CRITERIA, RATIONALE, AND METHODOLOGY FOR THE USE OF ANNIE JOHN: A NOVEL FOR COMMUNICATIVE PURPOSES

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The novel is a powerful tool for learning, whether in the ESL classroom or in a literature course. What makes it either an enriching experience or a painfully difficult task depends heavily on the book itself, the proficiency level of the students, and the objectives the instructor has set for the class. Clearly, the preceding items should all be in agreement. Presented here is a proposal to create a positive, nonpainful experience. The paper outlines 1) the criteria used to select the proposed novel, Annie John, 2) a discussion of the influence communicatively based objectives have upon book selection and activities, and 3) actual tasks thought to be appropriate for high intermediate or advanced level students.

INTRODUCTION

A strong case for the use of literature in ESL classrooms (Arthur, 1968; Povey 1967; Widdowson, 1975, 1982) and its value in combination with process writing tasks (Spack 1985) has already been made. Therefore, rather than reiterate similar perspectives, it may be more useful to present criteria for the selection of a specific text, followed by the rationale and methodology for its instruction. The text, targeted for high intermediate to advanced students, has been selected to fulfill two main objectives: 1) to generate an interactive reading experience for the reader individually, using a longer piece of work and 2) to encourage communicative exchanges in oral and written work between teacher and student, and student to student. While a few oral

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activities will be suggested, the emphasis will be on process writing activities, as it is often this area which intermediate to advanced students need attention.

Gajdusek's (1988, pp. 227-257) perception of literature and its uses has provided models for various types of classroom activity. Her article, which addresses literature in terms of theory, as well as pedagogical concerns, provides an excellent treatment on the use of literature to fulfill "communicative, content-based" (p. 228) objectives. In addition to convincing arguments to "exploit" the communicative aspects of literature, Gajdusek (p. 223) offers a four-level sequence of activities (prereading, factual in-class work, analysis, extending activities) that are presented for classroom use. A few of the activities she has offered will be recommended here. However, one notable difference should be mentioned. Unlike Gajdusek's guidelines which recommend only "fairly short" texts, (p. 228) this paper will concern itself with a lengthier piece of work, the novel. As this paper is not a critique of Gajdusek's work, nor a test of her theories, it seems reasonable to apply a few of the activities she suggests toward a longer piece. It is, however, not the goal of this paper to argue for length; rather, it will proceed with the assumption that the novel, as a text, is indeed suitable for students.

1. CRITERIA FOR THE NOVEL

Gajdusek does not provide criteria per se, for text selection. However, the communicative orientation and the subsequent activities would, by their nature, require certain features within a short text, more so in a work of greater length. Here, the criteria evolved from assumptions made following the reading of the Gajdusek article and through experiences gained in the classroom.

1.1. Language accessibility

The language should be accessible to the students. By that, it is meant that novel should meet or be slightly above the student's level of proficiency. That is not to say the novel should be easy, for students will be expected to learn and study new vocabulary. The idea is to avoid a novel that taxes their literal comprehension to the extent that communicative tasks are too difficult.
Moreover, a linguistically complex text would naturally demand more class time for vocabulary building techniques (root words, definitions, usage, pronunciation and testing of those skills.) This would not leave much time for issue-based discussion and assignments, the result of which would be a departure from communicative goals.

1.2. Relevance

The concepts found in the novel should be relevant to students' lives. Ideally, in addition to "universal themes" (e.g., self discovery, maturation, familial relationships) there should also be issues which could relate directly to students' experiences. Culturally oriented themes (identity crises, assimilation, alienation, acculturation) are topics to which students can relate. Such topics enhance the possibility of interactive reading and opportunities for students to explore and share ideas (p. 228).

1.3. Adherence to standard literary conventions

There should be a clear, recognizable structure to the book (beginning, middle, end; more specifically, a clearly established conflict, rising action, climax, resolution). If the structure of the novel is clear, it would make it possible (after receiving direction) for students to analyze, discuss and perform written tasks without heavy reliance on the instructor's perceptions of the novel. Students would then have much more independence and freedom to formulate their own conclusions. When given tasks to evaluate themes or characters, they would be able to identify issues and form statements on their own because they can pinpoint events, note the various stages in the character's life and locate examples depicting themes. In a less conventional format, the students might have a more difficult time pulling out such items. They may then rely heavily on the teacher's views of the book, rather than their own. Moreover, in novels where conflicts are more ambiguous or where writers attempt less predictable ways to indicate rising action and resolutions, students may become frustrated because there appears to be no "system" to analyzing the book.

