**Introduction**

This text set is designed to provide a wide range of reading material for high school students of English as a Second Language (ESL) of all levels on the topic of culture and identity. All of the selected texts are fiction, some more closely based on actual events than others. I’ve selected these specific texts to ensure the inclusion of a wide range of different cultures, different gender and different age perspectives. The stories are narrated by individuals from Korea, Japan, China, Laos, Mexico, Somalia, Romania, Kosovo and the U.S (Hispanic descent). The texts also address a variety of different culture-related factors that influence one’s sense of identity. These factors include things such as coming to terms with a new language, family background and expectations, and dealing with other people’s preconceived ideas about one’s own culture. Some of the texts have a serious tone, while others were selected based on their humor and irony. The text set includes items with readability scores ranging from 2nd grade to 7th grade. The text set is comprised of picture books, short stories and novels and includes items of easy fiction, juvenile fiction, young adult fiction and fiction. The easy fiction items are all illustrated picture books, thus making their content even more comprehensible for beginning ESL students.

**Purpose**

The purpose for choosing texts that revolve around culture and identity is so that students can be provided with texts which are meaningful and relevant for them. Relevance can be a highly motivating factor for encouraging students to engage in reading activities. In addition, the texts will serve as a basis for generating interesting discussions of the students’ experiences pertaining to culture and identity. The items in this text set encourage students to look more closely at how one’s native culture (and the individual as representative of that culture) is perceived by the new culture, explore how language is linked to identity, and reflect on how one’s identity is shaped by the culture of one’s ancestors. The items in this text set will act as a bridge for students to link their past experiences and native culture with their new language, culture and identity. In a non-fiction book entitled “My Trouble is My English: Asian students and the American Dream”, by Danling Fu, Fu studies the lives of four Laotian refugee siblings who attend a small public high school in New England[^1]. The book outlines how these students struggle with large volumes of remedial worksheets and decontextualized vocabulary drills in low-level classes. However, each of the students performed significantly better when they were engaged in activities which involved self-expression, often based on their real-life experiences. Following on from this idea, the items contained in this text set can be used as a rich starting point for encouraging activities that involve self-expression, such as painting and drawing, journal writing, or writing from personal experience. These activities will help ESL students gain confidence in their abilities to express themselves in English and provide them with an opportunity to tell their own stories.

Readability Considerations

For each of these texts, readability was calculated using both the Fry and Flesch-Kincaid readability formulas. For each text, scores were calculated based on the same three 100-word passages. Both the Fry and Flesch-Kincaid grade levels came out to be roughly the same for all texts.

Since this text set is aimed at ESL students, the grade level consideration is not the same as for other content areas in which you would expect students’ reading level to be a certain degree above or below the grade they are in. ESL students have very diverse English capabilities, depending on a number of factors such as: literacy abilities in a first language, amount of time spent in the U.S., family background/language spoken in the home and age on arrival in the U.S. Therefore, the grade level serves more as a rough indication of the type of language and vocabulary that would be appropriate for a non-native English speaker to read and comprehend. The readability level serves more as an estimate of how “decodable” the material will be for an ESL student.

My selections were also based on trying to find texts that would satisfy Stephen Krashen’s notion that language learners should be provided with comprehensible input that is one level above their current language knowledge (comprehensible input + 1). By selecting texts that range from the 2nd – 7th grade level, I aim to provide ESL students of many levels with texts that are accessible. I believe that texts written much beyond a 7th grade level would be too challenging, even for the most advanced ESL students. I am assuming that students who are able to read texts of this level would already be part of a mainstream English classroom and no longer require supplemental ESL instruction.

Standards of Learning

The English Language Proficiency Standards of Learning for Virginia Public School states, “Another difference between the English language proficiency standards and the English Standards of Learning is that the English language proficiency standards are not grade level specific. LEP students will proceed through these levels at their own pace depending in part on their level of proficiency in their native language, the age when they entered school in the United States, and their ability to learn another language” (p.3).

