

Scaffolding Linguistic and Intercultural Goals in EFL with Simplified Novels and their Film Adaptations

Currently, we are witnessing a new emphasis on the inseparability of language and culture in the development of policies and programs for the teaching of foreign languages. For language learners, an awareness of the cultural facets of language makes it easier to comprehend the topics and situations they encounter when reading or listening. Exposure to the culture of the people who speak the language being learned also leads to increased understanding and tolerance.

There are many excellent sources to help teachers connect culture with the language learning process. For example, to develop an English as a foreign language (EFL) program at our university, we consulted the linguistic communicative benchmarks from the Council of Europe (2001). Additional guidelines are available from the National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (2006), which provides valuable information

on how to help students (1) understand the perspectives of other cultures, (2) compare the language and culture of others with their own, and (3) use the foreign language outside of the school setting. These cultural objectives enhance an EFL program where “the true content of the foreign language course is not the grammar and the vocabulary of the language, but the cultures expressed through that language” (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project 2006, 47–48).

When developing our program, we felt that literature modules would be a great way to incorporate U.S. and British cultural elements while strengthening English reading abilities. We also recognized that using literature offered the potential to create an interesting multimedia experience and to introduce variety and more extensive exposure to English. Although unabridged literature is typically appropriate for advance learners,

there is a renewed interest in integrating graded literary materials such as simplified novels that are written especially for beginning and intermediate level students. Therefore, we structured our program around graded literary readers, in this case simplified novels, as well as associated audio recordings, films, and other supplementary texts and exercises. The aim of this article is to describe the implementation and results of two cultural multimedia modules that center on the simplified novels *1984* by George Orwell and *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck.

Graded literary readers in the EFL classroom

Graded literary readers are carefully adapted from the original text to match students' developing linguistic ability; such readers have been used to teach EFL since the beginning of the last century, until the surge of the communicative approach made it heresy to use them because they were considered inauthentic (Bamford and Day 1997). However, in the last ten years there has been a reappraisal of graded literary readers' potential to promote language learning (Day and Bamford 1998). Recent research supports the linguistic and psychological benefits of using EFL graded readers, including increased motivation, reading speed, vocabulary development, discourse awareness, and meaning-focused input and output (Waring 1997; Nation 2004). Because there is a link between extensive reading and success in language learning, an important objective is to promote enthusiastic and independent reading among students (Krashen 2004). Simplified literary texts can help fulfill this need by making content comprehensible and getting students excited about reading a large amount of interesting material.

The benefits of extensive reading are often undermined by the lack of appropriate material in textbooks, so teachers must be willing to find alternative sources and create their own texts and lessons (Villanueva de Debat 2006). Fortunately, the publishing houses of graded literary readers offer longer, interesting reading selections in different genres and at different levels along with a multitude of support materials such as lesson plans, activities, background information on the author, and complete pedagogical guides for using

simplified novels and their film adaptations. Moreover, it is easy to supplement graded literary reader activities with a wide variety of online resources by searching newspapers, magazines, and film reviews that deal with the unit's particular theme.

Using audio and film with graded literary readers

The inspiration for our simplified novel modules comes from Krashen (2004), known for his Comprehension Hypothesis, which asserts that we acquire a language best when we receive lots of meaningful comprehensible input. The use of graded literary readers fits in nicely with his hypothesis. However, one problem is that "there has been little attempt to maximize the amount of comprehensible input, little attempt to combine interesting discussions, read alouds, recreational listening, listening to tapes, watching films, all in one educational program" (Krashen 2004, 6).

From the humanities perspective, it is important to acknowledge the educational gains coming from exposure to literature and other imaginative cultural texts like film. In addition, Prowse (2002) and Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass, and Gorsuch (2004) emphasize the advantages of using audio recordings of the simplified novel to strengthen linguistic skills—such as better pronunciation, faster reading speed, and improved retention of vocabulary and grammatical structures—that enhance future readings. Therefore, we made it our goal to design our modules with a multimedia approach, and to complement the printed literary text with pertinent supplemental readings, as well as audio and film recordings. (Audio and film recordings are referenced separately at the end of the article.)

Scaffolding linguistic and intercultural goals

In any learning context, an important concept is *scaffolding*, Vygotsky's educational metaphor that comes from a social constructivist conception of learning in which the teacher creates affective and pedagogical support, including materials, experiences, peer interaction, and teacher-student interaction, through activities of increasing difficulty that systematically challenge a learner but are still achievable given his or her level of experience, which

is called the “zone of proximal development” (McMahon 1996, 60). We firmly believe that scaffolding is essential for teaching simplified novels and that it results in solid language gains and increased intercultural awareness in the learning of EFL. We therefore were careful in preparing the scope and sequence of materials and activities, ensuring that they were engaging, appropriately challenging, and supported by collaborative efforts of the teacher and students themselves.

