

Using classic literature in the ESL/EFL classroom: The Great Gatsby in the classroom: Searching for the American dream

Heather Doiron

Nanzan English Education Center

heatherdoiron@gmail.com

Abstract

The following book review is based on *the Great Gatsby in the classroom: Searching for the American dream* by David Dowling. The book, written for an American high school literature program contains lesson plans and activities that help students derive meaning from literature. Regardless of the original target readership, the teaching materials outlined in the book could be easily applied to other literature classics, and be used as materials by teachers who wish to use the classics in the ESL/EFL classroom.

The evolution of the graded reader has made classics far more accessible to the ESL/EFL reader, but for many L2 or even L1 students the historical and cultural underpinnings are not always readily available and may result in students regarding the classics as outdated and impersonal. *The Great Gatsby in the Classroom: Searching for the American Dream* by David Dowling provides the necessary background and instructional techniques to bring a classic to life. Although it is written for the high school classroom to accompany the original novel, the activities and lesson plans can be easily adapted to the graded reader version of *The Great Gatsby*.

Dowling's lesson plans and activities, draw on several of the general objectives of an ESL/EFL reading class i.e., activating prior knowledge, pre-reading, author's purpose and tone, main ideas versus supporting details, character development, as well as identifying and reflecting on story themes. As an activating prior knowledge or pre-reading activity for *the Great Gatsby*, Dowling suggests that students watch *The emergence of modern America: The roaring twenties*. The video recording is accompanied by a handout in which students compare the 1920s to modern times. In my own class, rather than watch the video, I had students do research on the 1920s and then complete the comparison sheet (pp.11). Many of the activities designed by Dowling, involve integrated skills; the oral interpretation exercise (pp.33-37) requires students to create and perform dialogues between characters. This activity is accompanied with an oral interpretation-grading rubric, providing a framework on how to evaluate the exercise. Student participation in this exercise highlights the importance of understanding

the tone of the author as well as the role of the characters in the novel. Understanding chronology (pp.52-55) is an activity in which students look at the supporting details of the story in order to make a timeline of events. Then, in partners, students refer to the the timeline to answer a number of questions based on the themes of *the Great Gatsby*: the American Dream, materialism, and the 1920s; this activity is especially useful for ESL/EFL language learners who may not be knowledgeable about these aspects of American history and culture.

The Great Gatsby in the Classroom: Searching for the American Dream provides ideas, lesson plans and insights into teaching *The Great Gatsby*, but the book does fall short in some areas as an ESL/EFL resource. The book is designed from the point of view of a veteran high school literature teacher, so ESL/EFL users of the books must keep in mind that modifications are essential to make many of these lesson plans possible. For example, some activities are based on a 78-minute class that meets two- three times a week, as opposed to a 90-minute ESL/EFL class that may meet only once or twice a week. The language of the text may also need to be modified to meet the particular level of ESL/EFL class. Lastly, the book does not contain an index, to act as a guide for those teaches who are acquainting or reacquainting themselves with *The Great Gatsby*.

In conclusion, Dowling has written a book that illuminates not only *the Great Gatsby* but also the idea that classics, which when thoughtfully activated, can work in the classroom. The book offers inspiration and energy to the experienced teacher and guidance and structure for the new teacher. *The Great Gatsby in the Classroom: Searching for the American Dream* is part of a series of teacher resource books published by the National Council of Teachers of English. If you are interested in this book you may browse the table of contents and the first chapter online at readwritethink.org. As an EFL/ESL reading teacher Dowling's work provides a guided passage to a far more student-centered reading classroom.

Author notes

Heather Doiron teaches at the Nanzan English Education Centre at Nanzan University in Nagoya. She holds a M.Ed from the University of New Brunswick.

Reference

Dowling, D. (2006). *The Great Gatsby in the Classroom: Searching for the American Dream*. Illinois, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.