

## Using *Seedfolks* with English Language Learners: A Resource File for ESL and EFL Teachers

### Introduction

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In academically oriented language programs, advanced students may aspire to read authentic literature in the target language. In others, where the emphasis is on developing communicative fluency in the target language, reading works of literature might be seen as less central to the goals of the program or its students. Opinions on the value of using authentic target language literature in ESL and EFL classes range from highly critical (a difficult, elitist pursuit burdened by dated language and irrelevant cultural baggage) to strongly supportive (versatile and timeless material, capable of fostering development of all four language skills and numerous sub-skills as well) (Collie and Slater, 1990). While reading target language literature may not be a primary goal, or *end*, for all language learners, a strong case can be made for incorporating the use of literature in a comprehensive language program as a *means* of achieving desired knowledge of and fluency in the target language (Collie & Slater, 1990; Gujdusec, 1988; Hişmanoğlu, 2005; McCloskey & Stack, 1996). Among often cited benefits of reading target language literature are these:

- It fosters interest in and enjoyment of the target language
- It provides a rich, varied, and authentic body of material for and study.
- It provides a window through which readers learn about societies, cultures, and historic events that are remote in time or space.
- It exposes readers to various forms, functions, registers, genres, and vocabulary of the target language in authentic contexts.
- It invites readers to respond to, discuss, and reflect on timeless questions, themes,

and experiences that are part of the human experience.

A principled use of literature as a core or supplemental component of a language course has the potential to realize these benefits. Unfortunately, many language learners have a sadly different experience with reading or studying literature. Anderson (1999) observed that from the perspective of language learners, reading lessons often seem to be little more than testing experiences in which they read difficult texts and answer an endless number of test-like comprehension questions. Tomlinson (1998) declared that textbooks and teachers often give learners an

experience of literature which is completely different from that intended by the authors and completely different from that enjoyed by readers in the L1. In fact it is not an experience of literature at all. It is an imposed study of texts. (p. 178)

Tomlinson went on to lend support to a reasoned use of literature in language classes, noting that extensive reading is the most “available and effective means of learning the target language during, outside, and after the course” and that “positive experiences of reading literature in the L2 ... can encourage free reading outside and after the course and thus increase opportunities for continued learning of the language” (p. 184).

*Seedfolks* is an award-winning novel written as a collection of first person accounts of a diverse group of strangers who gradually transform a vacant lot into a community garden and, in the process, transform themselves into a community as well. The narrators are young and old, male and female, immigrants and “old” Americans, native and non-native speakers of English. Their stories touch on themes that span the generations. The



book is available in audio format, so students can listen to as well as read the story. It is a popular choice in American middle school language arts classes, so abundant, standards-based resource materials are available in print and online (e.g., <http://www.uen.org/Lessonplan/preview.cgi?LPid=21754> and <http://www.kyrene.org/staff/schadaseedfolks/seedfolks%20launch%20page.html>). Most of the materials, however, are designed for young native speakers of English. This collection is designed to make the stories, themes, and language of *Seedfolks* accessible and appealing to ESL and EFL readers in high school, university, community school, and work place classes.

Developing this collection of activities was a project in an undergraduate course in the TESOL programs at Hawaii Pacific University on the teaching of reading and writing skills to ESL and EFL learners in the spring of 2011. Students examined a wide range of commercial and teacher-made materials used to foster reading and writing skills in ESL and EFL students. They independently developed activities to support one of the chapters in *Seedfolks*, presented microteaching lessons based on them, and then shared, compared, and revised their work. I contributed some materials of my own and edited the collection. The activities are organized into five broad categories with numerous activities and variations in each.

- *Before Reading* activities suggest ways to provide essential background information, build interest in the text, and connect the story to the local context.

- *Reading the Story* activities describe eight different ways to “get” the story depending upon the students’ proficiency levels.
- *After Reading* activities focus on the personal stories of the 13 narrators in *Seedfolks* as well as some of the major themes in the book including, but not limited to, sustainability, immigration, migration, transformation, and prejudice.
- The activities in *Developing English Language Skills* are designed to help students notice, understand, and use high frequency vocabulary and sentence structures in the book.
- The activities in *Telling and Retelling the Story* show how the *Seedfolks* stories can be used to develop both accuracy and fluency in English language learners.

Taken as a whole, the activities address all four components of a well-balanced language course as described by Nation (2008), with attention given to “meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development” (p. 1). The collection closes with an annotated list of references and resources. Teachers will need to survey the collection and carefully choose the activities that will most engage or benefit their students. We hope that in some small way this collection will be used to help language learners enjoy *Seedfolks*, or other great works of literature, in the manner described by Tomlinson.

## References

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