Textbook Review

Arrivals: Cross-Cultural Experiences in Literature


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Arrivals is a literature-based textbook intended for young adult and adult ESL students who read at an intermediate to advanced level. The short stories, poems, and novel excerpts are written by well-known authors, such as Jamaica Kincaid, Amy Tan, Sandra Cisneros, Richard Rodriguez, and Andrei Codrescu, most of whom are immigrants to the United States. Consequently, the overall theme of the text is the immigrant experience in America, including adjustment, homesickness, and language learning. The book serves as an excellent introduction to American cultural literacy, as the selections deal with American cultural situations and dilemmas.

The preface lays out the primary goals of the text: integrating the four discrete skills, developing academic reading strategies (prediction, use of graphic organizers, inference, reader response, schema building, questioning, annotation, etc.), fostering textual analysis, and exposing students to examples of good writing. Each unit contains two or more readings, sequenced by theme: "Arriving," "Learning English," "Feeling Homesick," "Changing," "Intersecting Cultures," and "Facing Discrimination." The introduction provides suggestions to the teacher for altering or expanding the lessons. For example, while space is given in the text for students to jot down their responses to the readings, the author suggests that students may instead wish to purchase notebooks to record those responses and to add to them later on, in the style of a dialogue journal. Students can then be asked to share journals with a partner, or the teacher can choose to collect them at intervals. If homework is to be assigned, Huizenga proposes that the sections called "Focused Reading" and "Look at Language" be used. Small group discussion is effective with the "Analyze the Story" section, provided each group member is held accountable for some aspect of the group work. "Move Beyond the Story" offers extensive writing tasks, which the author advises be dealt with in a process approach that includes peer response.

If the teacher decides to follow the lessons step by step, students will become familiar with the framework very quickly and will benefit from the sequencing of the lesson activities. Every section
begins with a short biographical sketch and picture of the author, along with some pre-reading suggestions. The readings are glossed, and space is available for the reader to jot down personal responses during or immediately after reading. The next two sections, "Focused Reading" and "Analyze the Story," force the reader to reread the text for specific reasons, and the following sections look at discrete aspects of the language used in the story, such as parts of speech and word formation. The last two exercises provide writing opportunities, both personal (such as letter writing) and academic (such as summarizing and comparing), that allow students to explore the themes of the text. A comprehensive review ends each unit, and the world map at the back of the book is handy for reference when discussing the native countries of the authors.

The adaptability of Arrivals was apparent when I opted to use it in a community college developmental English course on the Navajo reservation. Our class of ten people met in a rundown trailer juxtaposed with a spectacular view of Monument Valley, Utah; students came to the class stunningly underprepared for college-level work, but what they lacked in preparation, they more than made up for in quiet determination.

The previous textbooks utilized for the course were two well known ones that were thorough in presentation of grammar, but slightly weak in choice of readings. We, the developmental English instructors, decided to try a more literature-based approach. With some trepidation about the suitability of the theme of American immigrant experience for American Indian students who were in no recent way immigrants themselves, we chose Arrivals. Throughout the course, I found that students identified with the authors' alienation from contemporary American culture and struggles with English. "Four Directions," by Amy Tan, which describes the problems faced by an interracial couple, proved to be a favorite and provided an excellent foundation for discussing the merger and clash of cultures in the Four Corners area of the Southwest. On their course evaluations, students remarked that reading and learning about cultures that were foreign to them had been refreshing.

Huizenga's research-based approach provides for meaningful language learning through varied, insightful, and engaging texts, reminding ESL students and teachers alike that the business of learning to read is most exciting when grounded in excellent literature.

Note: Erin Hubbell teaches reading in middle school in the St. Vrain District in Colorado and has taught developmental English at the College of Eastern Utah on the Navajo reservation.