

A Thinker's Alchemy

: Using "The Alchemist" to Stimulate Critical Thinking in ESL Classes

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I. Introduction

"Deeply alarmed" is how I felt sometimes standing in front of my college classes in Ecuador and South Korea. The students were neither unintelligent nor unmotivated; they simply lacked the skills to critically think in an English class. Yet, this should not have completely surprised me. Isn't this what college is traditionally for -- creating the next great thinkers?

In a 2009 Newsweek article, "What's College for Anyway?: A Debate Over the Role of Higher Education," Lee Bollinger, president of Columbia

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University in New York, posed the following question: “What is the knowledge and what are the capacities that we want young people to have in order to do well in the future world they’re going to be responsible for?” Bollinger added that “it’s no longer just of interest to find about China. It’s now imperative that a young person graduate with a knowledge of China and India.” Thus, as college ESL instructors, it is only logical to ask ourselves, “What is English class for anyway?” In creating an answer, we must look at intercultural communication and critical thinking in preparing ESL college students for their global futures.

This article seeks to expand on my presentation, “Living Globally: Thinking Critically in the Universal Language,” which I gave at ESL conferences in Ecuador and Peru. The presentation emphasized the need for teachers to provide cultural material in the classroom that stimulate students’ critical analytical skills. Building on this idea, this article explores a specific teaching resource (a novel) that can be used in creating critical global thinkers. I will examine the role of modern classic literature as a means of helping to shape ESL thinkers by developing analytical skills. This article will provide a clear outline of how to stimulate thinking in college classrooms by teaching “The Alchemist,” thereby strengthening ESL students’ critical analytical skills to function in the global arena.

II. Literature in the ESL Classroom

Many educators have reported the extreme value of having a strong reading component in ESL programs. A 2011 study of previous research on literature and ESL revealed several benefits, including authenticity,

motivation, cultural/intercultural awareness and globalization, grammar and vocabulary knowledge, emotional intelligence, and critical thinking (Khatib, Rezaei, and Derakhshan, 2011). The study also addressed the drawbacks, including syntax, lexis, selecting suitable material, literary concepts, lack of value in academic English, and cultural barriers. Although these negative aspects present real problematic points, educators continue to search for practical classroom methods of teaching literature to strengthen English skills because a variety of formats and materials are needed in preparing students for interactions with diverse people outside of their native lands. Having the ability to read literature successfully has the potential to give students an edge in a very competitive world.

Although some students may not enjoy reading leisurely, Christine Ellsworth (2011) stated that a strong reading ability is essential to succeed in a university in an English-speaking country because college students must read a lot regardless of their majors. Consequently, Ellsworth argued that ESL college students should read young adult literary because the literary uses everyday speech, which is more relatable than classic cannon selections, and provides diverse genres to suit individual students' tastes (2011). Her case study of the novel *The Wanderer*, by Sharon Creech, showed positive results that strongly suggested young adult literature was appealing and could lead to students reading more for pleasure, thereby increasing their reading fluency and comprehension (2011).

Closely related to the relevance of literature in the ESL classroom is the specific teaching method used in the classroom. Some educators believe the magnitude of literature's impact on students lies in how students are taught to interact with text. Carolyn Coutant and Natalia Perchemlides (2005) argued that it is essential that instructors show students strategic

and methodical approaches to comprehending literature. Through clear guidance and “by sacrificing a little content for additional instruction, [teachers] can create a generation of readers who will be able to apply their critical thinking skills to any piece of text they encounter” (Coutant & Perchemlides 2005).

By combining Ellsworth’s argument for pleasurable reading and Coutant and Perchemlides’s argument for applicable reading techniques, a strong case for literature in the classroom is formed. The stance is enhanced with the addition of viewing literature as a means of improving critical thinking in English. Specifically looking at Korean educational system, Ji Sook Pak (2010) wrote that a major problem of the current system is the restrictive teaching format that has students focused on mastering language rules and linguistic points, with no value given to the content of the text. She stated that “such a disciplinary practice hinders students from taking ownership or initiative of their knowledge making process. Rather, they are reinforced as passive agents of top-down banking education culture” (p.167). Thus, Pak is suggesting that in order for students to be active agents, they must have a clear connection to the text they are studying in class. Literature can provide the path for that connection.

