

# THE LEAVES, THE TREES, THE FOREST: LANGUAGE, TEXT, AND CULTURE IN *THE JOY LUCK CLUB*

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## ABSTRACT

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* is a model text for ESOL students. This paper will discuss how *The Joy Luck Club* contains language, text, and culture in a potent mixture that is relevant for any ESL or EFL student, especially in the ever-expanding international community of English learners. After introducing *The Joy Luck Club*, the paper will commence with an examination of culture and its role in the TESOL classroom. Then it will discuss TESOL reading in general and how a text is created by and with language, supporting the use of books such as Tan's. Next, the synthesis of language, text, and culture will highlight the strengths of the narrative. Finally, the paper will conclude with pedagogic information on how to teach *The Joy Luck Club*, based on experience using the novel as a textbook in an advanced reading class in Taiwan.

## KEY WORDS

Language, text, culture, assimilation, schemata, top-down, bottom-up, interactive, authenticity, inferences.

## RESUMEN

*The Joy Luck Club* de Amy Tan constituye un texto modélico para estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera. En este artículo analizamos la forma en que *The Joy Luck Club* integra lenguaje, texto y cultura en una potente mezcla de gran relevancia para estudiantes de inglés como segunda lengua o como lengua extranjera. Tras presentar *The Joy Luck Club*, el artículo comienza examinando la noción de cultura y su papel en el aula de inglés. Seguidamente se discute en términos generales la lectura en el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera, y de qué forma es creado un texto por y con el lenguaje, apoyando el uso de libros como el de Tan. A continuación, se resaltan los

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puntos fuertes de la narrativa por medio de una síntesis de lenguaje, texto y cultura. Finalmente, el trabajo concluye con información didáctica sobre cómo utilizar *The Joy Luck Club* en el aula, basada en la experiencia de utilizar la novela como libro de texto en un curso de lectura avanzada en Taiwan.

#### PALABRAS CLAVE

Lenguaje, texto, cultura, asimilación, esquemas, de arriba abajo, de abajo arriba, interactivo, autenticidad, inferencias.

#### RÉSUMÉ

*The Joy Luck Club* d'Amy Tan est un texte-modèle pour les étudiants ESOL. Ce document explique comment *The Joy Luck Club* regroupe le langage, le texte et la culture en un puissant mélange qui conviendra à tout étudiant d'ESL ou d'EFL, surtout dans une communauté internationale d'étudiants en anglais en perpétuelle croissance. Suite à la présentation de *The Joy Luck Club*, le document commencera par étudier la culture et son rôle dans une classe TESOL. Puis il traitera de la lecture TESOL en général et comment un texte est créé par et avec le langage, en s'appuyant sur des livres comme ceux de Tan. Après cela, la synthèse du langage, du texte et de la culture mettra en valeur la force de la narration. Enfin, ce document se conclura par une note pédagogique sur comment enseigner *The Joy Luck Club* fondé sur l'expérience d'utilisation du roman comme manuel dans une classe de lecture avancée à Taiwan.

#### MOTS-CLÉ

Langage, texte, culture, assimilation, schéma, méthode top-down, méthode bottom-up, réciprocité, autenticité, inférence.

#### INTRODUCTION: WHY *THE JOY LUCK CLUB*?

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* exhibits language, text, and culture in an engaging narrative, which makes it a model text for ESOL learners. The novel tells the story of four Chinese families who move to America, focusing on the women of the family, the mothers and daughters. The narrative vacillates between the present and the past, between the States and China. The thematic thrust of the novel is culture, the assimilation and interaction (sometimes head-on collision) between American and Chinese values, inter-personal relationships, even table manners. There are eight protagonists in the novel: four daughters and four mothers. The chapters oscillate between different speakers, constructing both their separate and related stories.

It is beneficial for the teacher of a reading class to select a text that is a good mediator between the students and the learning objectives (Collie and Slater, p. 7). *The Joy Luck Club* has proven itself as a

worthy text in Taiwan for an American Cultural Reading class, helping the teacher to navigate the students into improved reading comprehension and heightened cultural awareness. While *The Joy Luck Club* might not always be a perfect fit, the underlying point is that a teacher should look for the right text, not only *a* text, and that a multi-cultural work might very well be most the most suitable material for custom tailoring. “If it is meaningful and enjoyable, reading is more likely to have a lasting and beneficial effect upon the learner’s linguistic and cultural knowledge” (Collie and Slater, p. 6). And shared cultural experiences, or life experiences, are a consistently effective method of conjuring *meaningful* texts from mere lines on a page.

