

How teachers develop content literacy of their students and use children's literature for such purposes

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This article centers round significant issues such as how children's literature supports the development of content literacy of students and what content literacy implies in itself. Based on a case study in a children's literature class, the author first defines content literacy, then outlines how mismatches in the classes derived from different cultural backgrounds of the students can influence the development of literacy in school. The article provides a brief analysis of classroom data followed by a proposal for developing students' content literacy development when they are asked to work with a novel; appropriate strategies to establish reading and writing comprehension of classic novels (in this case study "*Treasure Island*") in order to motivate students; how to develop activities aimed at helping students improve their analytical reading and writing skills; and how to sharpen children's self-regulated learning skills.

Introduction

Content literacy is described and defined as a meaning-making process through which students comprehend, process, criticize and evaluate the meaning of subject-matter (text) (Brown, Phillips & Stephens, 1995; Stephens & Brown, 2005). Students are required to appropriate and digest the content of selected texts and this "appropriating process" is what leads students to be able to "decipher" the meaning of the text given to them. It is essential for teachers working with literature to be able to develop efficient activities for developing this process. Content literacy strategies are the means and tools that, as Stephens and Brown have said in their book titled *A Handbook of Content Literacy Strategies* transport students "beyond rote learning to higher-order thinking" (2005: 2). The implementation of content literacy strategies has a powerful impact on student learning and thinking as they are processes that help students develop thinking and to be aware of their approach to a specific learning task such as reading and writing.

With these parameters in mind, the author developed reading and writing activities and strategies which were elaborated for an English Language Arts (ELA) class. The activities aim to provide students with multiple opportunities to construct meaning in ELA classes and enhance their content knowledge of the subject matter (language and literature) and also to promote a deeper conceptual understanding of the content. The applied strategies not only interrelate writing and reading activities (Cowen & Cowen, 1980; Daniels, 1994; Allen, 2004), they foster content learning of the students and contribute to lifelong learning.

Additionally, the teacher endeavoured to construct a framework of “cultural literacy” that covers both the cultural background of the literary text being studied with the diversity that makes up the students’ background (Readance, Bean & Baldwin 1998). In this way, it is acknowledged that the communities and homes where the students come from have a key role in their literacy development. Belonging to a culture of literacy, even prior attending the school, this culture continues to support and add credibility to the literacy experiences as students are scholarised. There are often mismatches between the class expectations of “literacy of culture” and those of the students - not all students come from well established culture of literacy context (personal experience and familiarity with mainstream literary practices –Payne & Bennett, 1977; Brice Heath, 1994; Street, 1994) These mismatches may relate to low motivation, disinterest and unwillingness to experiment with new literature, or lack of courage to improve literacy skills.

Teaching strategies for an ELA class

A commonly held perception is that literature is almost exclusively the domain of the English Language Arts classroom as literature has the potential to put the ‘human face’ on learning and thus “students are able to transform knowledge into personally useful and meaningful tools for expanding their understanding of the world and themselves” (Siu-Runyan, 1995: 132). Through the use of literature students can also become active learners in their content area.

In order to accomplish this link between self and world knowledge and help students transform knowledge, the decision to use children’s literature as a framework for the teaching strategies in the ELA class was taken. The activities were designed to try to achieve the following objectives:

- Familiarize students with different literary genres.
- Create a rich environment for learning by providing students with a variety of books with a wide range of reading and interest levels.
- Involve students by allowing them more options and greater flexibility in assignments.
- Promote learner autonomy by allowing students some choice in reading selections.
- Promote learner confidence by providing careful feedback about selected books (e.g. allowing students to choose 'easy' reading as they build from their cultural background towards more difficult books.
- Connect students' personal learning and promote life-long learning through a provision of up-to-date and varied children's literature and adolescents' literature.
- Promote active student involvement with their reading process through a variety of activities. (Readance, Bean & Baldwin, 1998)

In this case study, *Treasure Island* written by R. L. Stevenson provided the ground for implementing literacy strategies organized into teaching units. Using this text, goals were established in order to focus the teaching on the development of both content understanding and content literacy; goals that cover both class goals and individual goals. *Treasure Island* was chosen because the events narrated by Stevenson are attractive to students and the events can be used to orient the learners towards multiple motifs developed by the author such as piracy, adventure, racism, exploring nature and so on.

