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Advanced Foreign Language Learning: A Challenge to College Programs

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A Template for Advanced Learner Tasks: Staging Genre Reading and Cultural Literacy Through the Précis

Janet Swaffar

Abstract

This chapter illustrates how to use the précis as a template for pedagogical tasks that integrate comprehension and production practice in ways that can enable learners to identify the messages, obligatory textual moves, and language features of various genres. Exemplified with reference to both fictional and non-fictional genres that are thematically related to the novel Like Water for Chocolate, précis tasks are shown to originate in terms of specific genre features, such as distinctions between formal and informal, private and public discourses, and the language situation (sender/receiver relationship). I argue that only after identifying characteristics of the media presentation, genre conventions, and handling of stereotypes are students in a position to analyze and articulate textual information in a culturally appropriate fashion. Examples also show how students who compare key differences between various thematically-related genres can construct verifiable bases for drawing inferences about the broader cultural implications of such changes, thereby becoming competent advanced users of a second language.

Advanced learners, initially defined as college students whose language proficiency qualifies them to take courses at upper division college levels, have been the subject of little study until recent years. It was assumed that, if foreign language (FL) programs offered courses in great literature and the finer points of grammar, the needs of advanced learners would be served. In the past decade, FL departments have begun to rethink what to teach and how to teach it. More information about the processes involved in acquiring advanced language competence has become available, the profession has turned to cultural studies, and trends in linguistics have stressed the role of genre, audience, and socio-historical contexts in determining what texts say. (For an extended treatment of these issues, see Swaffar and Arens, forthcoming.)

That rethinking has commenced with a new look at language itself. For example, sociolinguists have established the degree to which language use is inseparable from textual meaning. The choice of words, the topics raised, the order in which points are addressed, the degree of directness or obliqueness with which, for example, exhortations, complaints, or eulogies occur, all involve distinct discursive and rhetorical patterns that are associated with different genres in public and private social settings. If learners are to comprehend and navigate multiple FL discourses at this level, they will, first and foremost, have to acquire the L2 defined in terms of these kinds of discursive practices.

The chapter explores pedagogies that will support learners in taking this step, a fundamental component of their developing L2 literacy. It will first specify the broad notion of discourse capacity in terms of the construct of genre. For purposes of this discussion genre is understood as oral and written rhetorical practice which enacts culturally embedded communicative situations in a highly predictable fashion, thereby creating horizons of expectations, to use Hans Robert Jauss' (1982) terminology, that enable comprehension and communication in culturally valorized ways. Using that genre basis, the paper will then present the *précis* as a template for advanced learner tasks that employs the inherent predictability of genres as a pedagogical tool to facilitate the analysis of textual information. (For additional discussion of the link between genre and the *précis*, see Crane, Liamkina, and Ryshina-Pankova, this volume.) This pedagogical use of the *précis* for enhancing L2 literacy will be exemplified with a number of genres that occur with great frequency in advanced collegiate content classes: the novel, the book review, the movie synopsis, the interview, and the film. I have chosen Laura Esquivel's novel *Like Water for Chocolate* not only because it is a popular choice for advanced classes, but also because it has enjoyed a wide reception in the United States. For that reason it has occasioned the natural occurrence of all these genres around one theme. My goal is to show how an understanding of the *précis* within its genre context can enable instructors to aid their students in uncovering a genre's diverse message patterns and the linguistic foundations of those messages. Through that cognitive and linguistic engagement students will link their existing knowledge to the content-form patterns instantiated in the L2 text—where that linking is one first way of capturing essential qualities of advanced learning and the advanced learner.

Genres and the Advanced Learner

Specifying the Challenges for Advanced Learners

An advanced learner can be variously defined, depending on the practices of departments with regard to placement and sequencing of students. In this paper I define advanced learners in a straightforward fashion as those whose language competencies enable them to enroll in non-sequenced, topic courses that a department designates as advanced or upper division. Presumably, such students have encountered multiple genres in prior course work or in other language use situations, but they are not necessarily familiar with using the structures and obligatory textual moves of genres as the basis for their reading comprehension and as models for their speaking and writing.

That is, they have had little, if any, systematic practice in recovering, replicating, and reproducing the formalisms that define genres in the target culture (if, indeed, they have such practice in their own culture). Also, they have probably not worked extensively with extended discourse—texts of more than three or four printed pages—and have rarely been asked to do more than describe or possibly contrast genres. As advanced learners, however, they will confront considerably more daunting demands.

These demands do not reside solely in the need for more vocabulary and more sophisticated use of grammatical forms. They also stem from the cognitive claims that

longer texts (whether read or verbalized by students in spoken or written form) place on student recall and their ability to synthesize information. Finally, such demands stem from pedagogical tasks associated with advanced work in comprehension and production of diverse genres: analysis of textual information and a genre's implications, and ways of interpreting its messages in a larger, socio-historical context.

In addition to linguistic challenges, these tasks may well present the advanced learner with unfamiliar cultural variables found in the genres themselves. Very possibly, the genres students have used in lower levels have not differed much from those used in North America or England: they have read, listened to, and talked or written about advertisements, nursery rhymes, songs, soap operas, fairy tales, newspaper articles, or web based texts. They have not, however, been challenged in any systematic way to confront the systems of similarity and difference that make two different cultural products out of genres that, on the surface, seem alike.

More advanced courses will, however, often focus on one or more genres that are distinctive for the culture of the language studied. That is, students read and discuss for the first time not only longer but also more complex genres. Even in Western languages with Latin alphabets these genres differ from the familiar soap operas or fairy tales with their stock characters and repertoire of predictable behaviors. Magazine articles and biographies often contain not only unfamiliar moves and sequences, but also contextual factors that contribute to inhibiting student comprehension.

Reconsidering Genres as Enacting Communication Situations

Whereas theorists on genre and textuality in the traditions of rhetoric have looked at textual utterances as narrowly linked to the formalisms of a genre type, I suggest that such direct and simple links need to be reconsidered, particularly in the teaching of FL texts. The tools to do so already exist. For example, in his essay "The Problem of Speech Genres," Bakhtin (1986) looks at the way texts represent normative and at the same time more complex forms of how individuals speak to one another. Todorov (1977) points out that literary texts in particular include representatives of different social classes, different positions vis-à-vis the messages of the text, and different degrees of formality in utterance.

Thus a diary entry or a letter has more than one particular set of characteristic formal features. To begin with, both genres may be private if their authors intend them only for their personal reading or for an intimate circle. By contrast, the diaries and letters of well-known writers, captains of industry, or politicians hardly carry that restriction. Degrees of formality, register choices, and topics reflect these kinds of decisions about the discourse situation which the text enacts. For the FL learner, in consequence, the text's *function* or *audience*, as marking the social situation, may well be the most important genre dimension to guide the outset of reading. That is, the form of a genre is not absolute, but rather has distinctive features with certain markers that vary systematically according to its place, ranging between how *public* or *private* its use is intended to be. In addition, the actual form assumed by the finished text is also modified with reference to another continuum, how *informal* or *formal* it is intended to be. Those dimensions are illustrated in the graphic on page 22, organized *in relation to the demands of the communication situation that they enact*, not simply by formal features:¹

Discourse Genres

← INFORMAL ————— FORMAL →

PRIVATE	Language Situation			PUBLIC
Written and personal	Letter Blog Montage, scrapbook	Business letter Diary (esp. publishable) Business diary	Specified sender-receiver Specified sender-generic receiver Generic sender-generic receiver	
Spoken	Conversation Ad hoc speech, monologue	Debate Oratory, homily	Face to face, equivalent Monologue, one-sided	
Print or published	Letter to the editor <i>Expository prose</i> General periodical self-published book (non-fiction) • non-fiction Fiction, other literary forms • literary genres, stressing originality within limited use contexts	Review Specialized periodical book from established press • handbook, encyclopedia • popular fiction, driven by formulae	<i>Known sender, implied reader and generic use context</i> Implied reader is general reading community of the medium involved Implied readership is member of a specialized reader community	
Electronic "publication" or broadcast forms	Sound only (radio, webcast) Call-in show Sound bytes, short reports or announcements DJ or hosted format Downloads Print and graphics mix personal website list-serve, newsgroup Broadcast TV drama comedy variety serial/soap opera Film/video/DVD/on-demand media as above, plus special features, voice-over commentary, outtakes, director's cut, speed up, edit out commercials	Interview News show Variety or news digest (Fresh Air, All Things Considered) Audio CD /finished collections Public website E-zine, other electronic forms	<i>Forms with known sender, generic and media-specific audience demographics</i> Two speakers One speaker, generic audience One uniting voice or context, with materials marshaled into that single context <i>All the subsequent forms are specific and content-driven or use-context-driven modifications of the above</i>	

Note that the scale for private genres commences with written and personal texts rather than the spoken ones, reflecting how the sender-receiver relation is configured. The sender-receiver relationship for informally written letters is not the same as that for the business letter. Specified in the personal letter, the receiver is profiled as a distinct individual. In the business letter, that receiver is impersonally generic—another agency or a customer type, rather than a discrete individual with whom the sender has a personal, nuanced relationship. Some genres blur these distinctions but they do so in consistent ways.

