

The Role of Stories in Educational Settings

As classrooms in English-medium countries become more linguistically diverse and as the influence of English expands globally, it is essential for both teachers and students to gain a deeper understanding of the process of acquiring English and the multiple factors that shape that process. Reference books and textbooks that are designed to promote this understanding can enable teachers and learners to reflect on their experiences in meaningful ways, but these texts typically approach the subject from a theoretical or practical perspective. What is often missing in these materials is the *human story* of language teaching and learning. *Language Lessons: Stories for Teaching and Learning English* captures this human dimension through fictional works that reveal the inner thoughts and lives of language teachers and learners in a poignant and evocative way, allowing readers to engage emotionally as they reflect on the issues involved in acquiring a new language.

THE STORIES IN THIS COLLECTION

Language Lessons is a groundbreaking fiction anthology that focuses on the role language plays in the lives of those who are negotiating new cultures or identities. This collection adds an aesthetic component to our understanding of the issues involved in language teaching and learning. The writers of these narratives share a vibrant imagination, a striking gift for storytelling, a mastery of nuanced language, and a compassionate ear. The stories' imaginative elements—gripping plots, symbolic settings, idiosyncratic characters, dramatic dialogues, interior monologues, shifting time frames, overlapping perspectives, and enigmatic imagery—are crafted to captivate readers and shape readers' meaning-making. The narratives are further characterized by serendipitous circumstances, unexpected relationships, and surprising outcomes. These literary features—and the raw truths the stories reveal—draw readers in, inviting them to reflect on their own assumptions,

experiences, and emotional responses. At the same time, ironically, the very fact that the stories are imaginary, that the writers have created fictional worlds, establishes a distance that enables a more measured analysis as readers examine the characters' behaviors and motivations in the context of the circumstances surrounding their lives.

The authors of the stories in *Language Lessons* are acclaimed writers who have had first-hand experiences moving back and forth between languages and cultures and, in most cases, have learned or taught English as an additional language. Their stories introduce us to learners of English whose public and private lives are shaped by political and social realities that, in turn, shape their language-learning experiences. We see the devastating effects of enforced English-only education on Native American children in the United States; the identity-transforming impact of colonialism on young English language learners in Nigeria, New Zealand, and Hawaii; the frightening prospect of school for children of Mennonite immigrants in Canada and of Mexican migrants in the United States; the lingering consequences of oppressive regimes or war on refugees and exiles from Germany, Poland, Cuba, and Vietnam; the disruptive impact of economic instability on immigrants from China, Sicily, and the Dominican Republic; the haunting influence of murder and rape on women who have fled Guatemala and India; the isolating effects of the lack of language and literacy on individuals from Puerto Rico and the Middle East; and the unique challenges faced by learners who choose to study English as a foreign language in their home countries.

Virtually all of the main characters in *Language Lessons* have a dire need to learn English in order to escape oppression, succeed in school, find a job, advance a career, or gain entry into their new social world. As the stories reveal, their language learning processes are rarely smooth and often traumatic. In story after story, we witness how illusions and dreams are shattered by real and imagined barriers, how moments of accomplishment are undermined by incidents that bring shame and tragedy. And yet we also see how fear or loss can be offset by opportunity and achievement, how frustration and embarrassment can give way to humor and joy.

In a number of the stories, we enter classroom scenes in which we observe how teachers respond to learners' language use, or to their

silence, and we learn how classroom participants are affected in both painful and amusing ways by such interactions. As readers, we often know or understand something that the teachers and learners in these scenarios do not know or understand. This vantage point allows us to see how the characters' outward behaviors may contradict or be in conflict with their internal thoughts and feelings. In revealing such discrepancies and incongruities, the stories capture the complicated, multilayered context of language teaching and learning.

Many of the stories in *Language Lessons* provide insight not only into the classroom experience but also into the home experience. We come to understand how language affects the family, for example, when a child strives to learn language to fulfill familial expectations, when a husband uses language to limit his wife's opportunities, when aging spouses struggle together to master a new tongue. These stories represent the complex realities of students' worlds and thus serve to underline the inextricable link between home life and language acquisition.

Several stories also show the role language plays in the public sphere, for example, when characters are confronted with the challenge of using their English to attain a goal, demonstrate their achievements, or even just tell a story. As we learn of the harsh realities many characters face, we see why their goals are so difficult to achieve and why their stories are rarely told or heard.

Language Lessons spans a broad range of time periods, a feature that allows readers to understand how language learning issues have played out over time and how these issues, though arising out of particular historical circumstances, continue to resonate. The collection also represents multiple geographic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds: The characters in the stories have lived in nineteen countries and speak at least sixteen languages in addition to English. Reflecting on these varied experiences, readers can come to understand how similarities and differences across languages and cultures may influence pedagogical choices and approaches as well as the learning process itself. Across and within the stories, too, we learn how age and gender, linguistic and geographical background, social and economic positioning, legal or illegal status, and racial and religious identity play a role in students' educational lives, influencing whether, when, how, and to what extent they acquire

a new language and adopt new ways of behaving and knowing. These wide-ranging experiences and perspectives highlight the multiple and overlapping factors that shape learners' language acquisition and adaptation to new world views.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Language Lessons has four parts. The first two parts center on the experiences of children: *Colonial Encounters*, Part I, focuses on students who learn English in a colonized setting in the United States, Nigeria, New Zealand, and Hawaii, while *Childhood Transformations*, Part II, focuses on students who learn English in mainstream classrooms in Canada and the United States. The final two parts center on the experiences of adults: *Adult Education*, Part III, features students who study English in night school and college in the United States and Australia, while *Private Lessons*, Part IV, features students who learn English privately in the United States, Japan, and an unnamed country.

Each part begins with an overview of its theme. The headnote that precedes each story includes information about the author and provides clues to the context in which the story is set. Each story is followed by a series of questions that suggest possibilities for reflecting on and analyzing the story in depth, with particular attention to issues related to language teaching and learning. The Questions for Reflection and Analysis across the Stories (pages 214–16) suggest possibilities for making connections across the four parts of the book. Throughout the book, our questions are intended to be suggestive, not exhaustive. We encourage readers to generate their own questions.

Although we have divided the stories in *Language Lessons* into four parts, each of which highlights a particular theme, we do not mean for these divisions to be rigid or constricting. There are multiple ways to read the stories, generating a number of thematic possibilities. For example, stories about children can be paired with stories about adults, stories about learning in colonized settings with stories about learning in the context of immigration, or stories that focus on classroom learning with stories that take place in private settings. Each new pairing can give rise to new understandings.

USING THE BOOK IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

Language Lessons can be used in a variety of educational contexts. For example, the collection can be used in graduate and undergraduate courses in TESOL, Literacy Studies, or Language Arts, and in workshops and programs that prepare teachers or tutors to work with multilingual learners.

In our own graduate and undergraduate courses designed for prospective and practicing English language teachers and tutors, we aim to engage students in the process of reflecting on their pedagogical assumptions, expectations, and practices and on the ways these factors inform and shape one another. In these courses we assign historical, theoretical, and research-based readings that address critical issues related to language and literacy acquisition. We also assign memoirs in which the authors describe their own journeys through language. But perhaps the most compelling readings we assign are the short stories in *Language Lessons*. Through literary portrayals of learners' and teachers' inner lives in and out of school, the stories generate a deeper appreciation of the complexity of language-learning issues. The juxtaposition of these different types of texts allows students in our courses to consider the relationship between the principles derived from theory and research, on the one hand, and the unpredictable and irreducible nature of language learning and teaching, on the other. In our experience, the stories breathe life into the subject matter of the course but not only because they illuminate, complicate, or even challenge the theoretical texts. These stories resonate for readers because they render, not just explain, the multifaceted processes of teaching and learning.

As we do in all of the courses we teach, we ask students to capture their responses to the assigned reading in writing, which serves as a generative source for thinking, speculating, and reflecting. Writing in response to reading provides readers with the opportunity to formulate and extend their own analyses and interpretations. Writing about fiction, which entails close readings of texts, has an added benefit for teachers and tutors in that it leads them to observe scenes with an attention to detail and level of analysis that they can apply to their own teaching or

tutoring experiences. For example, through her comparison of a fictional and a real classroom, one tutor reflected on the failings of an adult English language class to which she was assigned. She wrote:

“The English Lesson” by Nicholasa Mohr has a passage that I felt reflected part of my tutoring experience this week:

“Mrs. Hamma selected each student who was to speak from a different part of the room, rather than in the more conventional orderly fashion of row by row, or front to back, or even alphabetical order. . . . Mrs. Hamma enjoyed catching the uncertain looks on the faces of her students. A feeling of control over the situation gave her a pleasing thrill.” (p. 120)

In class on Monday, the substitute teacher was randomly calling on the students to answer or ask different questions. I felt that because this was a very different setting and because they were not used to being screamed at during their lesson, none of them wanted to participate. The teacher was correcting them on every single part of their pronunciation and seemed to be confusing them more. A few of the students will put an e in front of the words they speak in Spanish so that their sentence would read: “I espeak Spanish.” Obviously, this is not correct, but I did not feel that they needed to be called out every time they pronounced something incorrectly. Similar to Mrs. Hamma’s class, the students would almost slouch down and look away when the teacher was looking around the room to call on someone. They did not feel comfortable speaking with her.

Such close readings of classroom scenes can lead teachers and tutors to develop productive teaching philosophies, as is evident in this response to the final scene in Lucy Honig’s “English as a Second Language,” in which a character struggles to tell a story to her classmates in English:

The teacher’s role in this scene helps the students teach themselves. She is just there for support. The students seem to know words of the new language, they just need to practice what they have learned. The teacher only intercedes when none of the students know the proper way and look

for her help. This allows the students to correct each other and learn from each other and teach each other about their cultural differences as well. This is seen when the student says “heat” when she meant “hit”; the students knew that her sentence did not make sense but they could not figure out exactly what she meant. The teacher came in the conversation and corrected them. The teacher was a listener, a watcher, and therefore a teacher because the students seemed to be learning a great deal from each other.

The short stories in *Language Lessons* allow readers to get inside the heads of English language learners in ways that are not otherwise possible, engendering new understandings and insights. In Honig’s “English as a Second Language,” we learn what a refugee from Guatemala is thinking when the mayor repeatedly interrupts her while she is telling a story at an award ceremony for adult English language learners. A close reading of this scene led one student to theorize about second language acquisition, as the following excerpt from her written response demonstrates:

It is important to focus on the positive aspects of students’ learning, not just to correct their mistakes. Students should not feel ashamed when they make mistakes, but learn from them instead. As Maria made a mistake [at the award ceremony] in Honig’s story, she “realized she had not used the past tense and felt a deep, horrible stab of shame for herself, shame for her teacher. She was a disgrace!” (p. 139). Maria should not have focused so much on her mistake as on the fact that she was able to get her main ideas across in English. It is of course easier to say this than to practice it, but if students are made comfortable while learning and learn from their mistakes, they should not be as embarrassed when making errors.

In addition to generating their own theories and principles about language teaching and learning, students in our courses regularly make connections between the stories and the scholarly and pedagogical readings we assign, for example, by using the theories or principles they

have studied to explain a character's behavior, as the following excerpt from a student's informal response shows:

I enjoyed Nicholasa Mohr's "The English Lesson," although Mrs. Hamma's character really bothered me. I felt like she was very condescending toward her students. This relates back to the articles we read by Henry Widdowson¹ and Stephanie Vandrick,² and it reminds me of the idea of the "ownership of English." Vandrick points out that when teachers feel they are doing something positive for ESL students by endowing them with the English language and with knowledge of Western academe and culture—something that the teachers have possession of—a superior attitude can cloud their work, and make it extremely difficult for them to actually help their students. However, I do not feel that one can own a language. It belongs to all who speak it. In the story, Mrs. Hamma feels as though she is the great holder of knowledge, and she is doing such a good deed by bestowing this knowledge upon her students. As described in the story, I believe even the students in the ESL class feel this. Also, her constant referrals to the "American" way of life were a frustrating thing to read. Mrs. Hamma keeps making references to democracy, and the way it is done in America, and I feel as though it is exceptionally demeaning to the students.

When students in our courses are themselves still in the process of acquiring English as an additional language, they can identify with many of the scenarios depicted and, based on their own experiences, empathize with the characters' struggles and successes and critically evaluate academic or social situations that may undercut or promote language acquisition. And precisely because these stories are carefully crafted works of fiction, when students attend to the authors' use of language and stylistic choices, their own acquisition of language is enhanced. The words on the page become the students' words as well. The following excerpt from a student's text, for example, reveals the impact that reading Bernard Malamud's "The German Refugee" had on this student's

¹Widdowson, H. (2002). The ownership of English. In V. Zamel & R. Spack (Eds.), *Enriching ESOL pedagogy: Readings with activities for engagement, reflection, and inquiry* (pp. 381–392). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

²Vandrick, S. (2002). ESL and the colonial legacy: A teacher faces her "missionary kid" past. In V. Zamel & R. Spack (Eds.), *Enriching ESOL pedagogy* (pp. 411–436).

understanding of his own process of acquiring language and literacy. The excerpt further demonstrates how Malamud's very use of language not only captures the student's experiences but also infuses his efforts to use English to express himself:

Some lines from Bernard Malamud's "The German Refugee," especially impressed me. Malamud, referring to some foreigners who have just arrived to the United States, writes:

"To many of these people, articulate as they were, the great loss was the loss of language—that they could not say what was in them to say. *You have some subtle thought and it comes out like a piece of broken bottle.* They could, of course, manage to communicate but just to communicate was frustrating." [p. 169, emphasis added by student]

These lines wonderfully express what I have felt many times during these two last semesters. In the last months I have had to write many pages, I have had to put my ideas on paper, in a language that is not my native one. It was sometimes exasperating to realize that I had no words to express a good idea—well, it also may happen when one writes in her/his own language. Some others, it was frustrating to find out that my ideas appeared expressed with much less richness or elegance than when I write in Spanish. Many "subtle thoughts" have come out like pieces of "broken bottle" in my writings of this semester, and it was frustrating. But all my work for this seminar and the other courses has helped me to mend the broken bottle. I think I write English much better than when I came to the United States. I feel myself more comfortable writing in that language than at the beginning of the semester. Finally, I have realized that I will be able to improve even more these skills if I continue reading and writing English in the future.

In all of our courses—graduate and undergraduate alike—we use students' written work as a means through which to promote further engagement and collaboration in the classroom. Not only do we read and respond to students' texts, but students often read and write responses to each other's writing. This ongoing written interchange reinforces their efforts, makes it possible for them to consider their own interpretations in light of other readers' analyses, and enables them to draw on their own authority to respond back. Given that the root word of *authority* is

author, when students exchange their writing in this way, they become authors alongside the published authors we've read. And when they share the ideas they have had the time to formulate and reflect on, class discussions are more informed, dynamic, and enriching.

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING IN RESPONSE TO THE STORIES

The following suggestions for writing are designed to elicit thoughtful responses to each story in *Language Lessons*.

- Reflect on what you find intriguing, surprising, or confusing in the story.
- Explore the associations and experiences you bring to the story.
- Respond to one or more of the questions that follow the story.
- Write double-entry notes by copying a short passage from a story that resonates for you, and write a reaction to that passage, revealing why you find the passage significant or meaningful.
- Explore the connections between the story and other stories in this book by responding to the questions that appear at the end of the book (pages 214–16).
- Consider how the story can shed light on other texts that you are familiar with and that deal with similar subject matter, including fiction, nonfiction, and visual media.
- Explain what you perceive to be the fiction writer's overall idea, vision, or belief. You might, for example, follow the clues the writer provides to show a character's motivation and emotional state. To that end, you can examine the character's inner thoughts as well as the character's interactions and conflicts with other characters and with the physical, social, cultural, political, economic, or spiritual environment. Then analyze these clues to discover why the characters behave the way they do and to interpret why things happen as they do.
- Write creatively in response to the stories. For example, you might write a letter from a character to an author, or vice versa, or from one character to another; construct an interior monologue for a character in a particular scene; create a dialogue between char-

acters either within a story or across stories; or extend a story by writing an additional scene.

- Compose an original short story about an English language learner or teacher. The story can be drawn from your imagination; your experiences as a language learner, teacher, or tutor; your observations of language classrooms; or your research about issues related to language learning. You may use a short story in *Language Lessons* as a model and set your own story in one or more relevant sites, for example, the classroom, the home, the community, or the workplace. Provide rich details, narration, and dialogue. Keep in mind that your goal is to bring a reader to a deeper understanding of the lived experience of your main character as a learner or teacher of English.