Under this spectrum the development of content understanding and content literacy was organized in two content literacy strategies as described below: 1) *A Quick Write* and 2) *Create a Talisman*. The first strategy (*A Quick Write*) is categorized as an 'initiating' strategy. These strategies made up the group of preparatory strategies (pre-reading and pre-writing stages in the learning process). Key elements of this group include activating and building upon prior knowledge, purpose-setting, creating a need to know and stimulating curiosity. These strategies aim to help the students develop both content knowledge and content literacy. Initiating strategies are the beginning point of the instructional framework and as such they provide foundations for the more in-depth learning that takes place in the subsequent components of constructing and utilizing.

The instructional framework is understood as the basic structure of components that

form the backbone of the learning process. Teachers use it as a planning guide, while students use it as a learning guide. Hence, it has reciprocal impact, as it is recursive. The criteria on which it is developed indicates it as something that should be simple, adaptable to all content areas and also practical. It consists of three major components, which are: initiating, constructing and utilizing. Reading and writing are an integral part of all components of instructional framework, as they are fundamental tools for increasing content knowledge and developing thinking skills.

The second strategy (*Create a Talisman*) is considered a ‘utilizing’ strategy. This includes exploring associative elements in literature and particularly in classical children’s book known worldwide in the ways in which heroes and events are depicted. These depictions serve as models for the students to create their own renditions of elements featured in the literature (Stephens & Brown, 2005). These models are described below.

A Quick Write

This initiating strategy was designed to help students write a very short piece in response to a prompt, statement or quote depicted from the text (focused writing). This activity required reading without any concern about the mechanics of writing. The activity is designed to generate the connection between students’ previous learning and new information. As part of the activity, students are asked to exchange papers and continue responding. The activity is carried out at the beginning of the class and the students’ reflection is referred to throughout the whole process. This activity engages the students in writing, speaking and listening and can also serve as an informal assessment tool, starting individually and ending up as a whole class discussion.

Furthermore, the activity sharpens students’ critical and rational thinking in dealing with the text by leading the students to complement relevant information from the text (narration of events, action, characters’ development and their social, or historical, or emotional charge) to other sources of interest (see model in figure 1). Additionally, figures of speech can be discussed, such as: metaphor, metonymy and so on. Significantly the *Think Aloud* methodology can be used to make our students be specific and oriented in their responses.

Topic:	Mini- Gallery of Characters and Events in Chapters 1&2
Activity:	A <i>Quick Write</i> on <u>Treasure Island</u> / R.L. Stevenson
<p>The story begins back when my father was running an inn called the Admiral Benbow. The night was bitter, and we could hear a howling wind outside when the old seaman with a scarred face first made his way through our door (pg. 1).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was a terrible weather. • The old seaman dragged a sea chest in a wheelbarrow • Everything about him looked dirty. • He whistled and sang a song I would hear many times • ... 	

Fig. 1. Model of A *Quick Write* Activity

Create a talisman

This strategy is designed to enhance students' involvement with a main character from the novel they are required to read. The chosen talisman could be an object, a charm thought to fight evil or produce good fortune. The talisman could be either a concrete object or an abstract one. The object chosen to be a talisman can also be something that does not belong to the character, but is considered as an associative element because of the flow of events round which the character develops.

The following example demonstrates the implementation of this strategy in an activity entitled Talisman for Jim's "Admiral Benbow" Inn. The students select a character that is specific to their text and they work on this character. On the grounds of identifying, or creating or designing a talisman that matches that particular character they are interested in, the students' focus is oriented on the object the character and features that can be associated with that character. In the case study, students were required to draw Admiral Benbow's Inn then draw a treasure chest and another associative element, which are brought to the Inn by the Captain and so on (see figure 2).

Following that, they describe their reflective narration under the structure of the

“Admiral Benbow” Inn. This helps them reflect on the importance of the location from which the events revolve in the novel. Working with this activity the students are asked to answer questions alike:

- What is the character like?
- What motivates him to do...?
- Identify key words that illustrate the character.
- What objects remind you of the character?
- Are these objects related to his future?
- Close your eyes and visualize the character. What characteristics does this character have?

The activity also helps students analyze the cultural heritage of the character by having them reflect on what it is like to live in colonial times or during times of abundant piracy.

