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Lesson Plan For Teaching Nicholasa Mohr's "The English Lesson"

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Lesson Plans for Teaching “The English Lesson” by Nicholasa Mohr

*Created for junior high, high school, and/or college and university students
including English Language Learning (ELL) students
with a variety of learning objectives, backgrounds, and challenge levels*

by Adriana Lecuona and Peter Schmidt

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### *Introduction*

“The English Lesson” was first published in Mohr’s *In Nueva York* by Dial Press in 1977, at the height of Puerto Rican Brown Pride movement in New York City; then it was republished by Arte Público Press in Houston Texas in 1988, during the Reagan era, and this edition was corrected and reprinted several times in the 1990s.

Mrs. Hamma’s class for English language learners is taught 6:30-8pm at a local public school in the Lower East Side of NYC, one of the Latino barrios in NYC (the other most famous ones being Spanish Harlem and Washington Heights). All these locations have

long histories—going back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and even earlier—of being immigrant communities.

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Introductory material and learning goals

- to understand how the characterization of major and minor protagonists works in the story, especially through dialogue and description
- to understand the role played by the narrator in guiding our interpretations of the story
- to discuss and evaluate Mrs. Hamma’s techniques as an ELL (English language learning) teacher
- to identify the broader kinds of learning that may occur in ELL classes, beyond achieving greater proficiency in English
- to appreciate the story in the historical context of the 1980s and 1990s
- to allow students to consider the broader importance of access to ELL classes in the contemporary U.S.

The portrait of the teacher, Mrs. Susan Hamma

- after reading the story, what comments or actions do you most associate with her? what do these tell you about her character and motives?
- in what ways does the story portray her positively?
- in what ways is the story critical of her?
- the students’ English contains many mistakes, yet Mrs. Hamma is almost uniformly positive and supportive towards them. Is this a good teaching technique? Debate the pros and cons of her approach to teaching.
- in the story we learn that one of Mrs. Hamma’s grandparents was a German immigrant: how is this relevant?
- what role does the story’s narrator play in portraying Mrs. Hamma and shaping a reader’s judgment of her? Look at pp. 51 and 55, for example.
- why do you think Mrs. Hamma is temporarily at a loss for words after everyone hears Mr. Paczkowski’s story? (p. 60).
- how should we interpret the scene near the end of the story, in which William and Lali, practicing their English, imitate Mrs. Hamma’s manner and laugh about it? (p. 72). Is it significant that this moment is placed as part of the story’s end?

The portrait of Lali (Rogelia Dolores Padillo) and William Colón

Lali yearns for a greater role than her husband and culture have carved out for her. After all, she leaves her mountain village for a man she hardly knows. There’s mention of her childlessness, and eventually we see her chafe against her restrictions, especially with respect to her marriage. How are her conditions and expectations different for her life in the U.S.? Or, how would things have been different for her if she had remained in Puerto Rico?

In the beginning of the story, Lali has to be encouraged to take the English language learning classes. By the end, she is “especially irritable” because the ELL classes allowed

her to “leav[e] the world of Rudi, the luncheonette, that street, everything that she felt imprisoned her.”

- How have the “English Lessons” changed her? What if she had forgone the English learning lessons?

In many ways, Lali is full of contradictions. As one example, she “wishes” William “could be just like everybody else.” Yet she forgets that he is different. Explore and describe other contradictions in Lali’s personality, behavior, background and/or desires. Were you surprised by any of her behaviors or decisions? If so, how? How do these internal conflicts enrich her as a character? In other words, why might Mohr have chosen to create Lali as such a complicated character?

- How do you expect Lali will continue to change?

The story occasionally emphasizes how “short” William is (see pp. 53 and 62, for example), especially in comparison to Mrs. Hamma.

- Why is such a detail in the story?
- On p. 62, Lali explains why she was surprised by William’s full name. William’s nickname is “Chiquitín,” which means “tiny” and can be a term used to refer to very young children. How do Lali’s lines of dialogue about William’s various names provide inferences about William’s past experiences?

