

# Book Clubs as a Tool for Community Building and Language Enhancement

**D**uring the English Language Book Club's first summer, we read *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and a 19-year-old engineering student from China became obsessed with 1920s flappers, each week bringing us new color printouts of women and their dresses and their finger-wave curls. None of the attendees had heard of flappers before, although some of the older, Western students recognized the images in a nonspecific way—the fringe, the headbands.

A Vietnamese graduate student studying computer science spent much of our time together sketching variations of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg's eyes on the billboard constantly looming over the characters in the novel. A 60-year-old Korean woman, whose connection to the university (and therefore our book club) was that she lived down the street, told us the character Daisy Buchanan was well within her right to cheat on her husband. "He is not a good man, and a woman should be happy," she said. While this stirred up quite a bit of controversy, she stood her ground. We talked a lot about the Jazz Age, and although there were a number of teetotalers in our club, it was generally agreed upon that we would have had fun at Jay Gatsby's parties.

The next summer, the book club was made up of some of the same participants, but new faces filled the seats where we had lost visiting scholars who had returned home or students who had graduated and moved away. We read Dave Eggers' *Zeitoun*, the true story of a Syrian immigrant and his family

living in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. We discussed class and race in America, the cultural landscape of cities, and ways that disasters within the United States are portrayed in contrast to international tragedies—all topics that took on new meaning and weight, as one might imagine, as I discussed them in a room full of people who grew up outside the United States. Although I couldn't wait to get there each week, I felt an odd, new sense of discomfort in these situations. It was perhaps at once the most fun and, in certain moments, the most challenging teaching experience I've ever had.

Because I wasn't really "teaching," I wasn't leading a class or even a workshop, but a book club, and one full of international students and scholars and other members of the community interested in improving their English language skills. I had gathered these folks by posting flyers. And so we came together, but not as teacher and students. Instead, we gathered to read and sit around a table and talk about books with no one standing at the front of the room.

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This book club, free to participants (although sponsored by the English Language Institute of the university), ran for ten weeks each over two summers. I created the club to help international members of the university community improve conversation skills. But the successes went much further than that, and ultimately the groups dug into American history, culture, values, and stories and, as time went on, also felt a real sense of community. And while this particular group met in the United States and stimulated dialogue about this country, it became clear to me over the course of these endeavors that such a club could be even more valuable to communities of English language learners abroad.

### BOOK CLUB CREATION AND GOALS

There was a moment for me at age 17, sitting in a too-hot high school classroom in Virginia, when I understood that there was a real difference in the way I processed a text reading at home in my bed as opposed to hearing it out loud in a classroom and then discussing it. Sprawled across my ivy-print bedspread the night before, I had labored over reading sections of *The Canterbury Tales*. It was supposed to be funny, I knew, but I couldn't see the humor in it because of my struggle with the language. I probably put in about an hour and then shut the book, frustrated that I didn't understand or enjoy what I knew was an important text. Then, the next day in class, our teacher asked us to read out loud. We took turns reading, pausing at various points to dissect the language, to question the story and the characters. Talking it out formed crucial connections for me. And suddenly the text was funny. With

the necessary background information and being asked the right questions, I noticed that my relationship with the text completely changed. It meant something.

A year later, in college, I had a similar experience with *Moby-Dick*, which was admittedly less funny, but made so much more sense to me as I talked through it with other people—even other people who were also struggling with the book. Time after time I experienced this literary enlightenment once I was in a room full of other readers, a shift away from the solitary frustration in my lack of understanding at home. It is so easy to give up on difficult texts, regardless of why they are difficult to us, and yet there is nearly always a moment in a good discussion with other people that can combat these difficulties. What was, at home, perhaps a passage of meaningless phrases that we attempt to underline, consider, and ultimately move past, can become crucial and beautiful. It suddenly has meaning.

These are the experiences I was reflecting upon when I proposed the English Language Book Club to my boss at the time, a language services director at our university, which included a large international population. We decided that the club would be open to any member of the university community. Discussion took place among visiting scholars, their spouses and their children, international graduate and undergraduate students, a few staff members, and a handful of recent immigrants who lived within walking distance to our bright, if overly air-conditioned, room.