The electronic “blog” (the web-based diary or “web-log” site where authors express personal feelings and events in their lives) and the diary written for publication, for example, also both have generic receivers—those interested in the senders’ personal reflections, without any further personal specification. The blog, however, is typically less formal in style and register. The diary intended for possible publication or wider reading will have more formalized obligatory moves. It will frame topics (“today was one of the happiest of my life”), explain references (“because ...”) and define terms (“that opportunity/she/he has been ...”), while the blog can skip from one topic to the next without transition markers or structured entries, even to the point of including pictures or media clips. “Went skiing. What a bummer those prices are ...” The receiver of a blog must often create links to ideas and the senders’ situation or remain a reader at the purely factual level, while the reader of a published diary is initiated more systematically into understanding a text as the author reflects and elaborates on topics.

For the advanced learner, awareness of such distinctions can ease reading comprehension significantly. For the teacher, it helps pinpoint which texts will probably “work” for their learners and which may not, despite ostensibly simpler register, sentence style, and subject matter. It also explains why genres need to be examined carefully for their readability for the advanced learner. A blog entry may have simple subject-verb-object sentences on a known topic like “hobbies,” but its intent may be utterly alien to its readership. Some blogs are relatively easy, others virtually opaque reading, since reader background must fill in the gaps in style and content characteristic of this genre.

Example: The Encyclopedia Article

The need for careful differentiation within macro-genres holds true for different types of letters or any of the genres discussed in the second column of the chart. When the setting is construed as formal, readers are more likely to follow its messages and their implications. The genre of an encyclopedia article, for example, implies a reader of a generic (standard, demographically mixed and thus otherwise unprofiled) community. The writer of a typical entry must abstract the age, gender, dialect, and regional location of its receivers (or implied readers) precisely because the function of this genre is to provide for a broad audience the information it requires about a subject. That objective necessarily prescribes the text’s formal features. In other words, the sender operates under syntactic and information constraints that characterize the resultant text, because the encyclopedia article is engaged in an exchange that is seldom calculated to “rock the boat,” to challenge the status quo by introducing new knowledge.

To illustrate, the obligatory moves of such a typical encyclopedia article involve locating a specific person, work, event, or concept historically and providing an account of their origin, representative functions, and products. The entry on an author will not, typically, contain multiple voices that might challenge master narratives. While its readers might expect to find brief citations reprinted to reflect assertions about the author’s life or established reactions to his or her writing, the very definition of the medium and its communication situation renders this genre likely to conform with master narratives of the culture it serves, or at least with narratives that conform to established views about cultural achievements.

Consequently, as a genre the encyclopedia article will prove relatively predictable in register and structuring of messages. That assertion is particularly true for entries concerning subjects familiar to the reader. More important, the degree of interest or discussion arising from such an article is generally restricted because it has condensed a broad, potentially multi-faceted subject into a succinct summary.

By contrast, when the more user-neutral encyclopedia entry becomes an entry in an academic handbook for specialists in the field, it may generate greater user interest inasmuch as it is engaged in a more challenging exchange. Designed to serve a particular readership, and thus assuming a certain level of professional knowledge on the part of that readership, academic handbooks often include the pros and cons of a subject, its nuances, and controversial features and rely on the reader to take authoritative positions—albeit within the parameters of areas of disagreement within the field. Although also directed at generic receivers, handbook articles necessarily serve a specialized audience that has expectations that differ from those of the broader readership implied by comprehensive encyclopedia entries. They are engaged in different communication situations, with different degrees of publicness and thus different levels of formalisms (different obligatory moves in the information and the rhetorical organization that the readership expects).

Genres and Predictability

The success of courses designed for special purposes comes about when FL students have a horizon of expectations that parallels that of the target language audience for the texts in question, e.g., professional correspondence, technical documents, and verbal exchanges within the group. Working for these students is background knowledge that derives from their membership in that specialized reader community, such as engineers, members of the business community or the medical professions. Similarly predictable sequences occur in the bulk of essays, textbooks, and research reports written for students in specialty fields of science, social science, engineering, business, and the fine arts.

When a specialty field of interest is less public, however, the formal features of genres tend also to be less predictable. Readers of literature or TV viewers have a wide range of products from which to select and those readers' or viewers' tastes are, despite sometimes vigorous marketing efforts, not always homogeneous. Many genres, then—indeed, sometimes the richest from a standpoint of cultural information—have limited audiences. Hence the text exists in a context of limited use. This diversity among audiences often signals that the genre in question is less predictable than those written for specialty audiences.

Unpredictability is a particular characteristic of many forms of fiction and other literary genres that stress originality within limited use contexts. Original fiction, like the non-fiction that interrogates dominant expectations about a particular language community's behaviors and values, will often confound reader expectations about word choice and style as well as content and the obligatory moves with which it is presented. There is little chance that a reader of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* would ever have predicted that the hero was changed into a bug, unless the literary history is familiar.

Such works contrast with popular fiction driven by formulae (the horror story, the romance, the detective novel). Writers who produce books in series (*A is for Ashes* through *Z*) and publishing houses that specialize in formulaic series like Harlequin romances provide a specialized reader community with culture-specific versions of their individual genres. Such formulaic literature is so predictable that FL readers with relatively meager vocabulary can nonetheless begin reading it for main ideas, gradually acquiring vocabulary as they progress through the work.

To restate, while the same obligatory moves characterize classics of a particular genre (Dashiell Hammett's mysteries or Graham Greene's spy novels), the measures of predictability about plot development, register, tone, and style do not apply as fully. *The Maltese Falcon* (Hammett 1930) and *The Quiet American* (Greene 1956) are novels that made demands on reader attention by disrupting expectations of their day. They intentionally disconcert readers complacent about the power of wealth or the ethics of spying with humor or irony that reflects the author's intention to question such reader attitudes. In contrast, purely imitative or formulaic genres simply confirm their projected readers' horizon of expectation.

Small wonder that advanced learners of a foreign language can nonetheless find themselves challenged, even by genres that are relatively formulaic. Of course, audience expectations differ from one culture to the next even when genres are virtually equivalent. But only one or two relatively minor deviations can mean that the resultant predictability of the genre is easily reenacted only by native speakers of the L2 while posing significant problems for the advanced learner.

Often perceptions about an audience's cultural literacy, captured in terms of its horizons of expectation, influence the way a genre is translated from one modality or medium into another, such as a novel being turned into a movie or video version. Since the 1970s at least, novels of Magical Realism have been widely accepted in the United States, as indicated in the bestseller status of work by Carlos Fuentes, Garcia Marquez, and Isabel Allende. Despite the acceptance of this genre in written form, however, the star-studded film version of Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1993) largely excised magical dimensions of the author's novel (1985). The producers left the event structure of the story with only a few token scenes in which young Clara moves objects by telepathy. The adult Clara (Meryl Streep) depicts a protagonist as "sensitive" rather than as the clairvoyant of the novel. Apparently, producers decided that U. S. and international audiences would be discomfited or alienated by the novel's magical dimensions and their ambiguous implications. *The Milagro Beanfield Wars* of a decade earlier failed at the box office while maintaining the grandfather's ghost as a real character in the film, a factor which may well have helped the decision to downplay magic in the later Allende film.

To empower advanced readers to read genre features systematically for their formal as well as their semantic or content messages, teachers need to create reading assignments that support subsequent writing and speech situations by emphasizing such formulae in culturally appropriate ways—the formulae that constitute literacy in genres and language situations in the target cultures. As advanced learners encounter increased demands on their language competencies they need structures that keep them from becoming mired in translation efforts, the frustrations of partial comprehension, or false analogies between cultural settings.

By using textual language to articulate the ideas of the text, learners reinforce their grasp of a work's language usage and larger cultural patterns at the same time that they reflect about its implications. At the very least, tasks that have learners use facets of texts they read as the basis for personal expression afford practice in sophisticated language use—use that is patterned according to larger sets of cultural expectations rather than having been imported from the students' own cultures. As a particularly felicitous way of teaching cultural information by having students encode the interlocking relation between formal and semantic features of texts in culturally appropriate ways, I propose the précis as an assignment task.