The text set is designed to fulfill the following English Language Proficiency Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools (2002):

| LEP 1.5 | The student will read and demonstrate comprehension of fiction/non-fiction |
| LEP 2.4 | The student will read, comprehend and analyze fiction and non-fiction |
| LEP 2.6 | The student will demonstrate interpretation and analysis of literature. |
| LEP 2.7 | The student will use meaning clues and language structure to expand vocabulary when reading |
| LEP 3.4 | The student will read and demonstrate comprehension of familiar stories, poems, and informational text as a result of classroom instruction |
| LEP 3.6 | The student will use strategies to read a variety of narrative materials, poetry and informational text. |
| LEP 4.4 | The student will read and demonstrate comprehension of fiction and non-fiction |
| LEP 4.5 | The student will use meaning clues and language structure to read words. |
| LEP 4.6 | The student will use strategies to read a variety of materials, fiction and non-fiction. |
Summary/Rationale: This story is told by a young Korean girl named Yoon who has recently moved with her family to the United States. As the book begins, Yoon’s father spells out her name in the English alphabet and tells her she must now learn to write it this new way. But Yoon does not want to write her name this way because each of the lines and circles stand alone, unlike the Korean character representing her name which means “Shining Wisdom” and “looks happy”. When Yoon goes to school, her teacher asks her to write her name, but she prefers to only write other words she is learning, such as CAT, BIRD and CUPCAKE and pretend to be each of these things. It is only after another little girl reaches out to her in friendship that she decides to embrace her name written in English. The final page reads “Yes, I am YOON” and thus expresses the beginning of Yoon’s acceptance of her new culture.

I chose this text because it is a very simple story with beautiful illustrations, yet depicts emotions and feelings that are relevant to people of all ages. Although Yoon is only a young girl, she experiences the same feelings that many foreigners do when arriving in a new culture: initial rejection, exploration and finally acceptance. She is courageous enough to remain true to herself until she feels comfortable enough to branch out and start accepting her new surroundings. The little girl who reaches out to Yoon and the patient teacher all provide encouraging examples of ways that Yoon’s isolation from her new culture can be broken.

Readability: The Fry readability for this text is 2nd grade. The illustrations with each page help make the contents even more comprehensible to beginning ESL students. The vocabulary comprises mainly high frequency words that are easily decodable. There is also a degree of repetition of vocabulary and events: each day when Yoon goes to school, she encounters a new word that she chooses to learn to write and internalize.

Although the Fry and Flesch-Kincaid scores place the text at a second grade level, from a conceptual standpoint, the contents form a good basis for in-depth discussions of culture and identity. The book also focuses on aspects of culture and language that are equally relevant to learners of all ages, namely how difficult it is to move from one’s familiar language to begin working towards literacy in a foreign language and the internal conflicts this may cause.

Use: This book would be ideal as a read-aloud for students to begin generating interesting discussions of culture and language. To cater to ESL learners of different levels, it would be beneficial to begin with previewing strategies and have students discuss the illustrations and what they think will happen in the story. The story’s value lies in its use as a solid starting point for discussions of language, culture and identity. Some key questions to ask students post-reading could be: “Do you view yourself differently when you speak your native language? How does speaking/writing English make you feel?”
Summary/Rationale: This picture book details the story of Hassan, a young boy who has been forced to flee Somalia with his family. To Hassan, the U.S. seems “cold and gray”. He misses his home in Somalia very much, but lacks the knowledge of English to communicate his story and his feelings. His teacher offers him art supplies and Hassan is able to paint a picture depicting his home in Somalia and the distressing events that caused his family to become refugees. An interpreter is brought in to the school so that Hassan is able to tell his story. Having had the opportunity to express himself in this way, Hassan then asks to paint another picture for his mother that does not include the violence of the first. This bright and colorful picture is then placed on the wall in his family’s home and Hassan begins noticing other colorful things in his surroundings, signaling his increasing comfort in his new country.

I chose this book because many ESL students come to America as refugees and may be able to relate to Hassan’s situation. Refugees must deal with a range of emotions, since they may feel homesick for their country, but realize that they had no choice but to escape violent or turbulent circumstances. The story ends with a message of encouragement, but acts as a reminder that each refugee has an important story to tell. It may be important for students who are refugees to be able to express and thereby come to terms with their past before starting to embrace a new culture. This text could help encourage students to discuss their past experiences and feelings about their home country, as these events and emotions form an integral part of who they are.

