

# Introduction: Why a Book Club?

**I**MAGINE your students, sitting in small groups of five or six, earnestly and eagerly holding a discussion in English. Imagine the topics being learner-generated and the discussion natural, without formal comprehension questions or post-reading exercises. In our book club, this is not just a glorious pipe dream—it's reality. We use a specific set of comprehension strategies to provide a framework for our beginning to advanced adult ELL students in our multilevel class. Once students know how to use these strategies, we let them take it from there. The result has been increased levels of reading for pleasure, wider vocabularies, and the practice of higher-order thinking skills, such as analyzing and evaluating stories and the ideas in them, in class discussions.

We have both anecdotal and test score results that bear out our contention that book club works. After 50 hours in our class, our students typically improve between one and two levels on the standardized test, the BEST Plus, a speaking and listening test that we use to measure growth. While all aspects of the class contribute to this growth, we feel certain that the book club is an important factor. Students tell us about other books they have read once they realize how enjoyable and helpful reading in English is. We see improvement in their daily interactive journal entries, with words popping up from stories we have read. For example, after several months of our book club, one student started to bring in newspaper articles (in her native language

and English) to share during our Current Events session. She was reading these stories outside of class for enjoyment.

The books we provide for our students are high-interest pleasure books. High-interest books are important, whether you are using fiction or non-fiction, because reading in a second language is challenging, and students need to be motivated to move on in the story. If students want to know what happens next, or are fascinated by the material, they will make the extra effort required to keep reading and will learn to enjoy it. When one of our students initially resisted reading *Flor* because other students had summarized the beginning of the book for him and he thought it would be too sad, we asked him to read just one chapter. He did, but he didn't stop there. He read the entire book and then wrote us a beautiful essay on why reading in general is important and why *Flor*, specifically, is a good book. Once his interest was piqued, he couldn't put *Flor* down, even though his English was at a level that made the reading challenging for him.

Textbooks and readers with comprehension questions, grammar exercises, or vocabulary lessons may have their place in a curriculum, but they are not good choices for book clubs. Book club reading and discussions must focus on reading, on students making connections with what they are reading and generating ideas, and then discussing these ideas and connections. The emphasis is on comprehending the reading and being understood as they communicate their connections during discussion. The discussions are student-driven as opposed to text-driven. This fact helps students enjoy what they read because the focus isn't on understanding something to get a comprehension question correct, and there is less pressure to have "the right" ideas or answers. Students begin to look within themselves for ideas and begin to share them in a more natural way. Once lessons, exercises, and tests are introduced, they interfere with and

dilute this process and the discussion is no longer about issues the students care about.

Based on the research of Graves (1991) and our own experience, the use of comprehension strategies helps learners “make sense of the world around them through reading.” We’ve seen our book club help our adult students make sense of English and the new country in which they find themselves. And it all starts with reading.

## Research

As we researched books that would be appropriate, interesting, and enjoyable reading for our students, we discovered that many other educators and researchers advocate reading for pleasure in both ABE and ELL classrooms. In an article in a Department of Education report titled *Focus on Basics*, J. Storey and T. Modleski are quoted as finding that reading for pleasure “‘provides a terrain on which to dream,’ with fantasies that both reflect and counter ‘the very real problems and tensions in [people’s] lives.’” We believe this to be true for English language learners as well as native English speakers.

Perhaps the best evidence of this came from a student who wrote to us after reading *Flor*: “It describes with details for each part of the story. When I’m reading I can see in my mind all pictures in Flor’s life. Is strange, but I feel very emotion in my heart because I’m very *sensible* (sensitive) and I feel happy and sad through the chapters. Maybe I have the opportunity to know many women who are living the same situation as Flor.”

When students read for pleasure, it generates genuine discussion. They become excited about the conversations they are having and forget that English is challenging. During reading, they build on vocabulary they know and learn new vocabulary,

often even determining possible meanings of words through the contexts of the passages. During discussion, they collaborate with other students to determine bigger meanings/themes in the story. They make connections between the book, themselves, their cultures, and the world. They become “members of the club” (Krashen 2003), building community as they participate in the exclusive world of English speakers.

For example, after reading the first chapter of the second story we wrote about a Turkish woman named Senem, our multilevel students shared their own stories. Many students were very sympathetic toward one woman who said she had a child as a compromise with her husband; like Senem, she wanted to continue her busy career. Another woman said she wanted three children, but wasn’t strong enough to have more than two. This may seem like a conversation that is too personal for the classroom. Our students felt comfortable discussing it. However, only the teacher will know if her class can handle personal discussions. It’s essential that teachers reinforce that students should not talk about anything that makes them uncomfortable, and that they can leave the classroom if someone else wants to discuss something they think is too personal.

We believe promoting this sense of community and fellowship in a book club aids in lowering the “affective filter,” a block that Krashen hypothesizes keeps input from reaching Noam Chomsky’s “language acquisition device” in the brain (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen 1982). Once the affective filters of our students are lowered, they are open to comprehensible input in our multilevel and beginner classes.

