

## 【論文】

# From Literature to Literacy: The Utilization of Literary Texts to Develop Language Skills and Cross-Cultural Awareness for English as a Second Language Students

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## 文学からリテラシーへ

- 第2外国語としての英語において、言語スキルと異文化への  
理解を会得するためにテキストに文学を取り入れる -

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Abstract: Teaching literature through content-based courses designed to integrate the four basic language proficiency skills can provide a meaningful way for Japanese university students to learn practical communicative usages through their readings. By understanding a writer's point of view from various cross-cultural perspectives, the student can learn to appreciate the many nuances of language usage within story dialogues among characters or to understand the cultural context in which language is utilized for a specific purpose.

The elements of characterization and the importance of understanding general points of views are discussed in this article by recounting certain scenes in the Pulitzer Prize Winning Memoir entitled *Angela's Ashes* (1996) which was written by the late Frank McCourt. Specific examples from this book are incorporated into this paper to show the merits of teaching literature to students from a cross-cultural perspective. In this way, students will be able to understand their own culture from the vantage point of another. Moreover, the use of great literature provides an ideal way to integrate the development of the basic four skills by engaging students to read at a critical level in English.

In discussing teaching strategies to increase the proficiency levels of ESL/EFL students learning a second language, the most meaningful delivery of the learning experience is based on the expertise of an instructor's knowledge of literary works. While the teaching philosophy and course objectives help students gain reachable learning goals, the instructor is the one who shapes and influences the student's motivation for learning English.

**Key words** : Content-Based Instruction (CBI), Active Literacy, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

## INTRODUCTION

In the era where English is used in a great variety of cross-cultural encounters, modern literary texts are valuable to raise student awareness in current communication trends (Scollen and Scollon 1995). Typically, language is often used to convey an exclusive message through writings that utilize the essential grammatical structures that make communication readable for comprehension.

Through content-based subject courses utilizing literature to convey a writer's individualized documentation of his/her reality based on common experiences, the typical ESL/EFL student may be able to learn about cross-cultural communication differences in the learning process. The key component in literature for students learning a second language is to understand the answers to the questions *what* and *how* of the text. In fact, the questions *what* and *how* are inseparable; and ultimately, promotes the key link to understanding the essence of the story-telling genre. Specifically, this line of questioning often describes a given event or a set of circumstances within a story, and the wording depends on the point of view of the writer. Accordingly, Kramersch (1993) offers a simple illustration of the importance of form in conveying this information.

In Kramersch's book, *Content and Culture in Language Teaching* (1993), there was one section that offered keen personal insights about an educational

conference with the linguist A. L. Becker who provides us with how language can be interpreted from an individualized point of view. Kramersch noted that as a preliminary opening exercise, A. L. Becker asked the participants at this conference to describe in one sentence what he was about to do in the next few minutes. He then walked up the steps to the podium and laid a book on the desk.

An interesting observation is that each participant wrote and read their sentences in various ways. In fact, this simple act of walking up to the stage was dependent on the unique perspective of the writer and his/her observation of *how* the linguist A. L. Becker moved on stage, and *what* he did after walking up the stage to the podium.

For example, some participants referred to A. L. Becker as the man. Others referred to A. L. Becker as the “linguist.” Further, some stated that the A. L. Becker “put the book on the desk” while in comparison, another wrote that he “placed the book on the podium.” In evaluating other participant’s one sentence description, there were a few who wrote A. L. Becker’s actions in the past continuous form, for example, “He was walking up the steps” instead of the past tense form, “He entered onto the stage.”

In Kramersch’s observation of A. L. Becker’s written exercise, there is much to be considered for the instructor who teaches writing in a content-based literature course. The presence of unique perspectives among students can be expected in a literature course. In fact, such writings can help to develop language in specific descriptions of daily acts or actions of an individual or group. Such usage on whether a student relies on viewing a certain act in the present continuous form or the past tense form is the exercise of grammatical function as shown in A. L. Becker’s short writing exercise through the re-telling by Kramersch.