While *The Joy Luck Club* is especially applicable to a student of Chinese origin, the story deals with issues that any ESL or EFL learner might relate to and emphasize with. The text is not only cultural is the sense that it is an English novel and language is cultural, but also in that it deals directly with cultural issues. The second reason that *The Joy Luck Club* is an excellent textbook for ESL students is because the author intended the book to be comprehensible by her mother, herself an immigrant to America, in other words, an ESL student (Tan, p. 309). Its diction and syntax is just simple enough to still be authentic without being overwhelming.

In a book review of *The Joy Luck Club* in *Newsweek*, Amy Tan is quoted: “There is this myth that America is a melting pot, but what happens in assimilation is that we end up deliberately choosing the American things –hot dogs and apple pie– and ignoring the Chinese offerings” (Wang, p. 68). This exploration of the myth of the American melting pot renders *The Joy Luck Club* appropriate in the ESOL classroom. The struggle between individual and cultural identity becomes even more relevant in the intersection of two cultures. This is what happens in a ESOL classroom, whether the teacher and students are consciously aware of it or not. Finally, as technology streamlines international communication and transport, as the borders that define culture and language begin to blur, multi-cultural works help to foster cross-cultural communities.

## TESOL AND CULTURE

In a recent article for *TESOL Quarterly* Dwight Atkinson begins with this sentence: “Culture is a central yet under-examined concept in TESOL”

(p. 625). He then supplies a tidy history of the interaction between TESOL and culture, summarizing the various ways that TESOL educators have dealt (or not dealt) with this huge issue in the past. He then proffers the need for a re-examination of the prominence of culture in TESOL, hoping for some kind of professional consensus.

Atkinson summarizes three historical views of TESOL and culture (p. 629). The first is the received view, which stipulates that a culture is a distinct entity, a social island, which is static and unaffected by the wide world. Further, the received view holds that culture is internally static as well, homogenous, predictable. The second view of TESOL and culture might be labeled as reactionary: it claims that standard notions of culture are obsolete and should be discarded all together. Atkinson wisely points out that this view, while bringing an important issue to the fore, does not provide any substitute definition of culture. The third view might be termed moderate; it agrees that the received view needs to be revised, but insists that culture has an important place in the TESOL curriculum. Influenced by trends in anthropology, the moderate view recognizes the undeniable: that the learned world is getting smaller and smaller, that there are cultural structures within and without any society, regulated mostly (but not completely) by the society itself, acting like a cell membrane, discriminating and choosing what it will.

The author states “culture should continue to occupy a central place in TESOL, but that the concept needs to be substantially revised and updated” (p. 636). Atkinson lists six principles of culture which are handy points of departure.

1. All humans are individuals.
2. Individuality is also cultural.
3. Social group membership and identity are multiple, contradictory, and dynamic.
4. Social group membership is consequential.
5. Methods of studying cultural knowledge and behavior are unlikely to fit a positivist program.
6. Language (learning and teaching) and culture are mutually implicated, but culture is multiple and complex (p. 640).

These six principles could very well spearhead the next generation of cultural teachers. In this time of the advent of political correctness and the supposed death of ethnocentrism, with the birth of the Internet and the world dominance of English, it is especially important to

balance the seemingly competing interests of nationalism and personhood with globalization and cross-cultural awareness. Atkinson admits that some of these tenets might, at first blush, seem obvious, but taken in their totality, and applied in a classroom, they can make worlds of difference (p. 641). Novels like *The Joy Luck Club*, which tell cultural stories in humanistic terms, are excellent springboards to these principles without having to present them with a fancy drum roll to daunted learners.

In another article from *TESOL Quarterly*, “The Negotiation of Teacher’s Sociocultural Identities and Practices in Post-Secondary EFL Classrooms”, Patricia A. Duff and Yuko Uchida examine four EFL teachers working in Japan (p. 458). The four vary in background, interests, personality and teaching style. The article focuses on the teaching of culture: whether it should be taught explicitly, whether it can be avoided at all, and what kind of role it plays in the student-teacher dynamic (p. 457). Of course, it is not only the students who are facing a foreign culture.