In addition, beyond the skeletal structure, the novel should be complete. By "complete," it is meant that the plot should be plausible, the characters well developed, and the issues skillfully managed into the story line. There are great works of literature that deviate from standard
conventions. Perhaps after becoming familiar with the elements of fiction, students can continue on to read such work.

1.4. Timeliness and stature as a literary work

Finally, as nebulous as these last two features may appear, the novel should be considered timely and a work of some quality. Timeliness is mentioned as it is likely students would be attracted to contemporary fiction. It is assumed a current work would discuss present day concerns as well as idiomatic phrases and cultural references which students enjoy. As for "quality," the term could be defined as the success of the writer's ability, in some unique way, to evoke feeling, create images, provoke thought/discussion and/or create some long lasting impression on the reader. If this criteria is too vague—for the lack of any other discriminating device—reviews by literary critics could act as an instrument to determine the novel's worth. Again, quality may be poorly defined but its inclusion as a feature is justifiable. It seems somehow fair that the students be exposed to work that is considered superior within the literary field to justify the time they will spend examining and absorbing the language, themes, and structure.

2. THE NOVEL

Jamaica Kincaid's 1984 novel, Annie John, appears to fit the preceding criteria. The novel takes a close look at adolescence, and the changes it brings to the life of a young girl in Antigua. The novel, rich with images of rural life, has a great deal to offer the reader. The images are powerful, the issues relevant and the language accessible. Moreover, the issues of metamorphosis, leaving home, conflicting desires of obedience and rebellion toward her parents, may offer interesting parallels to readers' own experiences in a foreign land. Such a novel could lend itself well to the objectives set in a communicatively based class; a novel through which the students could read, reflect, discuss and then present their ideas in oral and written form.

Briefly, the novel revolves around the moods and conflicts within a family of three: Annie John, her father and her mother. Told in a diary-like form, in first person, Kincaid depicts the powerful metamorphosis that occurs
when Annie John grows into her own sense of being.

When the novel opens, Annie John reflects on her experiences as a young child. At this stage in her life, Annie John's sense of self is still wrapped within the context of her mother and father. She describes (Kincaid p. 22) the daily routine she and her mother followed; the washing of white and colored clothing on stones. "It was a beautiful stone heap my father had made for her: an enormous circle of stones, about six inches high, in the middle of our yard. On it the soapy white clothes were spread out; as the sun dried them bleaching out all stains, they had to be made wet again by dousing them with buckets of water."

Out of ordinary stones, a powerful memory has been created. Through these images, the reader learns a great deal about Annie John, the powerful emotional presence of her parents, and a sense of what life is like for a child in Antigua. A fairly mundane task has ritualistic overtones. The "enormous circle," "the beautiful stone heap," "the soapy white," "made wet again by dousing them with buckets of water" recalls a long string of associations: A stone altar, ancient worship, baptism and purification. Moreover, it is "her father" who as made this enormous circle. In other words, in the serene predictability of Annie John's daily life, a feeling of devotion and belonging resonates. In such a place, these tasks are transformed; they become ceremonies which somehow entwine the landscape with the identity of her mother and herself. It is this heightened sense of unity between mother, daughter and father that will play against the growing tension found within Annie John.

As Annie John moves from ages five, nine to the age fifteen, the novel continues to gather tension and discord. In the same way that deep images of intimacy were present, now images of bitterness and distrust appear. At one point, Annie John seeks solace (p. 84) from her mother. Finding none, she reflects, "as she (her mother) said this, she laughed. She was standing half inside the door, half outside. Her body was in the shade of our house, but her head was in the sun. When she laughed, her mouth opened to show off big, shiny, sharp white teeth. It was as if my mother had suddenly turned into a crocodile."

The writer has given us a rather macabre portrait of her mother. Creating a mother who is unfathomable, perhaps untrustworthy, "half in," "half out; practically in the shade, partially in the sun," Kincaid appears to
play on the dichotomy of children's perception of parents and what their parents truly are. The laughter is particularly unnerving, as it is normally an indication of joy, yet here, it is juxtaposed against the image of her mother as a crocodile. The half dark, half light, animal/human transformation brings up an other worldly metaphysical quality to the book. At times the imagery becomes so mixed with negative/positive, dark/light, that it evokes doubt as to whether this is just a phase in Annie John's life or whether there is truly something wrong with the main character or her family. In this sense the novel has successfully captured the very real sense of precariousness and danger parents sometimes feel in this stage of a child's life. This use of naturalistic imagery (oceanscapes, landscapes, animal imagery) reoccurs, either as a stylistic device or as a cultural framework for the novel.