## THE MERITS OF CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION

The rationale for content-based instruction draws from the theoretical foundation in a variety of sources, including second language acquisition research and work in the educational and cognitive psychological fields. There are multiple interpretations in the history of second-language teaching, and the word, *content* was originally defined as grammar-translation. In this case, grammar was taught as content of the target language.

Another example is the audio-lingual method which viewed *content* to be centered on grammatical structures, vocabulary, or sounds patterns presented in dialogue form. Both grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods were used primarily as a basis for teaching English as a second language in the early 1970's in America. These methods were widespread as a foundation for second language acquisition at one time.

While both were useful in teaching strategies at that given time, there was also a movement among instructors to integrate a more communicative language teaching methodology within *content* courses rather than mere skill-building exercises that were repetitive and relied mostly on the student's ability to memorize and recall words and phrases on cue. This new movement redefined *content* in order to enhance and heighten critical thinking levels among second language students by teaching academic subjects in the English language.

## WORDS IN THEIR OWN LITERARY CONTEXT

The discussion of literature courses rely on knowing the exact meaning of vocabulary words within a specialized knowledge base. For example, let's consider the different meanings for the word, "foot" in mathematics, biology, geography, furniture construction, poetry and theatre. Each context reveals several meanings from the word, "foot."

Accordingly, Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary states that the word,

foot is “the terminal part of a vertebrate leg upon which an individual stands.” Another Webster’s definition is that a foot in poetry is “the basic unit of verse meter consisting of any of various fixed combinations or groups of stressed or unstressed or long or short syllables.” Thus, each content area has standards that guide curriculum development in *how* commonly used vocabulary words are taught in class.

More recently, another definition of content-based instruction has emerged in an approach where the word, *content* has been interpreted in the use of subject matter for second language teaching purposes. For content-based second language acquisition, the general instructional goal is to prepare second language students for the types of academic tasks they will encounter at the college or university levels. This type of instructional focus is known as English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and has widespread application within the immersion programs in the United States (See Kasper 2000 and Johnson and Swain 1997).

Specifically, the immersion students in Culver City, California learn to read, to do mathematic problems, and to conduct science experiments in Spanish. In this case, the interest is for both immigrants and native speakers of the English language to embrace other languages and to become more bilingual as a result of this immersion. According to documented research by Genesse in 1987, and by Johnson and Swain in 1997, the results were amazing, in that, the children consistently performed at or above grade level on par with their monolingual peers in English language development. In fact, by the end of their elementary school years, these children were functionally bilinguals.

While the focus in learning English as a second language in Japan and the USA are quite different, there is some merit in understanding EAP (English as Academic Purposes) courses as taught in the United States. In EAP programs, students are expected to understand the language analysis from syntax, morphology and phonological skills. Spelling tests, for example, are important

if writing is a goal and when the task calls for a research paper or in writing an essay. There are familiar activities such as translation, dictation, and rote memorization as part of language analysis, and perhaps, the first order of English teaching for experienced instructors. Also, pronunciation exercises and patterned repetition of verb paradigms can be useful in understanding form from a bottoms-up approach. (Holliday 1994). Moreover, content-based second language instruction generally have a strong English for Academic Purpose (EAP) orientation, in which the main instructional goal is to prepare second language students for the types of academic tasks they will encounter during their college or university years.

Another layer in the use of English is the real and immediate communicative goals for Japanese students. This is especially true in Japan where the current movement toward communicative competency has been integrated into the policy guidelines under Mombusho (1994). The Mombusho succinctly states the objectives as follows: “To develop students’ ability to understand and to express themselves in a foreign language; to foster students’ positive attitude towards communicating in a foreign language, and to heighten their interest in language and culture, thus deepening international understanding.” (See Wada 1994, p.1).

Accordingly, Nunan asserts that not all learners are learning English for the same reasons in any given learning context. In short, learning is an individualized matter for students. Attention to the specific communicative needs of the learners is important in order to foster the necessary skills required of students to master reading fluency and writing skills. In fact, Nunan strongly suggests that every program with a goal of communicative competence should give attention to opportunities for meaningful English use. In total, there should be more opportunities for students to focus on meaning rather than only form. Nunan suggests that language should encompass more than memorizing words and its meanings, but to apply this knowledge in building on other skills such as writing

an essay, or in giving an oral presentation.