In research on a practical classroom application of literature, Eun-Hye Song (2010) argued that literature allows students to become personally involved. Song (2010) stated that “involving with literature makes learners to focus on their attention beyond the more mechanical respects of the foreign language” (p. 180). Yet Song cautiously warned against only teaching classical literature for its difficult language; this argument has been made by others, with a strong emphasis placed on more modern classical literature (Idapalath2012; Ellsworth 2011). Moving away from

old classics, such as Shakespeare, would also provide better preparation of students for a more diverse global community in which they are and will be active agents. As Idapalaph (2012) wrote, "the literature based instruction stands unique in many ways in the making of the citizens of the world" (p. 66). Idapalaph (2012) added, "unless a student is suitably trained to be fit for the global context with the knowledge of the normative values, the communication proves to be detrimental. Such training demands the selection of the materials for the courses and the lessons suitable for the formation of international communication basal" (p. 64). This achievement is more likely to occur with text that features diverse characters and settings as well as diverse authors.

Overall, the argument for teaching literature in ESL classes is strong, particularly in relation to students' analytical skills improving. After the review of many research cases, Khatib, Rezaei, and Derakhshan (2011) rationalized that literature is "fertile with ideas to critically look at" and that "critical thinking is the cornerstone of education particularly at advanced levels of education" (p. 203). Therefore, educators are essential in "developing such higher-order thinking skills" (Khatib, Rezaei, and Derakhshan, 2011, p. 203).

Thus, the question must be asked: what is a teaching strategy that can be applied in the ESL classroom to allow students to benefit significantly from reading literature? How can ESL instructors best link literature learning to the overall aim of teaching English in a manner to prepare global critical thinkers?

Peter A. Facione provides a good stepping stone to create the teaching tools that are needed to accomplish a literary goal. In studying critical thinking, Facione (1992) posed the question, "What can the strong critical

thinkers do (what mental abilities do they have), that the weak critical thinkers have trouble doing?” (p. 4). In answering the question, he provided the following six essential skills that are needed in good critical thinkers: the skills were taken from a 1993-4 study conducted by the Center for the Study of Higher Education at The Pennsylvania State University (p. 5-7).

1. Interpretation- ability to comprehend and express the meaning or significance of a wide variety of material.
2. Analysis - identifying the intended and actual inferential relationships among forms of representation intended to express some type of information.
3. Evaluation - assessing the credibility of statements or other representations; and assessing the logical strength of the actual or intended inferential relationships among forms of representation.
4. Inference - identifying and securing elements needed to draw reasonable conclusions; forming conjectures and hypotheses; and to considering relevant information and deducing the consequences flowing from various materials.
5. Explanation- ability to present in a cogent and coherent way the results of one's reasoning.
6. Self-regulation (open-minded) - consciously monitoring one's cognitive activities and the results deduced; and evaluating one's own inferential judgments with a skeptical eye in order to alter one's reasoning if necessary.

These six skills provide a practical framework in which to shape literature study. In this article,

The Alchemist will be used to show how a more contemporary novel (compared to cannon selections) can easily be incorporated into an ESL

class to help strengthen students' critical thinking in English.

III. The Alchemist

The *Alchemist* is a novel written by Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho that was originally published in Portuguese in 1988; it is a widely read book and has been published in many languages, including English and Korean. I first began using this modern classic upon a recommendation of a colleague while teaching ESL at a university in Costa Rica in 2008. All of the native English instructors read non-required literature with their students, such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *The Boy in the Striped Pajama*. Since then, I have continued to read the first part of *The Alchemist*, pages 3-47, with my advanced college students in Costa Rica, Ecuador and South Korea. I am not alone in my usage of this novel in ESL classes.

The Alchemist has been taught in many classrooms as a means of engaging students with a text. For example, when the novel was taught in an ESL class in an Arabic university, a study showed "the students found it very interesting to learn about the journey of a boy to Egyptian pyramids and so they were more eager to be involved in the activities designed by the teacher" (Idapalaph, p. 65). One reason given for the novel's popularity is that "with the hero's name (Santiago) given once early in the novel, the reader can almost envision him-or herself in the protagonist's place" as Santiago journeys from Spain to Egypt following his dream (Chumley, 2011).