Danny, an American, did not believe that culture needed to be taught explicitly, and yet his teaching style and attitude towards Japanese culture implicitly supplied a heavy cultural agenda. He liked to teach “like David Letterman does his talk show stuff”, and he thought Japanese culture to be lacking in “creativity, individualism, and progressive social values” (p. 461). He was overall the most popular teacher with the students. Carol, another west coast American, was specifically against the transmission of cultural perspectives, saying that it was entirely too subjective and gave her too much power. She eventually concluded, however, that this recalcitrance created a distance between her and her students. This was uncomfortable for Carol and ultimately she entertained discussions of Japanese culture and saw her classroom environment improve (p. 462).

After analysis and discussion, the authors assert that culture is an inescapable and indispensable part of EFL teaching (p. 477). This is not something to be shunned, imply the authors, but rather a positive opportunity to be embraced. Near the end of the article the authors state: “Fostering critical awareness in relation to issues of cultural identity and the curriculum is essential not only in EFL contexts but increasingly in ESL settings as well” (p. 477). Multi-cultural texts like Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* raise awareness of cross-cultural perspectives. Of course, EFL learners might be considering an eventual move to some English-speaking country. And even ESL students, already in an English-speak-

ing country, could benefit from the knowledge that they are not the only ones trying to juggle two cultures.

“Language teachers are very much ‘cultural workers’ socializing students into new cultural linguistic practices and helping them make new intercultural, cognitive, social, and affective connections” (p. 475). Teachers pass on cultural lessons in everything they do, regardless of the ostensible subject or course, and whether they explicitly intend to do so or not. They transmit culture not only by what they say, but also by how they say it, when they say it, and by what they don’t say. This is all the more true when a course is designated as a cultural class, or when a textbook is saturated with cultural issues. “Whether they are aware of it or not, language teachers are very much involved in the transmission of culture ...” (p. 476). Ideally, language teachers should be aware of their status as cultural exporters and, where appropriate, teach culture explicitly, using multi-cultural books like *The Joy Luck Club*.

This is not to say that the teaching of culture does not have potential problems and pitfalls. After all, a teacher’s presentation is necessarily subjective and she must be careful to be even-handed and to label opinions as such. In a volume of *College Student Journal* Bruce W. Speck wrote an article that centers around a survey conducted with Muslim students at the University of Memphis. Thirty-seven percent of the students who completed the questionnaire reported a conflict in at least one of their classes between their religious beliefs and some aspect of class content (p. 392). Offensive examples included bad language, nude pictures, the theory of evolution, and Freud’s theories. The article warns professors to be aware of the potential for bias, even unintended, and to keep in mind that they are representatives of a community: “The reputation of the academy is spread throughout the world by non-native speakers who come to this country to get what they perceive to be one of the finest educations available” (p. 398).

While Speck’s article focuses on ESL students living in the United States, it could very well apply to EFL learners living anywhere in the world. “Because professors may not be knowledgeable about other cultures and religions, they may inadvertently introduce bias into the classroom, abusing academic freedom” (p. 390). This is where books like *The Joy Luck Club* prove insightful, both for students and teachers. For teachers of Chinese students (and to an extent any Asian country) the cultural lessons are directly applicable. For teachers of other cultures the lessons are more general, but no less important: international stu-

dents bring their own perspectives to the classroom, and this intimately effects the way they view a new culture and a new language. And for the ESL or EFL student the moral of the story is that every cultural adjunct must grapple with issues of assimilation and identity. As an ESOL student is acquiring English competence she is also becoming a member of the international community, a group which is growing more and more representative of the population as a whole.

#### READING IN THE TESOL CLASSROOM

One of the hottest topics in contemporary TESOL theory is that of the schemata. Taken from the development of artificial intelligence, schemata theory allows for the subjective perspective that the reader brings to the text. In her seminal text, *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language*, Christine Nuttall defines schemata as the 'mental structure' composed of a person's repertoire of experiences and how an individual organizes the knowledge those life experiences have provided (p. 7). David Nunan defines schema theory as "a theoretical model which will explain the way that our background knowledge guides comprehension processes" (p. 67).

In general terms, different cultures produce different schemata. The more at odds the culture, the more at odds the schemata (Nuttall, p. 10). But what about the person who is the product of more than one culture, who is a cocktail of cultural schemata? This is the case with Jing-Mei Woo and the other daughters in *The Joy Luck Club*, and it is also the case with an ESL student. Further, a person is not only affected by their cultural socialization, but also by the almost infinite experiences that mold and shape an individual like a clay pot. All of this must be taken into account if the TESOL professor wants to provide a student-centered approach to passing on linguistic and cultural information. A productive ESL classroom is not only developing linguistic skills, but also evolving student's schemata.