Thus, *content-based* instruction focuses on other subject matters other than learning English language, but as a means for students to understand subjects like history, music or literature in a concentrated course syllabus (Snow and Kamhi-Stein 1997). Task-based curricula designed to provide learners with opportunities to apply and use the English language for academic purposes offer the maximum usage of the language for higher levels of comprehension (Breen and Candlin 1980).

With encouragement and help from instructors in developing strategic competence, students in this type of program are able to negotiate and interpret meaning from the texts, and express themselves with more satisfaction in the learning process. Kramersch (1993) further illustrates this with the comments made by one instructor in Japan. Kusano Hubbell reported the positive reactions she received at the end of her term of teaching from several students she interviewed for her survey. (All comments were translated from Japanese by the author.)

“Completely different from any class I’ve ever had!”

“I have never expressed my own ideas in English before. Work was always to translate this section, to fill in the blanks or read. It was all passive.”

“In my career of English education from Jr. High to Cram School there were no teacher who spoke English other than to read the textbooks.”

In view of these comments made by students in Japan, Kramersch states that their opinions do matter to educators as a way of gauging relevant and updated

teaching methodologies. From these random, yet heartfelt opinions, there may be room for educators to consider other methods to employ in teaching “meaningful” English for students in Japan.

## **THE LITERACY CRISIS IN THE USA**

The emerging patterns of content-based courses for the English language arts in the past several decades in the U.S. have touched upon the thorny issues relating to adult literacy. This means that most Americans require some level of proficiency in order to contribute to society in a meaningful manner through work or practical communications in daily existence.

Back in 1987, the number of Americans who could not read and write sufficiently according to the PLUS (Project Literacy US, 1987) was more than twenty-three million. At that time, the drop-out rate at some urban schools was above 50%, thus contributing to the growing problem of illiteracy during that time period. In fact, it was determined that one-third of American adults lack the communication skills they needed to function productively in society. Based on the general findings of the PLUS program in 1987, there had been substantial changes in the United States to promote literacy in its public policy campaigns throughout the nation by integrating literature into statewide reading and writing curriculum programs from elementary school to high school levels throughout the country. These programs were widespread on a national level in US. (See current policy changes on [www.nifl.gov/lines/collections/policy/resource.html](http://www.nifl.gov/lines/collections/policy/resource.html)). Thus, this shift that had taken place due to the findings in the PLUS program prompted the United States to step-up their reading program. In other words, there was a serious overhaul that took place within most school systems. Literacy was a necessary and serious goal for educators and for learners from all age groups as well.



## **DEFINING ACTIVE LITERACY**

In this regard to “literacy” and what this means to an instructor and for students, several good working definitions may provide a better perspective on what is required for a person to be literate in a given language. One definition is that “an actively literate person is constantly thinking, learning and reflecting, and the person would take the responsibility for continued growth in personal literacy, and if the answers are not clear to that person, then there is an expectation that such answers can be sought through active levels of seeking information.” (Routman 1988). For a better understanding of what “active literacy” means, the broader definition had been defined by the Australian educator Garth Boomer in the following way:

Active literacy is the ability to inject one’s own thoughts and intentions into messages received and sent; the ability to transform and to *act* upon aspects of the world via the written word.

To function in this way, learners must go deeper than the coding and encoding of written symbols. Beneath the surface iceberg of this ability is the ability to revise, to arrange, and to deploy personal experiences and thoughts as well as the ability to imagine other people doing the same thing (Boomer 1985, p.191)

Thus, in view of the proponents for “active literacy” within our society, the need to address and increase the competency levels of students to acquire this level of literacy can be incorporated into a content-based course or within a curriculum that provides literature as a basis for language learning.

