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## Using American Coming-of-Age Stories in the ELT Classroom

Elena Ortells Montón

### Abstract

Reading constitutes solid grounds for the development of basic language and critical skills as well as for the improvement of Intercultural Communicative Competence. However, in a world dominated by visual media and technology, getting young people to read becomes a challenging experience, which turns out to be even more problematic in English language teaching. Young adult literature and multicultural coming-of-age stories can offer teachers the necessary materials to foster interest in reading and to raise intercultural awareness. In spite of its limited scope, the project reported in this article proved that a conscientious choice of extracts taken from Yang's *American Born Chinese*, Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, among others, could contribute to improving language learners' linguistic and sociocultural competence. The project employed an interactive methodology based on a combination of critical multicultural pedagogy and reader-response theory, centering on the students' perspectives of their learning experience. While this experience did not answer the question whether the learners' reading competence had in fact increased, the students themselves acknowledged a substantial increase in reading motivation and confidence as well as cultural awareness.

**Keywords:** Coming-of-age stories, YAL, reading, intercultural competence, ELT classroom

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## Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged that reading makes you smarter. A significant number of studies confirm that reading constitutes solid grounds for the development of basic language and critical skills (Alsup, 2010; Grabe, 2009; Krashen, 2004, 2013; Lee, 2015; Mason, 2013) as well as for the improvement of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) (Bland, 2013; Byram, 1990, 1997; Fantini, 2009). Young adult literature (YAL) and multicultural coming-of-age stories can offer educators the necessary materials to foster interest and raise cultural awareness in the teaching space. Stories dealing with teenager development and sociocultural identity can become an invaluable tool for the introduction of multicultural issues in the ELT classroom. However, in a world dominated by visual media and technology, making young people read books becomes a challenging experience. In ELT, students' limited command of the target language is cited as one of the main tenets and conundrums against the use of real literature in this context. Nevertheless, in spite of this seemingly hopeless situation, surveys demonstrate that learners are likely to engage in texts of their own choice and aligned with their current interests. Consequently, since encouraging learners to read for pleasure and providing them with interesting and level-appropriate materials are essential conditions for the success of the process, teachers should receive the necessary support to provide them with literary texts appropriate for their level of language and prevailing concerns (Cremin, Mottram, Bearne & Goodwin, 2008, p. 459).

As a Senior Lecturer at a university, intensely involved with the education of pre-service English teachers and with the possibility of cooperation between high schools and my university, I decided to conduct a project with a view to demonstrating how a good selection of literary passages could offer a comprehensive view of the multiple realities constituting the United States, and provide opportunities for students to reflect upon the consequences of racial profiling and stereotyping. My intention was to show that literature could be extremely helpful in engaging students in reading in English as well as fostering cultural awareness and multiethnic understanding. The multiculturalist project that began in the United States in the 1970's and that contributed to the integration of minority writers in the literary canon was at the basis of the texts selected. In spite of its limited scope, one of the main purposes of this venture was to show how a

conscientious choice of book extracts taken from Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*, Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* among others could contribute to improving language learners' linguistic competence, to enhancing their knowledge of cultural and historical aspects of the past, present and future of the United States, as well as to developing empathy towards the Other.

In his graphic novel *American Born Chinese*, Gene Luen Yang uses the story of Jin Wang, a Chinese-American teenager living in the San Francisco Bay Area, to offer a portrait of Chinese stereotypes and of the struggles experienced by adolescents of mixed cultural identity. Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is the story of Junior, a fourteen-year-old boy who lives with his family on the Spokane Indian Reservation near Wellpinit, Washington, and who chooses to transfer to Reardan, a school attended by rich kids, 22 miles away from his territory. Junior seeks to pursue an education and to avoid the tragic fate apparently reserved for the members of his race. In *The House in Mango Street* Sandra Cisneros presents a rich portrait of the coming-of-age process of Latino adolescent girls in the city of Chicago. Finally, Toni Morrison artfully uses the character of Pecola, the eleven-year-old protagonist of *The Bluest Eye*, to explore the tragic consequences of the prevalence of the white standards of beauty among the African-American community. The excerpts from these titles were intended to develop students' linguistic awareness, essential cultural understanding of the target language and US society and fundamental considerations about coming-of-age processes.