### SELECTING TEXTS FOR A BOOK CLUB

When I created and instituted the English Language Book Club, I had never been a member of a formal book club. The idea had always sounded fun in theory, but I couldn't quite picture who I'd gather or join. Every reader I knew in my personal life leaned toward a genre that didn't quite mesh with my interests. Those readers were too into sci-fi or young adult fiction, or they favored graphic novels or dense

biographies of Civil War generals. Besides, I'd heard that most book clubs just devolved into gossip and cheese-and-cracker-eating, which, as far as I was concerned, was much easier to come by and much less useful in helping people learn anything.

While I hesitate to call my selections for the English Language Book Club random, I would be lying if I said that they were particularly systematic choices. That initial summer I chose *The Great Gatsby* for two reasons: First, it was a year of renewed interest in *Gatsby* culturally, with Baz Luhrmann's film version scheduled to appear in theaters midsummer. I also, in the way that many people who attended an American high school do, think of *Gatsby* as the quintessential classic American novel. As Corrigan (2014) says, the text has "been a mainstay for over half a century on high-school reading lists across the land" (5). I considered the insights it provided into that era of American history, and I knew from my other experiences teaching international students and visiting scholars that examining specific cultural moments is a key way to engage them. Generally, they desire this cultural capital almost as much as they want to improve their language skills.

The second summer, I chose *Zeitoun* to work, partially, as *Gatsby*'s opposite. In some sense, it is about the decline of a nose-to-the-grindstone, no-nonsense kind of man rather than about the rise of what some of the book club readers might argue was a full-of-nonsense Jay Gatsby. I saw *Zeitoun* as a kind of textual antidote. I also wanted to try nonfiction as opposed to fiction, and a modern text as opposed to a classic one. One thing that I found particularly interesting was the way participants responded to *Zeitoun* in this book club as opposed to the ways others have when I've taught it in a literature classroom—the shift in dynamic when we move from "teaching" a book in an attempt to lead students to a substantial literary analysis essay as opposed to simply *talking* about the book, about what is interesting or funny or thought provoking. Yes, the English Language Book Club still existed to build skills, but

they are very different skills, and I realized that I chose the books in a way that was much different than if I were teaching them in a literature course. It is no secret that many literature classrooms address reading in a way that is different from the way most people actually read. Or, as Whiteley (2011) says, "anxiety over the connections between what goes on in academic English departments and what goes on in the world of everyday reading, though by no means novel, is the subject of increased awareness and wider debate" (237).

One text-related note that is worth mentioning is that the book club participants were entering at different language levels, which not only made reading and discussing difficult for those with less English language experience, but also, on occasion, frustrated those with higher language levels. Additionally, *The Great Gatsby* is quite simply a more difficult book than I had realized. In addition to the constant cultural references that might trip up a non-native speaker, the language too is tricky. For instance, on page 1 of the book, the text reads:

Conduct may be founded on the hard rock or the wet marshes, but after a certain point I don't care what it's founded on. When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart.

The vocabulary isn't necessarily out of reach for an English language learner, but the metaphors ("Conduct may be founded on the hard rock") and framing of certain images ("I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention") might be. Some students definitely found it difficult to keep up.

Both books worked well overall, but I tend to think this is more a product of an engaged, motivated group than it is the texts themselves, although the participants told me they liked the books and said that the

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focus on specific American periods and places was especially interesting to them. Did the participants identify with the characters? *Gatsby* no; Abdulrahman Zeitoun, at least to some extent, yes. I’m not sure if identifying with the characters—although it is often noted as key for engaging new readers of English—is actually all that important. Stories trump this idea of connection, and so I’d argue that a compelling plot might be even more important in a situation like this one.

### BOOK CLUB DYNAMICS

No matter how many pedagogical arguments are made for subverting the power balance and equalizing the student–teacher relationship, most teachers agree that it is really difficult in a regular classroom. The teacher grades students and so has the power, regardless of how he or she includes students in designing a rubric or seats them in a circle. (I’m not mocking here; I do both in my formal academic classes.) Interestingly, in the book club, I found immediately that the dynamic truly shifted from “I’m the teacher, and you’re the student” to “We’re readers.” While I am technically the “leader” of the book club (I created it and chose our texts, I developed vocabulary lists to help those starting at a lower language level, and I encouraged discussion), I am, after that first meeting, really just another member and reader. This was especially important to me because research has shown that in comparable situations, traditional hierarchies will be less than helpful (Auerbach et al. 1998).