The Précis as Cultural Encoding of a Text

To illustrate how the précis can help advanced students identify and utilize genre to encode the formal and semantic features of texts in culturally appropriate ways, I now turn to specific works. Because teaching related content by using different genres builds vocabulary while offering distinctly different applications of that vocabulary, I have selected not only a Spanish novel, but also a movie based on the novel that was written by the author, a film review, and an author interview. The novel, *Like Water for Chocolate*, by Laura Esquivel is subtitled *A Novel in Monthly Installments with Recipes, Romances, and Home Remedies*, suggesting from the outset a domestic setting for a romance genre. Published first in Spanish in 1989 and in English in 1992, the book became a success in both English and Spanish-speaking countries, was a bestseller in the United States, and was made into a movie in the same year.

Esquivel's work intersperses actual recipes and directions for making them with events in the lives of two generations of women living on a ranch near the border between the United States and Mexico: the formidable Mama Elena, her three daughters, and their loyal female servants. Set at the turn of the century, their story takes place against the background of the Mexican Revolution. Commencing with the novel, I will exemplify how teachers can use the précis to have students work with both literary and linguistic features of a text and, at the same time, uncover for themselves a variety of cultural implications.

A précis has four distinct parts, each representing a different aspect of the reading process. The first part identifies the topic or content of what is read. Part two states how the reader sees that content organized as a pattern of textual information. Part three gives two or three examples from the text in a matrix format. To this point in the précis students almost exclusively use the language of the text. Thus the first three segments constitute a replication of text language as well as textual messages. Only the organization of those messages in this succinct form conveys the reading perspective of the student. Finally, using that language, students have the basis for articulating thoughts about those patterns in part four of the précis. It is here that they explore what the chosen examples say to them—the implications and significance of the information pattern they have identified.

The realization of the précis depends on what readers want to find out, their reader perspective or point of view. Consequently, précis vary between readers. That variance can be reduced when instructors specify particular parts as assignments. Such specifications, in turn, depend on the needs of learners and the goals of the course. Advanced students unfamiliar with reading longer authentic materials need assistance in constructing précis, because their reading comprehension can break down under the processing demands of details in the text. Unfamiliar vocabulary and grammar tend to detract readers' attention from main messages (top-down processing). However, with guidelines that focus their attention they can attend to major episodic stages in narrative development of ideas. In this, the précis proves an invaluable aid.

To reiterate, the précis is not just an assignment tool. Its format can serve the instructor as a pedagogical template for introducing a text and subsequently also for discussing it. In particular, a guided précis, one for which the instructor provides some categories, can help the advanced reader "stay on track" because it focuses attention on the main story line and the text's rhetorical structure. Once completed, the précis can be the basis for both written and oral work. To maximize the précis benefits in promoting multiple literacies, class time is necessary to identify and utilize its key constituents.

Pedagogical Aspects of the Précis: The Novel

I have advocated the use of the précis as a pedagogical template for all genres. In this section I propose that the précis is particularly well suited to identifying the richness of literary texts. I hope not only to support that claim for the précis by exploring its ability to capture a variety of approaches to the reading of literary texts; I hope also to offer convincing evidence for the particular suitability of literary texts in advanced classes, inasmuch as they invite just such a multiperspectival engagement in ways that non-literary texts do not.

Introducing the Novel's Generic Characteristics

If students are to read an unedited or lightly edited version of *Like Water for Chocolate* without heavy reliance on dictionary use, then a précis for pre-assignment work as an in-class activity is generally essential. For initial in-class reading, establishing the content and patterns of information in a text provides practice at the lexicogrammatical level and strategies for identifying the macro propositions of any text. It will help students identify the obligatory moves of a given genre. To insure a learner-centered approach from the outset, readers are not told what to expect. Instead, the teacher introduces the text with initial classroom reading and reactions to that reading by focusing on what readers identify as content and the pattern of that content. In the case of a novel whose chapters commence with months of the year and recipes, a brief perusal of chapter headings suffices to suggest the importance of foodstuffs generally and not just chocolate. Then students are prepared to read the first two paragraphs of chapter 1 (January/Christmas rolls) to see how food relates to the story the text wants to tell.

The first sentence is in the present tense as one would expect with impersonal recipe directions: "Take care to chop the onion fine" (5) but the cook herself intrudes with a private observation by line two ("to keep from crying when you chop it [which is so annoying], I suggest. . .") and by the end of the paragraph the recipe itself has been forsaken for discussion of a shared family trait. Both the unnamed author and her great-aunt Tita have cried excessively when cutting onions. The first sentence of the next paragraph focuses solely on Tita and the story of her birth, childhood, and early womanhood. Students see that the initial obligatory move of the novel, introduction of characters, occurs within the context of culinary events.

Using about ten minutes of class time to elicit such initial perceptions from students, the teacher enables readers to uncover the narrative strategy they will encounter throughout the text: the links between cooking and its impact on the lives of the characters. Equally important, they will have distinguished the voice of the present narrator (the "now" and present tense voice) from the story-telling voice, the one speaking in the past tense with the full authority of apparent total recall. That voice uses the Spanish imperfect and knows what Tita thinks and feels as well as what she does and says.

Developing a Matrix for the Genre's Content

The organization of textual information reflects these grammar signals consistently throughout the novel. In a course sequence for advanced learners, using a chapter of *Like Water for Chocolate* in a course in style or composition could begin with a matrix in which students contrast usage in these two voices. That matrix would contrast present and imperfect tenses and, at the same time, highlight the shifts in narrative focus: the context of particular events or moments in Tita's life in which the recipes are embedded.

The course whose goal for advanced readers is reading comprehension of longer texts will likely want to concentrate on facilitating those processes through extensive reading. For literary works, a grasp of narrative strategy is essential because readers are not yet fully in command of the language. Knowing the major techniques the narrator uses helps

readers account for shifts in story line or context. In this way, readers can keep macro factors in mind (circumstances of Tita's birth) when trying to comprehend micro features (individual words and sentences) of the narrative. In the case of *Like Water for Chocolate*, the teacher might assign the first chapter by focusing reader attention on the text-linguistic features that forge these links. The introductory reading and discussion in class has yielded a partially completed or guided précis to ease students' reading comprehension by providing them with a macro-propositional grid for the unfolding of the story.

This introductory in-class reading will also have identified the novel's content in terms of a message pattern: Tita's life as experienced through her cooking and intense relationship to food preparation. The message system that emerges can be confirmed by the teacher as a consistent pattern employed throughout the novel: the relation of food to life events. In chapter one, the storyteller moves in stages from birth, to early childhood, to young womanhood. In each case, the culinary situation is linked to critical experiences in Tita's life. Rather than discrete point questions ("What causes Tita to be born prematurely?") or multiple choice answers that ask only for specific facts, the matrix connects facts and narrative strategies, the expositional logic casting light on authorial intent.

At the same time, the matrix section of the précis asks students to choose or closely approximate the language of the text as a reflection of how textual logic is perceived by individual readers, a first stage in appreciating the author's discursive choices as conveyers of meaning. If the instructor devises a précis to ease reading comprehension by encouraging focus on macro-propositions, novice readers of longer texts in a foreign language probably need to have the textual logic established through in-class reading reinforced with a writing assignment.

The guided précis below illustrates how the précis can function as such a writing assignment. Items in italics are provided by the instructor; Roman typeface indicates potential student work. As is always true for précis answers, any student selection that matches the logic of the text is considered accurate. Along with that information, students have been told that all columns refer to specific pages and paragraphs and that they should use actual textual language where possible. These references help students attend closely to the language use of the text, they ease teacher assessment by identifying the place where potential misreadings occur, and they facilitate exchange of ideas in subsequent class discussion. In an advanced Spanish-language class, the format would be completely in the target language.²

Table 1

Chronology in Tita's life	Culinary context	What results for Tita
Babyhood	"onions ... being chopped" 5, 2 "Nacha offered to take charge" 6, 3	<i>"brought on early labor" 5, 2</i> <i>"Tita's domain became the kitchen" 7, 2</i>
Childhood	<i>Sisters "felt playing in the kitchen was foolish and dangerous" 8, 1</i>	"Nacha became her [Tita's] playmate then" 8, 2
Mid-teens	"When Tita was finishing wrapping the next day's Christmas rolls ... Mama Elena informed them that she had agreed to Pedro's marriage to Rosaura" 14, 5	<i>"Tita felt her body fill with a wintry chill" 14, 5</i>

As a pre-interpretive task leading to a specific kind of comprehension, this précis nonetheless orients the student to some key features that characterize Esquivel's use of characteristic logics drawn from Magical Realism within the context of a romantic novel. For a teacher interested in teaching students how to do traditional text-centered or close readings, in a way associated in the United States with New Criticism and other approaches to criticism, this précis has introduced that approach as a reading strategy. Their reading of chapter one has prepared students to see how the novel interweaves the relationship between food and the human condition in aesthetically well-crafted acts of language.