### **Theoretical Framework: Reader-Response Theory and Critical Multicultural Pedagogy**

In her enlightening *Proust and the Squid*, Maryanne Wolf features the terrible effects the absence of literacy provokes in early childhood:

When words are not heard, concepts are not learned. When syntactic forms are never encountered, there is less knowledge about the relationship of events in a story. When story forms are never known, there is less ability to infer and to predict. When cultural traditions and the feelings of others are

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never experienced, there is less understanding of what other people feel.  
(Wolf, 2008, p. 102)

According to several research studies, reading promotes overall comprehension skills, improves passive vocabulary, writing competences and intercultural learning and bolsters students' motivation and confidence (Bland, 2013; Grabe, 2009; Krashen, 2004, 2007, 2013; Lee, 2015). Hence, Stephen Krashen defends extensive reading and reading for pleasure as the basic means to improve language learning:

The manifestation of the Comprehension Hypothesis in literacy is the Reading Hypothesis, the claim that we learn to read by reading, as well as the claim that reading is the source of much our vocabulary and spelling competence, our ability to handle complex grammatical structures, and to write with an acceptable writing style. (Krashen, 2008, p. 180)

Krashen reminds us that 'more free reading results in better reading ability, better writing, larger vocabularies, better spelling and better control of complex grammatical constructions' (2013, p. 15). Moreover, a number of studies show that extensive reading practitioners have more cultural literacy and even more practical knowledge than non-readers and that reading contributes to the development of critical thinking and creativity (Krashen, 2013; Saccardi, 2014). In fact, Saccardi vindicates the role of reading literary texts in the creation of 'creative or divergent thinkers'. A 'creative or divergent thinker' is 'one who pushes the limits of knowledge and ability, is intrinsically rather than extrinsically motivated [...], is able to reframe a problem in order to see it in a different light, and can block out unproductive distractions' (2014, p. xvi). So how can literature contribute to this process? The answer is that we can assist our students in the process of looking 'at characters for what they have to tell us about how to live and grow and contribute to the world around us' (Saccardi, 2014, p. xix). Hence, Ortells suggests that:

[We should be able to use] literature as an instrument to articulate consistent and rational dissent against injustices, literature as a medium to provide our

students with the critical apparatus to question the established system. Today more than ever seems to be the moment to offer learners the adequate assets to perform as real citizens in the near future. (Ortells, 2013, p. 91)

Thus, including texts that epitomize diverse cultural identities expands literary experiences and showcases ethnicity among learners. Hence, my selection of texts was intended to contribute to equip our students with the traits frequently applied to the intercultural speaker: 'respect, empathy, flexibility, patience, interest, curiosity, openness, motivation, a sense of humour, tolerance for ambiguity, and a willingness to suspend judgment' (Fantini, 2009, p. 198). Consequently classrooms should become 'cultural sites' (Rogers & Soter, 1997, p. 6) 'where interrogation, struggle, and social critique are commonplace' (Lewis and Dockter, 2011, p. 83-84).

The design of the project was to record the response to an interactive methodology based on a combination of critical multicultural pedagogy and reader-response theory, centering on the students' perspectives of their learning experience. On the one hand, reader response theory focuses on the active role of the reader in a dialogue with the text (Fish, 1980; Iser, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1976), demystifying the reading process and enhancing the autonomy and the critical skills of the learning subject. The theoretical framework of reader response becomes extremely challenging and provocative in the field of YAL since 'reader-response methods can help to illuminate the values and attitudes that readers sometimes hide, even from themselves' (Benton, 2005, p. 96). On the other hand, critical multicultural pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1997; Jupp and Sleeter, 2016) undermines hierarchical race and gender formations, promotes awareness of diversity and respect for pluralism, and avoids the polarization of society and the prevalence of antagonistic views.

### **Methodological Approach and Development of the Project**

#### **Learners' reading habits**

An invitation to participate in the project was sent to three English departments of different high schools in the Valencian Community of Spain. Six teachers from these high schools offered their classrooms as laboratories in which I could implement my proposal. Two hundred and eight students with similar social, economic and ethnic

backgrounds from first and second year of Spanish ESO (Compulsory Secondary Education) partook in the experiment. The sample was gender-balanced and varied widely in English proficiency, ranging from pre-intermediate to intermediate levels.