At some points in the story, it seems that Lali and William might be falling in love—or at least Lali’s feelings toward William are changing, in part because of the extra time she is spending with him because of the English lessons. See pp. 63-64 for examples. Yet Mohr’s story seems to out of its way NOT to make the story become a love story; it seems instead to want to focus on how learning English together helps change both Lali and William and also allows for a friendship (not a romance) to develop between them.

- What do you think of the author’s decision to emphasize her protagonists’ friendship rather than romance?

The portrait of Rudi (Lali’s husband).

- What is Rudi’s attitude at first toward Lali taking English classes, and does the story give us any clues about why he reacts as he does?
- What is Rudi’s and Lali’s relationship like? Identify important hints the story gives us about their relationship. One key paragraph to re-read and discuss appears on p. 65, where the narrator gives us Rudi’s inner thoughts.
- Even though both Lali and William work at Rudi’s luncheonette throughout the story, Rudi does not play nearly as prominent a role in the second half of the story as in the first. Why is that?

The story’s use of Spanish and English

Williams’ English contains many mistakes; he also mixes English and Spanish together, as in this sentence: “my ambition is to learn to speak and read English very good. To get a better job. Y—y también, to help my mother y familia” (p. 54).

- Mrs. Hamma is almost uniformly positive and supportive towards William and the other students. Do you think that is a good teaching technique? If you do, how will the students improve if Mrs. Hamma doesn't constantly correct their mistakes?

The author Mohr is undertaking a difficult balancing act here: she wants to be realistic about the kinds of common mistakes English language-learners make, yet she doesn't want her readers to laugh at her characters and be unsympathetic. She wants to show her characters are human (they make mistakes), but they never lose their dignity.

- How well does the story achieve this balance, in your opinion? Give particular examples, including a discussion of the story's portrait of Mr. Fong's mistake calling "idioms" "idiots" (p. 54).

Mohr intends to show how her characters grow and progress. In terms of learning English, compare how Lali and William speak English at the beginning and the end of the story: is there proof in how they speak that they are making progress?

Here is a set of questions for more advanced students. When we are given William's and Lali's conversations after class (pp. 61-62), it is probably in Spanish, the shared language with which they are most comfortable. Yet Mohr seems to "translate" this conversation into English without marking it as a translation.

- Why does Mohr do this? What could be her justification?

Note that at other times the story carefully marks which parts of the spoken dialogue are in English ("he spoke in English," p. 63)—and sometimes when some Spanish words (like Chiquitín, p. 62) are used, the story does not translate them into English.

- Do you think Mohr's inconsistency marking when her characters are speaking Spanish is a flaw in the story? Or is it one of the story's strengths? Explore arguments both pro and con.

At one key point in the story (p. 62), Mohr contrasts Americans laughing openly at immigrants' English, versus the ways in which (for example) William feels that they should NOT laugh at English speakers' mistakes when they try to speak Spanish. Why does this happen, and why does the story single out this contrast to make us think about it?

Note: the ability to speak a language well gives the speaker both status and power. It can give you a chance for a better job, as William says, but it doesn't only have practical effects. Being fluent in the dominant language can also make others see you differently and treat you better; it can alter the power dynamic between immigrants and natives, especially in situations where it may turn out that some immigrants can actually speak English better than a native-born American.

- In what ways does learning English (even though they are not yet fluent) positively change Lali's and Williams' self-esteem and also allows them to reimagine who they are and what they might do with their lives? Give specific examples.

- Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, though many other “native” Americans don’t know that. Many have left the island for life in the continental U.S. because of lack of economic opportunities in Puerto Rico. Many, like William and Lali, speak a vibrant mixture of Spanish, English, and Spanglish (which mixes English and Spanish together, along with many invented words, “formal” and informal or slang English and Spanish, etc.). Many people (including some Puerto Ricans) look down on Spanglish for not being “proper” Spanish nor “proper” English; they find it degrading and embarrassing. Others, however, celebrate its inventive mixtures and believe it both its speakers’ resilience and allows them to celebrate their mixed cultural and racial identities rather than worship forms of “purity” in culture and language that don’t exist. For one recent article discussing the inventiveness of Puerto Rican Spanglish, see Ilan Stavans’ “For the Love of Spanglish”: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/20/opinion/puerto-rico-spanglish.html>
 - Mohr’s story obviously focuses on immigrants wanting to learn to speak English as well as they can; that is what they have enrolled for and what they expect from a teacher like Mrs. Hamma. Yet does Mohr’s story also honor its characters’ ability to be multilingual, to be comfortable in several different languages and also sometimes with mixing languages together? Cite examples from the story to support your interpretation.

