

Reviewed work:

Distant Thunder: An Integrated Skills Approach to Learning language through Literature. (1999). Janis G. Scalone. The University of Michigan Press. Pp. 141. ISBN: 0472085336. \$18.95

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Lying between the extremes of teaching literature as content and discarding literary knowledge and just focusing on language, *Distant Thunder* unfolds at the right position for its audience, adult high-intermediate to advanced ESL students, to achieve its aim of enhancing all four language skills. *Distant Thunder* has nine units, each centering on a short story, an excerpt from a novel or a poem accompanied by activities and exercises. The exercises focus on student-centered, reader-response activities and language exercises. That embodies its main approach of using "literature for personal enrichment"; in other words, using literature as a tool "for encouraging students to draw on their own personal experiences, feelings and opinions" (Lazar, 1993, p. 24). There are a few exercises dealing with literary knowledge and language, but they are appropriate and easy to use so that teachers do not have to have much knowledge about literature.

At the very beginning, in the To the Teacher section, the author provides brief descriptions or suggestions about how to use the components in each unit and the other parts of the book, such as the answer key, the Glossary of Terms, and the Additional Works of Interest. Following the Introduction, which describes the book's theoretical orientation as a student-centered and reading-process approach, is the main part of the book -- nine units of work. Notes for Teachers is the next section, which "contains additional background information, extra activities, suggestions for teaching, and answer keys to selected exercises" (p. xvi). The Glossary of Terms is a list of literary terminologies. After the Bibliography is the Additional Works of Interest, a list of resource books, videos, and sound recordings are provided for those seeking more information about the various cultural groups represented in *Distant Thunder* (p. xvi).

The nine units of the book are organized according to thematic and linguistic difficulty and the earlier units are less difficult in that respect than the later ones. Each unit is self-contained and teachers can adapt each one to their own teaching situation.

The literary works used in *Distant Thunder* are short stories and poems by Chinese, Japanese, Indian-Americans, Mexican-Americans, Native Americans, and African-Americans. Running through of these works is the theme of minority American's culture orientation, "whether they seek to maintain their cultural distinctiveness or assimilate" (blurb, back cover). The theme and content of those literary works are claimed to be relevant and of high interest to ESL learners and

to represent a reflection of the learners' own life experiences. Therefore, the material itself is an excellent stimulus for reader responses and meaningful communication.

Each unit is broken into the same eight components in the same sequence: Meet the Author, Preparing to Read, The First Reading, A Closer Look, Sharing the Possibilities, Understanding [various literary structures], Extending the Reading, and Focus on Language. This format reflects a process approach to reading literature. Meet the Author opens each unit with a brief biography of the author. More cultural, historical, and demographic background information is provided in Preparing to Read, followed by discussion questions about the central theme of the short story or the poem to be read in that unit. The First Reading begins with a short introduction, which calls the students' attention to how to read (using prediction, for example), and what to read (interpreting the theme or the author's purpose, for example). Then comes the literary work, either a short story, an excerpt from a novel, or a poem. After the literary work, the questions in A Close Look focus on the comprehension of the content of the literary work. It also "helps students relate the work to themselves as individuals, that is, to their own ideas, feelings, opinions, and perceptions of the world" (p. xv). Discussions regarding any confusion about, and appreciation of, the literary work is also encouraged in this session.

In Sharing the Possibilities the questions are usually designed to encourage multi-angle and personalized interpretations of the theme or events in the literary work. Following all the enlightening and interesting questions in the last two sessions, Understanding [various literary structures] introduces some literary activities (e.g., point of view, character, setting, etc.) in a very easy-to-understand manner. This "helps students gain a better understanding and appreciation for the craft of writing and the power of language -- how words help shape the reader's response to literature" (p. xvi). More creative and inspiring activities and projects appear in the next session: Extending the Reading Experience. "Students at times are called upon to rework the ending, interview characters, even create visual and aural interpretations of the work" (p. xvi). The final section in each unit is Focus on Language, which "is more form focused than the others as it looks at how specific language features work" (p. xvi), like figurative language, transitions in narratives, and so on. The aim of this section is to help the students better understand the literary work.

The questions and activities of each unit appear to be more than what is needed in the real-time classroom setting and it is up to teachers to select the activities they want to use to achieve their teaching purpose and teaching condition. The language of the instructions and the explanations of activities are simple and clear. The book can be also regarded as a student book since some space is provided for the simple questions and tasks. The author suggests any lengthy answers be written on loose-leaf paper or in journals.

One feature I particularly like in *Distant Thunder* is that the pre-reading activities arouse personal responses. This may make students feel empowered in the sense that their ideas and feelings become contributions to the exploration of the deeper meanings embedded in the short stories and poems.

There is one point of caution that I can think of: Do not overuse the activities. As mentioned before, the activities designed by the author are usually more than needed. Even though the

activities are very enlightening, they have a great deal in common, as they all tend to explore cultural themes or inner thoughts of the characters. In my opinion, just two or three such activities, in "Extending the Reading Experience" session are appropriate for most language classes. Students will probably feel bored after doing the same type of activities over and over again. For most student-centered activities, some questions require lots of thinking and re-interpretations of the text. One can say nearly all the questions are "heavy stuff". Though the author encourages more than one interpretation of the text, without the ability to unambiguously understand the language in the text, it is most likely difficult to find an appropriate answer to each question.

Another distinguishing feature of *Distant Thunder* is its use of the same format of content in each unit. I think this is a good feature, because the teacher can then easily predict what the activities should be and therefore feel more at ease to select materials to fit different purposes. The same format and activities can also be perceived as to how the author herself thinks of what and how students should think and appreciate the literary work when they read the text. However, since every coin has two sides, teachers and students may also find there is some lack of originality in this aspect of *Distant Thunder*.

A contradictory view can also find its source in the text selection of the book. The author clearly indicates why she selects works from minority Americans:

The voices of the characters in the text (and of the authors themselves)...like the distant thunder, their voices might be only faintly heard by the mainstream, ...but they presage a swell of power, energy, even fury coming its way. Although the voices remain for now on the periphery ..., they are nonetheless powerful for the reader who "hears" their rumblings (p. vii).

Coming from this perspective, most of the literary works are very revealing in the sense that they discuss the cultural conflicts, misunderstandings, and the miserable life of the minority American -- something which is frequently overlooked in the mainstream American life. This is also why the author named the book *Distant Thunder*. Students in ESL situations may find such works reflect their own experiences, allowing them to identify easily with the themes. However, personally speaking, I feel quite heavy-hearted while reading the book. Even though positive sub-themes emerge like hope, cultural understanding, and dignity, these do not make up for the overall weightiness of the literary works.

In short, this book is both heavy and enlightening. One definitely cannot adapt it to teach lower level students; in addition, much of the material may not be directly related to the life experiences of learners in foreign language settings. Thus, when used in such settings, teachers should consider adding literary texts from other sources.

Despite these drawbacks, I recommend *Distant Thunder* for teachers who want to incorporate literature to help their adult high-intermediate to advanced ESL students in developing their reading, writing, listening and speaking skills.

Reference:

Lazar, G. (1993). *Literature and language teaching: A guide for teachers and trainers*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Express.