An important dichotomy in teaching reading skills is between bottom-up and top-down processing. Top-down reading is defined as the macro-level view of a text, where the reader interprets assumptions and makes inferences, based upon her schemata (Nuttall, p. 16). Bottom-up processing starts from the mechanics of words and sentences, building meaning "from the black marks on the page" (Nuttall, p. 17). Interactive reading is when the reader continually shifts from one focus to

another, adopting a top-down approach to predict meaning and a bottom-up to confirm (Nuttall, p. 17). William Grabe separates the interactive approach into two different categories (p. 383). The first is the general interaction between the reader and the text. The second is “the interaction of many component skills potentially in simultaneous operation...” (p. 383). It is the latter definition which leads to fluent reading.

What makes an effective TESOL reading teacher? According to Jack Richards, the concept of schemata and the difference between top-down and bottom-up processing are two essential attributes (p. 87). TESOL learners might have a tendency to get caught up in the bottom-up approach because, especially at more basic levels, they are trained to focus on diction and syntax. This is a necessary step in the learning process, but it is equally as important for the teacher to shift the focus into a more balanced approach as reading skills develop. Part of this balance is the reader gaining confidence in her schemata, or background knowledge, and acknowledging the interaction between reader and text. A multi-cultural textbook, such as *The Joy Luck Club*, encourages both the student and the teacher to examine more than the bricks made of words and sentences, to look at the house, walk through the rooms and try out the furniture.

A final issue in the teaching of reading in the TESOL classroom that speaks for the appropriateness of *The Joy Luck Club* is that of authenticity. Williams and Moran offer an extensive discussion of authenticity with a survey of existing literature. They suggest that the generally-accepted definition of authenticity refers “to a text not specifically produced for language learners” (p. 219). They credit Grellet (1981) as saying that authentic texts provide an inherent student interest and motivation, and that any difficulties encountered by the advanced nature of the text can be overcome by simplifying or specifying the reading tasks (p. 219). If a learner is actively engaged by a text, then she is more likely to leap its linguistic hurdles. In the pedagogy section of this paper sample questions and their purposes will be offered, but practically speaking the text must come before the task.

In his book *Reading* (OUP, 1992) Wallace also provides a survey of some previous views on TESOL texts and the issue of authenticity. He quotes Breen’s four types of authenticity:

1. Authenticity of the *texts* which we may use as input data for our learners.
2. Authenticity of the *learner’s own interpretation* of such texts.



3. Authenticity of *tasks* conducive to language learning.
4. Authenticity of the *actual social situation* of the language classroom.

(Wallace, p. 81, emphasis added).

*The Joy Luck Club* passes Breen's analysis with flying colors. First, the text itself is authentic on several levels. It is authentic according to the definition proffered by Williams and Moran above: it is not a text produced specifically for ESOL students. It was a best-selling novel in New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles (Wang, p. 69). It offers countless examples of natural speech as the daughters in the novel are native speakers of English, as well as the narration itself. But what separates *The Joy Luck Club* from many novels is that it also includes examples of authentic "broken" English. The four mothers in the novel are immigrants to the States and their English often exhibits the typical problems of Chinese speakers acquiring English as a second language. This is a great boon to ESOL learners as they can profit from seeing native and non-native speech next to one another, perhaps gaining an emotional as well as linguistic boost. As the teacher points out the incorrect form and supplies the correct one, the students gain not only a specific linguistic morsel, but also learn that imperfect English is still capable of effective communication.

Second, the text of *The Joy Luck Club* is authentic because it has plenty of room for the students to bring their own interpretation, their schemata, to the text. The protagonists, not unlike an ESL student, are trying to balance the sometimes-competing interests of one's familial background and one's contemporaneous physical surrounding. In general terms, the mothers represent the Chinese culture, while the daughters represent the received American culture. The relationships between the two generations are sometimes stormy, and the narrative is largely successful in resisting the temptation to make one set of characters clearly more justified than the other. Perhaps this evaluation, if there is to be one, is best made by the reader, in this case the ESL student. Who else is better equipped, more sensitized, to make their own interpretation of this thorny maze?

The third component on Breen's list is the authenticity of tasks. While *The Joy Luck Club* does not contain any tasks, other than the text itself, it is particularly conducive to top-down comprehension and inference questions. Finally, *The Joy Luck Club* is authentic because it allows, even encourages, a social situation in the classroom that is a parody

of real life situations. This is true again because of the dynamic of the cultural conflicts; both sides are presented in a relatively even-handed fashion. If the teacher is careful to do the same, then it is the students who must hash out the issues, the advantages and disadvantages, and try to determine what course of action they might adopt were they in the same situation. This is the goal of the classroom discussion, to engage the students in real deliberation. Fortunately, many ESOL learners are already considering this oceanic leap and so the classroom talks tend to be lively.

