



## ESL Student Identity and the Multigenre Research Project

This article proposes to incorporate Freirean philosophy with a technique used in academic (monolingual) English courses: the multigenre research paper. When applying this technique in the ESL classroom, it is crucial to also use global and international texts of various genres in order to support students' cultural identities and also instill a sense of social justice. The theoretical framework is based upon Freire's ideas, with an overview of how the theory is implemented using the multigenre research project format in an advanced-level ESL Reading class. Results indicated that this method syncs with theory and that this format motivated students to read widely, validated their sense of self, and encouraged both independent and collaborative work in and out of class.

### Introduction

From kindergarten to college in a range of genres, from classic texts to hip-hop lyrics, English language texts can be employed to instill much more than literacy in English as a Second Language (ESL) students. English texts of various genres can impart aesthetic appreciation in our ESL students, while also illuminating cultural and aesthetic norms embedded in the texts. Moreover, by comparing and contrasting the way genres are constructed structurally and stylistically—and by a critical reading of the texts—ESL students can also validate their cultural identities while becoming global citizens. This, in turn, leads ESL students toward biliteracy and biculturalism while simultaneously supporting critical-thinking skills that encourage creativity and a sense of social justice.

Using a variety of global and international texts that model culturally embedded genres, educators can help ESL students not only to grasp an aesthetic and efferent reading of global and international texts, but also to engage critically with texts to nourish their sense of self and to engage as global citizens (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). In this article, we discuss the multigenre research project as a way to support and amplify ESL students' critical engagement with global and international texts in an ESL Reading classroom. Using this technique, we demonstrate how to offer high-quality global and international texts to serve as models for the multigenre research projects (MGRP), which in turn supports ESL students' identities and sense of social responsibility.

ity. MGRPs help ESL students to interact creatively with texts on several genre levels, thus contributing significantly to learning English registers, particularly the academic register. We begin this paper by first discussing some aspects of Freirean critical pedagogy, which underpins our philosophical framework as teachers. Next, we define and discuss global and international texts and the multigenre research project. Then we describe how to connect international texts with the project to support ESL student identities. Finally, we discuss the process of designing and completing a multigenre research project (MGRP) in our ESL Reading classroom.

## Freire and Critical Pedagogy

### *Dialogue*

As ESL educators, we strive to create learning environments that support positive identity development to manifest among our culturally and linguistically diverse students. Such learning environments must not be oppressive. They should allow ESL students to pursue solutions to problems that matter in their daily lives, to problematize and question the status quo, to feel empowered to play a role in social responsibility and positive global action, and feel empowered. ESL students must critically read both the written word and the world in which they live if they are to positively affect their world as global citizens. Teachers want classroom environments that permit students to engage in what Freire (1973) termed authentic dialogue and liberation. Paulo Freire's main objective was to promote this manner of classroom culture. Key Freirean concepts supporting cultural identity among ESL students now follow.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/1990), Freire wrote that dialogue is "the encounter between men [sic], mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (p. 76). Freire's dialogue does not simply imply talking passively with others, but rather it refers to active engagement with others. For example, in regard to media and how it can distort global issues, Freire would argue that global citizens must analyze what is being told to them by dialoguing with it and not simply passively accepting broadcasted messages. Authentic dialogue generates liberation from dominant media and other oppressive structures; such dialogue is key to positive social change. As teachers, we seek ways to promote authentic dialogue to help students to develop positive and global identities.

Freire argues that dialogue can benefit students in several ways by generating authentic cooperation. ESL students can create dialogues that address global issues. Dialogue also generates unity among students, thus combating misunderstanding and oppression. Teachers advocating Freirean critical pedagogy question gender and racial inequality by addressing these topics. Dialogue allows individuals and groups to get organized and stay organized. Moreover, ESL students can perceive the needs of others. No one is left out of the organizing process, thus allowing everyone a voice. Real dialogue allows for differing cultural groups to synthesize and present their own nonmainstream ideologies or discourses. Authentic dialogue allows students to come together through their own free will.

When teachers support authentic dialogue, we are scaffolding ESL students

toward developing their own voices. This process moves away from a banking model of education—in which the teacher “deposits” information into passive student recipients. Banking models see students “as ‘containers,’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher” (Freire, 1970/1990, p. 72) and do not permit students to become global citizens, for they are unable to transform their own worlds. Banking education creates the misconception that the teacher has all the information and power; students are ignorant and powerless. In contrast, when using dialogical styles of education, both teachers and students learn from one another.