The project was launched with an exploration of the students' attitudes towards the act of reading, and specifically towards the act of reading in English. Questionnaires intended to learn about the students' views on integrating literature into their learning contexts were administered. Although only 30 per cent of students admitted to reading regularly, up to 55 per cent indicated having read in Spanish titles such as James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* (2009) or John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012). Findings showed that despite their limited reading habits, nearly 80 per cent of the sample wanted a choice in the classroom texts they read and they cited a large number of YAL works as examples of books they would like to read as part of their English curriculum. Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (2007), Rachel Renee Russell's *Dork Diaries* (2009), Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) or John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006) were among the works mentioned. However, when confronted with the possibility of reading fragments of these texts in the English classroom, most of the students showed reluctance, quoting their inadequate knowledge of English as the main drawback.

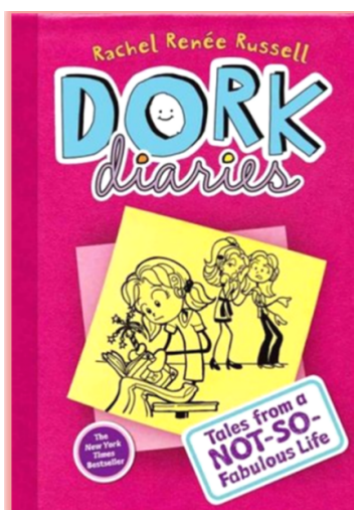


Figure 1: *Dork Diaries. Tales from a Not-so-Fabulous Life*



Figure 2. Pages 8 – 9. Courtesy of the author Rachel Renée Russell.

In order to undermine this negative preconception and bolster their self-esteem, I resorted to using two vignettes taken from Jeff Kinney's well-known *Diary of a Wimpy Kid. Hard Luck* (2013) and Rachel Renée Russell's *Dork Diaries. Tales from a Not-so-Fabulous Life* (2009) (see Figures 1 and 2), which presented conventional situations in the lives of teenagers.

Most students were able to make sense of the events presented on these pages and showed a certain degree of willingness to go on reading longer extracts from these books. Obviously, the combination of text and visual images proved extremely helpful since it contributed to overcoming linguistic difficulties. Students' intuitions regarding the interpretation of the text were reinforced by the illustrations, and as a result, their confidence was strengthened. Consequently, as Lisa Schade Eckert states, it seems evident that literacy education should include instruction on how the visual elements in a text interact and contribute to the creation of meaningful interpretations (2010, p. 139), especially in the field of reading in ELT.

However, there was still a serious obstacle that had to be overcome. In one of the groups of the second year of ESO (Spanish Compulsory Secondary Education) of the first high school I visited, there was an assembly of 14- and 15-year-old students on the brink of abandoning their studies and, consequently, deeply uninterested in the curriculum. Instead of utilizing the examples previously mentioned, I opted for the use of catchy fragments from J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. The figure of the rebellious protagonist Holden Caulfield together with a reference to the presence of swear words in the book and a selection of expressions from the text such as 'Sex is something I really don't understand too hot' or 'Mothers are all slightly insane' were enough to immediately catch their attention.

### **Learners' representations of the United States**

The next step consisted of exploring the students' knowledge of the United States and of Americans. In order to do so, in the first high school I visited, 70 students ranging from ages 12 to 14 were asked to brainstorm ideas about things American. As a result, they mentioned the flag of the United States and referred to conventional stereotypes regarding food and garments, such as hamburgers, hot dogs, cowboy hats and jeans. They drew on prior knowledge and on classmates' comments. Afterwards they were

requested to draw an American citizen. The majority of sketches centered on the idea of a white male patriot, wearing a cowboy hat and waving a flag, eating a hamburger or a hot dog, and drinking Coke.

The remaining drawings generally offered more ‘neutral’ portraits in terms of cultural stereotyping but yet overwhelmingly agreed on the whiteness of the individuals. Within this group, which decided on white race as a defining trait of ‘Americanness’, 18 per cent of the participants decided on a male character whereas the other 13 per cent opted for presenting a female individual (see Figure 3).