Readability: The Fry and Flesch-Kincaid score places this text at the 5th grade level. Since the story uses simple language and has illustrations on every page, I believe the actual grade level readability score should be lower. However, from a conceptual standpoint, the book deals with some disturbing events, which would be more appropriate for older students. For example, the teacher points to a “smudge near the red splashes” on Hassan’s picture and Hassan describes it as his uncle. He then tells the teacher “about the noise, the flames, the bullets, and the awful smell of burning and blood.” This is by far the most disturbing sentence of the book and surprised me given the ages for which the book is intended (4-8). I would not choose this book for elementary school students for this reason, but is suitable for encouraging discussion within a high school ESL setting.

Use: Because of its simple yet descriptive language, I believe that this text would be well-suited for use in facilitated peer dialogs. Students could work through the text together, stop when they encounter unfamiliar words and discuss meanings, asking the teacher for help if necessary. In the sections of the book which include dialog, students could assume roles. One of the most important aspects of teaching language is to make sure there are low-anxiety activities for the learners to practice their reading and pronunciation skills. Small group work is ideal for lowering the students’ affective filter. The book would also work well as a read aloud story, due to the illustrations and the rich descriptive language which would allow students to paint their own mental images.
3. **Grandfather’s Journey**, by Allen Say  
   Easy Fiction (Illustrated)  
   Country: Japan  
   Fry/Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 5th/5.66

**Summary/Rationale:** In this picture book, a grandson describes his grandfather’s initial journey from Japan to America and subsequent feelings of being torn by his love for both countries. The grandfather moves back and forth between the U.S. and Japan, ultimately settling again in Japan, but still longing for the “mountains and rivers of California”. He delights in telling his grandson stories about California and plans a trip, but the trip is interrupted by war (WWII) and he is not able to see California again. But the grandson eventually moves to California himself, and experiences the same sense of longing for one country as soon as he finds himself in another. Only after this experience is the grandson able to truly understand his grandfather’s perspective and feelings about each country.

This book was chosen because of the simple message that it is possible to love different countries for different reasons and that having a “sense of longing” is perfectly natural. Many ESL students will have conflicted feelings about their homeland. Some may be experiencing/have experienced culture shock and will take comfort in knowing that the feeling is not unique to them, but shared by everyone who assimilates into a new culture. Another message of this story is that the love for one’s home country does not diminish one’s ability to adapt to and embrace a new culture. Over time, similar feelings of love could even emerge for the new culture.

**Readability:** The Fry and Flesch-Kincaid readability level for this text is 5th grade. However, a Bader analysis would place the text at a lower grade level because of the rich illustrations and simple language. The words in the text are fairly decodable, but would be slightly more challenging for ESL learners since Say uses some less common descriptive verbs and terms (e.g. astonished, bewildered, marveled, scattered). Context and illustrations will help students infer the meaning of some of these words. The small amount of text on each page and the large illustrations make this book inviting to read and would be significantly less intimidating for students who are at a beginner level. The concepts introduced are simple and the storyline is straightforward.

**Use:** In terms of the ESL classroom, this book would be good as a read-aloud activity as a starting point for discussions about longing for one’s home country or conflicts in feelings brought about by seeing the positives of both places. Following a first read, the teacher could ask the students to generate a more commonly used synonym for each of the more challenging vocabulary words (e.g. surprised for astonished, confused for bewildered). The book also could be used to help teach sequence, since there is a chronological order to the events. One objective could be for students to aim to retell the story in basic language using a series of time expressions such as first, next, then, after a time and finally. A simple graphic organizer, such as a jot chart could help students to categorize events sequentially.
4. Drita, My Homegirl, by Jenny Lombard  
Juvenile Fiction, Novel  
Country: Kosovo  
Fry/Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 6\textsuperscript{th}/5.88

**Summary/Rationale:** The story revolves around 10-year-old Drita, a young girl from Kosovo who immigrates to New York City with her family. When she arrives in her new school, she meets Maxine, a popular African American girl in her class. At first, Maxine makes fun of Drita, but is then given the task of using Drita as the subject of a social studies report on Kosovo. Through this connection, the unlikely pair become friends and ultimately help each other get through tough times. Each chapter alternates narration between Drita and Maxine, thereby providing the reader with insight into each of their perspectives.

I chose this text because of the unique way in which the first-person narration alternates between the two main characters from very different cultural backgrounds. This provides unique insights into the thought processes, emotions and perceptions of these two main characters. Despite some serious underlying issues (Drita’s mom suffers from depression, Maxine’s mother died three years earlier in a car crash), the overall tone of the book is humorous and the storyline is engaging. The light-hearted tone will entertain students and make them want to read on.