To conclude, the characters do not find a sentimental reconciliation; nor does Annie John remain secure in her struggle against her parents. Instead, the reader is left with a gentle mix of melancholy, self awareness and maturity; emotions that Annie John carries with her as she leaves Antigua for a world of her own.

It is this gentle mix of elements which makes "Annie John" such an attractive book. One of the most convincing reasons for using the novel is that, here, accessibility of language, relevance, structure, literary value, and the fulfillment of standard pedagogical objectives are well interfaced. (The "pedagogical objectives" mentioned refer to vocabulary acquisition, literal comprehension, exposure to literary conventions, and mastery over a lengthy piece of work.)

3. THE ROLE OF THE AUTHOR IN ENCOURAGING INTERACTIVE READING AND COMMUNICATIVE RESPONSES

The saying, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts," describes the effectiveness of a well-integrated novel. A text with any one of the features mentioned in the criteria—skillful use of language, relevance or literary value—would enable students to adequately fulfill basic reading goals. However, when these elements are drawn together well into a single text, the overall impact upon the student is great. Such a novel can lay the foundation for rich, communicative interaction. This "genuine" communication manifests itself through student discussions and writings. (By "genuine" it is mean that
the interaction is more spontaneous, the messages sent from student to student, and student to teacher are actually felt, and some negotiation of meaning occurs.) In journals, rather than merely reproducing static recitations of what the teacher has already presented, students can create their own personal inquiries into issues. The task becomes an avenue to self reflection and a means to share feelings and ideas with the teacher. Further, essays and compositions not only require a well-thought out rationale with supporting evidence, they also give students an opportunity to share a unique view that is independent of the teacher's perceptions. Such results must clearly fulfill communicative goals.

Yet, again, what is crucial to such success is that the book itself must have the depth and breadth to stimulate students; and that there are sufficient layers of meaning so that the student can add, reinterpret or provide challenges to the perceptions the teacher may offer.

And, importantly, after reading a well-crafted novel, a great range of questions begin to emerge from the students—questions about culture, language, personal philosophies the characters or students may have about life. This combination of larger, global (e.g., cultural) and personal (philosophies, beliefs) issues are areas that are typically difficult to reach through short readings and assignments. Their inquiries offer the teacher an opportunity to encourage investigative thinking, and to teach techniques to help students find answers to their own questions.

This "coming together" of the elements to accomplish all that is mentioned above, can be tied to the skill of the author. Control of the language, issues, structure and suggested meanings lie in the craft of the writing. Kincaid, a native of Antigua but now a writer with The New Yorker, is skilled in her use of language. As we have seen in excerpts shown earlier in the paper, her images are powerful, yet simple. The vocabulary consists of one or two syllable words and the action is easy to to follow.

Interestingly, Kincaid has chosen not to include variations of dialect, despite the setting. This is one less obstacle for the students to overcome. The sense of Antigua is captured in the imagery without requiring the reader to wade through language variations or culture specific references. The writer constructs images of water, animals and rural life to continue to bring home the aspects of the individual lives of the characters and the cultural aspects of
island life in Antigua.

One example of Kincaid's ability to create a sense of culture within the context of the story, is a recurring dream of Annie John's: "...I had seen my mother and I, naked in the seawater, my mother sometimes singing to me in a song in a French patois I did not yet understand, or sometimes not saying anything at all. I would place my ear against her neck, and it was as if I were listening to a giant shell, for all the sounds around me—the sea, the wind, the birds screeching—would seem as if they came from inside her, the way the sounds of the sea are in a seashell. Afterward, my mother would take me back to the shore, and I would lie there just beyond the farthest reach of a big wave and watch my mother as she swam and dove."

"Naked in the seawater," the sounds of "the sea, the wind, the birds...as if they came from inside her," and Annie John as she watches her mother as "she swam and dove:" suggest deep images of birth, feminine aspects of nature and the constant tie between the ecology of the landscape and the ecology of the character's psyche. The scene has almost a mythic quality; with Annie John and her mother relating easily to each other without words, "sometimes singing to me a song...I did not yet understand, or sometimes not saying anything at all."