“The English Lesson” and lessons about immigration and citizenship

When Americans speak about being a “nation of immigrants” and the “American dream,” they usually do so proudly, as if to boast that American is a “opportunity society” in which those who work hard and have talent will eventually become successful.

Alternatively, throughout U.S. history, in times of economic stress new immigrants have often been scapegoated as the cause of those problems. Or immigrants have to be willing to endure a huge loss of opportunity and status—as Mr. Paczkowski’s story reveals (pp. 59-60).

- In what ways does Mohr’s story stress both immigrants’ humiliations and hopes?
- How should we interpret William’s comment “This is America, right? So ... everybody got a chance to clean toilets! Equality, didn’t she say that”? (p. 64)
- In what ways does the story indicate that some of the difficulties immigrants encounter *can’t* be erased by hard work and a positive attitude?
- Overall, would you say that the story is optimistic or pessimistic regarding the progress that immigrants can make in the U.S.? What qualities are most important for them to succeed?

In this story, we meet immigrants from Poland, Italy, China, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

- What do these immigrants share?
- In what ways does the story stress their *differences*, and why are those differences important? (Two immigrants from the Dominican Republic, for instance, differ sharply on whether to become a U.S. citizen or not: see pp. 56-57.) Are differences necessarily divisive?

English education classes do not just teach English language skills; studies have shown that they may also teach critical thinking (independent thinking) and thus what it means to be a responsible and active citizen. (Remember Mrs. Hamma’s statement of the American democratic credo, however much American realities might fall short: “We have a democratic class; fairness for all!” [p. 50])

One example of “critical thinking” in the story might be Mr. Torres’ opinions about the U.S. and the Dominican Republic (pp. 56-57)

- What are his opinions, and why does Mr. Torres feel that way, do you think? If he’s so skeptical about the U.S., do you think he’s a hypocrite for seeking to learn English?

Discuss also Mr. Torres’ argument with Fabrizio and another Dominican man over citizenship (pp. 56-58)

- What is their disagreement, and why do they have such contrasting opinions, do you think? They have completely different goals for working in the U.S.
- Mr. Torres is very critical of the Dominican Republic, not just of the U.S.; in fact, he launches into a diatribe against corruption in his home, suggesting that it’s caused by the U.S. domination of the sugar and tourist industries, which combine with local corruption to make it hard for someone like him to find a job without having the right “connections” (p. 56). If he’s so critical of the D.R., how can he end his speech by saying he’s “Dominican and proud”?

What are Mr. Torres' and Fabrizio's roles in the story as a whole, and why do you think the story includes these minor characters?

Historical context and research

The story's author, Nicholasa Mohr, is Puerto Rican/American, born and raised in the Bronx, New York. Information on author Nicholasa Mohr and her career may be obtained at

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicholasa_Mohr

and includes citations of interviews with the author.

- What elements of the author's life story are most helpful to you in interpreting "The English Lesson"?

Mohr's volume of short stories that originally contained "The English Lesson," *In Nueva York* (1986; 1993), has another story in it called "Lali," featuring the same character that appears in "The English Lesson."

- (Optional) Read "Lali" and discuss what this other story adds to your understanding of Lali's character.

"The English Lesson" first appeared in 1977, then was republished in 1988, near the end of the Reagan presidency in the U.S.

- What actions did the Reagan government take towards Latin America?
- What was its attitude towards immigration (especially by Spanish speakers)? What actions specifically did the Reagan government take towards Puerto Rico?
- Since 1917, Puerto Ricans are citizens of the United States. Why were they made citizens in 1917?