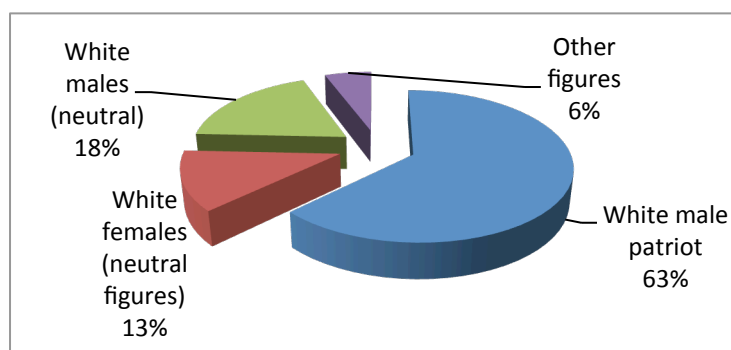


Figure 3. Students' responses to the question 'What is an American?' - High School 1

Among the 70 contributions, a single very outstanding exception was a student of Latino origin who chose to render the ethnic diversity of the United States of America and at the same time to underline the tragic fate of some of its members (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Sketch by a student of Latino origin at High School 1

After analyzing the data I realized that the sketches might have been swayed by the previous brainstorming about things American and, consequently, in the sessions



implemented in the other two high schools (70 participants in High School 2; 68 participants in High School 3), the order of the sequence was altered so that learners were asked first to draw their vision of what an American citizen was like before brainstorming their ideas about things American. Figure 5 presents the results.

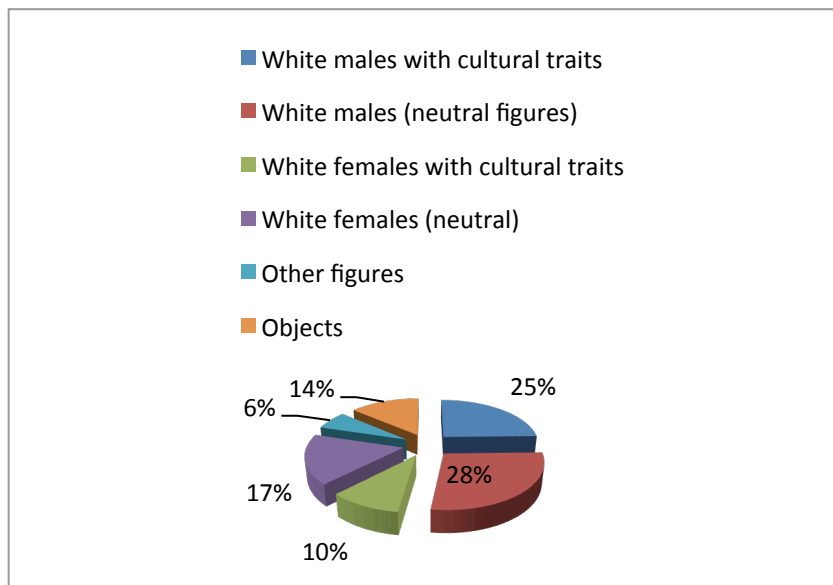


Figure 5. Students' responses to the question 'What is an American?' - High Schools 2 and 3

Accordingly, 53 per cent of the drawings were much more 'neutral', as we can see in Figure 6:



Figure 6: Sketches from students in High Schools 2 and 3

Additionally, the contrast between male and female representations was much more balanced (28 per cent male versus 25 per cent female). Even though both male and

female figures were still accompanied by culturally-marked objects such as American flags or T-shirts in 27 per cent of the examples, the character of the white male patriot was reduced to the minimum and even in one of the groups (a multilingual/multicultural classroom in High School 3, which consisted of 15 students) a significant presence of white female figures was noticed (41 per cent) as shown in Figure 7.