Implementing two simplified novel modules

The two modules presented here differ slightly from one another due to the level of students and class size. Trying to be realistic, we took into account the fact that Mexico traditionally has not been a reading culture. Also, since we had to implement the modules within an EFL program based on a commercial textbook, we had time restraints that made it practical to use only one graded reader, a simplified novel, instead of an extensive reading program with broader selections of texts from different genres. However, we were able to supplement the main literary reading with material from different genres, and with the critical support of our multimedia center we structured lessons around the reading, listening, and viewing of material that dealt with biographical, historical, and sociocultural features related to the main topic, including the film versions of both simplified novels. Although some suggest presenting a segment of the movie before reading the corresponding selection in the graded reader (Hess and Jasper 1995), we decided to place the film at the end of the modules based on our conviction that students should be exposed to the written version first to stimulate the imagination of settings and characters, which is also the position of Clandfield and Budden (2004).

Module 1: 1984 by George Orwell

This module was taught to students from the upper intermediate eighth and ninth levels of the English program. It focused on the novel *1984* by British writer George Orwell. We chose this novel for its relevance in understanding the role that the mass media play as elements of control and power, as well as for

its futuristic description of a totalitarian society that is at times uncomfortably similar to current events in certain countries.

Written post-World War II, in 1949, the novel describes in a terrifying and visionary manner the life of Winston Smith, the central character, who resides in *Oceania*, a fictitious society where citizens are reduced to subjects of observation and control by *Big Brother*, and love and the freedom to think and express oneself are punishable by death. Erich Fromm, in the afterword of the book’s centennial edition, declares that the mood of *1984* expresses “near despair about the future of man, and the warning is that unless the course of history changes, men all over the world will lose their most human qualities, will become soulless automatons, and will not even be aware of it” (Orwell 1977, 313).

Following is a description of the four scaffolded stages of the *1984* module, which are illustrated in Figure 1.

Stage 1

Students began building background knowledge at the group level about George Orwell by reading and discussing a short, informative text called *George Orwell: A Prophet of His Age* (Gleeson 2003). This introduction to the life and work of Orwell, which included a close reading aloud, focused on global comprehension, the article’s discourse structure and thematic content, and the detection and analysis of the main ideas. As an assignment for this stage, students wrote summaries of the article that later were presented and critiqued by the class for relevance and quality of information.

Stage 2

In this stage, students used the intermediate level 4 graded reader with audio to read and listen to the simplified novel (Audio recording: Orwell 2003). Students and the teacher first completed a read aloud, and then underlined, outlined, and discussed key aspects concerning the plot, characters, and context. Next, groups of students wrote information outlines. For homework, students were asked to listen to specific chapters of the audio recording. In the next class, a discussion took place regarding the chapters’ main ideas, followed by further reading aloud to zero in on intonation, fluency, and pronunciation.

