
Fictional Flights

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FICTIONAL FLIGHTS by Howard Sage. New York: Heinle & Heinle, 1993. Pp. xxi + 280. \$15.

Fictional Flights is much more than just another ESL reader; it is a vehicle for getting adult advanced-level non-native speakers of English affectively involved and actively engaged in reading and discussing authentic short story fiction. As the title suggests, this guided reading approach, which tries to foster independence in literary analysis, is likened to an experience in learning how to fly—first the departure, then the take-off and the training flight, next mid-journey, and finally the solo flight.

With this text, Sage intends to promote the use of authentic literature for ESL learners. He believes that teachers who have been reluctant to expose their second language students to authentic, unsimplified literature and to the linguistic, structural and thematic elements of story-telling would be surprised at their students' potential for understanding and discussing literature.

A common scenario in ESL literature classes is that students passively read a story, but when the teacher tries to elicit their impressions or generate an intelligent discussion of literary analysis, they are at a loss for words. This approach would come to the teacher's aid in these situations by encouraging learners to interact on a productive level with the text. They do this in the various activities which include writing their impressions about the characters, the plot, and the writer's style; by role-playing the characters; and by rewriting the story themselves—rearranging sequences of actions, changing the point of view, and inventing new story endings. The text also explores cross-cultural differences when it asks students to discuss how story characters' would have acted differently in their cultures.

Using the book is a learning experience, as the story content moves from the simple to the complex—from simple folk tales contrasting fact and fantasy to stories with more complex plots and character development. Similarly, the author's guidance in literary analysis, provided in the early chapters titled "Departures" and "Practice Flights", is withdrawn in the later chapters, which are appropriately labeled "Solo Flights." The objective is to create autonomous learners who can eventually discard their "training wheels" and begin to analyze literature on their own. The latter weaning stage is summed up in what Sage calls *The Entrance Method*: Instead of being led step-by-step through the story, students are now asked to decide what are

the easiest and most useful ways to approach a particular story. These approaches are discussions of a story's salient characteristics such as point of view, symbolism, characterization, writing style, symbols, setting, and themes. An audiotape of selected readings may be used to develop readers' listening comprehension as well as to appreciate the influence of aural literary devices of intonation, rhythm, style, and the narrator's dialect.

Now the heavy lifting. How many of your ESL students can actually "earn their wings" using this method? I suspect that my own ESL students at the university can do a lot more than I give them credit for. Although there are some exercises and activities that would be challenging to even the most proficient learners, the book's redeeming virtue is to provide a wide variety of activities after each chapter appropriate for learners with different learning styles and potential for literary analysis. There are a few concepts that are difficult for even a first language learner to grasp that may require further explanation and illustration--such as tracing structural and mythic patterns in stories and distinguishing plots from subplots. However, most of the approaches are conceivably within the grasp of the intended readers. With each new approach, Sage lightens the load considerably by relating new concepts to students' own personal experiences; for example, he introduces the concept of *ritual* by asking students to describe their own daily routines before requiring them to locate rituals within the story text.

This book, one of the best of its kind on the market, should be used for advanced-level ESL students of at least high school age. It would seem appropriate for two kinds of learners: for those who want a fresh approach to reading while cautiously testing the waters of authentic literature appreciation, and for those already exposed to authentic short-story fiction who need to be weaned from over-dependence on teacher and text for literary analysis and to assert their independence. For the former, the learner's short-term goal may be "mid-journey" while for the latter it's the "solo flight."

About the Reviewer

Lionel M. Kaufman, Jr., Ph.D. is Associate Professor at the Humacao campus of the University of Puerto Rico where he has taught applied linguistics, EFL methodology, and EFL courses for the past 20 years. From 1990-92 he was a senior Fulbright lecturer at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey, where he taught courses in research methods and language testing. He is currently editor of TESOLGRAM, the newsletter of the Puerto Rico TESOL affiliate, and a member of the Puerto Rico TESOL board of directors. He holds an MA degree from the University of Puerto Rico and a Ph.D. degree from New York University.