Of course, this might not be the case in other cultures or situations. In such cases, framing the book club as explicitly informal and “not a class” is especially crucial. This may need to be repeated throughout the club’s duration. And even then, in specific cultural situations, this attempt to equalize teacher and student

might be, quite simply, impossible. In such situations, facilitators should still work—perhaps work even harder—at creating a community in which participants feel respected and empowered to speak and even argue. It has always been my feeling that making language learners feel comfortable so that they will actually speak in class is about 40 percent of the English as a second language instructor’s job, and while in some classes and with some groups this can be difficult, with the book club it was straightforward. For me, providing a safe environment is the most crucial requirement for any classroom in which language acquisition is the goal (even if I’m not facilitating a “class” in it).

Oddly, one of the most difficult things for me in adjusting to lead this book club was allowing my facilitating and planning work to be secondary to the conversations the participants wanted to have. I arrived in my first few weeks armed with lesson plans, discussion questions, and copied, stapled vocabulary sheets. In those early sessions, I tried to force the gathering to fit these plans, when, in fact, it became clear that the participants had read and—obviously—wanted to talk about what they read, as one *does* in a book club. Eventually, my preparation took on the form of noting potentially confusing cultural components and writing a handful of starting questions. We often worked only through the first one, and then the participants’ own questions and points of interest took over. I also continued to make vocabulary sheets, but the participants felt comfortable reading through them on their own, and so rather than spending time walking them through these, I handed out the sheets at the end of the meeting, noting that these words and phrases were the trickiest for the chapter they would read the following week.

Because we were able to cultivate a less structured situation than the more formal workshops and classes I usually taught and they usually attended, individuals spoke surprisingly naturally. We went where the discussion took us, talking about those things that interested us. Whereas in, for instance, the grammar workshop I taught (that included some of the book club members), I might have felt the need to steer us back on course if we got off topic, I didn't feel that same pull here. There were many asides, but they were not rooted in what I assumed the club needed but rather voiced by the group. Sometimes these asides were actually a form of clarification: "What is *optometry*? What is a *ward*?" Sometimes these pauses took the form of pronunciation practice: "I struggle with this word *ubiquitous*—can you say that in a sentence and we can practice?" We took ten minutes to look at a map of Louisiana. We stopped to discuss why a writer used *a* as opposed to *the*. If a conversation about Zeitoun's canoe, which he used to travel through the flooded streets of New Orleans, led us into a conversation about boats and, thus, a quick look at a few new words (*paddles*, *oars*, *buoyant*), we were still generally keeping on task, since the task was, essentially, to improve fluency through casual discussion. Attendees gained more genuine practice in conversing—not in practicing the conversational skills deemed important in a workbook.

Additionally, just as I didn't feel compelled to keep the group on task in the same way I do in a formal class, I focused predominantly on the message of their spoken English, rather than in correcting their grammar, word choice, or pronunciation. Our primary concerns were clarity and fluency, which supported both the lower-skill-level participants and their more linguistically adept counterparts. The approach I followed is Fluency First, which "is based on the notion that students acquire a second language not by doing exercises and studying grammar rules but by using language for meaningful communication" (Mlynarczyk 1998, 129). This idea, often called "a basic tenant of the whole language theory," proposes that those learning to speak and write English "should try to imitate the whole skill, even clumsily, before refining any of the

component parts" (Reid 2002, 11). I would jump in with language assistance only when asked or when the student could not clearly convey his or her remark. For instance, when a participant said, "I think Nick is a person who I am not sure I believe about his version of the story," I offered up, "Unreliable narrator." The book club was obviously ideal for this kind of practice, and anecdotally I learned from the participants that this approach was freeing to them, particularly for those spending much of their other learning time in more rigidly focused grammar or academic-writing classes and workshops.

## CONCLUSION

I am a sucker for the cadence of different accents, and on a personal level, hearing my favorite *Gatsby* passages—especially sections I've read dozens of times alone, silently—suddenly delivered from a first-language speaker of Korean or Spanish or Vietnamese is enthralling. Similarly, discussing the politics of Syria or the shorelines of Jordan, as we did while reading *Zeitoun*, with people who, respectively, participated in or witnessed them, is the kind of lucky experience few people ever have.