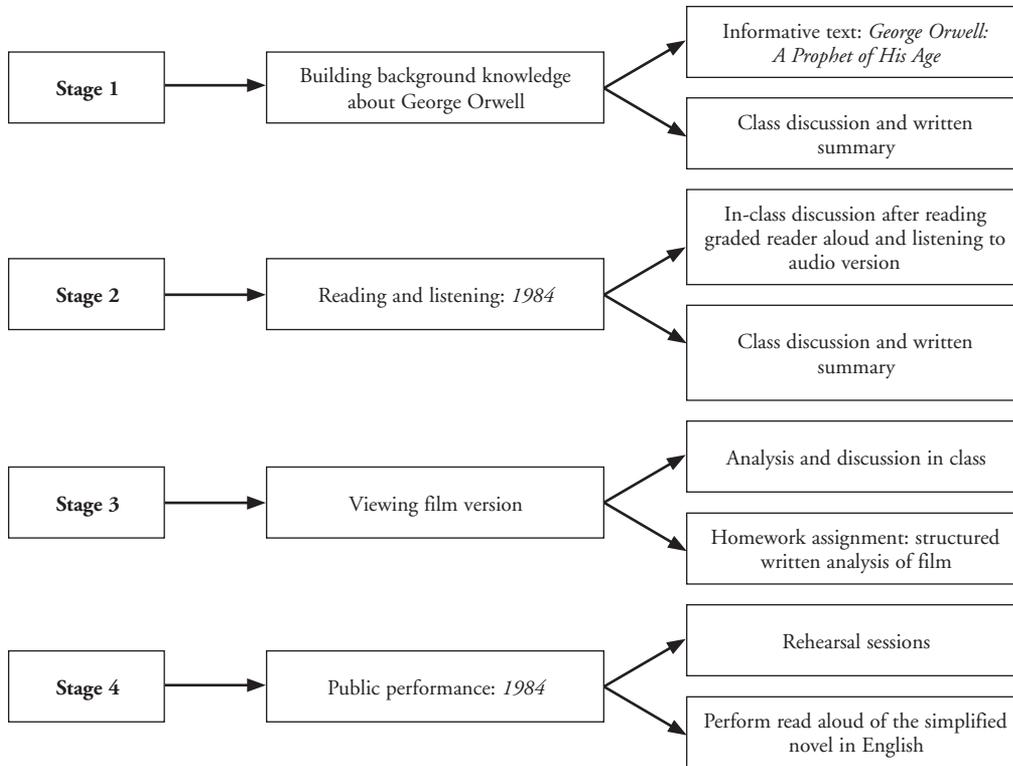


Figure 1: Four stages of the 1984 Module

Stage two ended with an oral recapitulation from the students about what *1984* meant to them as individuals.

Stage 3

This stage concentrated on the viewing, analysis, and discussion of the film version of Orwell's *1984* (Film recording: Radford 1984). Before viewing, as a kind of advanced organizer for the cinematographic experience, the students reviewed points in a universal film guide adapted from Stempleski and Tomalin (2001, 77–78). Although the film is in English, we used English subtitling to reinforce and facilitate the acquisition of vocabulary and idiomatic expressions. After watching the film, the class discussed the similarities and differences between the film and book. Students also described what their expectations had been prior to the viewing, how the film version did or did not fulfill these expectations, and finally, they reflected on the usefulness of the activities so far to positively affect their understanding. For homework, students answered questions from the adapted

film guide in Stempleski and Tomalin (2001, 77–78).

Stage 4

The principal objective of stages one through three was to contribute to the development of students' intercultural awareness by stimulating them with cultural themes and content. Nonetheless, we wanted to widen the project to extend English practice outside the classroom and prepare students to participate in multilingual contexts in their communities and in those beyond their own borders. Therefore, stage four of the *1984* module consisted of two student readings in front of a university audience of professors, other students, and administrative staff. In the first reading, each student read segments of the simplified novel aloud, taking on the representations of all the characters and situations in their sections. In a second reading, students focused on those parts in the novel that were particularly rich in dialogue, and students played the main characters (e.g., Winston, Julia, O'Brien), using appropriate gestures, intonation, and facial expressions.

Results of module 1

Module one met our goal by helping students to understand another culture, compare their language and culture with that of Britain, and use English outside of the school setting. In fact, besides gaining intensive practice of communicative skills in the interpretive and expository modes, the students became acquainted with and analyzed a British cultural text that is highly pertinent for any society at any time. Finally, the students experienced a palpable feeling of self-satisfaction for having achieved a goal that previously might have been difficult to imagine, as exemplified in the following post-module student comments, which have been translated from Spanish:

- “Personally, I didn’t know George Orwell or any of his works. It was very interesting for me to become acquainted with his life, his ideology, and his contribution to twentieth century literature.”
- “The most educational part was the reading of *1984*. We practiced reading comprehension, vocabulary, and developed our analytical skills. There was

discussion of opinions and I believe it was a very complete learning experience to include all these aspects.”

Module 2: *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck

The second module was taught to students from the sixth level of the English program, ranging from high beginner to low intermediate levels, and was structured around *Of Mice and Men*, by Nobel Laureate John Steinbeck (2002b). Published in 1937, this work is now considered a classic of American literature, and its two main characters, Lennie and George, have become iconic figures in American culture. The narrative deals with migrant workers on California farms during the Great Depression. The novel gives life to the dreams of migrant workers who want to have enough money for their own home and, at the same time, points out the need and the meaning of friendship.

Following is a description of the three scaffolded stages of the Steinbeck module, which are illustrated in Figure 2.