## WHY SHOULD WE TEACH LITERATURE?

Literature has been utilized as a vehicle in transporting ideas through the stories that elicit, enhance and enrich lifelong “active literacy” according to Routman in her book, *Transitions* (1988). In Routman’s research, she discovered that the highest literacy rate in the world was attributed to New Zealand. This was based on natural learning techniques in teaching literature from the late 1960’s.

Routman further cites Australia, Canada and then England were to follow New Zealand’s lead in the literacy movement in the early 1970’s. During this time period, each country had somehow embraced this literary movement toward inclusion at the elementary school levels and beyond. This same educational movement for the inclusion of literature as a basis for building literacy had become increasing apparent in the U.S. after the findings in the PLUS literacy report back in 1987. These troubling findings of the lack of literacy in the U.S. had helped to address the fundamental need through the political channels that formulated the California Reading Initiative to pass through legislation soon after the release of this 1987 report.

Specifically, this initiative helped bring in statewide funding to target the purchase of multiple notable titles in paperbacks for students in order to increase the literacy rates in California. This prompted other states to follow suit. Such states as Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona have large, active pockets of whole language/literature-based teaching to date.

Although literature may include picture books for younger and elder readers, traditional tales such as folk tales, fables, myths, fantasy, science fiction, poetry, contemporary realistic fiction, historical fiction, nonfiction informational books, and biographies are considered “literary texts.” Most certainly, the definition for literature is quite broad in scope, and a good working definition by Charlotte Huck, an American educator provides us with the following:

Literature is the imaginative shaping of life and thought into forms and structures of language. The province of literature is the human condition: life with all its feelings, thoughts and insights. The experience of literature is always two dimensional, for it involves both the book and the reader. *Children's Literature in the Elementary School* (Fourth edition), 1987, p.4.

Aiden Chambers (1985), an English educator and writer says: "Literature offers us images to think with." Chambers also provides us with a powerful and eloquent connection for the use of literature in our classrooms in *Booktalk: Occasional Writing on Literature and Children*, and thus states the following:

Literature connects us with past and present humanity. Literacy reading promotes the language development and thinking that is necessary for an educated, cultural society.

It is our job as educators to put all children in touch with excellent literature, especially those books which have the power to change us in some way. "Books that transform me as I read, books that go on working in me afterwards when they have become part of me, often refresh and reinvigorate the language."

(Chambers p. 18).

Such working definitions offer a convincing as well as poignant explanations for the incorporation of literature within curricula for students learning in a variety of settings. By exposing young readers to the world of literature, we are thereby, introducing them to the playfulness of literary language by drawing on selected instances of every day life. (Routman 1988).

Through literature, students can selectively find a phrase or a scene that evokes

an emotional connection to the written piece while deepening the learners worldview through the eyes of the characters that play out a certain part in the main story. The revelation of a character's thoughts and feelings may stir us inside with deeply-felt private emotions or general feelings of empathy or excitement from our personal experiences. This connection is what makes active listening so important in the learning process.

### **ADVANTAGES OF LITERATURE FOR STUDENTS**

The following paraphrased citations from Routman's *Transitions* are the four most valid reasons suggested in the use of literature as the mainstay of a beginning reading and writing program. Based on Routman's findings and personal teaching experiences, these serve to motivate and promote life-long learning and interest in reading. (Routman 1998, p. 20-22).

1. **Literature allows “meaning” to take root.** The student can immediately read for meaning. This type of activity starts the thinking processes for the reader in negotiating meaning from the language specific context.
2. **Literature use concentrates on the development of the reader rather than development of skills.** Students can focus their attention on reading continuous text which allows them to see themselves as competent readers from the start. Research has shown that students who spent more time on the technical decoding of language through analysis tend to be poor readers. They often miss the essential meaning behind the story.
3. **Literature promotes positive self-concepts in beginning readers.** Students who see themselves as readers from the start can develop positive images of themselves immediately, and thereby boosting self-confidence

levels in a classroom setting, and in establishing prolonged future interests in reading.