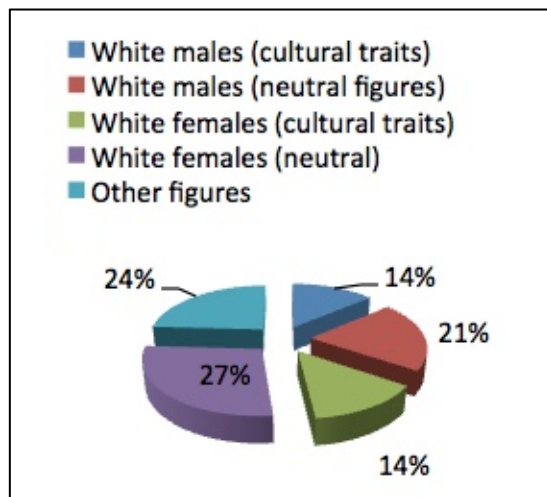


Figure 7. Students' responses to the question 'What is an American?' in a multilingual classroom - High School 3

Not only that, interestingly enough, many of the members of this group associated the concept studied with their English teacher, a blonde, blue-eyed, and freckled young woman, whom they adored, as shown in Figure 8. This clearly documented the decisive influence of the teacher as a role model in the education of adolescents.



Figure 8: Sketches from a multilingual/ multicultural classroom in High School 3

Besides this prevailing figure, other figures were represented which included an African-American – later referred to as Obama – a soldier figure and Abraham Lincoln (see Figure 9).



Figure 9. Students' drawings in High School 3

### **Learners' discovering a multicultural American literature**

One of the aims of this project was to encourage reading in English through a variety of passages which presented an inclusive view of the numerous ethnicities which create the United States, and to compel learners to ponder upon the dangers of racial stereotyping. It was therefore necessary to help students depart from the stereotype of whiteness as a defining trait for 'Americanness' and to introduce the idea of a multicultural America and, accordingly, of a multicultural literature. First, in order to illustrate the wide variety of ethnic groups that coexist in the United States, photographs of famous Native Americans, African Americans, Chinese Americans, and Mexican Americans were introduced. Secondly, students were presented with the events which surrounded the peopling of these new territories during the colonial period and explained how these affairs conditioned the lives of their native inhabitants. Next, they learned about the circumstances of each one of the different groups. This arrangement allowed them to delve into the constant struggle of Native Americans to defend their rights, preserve their territories, and fight against the terrible effects of the Manifest Destiny ideology and to reflect upon the long history of black slavery and segregation, Chinese immigration trends and restrictive entry laws, and Latino stereotypes and racial profiling in the United States. Slides containing images of the genocide against Native Americans, the ruthless oppression and discrimination of African Americans and the

terrible circumstances in which Chinese and Latino/a immigrants entered the United States were used to illustrate these aspects.

Finally, the teaching approach devised for this session comprised several activities whose main aim was to use literary texts to familiarize students with issues of race, gender and identity in the United States and to help them reflect upon the perils of acculturation and assimilation and consider the importance of bridging gaps between cultures. My intention was to make learners “cross the borders” from their known cultures into the less familiar cultures of others’ (Kuo, 2010, p. 31).

Thus, they were presented with a photograph of four authors – two males, two females – of different ethnic provenance, namely Native American, African American, Chinese American, and Mexican American. Students were asked to match the photographs with the names. The choice of authors was determined by their relevance within the literary canon and their recognition as celebrated representatives of a ‘minority’ group (see Figure 10).

Although most of the students performed this task successfully (89 per cent), some had problems with connecting Toni Morrison and Sherman Alexie to their corresponding photographs. The reason for that being that Toni in Spanish is a name traditionally associated with males. Those who failed to match these authors were extremely surprised by this connection. By being exposed to the names and photographs of these writers, learners reflected upon issues such as naming and identity, gender prejudices, and appearances and stereotypes.