Developing a Matrix for the Genre as Art

Subsequent assignments stressing this text-centered reading of *Like Water for Chocolate* as a repository of aesthetic relationships would validate this view through systematic reading, revealing that work's status as art. The reader has been prepared for the exaggerated effects of eating Tita's food—from depictions of mass fits of grief to sexual orgies. Using the implausible circumstances of Tita's birth as a starting point, a teacher might construct a Spanish-language précis designed for close reading of Magical Realism. For chapters one and two that deal with the events leading up to the marriage of Pedro, the man Tita loves, to her sister Rosaura, such a précis could look like this:

Goal: *Illustrate the semiotics of Magical Realism*

Logic: *Compare the plausible with the implausible to consider the message system that results*

Table 2

Plausible event	Implausible result
I. [Tita] "already crying as she emerged" [at birth], "washed into this world on a great tide of tears" 6, 1	"Nachá swept the residue of tears..." "enough salt to fill a ten pound sack..." 6, 1
2. "To make the cake for Pedro and Rosaura's wedding, Tita and Nachá..." 25, 1	[Rosaura eats the cake and leaves] "swept away by a raging rotting river [of other people's vomit]" 40, 3

By focusing on the scenes in the text that use techniques of Magical Realism, realized in the text as a logical pattern of plausibility and implausibility, students can more readily uncover the implications of features that critics define as part of art. After juxtaposing the event as realistically depicted and the outcome as comically exaggerated, the reader can interpret that relationship in a variety of ways, as indeed critics have done.³ One implication statement might be along the following lines:

The matrix reveals a pattern of ordinary feelings and events becoming extraordinary and powerfully felt. For the reader, the relationship between psyche and soma acquires power as the intensity of the felt experience becomes a palpable reality. At the same time, the implausible extremes are funny because they reflect and allow release for suppressed feelings, psychological reactions many readers have themselves experienced under other but similar circumstances.

If a course for advanced learners is oriented more along the lines of cultural history than literary history, the teacher could require students to assess the novel as a document of the social power relations and structures that characterize its episteme: the belief systems implied by the institutions and practices of the place and period in which it was written. A précis designed to help students interpret a text in this way would require a reader to focus on different aspects of the text, less on character development and expression, and more on how the social standards that motivate the characters are set, manifested, violated, and punished.

Developing a Matrix for the Genre's Cultural Patterns

These issues are also very much the concerns of cultural theory since poststructuralism. Most often, poststructuralism points to the gaps between what individuals believe about their lives and the forces that actually control them. In *Like Water for Chocolate*, as in many romance novels, there is a pronounced gap between the implicit and explicit social rules of a culture. In Tita's world, for example, daughters must obey their mothers unquestioningly or be cast aside. Servants live under similar constraints. Whether explicitly stated or not, what is considered allowable and what is not represents the ways in which a dominant order imposes itself on individuals—the truth or ideology behind its maxims.

Students who read *Like Water for Chocolate* can find illustrations of the obedience maxim and its consequences in every chapter of the novel. When Tita questions her mother's demand that she, the youngest daughter, remain single to care for her mother in her old age, her mother doesn't speak to her for a week. The aged servant Nacha, herself a victim of the same injunction as a young woman, dies when her surrogate child Tita loses her suitor at Mama Elena's orders.

What the little rural society described in this novel considers true or proper and what it rejects are revealed most explicitly in what actually happens to those who break the rules and those who do not.⁴ When the sister Gertrudis runs away and works in a brothel, she is not only ostracized by her mother, all traces of her existence are destroyed as well. She can return to the ranch (and to the narrative), only after her mother has died, but even then she is only a visitor. Her ties to the past have been effectively severed.

To see whether such moral, legal, and social codes are firmly established in the other characters' lives, readers might, then, look at how the text articulates the impact of rule-breaking on different groups (e.g., by class, gender, age, wealth) within a society. As a text-centered reading reveals, *Like Water for Chocolate* abounds with examples of social rules that are challenged or broken. A focus on text-internal, aesthetic structure would show how characters' value systems are built up for the reader gradually through their actions and the way they are described and articulated (as would be exemplified in précis for successive chapters). A poststructuralist reading of the text affords a different perspective by focusing on social codes and their practical consequences, as action-reaction or power patterns in the society. The poststructuralist reader, then, correlates winners and losers of social power games with espoused codes for behavior in order to establish how social rules operate under different constraints and which codes are particularly subject to revision.

A précis with a poststructuralist focus might ask readers of *Like Water for Chocolate* to look for 1) social expectations and 2) the subaltern's resistance to those expectations. The matrix would require readers to identify behaviors that other characters in the text object to or that result in profit or loss for those individuals or groups.⁵ A possible

schema for *Like Water for Chocolate* that points to the issues highlighted in poststructuralist theory might emerge along the following lines:

Table 3

Social power exercised	Resistance undertaken
Mama Elena: "you being the youngest daughter means you have to take care of me until the day I die" 10, 9	Tita wanted to know "who started this family tradition?...what happens to women who can't have children?" 11, 6
"The wedding guests were not performing a social act, they wanted to observe her suffering ..." 36, 3	"She was not meant for the loser's role. She would put on a triumphant expression." 37, 5
"With a look, Mama Elena sent Tita away to get rid of the [Pedro's] roses" 48, 4	"It was as if a strange alchemical process had dissolved her entire being in the rose petal sauce ...That was the way she entered Pedro's body ..." 52, 2

Viewed typologically (as categories of rules broken), the social strictures violated in these individual examples can be read in multiple ways. The empowered student reader can, at this point, give voice to reasonable inferences from examples selected from the text. For a post-structuralist reading, a student might infer that all of Tita's responses involve a suppressed and internalized resistance to a social injunction. This student might conclude that Tita, the victim or object of social constraints, passively resists public pressures for accommodation. She is not visibly or publicly in violation of any social expectations. Instead, she subverts these expectations privately, through transgressive thinking, thereby insulating herself from social retribution.

Using the Matrix as the Basis for Written Composition

If the advanced class were to continue through the novel using this style of matrix, students would have both the textual language and the propositional information to draw individual inferences about the larger implications of textual messages—implications about the larger cultural horizons represented in the text. Some might read their matrices for individual chapters as evidence that Tita's passivity ultimately betrays her.

They could, for example, extract the basis for this propositional logic and its exemplification from analog message systems in various chapters. Tita escapes her mother's overt tyranny, but not the covert tyranny of Pedro's physical attraction. Conditioned to subterfuge and reacting outside the pale of social acceptability, Tita is unable to recognize the exploitative parallels in the two tyrants in her life, across gender lines. She ultimately rejects her mother for indirectly killing her baby nephew but fails to hold the father, Pedro, accountable by that same standard. When Tita has a chance for marriage and a family with a man she cares for, Pedro seduces her and subverts her relationship with her prospective husband: she may have nominally escaped patriarchy, but patriarchy ultimately triumphs.

Using précis information in this way, the reader is in a position to argue that the aesthetics of the story deplore overt, publicly sanctioned sacrifices but valorize the sacrifices

arising out of illicit passion, or that there is evidence of gender inequity in the culture. The private domain takes precedence over the public sphere. If love does not conquer all, it seems to rationalize all.

With rich literary texts, relatively informal and full of multiple layers of meaning, the précis often yields as many text interpretations as it has readers—the patterns evolved suggest many layers of cultural meaning that can be interpreted, from within the horizon of expectation of either the source or target cultures. Students soon become adept in developing their own theses and arguments for individual chapters, since comprehending a longer text becomes easier for them as they proceed. Familiarity with an author's take on genre, plot line, and lexicogrammatical usage enables students to take full charge of their reading and articulate their own horizon of expectation, their prediction about a textually verifiable focus and logic for textual information.

For Esquivel's novel, the sum of chapters documented in student-generated précis would be read and discussed in many ways, yet all would be anchored in textual evidence and textual language. Student readers have the basis for making statements about gender and the role of food preparation by comparing the lives of the passionate, food-producing Tita to the inhibited sister who cannot cook and the uninhibited one who dances in the kitchen. These production exercises may take different forms, but they share the key facet of being based in the text's own representation of its culture, rather than being drawn from the students' point of view alone.

Readers who have focused on language describing the grief, joy, and passion experienced in the wake of eating Tita's food might find them exaggerated and consequently write or talk about the novel as a parody of Magical Realism. A student choosing to argue for the seriousness of these same experiences could, on the basis of similar précis documentation, view them as metaphors for the power of sensual experience. Whatever their interpretation, as long as it is grounded in the language and message systems of the text, students are engaging in an exercise in cultural literacy: exploring and/or evaluating the social and aesthetic semiotics of a text written in another language for another ethnographic community.