Much of the motive behind the search for authentic texts, whatever the definition, wherever the hair is split, is student interest. If a text is too easy or too difficult, the student is not likely to be engaged, quite apart from whether it is authentic or not. Jeremy Harmer, in *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, summarizes this issue: "If teachers can find genuinely authentic material which their students can cope with that will be advantageous; if not they should be using material which simulates authentic English" (p. 187). While simulated material might be necessary in some contexts, literature, as a general proposition, is authentic (Collie and Slater, p. 3). In their book *Literature in the Language Classroom*, Collie and Slater posit that the strongest argument for the use of literature in the classroom is the personal involvement it endangers (p. 5). As the reader begins to 'inhabit' (p. 6) the text, she gains not only reading comprehension, but strides in the whole language acquisition process. And with a multi-cultural book like *The Joy Luck Club*, the student's diminished distance with the text will also result in a heightened sensitivity to cultural barriers and bridges.

Christine Nuttall, in her extensive work, *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language*, points out that part of a reader's comprehension hinges upon how close the author and the reader's schemata are alike (p. 7). Nuttall supplies an example, not from literature, but from a mundane newspaper article, demonstrating that schemata and the relevance of culture are not only high effluent matters, but, like gravity, are operating around us all the time (p. 7). And the seemingly pervasive schematic factor influences how a student's reading comprehension develops no matter the context and tenor of the text. If a reading teacher is able to predict and prepare for the schematic difference between a reader and a text, then she is better able to map the digestion of the text. Students must be guided through reading comprehension, and an effective instruction allows for the subjective background of the learners.

Next, she enters into an illuminative examination of presupposition, which she loosely defines as connections between facts which are left unstated in the text (p. 8). Like schemata, readers are often unaware of the influence of presuppositions, at least until they start to break down. It is important to note, according to Nuttall, that schematic blueprints, including presuppositions, do not pertain only to facts, but also to how different cultures view, interpret, and judge those facts (p. 9). Nuttall defines inference as a means of reconstructing a writer's unstated presuppositions (p. 114). Inference is an advanced skill which bridges the gap between both the writer and the reader's schemata and the reader's pre-existing and evolving schemata. Presuppositions tend to go unspotted when they are projections of varying cultural backgrounds, different world views (p. 116). Connecting the presuppositions, predicting their paths, is where inference comes in, and although an advanced skill, it can be readily improved through training (p. 116). The skill of inferring a text's meaning is inextricably woven with the comprehension of any writing. This training is where the teacher as both the classroom manager and the text selector is paramount. A multi cultural text, like *The Joy Luck Club*, is language, text, and culture: it is the leaves, the trees, and the forest. Through main ideas and schemata, through intention and inference, the reader is learning a culture through a text and a text through a culture. And language is the bread crumbs to help guide everyone home.

#### LANGUAGE, TEXT, AND CULTURE

In an article published in the *English Journal* Mary Dilg discusses the classroom use of multi-cultural books such as *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan. The thrust of the article is that multicultural works serve to unify rather than to separate, that they affirm and confirm an individual's all-important personal and cultural identity (p. 64). Dilg has worked as both a public and private high school teacher in several major American cities. While her article is not directed at TESOL learners per se, many of her lessons are applicable.

It is a given that many TESOL classrooms contain a cultural distance of at least one sort: between the native speaker teacher and the learners. Many TESOL classrooms, especially ESL classes inside an English speaking country, contain learners from many different cultural backgrounds. Rather than tap dance around these differences, Dilge

suggests it is much better to face them directly and reap their benefits (p. 65). All too often cultural disparities might be glossed over in an attempt to simplify the classroom consensus. But language is culture and culture is language, and a multicultural text can be an effective tool to amplify this relationship. Dilge points out that all too often meaningful conversations are avoided, lacking a center, and that multi-cultural books are a convenient impetus to hazard these teeming waters (p. 65).