As follow-up the students create either an object-line narration that substitutes for Jim’s story-telling (the main character in the novel), or they write a narrative map of *Jim’s journey* accompanied by objects and associative indispensable elements that pursue Jim in his adventures.

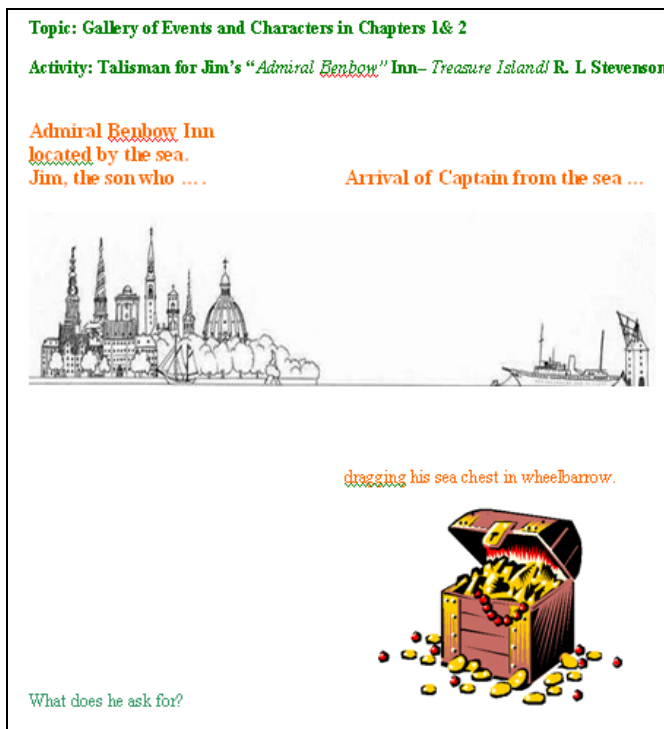


Fig. 2. Model of *Create a Talisman* Activity

Data and results from observations

Both activities were applied in ELA classes K-9 Grade of the Cynthia Cross High School of Music in the Bronx¹, New York. Both classes were made up of eight boys and seven girls. Most of the children were of Afro-American origin and came from poor or relatively poor neighborhoods, particularly the Bronx. There were also immigrant children of European descent with highly developed habits in reading and who possessed considerable 'world knowledge'. These students were Spanish or English speakers and those whose L1 was Spanish had some difficulties with the English-only curricula. The implementation of both activities in two ELA classes, lasting 45 minutes each, were observed and observations were recorded in researcher field notes.

Observation of "A Quick Write" activity

In what concerns linguistic content, this activity involved high frequency use of adjectives and nouns, compound sentences and compound predicates, especially in the description of the *Captain*. Observation also showed that students used rich vocabulary in elaborating their descriptions. The "Think Aloud" methodology helped them share ideas and comments, which was picked up on and integrated into the individual narrations, thus demonstrating the beginning of their content literacy development.

In comparison to their initial background in content literacy and literacy culture, the data from the field notes indicate that the children coming from backgrounds where reading is promoted at home demonstrated high involvement and attained high achievement. Focus group discussions with the students corroborated the observation that family background the students in further developing their *content literacy*, for instance, one young learner was adamant about her *literacy culture*, explaining that her mother had always read books to her since she was very young and reading was a family rule in her house.

Significantly, however, some students who came from backgrounds where reading was not prioritized in the family also proved to be highly motivated, despite possible hindrances to their educational achievement such as: low economic means, broken families and drug issues. Nonetheless, these students were quite determined to adjourn themselves in the literacy context and to be as active as the other students. Observations from the field notes highlight three students' willingness to study and prove they are good learners (see figure 3).

Jordan, Abby, Joanna have shown improvements in their reading skills and writing skills. They have targeted either their syntax or their semantics as features to improve.
J., A., & J. have started to articulate good complex and compound sentences, not just simple sentences
Lots of use of complex predicates when speaking in class.
Especially impressed with sentences like this one: "Captain had stepped in very furiously just like the nasty weather that had been hauling outside that little inn Jim and his family had happened to possess."

Fig. 3. Field notes

In the case of two students (Jasmine and Sheila), both girls were only interested in completing the task in writing and refused to participate in discussion, submitting the assignment in the last 10 minutes of the class. However, similar to the classmates who participated in the oral discussion of the description, their writing assignment showed a high frequency of adjectives such: "*suspending, dreadful, windy, nasty weather, nasty faces*", all of which were used properly in their right position in sentences, indicating that their understanding of syntax was also improved gradually in sequence to this activity.

