

Experiences Reading Literature and Reading Literature

Comparative Review by Bonnie Gairns

EXPERIENCES READING LITERATURE. John Dennis. Cambridge, Mass.: Newbury House, 1987. pp. xiv + 224. Paperback. \$11.95.

READING LITERATURE. Roger Gower and Margaret Pearson. Harlow, England: Longman Group, 1986. pp. v + 278. Paperback. Cassette. \$14.96.

Thinking of teaching literature in the ESL classroom? The following review presents two texts aimed at equipping upper intermediate to advanced ESL learners to read and enjoy English literature. The selections of both are authentic works by British and American authors. Glosses are provided, but no other concessions are made for ESL readers. In fact the authors suggest their texts may be used in "regular" (non ESL/EFL) literature classes.

Dennis' collection emphasizes American writers of the twentieth century, but makes an effort to include European authors and pieces of different times and places. Each chapter contains one complete short story or poem at a level of difficulty appropriate for Intermediate ESL students. The glosses average one for every fifteen words of text, but some of these are likely to be known to students at this level.

In contrast, there is much difficult vocabulary in the Gower & Pearson text. This may be due in part to the fact that their selections cover a much longer time

span—the 14th century to the present. Some of the pieces could be used with intermediate students, but most would be appropriate only for advanced students. Moreover, glosses are kept to a minimum. Each unit/chapter groups several pieces of work. Frequently, these are excerpts from larger works or even abridged excerpts. Both British and American works are presented, but there is a definite British emphasis.

The twenty-two pieces in *Experiences Reading Literature* are grouped into five general theme groups, but there is no required reading order. Likewise, the ten organizational units of *Reading Literature* do not have to be covered in their given sequence. Each unit has a particular focus, which varies, from a literary form, to ways of building up interest before reading. Both texts provide brief answer keys for some exercises, and the Gower & Pearson book also contains a valuable, condensed history of British and American literature.

The layout of *Experiences* is simple and pleasing to the eye. Each chapter follows the same format: an illustration, biographical notes, cultural notes to establish the appropriate schema, and strategies to be applied in reading the specific piece. Following each selection is a retelling exercise, and questions focussing on the author's structure and style. Class discussion is encouraged, but the work could also be done individually (as homework?) or in pairs or small

groups. Unfortunately, the retelling exercise is a good idea in a poor format. The point is to have students describe the story or poem in their "own" words, but the exercise is essentially a cloze test, with far too many blanks.

The units in *Reading Literature* are highly organized, with a strict adherence to a numbered outline style, but the layout is sometimes cluttered with too many print types and sizes (and highlighting). Overall, the impression is one of high print density per page. Personally, I find it frustrating to look at several different short works or excerpts and would prefer to spend more time on longer, intact pieces. However, teaching and learning styles vary greatly and the strategy of *Reading Literature* is no doubt pleasing to many. There are certainly plenty of different exercise types designed to elicit schema, develop vocabulary and illustrate how language may be used to achieve particular effects.

Experiences is designed to provide one semester's worth of work (about 45 hours), while *Reading Literature* is much denser; working through the entire book would likely require two semesters. Both texts provide a great deal of guidance for the teacher and either one could be used as a main text for a literature class. Alternatively, Gower and Pearson suggest using their text as a supplemental text in conjunction with an anthology. I feel this latter approach would be more appropriate.

Both books reviewed above contain excellent literary selections and interesting exercises. Gower & Pearson's index of 63 authors reads like a "Who's Who" in English literature! Gower & Pearson obviously cover more literary ground than Dennis, but at a price—few works are presented in their entirety. I prefer Dennis' tactic of including only complete works.

On the other hand, *Reading Literature* provides a wealth of exercises, leaving the teacher free to pick and choose among them, while the exercises in *Experiences* may require alteration and expansion.

Overall, for the ESL teacher undertaking a literature course for the first time, *Experiences Reading Literature* is my personal choice. It's very user friendly—for teacher and student alike. The Gower & Pearson text may be intimidating for users without a background in English literature and is unlikely to succeed with ESL students below the advanced level. In addition, I prefer to focus on one, whole work at a time, rather than several samples—however "great" the samples. Nevertheless, literature buffs with an advanced class of enthusiastic students may well be drawn the other way with equally good reason.

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