The banking style of education also hinders the development of students’ global identities. Freire argues, “Solidarity requires true communication” (1970/1990, p. 77). When a teacher goes into a classroom and lectures about global issues while the students listen passively, no unity exists between teacher and students. The power dynamic is skewed: Students are in the classroom only to listen, retain, and regurgitate the teacher’s words. But, when using a dialogical educational style, students realize that the teacher can help them obtain the tools they need to reflect upon their identities as active global citizens.

### ***Transitive Educational State***

Freire (1970/1990) wrote that those who are in a transitive state can “progress from naïve rebellion to critical intervention” (p. 32). This empowers students with the ability to realize and comprehend people, objects, and situations holistically. Intransitive students do not understand why they are in an oppressed condition—they may not even perceive their oppression. Transitive students, however, may change their world because they have developed a critical awareness of the people and objects around them and of their situation. Transitive students often choose to be proactive.

Freire argued that youth can put things that are historical into the present, thereby bringing history into the current movement for liberation; “the people are the subjects of their history too” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 82). Students grow personally, globally, culturally, and critically; culture evolves as well. Thus, ESL students may create their own history via literacy—because by reading and writing words and understanding what is occurring in the outside world, critical intervention can occur (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Yet even though one can read the word, she may not “read the world.” This is why dialogical education is crucial. When reading the word *and* reading the world are emphasized, literacy and social justice are enhanced. We believe that Freire’s theories of creating one’s own history segue neatly with the format of the multigenre research paper, which in turn supports the development of ESL student identity.

### ***Praxis***

Freire (1970/1990) defines praxis as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 51). But for ESL students to develop their cultural identities, they must be in the midst of an educational setting that promotes both taking action and actively reflecting. Praxis lies at the root of identity development because it requires critical awareness and action.

Significantly, ESL students must use dialogue when engaging in praxis, for,

without dialogue, critical reflection cannot occur. Our students need to engage with each other, their teachers, and others outside the classroom to generate, share, and refine their ideas. Praxis builds social and cognitive relationships. As these relationships strengthen, ESL students become empowered, and they can explore their sense of self.

Now that we have outlined Freire's critical pedagogy: dialogue, transitive educational state, and praxis, we turn to employing this pedagogy in the ESL Reading classroom. ESL students can become empowered by engaging with global issues by first reading global and international texts, and second, by creating multigenre research projects.

### **Why Use Global and International Texts?**

ESL teachers pay attention to supporting student identity: specifically cultural and global, because our students are culturally and linguistically diverse. ESL students are curious; they want to know about other cultures, not just their own and the American culture they are experiencing. They crave authentic and memorable experiences. ESL students cross national borders via texts to meet other minds. International texts illustrate what is written in and published outside of the US, whereas global texts focus on sociocultural aspects of life outside of the US (Montero & Robertson, 2006, p. 28).

Global and international texts are necessary for ESL students. First, students can identify themselves as global citizens; our ESL students "develop a deep understanding of the need to take action as global citizens of the global community to help solve the world's difficult problems" (Banks, 2004, p. 294). Students who position themselves as global actors may look critically at existing social systems. For example, by conducting a multigenre research project, one of our students recognized how global warming affects not only her community and nation but also its impact around the world.

Second, global and international texts help ESL students build intercultural understandings, allowing them to "develop awareness and respect for different cultural perspectives as well as the commonality of human experience" (Short, 2009, p. 3). These texts offer varying aesthetics and multiple perspectives on certain issues, demonstrating that these differing perspectives are just as important as their own. Our students all felt that they had become more open-minded by participating in both viewing and creating multigenre research projects.

Establishing the import of our students' own points of view is part of critical pedagogy. We found our ESL students bringing personal experiences into classroom discussions about global issues, and with this cultural knowledge, together they analyzed how their own cultures posed and proposed solutions to global problems. Finally, establishing respect for differing cultural points of view is essential to promoting intercultural understandings.

Global and international texts help students to realize and value the need to develop awareness of ongoing global issues. These texts highlight current events and can be worked into ESL Reading curricula. Such reading develops political consciousness as well as literacy.