Effective literature is often applauded for transcending cultural boundaries. While Dilge concedes this universal factor, she maintains that literature “is always rooted in the specifics of a culture, and those specifics often offer the reader a sense of familiarity which operates alongside universal aspects” (p. 66). This trident balance between the personal, cultural and universal is essential in a ESL student’s identity and in a fertile ESL classroom. Once again, multi-cultural works like *The Joy Luck Club*, if used effectively, can serve to highlight this trio within and alongside the language of the text. These cultural specifics are a comforting factor to students who share similar schemata. For example, Chinese students might feel at ease with the Chinese cultural aspects of *The Joy Luck Club*, as African-American students might find succor in *Beloved*. And perhaps even more importantly, if the cultural specifics are not one that a student is versed in, then they may serve to break down prejudice, to effect schemata positively, to become “antidotes to stereotypes” (p. 68).

In the article “Culture and the Interpretation of Meaning in a Literary Text”, M. J. Mafela discusses the important role of culture in interpreting the meaning of a literary text. His analysis is in regards to a Tshivenda text, native to South Africa. “The interpretation of a literary text takes place when the reader has all the elements of a piece of work in his/her intellectual grasp” (p. 16). Prominent among these elements is the cultural background of a text, especially if a reader is to understand the deeper themes. This is especially true in a text like *The Joy Luck Club*, which is culturally imbued, but according to Mafela, culture is relevant to all texts because they all occur in a certain time and place, and are therefore culturally prescribed (p. 19).

Mafela also focuses on the characters of a narrative, saying that to understand the character’s motives is essential to understanding a text. Further, these motives are heavily influenced by the character’s setting and culture. “For the reader to have a clear understanding of the behavior of characters in their setting, he/she must know their cultural back-

ground and share experiences and values with them..." (p. 17). Although the author does not actually use the term 'schemata', the concept is invoked. Even if the characters are operating in a cultural setting which is removed from the reader, she might learn from the text by vicariously experiencing the action of the story and incorporating new values into her rhetorical infrastructure.

Mafela lists metaphor, proverbs, archaic words and idioms as important signals to the subterranean meaning of a text (p. 20). Mafela also stresses, however, that language is comprised of more than its parts, that it is influenced and inspired by the cultural background of the author, that it is the muse as well as the canvas. "If the reader does not have the knowledge or experience of language and style used in the literary text, then it would be difficult for him/her to interpret the meaning of a text" (p. 20). The TESOL classroom is a relatively safe place for the learner to gain experience in English, which will in turn cocoon into knowledge of English. And because English is the current international language this knowledge helps propel the ESOL student into the global village. Language, as found in an authentic text, is an effective vehicle for the learner as she gazes out the window and watches the cultural landscape unfold in a numinous blur.

## A CUP OF PEDAGOGY

*The Joy Luck Club* is not necessarily an easy read for ESOL students. It is an authentic text, with authentic speech, hordes of new vocabulary, and advanced rhetorical strategies like inference and intimation. But long-term it is hugely rewarding as the students see both their cultural awareness and reading skills improve. And these twin interests, teaching culture and reading comprehension, support and encourage one another like cross beams. The icing on the cake is that the book is also an interesting and engaging read: it is emotively strong, touching the gamut of sentiments with deft use of character and plot. In regards to readability, Nuttall says, "Most important of all are the familiarity of the topic, the cultural background, the conceptual complexity of the content and the interest it has for the reader" (p. 176). *The Joy Luck Club* has inherent student interest; if learners are nudged in the right direction they will sow fertile linguistic fields.

This paper was based on experience using *The Joy Luck Club* as a textbook in a college-level class in Taiwan titled "American Cultural

Reading". A description of the class follows, in order to place the teaching methodology into a practical framework. Of course, different teachers will have different environments, but the main learning issues are likely to be the same, with the twin focus of reading and culture. How to get the students to make the long-term effort to read the book, and to focus their attention on the top-down themes so they don't drown in a sea of vocabulary, are prominent classroom challenges. Not all classroom exigencies and priorities can be forecast, and even the best teacher's crystal ball is foggy. More specific objectives are rife and variable; the teacher will pick and choose what is best for her students and classroom.

These reading classes have about 50 students in each class. Each class meets for three periods a week; usually the three class periods run concurrently. While there is a good deal of variety among the student's levels, the average reading ability is intermediate to advanced. The class is multi-textured, moving from individual work, to lecture, to group work, and back to individual work, in an attempt to maintain the student's attention and interest. Each class has four basic parts. Collie and Slater offer a four part answer to the important issue: How to best utilize limited and therefore valuable classtime?

1. Follow-up from home reading.
2. Ongoing snowball activities.
3. Presenting the new section.
4. Looking forward (p. 37).