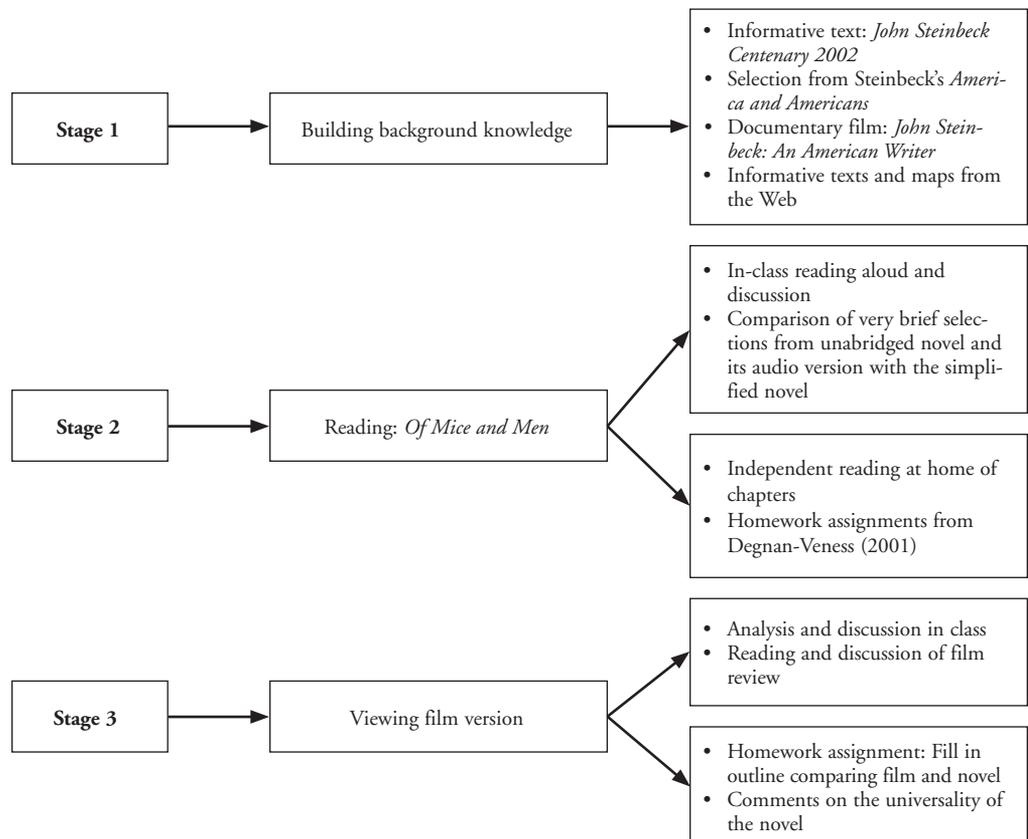


Figure 2: Three Stages of the *Of Mice and Men* Module

Stage 1

The module began with a brief discussion of the differences between reading literature and reading informative texts, followed by a short reading in simplified English about the *John Steinbeck Centenary*, which sums up his biography and the themes and public reception of his main works; this reading, which is available online, also includes a teaching guide and a student activity sheet (Pearson Education 2002).

Next, the whole class read two short expository paragraphs from Steinbeck essays that dealt with (1) the importance of what literature can reveal to us about the human condition, and (2) the role of dreams, and in particular, the dream of having one's own home and being self-sufficient (Steinbeck 2002a). Students were invited to try to paraphrase in as many ways possible the key ideas of Steinbeck on the dream of possessing a home.

The students then viewed a fifty-minute documentary film in English about the life and work of Steinbeck (Film recording: Neville 2000). Again, English subtitling was used because it is an important aid to understanding films for basic and intermediate EFL students. The film shows the golden farm fields of Salinas, California, where the novel takes place, and so it especially helped students who had no real knowledge of that area to visualize the book's setting and contrast it with farms in Mexico.

The final activity of stage one was the reading of abridged expository texts taken from two websites. The first was from a Web project on *Of Mice and Men* that includes maps of the Steinbeck region, a short synopsis of the novel, and brief descriptions of the characters (Stephan 2005). Again, students were encouraged to reflect about the current condition of migrant workers in the United States. The second website offers materials for middle school and high school teachers who wish to teach *Of Mice and Men* in class, and contains pre- and post-reading exercises, information about the characters and setting, and even an entire lesson plan (Steinbeck Institute 2007). Texts from this website were used for reading aloud.

Stage 2

Stage two involved the silent reading and reading aloud of the level 2 *Of Mice and Men* graded reader (Steinbeck 2001), as well as

activities from a website that provides useful materials, including critical vocabulary, multiple choice questions, and a series of simple exercises to do before, during, and after reading (Degnan-Veness 2001). In order to stimulate a personal response from the students, we focused on their construction of an imaginary world as they read the text, frequently pausing to ask questions about how they were visualizing this fictitious world, the narrative sequence, and the interaction among characters. Given that the level of the text was for beginners, and that students had built up background knowledge through the introductory texts and the documentary film, the reading was not difficult for the class.