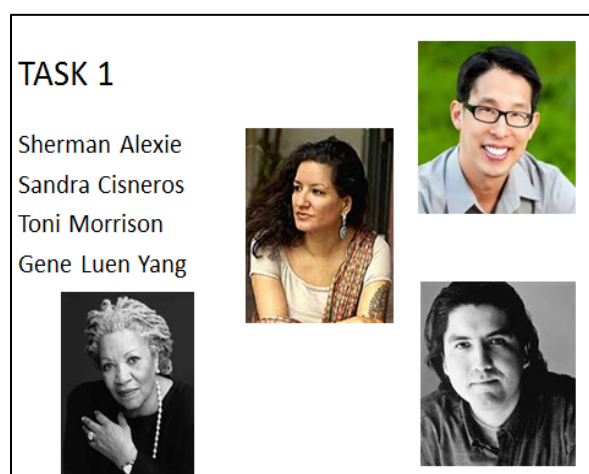


Figure 10. Task 1

The ensuing activity consisted of matching the title of a book written by each one of them with a significant quote pertaining to the texts chosen. The task was designed taking into consideration what the students would enjoy reading and what they would be capable of accomplishing in order to diminish their level of anxiety, enhance their self-esteem and boost their motivation. I selected passages with adolescent-sensitive themes, and which exhibited an unsophisticated linguistic register and even drew on some key words that allowed learners to easily work out the correlation between title and passage in most cases (see Figure 11). In fact, by making use of their background knowledge and of the same reading strategies they would use in their mother language, nearly 98 per cent of the students were able to successfully accomplish the task.

TASK 2	
<i>American Born Chinese</i>	Each night Pecola prayed for blue eyes.
<i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</i>	Your <i>abuelito</i> is dead, Papa says early one morning in my room. <i>Está muerto...</i>
<i>The House on Mango Street</i>	He and his family recently moved all the way from China...San Francisco...
<i>The Bluest Eye</i>	You can't just betray your tribe and then change your mind

Figure 11. Task 2

In order to encourage extensive reading, to introduce sociocultural and historical issues about each one of the different ethnic backgrounds, and to help students reflect upon their perception of cultural identity and their response to difference, the learners were presented with a careful selection of passages from the aforementioned authors, as outlined below. The extracts chosen from the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang deal with false beliefs regarding Chinese origins and cultural traditions (see Figure 12).

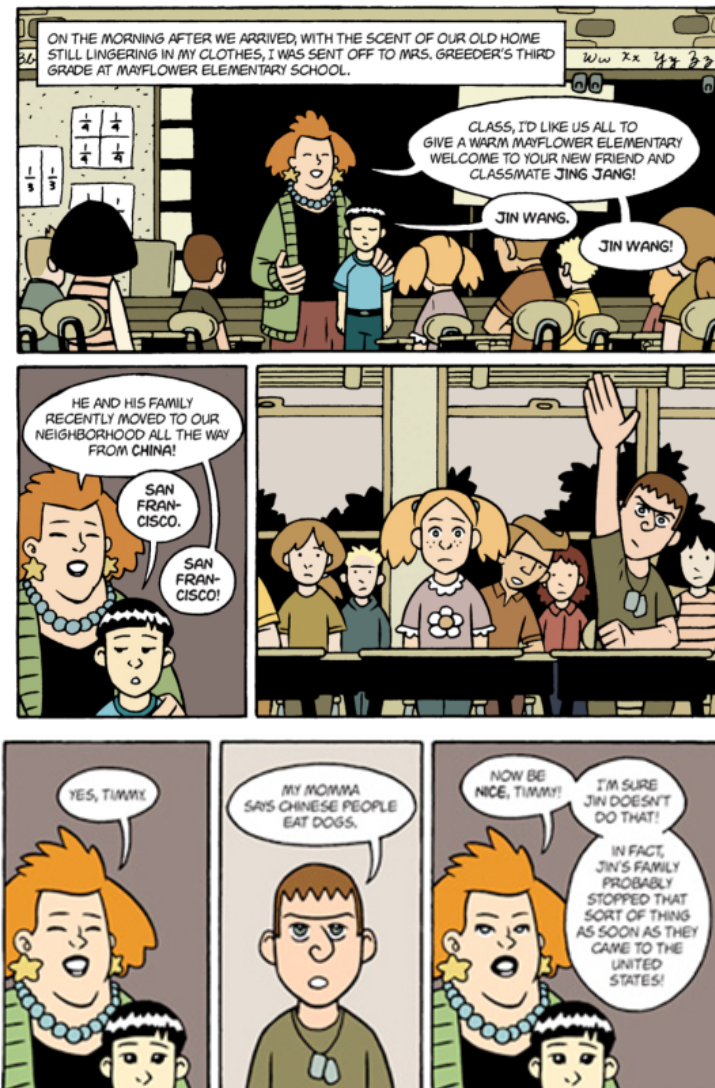


Figure 12. *American Born Chinese* (2009, pp. 30-31). Courtesy of the author Gene Luen Yang

The fragment selected from Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* was intended to familiarize students with a cultural and linguistic issue among Native Americans; for example, why the term 'apple' is commonly used to refer to a member of this group who behaves like a white person.

