help students cope with this, the following activities might be useful:

Summarizing

Example:
—Write a summary of events in Chapter 1 in 50 words.
—Write a second summary of Chapter 1 in 100 words (or 150 words). Justify why you added the information you did.

The aim here is to encourage learners to extrapolate essential elements from the plot to order them according to their importance. It is important in this exercise to impose a limit on the number of words in the summary since, as Carter points out, 'a word limit enforces selection of what is significant' and 'students learn that even a summary of what happens is in one sense an interpretative act'. (Brumfit and Carter, 1986: 114)

Headlining

Example:
Read the beginning of Chapter 2 from *The Great Gatsby* and decide which of the following titles would most adequately summarize it. Justify your choice.

i. Tom gets drunk.
ii. Mrs Wilson takes the train to New York.
iii. The inhabitants of the wasteland.
iv. A visit to the underworld.
v. Tom visits his mistress.
vi. Nick meets Wilson's wife.
vii. Nick meets Tom's mistress.
viii. Tom and Nick stop at Wilson's garage.

In this task, students are required to label the events of a particular extract or chapter in the novel. The main objective here is to provoke discussion about the significance of an episode from the text, not only in terms of how it advances the plot but also how it reflects the relationship between characters and the underlying themes of the novel.

Sentence completion and chronological ordering

Example:
After you have read Chapter 7, try to complete the following statements. These statements are in jumbled order: re-order them as they occurred.

i. Myrtle ran into the street because _____ .
ii. The yellow car was going very fast because _____ .
iii. Myrtle saw Nick, Jordan, and Tom sitting in a car and thought that _____ .
iv. Tom realized that Wilson thought the yellow car was his because _____ .
v. Tom thought Myrtle had been killed by _____ .
vi. Wilson locked Myrtle up because _____ .

Can you make any predictions about what will happen in Chapter 8?

The aim here is twofold: to encourage students to make inferences about cause–effect relations even if they are not stated explicitly, and to get students to reconstruct events in chronological sequence even if they are jumbled in the text.

Understanding character

For the language learner, understanding the characters in the novel implies assigning certain traits or features to them. Students quite often require guidance on this, because they may not always have a satisfactory stock of adjectives for the job. The following tasks are intended to extend the students' descriptive vocabulary, to get them to apply it to characters in the novel, and to get them to use it more creatively in their own writing.

Examples:
Here are some adjectives which can be used to describe different characters. If you don't know the meaning of them, look them up in a dictionary.

restless	*violent*	*extrovert*
vivacious	*idealistic*	*sophisticated*
snobbish	*pragmatic*	*generous*
ambitious	*superficial*	*dominating*

i. In groups, go through the first three chapters of *The Great Gatsby* and try to see which of these adjectives can be applied to which characters. To do so, you need to check whether any of these adjectives, or a synonym for them, is actually used to describe a character or whether the behaviour of a character indicates particular qualities.

ii. Write a short description of somebody you know well. Describe his or her physical appearance and indicate what kind of person he or she is, both by using descriptive adjectives and describing behaviour.

Understanding 'narrative point of view'

Particularly with novels which tell their story from the perspective of a first person narrator, students should be alerted as to how events and their significance are filtered through a particular point of view. The following kinds of activities help students to do this:

Example:
After you have read Chapter 1, look at the following diary entry of Tom Buchanan: 'Monday evening. Nick Carraway, a cousin of Daisy's

came round. Showed him garden. Good sort of man, but working for a very obscure firm. Told him about Goddard's book. Phone call from M.'

i. What other information do you think could be added to this? For example, what do you think the conversation between Tom and M was about?
ii. Write a diary entry for either Jordan or Daisy for exactly the same day.

The language of the novel

In attempting to make the language of the novel more accessible to students and increase their awareness of how it communicates mood and theme, I have concentrated on two main activities. The first of these is close textual/stylistic analysis—examples of which can be found in both Carter and Long (1987) and McRae and Boardman (1984). Students are encouraged to analyse an extract from the novel to identify how specific lexical and grammatical features produce particular stylistic effects. The second type of activity is more 'global' in that it focuses on how lexical clusters recur throughout the text to create a web of associations.

Close analysis

Examples:
Read the extract and then answer the questions.

> There was music from my neighbour's house through the summer nights. In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars. At high tide in the afternoon I watched his guests diving from the tower of his raft, or taking the sun on the hot sand of his beach while his two motor-boats slit the waters of the Sound, drawing aquaplanes over cataracts of foam. On weekends his Rolls-Royce became an omnibus, bearing parties to and from the city between nine in the morning and long past midnight, while his station wagon scampered like a brisk yellow bug to meet all trains. And on Mondays eight servants, including an extra gardener, toiled all day with mops and scrubbing-brushes and hammers and garden-shears, repairing the ravages of the night before.
>
> Every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons arrived from a fruiterer in New York—every Monday these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulpless halves. There was a machine in the kitchen which could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler's thumb.
>
> At least once a fortnight a corps of caterers came down with several hundred feet of canvas and enough coloured lights to make a Christmas tree of Gatsby's

enormous garden. On buffet tables, garnished with glistening hors-d'œuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs and turkeys bewitched to a dark gold.

The Great Gatsby, p. 45[1]

i. What kind of verbs are used to describe the motor boats (line 7) and station wagon (line 12). Does this have any particular effect?
ii. The word 'his' is repeated many times in the passage. To whom does it refer and what effect do you think is created by using it so often?
iii. Rewrite lines 20 to 23 in the active voice. Do you think this would change the effect of the paragraph?
iv. Write down all the adverbial time phrases you can find in the passage. When are time phrases like this usually used? Why do you think there are so many here?

Lexical clusters

Examples:

i. The following words recur throughout the book. Try to organize them into three main groups which you think have some characteristics in common.
Dust, Silver, Rolls Royce, Music, Smoke, Flower, Stars, Yacht, Money, Ashes, Gold, White, Mansion, Light.
ii. Now write down all the possible associations you have for a particular word and the other words in its group. For example, perhaps you grouped *ashes* and *dust* together and both words made you think of death or destruction. Compare your associations with those of other students and of your teacher.
iii. Look at the first three chapters of the novel again. Write down any phrase or sentence containing one of the words above. Can you find any connections between the words above and their description of particular settings or characters?

Conclusion

The tasks suggested here are intended as a basis for classroom discovery. Once students show some competence in the kinds of skills the exercises demand, students and teachers might engage in more elaborate activities—for example, writing short essays on the novel's main themes, discussing comments made by different critics about the work, or even comparing the novel with similar genres in the students' own language.

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Note

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