As previously discussed, research strongly supports reading for pleasure as a primary tool for improving reading comprehension, grammar, and passive and active vocabularies among primary and secondary school students (Nagy, Herman, and Anderson 1985; Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding 1988; Foertsch 1992).

This includes free voluntary reading (FVR) and sustained silent reading (SSR) (where students select their own reading material and read silently for a specified portion of each day or class period). In *The Power of Reading*, Krashen reviews the results of 41 studies of FVR, in which 38 supported the idea that this practice results in improved reading comprehension. In addition to the studies cited in *To the Teacher* (see p. x), two other studies of school-aged children learning English as a foreign language showed free voluntary or shared reading to be beneficial (Elley and Mangubhai 1983; Elley 1998). The students in these studies outperformed children being taught English by traditional methods in tests of reading comprehension, vocabulary, oral language, grammar, listening comprehension, and writing.

Although there are fewer studies advocating reading for pleasure as an important component of an adult ELL curriculum, at least three studies (Gradman and Hanania 1991; Mason and Krashen 1997; Lao and Krashen 2000) support reading for pleasure. The 1991 study showed that pleasure reading resulted in learning new words without “trying to” and also increased scores on the TOEFL® (paper-and-pencil test).

The comprehension strategies in our book club model are based on research performed in the 1980s on the cognitive strategies that proficient readers use to interpret what they read. This body of research has become known as the “proficient reader research” (Keene and Zimmerman 1997). It showed that proficient readers thought about their own thinking during reading and used a consistent set of seven or eight strategies while doing this thinking (Keene and Zimmerman 1997).

A book club of teachers formed by Colorado’s Public Education Coalition (now Public Education Business Coalition, PEBC), of which Keene and Zimmerman are a part, realized that “by being metacognitive (literally to think about one’s own thinking)—we could actually deepen and enhance our comprehension of the

text.” They then set out to study teachers across the country to see if the comprehension strategies were being systematically taught in classrooms to help children become better at thinking about their reading and therefore more proficient. They did not find any programs that were teaching children *how to comprehend*, which goes beyond knowing *how to read* (i.e., *decode*).

Since then, Ellin Oliver Keene, Susan Zimmerman, and other elementary and secondary educators have developed effective methods of introducing the strategies to improve students’ comprehension. We have adapted these methodologies to our adult ELL classroom. These strategies are described in detail in Chapters 3–8.

### **Materials**

Some educators have asked us whether adult students like the children’s books. Yes! There is never as much laughter as when we are reading a funny picture book with detailed illustrations, such as *Guess What?* by Mem Fox. Whether the books are touching, sad, or educational, our students are fond of them. Who doesn’t like to be read to now and then? Our students also enjoy reading books in groups, and they often check books out to take home and read to their own children, grandchildren, nephews, and nieces. However, we do move on to adult books; we want our students to read for their own pleasure and English improvement, not just to enhance their reading experience with their children.

There are many suggestions for books to use in the ELL and ABE classroom in the chapters that follow. All the children’s books are for ages eight and under. Reading levels for other books are included in the text or the appendixes.

### **Advantages for Family Literacy**

Family literacy is an important component of many ABE and ELL programs, and a book club can help promote family literacy.

As adult learners become competent readers in English, they can begin to enjoy fiction, newspapers, magazines, and other reading materials at home, acting as reading role models for their children. It has long been proven that children who see their parents reading are better readers; the value of parents as role models for their children's reading skills cannot be overstated. As parents themselves learn to ask questions, create images, and make connections to what they read, they can assist their children in making these connections, too.

In our class, we introduce parents to good children's literature and model reading-aloud techniques, encouraging parents to read with their pre-school children to interest them early in the wonderful world of books. As an extra benefit, the parents are able to practice their English.

### **Advanced Students**

For more advanced students, particularly those in community college classes, we suggest the instructor investigate using the many high-quality books mentioned on lists for middle school and high school students that are available at local libraries. Award winners—such as recipients of the Newbury Prize (awarded to books of fiction for middle school-aged children), the Pulitzer Prize, and the American Library Association Booklist Awards—are good choices. See Appendix B for book suggestions. Internet sources with good summaries also abound (see Appendix B).

The addition of a book club to our multilevel ELL classes has been an extremely rewarding process. It is a reflection of our philosophy that reading for fun is an important component of a well-rounded English language program. The book club is definitely not a fill-in activity or an answer to, “What can I do on Monday?” Several class periods may be needed to get a book club going, and periodically it may be necessary to reteach certain concepts or strategies. The addition of the comprehension strategies makes our book club much more than a read-and-discuss activity. Our book club explicitly emphasizes the instruction of strategies on *how* to understand what is being read, skills that serve our adult ELL students in many ways outside and beyond our classroom. The book club is the best way of promoting reading for pleasure and authentic conversation among adult ELL students that we have found.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence to us that the book club is valuable to our students comes from them. In a year-end program evaluation, more than half our students mentioned reading for the book club as one of the elements they especially liked about our class. One student said of the book club: “It’s good for comprehension for life.”