Using the Matrix for Comparing Genres: The Novel Turned Film

When viewing the film version of a literary work, students engage in yet another type of cultural literacy, needing to negotiate both visual and aural message systems. Even a film that seems to exhibit great fidelity to the print text necessarily alters the reader/viewers' experience in a variety of ways, once a director's vision is added to the author's words (to say nothing of the intervention by screen-writing). Alterations occur even when, as in this case, the author of the novel writes the film script. First, a film is not only a different material mode of communication, it also has its own genre characteristics and hence introduces new obligatory and optional moves into any strategies of story-telling it may have borrowed from its source text. It must, for example, emphasize dialogue over monologue, showing over telling, which implies that films tend to condense and propel episodes through visual rather than verbal means. Similarly, the camera rather than the narrative voice controls point of view, and background effects from the film score or foley, such as music, conversations, or noise, can underscore or contrast with the visual scenario.

Second, films guide the reader/viewers' point of view covertly, through these various almost independently manipulative systems of meaning, but with greater specificity than can be the case with a novel or short story. By showing concrete images of people and places, the film version restricts viewers to *its* rather than *their* construction of the story's context—it is inherently more controlling of its viewers' expectations, as film theorists like Laura Mulvey (1989) underscore (especially in her work on how the gaze

imposed by the film's point of view constructs the audience's position). Such images can reconfigure the audience's horizon of expectation through a range of options, from camera angles and color-coding to casting.

For example, because it was cast with well-known, largely Anglo-American stars such as Meryl Streep and Glenn Close, the film version of Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1993) became less South American and more international in its cultural framing. Echoes of previous roles played by these well-known actresses necessarily influence audiences' and critics' perceptions about their roles in a film about military oppression and class struggle in an unnamed South American country.

If the adapted print text belongs to the canon of "high culture," the film drawn from it often alters the original in a third way. It generally strives to popularize that work in order to reach the widest possible audience. Popularization involves using film features designed to appeal to a large potential public, whereas a consciously aesthetic novel will try to highlight the particularity of its narrative voice. In this sense, most films reflect their producers' awareness of their target audiences' capacity to accept or reject specific cultural points of view at particular points in time. Read as conscious decisions to influence and appeal to viewers' perceptions, the mass-market film version's inevitable weighting and addition or omission of elements from the print text alters the message systems of the print version.

Equally predictable special effects broaden audience appeal yet maintain the cache of the European films when foreign films are remade for a domestic audience in the United States (e.g., *La Femme Nikita*, 1990; *Wings of Desire*, 1987), or when those same foreign films are made for international distribution by known directors of, for instance, European art films (e.g., Schlöndorff's *The Ogre*, 1996, with John Malkovich and Arnim Müller-Stahl, the latter a known quantity for German audiences, while the former is an international star). Consequently, when such "foreign" films have been made not only to be viewed by native speakers of their maker's language and culture but also to reach lucrative U. S. and international audiences, they provide advanced students with excellent case studies in cross-cultural literacy

Such was not the case in *Like Water for Chocolate*, 1992, since that film was made in Mexico with a cast of actors known largely to Mexican and Central American audiences. In this case, then, only the first two types of moves characterize the adaptation from print text into film: 1) obligatory changes conditioned by the genre (visual versus print), and 2) changes in point of view for potentially different audiences. Space prohibits a detailed analysis of these shifts, but their implications for framing pedagogical tasks that explore some cultural implications of these changes can be briefly addressed.

As noted in the foregoing discussion of the novel, Esquivel's text is divided into monthly installments, each introduced with a particular recipe germane to the subsequent episode. Given its time as well as media constraints, the film reduces references to recipes and the implications of food preparation and consumption, and generally overlooks the detailed time frame in favor of a more general "time passes." Consequently, not only the recipes but also the character who plays the narrative voice of the print text, Tita's niece, appear less frequently in the film, and so the typical viewer's focus of attention is more specifically on historical events rather than on the tension between those events and their meaning as mythic stories for future generations. Even more significantly, for those readers who saw the function of recipes in the story as parodying clichés or stereotypes about Latin romance novels, this element is reconfigured through visual emphases that viewers may not see as equivalent to the descriptions in the text. The realistic depiction of kitchens does not easily translate into an audience's sense of parody.

Perhaps most striking to viewers who have read the novel will be the film's depictions of relationships between key figures. Whereas the novel describes Tita's mother as despotically matriarchal, repeatedly punishing and even viciously beating her daughter for minor offences, this woman emerges in the film merely as stern and firm rather than as manically despotic in her treatment of her youngest daughter. Viewers are more likely to read Tita's depicted verbal resistance to her mother as petulance and her frequently depicted encounters with her sister's husband as engagement in reprehensible collusive behavior.

The novel, on the other hand, makes many more references to the ways and means of Mama Elena's virtual enslavement of Tita, and hence provides legitimacy to her daughter's subterfuges because the reader sees them as essential for the young girl's psychological and physical survival. Instead of petulant and underhanded, the novel's Tita can be read as both long suffering and courageously independent.

If asked to look for contrasts between images in the novel and those depicted in the film, students can identify such differences as evidence of the filmmaker's effort to make many aesthetically exaggerated features of the book more palatable to a larger viewing public. Typically, then, a student *précis* comparing images might note that, rather than the extremes depicted in the book (spewing virtual rivers of vomit after eating the wedding cake Tita has helped prepare), the film's camera looks down at a discrete distance on the backs of guests lined up along a fence over a riverbank while a soothing narrative voice announces that these people are vomiting into that river. Whereas the novel has Tita, the presumed culprit responsible for this event, receiving a "tremendous hiding from Mama Elena" for which she needed two weeks in bed to recover (41), in the film even the mother's barely articulated verbal remonstrance is cut short by Tita's announcement that their chief cook (Tita's surrogate mother) has died.

Such shifts in depicting relationships modify not only the genre moves but also their messages. Students who compare key differences between these versions, in terms of media presentation, genre conventions, and handling of stereotypes, have verifiable bases for drawing inferences about the cultural implications of such changes. They might, for example, conclude that the novel with its critique or parody of patriarchal myths prevalent in Central and South American countries has turned into a film about a mother/daughter relationship whose archetypical conflicts are embellished with trappings of Magical Realism.

If supported by careful attention to contrasts such as those identified above, students would be able to analyze cultural positions in a sophisticated fashion. While the novel depicted a landowner's tyrannical cruelties, thereby implying a need to reassess patriarchal norms (whether embodied by a man or a woman), the film tells a bland fairy tale about the "eternally human." By directing viewer attention to mothers and their pasts, the filmmakers have shifted the novel's focus away from its more Mexican-specific messages about daughters and their futures. Instead of being introduced to a particular kind of state and cultural tradition as in the print text, the international cinema audience views a much more universal message.

Pedagogical Aspects of the *Précis*: Other Genres

As I have exemplified, literary texts offer a particularly rich environment in which the capacities of the *précis* can be fully observed. But the pedagogies associated with the *précis* also apply in other, mostly non-fictional genres, though with less variety and more predictability, e.g., in general periodicals essays, biographies, autobiographies, movie reviews, interviews. As noted earlier in the chart on p. 22 and the subsequent discussion

of genre, the degree to which non-fictional texts are public *and* formal generally renders them relatively “easier” reading (in intention and content, albeit not necessarily in grammatical form or specialized vocabulary) than those genres that, although public, are marked by originality and hence have fewer obligatory formal features. Moreover, in more recent texts their producers aspire to a broad, potentially global audience; consequently, their obligatory moves and register (formal features) are relatively predictable to audiences.

The Movie Review

Thus a movie review of *Like Water for Chocolate*, particularly one published on a web site, would be an “easy read” in comparison with the novel: the reader knows, in advance, that the review will automatically be configured as “for” or “against” (aspects of) the film. Reviews published in periodicals commonly begin with a judgmental statement that frames the subsequent synopsis of content and genre features in conjunction with assessment of the work discussed. Depending on the complexity of the review, the précis format for this genre can ask students to look for either descriptive features and reasons for accepting or rejecting them, or for the reasons for accepting or rejecting features and the judgments that result. In either case, the reader is to ascertain the reviewer’s criteria for recommending or rejecting the book or film. From the standpoint of fostering students’ cultural literacy, reviews offer excellent, fairly transparent windows into perceptions about different segments within a larger cultural community—their structures are very common across cultures, while the contents reflect specific cultures. U.S. reviews are, for example, much more likely than European ones to fault films for ethnic or gender insensitivity.

Reading several reviews with differing assessments will help students learn how to look for the basis for judgments in this relatively formal genre to identify the accepted values of the reviewer and her presumed audience. Such an exercise, then, provides practice in identifying how individual statements are made within formulaic genres in particular cultural contexts.

A website for the movie version of *Like Water for Chocolate* will predictably provide readers with an advertising variant of a review stemming from a disinterested source (see Appendix 1).⁷ The obligatory moves for such web sites, the review-promotion for *Like Water for Chocolate* made by the company advertising it, commences with a single paragraph synopsis stressing the central role of the smells and flavors of the traditional Mexican kitchen (“los olores y sabores de la cocina tradicional mexicana”) joined to the theme of eternal love (“un amor que perdurará más allá del tiempo”). The five paragraphs of comments that follow each pick up a different theme: the significance of the novel on which the film is based, the personal history of the director, the international appeal of the film, its audience appeal, and its artistic merits. Both segments are anonymous, signaling a generic rather than a personal sender of these messages. These are “everyone’s” reviews, designed to interest the maximum number of viewers for the film product.