At one point in the story, William confidently boasts that "I can vote; I got all the rights. I am citizen" (p. 69). This is something of an oversimplification of his situation. Although Puerto Ricans are legally citizens, their citizen rights are severely limited. Puerto Ricans cannot vote in national elections, nor do they have voting representatives in the U.S. Congress, in either the House or the Senate. (They can vote in the presidential primaries and choose delegates to the Republican and Democratic conventions, but by law they cannot vote in presidential primaries and in the presidential election itself unless they are registered as voters in the U.S. (as Williams says he is).

The entire island of Puerto Rico is represented by one member in the House of Representatives in Washington, but he or she cannot vote. It's not clear whether William understands all this.) Puerto Ricans pay full Medicare payroll taxes, but by law their benefits are capped at 30% of the U.S. national average. In many ways, Puerto Rico is an underdeveloped colony of the United States, its economic development restricted and controlled and perpetually in crisis, causing generations of Puerto Ricans to leave the island to pursue jobs in the U.S. mainland. The situation became even worse after hurricanes struck the island in 2017.

- Mohr’s story does not make direct references to Puerto Rico’s struggles, yet do you think these are still relevant for interpreting “The English Lesson”?
- In what ways are William and Lali portrayed as engaged and responsible citizens, even if they may not be entirely clear about how the “rights” of Puerto Ricans as a whole are limited? (To put Williams’ over-simplification in perspective, most *Americans* are very confused on these matters too: many don’t know Puerto Ricans are citizens; many who do know islanders are citizens think they have full voting rights....)

For English Language Learner (ELL) students: Teaching and Research Topics

ELL Students Lesson Plan Objectives

ELL students should be able to:

- compare their ELL classroom experience to that depicted in *The English Lesson* in oral discussion and written formats (paragraph, essay)
- design a “Top 5” pieces of advice for new ELL students based upon their experiences
- draw upon their own experiences for a short, reflective paragraph
- compare and contrast the varying immigrant experiences of the ELL student population
- place their ELL experience in a cultural and ideological context

Ideas for Classroom Discussion and/or Writing Assignments

- What are best practices in English language teaching that encourage student learning? Do you think Mrs. Hamma is a good teacher for her students?
- How is the classroom experience depicted in “The English Lesson” similar or dissimilar to your classroom experiences learning English?
- On the board, place the characters in Mrs. Hamma’s classroom on a “timeline” or geographical cluster, identify their nationalities and their characteristics in the story, have students place themselves in a “who are they most like. (OR this could be a subject of a paragraph assignment.)
- What is your perception of Mrs. Hamma? Can you relate Mrs. Hamma to any of your ELL teachers? (For small group discussion, since students might be reluctant to criticize a teacher in front of another.)
- Examine the third full paragraph on page 55 regarding Mrs. Hamma, the one that begins “Mrs. Hamma selected each student who was to speak...” Discuss what new information we learn in this paragraph about Mrs. Hamma’s motivations and methods as a teacher.
- What is your impression of Diego Torres? (See pp. 56-57.) Do you sympathize with his point of view?
- What is your (cultural) perspective regarding Diego’s treatment of Mrs. Hamma? All students seem to be annoyed with her yet treat her with deference. Do your feelings regarding Mrs. Hamma change when Diego “snaps” at her?

- What is Mohr’s attitude toward Mrs. Hamma? toward William and Lali? How do you know? Provide details from the story itself, such as description, actions, dialogue, etc.
- Why do you believe the writer included the final scene with Mrs. Hamma, when she asks William and Lali if they’re related? (p. 71)
- Equality is an important, but perhaps elusive, American ideal. Mrs. Hamma seems to promote the idea of equality when she insists everyone should clap after every student’s oral statement. Does Mrs. Hamma genuinely practice equality? What elements in the story suggest a different point-of-view regarding Mrs. Hamma’s notions of equality? Whose point-of-view is it and why is that point-of-view important to the story?
- What kinds of U.S. government funding is devoted (now in the 21st century) to supporting classes like Mrs. Hanna’s? For more background, see the U.S. Government Accountability Office’s report on English Language Learning (2009): <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-09-575>
- The 1960s-1980s were a particularly active time for Latinxs in New York, especially culturally, in terms of music, art, literature. *In the 1970s*, Nicholasa Mohr became the first Latina in the modern times to have her literary works published by major commercial publishing houses. For one other example of Latinx activities in New York City during this period, see background on the Nuyorican Café: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuyorican_Poets_Café
 - How does doing further research on this topic help you understand Nicholasa Mohr’s goals as an author?