'The people at home,' I said. 'A lot of them call me an apple'  
 'Do they think you're a fruit or something', he asked.  
 'No, no,' I said. They call me an apple because they think I'm red on the  
 outside and white on the inside.'

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‘Ah, so they think you’re a traitor.’

‘Yep.’

‘Well, life is a constant struggle between being an individual and being a member of the community.’ (Alexie, 2007, p. 132)

The following piece belongs to *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros and reflects upon the protagonist’s dream of being a writer and her sense of belonging (or not) to her natural community.

I like to tell stories. I tell them inside my head [...]

I make a story for my life [...]

I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn’t want to belong. (Cisneros, 2009, p. 109)

Finally, as the passage quoted below illustrates, Toni Morrison skillfully uses the protagonist of her novel to delve into the disastrous effects of the white esthetics on African Americans.

It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes [...] if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. [...] If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too [...] Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. (Morrison, 1999, p. 44)

The learners were also alerted to the significance of the term ‘oreo’ among the African American community and talked about how this phrase is commonly used as derogatory to refer to a member of this group who behaves like a white person.

In order to encourage the debate on the fragments, students met around an oval table and engaged in literary discussions without the teacher’s intervention, following an approach used in Dialogic Literary Gatherings (Flecha, 2000). This approach is considered an example of ‘critical pedagogy and dialogic and transformative learning’ (García Carrión, 2015, p. 914) and heavily depends upon dialogue based on egalitarian



relationships (Flecha & Soler, 2013, p. 456). That is, the exchanges were founded on the rationality of the students' arguments rather than on the authoritative voice of the teacher (Habermas, 1984).

The results proved the potential of these materials to encourage reading in the ELT classroom. The learners' reaction towards the literary fragments and the culturally-related materials was extremely positive. They were observed actively engaged in the reading of the passages and showed great curiosity regarding the educational issues that accompanied the presentation. They were also quite eager to know more about the protagonists' life experiences and ethnic provenance. Ten students in High Schools 2 and 3 showed curiosity for *American Born Chinese* and asked about the possibility of having access to the work in Spanish or Catalan since they felt they would not be able to read the whole graphic novel in English. Not only that, the excerpts served, ultimately, to lead some of the most outstanding students to extensive free reading of one of the literary works suggested, *The Absolute True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Five students from High School 1 and six students in High School 3 asked for the reference to the book, expressing their interest in reading it in their free time. As Kolb (2013) argues, if they feel they can read in English, their confidence will be bolstered and their reading habit encouraged. As a consequence, once the reading habit has been established, comprehension strategies are strengthened, language and intercultural competences increase, and emotional and affective factors are developed.

## Conclusion

To summarize, in spite of the limited scope of this project, the results provide positive implications for the integration of multicultural YAL in ELT. The study presented this literature as invaluable material to promote reading in English, provided an adequate selection of materials – in terms of level, age, gender and interest – takes place, and to raise the students' awareness about 'otherness' exploiting the potential of literature for cultural learning. The project shows how to employ fragments of multicultural YAL to acquaint learners with issues of race, gender and identity in the United States and to help them ponder upon the significance of developing understanding between cultures. Consequently, I would suggest this genre should be considered as an essential component of the educational milieu of pre-service teachers.



While this experience did not answer the question whether the learners' reading competence had increased, the students themselves reported a substantial increase in reading motivation and confidence, and cultural awareness. A larger sample size and a longer period of time would shed more light on how YAL contributes to the acquisition of the English language and culture, and to the development of critical and emotional responses among adolescent learners. As Rosenblatt affirmed, 'literature makes comprehensible the myriad ways in which human beings meet the infinite possibilities that life offers' (1976, p. 6). However, it is up to the teacher to select adequate texts to engage students in the process of reading and to convince education authorities of the important role literature can play in the formation of a twenty-first century generation of divergent thinkers and resourceful entrepreneurs.

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