Through this simple yet powerful language, the reader experiences the feeling of Antigua, its people, and its images—the waves, the circle of stones, images of the mother/crocodile. The reader perceives the characters, the island, the culture through images rather than through characteristic speech or overt declarations.

The effect of using this image-rich language to construct a background and story line, is that the student and teacher are freed from the obstacles of discerning literal meaning and can be directed towards issues: identity, self discovery and change. The author's sensitivity and exploration of life can ignite students to explore humanistic values. Annie John's personal questions are universal questions: "Who am I?" "Where do I belong?" "To whom do I belong?" are similar to questions students adjusting to a new culture may have. Such a focus provides a meaningful context and relevance for study. The readers can focus on communicative skills and have an opportunity to transcend the sometimes mundane tasks of mastering vocabulary, comprehension, pronunciation and grammar structure.
4. FORMAT FOR STUDY

This transcendence of the mechanics of reading motivates the reader not only into new areas of thought but also into new areas of expression. A wide range of activities are possible.

For example, literal comprehension could be the primary focus for an intermediate level class. Vocabulary and guessing-from-context skills could be stimulated through cloze tests (Gajdusek 1988, p. 236) Assignments could revolve around the determination of plot, setting, character description and the sequence of events. Timelines (Gajdusek 1988, p. 244) could be constructed to connect the principles of cause and effect in the main character’s life. They could also be used to pinpoint the emotional changes and at what point they occur in her life, when she is five, nine, fifteen and so on. The book could be broken into sections which clearly show the phases of her metamorphosis. It is likely that these activities would fully occupy the time allotted for the book. However, if time allowed, students could do extended activities. Students could write short paragraphs that would recall their own images of life in their home country, finding parallels between their own memories and the memories that Annie John holds. Discussion groups and presentations on assigned topics could evolve from their study.

Readers in advanced level classes could approach the novel differently. Beyond the literal meaning, students could analyze imagery, symbolism, character motivation, parallelism between identity crises felt at certain ages in life and identity conflicts felt by those who are faced with alienation, assimilation or acculturation. Activities for advanced level students could focus on their ability to analyze, justify and articulate their personal reactions to the material.

An example of an assignment that could capitalize on personal reaction or self discovery, would be to require a journal (Gajdusek, p. 253) from each student. The journal could be similar to the format of the novel—a diary-like book in which students could do freewrites. Assignments could require students to explore any parallels that may exist between lives and the lives of the character. This task is rich with possibility. The students may react to generational conflicts between parents and children, cross cultural conflicts, the price of maintaining one’s identity. Venturing into these areas may stir up
emotions in the students as powerful as those that Annie John feels. These conflicts have no easy answers, but students may benefit from articulating these ideas in writing or in discussion groups.

Students could also learn how to track the development of the main character. What is Annie John's profile as a child? As a preteen? As a teenager? This type of study is possible because the plot, character development and establishment of issues are clear and logical in the novel. The instructor can easily present models of a character/event and the students are also able to justify and validate their own theories by referring to the work.

The novel is flexible in that it could be studied by both intermediate and advanced readers, depending on the angle of the study. The vocabulary and structure of the book may appear simplistic, but as demonstrated by the analysis of the imagery, the meanings are not. Therefore, the depth of study could make it either an "easy" or "difficult" book. Still, this flexibility may be considered by some to be its weak point, as it may be considered too simple for advanced readers. However, if this is a serious concern, the novel could be considered as an effective first novel in an ESL course. The directness and simplicity of the text could give students a chance to develop skills before tackling a more difficult text.

SUMMARY

In summary, the novel is a rich source upon which ESL students can draw. What is essential to the success of subsequent interactive and communicative activities is the appropriate text. Such a literary work should 1) contain language that is accessible, 2) be relevant 3) have a well-defined structure that students can use as a resource for their writing/oral work (with, and independent of, the teacher), 4) be timely and of sufficient quality to consider it "literary." In concert, these are qualities powerful enough to inspire the student to read, reflect, discuss and in turn present their own reactions to issues unearthed by the author; accomplishing the goals of most reading curricula, the intentions of those advocating communicative foci and perhaps contributing to the personal growth of the student.
REFERENCES