Writing Assignments (Choose one or more and write a paragraph. Don’t forget to use transition words whenever appropriate.*):

- What advice would you give ELL students on their first day of class?
- What general advice would you give new ELL students to help them succeed in learning English.
 - Choose either top five tips or a brief elaboration of your single most important piece of advice.
- What advice would you give Mrs. Hamma regarding the work responsibilities of her students?
- Summarize the story using [transitions](#).
- How important is the availability and quality of friendship(s) in your ELL classes? Why?
- Challenge yourself further: Write a five-paragraph essay on any one of the topic questions in the first section of this lesson plan (your choice.) For advice on writing an essay, see: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/685/1/>. There are many lessons on websites and videos on the standard essay format. Please search around for other explanations of the essay-writing process until you find the clearest approach for yourself.

*For advice about how to write a strong paragraph, see: https://awc.ashford.edu/PDFHandouts%5CHow%20to%20Write%20a%20Good%20Paragraph_final.pdf

*For a list of transitions, see: <http://www.smart-words.org/linking-words/transition-words.html>

English Language Activities//Exercises (for Group or Solo:)

- In “The English Lesson” there are some examples of common grammatical errors for ELL students. Can you identify some of those common grammar errors? For example, see William’s dialogue on pp. 53-54.
 - What does this suggest to you about learning English?
- Make a list of the top ELL grammar mistakes and compare them to the grammatical mistakes made by the students in the story. Have the students search, find and correct the errors.
- Vocabulary: List words or phrases in the story that were new to you, or that you were not sure you understood. Discuss and define these in class, or with a partner. How does learning these new words or phrases help your understanding of the story?
- See Mr. Fong and Mrs. Hamma’s experience with the idiom on p. 54. What is an “idiom”? What makes learning idioms difficult? Why is it important for ELL students gradually to learn them?
 - Do you have any idioms in your native language? If so, translate a favorite idiom’s meaning into English. Does it make sense? Do a search for English idioms—is there an idiom that matches yours?
- Write the thoughts behind Lali’s and William’s dialogue as they walk to work after their last class (pp. 71-72). What are they really thinking?
- Write out a scene from the story as a play, or a script for a TV episode. However, unlike a script’s spare instructions for setting and props, describe the setting, props, character details, etc., with significant detail, imagining details beyond what’s given in Mohr’s story. How will these added details enhance the story?
- Challenge yourself further: Read David Sedaris’s “[Me Talk Pretty One Day](#)” or “[Jesus Shaves](#)” (*Warning: some language some language may be inappropriate for your students.*) In these stories, Sedaris writes humorous accounts of his French language learning. How do his experiences contrast with those depicted in “The English Lesson”?

Lifetime Learning

- Near the end of the story, William encourages Lali to speak English with him “so we don’t forget what Mrs. Hamma taught us.” In doing so, William recognizes the difficulty of maintaining their English language skills since they primarily speak Spanish outside the classroom. It is natural that students wish to speak their native language at home, however, practice is important.
 - One piece of advice is to find an English-language magazine you enjoy. Everyday read aloud for five to ten minutes and, if possible, take a moment to reflect quietly.
- To strengthen your ability to speak and write English subjectively, read reviews—movie, music, book, sports games, restaurants. For example, if you’ve just watched a movie, reflect for a few moments. How would you describe your reaction to the movie in English? Then read a movie review. How did the review expand your ability to discuss the movie in English? This could be adapted to any popular medium.

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