- 4. Literature promotes language development.** Generally, exposure to a variety of complex syntactical patterns, creative and figurative language, and imagery found in good literature seems to aid in the comprehension of language. Literary works are not found on popular television shows and/or general conversations, and it is important for students to be exposed to good literature in a classroom setting. In Routman's experience, vocabulary and multiple meanings are best learned and applied through the context of literary works.

In Routman's views, there were at least nine fundamental points where literature can make a difference in increasing a student's ability in mastering his/her reading and vocabulary skills, but the most important matter raised by Routman is that the philosophy of education stems from oneself. She passionately states as follows:

“...what we say to children, what we expect from them, and how we teach and conduct ourselves, reflect our beliefs. If we are to articulate our philosophy and beliefs, then we have the capacity to examine, reflect, refine, and change. We can listen to new ideas with some frame of reference to evaluate them. If our philosophy is in agreement both with our beliefs and with current educational theory and research, we can be intelligent and consistent in our decision making. Our own growing professional knowledge and philosophy elevate us to being teachers in the highest sense of the word. (Routman 1988, p 25) .

## **WHAT IS OUR TEACHING PHILOSOPHY?**

How can we come up with our own philosophy of teaching? The most important part of our search to be good instructors is to maintain dialogue with other colleagues, to keep up with new research trends, and to observe our students during our time with each of them.

Part of this philosophical search in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, takes us to the process teaching approach in America. The main philosophy in process teaching is to promote whole language in meaningful, real and relevant teaching and learning scenarios for students. In this regard, the whole language approach involves the total realm of listening, speaking, reading and writing – including spelling and handwriting as well, and where meaningful context can be described as inseparable. In sum, the English language should not be taught in little parts. This makes learning more meaningful for students, and information is received at an optimal level. (Goodman 1986).

## **USING LITERARY TEXTS TO INTEGRATE FOUR BASIC SKILLS**

The following sections have been provided to give instructors a general sense of what can be done to integrate the four skills within a given course.

### **READING SKILLS**

Using literature as content provides an ideal way to integrate the development of the four skills. As suggested by Goodman and Routman, it is necessary to encourage students to carefully examine a literary text to support their interpretations of the expressed exchange between characters in a story. This helps to promote the students' close reading of texts, a skill which will benefit their reading of other academic material with more scrutiny and understanding. Becoming engaged with a piece of literature will certainly increase students' interest in reading often and widely in English. (Day and Bamford 1998).

## **LISTENING SKILLS**

When read aloud, literature offers an excellent context for developing global listening skills. There are a multitude of audiotapes that can be utilized for an extensive listening experience. Literature read by professionals expose students to a wide variety of dialects and voice qualities.

In their book, *Once Upon a Time*, Morgan and Rinvoluceri (1983) convincingly give us insight on what happens when someone is telling a story. Essentially, it is “radically different from that during listening comprehension from a taped exercise.” The latter is always listening done from a third person perspective. Morgan and Rinvoluceri describe this kind of listening as ease-dropping behavior. In this manner, this does not greatly motivate students to catch every nuance in the spoken language other than to find the answers that are part of a dictation exercise.

On the other hand, a live storyteller or a professional taped version of a story, involves the “I-thou” listening arena whereby the listener can directly influence the “telling” of the story. This is called “active listening” and through this learning process, students can internalize the words to “mean” something to them from their own personal experiences. This is what makes live story-telling so “real” for listeners. Moreover, a good story or program can draw a circle of listeners on a weekly radio show. In this way, learning can take place simultaneously and naturally because the listeners are greatly motivated to engage in hearing to what is being said in a given context.

## **SPEAKING SKILLS**

The greatest benefit of using literature lies in its potential for developing students’ speaking skills, particularly on a sociolinguistic level and for communicative competence. (McCloskey and Stack 2000). Unlike dialogues created for traditional language learning texts, story dialogues offer a more

detailed account of the speakers' backgrounds and role relationships with other characters. In this way, story dialogues provide students with a basis for judging the appropriateness of language use.