**Readability:** The Fry readability level for this text is 6\textsuperscript{th} grade and the Flesch-Kincaid readability is just slightly lower, indicating a 5\textsuperscript{th} grade level. I believe this reflects a good assessment of the book’s accessibility for the average student on this grade level. A Bader analysis reveals the use of easily decodable and high-frequency words and a great deal of dialog, some of which is written in simple slang (which could require additional explanation for ESL students). Since the story is narrated from the perspective of two 10-year-olds, the events of the story are presented in a simple and straightforward manner, although many of the dilemmas and issues these girls are facing are not.

The sentences are fairly short, as are the chapters (about 5 pages each), which would increase its appeal for students learning English. From a formatting standpoint, the text is double-spaced and 12-point, adding to the ease of reading. At 135 pages, the length of the book would not be an insurmountable read for advanced ESL students.

**Use:** If used in its entirety, this book would most suitable as recommended reading for more advanced ESL students. The teacher could provide these learners with questions to check comprehension or vocabulary support as necessary. If used in sections, the book could provide some humorous read-alouds. For intermediate students, it would make sense to involve them in some scaffolded reading activities. There are a few key chapters which focus on some of culture-related acceptance issues, such as the chapter when Drita first arrives at the school or when Drita brings Albanian food to the lunchroom and generously offers it to one of the most popular girls in school (only to have it literally thrown back at her). It would make the most sense to select certain chapters and discuss the perspectives, feelings and reactions of the characters. ESL students would definitely be able to relate different aspects of Drita’s experiences to their own first in-school experiences.
5. The House on Mango Street, by Sandra Cisneros
   Fiction, Novel
   Country: USA (Hispanic decent)
   Fry/Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 5th/5.60

**Summary/Rationale:** This novel tells the story of Esperanza Cordero, a young teenage girl growing up in the Latino section of Chicago. The story focuses on rich and colorful descriptions of her family, her friends, and her harsh surroundings. The characters are brought to life through a series of short vignettes, told as a first person narrative. The imagery and descriptions are powerful and will form an interesting and diverse basis for discussions of culture and what it is like to grow up as part of a minority culture.

**Readability:** The Flesch-Kincaid and Fry readability for this text is 5th grade. Although the readability grade places this text on a 5th grade level, this level does not take into account the rich imagery and implications of the story that is being told, which makes it more appropriate for an older audience. The novel lends itself much more to use high school students (e.g. 9th – 12th grade) who are able to comprehend the identity issues related to “coming of age”. The book also deals with some harsh realities relating to poverty, domestic violence and teen pregnancy, which older students would be more capable of handling.

A Bader analysis also highlights the following linguistic factors which would make this book appealing for use in an ESL setting: simple vocabulary, easily decodable words and short sentences. In view of conceptual factors, it becomes clear that the book lends itself to more in-depth, thoughtful discussions about the overall meaning and social context of the vignettes. Students of Hispanic culture may find the subject matter even more relevant on a personal level, allowing them to make connections to their own experiences. The hope is that all ESL students would be able to “see themselves” in some aspect of Esperanza and her efforts to come to terms with her identity and surroundings.

**Use:** This book could be used instructionally with high school ESL learners of all levels. I feel that parts of this text could be used as a read-aloud activity for beginning ESL students. The text is also suitable for use with intermediate ESL students and could be used, for example, as an in-class buddy reading activity (supported with discussions of specific vocabulary), or using directed reading and thinking activity (DR-TA). Advanced ESL students would also find the topics thought-provoking and could concentrate more on discussions of imagery and what is stated “between the lines”. With advanced students, there would also be the potential to assign the brief chapters as take home reading for and then follow up the next day with activities that monitor comprehension and encourage further discussion.
Summary/Rationale: This story is told from the perspective of Roberto, an adolescent boy who, together with his family, emigrates from Mexico to California so that his family can find work picking crops. Once the grape picking season is over, Roberto is allowed to go to school. At school, he becomes friends with the sixth grade teacher, Mr. Lema. Mr. Lema starts working with Roberto on improving his English and offers to give him trumpet lessons. When Roberto excitedly returns home to share this news with his family, he finds that the boxes are packed and they are on the move again.