Since the intent of the review is evident from the outset, even novice readers can note each paragraph topic (what aspect is discussed) and the particular virtues praised. They could easily create a précis whose logic revealed the review’s logic of praise and the rationale for such praise. Thus the topic of paragraph five, the aesthetic value of the film (“un éxito a nivel artístico”) is supported with phrases like “an interesting story, well executed ... an intelligent approach to commercial success” (“historia interesante, bien realizada, ... comercializada de manera inteligente”). The sum of such a system of features and inferences from all five paragraphs enables students to see how movie makers in our neighboring country to the south try to position themselves as culturally unique, both

independent of and competitive with Hollywood. This is a completely familiar formula from Hollywood marketing (one with overt and familiar obligatory moves), yet used in distinct ways by a culture outside the United States.

Interview

Other genres related to promotion are equally formulaic, but focus on different content areas such as plot, personal stories, quality, or social messages. An author or actor interview, for example, has aims similar to those of the production-sponsored appraisal of the movie, but such an interview can be somewhat more challenging to read due to its dialogic structure. The interview must be framed by the interviewer, usually with a colorful description of the subject, and then followed by questions and answers, in which the subject lives up to or counters that description. That format, the leeway afforded verbal exchanges, and the inflated claims celebrities often indulge in can become more comprehensible if the genre is read using the strategies of a *précis* format reflecting its obligatory moves.

An illustration can be taken from an interview in *La Jornada* in 1995 just after the appearance of Laura Esquivel's second novel, *La ley del amor* (*The Law of Love*) (see Appendix 2).⁸ The author is briefly introduced as a person "conscious of the energy of the universe" ("Consciente de la energía del universo"), yet as a modern woman who loves movies because they are "the artistic manifestation of our century" ("La manifestación artística de nuestro siglo"). The subsequent exchanges are grouped by the subtitles "The story of a passion" ("La historia de una pasión"), "The invasion of time" ("La invasión del tiempo"), and concluding with "Just Laura, nothing more" ("Laura, nada más"). The interviewer has set up a grid: timeless elements of the woman as artist ("energy of the universe," a metaphor tapping into certain gendered ideas of what a female-creator must be), yet engaged in this century (making a space for a modern woman, who is nonetheless anchored in traditional values—perhaps a good space for a Mexican audience to learn to listen to a younger female author who is social-critical).

Based on the subtitles, the reader has been prepared to anticipate a demanding register (a broad range of serious topics) but relatively little content of substance. Comparisons with U.S. counterpart interviews in *People Magazine* or on *Entertainment Tonight* could potentially point to differences in self-fashioning as culturally marked realizations of audience expectation. A recent U.S. interviewer would scarcely consider it appropriate to hint that a woman should be inward-centered, a "force of nature," rather than choosing to be social-critical (or not). Even without such cultural comparisons, a *précis* structured to follow the internal logic of such interviews could lead to a matrix following the structure of the genre by noting two or three "typical stereotypes imposed by the interviewer/author responses that deflect (or support) such insinuations."

Students might observe, for example, that a single reference to this most recent work turns the interview into a promotion of Laura Esquivel the person rather than Laura Esquivel's new novel. That impression is recoverable from the pattern of questions and answers in the text, with most questions in the vein of "... Do you believe you are the same Laura Esquivel who gave us *Like Water for Chocolate*?" ("... crees ser la misma Laura Esquivel que hace años nos entregó *Como agua para chocolate*?") and answers such as "No ... [that book's] immense success changed my way of life and that automatically changed me as well" (No ... Su éxito inmenso cambió por completo mis circunstancias y automáticamente yo también cambié").

Such exchanges reveal less about the novel than about the interviewer's assumptions regarding female authors: what facets of her life are worth noticing or asking about,

and what stereotypes of authorship she accepts for herself, an essentialist definition of “women-artists” that seems dated to many U.S. audiences. A matrix illustrating that tension could prepare students for a short writing assignment on the implications of the sample queries and responses students select.

Table 4

Interviewer: the intimate, personal Laura	L.E.: the outgoing, community oriented Laura
<p>“Esta relativa demora podría leerse como cierto temor” (#3) (This relative delay [i.e. the gap between your first and second book] could be read as a certain fear/timidity)</p>	<p>“... sólo disfruto de la posibilidad de tener...una relación directa con el lector.” (... I just enjoy having the possibility ... of a direct relationship with the reader)</p>
<p>“También [cambió] tu relación con la literatura?” (#6) (Has it [success] also changed your relationship to literature?)f</p>	<p>“Lo que cambió fue mi ritmo de trabajo...” (What changed was the rhythm of my work) “Me gusta hablar por teléfono,...” (I enjoy talking on the telephone)</p>
<p>“En Nueva York ... ganas algo: el anonimato” (#11) (In New York you gain something—anonymity)</p>	<p>“Las personas se acercan a mí solo porque soy otro ser humano y ya. Allá lejos me vuelvo Laura, nada más.” (The people around me [in New York] know me for myself, for my qualities as a human being. There I can simply be Laura, nothing else.)</p>

Students who have examined the interview from this perspective are poised to write about or discuss inter-cultural play in the content of this exchange. In the interview’s emphasis on Esquivel’s personality, the author’s observations about herself follow a pattern of relative enthusiasm about the vicissitudes of living in the real world that contribute tacitly to the debate about the United States and the domestic norms and values Esquivel experiences in Mexico. Typically, then, winter and early dusks depress her in New York (“en invierno, la noche llega a las cuatro de la tarde. Eso me deprime”), but the anonymity she enjoys also opens up a different style of relationship to others, one freeing her from the artificial life of the celebrity (“me encanta [el anonimato] porque me permite establecer un contacto más espontáneo y natural con otras personas”)—perversely, subsequent to her literary success, Esquivel can be “more real” in a U.S. urban environment, than she finds herself able to be when living in a Mexican community.

These contrasts provide the basis for an implication statement that assesses Esquivel’s interaction with the interviewer. Such an assignment might direct students to assess the exchange using forms of negation (what Laura denies or how she differs with the interviewer) or explore student’s interpretations of those responses with reference to their matrices. The latter task would ask students to speculate about the differences they have identified, necessitating use of the subjunctive. The resulting statement would use language generated by students, introduce subjunctive forms but at the same time,

rely heavily on the language of the text. The example below (with subjunctive forms in italics) illustrates articulation of opinion anchored in the logic of the text in question.⁹

Yo no creo que su demora *se pueda* leer como temor. Me parece que ella es una persona que quiere establecer un contacto espontáneo con otras personas. Es posible que su falta de tiempo *sea* causa de esta demora. Creo que le molesta que su entrevistadora la *trate* como mujer tímida cuyo mundo es el amor y la cocina. Por eso, es natural que *quiera* defender su vida social. Parece que tampoco le gusta que la entrevistadora *la trate* como persona especial por su éxito inmenso. Es indudable que el éxito ha cambiado su vida y su ritmo de trabajo. Pero a pesar de que su éxito lo *haya* alterado todo, ella quiere ser tratada como los otros.

I don't think her delay should be read as timidity. It seems to me that she is someone who likes spontaneous contact with other people. It is possible that her lack of time is the reason for the delay. I think it bothers her that her interviewer treats her like a timid woman whose world is love and the kitchen. Therefore, it is only natural that she would defend her social life. It seems that she also doesn't like it that her interviewer treats her in a special way because of her immense success. Doubtless, success has changed her life and her rhythm of work. But even though her success has altered everything, she wants to be treated like others.

A student who uses matrix information to write a statement like the one above has grasped that Esquivel resists the interviewer's attempts to essentialize her through inquiries that focus more on the author's private "woman's world" of love, passion, and cooking. Another such statement might refer to the way Esquivel counters with examples of her wider intellectual and social spheres: her great admiration for Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, her love not only of cooking but also of dancing, and the way she has dealt publicly with the challenges of success.

Such student insights lay the groundwork for looking at features like the typical obligatory moves of the celebrity interview. This genre addresses in turn the central problems of Esquivel's specific cultural locus: mention of role models (Mann), her human side, her struggles with fame. Has Esquivel, her readers wonder, sold out to the United States? Is she *really* still Mexican, familiar with the domestic scenes and like "normal people" described in her books, or is she something else? The author carefully erases such dichotomies, pointing out that "natural" does not need to mean "born domestic," and that "authentic" does not mean a woman who writes can't look outside her own culture for inspiration. This is a very loaded exchange—but by implication only, since no overt rejection of interviewer questions or interrogation of the author's answers occurs.