## The Multigenre Research Project

Multigenre research projects strengthen ESL students' global identities by allowing teachers and students to work interdependently within the concepts of Freirean critical pedagogy, all the while delving deep into global and international texts. Multigenre research projects contain text in which "each piece of the paper [project] utilizes a different genre, reveals one facet of the topic, and makes its own point" (Allen, 2001, p. 2). ESL students research different kinds of genres that best suit the presentation of their topic and they do in-depth research. Multigenre research projects allow students to "consider multiple perspectives on a topic and represent those perspectives through different genres" (Groenke, Maples, & Henderson, 2010, p. 32). In sum, writing in different genres is not only creative but also encourages different perspectives and enhances the use of academic registers.

Using highly diverse genres—poems, job applications, letters to a friend, postcards, and so forth—ESL students become more culturally aware and competent in English. This Freirean understanding of dialogue manifests itself in both written and visual texts because students are reading both the written word and the world critically. Significantly, students interact with modern forms of literacy and media. They read and write using unconventional sources, which differ greatly from traditional formats, such as the five-paragraph essay or the traditional research report. Take, for example, a typical newspaper, which has more than 30 types of genres (Allen & Swistak, 2004). ESL students who create multigenre research projects can draw upon their own cultural funds of knowledge to produce projects that allow them to shine using modern multimedia and other sources.

Multigenre research projects allow ESL students choices and creativity. Students can clarify what is personally important to them while evolving their identities (Romano, 1990). Choice is also essential in Freirean critical pedagogy because, without choice, students cannot liberate themselves from personal and structural oppression. Choice is a powerful motivator (Moulton, 1999). Choices motivate students to write and research deeply. They produce richer writing and create more creative final products (Allen & Swistak, 2004).

Finally, multigenre research projects benefit young researchers by offering students a sense of empowerment. Students must be well informed about global issues to become future leaders. Understanding and analyzing global issues helps young people to define their cultural identity. ESL students who do research for multigenre research projects become competent in various creative methods of presenting research (Romano, 1990). Multigenre research projects are also relevant. They incorporate

changes that have made the content more relevant to students' lives and interests; changes that have incorporated research tools other than books, such as interviews and Internet data; changes that have made the presentation more accessible and interesting to audiences other than academia. (Moulton, 1999, p. 528)

We now discuss a semesterlong multigenre research project in our ESL Reading classroom.

### **The Multigenre Research Project in Our ESL Classroom**

#### ***Classroom***

Our ESL Reading class had a cohort of 12 students: three from South Korea, four from Saudi Arabia, one from Mainland China, two from Vietnam, one from Venezuela, and one from West Africa. All students were under age 30; eight of them were between 21 and 25 years old.

Our department categorized this class level as a bridge course; this meant that these students had either gained a 500 on the TOEFL, thus admitting them into undergraduate courses at our university, or they were within 15 points of the 500 mark. Those who had gained 500 were simultaneously taking undergraduate courses and also Reading or Writing ESL courses to bolster their academic proficiency in English.

#### ***Past Instruction Techniques***

In the past, this bridge reading class was conducted very much like a seminar course: The instructor, trained in linguistics, assigned readings, and the students discussed the readings in class. Some grammatical, lexical, and stylistic handouts were offered for each reading, and a series of comprehension tests were administered every 3 to 4 weeks. These assessments included cloze exercises, multiple-choice questions, and essay questions designed to elicit critical comprehension. The instructor had complete control of the “talk” in the classroom, *initiating* questions for specific *response* to make an *evaluation* (IRE). Students did not complain, but clearly they were not thrilled to be in yet another teacher-led lecture class that fed them required bits of information and that was designed to help them successfully pass a series of tests. Sometimes the instructor would hand out typed questions and pair up the students for what he called “collaborative work.”

#### ***Multigenre Instruction Techniques***

To employ the multigenre research project (MGRP), it was important from the beginning to present global and international texts in a variety of genres to serve as models for culturally diverse, socially aware, and technically sound writing. As a class, we visited a research librarian. She taught our students how to search for excerpts from world literature, international newspapers, poetry journals, songs, and various online sources. Some tech-savvy students also gave minilessons in downloading and finding information on the Internet. Students did private searches as well. In class, students did “pair-shares”—acting as peer partners to read and choose texts together. The class also met in small groups to evaluate potential texts and outlines for themes and topics. During specific class periods, students offered their research proposals to the class, which in turn responded with positive mini-analyses. No formal testing was conducted, but we created vocabulary cards to play concentration-type matching games with key words derived from students’ topics. As a group, we also played with

short pieces of student-generated text in the form of scrambled sentences, and we changed story endings, rewrote obituaries/articles/headlines, and added or edited songs and poems.

We conducted what Graves (2003) calls writers' consultations—meeting with students individually regarding their research topic during office hours. Students had regular, independent class sessions in the library from the 3rd week to the 15th week to give them time to research their topics. At midsemester, before the break, we rechecked student progress and again offered comments. Peer partners also signed their partner's checklist and commented as well. As they worked on their projects, we as a class also worked through the various genres: short story, book review, poems (sonnet, haiku, free verse, and couplets), songs, argument essay, newspaper articles (editorial, news, features, complaints, and obituaries), and cartoon captions. We also analyzed headlines, leads, hooks, and abstracts. The final, abstracts, also included a brief examination of the structure of an abstract for formal academic articles. During the final week of class the students made individual presentations on their topic: Additionally, they could choose to explain their process. They discussed their choice of media and genre. Some presented their projects in PowerPoint format, taking a more academic stance. On the last day of class, portfolio projects were placed around the class, along with laptops. Students from other classes came to view their projects and listened to the authors speak. This last class was a festive event, offering public validation to the students and snacks and cold drinks to everyone. The IEP director and visiting instructors also attended this event.

### **Discussion**

Through instigating multigenre research projects in our ESL Reading classroom, we aimed to support student identity. Through our giving our ESL students choices, students had access to authentic learning. They gained higher levels of English literacy, and they also learned to take responsibility and explore a variety of texts and mediums. Moreover, students taught each other and motivated themselves. As instructors, we guided rather than dispensed select information.

Students chose their own topics and genres. This choice motivated them and sustained them to complete their projects. "I was obsessed with presenting my topic to everyone, not just to you for a grade," one Saudi student said after the semester. "I felt I learned something important about a different culture from another student, rather than from you or a book," a Vietnamese student said. "I liked having the freedom to choose," said an African student. Clearly, choice gave students freedom to reflect upon what they felt passionate about, and this freedom ultimately educated everyone, including the teachers.

To prepare students for this project, we, along with several tech-savvy guest speakers, offered formats that displayed ways to present information in an organized fashion. As teachers, we presented and reviewed book and magazine layouts as models. Also, we explained basic graphic design by photocopying pages and ideas and posting them around the classroom. Setting forth a

clear but flexible plan to create this project, and posting portfolio-assessment guidelines, became our primary job (see the Appendix for portfolio-assessment guidelines). Allowing choice of genres demonstrated that our students knew more than we did about using new media. Their creativity and scope of genres was amazing. For example, one student not only chose traditional text genres—poetry, journalism, narrative—but also made an iMovie that caught the attention of his classmates and our school director; his subject addressed the legality of euthanasia. Another ESL student, with an artistic background, chose to portray her topic in images as well as text; she researched the life of Frida Kahlo. She drew sketches, imported graphics, and PhotoShopped her images with a keen, artistic eye. Her method of presentation was PREZI, a new form of PowerPoint. Another student typed and illustrated hip-hop lyrics that he modified and sang, using an embedded music track to express the racism of US Homeland Security toward Arabic visitors after 9/11.

Allowing students the choice to engage with many genres demonstrated that voice can be used within different modes. It also demonstrated the personal and keen political interests of these students. One student from Korea presented the leaders of her country in contrast with those of other countries by creating cartoons with animated speaking heads (in original soundtrack with colorful text translation) to demonstrate how different cultures perceive political terms, such as *socialism*, *capitalism*, *fascism*, and *democracy*.

New media genres have changed the way people view literacy. The Internet and sophisticated software programs, such as the CS Adobe suite, have changed the ways we present text. We think it is crucial to allow ESL students to use these media in academic settings to express their identities and to enhance their English and other language skills.

The multigenre research project had a final book format, which helped students by offering a loose structure and a modicum of discipline. Defining the term *book* reflected student identity in terms of culture and technology. One student, for example, presented her entire project digitally, creating in effect an e-book: she turned in a thin notebook consisting of succinct abstracts for her links and images. Another student created a cloth book in traditional Chinese format, with the script and imagery running vertically rather than horizontally, and she also sewed a pouch in the book to hold a flash disk with her voice recordings. Finally, as mentioned, some students combined digital software to create both an online (in Google Docs or on a personal website) as well as a paper project.