Another teaching bonus is that the themes of thinking and

decision-making are prevalent in the novel. As Muraleedharan (2012) wrote, "Santiago listens to his heart but uses his intellect to drive his mind towards his goal"(p.5). Throughout the course of the main character's journey, he is forced to make decision which provides great material for students to practice their critical thinking abilities in English. For example, students must think if Santiago made the right decision and/or if the students would have chosen the same decision.

It should be noted that some scholars have found problems with the novel. Al-Sudeary (2009) criticized the novel for maintaining the "other" perspective of the Middle East and stereotyping non-Western characters. In using the novel, it would be wise to address this issue in the classroom. Yet the overall message of the novel has a strong universal story of finding one's purpose in life that resonates with diverse groups of college students.

IV. Critical Thinking about *The Alchemist*

With the text selected, *The Alchemist*, and the teaching strategy selected, implementation of the six critical thinking skills, lessons can be carried out in the ESL classroom. In this section, I will outline several activities that have been used in the class to engage analytically students with this novel. Activities only involved the first part of *The Alchemist* and can be modified for students who are at a lower level.

1. Interpretation -- Using Idioms.

"People from all over the world have passed through this village, son," said his father. "They come in search of new things, but when they leave they are basically the same people they were when they arrived. They climb the mountain to see the castle, and

they wind up thinking that the past was better than what we have now. They have blond hair, or dark skin, but basically they're the same as the people who live right here."

"But I'd like to see the castles in the towns where they live," the boy explained.

"Those people, when they see our land, say that they would like to live here forever," his father continued. "Well, I'd like to see their land, and see how they live," said his son.

The Alchemist, p. 9

This excerpt of a principal passage provides the perfect platform to introduce the English idiom, "the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence." After reading the entire passage on page nine, the teacher writes the idiom on the classroom board and asks student to interpret the idiom. If this is not possible, as has been my personal case, the teacher explains the idiom (by drawing a picture of two houses with a fence separating them) and then asks the students to interpret the passage in the framework of the idiom. The last part of the activity consists of students deciding which character is correct, the father or the son. Students should be encouraged to use personal experiences to justify their decisions.

2. Analysis -- Recapping Events

After a significant portion of the first part has been read, a mini-quiz can be given to test students' comprehension. One effective task is having students order summarized sentences. By not using the exact words from

the text, student must identify the information in a new form and through inferential relationships. The following is an activity that I have used with college students in Korea and Ecuador.

What happened so far? (Recap of The *Alchemist*, pages 3-11)

Number the events in the proper order in which they occurred in the story.

_____ He is envious of his sheep because their only concerns are food and water.

_____ Santiago arrives at an abandoned church at dusk.

_____ He remembers the merchant's daughter being surprised that he _____ could read.

_____ He realizes his heavy jacket has a purpose, and so does he have a _____ purpose in life.

_____ He remembers a conversation with his father about the grass being greener on the other side of the fence.

_____ Santiago downplays his hopes of being with the merchant's daughter.

_____ Santiago thinks the world is inexhaustible and is excited about discovering new things in his travels.

_____ He thinks that life is interesting because it is possible to achieve goals.

_____ He recalls an old lady who can interpret dreams.

_____ He has a recurring dream

The task is first given as individual work. However, if students demonstrate having some difficulty, the students are allowed to work with a classmate to complete the activity.

3. Evaluation -- In-class Group Work

In reading the novel, students regularly read the novel aloud in class. Each student reads two to three sentences in a circular pattern, with the instructor, myself, correcting pronunciation, asking comprehension questions and defining new vocabulary. Thus, it is good to introduce a slight variation to the standard reading format.

Students work in small groups, in class or in another area of the university campus. They are given an hour to read a section and complete questions. In answering the comprehension questions, students must assess specific ideas presented in the novel. The following questions are a sample of some questions that were given for reading pages 11-21 during group work.

1. Do you agree that "dreams are the language of God"? Why or why not?
2. What's your opinion of the Gypsy's interpretation of the dream?
3. Is the following statement true or false? "It's the simple things in life that are the most extraordinary; only wise men are able to understand them." Why?

Students found some of the questions to be challenging. Thus, in the following class meeting, all the questions and answers were discussed. In sharing their opinions, students were able to practice their evaluation skills in the written and oral forms. They were also able to agree or disagree with classmates' opinions, which served as listening and speaking practice.