Conclusion: Realizing Different Curricular Objectives With the Précis Template

The foregoing examples have illustrated how genre literacy and cultural literacy can be developed out of a student's language ability. They also reveal the degree to which the précis, a grid for identifying a particular perspective and logical system for information available in any genre, applies as a tool for flexible pedagogical and curricular design. As

demonstrated in earlier examples, the grid section of a précis can vary with the choice of instructor and reader goals. What the advanced foreign language reader reads to find out should, ultimately, be determined by pedagogical and curricular goals. In this sense, the précis functions merely as a template for fully developing exercises that serve particular instructional goals, a foundation on which to ease reading comprehension, to argue textual implications, to have classroom discussions, to make writing assignments, and to foster critical thinking.

The Value of Theoretical Frameworks for the Advanced Learner

But the précis can also be thought of as offering more—an invitation to teachers and students to value multi-perspectival approaches in order to be able to interpret texts at ever greater depths of understanding. As I have illustrated, almost any area of cultural or literary theory can lead to systematic discovery learning. Theoretical frameworks help focus students' attention on a pattern of information that can be put to strategic use in interpreting a text, instead of generating opinions based on loosely related or isolated language facts. The logic and implication of the précis specify its interpretive goals and, consequently, the theoretical, cognitive, linguistic, and/or cultural ends desired by the instructor. When the cues for those logic and implication sections are provided, the précis ties this one specific act of cultural, cognitive, and linguistic learning into the larger goals set by the class, as reflected in the initial and concluding phases of textual analysis (the goal of the whole reading, analysis, and production unit within the class).

Note, however, that these overriding curricular goals do not restrict students' creativity. Instead, they allow them to develop, within the framework of the précis matrix, their own logical (syntactical) chains of argument and evidence to get to where the group wants to go—in this case, to get to the question of cultural stereotyping and/or Magical Realism used by Esquivel. The implications cued as the final stage should be set up adequately by the matrix's logic, in both its vertical and horizontal dimensions, as they present textual evidence (and thus cultural specifics and exact language, which is telling in other ways) for the more schematic logic proposed at the outset. The pattern of the interviewer's questions and Esquivel's responses, as exemplified earlier, enables readers to look at a text's macro-propositions and their possible interpretations in a denser logical and critical context. Since they use their own choices of examples, students can be evaluated on the basis of the consistency of *their* logics, rather than being graded by the teacher's norms. Consequently, an exercise that is carefully targeted within a class syllabus nonetheless allows much freedom of expression and preference—it becomes learner-centered without becoming an inventory of purely subjective views, a substantiated response rather than a free opinion.

When instructors control the focus and logic of a textual reading they have explicitly instrumentalized their students' readings towards the larger goals of a learning sequence. Such guided use of a précis format thus characterizes its implementation for novice readers. As a key template in a developmental sequence, beginners and intermediate students can gradually be encouraged to undertake unprompted précis as they become familiar with the template—to provide *all* sections in the full précis themselves. By the time they qualify as advanced readers in that sequence, students should be in the process of being weaned from topic and logic statements that originate with their professor. They no longer require an aide in guiding their strategies and facilitating comprehension of cultural as well as textual analysis. In other words, at some point the entire

précis for advanced students should originate with the reader. Only when they can articulate the logic and goal of their reading are advanced learners being prepared for fully independent reading and analysis, with content, linguistic, and cultural learning-to-learn strategies at least partially in place.

The Relation of Genre and Précis

Familiarity with the concept of genre remains integral to the development of a précis praxis leading to independent reading. Awareness of who has written a text and for what audience remains the framework for any use of texts and textuality as the basis for language acquisition. For a prompted précis, for example, the point might be to learn about the purposes of interviews or reviews, or about how novelists transact stereotypes to tell new stories. As a responsible template for tasks aiding learners in comprehending a text and assessing its implications, each précis must be constructed against the joint considerations of reader goals and genre. As in the interview discussed above, the précis logic suggested by the genre itself involves viewing the interviewee in terms of the generic audience position toward his or her publication. Consequently, distinguishing between what is asked and how questions are answered points to the stereotypes implied by the text (the semiotics of terms such as “force of nature” versus Esquivel’s language pointing to an independent authorial identity). This give and take is, moreover, the essence and art of the interview as commonly practiced today—its definition as a genre.

As noted earlier, the genres with less generic audiences (that is, those audiences designed to include the maximum number of users, regardless of those users’ ages, cultural or class locations, finances, and sometimes even gender) enable a wider range of reader options. Yet, to question those assumptions about how culturally specific even these most generic of genres become, one can point to the gamut of theoretical approaches which could set other instructional goals for further stages in a particular class. If the learning goal for Esquivel’s novel is aesthetic (that is, if the class is focused on the novel as a form of art), the impact of realistic elements juxtaposed with magical ones might become a key reader strategy (see Table 2, p. 29). To be sure, each novel has an implied reader (Iser 1974), but the class would be looking at the text’s story-telling logic, its language, and the like. When the reader writes a précis on Esquivel’s novel in this class context, the implication stage that completes the exercise might include references to the cultural significance implied by the patterns uncovered, but these would not be the focus of the précis as a whole.

Quite the reverse might hold for a course in cultural history or Women’s Studies. There, as illustrated above, a précis constructed along the lines of a poststructuralist approach to texts might lead readers to juxtapose the social constraints in any given situation with leading characters’ responses to those constraints or, in a similar vein, the breaking of rules and socially charged consequences or the ways in which such consequences are circumvented (see Table 3, p. 31). Or it may question whether the implied readership of the novel is male or female, rich or poor, depending on the clear preferences about who in the text is represented as “right” or “wrong” over the course of the novel (and by the novel as a whole, not by individuals in it).

In each instance, acknowledging such aspects of genre framing and the obligatory moves arising out of it can be deployed in précis strategies that lead students to identify aesthetic or cultural features. Such choices foster fulfillment of particular instructional objectives, which in turn can ease the reading task of the advanced learner. Applying the précis template to a genre of their choice enables teachers to develop exercises and exercise chains that designate the cultural literacy they want advanced students to

achieve. At the same time, this template allows those students to remain in charge of and responsible for their own work, as independent thinkers informing one another within a cohesive community of readers, sensitive to their own cultural contexts as well as to those of the texts they read.

Notes

1. This chart was developed by Katie Arens. I am indebted to her for her substantive and editorial suggestions for this paper.
2. These and all subsequent English-language citations of *Like Water for Chocolate* are drawn from the 1992 edition.
3. Sometimes referred to as text-immanent or formalist approaches, Richards' *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), characterized by Marshall as "the influential founding book for Anglo-American formalism" (1993, p. 46), describes the tenets of a literary humanism. In *The Verbal Icon*, Wimsatt argues that the critic must explicate those values by demonstrating a work's coherence in its verbal structures in order to reveal its unique aesthetic qualities (1954). These two strands, then, humanist values and their aesthetic realizations, characterize interpretive work which today is often found in feminist, psychological, and New Historicist interpretations.
4. Thus Kristine Ibsen views the novel as a postboom parody (1995) while Susan Dobrian (1996) assesses the work as a parody of popular myths about romance. Antonio Marquet (1991) turns to related reception issues in an article that looks at the basis for the novel's success. Maria Valdés (1996) looks for paradigms of social reality in the novel. Many studies consider the novel from the perspectives of gender and related cultural implications. For example, Tina Escaja (2000) as well as Georgina Whittingham and Lourdes Silva (1998), read the work as exploring the identity of the Mexican woman. Touching on similar issues from a different vantage point, Maria Angelica Álvarez (1996) sees traditional norms interrogated by subversive discourses in the novel.
5. This is the approach attributed to Foucault, in texts like *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1978). But in actual practice, poststructuralism, deconstruction, and structuralism are sometimes presented in conjunction with one another (e.g., Berman 1988; Fekete 1984; Harland 1988; Marshall 1993). For purposes of this discussion, however, focus is on the historical dimension of poststructuralism which is absent in both deconstruction and structuralism. The work of Bourdieu describes how these power structures are administered through language use (1991).
6. See, for example, Eagleton, who presents a similarly conceived Marxist analysis by arguing that "the primary terms on which Charlotte Brontë's fiction handles relationships are those of dominance and submission" (1975, p. 29).
7. The review can be found at <http://cinemexicano.mty.itesm.mx/peliculas/chocolate.html>.
8. For reasons of accessibility, I used the copy of this review available on the web through a link from <http://bome.t-online.de/bome/Andreas.Huelsm/>. This site offers pedagogical suggestions in conjunction with photographs, samples of music and transcriptions of selected scenes from the film as well as links to information relating to the filming of the book and the novel's author.
9. This example is not an actual student essay. It was written for the author by Laura Sager, based on the matrix of information she had selected from the interview, as noted in the text. I thank Ms. Sager for her help in translating and interpreting the Spanish language segments in this paper.