In sum, we tried to anticipate potential obstacles that would obstruct the completion of the finished project. Our guest speakers served as cheerleaders because this semesterlong project required sustained discipline and focus among our ESL students, who needed validation as well as editorial help. They needed to know that the end project was their portfolio and final grade. Students needed structure in the form of a “book” as portfolio, and they needed our minilessons on genre as a resource and as a break from this big, at times overwhelming, project. By completing this task, students felt empowered to



step into the global society. They had created valid, contemporary texts that presented serious global issues.

We did not ask the students to keep weekly reflective journals. We thought about it, but they were already working hard. We did, however, ask the students to actively reflect while they were engaged in the creation of the multigenre research project. This ongoing reflection, particularly at the end of the semester when they showed their work to others, helped the students to generate higher-quality projects and to understand (and share) the mental processes they used in creating academic projects. Active reflection also offered these students opportunities to critically analyze how their own identities have dynamic qualities, and how they can choose to continually evolve as members of a global community.

Guiding ESL students toward the creation of a multigenre research project was challenging. It took careful planning. We needed to create ways to support in-depth research among students. We needed to know, present, and model many kinds of genres. In the end, however, we found the process of creating, learning, and teaching the process highly rewarding. Multigenre research projects engaged our ESL students toward critical and reflective thinking; their English proficiency increased significantly. ESL students collaborated in and outside of class and everyone produced a portfolio that exceeded expectations. What more could ESL instructors ask for?

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## Appendix

### Semester Writing Portfolio Checklist

#### CHECKLIST

Please submit, in this notebook, six complete compositions, each in a different genre. The genres we have studied include: short story, book review, poems (sonnet, haiku, free verse, and couplets), songs, argument essay, newspaper articles (editorial, news, features, complaints, and obits), cartoon captions, and abstracts. You may also expand on these genres.

The portfolio will have a table of contents in APA style, generated by Word. Each composition will have a title, with a subhead noting the genre.

Example: Georgia O’Keefe: A narrative feature from a newspaper about her art show—journalism.

The portfolio will be typed unless the teacher agrees to the need of using alternative script.

The audience and tone will be varied. For example, one essay may be in first person addressed to an intimate (a letter to a friend about your dog dying); another will be formal (an obituary that tells about Georgia O’Keefe’s demise).

You may experiment with structure and content, but you may not use offensive or pornographic text and/or imagery.

The portfolio will be bound in some way: notebook, weave, etc.

The portfolio will be offered at the end of the semester to public scrutiny and praise.

- One piece should be reflective and discuss why you chose this subject, and what you learned from it. In the reflective essay, answer these questions: What is the big picture concerning the essays you selected?

Can you talk about the process of writing and revising? How do the essays collected in the portfolio demonstrate your creativity and your writing strengths? What areas of your writing and creativity will you continue working on?

- One composition must be a narrative of 1,000 to 3,000 words.
- One composition may be poetry, lyrics, or a form of multimedia that is approved by the teacher after a writer's conference.
- One piece should offer a logical and well-supported argument, or it can be a persuasive piece in which you as author take a stand on a topic or issue, or propose a solution to a problem.
- One piece is your own choosing; feel free to show us your best, your most experimental, your most impressive, your most creative writing.
- You may incorporate as many images as you wish, as long as they are placed in the text with aesthetics in mind.

***Annotation:***

- A paper located at the front of the whole portfolio shows the date that this portfolio was presented to a peer for evaluation, and the dates (2 minimum) it was presented to the teacher for editorial consultation during the semester.
- The peer and the teacher will write comments beside the dates concerning the strengths of the portfolio.

Initial your name next to the following details before turning in your portfolio:

- \_\_\_ All submissions have been revised at least once, after someone has seen them and commented
- \_\_\_ I have used Word's spell check to copyedit
- \_\_\_ I certify that the writing is my own, unless it is cited or quoted
- \_\_\_ I have thought carefully about this project and tried to be creative in organizing and compiling this
- \_\_\_ The length of my portfolio is 12 double-spaced typewritten/printed pages (or equivalent, approximately 4500 words), distributed among the six pieces.