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Recreational Reading Notes on a Semester Long Outside Reading Activity

During the spring semester, which just ended, I tried something new in an effort to organize outside pleasure reading assignments for the international students in my advanced reading class, in the intensive English program at Kansas State University.

At a campus-wide faculty retreat--which all our ESL faculty attended-- in early January, I learned that the K-State library was very open to teachers setting up

Reserve Desk collections, and I decided to invest two or three days searching the online catalog and combing through the stacks to compile a list which eventually numbered about 95 books, for my students to select from in completing their ongoing "recreational reading" tasks throughout the semester.



I have long believed in the value of extensive reading experiences in supporting the development of reading skills, in a first or second language. I have especially liked using fiction-reading over the years, because of the way a novel creates an imaginary world in which plot lines, landmarks, characters, statements, and vocabulary refer to each other within a context which supports understanding.

Yet there is not always a lot of room, in a content-based, skill-building ESL curriculum, for teachers to introduce an activity such as everyone reading a single novel, although in the English Language Program at K-State we seem to be moving towards a syllabus which incorporates a novel as a class text, as well as extensive opportunities for students to read shorter texts in our language lab. What to do beyond the shared text, or if there is not a full-length reader, is a challenge I have faced in every program I have known over the past 25 years.

Over time, I have also come to realize that students have their own individual tastes when it comes to reading. Some will enjoy fiction; others will put up with it, if only because it is a course requirement; and others will actively resist fiction-reading, considering it a waste of their time. Many people just prefer to read about real things, and it is unlikely

that an ESL/EFL teacher is going to change such a predisposition--and less likely still that change at the level of personal preferences and styles is even an appropriate focus for us in today's world.

The special shelf at the Reserve Desk in K-State's Hale Library for my students this semester included as much variety as I could muster, and ensured that the books my students were reading for this assignment would be things I had read myself, authors I was familiar with, or at least items which I had browsed through for a few minutes myself, on a range of topics which I thought would be interesting to the students. It is fun to pull together a reserve desk collection for a group of international students, guessing at which topics might interest them.

Here are a few of the books that ended up on the shelf that my students started sorting through in the first week of classes, as they tried to find something interesting to read.

20th Century Black American Women in Print: Essays (Reckley, R., 1991)

40 American Biographies (Todd, L.P., 1964)

All Men Are Brothers (Gandhi, M., 1960)

Adventures in Space and Time: the Story of Relativity (Kondo, H., 1966)

Barns of Kansas: A Pictorial History (Marsh, R.L., 2002)

The Book of Soba (Udesky, J., 1988)

Cancer and the Family Cycle: A Practitioner's Guide (Veach, T., Nicholas, D.R., Barton, M.A., 2002)

Cosmos (Sagan, C., 1980)

The Cowboy Encyclopedia: the Old and the New West from the Open Range to the Dude Ranch (Grant, B., 1951)

The Desert Camel: Comparative Physiological Adaptation (Yagil, R., 1985)

Gloria Steinem: A Biography (Marcello, P.C., 2004)

Hezbollah: the Changing Face of Terrorism (Harik, J.P., 2004)

History of the World Cup (Glanville, B., 1984)--note: this book was added to the collection at mid-semester, when a student requested books about soccer.

Igor Sikorsky, the Russian Years (Finne, K.N., 1987)

Imagining the Course of Life: Self-Transformation in a Shan Buddhist Community (Eberhardt, N., 2006)

Introduction to Solar Energy for Scientists and Engineers (Wieder, S., 1982)

Magister Ludi, translated by Mervyn Savill (Hesse, 1949)

The Migrant Workers and Cesar Chavez (Young, J., 1919)

The Old Man and the Sea (Hemingway, 1952)

Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House (Barber, J.D., 1985)

A Random Walk Down Wall Street: The Time-Tested Strategy for Successful Investing (Malkiel, B.G., 2003)

Rice: A Cookbook (Scott, M.L., Scott, J.D., 1989)

Siddhartha (Hesse, H., 1957)--this book was added from my personal collection when a student requested more fiction books.

The Snows of Kilimanjaro and Other Stories (Hemingway, E., 1961)

Things Fall Apart (Achebe, C., 1959)

Veggie Revolution: Smart Choices for a Healthy Body and a Healthy Planet (Kneidel, S., Kneidel, S.K., 2005)

A Voice from the Holocaust (Soumerai, E.N., Schulz, C.D., 2003)

Wright Brothers: A Brief Account of Their Work, 1899-1911 (Gibbs-Smith, C.H., 1963)

[Click here to access the entire list](#)

This short list hopefully will give a flavor of the complete set of 98 books which were on my reserve shelf in the library this semester. Initially the

collection was just about 75 or 80 books, but twice during the semester I responded to requests from students for additional options: first, a call for more novels; next, a query for books about soccer.

Students were asked to pick books from this special shelf and read at least 30 pages every two weeks. If, after reading at least five pages in a book, a student decided he or she wasn't interested in it anymore, those pages could be counted towards the 30-page total and the student would choose a different book to continue reading in. By week four, about 25 percent of the students had locked into a particular book and were determined to see that one through to the end. Others experimented throughout the semester, reading no more than 20 or 30 pages in one book before switching to another. Several students read beyond the assigned numbers of pages, and two of these actually went on to finish three or four complete books before the semester was over.

Every two weeks, students turned in two-page-long "recreational reading reports," typed, double-spaced, with a unique title and, at the end, a "Reading Data" section, consisting of an APA style bibliographic entry for the book(s) they had been reading, and specifying which pages they had read in each.