This is especially significant considering that prior to this activity, these students had difficulties using adjectives appropriately and they often confused their position as exemplified by this excerpt: "*Captain nasty stepped in inn small.*"

Observation of "Create a Talisman" activity

General observation from this activity indicates that the students developed special syntax and good discourse. They were able to use short orienting sentences to encourage drawing comprehension and proved capable of cohesion in the rendering objects in line with the narrative. They produced sentences like: "*Arrival of Captain from the sea*"; "*Raining and hailing outside*"; "*... dragging a heavy chest in dark color wheelbarrow*"; and so on.

Furthermore, the objects found and used to develop and illustrate the narrative were highly entertaining and colorful most of the time, indicating how well the students oriented themselves towards visualizing the story content. Thus, not only did they comprehend the story and learn to narrate it, the activity helped them develop other artistic skills. They identified a lot of objects like: "*boat, inn, chest, spyglass, heavy coat and hat, hand shaking, glass of drink*" and so on, indicating a growing lexicon. They also showed skills in animating the characters through action-verbs and drawings: "*Jim shivering from the*

fears." "Jim - overcome by curiosity." "Jim - a very hard working boy", " Jim - a very sociable boy". In post- activity observation it was noted that the students were interested in conversing in this way by using also gestures and other non- verbal means of communication.

In this activity the "Think Aloud" methodology helped them to provide a rationale to their selection of objects, indicating development in their creativity and critical thinking. Students with a content literacy background (habitual reading) and some knowledge of "Treasure Island" as text and movie demonstrated their strong content literacy understanding and developed higher critical thinking. Many of these students used colorful drawings and developed additional complimentary questions related to the issue in question; they showed their tendency to develop artistic tastes.

The students from less literacy-content backgrounds were keener on using objects to narrate the story through the object - line approach. For example, Alejandro and Imperatriz demonstrated their skills for drawing objects related to the story and writing orienting sentences just below the objects drawn by them (although there were mistakes in their syntax: "dragging, talking, holding" and so on). These students preferred to use **ing-forms** of verbs (another special syntax that marked their limited knowledge in the English grammar). These students achieved more positively in this second activity "Create a Talisman"; in the post- activity period, they actively participated and shared their drawings and respective explanations of them with the rest of the class.

All of the above described results were observed while the students were involved in both activities. As these activities showed changes and development in the students' content understanding and content literacy, it can be argued that they provide very good literacy strategies that meet the requirements of teaching: good tools to evaluate the students' reflective response in essay assignment, project work, knowledge of character development and elements of plot and other aspects of text comprehension as well.

Conclusion

Working in a teaching context made up of students coming from different literacy and cultural backgrounds is not easy. At the same time, teachers have a responsibility to establish the "school culture" (Stephens & Brown, 2005) which includes accepted literacy skills. In

this light, the development of content literacy of students that compose classes is significant. This content literacy growth, stemming from teaching, and beginning with what the students already possess as a result of their backgrounds, will result from the appropriation that the students are able to achieve as a result of the teacher's work in classroom. Considered thus, what influences and improves content literacy development and its growth embraces reading and writing activities which generate students' positive feelings about the process and drives them to actions that help them achieve the set goals.

At the same time, these are activities that orient the teachers' intentions to transfer knowledge and to assess new knowledge. The students become oriented to attaining learning goals and become self-regulators in their learning, which, in turn, produces reflective and critical thinking. As such, the activities, based on reading and writing, facilitate the work of teachers and provide good sources to foster and develop content literacy (Readance & Bean & Baldwin 1998).

The selected strategy – oriented activities presented above illustrate the efficiency of following this procedure in teaching literature and once more reinforces the participating aspects of the selected strategies in ELA teaching classes, specifically the significance of using children's literature in the teaching context. Due to the use of these selected strategies the materials produced by students outlines their content literacy development and growth. The compilation of activities certainly paves the path for proper assessment and evaluation as well as representing a solid content literacy growth and content area development of the students as they achieve the learning goals in the ELA classes.

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¹ The names of the school and all participants have been made anonymous to protect their identity.

Author's references

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