To illustrate this, there are many poignant scenes described from a child's perspective in Frank McCourt's Pulitzer Prize winning memoir entitled *Angela's Ashes* (1996). The main character is a young, American born Francis who must deal with his Irish-born father, an alcoholic.

In a particular scene, Francis is forced to tell his father to stop drinking on the day of his younger brother, Eugene's funeral. This is the third death in the family within a very short time after moving to Ireland. Francis recounts the death of his other younger brother, Ollie (the twin of Engene) who passed away just months before, and his younger sister, Margaret who had passed away in America and thus, prompted the whole family to move to Ireland in order to forget the sadness of their initial loss. On page 105 in his searing memoir, the writer Frank McCourt's brings us this "moment of time" as told by the main character, Francis.

Dad is sitting at the back of the pub with a man who has a dirty face and hair growing out of his nose. They're not talking, but staring straight ahead and their black pints are resting on a small white coffin on the seat between them.

The man with Dad lifts his pint and takes a long swallow and when he puts his glass down there's a hollow sound in the coffin. Dad nods at me. We'll be going in a minute son, but when he goes to put his glass on the coffin after the long swallow I push it away.

That's Eugene's coffin. Ill tell Mom you put your glass on Eugene's coffin.



Now son. Now, Son.

The other man says, Will we have another pint, mister?

Dad says to me, Wait outside another few minutes, Francis.

No.

Don't be a bad boy.

No.

The other man says, By Jesus, if that was my son I'd kick his arse from here to the County Kerry. He have no right to be talkin' to his father in that manner on a sorrowful day. If a man can't have a pint the day of a funeral what's the use of livin' at all, at all.

Dad says. All right. We'll go.

In this verbal exchange between Francis and his father who was drinking with a stranger at a local pub before the funeral, the reader may be able to feel Francis' urgency in returning back to their place so that they can deliver the small casket for the dearly departed young Eugene. Moreover, Francis is quite upset about seeing the pints of glasses settled on top of the coffin that made such a hollow sound.

Eugene is gone, and the hollowness of the sound made by the glasses on top of Eugene's coffin depicted the emptiness echoing inside of young Francis' heart. At that moment, Francis was still struggling to understand his younger brother, Eugene's death. For Francis, life did not seem so fair at all, but he had to accept this uncomprehendingly sad fact. Within the background context of this dialogue in previous pages, this was the third sibling death experiences in Francis'

family life.

In this dialogue at a local pub, the purpose was to illustrate the exchange between a father and son during a difficult period in their lives. There is a subtle reference as to *why* Eugene and his other siblings may have died. Francis knew that this may be due to the father's inability to keep a steady job to feed all of them as a family, but he still loved his father nevertheless. He needed his father at this critical time in his young life for this is the only family he had. For Francis, the stranger in the pub was not family at all, and in his mind, this man's opinions did not count. This total stranger did not know what they all went through to arrive in Ireland from America.

Moreover, Francis' disobedience for his father's wishes to stay outside until he finished another pint was a breakthrough from his usual tolerance for his father's inability to feed the family, and in having them live in dire financial circumstances in America as immigrants for the first ten years of his life, and then moving back home to his parent's homeland, Ireland. This was the final straw between himself and his father's drinking habits. For Francis, he felt that it was vital to go home immediately, and to meet up with the rest of the family who were waiting patiently for the coffin. They needed this coffin to place his dead brother, Eugene for the burial, and to bring him to his final resting place this afternoon.

His father finally gave in to Francis' urgent request, and this may be due to a nagging trigger within his moral sense of consciousness and duty. Deep down in his heart, he knew that his drinking was a problem, and in losing three out of five of his children was not a easy matter to take as a man. Perhaps, there was some level of unconscious guilt in knowing that he may have contributed to their deaths by his excessive drinking bouts, and in spending what little money they had on drinks rather than food for his family. At the very least, the father knew that he had to bring this small, white coffin for his son, Eugene so that he may be able to

rest for eternity in heaven with his other twin brother, Ollie, and his younger sister, Margaret.

If he could have cried in his beer at that moment he would have done so, but his inner sorrows cannot erase hearing Francis words “that’s Eugene’s coffin” for these very same words snap him back to reality again. He had to conduct himself accordingly as the father of the family, and his responsibilities to see that his son, Eugene is respectfully buried in the white coffin that day.

Thus, the full range of social context brings to light upon the sociolinguistic exchange between a father and son as told in *Angela’s Ashes*. For educational purposes, teachers can also use literature as a basis for having students write out their dialogues from various scenes from literary text, and in assessing a student’s ability to comprehend the natural course of conversation once the social context such as the setting, place and psychological reasons for the exchange are explained for each character.

## **WRITING SKILLS**

Using literary texts for writing assignments for students to react in personal journals and formal essays to the literary texts they read in class is ideal for instructors teaching literature within content-based courses. First, it provides students with a way to express their personal interpretation of the story, thus promoting the type of aesthetic response to reading literary texts. Second, by engaging learners to make references to text in order to justify their conclusions about a literary selection, students can learn to support their opinions with relevant information. This is the most important part of academic writing for EAP (English for an Academic Purpose) according to Kramsch (1993).

Literary text is also helpful for students to understand voice and point of view in written text. In *Angela’s Ashes*, Francis is an observant, young boy who recounts the many personal experiences in dealing with his father’s struggle to

keep his alcoholism at bay. Francis views his mother's ever-present gentleness as the sustaining source for the family's togetherness. His mother almost always addressed the basic need to feed the family with meager scraps of food and bread. She even went out of way to care for her family by begging and in asking the church for help in buying shoes for her sons since they could not afford to do so after the deaths of her three other children.

Francis' voice is spoken in a narrative form and each scene is described with such clarity and detail about the times they all had in living back in Ireland which, according to Francis was "a very wet, and miserable existence." The dialogues in this story are in the present tense, thus taking us back to the exact "moment" he was feeling something or the point of view that makes an observation about the circumstances he lived under so understandable to readers. Francis, in his youth had an undying belief that, despite desperate times, he would always try to make good for the sake of his family, and to see the goodness in all at the same time. This story strikes the balance between *what* they did not have in material goods as a family, and *what* they did have in terms of a good, loving relationship with each other as individuals, especially the father when he was sober.

## **CULTURAL AWARENESS THROUGH LITERARY TEXTS**

Kramersch (1993) relates that there is advantage of utilizing literary texts in helping students develop more cross-cultural awareness. This is especially important in an era where learners communicate in English, not only with native speakers of English in Western countries, but also with other non-native speakers around the globe. In order to discuss the benefits of using literary texts to develop cultural awareness, it is useful to distinguish various dimensions of culture.

Adaskou, Britten, and Fahsi (1989) distinguish four dimensions of culture: (1) the aesthetic sense in which a language is associated with literature, film, and

music of a particular country; (2) the sociological sense in which language is linked to the customs and institutions of a country; (3) the semantic sense in which a culture's conceptual system is embodied in the language; (4) the pragmatic sense in which the cultural norms influence what language is appropriate for the given social context that the interaction calls for at that time.

Most literary texts show several dimensions of culture. For example, in *Angela's Ashes*, we are exposed to the cultural shift from being in America as immigrants in the beginning of the story, and *how* the family had transitioned back into Ireland. The character, Francis describes the local people and *how* his classmates at school had labeled Francis and his other younger brother, Malachy as being "American" even though they were Irish. Sometimes, Francis and Malachy were mocked for being different by their classmates, and even the teachers were guilty of this behavior too. Yet, there were times when the local people of that town were kind enough to realize their financial plights and struggles as a family for this was true for all of them. In fact, the story *Angela's Ashes* provided us with a balanced view of *how* they had survived those lean years.

There were other flashbacks by Francis who provided background information about the hard times they lived in New York. He would tell us about the kindness of Jews and Italian immigrants who took pity on them when Francis' mother lost her daughter, Margaret in a crib death. Even though they were not relatives, these immigrant families who lived near them, helped them out when they learned that their father did not come home with the money he earned for them since he spent it all on his need to drown his own sorrows. Francis explains *how* these same immigrant neighbors helped feed his brothers and himself during the loss of their only sister, Margaret while their mother fell into a great bout of depression and stared at the wall in her bed for days in a coma-like state.

McCourt masterfully weaves in intermittent dialogues with this Jewish family

who lived near Francis in great detail. Through the character, Francis' recounts his episodic encounters in their American apartment with American locals such as this Jewish family. The reader can get a sense of *how* this Jewish family's strict adherence to their religious faith revolved around their daily lives. Francis' retelling of the short time he spent with members of this Jewish family centered on *how* they talked among themselves. In this regard, this can be the "cultural" learning experience for most readers who were never exposed to the Jewish faith and cultural upbringing in their own personal experiences. Even though the dialogue may be different from other cultural groups, there is a sense that families from different cultural backgrounds do talk about similar things in one's daily life.

### **CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING IS THE MAINSTAY IN LITERATURE STUDIES FOR ALL STUDENTS**

With regard to Kramersch views on language and culture, she points out that knowing "culture (i.e., gaining cultural competence) does not mean that one has an obligation to behave in accordance with the conventions of that culture." Instead, Kramersch reiterates that the ultimate goal for cultural learning is not to convey information about a culture nor to promote the acquisition of culturally influenced ways of behaving, but rather to help learners see their own culture in relation to others so as to promote cross-cultural understanding.

In order to teach cross-cultural understanding to students, an instructor should be able to examine and explain the cultural assumptions present in a particular literary work and then structure activities that help students gain an understanding of those assumptions. To sum this up, the instructor can guide students to explore how cultural assumptions differ from their own, and from those characters who are portrayed in literary text. With regard to cross-cultural understanding, the final goal for instructors in teaching literary works is to explore both sides of the coin, and to let the students write and discuss the merits of both cultural

perspectives in peer-related group sessions.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

The enrichment of literature within a classroom setting provides an enjoyable aesthetic experience for ESL/EFL students while building awareness of language usage in texts that relate to the “humanity” found in common plots and subplots of universal struggles expressed in all cultures across this world. The various cultural components in the dialogue among characters within a given story can provide students with the ability to consider other points of view other than their own. There is a sense of exploring, yet a comfortable feeling of safety behind the imaginings of the words that create a world outside one’s own realm or reality. Following the characters in their struggles to seek buried treasures through their adventure-filled journeys into another world beyond what is known for us, or to find the answer to their pending doomed destiny can offer insights into the human condition unlike characters found in commercially-created movies with fast-moving special-effects or animation that offer only superficial entertainment.

Using literature as content in ESL/EFL classes has tremendous benefits, and helps to promote students’ language awareness in dialogues expressed by characters in a story. The background information about each character that lead to certain conversations about a certain event or circumstances in their lives provide students with the social context in which language is spoken in real life scenarios. The role of the instructor in teaching literary works must demonstrate the ability to separate and explain cultural assumptions found in the literary text, and to provide students with exercises that isolate the differences, yet to respect them as well. The instructor’s knowledge of and interest in the literature as well as the teaching philosophy to heighten literacy among students must be formulated in their classroom objectives. The most important aspect of teaching literature in the classrooms as content in an era of increasing globalization is that

literary texts yield the ideal context for examining cross-cultural awareness. By exploring culture and social nuances within the literary text, the students may be able to particularize the social interactions among the characters in the story, and to go beyond the mere stereotypes that generalize groups. By providing students with the opportunity to learn in this way, the global perspective becomes wider for students, thus inviting a sense of unity in the stories that tell us that these universal struggles are all part of what makes us human.

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## **WEBSITES**

NCLE/ERIC Digests and Q&A

<http://www.cal.org/ncle/DIGESTS/>

Both the U.S. National Literacy act of 1991 and the U.S. Adult Education Act of 1991, along with related policy resources, are available on-line at:

[www.nifl.gov/lines/collections/policy/resource.html](http://www.nifl.gov/lines/collections/policy/resource.html)