Each week's reading assignment is approximately twelve pages. The students are also required to write a short summary of each week's reading in their notebooks, which is a means of facilitating their reading comprehension (Collie and Slater, p. 43). The first part of each class is a short, three question quiz which is graded on a loose system of plus, check, and minus. While not necessarily popular with the students, the weekly quizzes are indispensable in keeping the students on task and in charting their reading comprehension. With an extensive reading assignments it is essential that the learner's tackle the text in small bites. The students are repeatedly reminded that the questions are general and based on broad-stroke themes, not on vocabulary or any other bottom-up mechanic. The goal of the quizzes is to reward and encourage the requisite effort, not to punish a less-than-perfect reading. A score of minus is only given when it is obvious that the student has not done the reading at all. Simply by taking the quiz, the

students are learning how to issue spot and connect thematic dots. The quiz usually takes about twenty minutes. Samples of quiz questions follow.

1. Why did Jing-Mei take her mother's place at the majong table?
2. Why did Suyuan start the first Joy Luck Club in Kweilin, China?
3. Describe Auntie An-Mei.
4. What happened to change Lindo's life when she was twelve?
5. What was Ying-Ying's secret wish to the Moon Lady?
6. Do you think Lena's mom was crazy? Why?
7. Why did Ted want to divorce Rose?
8. What 'mistakes' did Richard make at the dinner table?

The second part of the class is lecture. First, brief answers to the quizzes are provided, keeping matters tidy at this point to encourage the students. For example, a sample answer to question one might be: "Because her mother died two months ago". This is to demonstrate that a reader can enjoy and understand a text without being able to translate every word. More complete answers are rewarded with a plus, but a bare bones answer is acceptable. Then the lecture proceeds through the week's reading paragraph by paragraph, page by page, drawing student's attention to relevant passages. Both elements of reading and culture are highlighted, depending on the text. The focus is usually on the top-down reading, but the students are also reminded that a bottom-up approach is necessary to confirm hypothesis about the text. The teacher summarizes important points and then directs the students to the supporting passage. The lecture also attempts to connect the reading with both former and future segments, keeping an eye on the macro-level of the narrative. The lecture ends with a brief skeleton of next week's reading assignment, just enough to whet the student's appetite and to give them a vague outline. Finally, the students are given an opportunity to ask questions. This part of the class takes anywhere from around twenty to forty minutes, depending on the complexity of the reading and the cultural issues presented.

The third part of the class is small group work. The students are given cultural worksheets especially prepared for the class; the topics were selected by former classes. Subject matters include tobacco, religion, homosexuality, drugs, and tanning salons. These worksheets are out of the scope of this paper, but here it will suffice to say that they contain short essay questions, opinion based, never simple 'yes' or 'no'. The students are told that they will benefit from verdant discussion as

the cultural questions are similar in difficulty and range to the questions on the mid-term and final exam. The students are put into small groups because this re-vitalizes waning attention spans, increases confidence, and fosters more varied discussions. Each student is required to write the group's answers in their notebook to ensure that every student is touching the material, even if they are shy in the group dynamic. This penultimate section of the class can go either way: sometimes it's the most productive part of the class, with students engaging in meaningful discourse, stretching the bounds of both their language ability and schemata, and sometimes the class will degrade into flurries of chatter. Closely monitored, this part of the class takes about one period, fifty minutes.

During the fourth segment of the class the students move their desks back into rows and are given time for individual work. By this time the energy level in the class is often buzzing, and the students must be reigned in a bit and brought back to the classroom. Most students use this study period to read *The Joy Luck Club* homework, others might finish the cultural questions or work quietly on some other activity. As Collie and Slater point out, "reading is often a quiet, private activity" and a habit that students would do well to acquire (p. 93). While the students are working the teacher makes a circuit, walking down the rows, looking over their shoulders, making a comment here or there. Often students will use this opportunity to ask questions about the reading because they are less intimidated than during lecture, when asking a question entails a spotlight. If the questions are relevant to the whole class, which is often the case, then the answer is given to the whole class, along with praise for the question. This portion of the class is variable and, to a degree, expendable. Sometimes it might last the better part of a period and sometimes it might be totally eclipsed by the small group work.