I chose this story because it tells a complete story in a very succinct and clear manner, using simple language. It depicts the realities of migrant workers and the challenges that the children face when attending school, yet faced with constantly moving from place to place. It also shows the important role that a teacher can play in helping an ESL student gain confidence in their new surroundings.

Readability: The Fry and Flesch-Kincaid readability level for this short story is 5th grade. This grade level seems to be a fairly accurate reflection. The Bader analysis is closely matched to the appropriate grade level according to the readability formulas. The words are high frequency and easily decodable. From a conceptual standpoint, the story is presented in a clear, chronological format. Furthermore, since the story is only 9 pages in length, the reading task would not be too overwhelming for ESL students.

Use: This text lends itself best to use with intermediate and advanced ESL students. An anticipation guide involving various ideas/misconceptions about migrant workers could be a good way to introduce this text. For intermediate students, it would be useful to employ DR-TA with this text, given the ability to work through the text section by section to ensure comprehension and explain any vocabulary that the students may lack. Students could read the first paragraph of each section, make predictions about what will happen in that scene and then continue reading silently or in groups. For advanced students, the text could be assigned as independent reading. To check comprehension and encourage discussion, the reading assignment could also be broken into sections and students could discuss their answers in small groups.
Summary/Rationale: This short story is told from the perspective of an adolescent Chinese girl who emigrates with her family from China to America. The story revolves around a few different and humorous eating experiences. For example, the family goes out to eat at an expensive restaurant and show their appreciation of the soup by slurping it loudly per Chinese custom. The girl is mortified at the shocked and disapproving looks the other patrons give them, while the rest of the family remains oblivious. In another instance, the family invites the neighbors over to their house for dinner and is then confronted with breaches of Chinese etiquette. In the closing scene, the girl shares a milkshake with her new friend and is astonished when the girl slurps the end of her milkshake through the straw. She asks her friend whether slurping is customary and her friend replies “Sure. All Americans slurp.”

I chose this story based on its humor and ease of reading. Since it is told from the first-person perspective of a young girl, the language is fairly simple and straightforward. Not only does it reflect how different customs may be misinterpreted, it also includes some explanation of how each of the different family members adapt to their new culture. While the young girl is cautious with her approach to speaking English and worries about making mistakes, her brother speaks quickly and with little regard for accuracy. The father spends his time studying the anatomy of English and making diagrams, while the mother concentrates on memorizing polite phrases that “cover all possible social situations”. ESL students will definitely find humor in the attempts of the girl to gain an understanding of how American and Chinese customs differ.

Readability: The Fry and Flesch-Kincaid readability level for this short story is 7th grade. This seems to be a fairly accurate indication of the appropriate grade level for this text. From a Bader perspective, most of the words are easily decodable and high frequency. Sentences are longer than in most of the other texts in this text set, which seems to be reflected in its higher readability level. Some of the language is more complex, with less common words interspersed such as “murky, hypnotized, muttering and favoritism.” The writing style is generally appropriate for ESL students, as it includes some simple dialog that is written using everyday English expressions. The ideas are expressed clearly and in a logical chronological format. The text is only 13 pages long and is therefore does not present too daunting a task for ESL students to read.

Use: Because of the use of some less frequency vocabulary and longer sentences, I would recommend this text for use with advanced ESL students. The humor of this story makes it a highly enjoyable read. Through this story, readers are exposed to numerous aspects of Chinese and American culture, not just culinary-related. A DR-TA activity would lend itself well to this text, as students would really enjoy predicting what might happen in each of the different situations. A jot chart could also be used in the reflection stage to list various customs (U.S./Chinese) and describe how each culture might interpret the behavior.
Summary/Rationale: This humorous short story is about a teenage boy named Adrian from Brasov, Romania, who comes to America with his family. The family believes they are moving to Arkansas, but, through the vengeful deed of the uncle who buys them their tickets, they end up in Alaska during the dark winter. Adrian begins attending an American high school and the misconceptions begin. When Adrian explains that he is from an area of Romania called Transylvania, his new friends assume that he is a vampire. They feed him abnormally large amounts of garlic, stare at his teeth, put gel in his hair and ask him questions about being afraid of the sun. Adrian is at first puzzled by his friends’ behavior, but eventually catches on to what they think he is. He decides he will ultimately tell them the truth, but for the present, he is just enjoying the extra attention.