Unable to obtain the graded reader's audio recording, we decided to use two very short excerpts from the unabridged versions of the novel and audio recording. (In the future we plan to record any graded reader when we cannot obtain its recording.) Students read the excerpts of the unabridged novel (Steinbeck 2002b) and listened to the same excerpts from the CD (Audio recording: Steinbeck 2002). Afterwards, the students compared and contrasted what they read in the unabridged version with the corresponding parts of the graded reader, including the different way the story ended in each one. The idea was to make students aware of the differences in discourse, which was successful because they were able to appreciate how Steinbeck's original version is much more elaborately and vividly constructed in its descriptive passages than the level 2 reader. For homework, students were assigned exercises from Degnan-Veness (2001).

Of course, students did not have a complete understanding of the original novel from the short excerpts they read and heard. They did, however, later recognize the voice of the actor in the recording, Gary Sinise, who also directs and stars in the film adaptation that they viewed next.

Stage 3

During the final stage of the module, students watched the film *Of Mice and Men* with subtitling in English (Film recording: Sinise 2003). The class used a simple outline based on the setting, characters, and events to compare the novel and film (Stempleski and Tomalin 2001, 91). Students noted that the

movie began with an incident that is portrayed quite differently in both the original novel and the graded reader. They also found that the film emphasized a certain character much more than the written texts did and that the film's final scene is absent from both the graded reader and the original novel. After discussing these and other similarities and differences, the class read a short film review and gave their opinions of it (Brussat and Brussat 2007).

At the end of the module, students commented on how the novel and film depicted the human condition, including the life of migrant workers (Anglos and Mexicans); the importance we all place in dreams, especially to help us get through difficult times; and love and friendship. The majority of students realized that Steinbeck used two characters—George and Lennie—to try to capture the complexity of all human beings.

Results of module 2

Module two scaffolded lessons and activities to support students in their development of critical language and intercultural competencies and elevated their awareness of different types of media and variations in texts. For our students, the module was quite satisfying, and they agreed that studying *Of Mice and Men* was much more interesting than the usual exercises found in their EFL textbook. Finally, the students gave feedback; the following sample comments have been translated from Spanish:

- “You really don't just read but you also listen and see the movie, and this helps you to understand the whole context.”
- “It enriched my studying because the novel was very interesting. It motivated me to read, write, and listen with more attention and enjoyment, and to increase my vocabulary.”

Benefits to teachers

Not just students benefit by scaffolded instruction that uses literary texts to increase linguistic and intercultural skills. The creation of modules centered on a graded literary text and its film version, with related audio recordings and supplemental readings and exercises, also benefits EFL teacher development. In using such modules, teachers who are not native speakers, especially those who do not come from a humanities background, could experience a sheltered and comfortable means

to learn about Anglophone cultures. In addition to stimulating language development, the use of literature and film modules could help teachers enhance their own linguistic, intercultural, interpretive, and critical thinking skills in English.

Conclusion

It is no exaggeration to say that, in emerging countries like Mexico, students frequently have a negative attitude toward Anglophone countries (Ryan and Gómez de Mas 2000; Demeyere 2005). This is largely due to an ideological rejection of a foreign culture that is frequently perceived only in stereotypes. As a strategy to question and overcome such negative attitudes, we believe it is fundamental to create learning scenarios that allow students to come into contact with a wide diversity of Anglophone cultures. Active participation in an aesthetic encounter with these cultures can become an educational experience that sharpens the students' perception of their everyday world, gets them out of their own skin, and enables them to actively enter into distinct worlds. Furthermore, cultural, aesthetic, and narrative encounters encourage our students to act and think interculturally and place themselves at a critical distance from both the foreign culture and their own culture (Byram 1997; Kramsch 1993).

With the modules we have described, students can approach and interact critically with other cultures, utilizing a graded literary reader and its audio and film versions to aid in the acquisition and strengthening of complex linguistic and cultural skills. We hope that our pedagogic proposal can contribute significantly to the undeniable need to educate students to be more informed, curious, critical, and eager to open themselves to the vast and inexhaustible variety of Anglophone societies.

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MARGARET LEE ZOREDA holds a PhD in Education and is a member of the Research Area in Foreign Languages and Cultures at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa. Her interests include film, popular literary genres, EFL curricular design, and interculturality in education.

JAVIER VIVALDO-LIMA holds a PhD in Education and is a member of the Research Area in Foreign Languages and Cultures at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa. His interests include quantitative and qualitative research in reading in EFL, curricular development, and educational psychology.