The students are given a challenging mid-term and final exam, consisting of ten essay questions. Five of the questions are on *The Joy Luck Club* and five are on the cultural worksheets. These short essay questions are not difficult in the sense that students are expected to identify passages, or commit the smallest details to memory. They are difficult in that they attempt to require the student to make their own connections, to form their own opinions and to think for themselves. The idea is to do more than regurgitate facts from the material or mirror the teacher's soliloquies. The hope is that this will aid the students in internalizing the material, in making it a part of their world view



instead of only their small exam window. Below is a checklist from Nuttall which was illuminative in the writing of the exam questions.

1. Can the answers be written without reading the text?
2. Are there several questions on every part of the text?
3. Are there enough questions?
4. Are the questions varied in type?
5. Do some questions try to make the students aware of the strategies a reader needs?
6. Do the questions attempt to help students understand?
7. Are the questions written in language that is more difficult than the text?
8. Do the answers require language that is beyond the student's proficiency? (p. 190).

During the lecture in the second part of the class, particular attention is paid to the kinds of relationships and inferences that will poke their heads into the written exams. Students profit from heeding the lecture and they quickly learn to do so, thereby improving not only their reading comprehension but also their listening skills. It seems unlikely that a student could answer these open essay questions without reading the text. The exam does not necessarily cover every part of the text, but it does cover the most salient ones, and Nuttall concedes that this criteria is flexible (p. 190). Out of the eight questions above, numbers five and six seem the most significant because they most invoke the learning process and are most likely to give the learner a skill that she can take out of the exam and incorporate into her academic arsenal. At this point the quizzes and lecture have already imparted reading strategies and guided the student's reading comprehension; now they must take these lessons and apply them to the written exams. Sample exam questions follow.

1. Jing-mei's mom wanted her to be a child prodigy, like Waverly. Please compare these two families. How are the daughters the same or different? The mothers? The relationship between them?
2. Pretend you are Harold and explain why your budget is a good idea. OR, pretend you are Lena and explain why it is not a good idea.
3. Waverly's mom meets Rich, Waverly's fiancé, at a dinner party. Rich thinks the dinner went quite well; Waverly knows better. Please discuss the cultural differences between Waverly's mom and Rich, and how Waverly is in the middle.

4. Why was the garden an important symbol to Rose? What did the divorce with Ted teach her? What is the whole meaning of the garden in this chapter?

5. Give a brief summary of the turtle story. Why was it so important to An-mei's mother? Why was it also important to An-mei? Do you agree with the point of the story? Why?

6. Why is the chapter about Ying-Ying's childhood called "Waiting Between the Trees"? Who is waiting between the trees? And for what? And why are Lena and Ying-Ying both like tigers?

7. What do you think happened with Jing-mei and her sisters? Were they angry with her? Did they laugh? Cry? Did Jing-mei keep in touch with them? Did they all move to America? Why do you think so. Be specific.

8. Who was the character in *The Joy Luck Club* who touched you the most or with whom you could most understand? Why? What do you think was most interesting about his or her life? Is it similar to your life? How?

The student evaluation for the class is based on four equal parts: notebook, quizzes, mid-term, and final exam. The notebook is expected to contain both weekly summaries of *The Joy Luck Club* reading and the answers to the cultural questions. The quizzes are graded somewhat lax. As mentioned above, a minus is given only when it is clear that none of the reading has been done. Similarly, the notebooks are given passing scores as a matter of routine; only the absence of a notebook results in a low score. The quizzes and notebooks are intended to balance the difficulty of the exams. The weekly assignments and quizzes are easier in the sense that their requirements are more closely akin to the exercises the students are most familiar with. If a student reads the book and completes the summaries and cultural questions, then she should be able to pass the class, even with a relatively low grade on the mid-term and or final exam.

## CONCLUSION

The students who took the American Cultural Reading class which were the subjects of this paper were almost unanimously happy with the class. They were satisfied with the cultural worksheets, but most of all, the reports on *The Joy Luck Club* were glowing. Many students said it was their first English novel and that they were planning on reading

more of Tan's books. Others said that the book touched their heart and actually thanked the teacher for selecting the text. And still others particularly valued the cultural information and thought it interesting as well as educational, sometimes having acquired misplaced details about their own backgrounds. While not as many mentioned an improvement in their reading comprehension skills, it was evident to the teacher that every student who regularly did the reading progressed steadily throughout the year. The students provided consistent proof of this advancement through their summaries, quizzes and exams, and through their facial expressions during lecture. And last, but perhaps not least, the teacher also found the text enlightening and rewarding. Books like *The Joy Luck Club* serve to remind TESOL professors that they are always dealing with disparate cultures in between the language lines and must learn about and embrace these varying value systems if they truly desire to present a student-centered classroom.

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