Twice in the first half of the semester, I gave students a sample report, by me about my own recreational reading experiences. The first one was a little negative, because I was struggling to get traction in W.G. Sebald's "Vertigo" (which my friend Dan Castelaz had recommended) and also was just starting to make headway in another book, Joy Williams's "The Quick and the Dead" (which I had promised a colleague I would read, but which was a little too self-conscious and contrived for my tastes). I noticed that I was getting quite a few reports from students criticizing the books they had chosen, and I wondered if my example was influencing them, so I wrote another one, much more upbeat, about how I had discovered I liked the Joy Williams book by the time I finished it, and how I was now going to reread one of my old favorites, Hardy's "The Mayor of Casterbridge." I think this additional sample report may have had a positive influence on the way the rest of the semester went, but you never really know.

When I teach students about logical conversation flowcharts, I find that my own awareness of the form of my exchanges with friends and colleagues is enhanced in the process; the recreational reading activity this semester also prompted me to do more pleasure reading myself, and I am now just about finished re-reading Vonnegut's "Hocus Pocus," which I picked up in the library a few days after he passed away last

month. That will make three novels I have read this semester, which for me is a significant increase. Next up for me is a re-reading of Hesse's "The Glass Bead Game," which I last read about 15 years ago. After that--and after reading my assignments for this summer's courses in my doctoral program--I will probably re-read (after 25 years since the first reading) Henry IV Parts One and Two, but that is because the transformation in Henry, from young ruffian to responsible leader, interests me in the context of my research in the area of transition planning for high school students. Another book I may look at soon is "My Name is Asher Lev," by Chaim Potok, which I was fortunately made to read in my sophomore year of high school, with Mrs. Cross, at Great Bend Senior High, about 33 years ago.

I think that one key to what appears to be the "success" of the recreational reading activity in my advanced ESL reading class this spring was the format for the biweekly reading reports. I did not want to see just summaries of what the students had read; instead, there would ideally be a balance between brief summaries of key points and, more importantly, a personal description of each individual's reading experience from those two weeks. Some students found events in their own backgrounds that helped them relate to what they were reading. Others sought to apply what they were reading to help them to better understand current events in their lives. A number of students described what time of day and what settings were the best for doing this extra reading.

Students got points simply for adhering to the expected format: two pages, not one or three; a complete "reading data" section; a nice balance between summarizing and describing their reading experience itself; a unique title for the report (not just the book title); and things like that. I marked up their papers, correcting usage errors, but these did not count against them. I believe that 95-99 percent of the reports were original, and indeed I would like to hope that 100 percent were. I think that is possible, because the way in which the assignment was crafted made it nearly "plagiarism-proof," since personal experience was as important as conveying information from the books themselves.

Shortly before spring break, in mid March, I asked students to give me some feedback on the recreational reading process so far, and here are some of their replies:

I have noticed some changes during reading every time I read another subject.

I think the biggest effect on my English reading is that I can read the newspaper more fluently now.

I think that it helps me a lot because I can open my mind.

My reading skill is improving...I become familiar with new words, skimming, scanning the newspaper becomes faster, which helps me to read more things.

Yes, I sometimes know all the words, but I need to look over the sentence again to understand it. Yet, I think I don't have this habit right now. It's vanished. Another thing, I'm getting faster. At the first report, I finished 10 pages in two hours. And in the last report, I finished 35 pages in three hours, which is better.

I have noticed that I can read faster and understand the content, which I couldn't before.

I have learned many words from it and a lot of new information for me, and that is a very good thing.

Now I almost don't check the dictionary. I just get the main idea of the sentence. That's helpful.

I think I am able to read faster than before this class. In addition, now I can go through the text without stopping with the dictionary to look for new vocabulary. Therefore, my ability to know the meaning from the context has increased.

I actually have a weekly assignment that I need to read a whole chapter for one of my university classes, so I think somehow the recreational reading makes me at least feel O.K. to do my assignment without having a lot of difficulties.

After spring break, I had scheduled a training/tour of the campus library, with an intern (M.S. in library science) near the end of her internship at K-State, whose special interest is instruction. She gave the students a nice introduction to the online catalog and database search features of Hale Library, and they practiced finding items of interest, before going on a walking tour of different sections and floors, and finding some of the books their searches had generated.

After this "tour," I told students that they no longer had to limit themselves to books included in our special Reserve Desk collection. They were now free to follow wherever their interests carried them,

anywhere in the library and beyond. Some students continued using our reserve shelf, but it was exciting to see how creatively and sensibly a number of the students utilized their "new freedom" to find books that really matched their interests well.

At the same time these students were working through their recreational reading assignments throughout the semester, and completing tasks for a variety of university courses, we were also making considerable progress in our assigned text, "Reader's Choice," split edition book 2 (Sandra Silberstein, Barbara K. Dobson, Mark A. Clarke, 2002), and another reader for timed reading exercises. I have enjoyed Reader's Choice this academic year (we used book 1 in the fall semester) and feel very comfortable moving sequentially through its units of instruction.

Recreational reading was outside of class time, and was required of the students in my section of advanced reading only. I estimate that 70-75 percent of the 18 students complied with this extra assignment and, of these, perhaps 10 or 11 students told me at the end of the semester that it had helped them become better readers, influencing their work in their university courses as well. From their semester-end reports and comments, with many students finishing complete books or second or third books, I believe that four or five students might maintain a pleasure-reading habit beyond this course and into the future.

As I shook hands with many of my students in the reading class after our last session, I felt that something special had happened for us this spring. I wanted to write down these few notes while the experience was still fresh in my memory.

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