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Appendix 1

<http://cinemexicano.mty.itesm.mx/peliculas/chocolate.html>

Como agua para chocolate (1992)

México Color (Eastmancolor)

Lugar dentro de las 100 mejores películas del cine mexicano: 56

Sinopsis:

Historia de amor y buena comida ubicada en el México fronterizo de principios de siglo XX. Tita y Pedro ven obstaculizado su amor cuando Mamá Elena decide que Tita, su hija menor, debe quedarse soltera para cuidar de ella en su vejez. En medio de los olores y sabores de la cocina tradicional mexicana, Tita sufrirá largos años por un amor que perdurará más allá del tiempo.

Comentario:

Como agua para chocolate ha significado un fenómeno muy interesante dentro de la cultura mexicana contemporánea. La primera novela de Laura Esquivel obtuvo muy buenas críticas y un gran éxito de ventas, algo muy difícil de lograr en un país en el que la gente lee muy poco. Calificada como ejemplo del realismo mágico, la novela logró traspasar los límites de la mera curiosidad y colocarse como el libro de ficción más vendido en México en los últimos veinte años.

Su paso al cine fue producto de la buena suerte. Alfonso Arau -actor y director mexicano muy popular a principios de los setenta- se interesó inmediatamente en producir un filme basado en la novela de Esquivel. Al fin y al cabo ella no podía poner muchas objeciones, pues el interesado en filmar la historia de amor entre Tita y Pedro era su esposo. En los últimos años Arau no era muy popular en México, pues su carrera la había continuado en Hollywood, casualmente el lugar en donde hacer cine es algo de lo más común.

De esta manera llegó Como agua para chocolate el filme. Realizado con un presupuesto mucho mayor que el común para el cine mexicano, con técnicas cinematográficas hollywoodenses y con un gran sentido comercial. El resultado es un filme fiel a la novela original, excelentemente producido y, sobre todo, inteligentemente comercializado. Los diez Arieles otorgados a esta producción y el éxito internacional de la misma comprueban que Arau sabía muy bien lo que estaba haciendo.

¿Cuál fue la clave del éxito de **Como agua para chocolate**? Indiscutiblemente el filme posee muchos valores estéticos, pero esto no valdría de nada si no tuviera nada que contar. El cine es un arte que narra historias visualmente. Para que el público se interese por una película, ésta debe contar con personajes interesantes que vivan un conflicto que mantenga la atención del espectador. Una buena historia es la clave principal para un buen filme.

¿Se puede conjuntar un éxito económico con un éxito a nivel artístico? Definitivamente la respuesta es sí. Desgraciadamente el cine mexicano se ha debatido en dos polos artificialmente opuestos: el cine comercial—barato y vulgar—y el cine de arte—pretencioso y aburrido. Los cineastas mexicanos de calidad han insistido en contarnos historias que no nos interesan, ya sea porque no se comprenden, o porque no tienen elementos que apelen a nuestra más elemental atención. **Como agua para chocolate** encontró el hilo negro del cine de éxito: una historia interesante, bien realizada y, no hay que olvidarlo, comercializada de manera inteligente.

Appendix 2

Obtained through link from: <http://home.t-online.de/home/Andreas.Huelsm/>

La Jornada 13 de noviembre de 1995

Laura Esquivel, al rescate del mundo íntimo en el "siglo del desequilibrio"

Cristina Pacheco/ II y última "El siglo XX será visto como el siglo del desequilibrio. El excesivo propósito de conseguir el progreso nos desequilibró; pero creo que la gente se está dando cuenta de que por eso mismo ha llegado el momento de recuperar su mundo íntimo, su mundo sagrado", dice Laura Esquivel. Consciente de la energía del universo, atesora recuerdos, sólo teme a los resentimientos y acaricia un sueño: "Ir a Venecia de luna de miel. Hace mucho tiempo que he querido ir allá, quizá porque la novela de Thomas Mann me fascinó tanto y luego también me encantó su versión cinematográfica".

Respetuosa y amante de las palabras, Laura Esquivel es apasionada del cine, "la manifestación artística de nuestro siglo", como espectadora y también como escritora: "porque es un medio que te brinda infinidad de posibilidades. Resulta apasionante la magia de poder narrar con imágenes". Laura Esquivel recurrió a las imágenes en partes de su segunda novela: *La ley del amor*.

La historia de una pasión

Entre tu primera novela y *La ley del amor median seis años. Esta relativa demora podría leerse como cierto temor. Imposible que recuerdes cuántos ejemplares de Como agua para chocolate has autografiado, pero supongo que recordarás el momento en que lo hiciste por vez primera.*

Claro que sí: estaba nerviosísima. Al principio, cuando alguien me pedía que le autografiara mi novela me costaba mucho trabajo pensar en lo que iba a poner en la dedicatoria, me sentía comprometida a escribir algo muy especial. Ahora es distinto. He eliminado ese tono de nerviosismo y sólo disfruto de la posibilidad de tener, aunque sea momentáneamente, una relación directa con el lector.

La invasión del tiempo

Ese cambio de actitud, ¿implica también un cambio en tí o crees ser la misma Laura Esquivel que hace años nos entregó *Como agua para chocolate*?

No soy la misma, por supuesto. Cuando escribí *Como agua...* no pude siquiera imaginar lo que pasaría con la novela. Su éxito inmenso cambió por completo mis circunstancias y automáticamente yo también cambié.

Madonna dice algo muy inteligente al respecto: 'La gente siempre piensa la forma en que el éxito cambia a una persona, pero pocas veces toma en cuenta la manera en que las personas cambian frente a quien tiene el éxito'.

Siempre existe un juego de interacción del mundo hacia tí y de tí hacia el mundo. En mi caso, lo que sucedió es que de pronto me sentí completamente invadida, atosigada casi, por algo que no había planeado ni esperaba y que me desconcertó muchísimo. Quizá todo hubiera sido distinto si yo hubiese tenido un periodo de preparación; es decir, si me hubiera llegado el éxito en la cuarta o quinta novela y no en la primera. Pero no fue así y el éxito removió y lo alteró todo.

¿También tu relación con la literatura?

No. Tampoco variaron mis objetivos. Lo que cambió fue mi ritmo de trabajo. El éxito me dejó sin tiempo para mí o para trabajar con tranquilidad; me quitó la paz de que había disfrutado antes de que se publicara la novela. Entonces comencé una etapa muy difícil, donde tuve que seguir escribiendo en medio de viajes, llamadas telefónicas, entrevistas, problemas personales. Me gusta hablar por teléfono, pero si respondiera a todas las llamadas que recibo al día ya no iba a quedarme tiempo para conversar con mi hija, para meterme a la cocina, para salir de mi casa o cocinar.

Laura, nada más

¿Sigues cocinando?

Aquí ya no puedo hacerlo, por todos los compromisos que tengo. En cambio en Nueva York sí lo hago. Allá me pierdo. Puedo ir tranquilamente a los centros de abasto y comprar lo que necesito para hacer los platillos mexicanos que me gustan y de los que depende el sazón.

¿Qué significa para tí el hecho de cocinar?

Es un acto amoroso en la medida que te brinda la posibilidad de producirle placer a otra persona.

También escribir es un acto amoroso.

Es cierto, y encuentro una relación muy estrecha entre uno y otro. Lo mismo pienso acerca del baile (entre paréntesis, te diré que me encanta bailar). La escritura tiene un ritmo, un movimiento, una especie de respiración a la que es necesario integrarse. Por eso procuro mantener cierta disciplina.

Háblame de ella.

Me levanto temprano, realizo una serie de prácticas de meditación que me permitan proteger mis silencios y escucharme. Después puedo ponerme a escribir.

Lo haces a la luz del día.

Sí, y no sabes hasta qué punto influye sobre mí, sobre mi trabajo, la luz del sol. Mirar el amanecer, la luz que avanza, me llena de ánimo y de energía, me entusiasma. Si me cuesta vivir en Nueva York es porque allá, en invierno, la noche llega a las cuatro de la tarde. Eso me deprime, entre otras cosas porque siento que perdí la mitad de un día.

En Nueva York, como en otras partes del mundo donde los inviernos son severos, pierdes parte del día, pero ganas algo: el anonimato. Eso ¿te desagrada o te libera?

Me encanta porque me permite establecer un contacto más espontáneo y natural con otras personas. Ninguna se me acerca porque escribí tal o cual cosa o porque piensa que soy importante debido a que mi obra fue traducida a tales o cuales idiomas. Las personas se acercan a mí sólo porque soy otro ser humano y ya. Allá lejos me vuelvo Laura, nada más. Luego, claro, hay que volver al medio y la vida que son míos. Eso también es muy hermoso, aunque tenga que compartir mis horas de trabajo o gastar mucho tiempo en responder llamadas telefónicas.