4. Inference -- Pre-Reading Task

In giving strategies for teaching narrative text, Coutant and Perchemlides (2005) provided questions to have students contemplate prior to reading. They specifically presented questions for *The Alchemist* as seen in the following section:

Pre-Reading Questions

1. What does an alchemist do?
2. Does the word have anything to do with chemistry?
3. If the word refers to a person, is the person the main character?

Students' answers to these questions reveal the usage of previous English language knowledge as seen in the following student' answer (Coutant and Perchemlides, 2005)

1. The alchemist is probably a scientist. I think so because I know that the suffix -ist means it's the person's career.
2. I think it has to do with chemistry because the word alchemist has "chem" in it.
3. I am almost positive that it is the main character. Why else would the whole book be called *The Alchemist*?

In addition, I have used inference tasks for students to make educated guesses about what will happen in the next upcoming sections or with newly introduced characters. This heightens their curiosity and maintains motivation to continue reading.

6. Explanation -- Open-ended questions

One of the most effective activity to get students to interact with the text is by giving them comparison questions. By having them compare themselves with characters in the novel, the students must present a logical reasoning for their similarities and differences. It is best to present questions with a large scope after a significant portion has been read on a character. Thus, I usually give these questions in regards to Santiago on the final written exam. Also on the final exam is a question asking if the student would recommend the novel to others. These two questions also allow for responses that are more personalized and carry no right-wrong penalty. Students must simply present a clear argument that supports his/her viewpoint. Below are two questions that were included in the written exam.

Final Written Exam

1. Are you similar to or different from Santiago? How?
2. Would you recommend this novel to a friend? Why or why not?

7. Self-regulation -- Who is the old man in the plaza?

Of all the six factors of critical thinking this provided the biggest challenge for implementation. Perhaps because the teacher must present a character or piece of information in a manner which causes students to be skeptical. However, the old man character who appears in the plaza provides a good platform. Once the character appears initially, page 16, students try to guess the true identity of the old man. Then after the old man identifies himself, students must evaluate the validity of the man's

claim and reanalyze their initial impressions of the character. Lastly, after the old man's final appearance, students need to think about their overall opinion of the character and the character's credibility, thereby using clear reasoning.

IV. Conclusion

Using literature in ESL classes has a high potential of being enjoyed by and beneficial to students. Studies have shown positive effects of literature on ESL students. However, one of the biggest challenge facing teachers is selecting the most appropriate method to teach the literature. In this paper, I have argued that applying Facoine's six skills of critical thinking to a more contemporary novel, *The Alchemist*, provides a practical and easy-to-implement literature activity. This method allows ESL instructors to freely modify lessons for the various levels of the students.

Instructors should view this paper as a prompt to use the ESL classroom as bridge in helping to build our next generation of global thinkers and doers. Instructors should no longer view literature as something not logically practical for ESL students, but as a necessary part in building their English skills. Instructors should challenge themselves to find the best methods to maximize the continual growth of their students in the English language that will allow students to significantly contribute to our global community; literature offers a strong solution to this challenge.

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〈국문 초록〉

사고자의 연금술 : ESL 수업에서 비판적 사고를 장려하기 위한 “The Alchemist”의 사용

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여러 연구에 의하면, 현대 문학을 ESL 수업에 소개하는 것이 학생들에게 유익하고 즐거워할만한 잠재력을 가지고 있다고 한다. 그러나 많은 교사들에게 도전이 되는 것은 적절한 교수법을 찾아야 한다는 점이다. 이 글에서는 피터 파씨오네(Peter A. Facione)가 제안한 비판적 사고의 원리를 사용해 볼 것을 제안한다. 이러한 논의를 분명하게 하기 위해 현대소설인 ‘연금술사(The Alchemist)’를 통해 예증한다. 이렇게 하여 ESL교사들이 수정하여 적용할 수 있는 실제적이고도 이행이 쉬운 문학 활동에 대해 보여주는 것이 이 글의 취지이다. 수업에서 문학을 사용함으로써 교사들은 학생들이 영어로 비판적인 사고를 하는 기술이 자라도록 촉진시키는 것을 도울 수 있을 것이다.

주제어 : 문학, 연금술사, 비판적 사고, ESL