This is the most far-fetched but humorous piece in this text set. I selected it because it shows how one misconception can lead to others in a kind of snowball affect. Adrian’s new identity is shaped by his friends’ notion that he is a vampire. At the end of the story, Adrian forgives his uncle for sending them to Alaska and says “I forgive you. Because Americans are forgiving people, with warm hearts. And I am an American.” This final passage reflects Adrian’s transition and acceptance of his new culture and the newest aspect of his identity.

Readability: The Fry and Flesch-Kincaid readability level for this short story is 4th grade. From a Bader perspective, I believe that it would be more suitable for use at higher grade levels. While the words are easily decodable and the sentences are short, the underlying irony and implied humor would be lost on students of lower grade levels. The text is well-suited for high school ESL students because of the use of simple language. Furthermore, the story would hold their interest due to the subject matter and the fact that the story is narrated from the perspective of a same-age student. The 14-page story length and 12-pt font further add to the ease of reading.

Use: This text would be most applicable for intermediate and advanced ESL students. To set up the framework for the story, it would be useful to begin by reading the first part of the story aloud, so that students understand how the family ended up in Alaska (as it is later of significance for the plot). Once the setting has been established by reading the first four pages aloud, it would be useful to break the story up into logical and manageable chunks for reading. Paired reading would lend itself well to this text and the teacher could provide some key comprehension questions for the reader to answer for each section. After reading the story, a good reflection activity would be to ask students go back and identify the clues that indicate that Adrian’s friends believe him to be a vampire. A follow-on discussion could include asking the students to identify a situation in which they were confronted with someone’s preconceived notion of who they are. Students could work in small groups and exchange stories, thus gaining valuable practice at speaking and articulating their own thoughts.
Summary/Rationale: This novel is narrated by a 13-year-old Hmong girl named Mai Yang from Laos, who spends 10 years in a refugee camp in Thailand with her grandmother before traveling to Rhode Island to be reunited with family. For many years, Mai has dreamed about experiencing American culture firsthand, but when she arrives, she is faced with many conflicting situations. Her grandmother is completely dependent on her and is unable to assimilate into the new culture. Mai’s cousins place pressures on her to dress and act more American and behave in ways that directly contradict her grandmother and her native culture.

This book was chosen because it provides unique insights into how individuals cope with coming to terms with a new culture while still retaining their own heritage. It shows how difficult it is for Mai to reconcile who she is when faced with the challenge of keeping her Hmong identity while also finding her place in America. Students from all cultures will be able to relate to her conflicting emotions and attempts to figure out where she fits in. Students will also enjoy the fact that the story is told from the first-person perspective of a student who is roughly their age.

Readability: The Fry and Flesch-Kincaid readability level for this short story is 4th grade. From a conceptual point of view, however, this text is more suitable for middle school or high school students. For example, the first part of the book describes the desperate conditions in the camp and mentions issues such as the beating and rape of Hmong refugees at the hands of Thai soldiers. Later on in the book, Mai learns that her American cousin had been involved in gangs and drugs. At just over 200 pages, the book is fairly long and the storyline is somewhat complex (in terms of historical facts and geography of South Asia), thereby also making it more suitable for older readers.

Use: The length and complexity of this novel would prevent me from using it in its entirety for ESL students. It could potentially be assigned as reading for an eager ESL student at the advanced level with existing background knowledge of the Hmong people or South Asia. More realistically, a teacher could focus on a single chapter of the book and the insights it provides about Mai’s cultural perspectives. Chapter 6 would lend itself well for use in isolation, as it describes the arrival of Mai and her grandmother in America and their initial reactions. Many ESL students could relate well to this scene and could use it as a basis for comparing Mai’s arrival in America to their own.
Summary/Rationale: The chapter “Two Kinds” describes the experience of Jing-Mei Woo, growing up as the daughter of Chinese immigrants in San Francisco. Now an adult, Jing-Mei recalls how her mother has decided that if she tried hard enough, she could be a prodigy on the piano. But Jing-Mei is not a natural talent and embarrasses herself and her family when playing badly in a recital. Jing-Mei thinks this will get her out of practicing the piano, but her mother has other ideas. After the recital, she tries to force Jing-Mei to be obedient and practice, but following an argument, her mother never mentions the piano again. In many subsequent aspects of her life, Jing-Mei feels that she is a failure. Years later, her mother offers her the piano for her thirtieth birthday and says “You have natural talent. You could been genius if you want to”. It is then that Jing-Mei begins to understand the nature of her mother’s love.