Much has been said about how communities of readers approach and process texts (Whiteley 2011), in both formal and casual reading groups, but our group was, in fact, reading to develop language, which I'd venture to say the average reader hasn't done since learning his or her first language, struggling with basic school texts in the first or second grade. But the more compelling prompt for me to create the English Language Book Club was the many international students in my academic classes telling me that they felt disconnected from other students who were also working to learn English. And, of course, we see this in English language learners abroad as well. Meeting each week in this kind of environment built, for many participants, this community they'd been longing for. This was the case both in our classroom and, oftentimes, outside of it. In almost every way, the week's reading mattered less than the gathering to talk about that text. Some of the

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club members told me they were big readers in their native languages, and some were not. But ultimately, this didn't matter. What does matter is that in reconfiguring the kind of setting where English language learners gain knowledge and skills, and in offering them a community (and a topic) outside of a classroom where they feel comfortable practicing, we give them an opportunity. (For guidelines on setting up your own English language book club, see the Appendix.)

Of course, as creators or facilitators of book clubs, we have our own unique opportunity. I have a hard time recalling another moment when I found such professional (or, truly, personal) joy as I did during the book club's theater field trip to see and then discuss the latest film adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*. Not every member was able to attend, but many who did brought along their husbands, girlfriends, or a good friend from down the street. We bought popcorn and seemed to take up half the theater. The students nodded in familiarity at Eckleburg's eyes and at the famed green light. They raised their hands to their mouths in anticipation when Daisy got behind the wheel. Perhaps the best part: A Chinese visiting scholar who called herself Rose put her hand on my arm and told me, "I would not have understood the movie if it hadn't been for our discussions." Further, our post-viewing discussion took on an added component that I recall fondly; not only did we consider the decisions of the director, but we discussed them with the tone of a friendly conversation, one where the purpose is to learn what other viewers thought, rather than to practice stringing together complex phrases. We talked not about the clothes of the period, as we had in book club, but rather about which clothes from the film we would have worn, the clothes we loved. We talked about the difficult choices of the characters as though they were our friends. The conversation was easy, which

is something that not many participants had experienced before in English. They engaged in it there in the lobby of the theater, and we all looked forward to the next week, the next conversation.

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# APPENDIX

## Setting Up Your Own English Language Book Club

### 1. Who should start an English language book club?

Facilitators do not necessarily need to have a background in teaching English language learners. Instead, it is more important that facilitators:

- be engaged and excited
- be patient
- be flexible
- work to anticipate and react to the needs of participants
- enjoy discussing Western culture through the frame of the text

It is also key to note that a group—with no specific “leader” or “facilitator” at all (or two facilitators, or rotating facilitators)—could easily and effectively create an English language book club.

### 2. Who should be invited to join the book club?

Diversity breeds engagement. You should invite:

- students
- other teachers
- native English speakers
- anyone else you think might want to participate

### 3. What kinds of texts should the club read?

- Focus on accessibility. Engagement with the text—whether due to an interesting plot, characters readers relate to, or the setting—is more central to success and learning than a specific genre of book or even a specific level of difficulty, as long as the language is somewhat accessible. Try to choose books that are available at the library or inexpensive, perhaps at used bookstores, or those texts in the public domain (meaning they are no longer subject to copyright laws). Avoid expensive, new-release hardcovers.
- Go back to the classics. Many classic texts are now in the public domain, with both print and digital versions available for free. Classic public domain texts to consider include *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Call of the Wild*, and *Ethan Frome*.

- Consider whether your book club might be better suited to short stories, allowing each week to “stand-alone.”

#### **4. Should I seek participant input on the text? If so, how?**

- Involve the book club members in the decision-making process if possible. Research shows that this can be immeasurably helpful in engaging the group (Reid 2002).
- Offer a choice of four or five books, along with brief descriptions.
- Consider taking an electronic survey of participants’ reading interests prior to the first meeting.

#### **5. How quickly should we read?**

This depends on the language level of your book club attendees, but even with very advanced readers, organizers should limit page counts to no more than 30 pages each meeting. Participants will have a lot to say! For a less advanced group of English speakers, you might consider sections of only three to five pages.

#### **6. Are there technological aids that could be useful?**

Facilitators might consider having students:

- screen clips from—or even entire film adaptations of—the texts
- watch or listen to an interview with the author
- use books with a digital audio component so that students who struggle with pronunciation (or who simply do not enjoy the act of reading, or who want to supplement their reading experience) can follow along or use it instead (Reid 2002). LibriVox (<https://librivox.org>) is a great source for public domain audio books, read by volunteer users.
- Skype with a partner at some point during the week to have a pre-discussion talk about the text. This can aid in clearing up confusing plot points prior to the large-group discussion and can help participants build language skills, particularly for those attendees who feel more comfortable talking one-on-one.