

# To the Teacher

**W**E love to teach. Teaching is our vocation and our avocation. It's our volunteer work and our profession. We also love to read. We love to talk to each other about what we've read. It seems we are always saying, "I read the best book!" We share the ideas, connections to our lives, and lessons we've learned from the many wonderful tales we've read.

We recognized that these passions were not mutually exclusive in a seminar we attended with Stephen Krashen in 1998, in Denver, Colorado. We had registered for the seminar because we wanted to include more reading in our Adult English Language Learners (ELL) program, to know what kind of reading to include and, also, to learn about the research. Krashen advocated "reading for pleasure" as part of a good ELL program, citing a 1994 study (Cho and Krashen) that appears to have found that Korean women who read the *Sweet Valley High* series for teens showed marked improvement in their speaking vocabularies and in spoken English in general. Of course, these were our goals too.

Studies indicate that ELL students in high-level academic settings, such as universities, show improvement on test scores and reading comprehension when provided with ample reading material and time (Mason and Krashen 1997; Lao and Krashen 2000). In the Lao and Krashen study (2000), students in a popular literature course who read for content and enjoyment, also felt that "what they had learned in the course would help them in other university courses" (Krashen 2003). Intuitively, we were sure this was true, so we vowed—somehow—to find a way to incorporate reading for pleasure into our schedule. But that wasn't all. We wanted our students to talk to each other

about what they were reading, and the idea of a class book club was born.

*Reading for pleasure* in our class involves providing students with a variety of high-interest materials to read and giving them plenty of time in class to do the reading. While the students are reading, we are also reading, often some of the same materials they are, but sometimes other books or articles.

Like Krashen, we also want to provide *comprehensible input* (understandable messages) through reading. When we introduce students to the structure of the book club, we instructors provide comprehensible input for our students by reading and pondering out loud. This thinking out loud helps students understand *how* to read (Keene and Zimmerman 1997). The book club discussions also help our students negotiate meaning, which is an important way to use their new vocabulary and share connections about the text.

If you've picked up this book, perhaps it's because you, too, are a teacher who wants to make some changes in the reading component of your curriculum. You might already know that reading is one of the best ways to improve English acquisition and would like to add more of it to your program, but you aren't sure how to do it. This book can help—it provides a model for adding more reading through implementation of a book club in your classroom.

As the co-directors and teachers of the AIMS (Authentic Immersion Multilevel Systems) Adult ELL Program of Dora Moore K–8 School, we offer beginning and multilevel classes for community members and parents of children at this Denver public school. (For the sake of clarity *we* is used in the book to indicate that we both teach the multilevel class; however, there is only one instructor teaching at any given time.) We use communicative methods to teach English through content and have developed AIMS to assist our students in acquiring English. All of our stu-

dents are literate in their own language and can use the Roman alphabet, although education levels vary widely.

After our experience with Dr. Krashen, we embarked on a search for books that would be appropriate, interesting, and enjoyable for our students. We knew that student interest in the reading material was going to be key to our students wanting to read. When we couldn't find any that we thought they could love, we decided to write our own. We wrote a story about a young Mexican immigrant woman who learns to stand on her own feet in the United States after her husband abandons her and their small child. In *Flor's Journey to Independence*, we used simple English but did not control for grammar or vocabulary; we used the language that was necessary to tell a good story and still be authentic. We gave the story to our class to read, and the students not only enjoyed it, they loved it! Although we knew they liked the story, the discussions that followed were disappointing. They were mostly retellings instead of making their own connections.

It was obvious that we needed some structure for the discussions. As you are undoubtedly aware, just asking students to "talk about it" does not work. Given our philosophy that students should help design the content of our classes, we did not want the discussions to be about topics we, the instructors, had assigned. We wanted to know how the students related to the story, what their experiences were, and why they found the book so entertaining and interesting.

Our book club model format evolved from our own experiences in developing book clubs (or discussion groups) for children, plus from many helpful books on book clubs and reading (see the Bibliography). We both had experience with Great Books and the concept of shared inquiry, where discussion leaders and participants work together, without lists of comprehension questions, to determine the importance of a story. Through Great

Books, we became familiar with the interpretive, or authentic, question, one to which the readers and the discussion leader do not know the answer, as opposed to a question that merely tests the reader's recall of actions and characters in the story. Answering an authentic question requires the use of background knowledge and inferences about the story.

For example, a question that tests recall from the fairy tale *Jack and the Beanstalk* might be: "What did Jack do when he saw that a beanstalk had grown outside his window?" The answer to this question is in the story: He climbed the beanstalk. An authentic question would be: "I wonder whether Jack climbed that beanstalk out of curiosity or fear." The answer to this question does not necessarily have a "right" answer and can start a thoughtful conversation including the follow-up question: "Why curiosity or fear?" The reader has to think not only about Jack's mother and how angry or disappointed she was with him for trading their cow for beans, but also about Jack's character, who has shown himself willing to believe in miracles (magic beans) and take chances (disobeying his mother by bringing back beans instead of gold or milk, or whatever item the story version specifies).

In addition, we had worked with children in book clubs, using the comprehension strategies identified by reading researchers to be the ones that proficient readers use (see Keene and Zimmerman 1997). In these book clubs, children make personal connections to the books and use images, predictions, questions, and inferences to help them analyze and evaluate (i.e., higher-order thinking skills) the literature they read. The children are taught each strategy discretely, so that eventually they will be synthesizing, which is changing their ideas and thinking as they read the story.

We had many long talks about how to get adult ELL students to be able to read and discuss *Flora* with the same enthusiasm

and interest that the children in our book clubs had shown, and without relying on review and comprehension questions, vocabulary exercises, or grammar lessons. We wanted authentic conversation generated by the students. Then we had the *aha* moment: We realized that we could use the same comprehension strategies that we had used to guide children's book clubs with our adult students. And it worked!

In *The Book Club Connection: Literacy Learning and Classroom Talk*, Cynthia Brock (1997) cites Makhail Bakhtian: "Meaningful situated language facilitates learning." We've seen this in our book club. It provides the environment for adult learners to use their thoughts and feelings about works of literature as a basis for meaningful communication in a second (or third, or fourth) language.

Although we do rely heavily on some basic reading techniques from books written for teachers of elementary and secondary students, it's important to note that book clubs for children have a somewhat different focus than those for adults learning English. Book clubs for children have as their primary objective "creating an instructional environment in which students would develop the necessary literary knowledge and literacy tools to participate fully and effectively in talk about text" (McMahon et al. 1997). In contrast, our adults want to acquire proficiency in English. They come to us with rich life backgrounds and varying levels of educational accomplishment. While some hold advanced degrees, others in the same class might have a sixth-grade education. Our adult students may or may not be voracious native-language readers, but all of them can read, and most are already able to make connections to text in their own languages. Others, especially those with lower levels of education, will greatly benefit from learning how to use comprehension strate-

gies to think and talk about what they read. Our main objective again, though, is to aid our students in acquiring English.

This said, the book clubs developed for children in elementary and secondary schools, with a little tweaking, provided excellent resources for us to set up a book club in our adult ELL classroom.

Our book club has three components: reading, discussion, and writing a Book Log entry. These parts, especially the discussion and Book Log portion, are described in detail in Chapters 3–9. During the discussion portion of the book club, our students negotiate meaning and engage in authentic discussion about “issues and ideas that they choose,” (Brock 1997), rather than teacher-generated topics. The discussion portion is especially important because this is where students are free to experiment with language—something that three studies of book clubs of children acquiring second languages (Raphael and Brock 1993; Goatley et al. 1995; Brock 1995) have corroborated. These studies suggest that book clubs aid language acquisition. Over the four years that we have conducted book club in our multilevel class, we have certainly found this to be true for our adult students as well.

In summary, the primary goals of our book club are:

- ◇ to provide comprehensible input, through reading and discussion, for all students.
- ◇ to improve our students’ English skills through reading.
- ◇ to give students opportunities to negotiate meaning and experiment with language.

In any book club or discussion group, the choice of books is important. You don’t need to write your own story, as we did! In fact, we use children’s books to introduce students to the book club because most of our students are also parents, and this is

an excellent way to promote parental involvement in reading. As we move through the year with the book club, our students read both fiction and non-fiction (often in the form of newspaper and magazine articles) as reading choices. But, any quality, high-interest, enjoyable fiction or non-fiction can be used to achieve the main goals of a book club.

Some of the other advantages of using the book club model as presented here are:

- ◇ Students who are parents can help improve the literacy skills of their children.
- ◇ Parents are introduced to quality children's literature.
- ◇ Through our meaningful and interesting discussions, which expose students to a variety of cultural and personal perspectives, a sense of community is created in class.
- ◇ Students share knowledge and information about important topics, from basic life skills to the news of the day.

### **A Few Notes about the Contents of This Book**

- Although we wrote this book with the adult ELL learner in mind, it can be adapted easily to Adult Basic Education (ABE) classroom situations. The same strategies will work for ABE and ELL students. ABE students will profit from learning some literacy tools useful for analysis and discussion of literature, and they will improve their reading. In fact, the same comprehension strategies work well in high school or even middle school. However, we would not recommend the use of our series of stories with these students because they were written for an adult audience.
- Although we sometimes ask our students to share, we try to have class sets of the books we use. Students read at dif-

ferent paces and often want to borrow books to take home, which we encourage if they belong to our program. Many booksellers offer discounts on class sets or multiple purchases, and local libraries often carry multiple copies. The kindergarten, first grade, and second grade teachers in our school share their multiple copies of children's books with us.

- We have used an anecdotal style in this book because we are modeling how a book club works. We present our own experiences with our students and examples of how the book club works in our program. When possible, we provide ideas for use in other types of adult programs.

*A final note:* If you read *Flor's Journey to Independence* before continuing with this book, our examples and explanations may be clearer. *Flor* may be purchased through our publisher, the University of Michigan Press. A modified (simpler version) of *Flor* is available at [www.press.umich.edu/esl/stories](http://www.press.umich.edu/esl/stories).

—*Barbara Vaille and Jennifer QuinnWilliams*