This text was chosen because it highlights how the expectations and hopes of one generation can influence the identity of the next. Depending on the student’s native culture, they may be able to relate to Jing-Mei’s experience and to the mismatch between their behavior and their parents’ expectations. Growing up as an American, Jing-Mei does not have the same ideas about obedience and honoring her parents’ opinions. She is unable to understand her mother’s true belief that she could be anything she wanted. She goes through most of her life feeling ashamed by her failures, but ultimately comes to understand her mother’s viewpoint and accept their differences. The story reflects a bridging of both the culture and generation gap and is therefore relevant for this text set.

Readability: The Fry and Flesch-Kincaid readability level for this chapter is 6th grade. This seems to be an accurate reflection of this chapter of the book. This grade level is also conceptually appropriate, as the material does not involve mature subject matter. The story is presented in a clear chronological format. The language Tan uses is highly descriptive, but does include some vocabulary that would be more challenging to ESL students, such as “nonchalantly, betrayal, contented and sulky”. The text has already been sectioned to indicate gaps in time and would help readers understand the shift from one “scene” to another. At 15 pages, this chapter would be accessible for an ESL student.

Use: Due to Tan’s use of more sophisticated language, this text is most suited for advanced ESL learners. It would make sense to begin the story as a read-aloud, first providing students with background information about the book as a whole. The story is already broken up into sections that focus on one particular anecdote or aspect, therefore it would be easily to assign each piece to be read either silently in groups and then follow each with a discussion to confirm comprehension and answer questions. After reading the piece, students could be rewarded by viewing the scenes from the film “The Joy Luck Club” (10-15 minutes running time) based on this chapter. Prior to viewing the movie, students could make predictions about what the different characters will look like, which aspects of the book will be included, etc. This would also make for interesting group discussion following the excerpt of the film.
Country: U.S./Native American

You think I’m an ignorant savage
And you’ve been so many places
I guess it must be so
But still I cannot see
If the savage one is me
Now can there be so much that you don’t know?
You don’t know ...

You think you own whatever land you land on
The Earth is just a dead thing you can claim
But I know every rock and tree and creature
Has a life, has a spirit, has a name

You think the only people who are people
Are the people who look and think like you
But if you walk the footsteps of a stranger
You’ll learn things you never knew you never knew

Have you ever heard the wolf cry to the blue corn moon
Or asked the grinning bobcat why he grinned?
Can you sing with all the voices of the mountains?
Can you paint with all the colors of the wind?
Can you paint with all the colors of the wind?

Come run the hidden pine trails of the forest
Come taste the sunsweet berries of the Earth
Come roll in all the riches all around you
And for once, never wonder what they’re worth

The rainstorm and the river are my brothers
The heron and the otter are my friends
And we are all connected to each other
In a circle, in a hoop that never ends

How high will the sycamore grow?
If you cut it down, then you'll never know
And you'll never hear the wolf cry to the blue corn moon

For whether we are white or copper skinned
We need to sing with all the voices of the mountains
We need to paint with all the colors of the wind

You can own the Earth and still
All you'll own is Earth until
You can paint with all the colors of the wind
Summary/Rationale: The lyrics to this song depict two key messages. The first revolves around the intimate and reverent relationship between Native Americans and nature. This simple message would be appropriate as a starting point for students to reflect on and describe the relationship between themselves/their culture and the natural world. In addition, the song lyrics describe how useful it can be to “put yourself in the footsteps of a stranger” to reach a deeper understanding of the world. The message is therefore that people should be accepting other people who may be different in appearance and culture and learn from them.

I selected this song because of its simple-to-understand message. The language is simple and descriptive and should provide ESL learners of all levels with comprehensible input. For this reason, the song could be used at the preparation stage for introducing the overall topic of culture and identity to the class as a whole.

Use: For ESL students, the lyrics could first be read aloud once, then read again by the students (on a volunteer basis) and worked through for questions relating to vocabulary or content. Finally, the teacher could either play the song or show the video clip (currently available on YouTube – www.youtube.com). An informal discussion of how each student’s native culture views/experiences nature could follow, thereby encouraging reflection about the song’s message and helping students improve oral communication skills.
References:


