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Language instruction in the high school classroom: an action research study

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Language instruction in the high school classroom: An action research study

by

Amy L. Finnegan

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Literature)

Program of Study Committee:
Donna Niday, Major Professor
Jane Davis
John Levis

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2005

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Amy L. Finnegan

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of language in an Advanced Placement Literature class consisting of high school students in the Midwest. The language strategies focused on pertain to storytelling, dialect, syntax and style, vocabulary, and narrative framework. The three literature texts explored were Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. The research questions for this study examine the literature classroom in terms of language instruction: (1) What strategies do students use to read difficult texts? (2) What motivates students to continue reading what they consider to be challenging texts? (3) How does language instruction influence critical and creative thinking? (4) How can teachers help readers comprehend challenging texts?

I used a method of triangulation for this study that involved the use of case studies (student interviews, student surveys, and collected student writing samples), observation of class discussions (using audiotape), and a teacher journal that served as field notes centered around theoretical, methodological, and personal findings.

The following conclusions were drawn from this study involving both quantitative and qualitative research: (1) High school students can identify and apply language strategies to the texts they read. (2) While engaged in small group discussions, students used reading strategies to construct meaning of the texts. (3) Reading strategies were accessible to both high and intermediate students. (4) Using reading strategies involving vocabulary and tone helped students to appreciate the author’s word choice and style. (5) Some students lacked
motivation to read texts but developing a historical context helped reader motivation. (6)

Using multiple language strategies helped students ask new questions about literature.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

With a rising focus on standardized tests, teachers of today face intense demands as they explore student-learning goals. Government mandates, such as the No Child Left Behind laws, influence all educators’ perceptions of methods of testing and student scores. At the state level, the mandated Iowa Teaching Standards help teachers focus on their role in the educational process. Teacher quality is rated differently by the various participants in the educational process, including students, administrators, parents, community members, and state leaders. Educators continue a vigilant search for instructional tools with the power to maximize learning for each student each day. One topic of discussion is reading comprehension and its direct influence on a learner’s educational success. The type of language instruction a high school literature teacher provides is key to helping students achieve high levels of comprehension.

In a time when effective English instruction is based primarily on scores from standardized tests, many educators choose to remain devoted to making instruction meaningful. These educators strive to replace the dissection of language and analysis of texts with a holistic instruction that includes meaningful reading and writing activities that address a real audience. The goal of any literature curriculum is to push readers past their current status using what is already familiar to allow them to read more demanding texts.

At the heart of the curricular goals is a simple ingredient: language. Jim Burke, author of *The English Teacher’s Companion*, states, “Whether it is about the structure of a poem or the function of language, the amazing complexity of American society or the
complicated nature of the human mind, I want them thinking, making connections, building knowledge. The building blocks of such thinking are words, language” (134). The literature classroom involves elements of fiction and poetry such as metaphor, imagery, style, and symbolism. Included in a close reading of a text are literary terms that provide students and teachers with a common language.

Authors of canonical texts display a control of elements of language such as style, diction, syntax, and voice. Employing various reading strategies can help a reader approach a text, motivate a reader to continue reading, and ultimately allow a reader to comprehend and appreciate the author’s style and meaning. John S. Simmons and H. Edward Deluzain, authors of *Teaching Literature in Middle and Secondary Grades* explain, “In their search for central meaning, careful readers must be able to perceive details clearly and recall them accurately” (58). While focusing on longer texts more prevalent in high school classrooms, Simmons and Deluzain note, “In the reading of a lengthy text for its implied main ideas and impressions, students must be able to recall what went on in the earlier passages of a given text as they are moving toward the reading of its later ones . . . In short, teachers should keep in mind that the sustaining capacity is a most important one in fostering comprehension skills” (58-9). Educators strive to provide students with strategies that empower them to be self-sufficient. Students must be given tools to navigate through many different texts, while applying different strategies. Burke asserts, “We don’t read a novel the same way that we read a menu or a newspaper . . . we must carefully scaffold and sequence their reading so that we develop their ability to successfully read a series of increasingly challenging stories” (24). Teaching many reading strategies helps readers successfully greet new challenges.
One goal of a literature program is to help students think and reason within society in order to solve intellectual problems. A literature classroom that includes elements such as vocabulary instruction and literary analysis, as well as literary skills, is one way to achieve this goal. Consequently, if instruction is too focused on the dissection of a text’s language, the value and thematic credit may be lost. Providing a balance between words and their meaning, and implications of values, morals, and ethics is essential. As Leila Christenbury writes in her book *Making the Journey: Being and Becoming a Teacher of English Language Arts*, “Don’t forget the joy of it [reading literature], the possibility that some of your students, not all certainly, but some, will become lifelong readers due in part to what happens in your class” (142). While vocabulary instruction and analyzing the text are important, they should not overpower the literature classroom.

Judith Irvin, Douglas Buehl, and Ronald Klemp address vocabulary acquisition and instruction in their book *Reading and the High School Student: Strategies to Enhance Literacy*. They state, “Students must use the strategies they have learned to derive new word meanings, but more important, they must access their prior knowledge and engage their metacognitive thinking abilities to infer the meaning of the word or even decide if it is important enough to stop and think about it” (126). Irvin, Buehl, and Klemp offer several strategies to motivate students to become independent word learners, explaining, “Nelson-Herber (1986) pointed out that ‘extensive reading can increase vocabulary knowledge, but direct instruction that engages students in construction of word meaning, using context and prior knowledge, is effective for learning specific vocabulary and for improving
comprehension of related materials” (128). Vocabulary instruction involving many strategies provides students with tools needed to comprehend the literature curriculum.

While considering literature and methods of teaching it, educators raise many essential questions. The research questions for this study examine the literature classroom in terms of language instruction: (1) What strategies do students use to read difficult texts? (2) What motivates students to continue reading what they consider to be challenging texts? (3) How does language instruction influence critical and creative thinking? (4) How can teachers help readers comprehend challenging texts?

In the following study, I will begin with a literature review that examines the research related to language and critical thinking. Then I will investigate two types of quantitative data: pre- and post-tests, and vocabulary quizzes. Next, I will connect the quantitative data to the qualitative information. The connections will examine the details of surveys, classroom discussions, and student writings. I will conclude by examining how the use of language strategies influenced student motivation and comprehension.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Literature related to this study encompasses a variety of texts. What motivates students to want to read a tough text? What strategies do readers employ when they reach challenges with the text? What reading strategies generate self-thought? What language research guides readers to question a text and make meaning of the text?

In order to think about the definition of language, it is important to consider how different cultures have thought about language throughout history. In the 18th century, Greek and Latin were the models for “perfect language” due to their “refined grammatical features” while English was, by comparison, “a primitive language” (Roberts 115). In 1747, Samuel Johnson began work on his Dictionary of the English Language, but it wasn’t until eight years later that he secured a place in literary history with the completion of his dictionary. In the preface he recounts the challenges he faced. Before Johnson attempted this book, England had no Academy where scholars worked to determine standards of correctness, like those of France. Johnson faced the challenge of recording words as well as deciding which usage was “correct.”

Today the Oxford Companion to the English Language devotes more than ten pages to the definition of language. Oxford defines language as “a human system of communication which uses structured vocal sounds and can be embodied in other media such as writing, print, and physical signs” (571). Language is an essential part of life. Linguists regard language as a defining characteristic of being human.
Writing in the 20th century, James Moffett, in his book *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, notes the different ways in which English can be defined. "Sometimes it is defined as contents—literature, language, and composition. At other times it is defined as 'arts' or skills—reading, writing, listening, speaking" (3). Moffett describes the dilemma of teaching English as a struggle between covering content and a matter of developing skills.

While content of the English class is important, equally important is the development of skills. Defining English in terms of skills such as reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing is a way to focus on integrating the arts. English skills are critical to becoming a successful reader and enriching the learning experience. While considering the novel selections for a literature course, teachers must acquire research-based strategies as they prepare to teach each text. Some areas that will be considered in this study are storytelling, dialect, style and syntax, vocabulary, and narrative framework.

**Storytelling**

Myths involving Greek and Roman gods and the tale of *Beowulf* are some of the earliest forms of oral tales now anthologized for high school English students. Society today remains interested in stories of the past as well as the unique art of storytelling and language use. Shirley Brice Heath explores language development in her book *Ways With Words*, as she recounts the study she conducted involving two communities in the southeastern United States. Heath became a part of these two communities "In the massive reshuffling of students and teachers during desegregation in the South" (1). In Heath's study, Roadville is a white working-class community inhabited by families that have been working in textile mills for four generations. Trackton is a black working-class community of mill workers, but their
ancestors were farmers of the land. While these communities were only a few miles apart, the children learned to use language at home and at school in much different ways. Heath discovered, “The ways of living, eating, sleeping, worshipping, using space, and filling time which surrounded these language learners would have to be accounted for as part of the milieu in which the processes of language learning took place” (3). Heath’s study examined the cultural part of literacy in addition to the oral tradition. She attempted to “describe children learning language as they grew up in their own community cultures” (3). Heath found that students respond to classroom conversations and directions differently based on practices at home. While educators assumed their oral directions would be interpreted the same by all students, students’ interpretations depended on their experiences with language in their homes.

Language development must be taken into consideration while planning curriculum. Teaching strategies focused on storytelling create an awareness of a text’s structure. An unfamiliar dialect might cause readers to struggle to decode the words in this different form. There are many approaches teachers have taken to explore dialect in the past. Reading specialist and author of Revisit, Reflect, Retell, Linda Hoyt has developed several strategies to help students practice oral retellings. Hoyt values retellings as “a reflection tool that requires readers to organize information they’ve gleaned from the text in order to provide a personalized summary” (39). This is one way to help comprehension and also help students become “effective communicators” (39). Hoyt goes on to state that “retelling life events is a natural part of our lives” (39). A sense of dialect can be addressed by encouraging students to “utilize voice changes, develop shifts in pacing, and add a sense of drama to the ‘telling’
of a story” (40). Hoyt is an advocate for storytelling in the classroom and proclaims it a natural part of the reading practice—whether the reading is assigned in a school setting or a novel one chooses later in life. She states, “One of the greatest gifts we can offer our students is to help them find their own voices as readers as well as writers” (ix). Hoyt suggests storytelling as one way to find that voice. Whether talking about a book a student recently read or telling about weekend plans, she considers storytelling essential to the learning environment.

Narrative Framework

Two of the most common structures of writing found in a school setting are expository and narrative. While an expository text is used to inform, a narrative text provides the reader with a story. Plays, novels, short stories, and poems can be written using a narrative structure. Gloria A. Neubert and Elizabeth A. Wilkins, authors of Putting it all Together, state that readers of narrative texts must process “a mental set of the properties of all stories—setting, characters, conflict, significant events, and outcome or solution” (58). Characters, setting, and plot are the key elements of all narrative structures. Students can assess the plot by “applying the thinking skills of chronological order, cause and effect, and problem and solution,” according to Neubert and Wilkins (58).

Students who have knowledge of characters, setting, and plot, can respond emotionally and personally to the text. Their knowledge of the narrative structure helps long-term memory and recalling events. Irvin, Buehl, and Klemp assert, “The last decade has yielded much research on text structure and how students can use this structure to comprehend text better and longer” (97).
Neubert and Wilkins add, “Armed with an internalized story grammar, readers can search for a property they have missed, or predict events and behaviors, thus enriching their environment with the reading and their overall comprehension” (59). Neubert and Wilkins offer story maps as a scaffold to direct students to the essential elements of the narrative as they read. A story map is a graphic organizer that provides a visual representation of the narrative structure. Neubert and Wilkins note, “Research supports the link between the attention to story grammar and improved comprehension” (59). Irvin, Buehl, and Klemp echo this assertion and note, “Previewing text and preparing to display information using graphic organizers has the potential of helping students understand and use text structure” (96). By providing readers with a story grammar, or plot line including notes regarding characters and setting, students are better able to understand the structure of the story. Before students begin reading, the story grammar helps them focus on elements of the story’s structure. Irvin, Buehl, and Klemp explain, “Teaching students to use headings, titles, subheadings, graphic clues, and signal words when previewing text helps students use text structure to comprehend text” (88). Story maps and story grammars promote students to make predictions about what will happen without giving away suspenseful points of the plot.

While they are reading, students can track the key elements and perceive the structure. Later, these story diagrams can be used for discussion. They are a way to help students understand relationships between people and events.

When readers comprehend a text’s narrative structure they are more motivated to read. Simmons and Deluzain state, “Obviously there will be many students who will turn away from the task of studying literature because of inadequate competence in the necessary
reading skills” (71). A source that may cause comprehension concerns according to Simmons and Deluzain is “irregularities in narrative structure” (71). Flashbacks, interruptions in the sequence of events, “shift in narrators, multiple narrators, stream of consciousness, interior monologues, and unexpected shifts from outer to inner action” are all classified by Simmons and Deluzain as irregularities causing comprehension concerns (71). They recommend reading strategies as a way to introduce the literature to readers and help them comprehend as they explore meaning.

Because narrative structure is a key element of a text, students must be taught to use strategies that allow for understanding of the writer’s form. Author of *Narrative Design*, Madison Smart Bell, states, “Form is of primary importance, always. [Everything else] . . . is always subordinate to form” (279). Burke agrees with this statement. He states, “To think about narrative design is to develop textual intelligence and to refine students’ story grammar, a faculty that serves them well as readers” (279). During literature discussions, Burke suggests addressing several elements including: “form: the aspect of a story that can be represented by a diagram or other graphic means; time management: how stories unfold across time; imagery: the pictures within a piece of writing that help the reader to see what they are reading, and elements of the text that have symbolic meaning” (279). Burke goes on to suggest having students perform the text as well as using a type of graphic organizer that he refers to as “idea cards.” These cards allow students to make predictions. As students read the story, they confirm and reject their predictions by looking back at their idea cards. While using the strategies, Burke also suggests discussing how point of view affects the meaning and action of the text, as well as the source of tension or conflict in the story.
Vocabulary and narrative structure are important elements of reading comprehension. Moreover, as students develop a close reading of the text, the role of character becomes essential to understanding themes. In *Bring Life into Learning*, Don Graves asserts that all things in nature, including people and organisms, can be understood by asking what they want most. Burke suggests using Grave’s research while discussing the role of character in literature classrooms by asking students questions such as: “What does the character want more than anything else? Why does he or she want that? and What factors directly and indirectly influence the behavior of the character in this situation?” (285). In addition to using this simple question to address a character’s motivation, Burke also suggests inviting students to look for inconsistencies in a character’s behavior and discussing how these instances reflect on the character. By having students create their own character and then manipulate their character’s circumstances, teachers can help readers understand differences in gender, race, age, era, and place. Burke offers a character study assignment in which students are able to explore their own character as well as the character traits of a character in the story.

**Vocabulary**

While the author’s message is critical during instruction of every novel, if students are to understand the content of the novel, the vocabulary the author uses must be addressed. Author Aldous Huxley once said, “Words form the thread on which we string our experiences” (Burke 267). Creating a classroom that welcomes the study of language is one important thread connecting experts in the area of language research. English teacher and author of *The English Teacher’s Companion* Jim Burke states the classroom itself should be
an "entire learning environment" through art, words, and music. A room should "make you think" about what is important, which includes cultures, careers, good writing, ideas, and literature. Burke says, "To discuss vocabulary is to discuss language, meaning, and culture" (52). Vocabulary instruction, as well as literary terms, are essential to improving discussion and creating a common vocabulary between teachers and students.

Irvin, Buehl, and Klemp offer guidelines for vocabulary instruction. They state, "Although knowing a large number of words is certainly good, making expedient decisions about new words is better" (126). Irvin, Buehl, and Klemp believe there are several questions to help guide teachers in making good decisions about vocabulary instruction including: "Which words are most important to the understanding of the text? What strategies could I employ to help students integrate the concept (and related words) into their lives? How can I make repeated exposures to the word or concept productive and enjoyable? How can I help students use the word or concept in meaningful ways in multiple contexts?" (126-127).

Researchers of vocabulary agree that word knowledge is an integral component of reading comprehension. Janet Allen, associate professor of education at the University of Central Florida and author of *Words, Words, Words*, recognizes the importance of teaching vocabulary and notes "students internalized the language we used together in meaningful contexts" (4). Allen also believes that words are known at different levels and therefore teachers must vary instruction. Allen asserts that the goal of any vocabulary instruction is to encourage students to use the words in their speaking and writing. Students must connect the words to their own lives and generate effective contexts to understand the words. Allen
suggests many strategies to increase comprehension including: “Extensive reading, the context of longer texts, multiple exposures to the same word, and instruction in learning from context” (9). Rather than handing out extensive vocabulary lists, Allen suggests selecting only the words students don’t already know. The goal is to increase comprehension and help students become independent word learners. Allen believes students “need extensive reading and direct instruction in word-learning strategies in order to become fluent, independent readers” (10). One way to begin vocabulary instruction is by asking students simple questions such as: “How do you learn new words?” Allen believes confident readers apply context, analyze word structure, activate prior knowledge, and use resources to figure out the meaning. One way to instruct students is modeling the strategies that confident readers use in shared reading.

To help readers value reading, teachers can allow for choice. Burke suggests building a classroom library and recommending selections to readers based on their likes and dislikes. Joni Bodart, author of *Booktalk!*, notes the importance of allowing students to talk about literature they have read, especially self-selected works. Bodart defines a booktalk as “sharing your enjoyment of a book with other people and convincing them that they will enjoy the book too... a booktalk is not a book review or a book report or a book analysis. It does not judge the book’s merits; it assumes the book is good and goes from there” (2). Allen advocates adding elements of poetry, prose, and short stories to the literature classroom, stating, “When students read a variety of genres, they learn to use semantic, syntactic, and typographic cues in diverse contexts” (29). Allen adds a nonfiction element to the study of these genres. She states, “Nonfiction satisfies curiosity while expanding
vocabulary, building content knowledge, creating background knowledge to supplement or support the material in textbooks, and familiarizing readers with expository text structures commonly found in technical manuals, textbooks, and standardized tests” (29). Allen defines a good reader as one who can navigate through tough texts and one who has practice reading many different genres.

Building a readers’ vocabulary assists learners as they approach challenging texts. Jim Burke, in his book *Reading Reminders*, addresses how to help students expand their vocabulary. Burke suggests helpful reminders when teaching new words. He states, “Assuming that their reading continually grows more demanding—in its use of language, sentence structures, and concepts—we need to prepare them by introducing them to the necessary words and teaching them the strategies they need to expand their own vocabulary” (267). Burke offers several strategies in order to teach new words. He bases these strategies on the research done by Janet Allen as he explains looking up the word, asking someone what the word means, and skipping the word as ways a reader can make sense of a difficult selection. Burke addresses expanding vocabulary as he offers these guidelines: “Teach the words that are most useful now and in the future, teach the words they need before reading, teach word structure, and examine word relationships: antonyms, synonyms, analogies, associations” (267). One way to expand students’ vocabulary is to keep a running display of words that have been introduced. This strategy is called a “word wall” and is suggested by Janet Allen as well as Jim Burke. A bulletin board could be used to display a classroom word wall; the learning strategy might entail materials such as the letters of the alphabet and note cards containing the words and definitions.
Another vocabulary strategy suggested by Burke is a semantic map, which he describes as putting “the word in the middle, then add notes for the definition, part of speech, a picture, and three examples” (268). The goal of vocabulary strategies is to help students use the words multiple times in order to commit the words to memory. Allen believes, “Words should be used in a meaningful context between ten and fifteen times” (35). With use of the word wall and other strategies, Allen began to see the words in students’ writing and graphic organizers. The word wall is a way to help students remember the words they know and encourage them to use the words in their writing.

A vocabulary journal is another strategy Janet Allen suggests. She describes this activity as one in which students “organize the words they encounter into four columns: (1) ‘Don’t know at all;’ (2) ‘Have seen or heard—don’t know the meaning;’ (3) ‘I think I know the meaning;’ (4) ‘I know a meaning’” (268). After placing the words in one of the four columns, students share their knowledge of the words. This strategy also helps teachers focus on the words that students don’t already know, essentially abbreviating vocabulary lists.

Allen states that “searching, categorizing, using words in multiple contexts, and connecting the words to their own lives were great ways to keep students aware of the words” (71). Categorizing terms in this manner provides links to reading comprehension. Irvin, Buehl, and Klemp suggest a similar technique in which students list important words from the text, then divide these words into labeled categories, and finally make generalizations about a the text. Irvin, Buehl, and Klemp assert, “Since the strategy involves the categorization and labeling of words, List-Group-Label makes an excellent prereading
strategy for a vocabulary development lesson as well” (130). This strategy motivates all readers by allowing them to participate and share perceptions. It promotes higher order thinking skills through “categorizing, interpreting, and making generalizations” and then lets students group the words in a way that makes sense to them (132).

Assessing Student Learning

Expert readers possess knowledge of storytelling, narrative framework, and vocabulary. As readers learn more about these areas, they can easily apply strategies to any new text. Assessment, evaluation, and grading are three elements to consider when addressing student learning. Burke defines assessment as an element in which “purpose depends on audience and occasion” (168). Burke states, “To assess is to question—constantly, honestly—where you are going and why you are going there” (171). Providing students with a list of items at the beginning of a unit is one way to clarify the important assessable attributes of a unit. Burke also suggests talking with students about forms of assessment in educational settings, the workplace, and in society. He writes, “I speak to students often about different types of standards . . . those in the workplace, my profession’s, society’s, their own, and those specific to an assignment” (170). Burke describes assessment as a process when he states, “Assessment involves an ongoing conversation—between the student and the teacher, their peers, parents, and of course, themselves—about the work while it is in progress, and includes opportunities to improve that work in response to this information” (170). Throughout the process of assessment, students are given time to process feedback and accommodate that information in a productive manner which shows their level of learning.
Assessing students’ attitudes and beliefs about reading and writing is important. Knowing what students want to learn and what they already know is essential according to Susan Hynds, author of *Making Connections: Language and Learning in the Classroom*. Hynds explores one classroom with a teacher who engaged students “in a series of informal writing and speaking activities, designed to give her information about their attitudes and beliefs” (244). These activities allowed the teacher to get to know her students’ abilities, as well as their interests. Students wrote letters with a specific audience and purpose that revealed how they thought about the writing process and their role in that process. Hynds also describes using questionnaires to gather information about students, and she explains this is “... the kind of information that wouldn’t show up in their letter grades or their scores on achievement tests” but “Knowing more about student attitudes and beliefs is an important part of planning and program evaluation” (247). Hynds believes, “A competent assessment system is sensitive not only to students’ knowledge but to their assumptions and beliefs about the nature of the content area they are studying as well” (247). She notes that student progress can take the form of a pre- and post-test analysis, but can also be revealed using day-to-day observation techniques.

Exams are another way to measure student learning and the alignment of curriculum standards, as well as provide feedback to everyone involved in the student’s education. The key to any exam, according to Burke, is to be sure it measures “the depth and breadth of a student’s understanding and ability in a particular area” (179). Rather than testing how well students can understand the exam, the exam must measure the knowledge of the content material.
Asking students to develop questions for both exam situations and class discussion can take the reader deeper into the literature selections. Burke suggests having students read a novel and then write text, reader, world/other literature, and dense questions. The dense question combines all three forms and is an open-ended question students can use as an essay prompt.

Burke also recommends asking students to set goals. Teachers know students are improving when they have reached their goals. Improvement should be reflected in their grade. Burke explains, “At their best, grades are an invitation to reflect for both teachers and students. If we create grading systems that are clear and fair, if we help students to assess their own work and thereby internalize high standards, the grades they receive will be mere confirmations of what they already know” (187). Burke links assessment and grading when he states, “… results, if they are to be lasting and meaningful, must come from the goals students create themselves” (188). To truly empower students means asking students to set goals and then work to reach these goals.

**Texts Emphasizing Language Use**

Teachers of literature courses consider many texts as they organize curriculum. In AP Literature, it is especially important to consider canonical literature that will prepare readers for college as well as prepare them for the College Board exam at the end of the course. One way to give readers a better background is to consider the subject matter and authors. A literature classroom might include texts such as Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, and Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. These
three texts can be taught using the previously described techniques of storytelling, narrative framework, and vocabulary.

**Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: Storytelling and Dialectical Challenges**

Author and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston uses a unique form of storytelling throughout *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This novel is the story of Janie Crawford’s journey through life. Janie discovers her identity through her three marriages. This story opens with Janie rocking in her porch chair as she tells her friend Pheoby Watson what she has learned from her journey. Hurston tells the story by using the voice of Janie in order to remind readers of the oral tradition. Critic and author of “Orality and Textuality” Elizabeth Meese writes, “Hurston employs a narrative strategy that is culturally, philosophically, and aesthetically complex. This complexity reveals itself through Hurston’s decision to retell the story rather than to tell it” (60). Many critics note Hurston’s position of the time as a part of the Harlem Renaissance. Her writing comes from the rich oral tradition established in her own culture. Meese explores Hurston’s style of writing by stating:

Hurston’s artistic method displays a keen awareness of the performative quality of fiction as it emerges from the tradition of oral narrative, as well as a clever consciousness of the storyteller-writer’s role in constructing the history of a people through language. Her brilliant use of dialect, specifying pride and ownership, lends credibility to the novel’s claim as a work for the black community. (61)

Hurston’s unique narrative strategy is also addressed by Lorraine Bethel, who defines herself as a Black feminist critic in her article “Hurston and the Black Female Literary Tradition.”
Bethel analyzes Hurston's novel as a text written by a black female author who conveys the political and cultural truths using literary forms created by white men of upper-class. Bethel asserts:

... black people have always bonded together in order to establish and maintain positive definitions of Blackness. The most important and common form of this racial bonding has been Afro-American folk culture: the musical, oral, and visual artistic expressions of Black identity that have been handed down from generation to generation. (11)

Bethel reminds readers that Hurston attended college during the time of the Harlem Renaissance: Hurston’s sense of voice in her writing reflects the spirit of this historical time period.

Several instances in the novel appear to be autobiographical. Hurston was born on January 7, 1891, in Florida and grew up in Eatonville, a town made up entirely of African Americans. Her father, John Hurston, was a carpenter and a Baptist minister, while her mother, Lucy Potts Hurston, was a former schoolteacher. Zora Neale Hurston attended Howard Prep School in 1918 in Washington, D.C. She later earned her associate degree from Howard University in 1920. From 1925-1927, Hurston studied anthropology with Franz Boas while attending Barnard College. Her connection with Boas helped further Hurston’s study of anthropology, and she began field work in Harlem in 1926. In 1927, her interest in anthropology took Hurston back to her roots in Florida where she collected folklore. Mrs. Rufus Osgood Mason funded part of Hurston’s study, which allowed Hurston
to return to Florida after marrying her first husband, Herbert Sheen. This marriage lasted only eight months, yet Hurston and Sheen did not officially divorce until 1931.

Zora Neale Hurston’s education and relationship with Langston Hughes is an important part of her life. Hurston received her bachelor of arts degree from Barnard in 1928 and she published a few works before starting a collaborative writing project with Langston Hughes. Hughes and Hurston worked on their play *Mule Bone* in 1930. After an argument regarding authorship, the relationship between Hurston and Hughes collapsed. Hurston did attempt to study for a Ph.D. in anthropology at Columbia University in 1935, but was unsuccessful.

Hurston spent only seven weeks writing *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and published it in 1937. Two years later, Hurston was hired as a drama instructor at a college in North Carolina. In this same year, Hurston married Albert Price III, but they separated in 1940. Just as Hurston uses Eatonville, Florida, as the setting in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she also authorizes her protagonist Janie to experience several marriages.

Throughout Hurston’s life she became acquainted with many wealthy and noted artists and writers, yet the end of her life presented lonely and troubled times. Hurston worked as a librarian at Patrick Air Force Base but was fired in 1957. In 1959, Hurston suffered a stroke and was forced to enter the St. Lucie County Welfare Home, where she died on January 28, 1960. She was buried in an unmarked grave in Fort Pierce, Florida. In 1973 Alice Walker set out to find Hurston’s grave and later published *In Search of Zora Neale Hurston*, launching a revival of Hurston’s works.
With this revival, literary critics began examining Hurston’s works. Barbara Christian, a major critic of African-American literature, talks about Hurston’s work as she explains, “At the center of her work as a folklorist, an anthropologist, and a writer was her desire to express the functional beauty of folk language, lore, and custom” (56). Even though Hurston is most often times associated with the Harlem Renaissance, her major works were published in the 1930’s. By contrast, the Harlem Renaissance is a movement that exploded between 1917 and 1929. According to Christian, it was a time when, “Intellectuals such as [Alain] Locke and [James Weldon] Johnson, the oldest and most prestigious black writers of the day, proclaimed a new philosophy, the New Negro Philosophy” (37-8). However, Hurston had a different style than other writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Christian explains, “For she knew intimately rather than talked about folk speech and folk images and used them as guides for her imagination” (57). While Hurston was living in New York at the time of the Harlem Renaissance, she traveled South trying to capture and preserve folk culture.

While in New York, Hurston studied under the guidance of Franz Boas at Columbia. In her book Black Women Novelists, Barbara Christian explains this great man by stating Boas “dominated American anthropology for two decades” and “played a major role in changing the meaning of the word ‘culture’ in anthropology” (57). It is important to note that the folk tradition was not merely an academic pursuit of Hurston’s, but rather an essential part of her life. Christian explains the importance of Hurston’s novel Their Eyes Were Watching God when she writes, “It is also a significant novel, a transitional one, in the development of black woman images in literature. In it Hurston revised the mulatta images
that had preceded her and led the way toward the presentation of more varied and complex women characters” (57). Instead of portraying a tragic mulatta stereotype image of victimization, Hurston provides a protagonist who exemplifies courage and explores her self-image. Hurston wanted to celebrate, rather than victimize, African-American culture. The protagonist, Janie Stark, tells her life story to her friend, allowing readers to see her as a part of a community which shapes her and which she shapes.

Christian explores the character of Janie by stating, “Through Hurston’s language, the lying sessions, the whisperings, the music, the linguistic contests, and the communal celebrations as well as the misunderstandings are grandly preserved for everyone to see” (58). Hurston was unlike the other writers of her time. She emphasized the folk community as setting for literature and was concerned with the characteristics of the relationship between the African American woman and her community. Christian explains, “Hurston’s Janie not only revised the previously drawn images of the mulatta, the author’s rendition of her major characters beautifully revealed the many dimensions of the black woman’s soul as well as the restrictions imposed upon her by her own community—that she, like all others, seeks not only security but fulfillment” (59). Hurston’s style involved her rich ideas regarding folk culture as she used dialect to develop characters.

Hurston defines her own dialect as “a map of Dixie on my tongue” (77). In her essay “Metaphor, Metonymy and Voice,” literary critic Barbara Johnson credits Hurston as a writer who “devoted her life to the task of recording, preserving, novelizing, and analyzing the patterns of speech and thought of the rural black South and related cultures” (45). The rhetoric employed by Hurston, through her use of dialect, provides the essence of her novel.
Lorraine Bethel concedes, “In presenting Janie’s story as a narrative related by herself to her best Black woman friend, Pheoby, Hurston is able to draw upon the rich oral legacy of Black female storytelling and myth-making that has its roots in Afro-American culture” (12). The historical background helps readers experience the novel as both a work of literature and a conversation they might overhear.

In addition to knowing about the author and historical setting, probing the definition of rhetoric is important when considering Hurston’s dialect. Moffett defines rhetoric as “The ways one person attempts to act on another, to make him laugh or think, squirm or thrill, hate or mate . . . acting on others through words is merely one aspect of the larger rhetoric of behavior” (115). Zora Neale Hurston is said to have captured the folk culture of the times rather than looking to Africa as a basis for cultural heritage. According to Susanna Payloska, “Her stories . . . made her the first African American to bring African American folklore to a wide audience” (77). As a novelist, folklorist, anthropologist, and Harlem Renaissance personality, Hurston uses figurative language and dialect to weave a tale.

Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* presents a unique dialect. Jim Burke describes helping readers with a dialect such as Hurston’s by prompting students to “. . . find the familiar within the foreign by asking themselves questions such as: ‘What might I compare this with in order to better understand it? Does this remind me of anything with which I am already familiar? Can I compare this to any experience of my own?’” (271). By making these connections, students are able to bridge the gap between a language that is familiar to them and one that is not. Some strategies Burke suggests to improve understanding are the following: writing their way into the text from their perspective,
While making connections to Hurston’s art of storytelling, readers might also consider how the dialect influences the author’s themes. Janie’s journey is a physical as well as an emotional journey. She discovers learning takes place while a person is living; at the end of the novel, Janie explains to her friend Pheoby, “... you got tuh go there tuh know there” (Hurston 183). Janie has returned after acquiring three different husbands and traveling to various towns. As Lisa Garrigues suggests in her article in the September 2003 issue of *English Journal* “Porch Talk: Reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God,*” the audiotape helped students become familiar with the dialect Hurston uses. Garrigues writes, “As with other texts thick with dialect, it is easier for students to begin by hearing the natural cadence of the spoken language than by struggling to decipher the invented spellings of the written word” (23). While *Their Eyes Were Watching God* presents themes of love, marriage, and journeys, it also provides storytelling and dialectical challenges for readers.

**Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*: Syntax and Vocabulary Challenges**

While the dialect Hurston uses creates a challenge for some readers, Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* is a rigorous text involving dialogue and syntax, as well as foreign words and war terms. *A Farewell to Arms* is a story about love and war that involves characters struggling to deal with the death and destruction caused by battle. Set during World War I, this novel recounts the life of an American ambulance driver, Frederic Henry, who gets wounded on the Italian front and falls in love with a nurse named Catherine.
Barkley. Hemingway’s style communicates the love, pain, and loss Henry experiences as he journeys through life as a soldier in and out of war.

Hemingway recounts his own experiences in writing about the complexities of war in his book *Ernest Hemingway on Writing*. Hemingway explains:

> For your information in stories about the war I try to show *all* the different sides of it, taking it slowly and honestly and examining it from many ways. So never think one story represents my viewpoints because it is much too complicated for that.

But it is very complicated and difficult to write about truly. For instance to take it on a simply personal basis—in the war in Italy when I was a boy I had much fear. In Spain I had no fear after a couple of weeks and was very happy. Yet for me to not understand fear in others or deny its existence would be bad writing. It is just that now I understand the whole thing better . . . .

I would like to be able to write understandingly about both deserters and heroes, cowards and brave men, traitors and men who are not capable of being traitors. We learned a lot about all such people. (23-4)

In this passage, Hemingway provides a chronology of his war experiences, as well as the changes in his feelings about war.

In his introduction to *Hemingway on War*, Sean Hemingway notes that his grandfather, Ernest Hemingway, believed the prominent elements of war to be danger, courage, physical exertion, suffering, uncertainty, chance, friction, resolution, firmness, and
staunehess. These concerns regarding war are revealed in the stories Hemingway wrote throughout his lifetime. Sean Hemingway believes his grandfather’s greatest accomplishment was the “portrayal of the physical and psychological impact of war and its aftermath” (xx). He reminds readers that Hemingway was a “military expert” and a “student of war in its totality” (xx). Hemingway’s writings reveal his witness to the major conflicts of the first half of the twentieth century.

Born on July 21, 1899, Ernest Hemingway experienced many wars during his lifetime. Both of his grandfathers served on the Union side for the Civil War, and his father served as a corporal with the First Iowa Volunteer Cavalry. In 1917, when the United States entered World War I by declaring war on Germany, Ernest Hemingway was a senior in high school and was eager to join the war. His father opposed this desire, so Hemingway joined the staff of the Kansas City Star. Even so, in 1918 he enlisted for a six-month tour of duty with the American Red Cross as an ambulance driver. After two weeks in Italy, Hemingway volunteered to run a mobile canteen distributing chocolate and cigarettes to soldiers at the front. These trips to the front involved riding a bike or traveling on foot. On one such trip, Hemingway was wounded during an Austrian offensive. Sean Hemingway recounts the details of his grandfather’s wounds: “Shrapnel from a trench mortar blast had inflicted more than two hundred separate wounds in his legs. Despite the serious injuries, he carried a wounded Italian soldier to safety, but only after a round of heavy machine gun fire tore into his right knee” (xxi). Some of these details of the wounded soldier at the front are reflected in the plot of Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms.
Due to his bravery, Ernest Hemingway was awarded the Silver Medal of Valor and the Croce di Guerra and promoted to first lieutenant in the Italian army. While recovering from his wounds in an American hospital in Milan, Hemingway met Agnes von Kurowsky and they had a brief love affair. Some critics think that the character Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms* is patterned after Kurowsky.

In 1919, Hemingway returned to Oak Park, Illinois, and in 1920 he began writing freelance articles for *The Toronto Star*, in which many articles centered around the theme of war. Months later he met and fell in love with Elizabeth Hadley Richardson of St. Louis, and they were married in 1921 at Hemingway’s cottage in Upper Michigan, and then they moved to Paris where Hemingway kept writing for *The Toronto Star*.

In contrast to his successful career, Hemingway was experiencing great turbulence in his personal life. In fact, Hemingway considered suicide during his divorce with Hadley Richardson, and ended up giving her royalties from *The Sun Also Rises*. In 1927, after his separation from Richardson, Hemingway married Pauline Pfeiffer.

War remained at the core of Hemingway’s life. In 1922, Hemingway interviewed Benito Mussolini. Later that year, he traveled to Constantinople to report on the Greco-Turkish War.

In July 1936, the Spanish Civil War began and Hemingway agreed to cover the conflict as a correspondent for the North American Newspaper Alliance. At this same time, Hemingway wrote *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. In Ernest Hemingway’s articles about the Spanish Civil War, Sean Hemingway notes, “I believe that Hemingway’s frank descriptions of the dead sustain the narrative power, especially in light of today’s graphically violent
imagery” (xxiii). Sean also captures Hemingway’s feelings about the emotional impact of war quoting his grandfather’s words:

There is no man alive today who has not cried at a war if he was at it long enough. Sometimes it is after a battle, sometimes it is when someone that you love is killed, sometimes it is from a great injustice to another, sometimes it is at the disbanding of a corps or a unit that has endured and accomplished together and now will never be together again. But all men at war cry sometimes, from Napoleon, the greatest butcher, down. (xxiv)

The concerns Hemingway faced during his experiences at war, especially those during World War I, are similar to the concerns in *A Farewell to Arms*, where Hemingway presents readers with several themes such as war, violence, death, love, and nature. Oldsey notes the autobiographical influences within *A Farewell to Arms*. For instance, in 1928, after his wife’s own pregnancy complications, Hemingway wrote about the protagonist’s death during childbirth. Also, shortly after visiting his father who was ill and depressed, Hemingway received notice on December 6, 1928, that his father had committed suicide. Hemingway made the final revisions to his novel in 1929 while in Paris, perhaps connecting the protagonists’ grief after Catherine’s death to his own sense of loss. Oldsey writes, “As F. Scott Fitzgerald was to remind him, Hemingway had to face the fact that he was being prompted to write out of two sets of circumstances—the events and people associated with his war experiences in Italy (in 1918), and certain attitudes and emotions connected with this period of novelistic composition (1928-1929)” (4). Oldsey recounts by the time Hemingway began work on *A Farewell to Arms* he was an “accomplished writer who had developed a
prose style of his own and had attracted a large following of devoted readers, including F. Scott Fitzgerald (who helped him [move] to the more prestigious publishing firm of Charles Scribner’s Sons)” (2). He had already published *In Our Time, The Sun Also Rises*, and *Men Without Women*.

The publication of *A Farewell to Arms* brought Hemingway further fame. Bernard Oldsey states, “Scribner’s intended to pay a young American novelist, just turned thirty, the then unheard of sum of $16,000 for the serial rights to his novel” (6). *A Farewell to Arms* ran in six installments in Scribner’s magazine from May to October in 1929 and became popular with the public as well as the critics. By November of 1929 sales stood at 79,251 copies; by 1961, *A Farewell to Arms* had sold more than a million and a half copies.

Even though he wrote in both styles, Hemingway favored fiction over the factual form of journalism. Sean Hemingway writes, “Hemingway did not believe that being a journalist was as important as writing fiction. In fact, he believed that a writer had only so much creative ‘juice’ and that, after a certain point early in one’s career, one should not waste one’s talent writing journalism when one could be writing fiction instead” (xxiv). Hemingway continued writing fiction until the end of his life. In 1950, he wrote *Across the River and Into the Trees*, a World War II love story that was said to be a critical failure. After this, Hemingway published *The Old Man and the Sea*, a novel that is accredited with Hemingway’s redeemed popularity and perhaps his 1954 Novel Prize in Literature.

In 1959, Hemingway was forced to leave Cuba, where he had made his home for over twenty years, due to the revolution in Cuba and the American Cold War politics. Sean Hemingway recounts the end of his grandfather’s life as he writes:
In many ways, Hemingway was a casualty of that last war—he retreated to Idaho, where he took up residence in a bunkerlike home, a concrete fortress perched on a hill on the outskirts of Ketchum. This is the place where he took his life only two years after battling depression and the onset of old age, after a lifetime of physical excess, and the fear of not being able to write. To this day the house emits an aura of sadness. It is the final chapter of one extraordinary man’s extraordinary life. (xxviii)

Following his death, Hemingway’s novels became even more popular. *A Farewell to Arms*, his war romance novel, has received critical acclaim for its intertwined themes of war and romance and for its style of writing. Author of *Hemingway’s Hidden Craft*, Bernard Oldsey addresses Hemingway’s style when he states, “To understand and appreciate *A Farewell to Arms* as it deserves, we should examine some of the underlying acts of craftsmanship responsible for its finely wrought surface and resonant quality” (1). Oldsey goes on to note how Hemingway went about drafting his novel and explains:

Hemingway’s novel is revealed as a work of high creative order, the product of a series of drafts, rejections, recompositions, adjustments, and refinements. [He was] . . . the kind of writer he often said he was: one who wrote, rewrote, and re-rewrote, who tested sentences for their shape, ring, and accuracy, and who worked hard to expunge the inevitable dross of composition from the final form. (1-2)

Critics also note the connections between Hemingway’s style and the meaning of the text. Hemingway enhances and reveals meaning by way of style. Ronald Berman warns readers
of the depth of the language used by Hemingway when he writes, “Plain monosyllables may not denote, instead they invite translation” (81). As they attempt to translate Hemingway’s meaning, readers are faced with the challenge of the author’s style and tone of language. According to Berman, “Style, tone, and ‘manners’ are going to matter; and at all times the respondent (and also the reader) will need to interpret meanings or even provide them” (81).

Some critics note nonverbal clues as an area of interest while analyzing Hemingway’s novels. Portch explains, “Silences and other non-verbal elements enhance and reveal the meaning of these non-events” (92). Portch goes on to explain how events that do not take place are as pivotal as those that do. For example, Frederic Henry fails to return to the war, and Catherine does not give birth to their child. Especially in these passages of high emotion, Hemingway’s style influences meaning.

Literary critic John Dos Passos notes Hemingway’s style of language when he states, “each sentence and each phrase bears its maximum load of meaning, sense impressions, emotion” (89). In *Ernest Hemingway on Writing*, Hemingway reflects on his writing as he gives advice to other writers, explaining, “You see I’m trying in all my stories to get the feeling of the actual life across—not to just depict life—or criticize it—but to actually make it alive” (33). In addition to considering what Hemingway writes on the page, readers must also consider what is not. Berman suggests this aspect of reading when he states that “Hemingway’s scenes at bars and cafes have no social dimension, and often appear, because of that, to be allegorical” (80). What is not said by the characters through dialogue is as important as what is said. Berman explains, “The nonverbal elements of these scenes matter as much as dialogue, and one needs to note silence as a value, even as an intellectual value”
Berman describes key scenes in which characters say very little, but key themes are revealed through setting and words left unsaid.

In his introduction to *Hemingway on War*, Sean Hemingway writes about an interview between his grandfather and George Plimpton. Ernest Hemingway said:

I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg. It is the part that doesn’t show. If a writer omits something because he does not know it then there is a hole in the story. (xxx)

Sean Hemingway provides examples of his grandfather’s “iceberg philosophy” as he explains its use in *A Farewell to Arms*. While Ernest Hemingway never names the general in his novel, Hemingway’s knowledge and details of the same character are explored in depth in his story “A Natural History of the Dead.” Sean Hemingway notes, “When you have read *The Retreat from Caporetto* you will know a part of World War I and what it was like to have been there” (xxxi). Like Sean Hemingway, many authors and critics credit Hemingway’s style with the creation of imagery that evokes strong emotion within the reader.

Hemingway himself describes the qualities of writing in his book *Ernest Hemingway on Writing* when he says, “Good writing is true writing. If a man is making a story up it will be true in proportion to the amount of knowledge of life that he has and how conscientious he is; so that when he makes something up, it is as it would truly be” (10). The close connection
between Hemingway's experiences in World War I and the plot and characters of *A Farewell to Arms* reveal the writer's knowledge of life.

Hemingway's war experiences included World War I, the Spanish Civil War, and World War II. In a letter to Charles Scribner in 1940, Hemingway reflected on the pain and pleasure of writing:

Charlie, there is no future in anything. I hope you agree. That is why I like it at a war. Every day and every night there is a strong possibility that you will get killed and not have to write. I have to write to be happy whether I get paid for it or not. But it is a hell of a disease to be born with. I like to do it. Which is even worse. That makes it from a disease to a vice. Then I want to do it better than anybody has ever done it which makes it into an obsession. (16)

While Ernest Hemingway's oeuvre of literature involving war is extensive, Sean Hemingway notes the poignancy of *A Farewell to Arms* when he writes, "Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, first published in 1929, is among the best novels ever written about World War I" (xxx). It is with this novel that Ernest Hemingway addresses the themes of love and war, in addition to the loss a soldier experiences on his journey through life.

Hemingway's style of writing presents challenges to high school readers. Literary critic Ronald Berman states, "Hemingway and other modernists value directness and simplicity, understanding that they express complexity" (77), although the novel contains military terms from World War I and Italian vocabulary. While studying a text such as *A Farewell to Arms*, Allen recommends including a specific list of military terms on the word
By seeing the words visually displayed in the classroom, students can make connections to the vocabulary in the text.

Readers of the novel also face the challenge of the style and tone of language. Stephen R. Portch, literary critic and author of *Literature’s Silent Language: Nonverbal Communication* explains, “The Hemingway style has become a literary obsession . . . The characteristics of that style – his economy, his mastery of dialogue–have been analyzed by linguists and tabulated by word counters” (89). In fact, in *Ernest Hemingway on Writing*, Hemingway himself addresses his word choices stating, “All my life I’ve looked at words as though I were seeing them for the first time” (7). This fresh look at language and individual words contribute to Hemingway’s writing style. While *A Farewell to Arms* presents themes of war, violence, death, love, and nature, it also provides syntax and vocabulary challenges for readers.

**Conrad’s Heart of Darkness: Narrative Framework and Vocabulary**

A third novel, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* presents even greater challenges of narrative framework, imagery, and vocabulary. This novel describes the protagonist, Marlow, as he journeys to the heart of Africa in search of a man named Kurtz, who was involved in the ivory trade. In addition to the physical journey, readers discover Conrad has created a psychological journey of a man in the middle of the colonization of Africa. Conrad’s story begins aboard the *Nellie*, a cruising yawl. The narrator tells about the crew and then Marlow begins to tell a story about a long-ago journey in which he became fixated on finding Kurtz and wanted to learn about how he created a name for himself. Yet when Marlow finally reached Kurtz, the dying words uttered by Kurtz are “the horror, the horror.”
By using these lines, Conrad comments on the role of good and evil in the world and more specifically, as it applies to colonization.

Conrad’s life involved journeys on the sea after a difficult childhood in Poland. In 1857, Joseph Conrad was born to patriotic parents who lived in the southern Polish Ukraine. Conrad’s father had a literary background and was a distinguished translator of Shakespeare. When Conrad was five years old, his father was arrested for allegedly plotting against the Russians; the family was exiled to Northern Russia. Three years later, Conrad’s mother died, so his father sent him back to Poland to live with his uncle. His father lived only four more years, so Conrad never saw him again.

After obtaining an education with his uncle in Poland, Conrad decided on a career at sea. Setting sail at the age of seventeen, Conrad continued his life at sea for the next twenty years. He learned English when he signed on with an English ship in 1878. Conrad transferred to a Congo River steamer in 1887; during his time in Africa, he kept journals that would later become his novel *Heart of Darkness*. In 1895, Conrad left the sea and devoted his time to writing novels such as *Heart of Darkness* which was first serialized in *Blackwood’s Magazine* and then appeared as a single volume. Later, after publishing *Lord Jim*, Conrad published several major works, yet from 1911 until his death in 1924, he did not write anything equivalent to his early great works. Even so, throughout his life Conrad was known in literary circles as a master.

Because *Heart of Darkness* is such a perplexing novel, entire books have been devoted to methods of teaching its complexities. Hunt Hawkins and Brian W. Shaffer, the editors of *Approaches to Teaching Conrad’s Heart of Darkness* and *The Secret Sharer,*
record the joys and frustrations of teaching Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. When describing a survey given to teachers of the novel, Shaffer notes one teacher’s challenge with Conrad’s “narrative indirection” and dense style “full of imagery, seemingly repetitious qualifications, endless paragraphs, obscure allusions, and an apparent concern by Marlow with everything but the actual narrative action of locating and retrieving Kurtz from the Inner Station” (17). Shaffer extends that the narrative is deliberately complex and it is up to teachers to help students penetrate the tale’s complexity. While the narrative frames might serve to confuse students at first, Shaffer explains it will “later delight them when they understand why Marlow’s audience are the quintessentially appropriate auditors for his narrative” (17). In his essay, “The Role of Marlow’s *Nellie* Audience in *Heart of Darkness*,” Brian W. Shaffer explains: “In more fully grasping the role Marlow’s audience plays in *Heart of Darkness*, we may avoid the obliviousness of the smug, self-deceived, blind *Nellie* audience—which ends up sitting in a darkness that is not only visual but epistemological and moral as well—as to the ills its civilization inflicts on so many nameless, faceless others beyond its pale” (73).

Shaffer advises teachers to discuss the characters Conrad creates as those aboard the *Nellie* mirror those Marlow meets as he journeys to the heart of Africa.

Time and characterization make Conrad’s narrative framework complex. Avrom Fleishman, literary critic and author of “Exploring Characterization in *Heart of Darkness*,” approaches the narrative framework of Conrad’s tale in terms of characterization. Fleishman asserts:

Conrad’s methods of characterizing the colonists and natives in the Congo, the Englishmen in the frame narrative, and the Belgians in the early phase of the
story require further attention, both because they display a mastery – almost a repertoire – of such methods and because neglecting them leads to misapprehensions about the novella’s structure and even its themes. (61)

Fleishman reminds readers that Marlow’s voyage into the dark continent can be read as “a passage through geographic space” and can also be “interpreted as a journey into the interior of human nature and of his own consciousness” (61). Fleishman advises teachers to focus on the characterization by probing individual passages where Conrad describes key characters. For example, Fleishman interprets the old doctor who conducts Marlow’s physical in the company office as a psychiatrist who instructs Marlow to avoid irritation, a prescription that will be hard to follow. He argues, “Another version of the ominous hints of and distant observers’ indifference to the Congo’s horrors is the allegorical portrayal of the office receptionists as avatars of the Fates (or at least two of that triad)” (61). Fleishman notes Conrad’s description of these characters “guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool” and therefore labels them an allegorical reference. In addition, he explains, “This phase of the story also offers a flash-forward to a Congo encounter with another monitory personality, the former captain of Marlow’s riverboat, in the grotesque mode” and Fleishman goes on to describe the dead carcass of Fresleven (62). The description Conrad offers of grass growing through the dead body of Fresleven is read by Fleishman as Marlow’s keeping account of those who have come before him along this path that all travelers must take.

Fleishman notes Conrad’s description of the company manager at the central station and explains that this description is “couched in negatives” (62). Fleishman says Conrad’s style of description, “Functions . . . to establish a character type that will include most of the
colonists, culminating in Marlow’s perception of Kurtz as ‘hollow to the core’” (62). These negative characters serve as Conrad’s way to translate the destruction of Africa caused by the colonizers and express Conrad’s views of the mentality of the colonizer.

In addition to characterization, Shaffer addresses the narrative structure of *Heart of Darkness* as he probes Marlow’s audience hearing his story aboard the *Nellie*. Shaffer believes there are several reasons Conrad chooses such an audience for Marlow’s storytelling. Shaffer states, “Put simply, Conrad intentionally constructs an audience for Marlow that misses his story’s subversive suggestions and that instead views the remembered story, as so many readers have viewed *Heart of Darkness* itself, as just one more popular, exotic, masculine adventure tale” (69). Marlow’s audience serves as a reminder to readers to be mindful of the storyteller’s point. Shaffer asserts that Conrad’s narrative structure reminds readers of their own role in history.

Conrad’s tale can be read as the story of a physical and psychological journey, but to move students beyond this conception, Shaffer suggests a focused discussion of the individual characters aboard the cruising yawl. Shaffer believes,

Focusing on the role Marlow’s audience plays in *Heart of Darkness* will help sensitise students to the ways in which Conrad’s novella challenges the Western presumption of moral and intellectual superiority and will help suggest why this novella even now endures, in [Ian] Watt’s words, “as the most powerful literary indictment of imperialism.” (72)

Shaffer links the mirrored image of the accountant aboard the *Nellie* to the accountant Marlow meets at the outer station who is meticulous about the order of his books. In
addition, Shaffer argues that the lawyer, the Director of Companies, and the unnamed narrator who is a merchant seaman parallel the other characters Marlow meets along his journey.

In order to teach narrative framework, Janet Burroway uses Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in her fiction writing workshop at Florida State University. Burroway chooses Conrad over writers such as Hemingway and Henry James because Conrad “offers an immensely varied school of techniques, and *Heart of Darkness*, particularly in the manipulation of point of view, can be used to help students grow some fundamentals otherwise dimly understood” (152). Burroway asks students to imitate Conrad’s writing and also explore their own use of narration. She notes the originality in assigning a novel such as *Heart of Darkness* in a creative writing course, saying that Conrad’s depth of narration is useful in a classroom of writers.

After a discussion of Conrad’s first three sentences, Burroway analyzes Conrad’s use of point of view. She states, “So in these three sentences Conrad has, in addition to setting the scene, established his authorial right to objectivity, colloquial idiom, narrator interpretation, and eloquence” (153). Burroway goes on to recommend a writing activity to help students explore point of view. She explains, “Students might at this early point in the discussion be asked to write a paragraph of fiction establishing several divergent authorial rights” (153). This writing activity is used by Burroway to help writers consider the benefits of first person versus third person.

Once the narrator has recalled historical events, Conrad introduces Marlow, a second narrator aboard the *Nellie*. Burroway notes the difference in the two narrators as she
explains, "The outer narrator speaks to the convention of the reader from the convention of a story. Marlow, however, speaks to other characters as a narrator of a spoken monologue" (154). With these two narrators, Conrad has employed an external interpreter to help make points that could not be addressed with a single viewpoint. Burroway cites author Rust Hills as an authority on point of view. Hills asserts that "the point-of-view character must be the one moved or changed by the action" (154). Encouraging students to consider this point as writers prompts them to focus on Conrad’s form.

Burroway suggests several writing activities, two of which address narrative structure and metaphors. Burroway suggests these steps: "Write a passage in which a narrator introduces a speaker who recounts the dialogue of a third. Characterize all three. Do so partly through metaphors taken from the frame of reference of each" (157). Burroway also suggests students write and "Have a narrator set a scene in such a way as to undermine our confidence in the narrator’s judgment. Then let the narrator introduce and pass judgment on a second character we are therefore inclined to trust more" (157). While these two activities help students explore the narrative technique Conrad uses, Burroway’s third writing strategy involves vocabulary. Burroway states, “David Daiches observes that Conrad used the English language in a way no Englishman would dare, without any evidence of the restraint Marlow so praises in Heart of Darkness” (157). Burroway goes on to ask students to write a monologue using at least three of the following words unironically: inscrutable, immeasurable, immensity, etc. This written monologue will provide students with a useful way to use the vocabulary words they have learned from Conrad’s text.
Due to critical reviews regarding Conrad’s novel, teachers must consider the role *Heart of Darkness* plays in the literature curriculum. Padmini Mongia addresses the question: “Why should and how can one teach a novella that is considered racist?” in the essay, “Why I Teach Conrad and Achebe.” Mongia notes, “To deal with *Heart of Darkness* is always also to deal with its status as a high-culture text and one that has, at least in the United States, become the nexus of vehement arguments on the threatened condition of Western culture itself” (104). Here Mongia offers support for the inclusion of the text to the curriculum of literature courses. In addition, Mongia suggests giving students insight into the message Conrad conveys by providing students with the perspective of one who has lived in a colonized land. Mongia stresses that what a teacher chooses to teach is as important as how she chooses to teach it. He extends this idea by thoroughly explaining how he goes about teaching Chinua Achebe’s critical essay, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.” Mongia justifies the inclusion of Conrad’s novel in his literature classroom based on his inclusion of Achebe’s essay. Mongia believes Achebe’s essay provides readers with a balanced view of Africa and its indigenous people.

To avoid defending Conrad after reading Achebe’s critique, a teacher might show students Conrad’s racism through Achebe’s critical essay. Padmini Mongia describes teaching *Heart of Darkness* when writing:

In order to problematize civilizing, I point out the role of missionaries and the spread of English education as part of its necessary features. I try to link the civilizing mission with its residual lives today, whether it is the pope’s call to
convert Hindus in India or the Gulf War and stated American intentions to rescue Kuwait. (108)

Mongia uses Achebe’s article on *Heart of Darkness* to probe the role of missionaries. He also confronts the preconceived notions his students have regarding Africa. He begins the discussion regarding modern-day perceptions about Africa by asking students to list on the board adjectives that describe this continent. Mongia explains, “I make them proffer their stereotypical views of Africa and suggest that they are not alone in believing that Africa is a primitive, backward place, prone to famine, poverty, and mayhem” (108). As the list grows, students become aware of their beliefs and “begin to see that their views are shaped by the worlds they inhabit and not the result of some deep inner racist flaw” (109). This exercise helps students become aware of the stereotypes due to television and news reports and the focus the media takes. By becoming aware of their ideas, students open to the idea of the reality of Africa and its people. Mongia notes, “My students are made uncomfortable by realizing that they share assumptions they never considered they had, in their certainty that they were not racist” (109). After this awareness, students can consider Achebe’s arguments regarding Conrad’s position in the canon as well as his claims regarding society’s views of Africa.

At the basic level of Conrad’s text is his diction. Comprehension depends on word knowledge. To penetrate Conrad’s dense language, words can be added to the wall as well as learned using semantic maps. Students can also use a vocabulary journal in which they organize the words, as Janet Allen suggests, into four columns: (1) “don’t know,” (2) “have seen or heard but don’t know the meaning,” (3) “I think I know the meaning,” and (4) “I
know the meaning” (268). This activity could be used at the beginning of a unit involving Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. While *Heart of Darkness* presents themes of darkness, death, and journeys, it also provides narrative framework and vocabulary challenges for readers.

**Summary**

Throughout time, cultures have used language to pass on historical information. Whether by oral retellings or written accounts, people gain an understanding of both factual and anthropological events through stories. Today, as literature students consider novels, they must also learn about approaching, staying motivated, and analyzing challenging texts. Selecting literature and considering reading strategies are essential elements literature teachers must focus on in light of language instruction. Chapter Two included a review of the literature associated with questions centered on language, as well three authors and their respective novels. Next, Chapter Three will explore the application of strategies discussed in Chapter Two and apply this pedagogy to a specific group of students in a high school AP classroom.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Context of the Study

For this study, I conducted an action research project on how using language strategies adds to or detracts from students' critical thinking while analyzing literature in an Advanced Placement Literature course. Understanding the logistics of the environment in which the study was conducted is essential.

Norwalk High School is located in the upper middle-class suburban city of Norwalk, Iowa, which is just south of the capital city, Des Moines. The enrollment of Norwalk Community Schools continues to grow, which means this once rural community faces challenges of more students and less room as many students transfer from Des Moines schools. The student population is rather homogeneous. Of the 684 students who currently attend Norwalk High School, only 3.9% are Asian or Pacific Islander, Black (not of Hispanic origin), American Indian or Alaskan Native, or Hispanic. Moreover, less than 1% are in the ESL population. Only 9.9% qualify for free and reduced lunch. Special education students comprise 15.7% of the student body, and 3.5% of the student body are labeled gifted and talented (GAT).

Parents in the community are involved in the school and are concerned about the success of their children. At times, parents become involved in the curriculum, but usually rely on the decisions of faculty and administrators who conduct parent sessions to inform parents of the high school courses and curriculum. Norwalk High School opposes the concept of tracking,
although nine Advanced Placement (AP) courses are currently offered which unintentionally track students based on these advanced curricula.

In general, Norwalk High School students perform above state and national averages on standardized tests. Nearly 73% of the student body takes the ACT exam, and 94% of seniors indicate plans to attend some kind of post-secondary education during their exit interview. The goals of the building reflect the high standards set for students as well as teachers: 82.2% of students will be proficient in reading, 83.5% of students will be proficient in science, and 84% of students will be proficient in math (all scores based on ITED results). Administrators work closely with teachers and educational agencies to implement contemporary research strategies. Funding for educational resources is granted upon request.

**Norwalk AP Literature**

The Advanced Placement Literature course has been part of the Norwalk High School curriculum for 10 years. The course had been limited to one section and approximately fifteen students, until the dawn of Advanced Placement Language. This AP course provides an option for those sophomores and juniors who enrolled in Advanced English 9 as eighth or ninth graders and Advanced English 10 as ninth or tenth graders. AP Language is similar to AP Literature in that it meets all year long, is a college-prep course, and college credit can be earned by students taking the AP exam. Although some exceptions may occur, traditionally students take AP Language prior to enrolling in the AP Literature course.

Under the philosophy of the AP teachers, all students are encouraged to sit for the exam. Students and parents are told that the experience of taking an exam of this length will help in preparation for both college and career examinations. Over the past three years,
approximately 91% of the students enrolled in the course took the AP exam, and 47% of the students earned a score of three or higher (on a scale of 1-5) which most colleges recognize as equivalent to passing a freshman English or composition course.

The AP Literature course is designed to help students develop critical reading, writing, and thinking skills necessary to analyze and critique literature. The course invites students who are willing to produce college-level work and devote time to a challenging course. Throughout the course, students develop critical skills and a technical vocabulary necessary to articulate literary analysis. An intensive writing process allows students to develop their writing skills and learn to effectively communicate their ideas about the text.

Students enroll in AP Literature for one of several reasons: (1) they have experienced success in previous English courses and want to pursue the study of literature, (2) they plan to attend college and want to earn college credit by scoring well on the AP Literature exam, (3) they desire a challenging English course, and/or (4) they want to be prepared for college. As recommended by the College Board, this course is offered to Norwalk students who have reached a junior or senior level standing. While there are very few set prerequisites, the majority of students entering the course in the past three years have taken Advanced English 9 and 10, as well as AP Language and Composition. Even so, the English department encourages all students to enroll. Promotion of the advanced English courses addresses success on the essay portion of other AP exams such as AP History and AP Biology. AP Language helps to increase enrollment in AP Literature and provides a way to identify prospective AP Literature students. Students in the course possess a unique balance of intelligence and perseverance.
The AP Literature curriculum at Norwalk includes five novels and four plays. In addition to these nine selections, students are required to choose three books to read on their own. Therefore, when students write the open-ended essay portion of the College Board exam, they have a choice of at least twelve selections to write about. The five novels students are required to read are: Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Anne Tyler’s *Accidental Tourist*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. These selections provide a range of British and American authors as well as works by both male and female authors. They span publication dates from 19th century to the more contemporary literature of the late 1900’s. During first semester, students read Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and Anne Tyler’s *Accidental Tourist*, while the remainder of the literature selections are taught during second semester. During the first semester, the role of language in each of the novels is considered. Students also read short stories and poems. With the groundwork established, students are ready to focus on the complex organization of the second semester novels. The three novels students studied during second semester are Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. The novels are scaffolded with consideration to the complexity of the text; therefore, Conrad’s text is read last.

**Conceptualizing Action Research**

An action research format was used for this study of Norwalk’s Advanced Placement Literature class. Believing in and proving language instruction impacts students’ comprehension of challenging texts are two complex entities. Determining the effectiveness
of language instruction was the role of action research in this study. In their book *The Art of Classroom Inquiry*, Hubbard and Power explain, “Teacher-researchers embark on a new kind of vision quest as they look for research topics in their classroom. They want questions to research that can lead to a new vision of themselves as teachers and their students as learners” (3). Action research is a research method that involves both observation and inquiry into expert data. In the second chapter of Clarke’s *Real Questions, Real Answers*, Judith A. Aiken writes, “When teachers are encouraged to engage in self-directed inquiry about their own instructional practices, they create powerful learning environments for themselves and their students” (19). This kind of inquiry is necessary to promote a rich learning environment that reflects change. Problem-based school development is one form of action research that links school development to professional development. Hubbard and Power explain, “Students are the informants in teacher research, helping us to learn both the recipes for behavior in their cultures and the learning strategies that they employ” (1). Problem-based school development research involves finding meaningful ways to organize learning for students. In considering the ideas of Hubbard and Power, as well as Aiken, I developed the following research questions as the focus for this study: (1) What strategies do students use to read difficult texts? (2) What motivates students to continue reading what they consider to be challenging texts? (3) How does language instruction influence critical and creative thinking? (4) How can teachers help readers comprehend challenging texts?

Hubbard and Power describe the four basic problems necessary to discuss in any action research study as (1) finding a focus or question, (2) determining what data are relevant, (3) collecting data, and (4) analyzing the data” (51). Action research involves
several forms of data collection that helps the researcher process the information and utilize the preliminary findings in order to better the study.

**Essential Terms of Action Research**

Action research consists of two main types of research: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research involves numerical data used to explore patterns and relationships among traits. On the other hand, qualitative research involves conducting studies such as student surveys, interviews, student work, and a variety of other approaches. Catherine Marshall and Gretchen Rossman define qualitative research as research that “entails immersion in the everyday life of the setting chosen for the study, values participants’ perspectives on their worlds and seeks to discover those perspectives, views inquiry as an interactive process between the researcher and the participants, and is primarily descriptive” (154).

Qualitative research is similar to the data teachers gather each day as they assess students engaged in learning. Student interviews provided a focused account of how students felt about what they learned. While answering survey and interview questions, students explained why they felt motivated to read the texts. These surveys were given to the whole class at the beginning and end of each novel unit (see Appendix A and B). Students’ questions and explanations provided specific examples to my research questions. In addition, the teacher journal provided a place to record notes about daily discussions. With the journal, I was able to quickly summarize pinnacle moments during teaching that I could reflect on later.
Pilot Study

A year prior to beginning this study, I conducted a pilot study. In this pilot study, I created surveys to assess both the knowledge and confidence level of students before, during, and after reading William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The survey included a portion of text and objective questions measuring comprehension, as well as subjective questions asking students to rate their confidence level with the text. While the level of reading experience varied from student to student, I did learn that all students’ level of confidence increased from pre- to post-tests. Furthermore, most students answered more comprehension questions correctly at the end of the unit than at the beginning.

In addition to the survey, my pilot study also involved an end-of-the-year survey asking questions about all the texts read throughout the course. Students openly discussed the texts they enjoyed as well as those they found challenging. Some students reported reading 95% of the material assigned, while others reported reading 80% or less. On the whole, students reported the main motivational factors in reading a novel as: lack of understanding, lack of interest in plot or theme, frustration with the language or syntax of the text, and lack of experience with the language, thematic focus, or historical time period. These surveys prompted my research and the introduction of specific reading strategies that focused on language and vocabulary instruction.

Applying Action Research

Hubbard and Power outline the process by explaining, “When you create your questions, build in enough time for observations to take shape and even for the nature of the questions to shift in focus. The questions we pursue evolve and become richer when we
allow our ideas and observations to incubate" (6). This “incubation” process described by Hubbard and Power can take place over the course of a few days in the form of a teacher journal, as well as throughout the year in the form of surveys and objective test questions. Therefore, I chose to use a variety of types of data collection.

I started the year by asking students to draw a timeline of their reading history. In this assignment students considered the books they loved and hated, books that influenced them in a special way, and books they would like to read in the future. In addition, I used a survey adapted from Burke’s Reading Reminders to ask students about what, why, how, and when they read. This survey also addressed reading strategies that help students understand what they read better, and create goals for improving themselves as readers.

At the beginning of second semester, I used a student survey to ask students the strategies they used with challenging texts. Questions focused on storytelling, dialect, style, vocabulary, and narrative structure in order to gain an understanding of what readers already knew. I used a pre-test to determine the level of students’ comprehension as well as their knowledge of vocabulary terms and level of confidence with each text.

In the past three years I have taught novels through the use of thematic units that included all genres such as poems and short stories. After further research, I decided to reorganize the material in a reciprocal manner that involved two- to three-week units focused on one genre such as poetry, then a three- or four-week unit involving one novel and then cycling back to poetry before moving on to a short story unit. This arrangement allowed for an in-depth study of the specific texts as well as time to focus on the literary terms associated with the poetry and short story units.
After considering what materials to teach and the structure of each unit, I considered elements of the literature classroom including storytelling, narrative framework, vocabulary, and style and syntax. Narrative framework was addressed while exploring Zora Neale Hurston’s storytelling techniques. Students began this unit by writing and telling stories as they considered how language influences the audience. They considered word choice as they wrote their own journey stories. One goal of the unit was for students to understand the narrative framework Hurston creates. Another goal was for students to develop an appreciation for the way in which Hurston’s (and all storytellers’) unique use of language influences the story’s theme.

While teaching Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, I focused on the elements of style and syntax. I began this unit with Hemingway’s story, “Soldier’s Home.” This text portrays a soldier’s alienation from society as he returns from war. Students read the text and answered questions about their own connections to war as well as elements of style in Hemingway’s text. After discussing the style and syntax of “Soldier’s Home,” students read the first chapter of *A Farewell to Arms* aloud. We discussed the difference in description and details between these two Hemingway texts. In addition, we discussed Hemingway’s use of symbols in settings such as the mountains and plains. Students analyzed Hemingway’s language and his use of details by closely reading specific passages in class.

In order to understand Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* more fully, students read Chinua Achebe’s novel, *Things Fall Apart*, a strategy I garnered from reading Padmini Mongia’s critical essay. The goal of reading six chapters of Achebe’s novel was to establish an African setting for Conrad’s novel. With Achebe’s description of the Ibo tribe, students were able to
discuss the people and their culture before colonization. Once the setting was established, students began reading Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Students focused on narrative structure as they heard the tale of the narrator aboard the *Nellie*, who tells of Marlow, who then becomes the storyteller, Marlow describing an earlier time in his life. This complex narrative structure often serves to confuse readers, so reading strategies such as story maps were utilized. In addition, the vocabulary Conrad uses and his descriptions and dense syntax were a focus throughout this unit.

While Hurston, Hemingway, and Conrad have very different writing styles, their works fit together nicely. Students moved from Hurston’s tale about storytelling to Hemingway’s war story to Conrad’s complex narrative of a journey to the center of Africa. I arranged the texts with consideration of Conrad’s complexity, and I strategically placed this novel last in the sequence of the course. I hoped that as readers developed their reading strategies, they would be able to greet this complex text with confidence and be successful in navigating through its challenging narrative structure and vocabulary.

Writing is an essential part of processing information students read, so I used creative writing as one way of inviting students to take a closer look at the author’s style. Students imitated the different styles of writing in the three texts. These activities were essential to analyzing the syntax each author utilizes as well as their word choice. While reading both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Heart of Darkness*, students considered the craft of storytelling. They wrote their own endings after finishing *A Farewell to Arms* and *Heart of Darkness*. This gave students the opportunity to consider any details that they felt Hemingway and Conrad had omitted. Before writing, students generated a list of traits
characteristic of each writer, including word choice, syntax, description, and dialogue tags. As students wrote their own endings, they imitated the stylistic qualities of both Hemingway and Conrad.

Vocabulary is an essential part of each novel unit, and students approached each novel with the goal of building their vocabulary. Jim Burke has developed five standards one of which is "Students will acquire and use at least one thousand new words each year" (54). In order to chart the words students learned throughout the year, I created a word wall. Burke describes this concept as an alphabetized collection of the vocabulary words. My "wall" was a bulletin board with all the letters of the alphabet to give order to the many index cards containing words. In addition to the classroom display of words, students kept their own list of words in a portfolio in a section labeled "lexicon." I chose words from the text and then used a vocabulary strategy involving a chart that asked students to rate how well they knew each word. When students listed the word in the chart, I was able to quickly discern how much time was needed for learning each word. Students then defined their unfamiliar words and studied and used the words in meaningful ways throughout the entire unit. Students explored synonyms for the vocabulary words as they discussed tone and style. They responded to questions noting the difference in tone when the author's word was replaced with a different term (see Appendix C). This helped students consider why authors choose certain words. Students were tested on the words at the end of each unit, but the words were used in a different context.
Data Collection

Pre- and Post-Tests

Students’ comprehension and vocabulary skills were measured by using pre- and post-tests (see Appendix D). The pre-test was given before the three novels were taught, and the post-test was given after the completion of the novel units. These tests asked students to rate their confidence with each text after they read a sample passage and answered comprehension and vocabulary questions. In addition, the tests asked students to rate their level of experience with the author’s writing style. Over the course of the unit, students were involved in discussions regarding navigating the text by utilizing specific strategies. The post-test contained the same questions and passages as the pre-test.

Student Writing Samples

Each novel unit concluded with a timed writing assignment. Students were given approximately forty minutes to write addressing a prompt much like the open-ended essay question on the College Board’s exam. These writing samples showed students’ critical thinking skills.

Student Interviews

Hubbard and Power suggest using both formal and informal interviews as a way to gather data. While informal interviews are spontaneous and come about due to daily interactions in an attempt to understand a student’s learning process, formal interviews take more involved open-ended questions and allow for anecdotal accounts. Interviews are essential to getting to know the why and how of student learning. Hubbard and Power explain, “Asking students why and how they do work, and getting them to analyze those
processes themselves, helps you enlist students as co-researchers” (61-62). Individual interviews might start with questions such as: “What you were telling me the other day was really interesting” or “I didn’t have a chance to ask you about this before, but can you tell me a little bit more about . . .” (63). Hubbard and Power suggest keeping a conversational tone during formal interviews. The questions asked should invite students to share their learning. Hubbard and Power explain, “Good interviews often begin with a kind of skeletal framework and adjustments emerge as the conversations take shape. The key ingredients are listening, respect, and asking genuine questions” (63).

Using Hubbard and Power’s recommendations, I randomly selected six students to focus on during the survey process. Students involved in the case studies were chosen based on standardized test scores that labeled them as intermediate or high. Three students were selected from the intermediate category and three were selected from the high category. The students in AP Literature are high-achieving students; therefore, there were no students in the low category. Survey questions consisted of specific questions regarding motivation, reading strategies, and textual questions related to narrative structure, author’s style, and vocabulary (see Appendix A and B).

**Triangulation**

Sometimes a single method of inquiry is used to conduct a qualitative study. While relying on one form of data can be informative, many researchers employ the use of several forms of data collection in order to achieve a balance. Using several methods allows for patterns to emerge that can lead to insightful conclusions and balance the drawbacks of a single method. According to Hubbard and Power, “When you use multiple sources to
support your findings, you can build a compelling case for what you have discovered” (122). This method is referred to as triangulation.

I used a method of triangulation for this study that involved the use of case studies (student interviews, student surveys, and collected student work), observation of class discussions (using audiotape), and a teacher journal that served as field notes centered around theoretical, methodological, and personal findings.

**Case Studies**

Permission to research students was obtained by securing both parent and student signatures. I thoroughly explained the option to participate in the research study and the fact that participation was not related in any way to the student’s grade in the course. Those students who returned surveys conveying their interest and their parents’ consent were eligible for the case study positions.

I replaced students’ actual names with pseudonyms to protect their identity. The three students from the high proficiency level were Andy, Allison, and Megan, described below:

*Andy* is a quiet, artistic student who enjoys listening to country music. While his list of school activities is limited, Andy does enjoy camping, running, and traveling. He has a Tuesday evening ritual of swimming laps at the YMCA. Andy is a visual and artistic learner shown in his frequent drawings, which often combine characters and theme from the text we are reading. Andy always completes his homework assignments and readily volunteers ideas in small group discussions, but he rarely volunteers answers in the large group.
Allison is a soccer player. In her free time she enjoys shopping, reading, watching the Green Bay Packers, and listening to music. Allison is soft-spoken, but will add to the discussion in both small and large group settings. She completes assignments on time, and her papers indicate development of critical thinking.

As vice-president of the junior class, Megan appears to be a mature thinker who blends well with the seniors in the advanced placement class. Megan is actively involved in school activities including volleyball, tennis and managing the wrestling team. Having been active in 4-H and showing steers, she plans to attend college to become a veterinarian. As a well-organized individual, Megan spends time out of class closely reading the text and analyzing its features, helping her be prepared to participate fully in discussions.

The three students selected from the intermediate proficiency level were Sarah, Logan, and Mary:

Like Megan, Sarah is also actively involved in school, being a member of the National Honor Society, band, and chorus. She enjoys shopping, listening to music and spending time with friends at the local coffee house. She plans to attend college and become an English teacher some day. Sarah contributes in class and clearly articulates her opinions regarding the literature.

Logan enjoys playing video games and reading in his spare time. As shown by his increased number of comments during large group discussions, Logan has become more confident throughout the semester and is more willing to share his ideas about the literature.

Mary possesses a strong vocabulary and usually carries another book with her to class. She talks about her mom reading the books and discussing them with her. Mary uses
their discussion as one of her reading strategies, indicating she might be an auditory and verbal learner. While her comments in the large group discussion indicate she possesses critical thinking skills, Mary is frequently absent, and her job and activities hinder completion of her homework.

While there was no lower group due to the advanced level of the course, a total of thirteen other students were a part of the study. While these thirteen students were not chosen for the case studies, they did complete the in-class surveys and all other assignments. The eight students considered high proficiency were Leo, Gehrig, Jimmy, Bryce, Tia, Tate, Vivian, and Cassidy. The five students considered intermediate proficiency are Reggie, Darby, Justine, Quincy, and Molly.

**Teacher Observations/Notetaking**

Ruth Shagoury Hubbard and Brenda Miller Power offer strategies on data collection. They explain, “Few teachers can undertake a research project without some sort of note taking—it would be comparable to a carpenter trying to build a house without a hammer” (36). Hubbard and Power compare the process of gathering data to that of a painter, saying that like painters, teacher-researchers must start by visually assessing their subjects, then work to blend their ideas by challenging the questions they have, and finally take time to step back and watch what is evolving. Hubbard and Power explain, “For example, if you are having trouble making sense of a scene through the notes you take, you may want to do some interviews or tape transcription to help you refocus. If your interviews narrow your view of classroom encounters too much, you may want to return to the *broad strokes* of rapid note
taking” (38). This shift from part to whole helps researchers consider all essential components of the study.

Note taking is a qualitative form of gathering data which Hubbard and Power explain as a way to “understand the culture” a researcher is studying. Hubbard and Power clarify that this form of data should not detract from the role of teaching, “But if note taking is integrated naturally into your classroom routines, it can inform both your teaching and your research” (40). Note taking can be used as an observation tool and notes may be jotted in phrase form or quotes. These notes will serve as a “joy to the memory or a catalyst for more focused writing later,” according to Hubbard and Power (40). Researchers should record critical incidents. Hubbard and Power assert three strategies for note-taking: “using anecdotal records as part of the database, taking notes or keeping a journal while working with students, and setting aside time when students are not present to record classroom events” (41). Hubbard and Power suggest tailoring anecdotal records to meet research needs. They warn against gathering too much information as well as gathering information without a clear purpose.

There are many methods to taking notes and researchers develop skills as they become more familiar with the note-taking process. Whole-class discussions allow time for teachers to note the contributors and topics of discussion. After notes are gathered, Hubbard and Power suggest “cooking notes” and define this process as “reflecting on what you are seeing shortly after you first write your notes” (45). Hubbard and Power suggest researchers “Look for incidents that delight, jar, confound, or confuse you during the day (45). These key incidents will help researchers adjust essential questions and focus lessons. Questions to
consider while "cooking notes" are: "Are there places in my notes that call for changes in the way I am doing research?" "Am I describing the field fully?" "What theories am I developing or supporting through what I am seeing?" and "What in my life, or the lives of the students, is affecting what I am seeing?" These questions help researchers focus and reevaluate as they process the notes they have taken. These questions address four forms of notes including: field notes, methodological notes, theoretical notes, and personal notes.

Hubbard and Power assert that note-taking is essential to any classroom study. They state, "Researchers we work with find that their notes are usually the most important data source" (55). They encourage adding visual aids to notes and recording the details that will spark memories later. Recording details rather than generalizations is one way to provide specific dialogue later on. Hubbard and Power explain, "At times, the process can be frustrating. But ultimately, no other data source is more important for tracing how you come to see your classroom and research question in new ways" (57). Hubbard and Power encourage researchers to look for patterns as they process the notes they take.

I used a teacher journal to record answers students gave as specific language questions were addressed. During small and large group discussions as well as literature circles and student-led discussions, I made notes regarding specific student comments. I recorded details of vocabulary discussions as students described their strategies for remembering a new definition. While taking these notes, I focused on particular moments and tried to summarize specific words students said in order to recall the situation later. After class, I took time to reflect on the notes I had taken. I processed notes by connecting ideas and highlighting the most important anecdotes. Then, I drew connections between my
notes and my research questions as I looked for patterns. My teacher’s journal allowed me to record my findings as well as reflect on how well students understood the text and recognized strategies they were using.

Analyzing the Data

I used a variety of data sources to measure students’ learning. Pre- and post-tests included multiple-choice questions to measure reading comprehension and vocabulary. Surveys encompassed questions regarding experiences with author’s style, strategies used for unlocking the language, motivation to read, and confidence with the text. Writing samples provided a measurement of the critical thinking skills developed, use of high level diction (or vocabulary words studied), and creative thinking regarding imitating author’s style and considering the outcome of the novel. In addition, I tape recorded conversations about literature to measure students’ knowledge of tone and author’s style.

Motivation was assessed by a pre- and post-test self-analytical Likert rating, as well as student interviews. I asked the whole class informal questions about their motivation level and then recorded these ideas in my teacher journal. Growth in student critical thinking was analyzed through writing samples, surveys, small group discussions, and whole class discussions. Student growth in the level of comprehension and vocabulary was determined by comparing the results of the pre- and post-tests. In addition, vocabulary knowledge was measured with quizzes at the end of each unit.

In analyzing my data, I looked for reoccurring patterns. This helped me in responding to my research questions: (1) What strategies do students use to read difficult texts? (2) What motivates students to continue reading what they consider to be challenging
texts? (3) How does language instruction influence critical and creative thinking? (4) How can teachers help readers comprehend challenging texts? In Chapter Three I described the context of the study. Using this methodology, I will analyze the data I collected in the next two chapters. Chapter Four provides the quantitative study and Chapter Five provides the qualitative data.
CHAPTER IV

QUANTITATIVE: FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

The quantitative and qualitative data for this study produced a comprehensive picture of vocabulary, reading comprehension, and level of confidence relating to the texts read in this AP classroom. The quantitative performance assessment offered a broader view of all students and their level of comprehension and confidence before and after instruction regarding reading strategies, while the qualitative method provided a more narrow focus with voices from class discussions and the writing samples and surveys of case study students. This chapter will describe the broad scope of the data, relaying the quantitative data. Then, Chapter Five will narrow the focus by concentrating on the qualitative data.

Pre-test

Students in their second semester of Advanced Placement Literature and Composition were given the pre-test before beginning the novel units of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and *Heart of Darkness*. Prior to the pre-test, the nineteen students involved in the study had read two assigned canonical novels and two novels of their choice. For the pre-test, students were asked to read sentences taken from the texts and choose the correct definition for each word used in context. Students also read passages and answered reading comprehension questions dealing with tone and style. In addition, students rated their level of confidence after responding to the multiple choice questions for each text.

Comparing Pre- and Post-Test Comprehension and Vocabulary

The following data separates the three portions of the pre- and post-test into the three novel units. While the pre- and post-tests were given as a cumulative test over the three units
of study, I will discuss patterns of data as they relate to the individual novel units: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* Pre-/Post-Test Comprehension and Vocabulary

The first unit of study began in February 2005 when students read Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The average pre-test score for the first novel unit was 70%, while the average post-test score was 93%. Overall, the majority of the students increased their post-test score by 20% or more on the comprehension and vocabulary multiple-choice questions. The graph on the following page details the results from the pre- and post-tests (see Figure 1).
Figure 1. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* reading comprehension and vocabulary comparison between pre- and post-test

The pseudonyms of the students’ names are shown at the bottom of the graph to display the students’ scores. While one student (5%) did not increase his score, the remainder of students, approximately 90% improved from pre- to post-test. Allison, who was a part of the group labeled *high* learners, increased her score from 62% on the pre-test to 100% on the post-test. While Mary was a member of the *intermediate* learning category, she also moved from 62% to 100%.
A Farewell to Arms Pre-/Post-Test Comprehension and Vocabulary

For the second unit, Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms, students answered approximately twenty-one questions involving Hemingway's tone, style, and word choice. The average pre-test score was 66%, compared to the average post-test score of 90% (see Figure 2). Overall, the majority of students increased their scores by 20% or more. While many students scored 90% and above on the post-test, no one earned a perfect score. One-hundred percent of students scored better on the post-test which measured their comprehension and knowledge of vocabulary.

Figure 2. A Farewell to Arms reading comprehension and vocabulary comparison between pre- and post-test
Heart of Darkness Pre-/Post-Test Comprehension and Vocabulary

In April 2005, students took the comprehension and vocabulary post-test over Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, completing the last of the three novel units. On this portion of the pre-test, students earned an average score of 59%, while 84% of students scored 94% or higher on the post-test. Overall, 100% of students increased from the pre- to post-test (see Figure 3).

![Figure 3](chart.png)  
*Figure 3. Heart of Darkness* reading comprehension and vocabulary comparison between pre- and post-test
Summary of Pre-/Post-Test Comprehension and Vocabulary

While students increased an average of 23% from pre- to post-test questions over Hurston’s novel and 24% over Hemingway’s novel, students’ average increase was 35% from the pre- to post-test over Conrad’s novel. Possibly the post-test of Conrad’s novel was higher due to this being the most recently read book. While considering the pre-test scores of the three novels, students scored the highest on the first unit, earning an average score of 70%. They scored the second highest on the second unit, earning an average score of 66%. Pre-tests indicated the third unit to be the most rigorous selection, since students scored the lowest on it, averaging 59% on the pre-test. Pre-test scores indicate an increase in level of difficulty from the first novel unit to the third. These scores validated my scaffolding plan of building students’ level of confidence and experience with reading strategies from easier to more complex texts.

Comparing Pre- and Post-Test Confidence Levels

After answering the pre- and post-test comprehension and vocabulary questions, students rated their confidence level with each of the texts. A scale of 1-5 was used in order for students to rate their level of confidence; “1” indicated the lowest level of confidence while “5” indicated the highest level of confidence. The charts that follow are separated into the novel units, starting with Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God (Figure 4), followed by Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms (Figure 5), and finally Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (Figure 6).
Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Pre-/Post-Test Confidence

A comparison of the pre- and post- levels of confidence regarding *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is shown in Figure 4 below:

While rating their confidence with Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a total of 84% of the students rated their confidence higher on the post-test, while 10.5% indicated no change in level of confidence and 5% (one student) of students suggested a decrease in confidence. On average, students rated their confidence level 2.89 on the pre-test, and 4.21 on the post-test (see Figure 4).
Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* Pre-/Post-Test Confidence

A comparison of the pre- and post- levels of confidence regarding *A Farewell to Arms* is shown in Figure 5 below:

Confidence levels regarding Hemingway’s text did not increase as significantly as with Hurston’s text. Only 63% of students rated their confidence level higher on the post-test, while 26% of students indicated no change in confidence (note: one student rated confidence a “5” on both pre- and post-test) and 10.5% considered their confidence level as lower. The average confidence level on the pre-test was 2.89, while the average confidence level on the post-test was 3.79 (see Figure 5).
Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* Pre-/Post-Test Confidence

A comparison of the pre- and post- levels of confidence regarding *Heart of Darkness* is shown in Figure 6 below:

![Bar chart showing pre- and post-test confidence levels for Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*](chart.png)

Most students rated their confidence level higher after reading Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In fact 79% of students indicated an increase in confidence and approximately 16% of students noted their confidence remained the same (note: one student rated his confidence a “5” on both pre- and post-tests). Only 5% (one student) indicated her
confidence decreased (see Figure 6). On average, students rated their confidence level 2.20 on the pre-test, while post-test confidence ratings showed an average of 3.90.

**Assessment: Vocabulary Quiz Following Each Unit of Study**

At the end of each unit, students were quizzed over the vocabulary terms they studied taken from the particular novel. While the pre-/post-test used the words in sentences directly from the novel, the vocabulary quiz at the end of the unit used the words in a different context. Nineteen students took each vocabulary quiz. Figure 7 shows all students and their scores on each of the three vocabulary quizzes.

Figure 7. Vocabulary Quiz After Each Unit of Study
On the quiz pertaining to Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, students averaged 7.2 out of 8 points. A total of 72 percent of students had perfect scores. Similarly, students were given a quiz over the terms found in *A Farewell to Arms*. Once again, I selected quotes and passages from other novels in order to provide a new context for the words to test the students’ ability to discern the meaning of the words when placed in a different context. This vocabulary quiz tested students’ knowledge of thirteen words. Out of the 19 students who took the vocabulary quiz, 13 scored 100%. The average score was 12.6 out of 13 (see Figure 7). At the end of the final novel unit, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, students completed a vocabulary quiz over the fourteen words they studied. Out of the 19 students who took the vocabulary quiz, 9 scored 100%, and 7 students missed only one question. The average score was 13.2 out of 14 points.

**Analysis**

Students completed the pre-test prior to reading the novels, so their comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, and confidence levels from the pre- to post-test were likely to improve. Even so, the fact that 100% of students did not earn perfect scores on the post-test nor rank their confidence level a “5” shows the novels do indeed present readers with a challenge.

The pre- and post-test results also indicate the largest rate of gain with the third novel unit, *Heart of Darkness*. Pre-test results indicate the most difficulty with Conrad’s text. Due to observations made in previous years while teaching these texts and my research (Chapter Two: Review of Literature), I chose to scaffold the novel units. Ordering them from least to
most difficult allowed students to develop reading strategies while experiencing success before moving on to a more challenging text.

The average growth from pre- to post-test scores involving comprehension and vocabulary was 23% on the Hurston unit, 24% on the Hemingway unit, and 35% on the Conrad unit. Students' level of confidence also increased from pre- to post-test. From pre-test to post-test, students rated their confidence level at an average increase of 1.32 for the first novel, .9 for the second novel, and 1.7 for the third novel.

While analyzing the data, I decided to delete question number 46 (see Appendix D) from both the pre- and post-test results because the answer choices were too similar. While destructive and cunning might seem dissimilar out of context, when readers studied the characters in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, these terms become synonymous. While studying the term rapacious we used the definition taking by force; greedy. Throughout his novel, Conrad describes many of the characters who seek ivory and power in the African Congo as rapacious; these characters are both cunning and destructive.

The quantitative data indicated the need for study, the amount of growth, and the level of student confidence. The qualitative study provides a more in-depth examination of students’ thinking and questioning. The quantitative data provides statistics regarding what happened and to what degree; the qualitative helps explain the how and why underlying these statistics. Qualitative data will relay the strategies used to help students improve reading comprehension as it applies to storytelling, dialect, syntax and style, narrative structure, and vocabulary. These strategies are conveyed in the form of oral retellings, student lexicons,
word maps, dialectical journals, story maps, student writings, multigenre research projects, narrative maps, and synonym discussions.
CHAPTER V

QUALITATIVE: FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

Collecting both quantitative and qualitative data for this study offers a comprehensive illustration of the effectiveness of language instruction. Chapter Four described the broad scope of the data, relaying the quantitative data, while this chapter will narrow the focus by concentrating on the analysis of the qualitative data. While the quantitative data revealed an overall increase in scores related to vocabulary and reading comprehension, the qualitative data in this chapter examines students as they answered surveys, participated in discussions, gave presentations, and wrote about the novels they read. In the following chapter, I will focus on my research questions (1) What strategies do students use to read difficult texts? (2) What motivates students to continue reading what they consider to be challenging texts? (3) How does language instruction influence critical and creative thinking? (4) How can teachers help readers comprehend challenging texts? I will connect these questions to my findings.

Strategies for Challenging Texts

This study involved many opportunities for students to develop and utilize reading strategies. Each unit included new strategies that focused on the challenges particular to that text, while also relying on strategies learned in prior units. The strategies for this study included storytelling, lexicons, synonym discussions, vocabulary maps, and dialectical journals.

Drawing and Storytelling

Students began the unit over the literature text *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by drawing maps of their own neighborhoods. Irvin, Buehl, and Klemp endorse this strategy in
their book *Reading and the High School Student: Strategies to Enhance Literacy*. In this text, Nancy Dean and Jeanette Schiffbauer address visual demonstrations of mastery. They describe the graphic map as a map that "encourages students to discover an organizational pattern and support the pattern with symbols and words" (216). Dean and Schiffbauer note that a map "combines creativity with intellectual rigor" which helps all students "participate in the intellectual atmosphere of the classroom" (216). While drawing the maps I encouraged students to add objects such as street names, secret hideouts, and paths to favorite hangouts. Next, students selected a place on their maps where something happened and used this place to start a story.

Students wrote and later orally shared stories from their maps. Before students shared, we generated a list of qualities that make a good storyteller. According to students, an effective storyteller must have a strong lead, specific details, original word choice, a sense of the setting, a build to the climax, and a clear sense of closure. As each storyteller shared, I asked students to write down the qualities the storyteller used. Reggie shared a story about riding around with a friend who bet he could jump out of a moving vehicle at thirty miles per hour and not get hurt. As the driver, Reggie took the bet and his friend jumped out of the car. The audience laughed with disbelief and listened intently as Reggie finished telling how his friend ended up with a torn jacket, a few bruises, and the realization that he had no future in becoming a stunt man. When Reggie finished, I asked students: "What makes Reggie an effective storyteller?" Classmates talked about Reggie's details regarding the setting. They liked when he referenced the specific place by saying, "Ya know the gravel road out by the Git 'n Go?" The listeners also liked his use of hand gestures, slang terms, and the word *like*;
they agreed that these qualities personalized Reggie’s story. This pre-reading activity helped students to value storytelling, note the elements of the story, and appreciate the storyteller’s use of voice.

Students’ active participation indicated that they enjoyed the storytelling exercise. They considered their own neighborhoods as they drew maps and wrote stories. This activity also allowed them to consider the dialect of a storyteller. They noted qualities of a good storyteller and specific gestures and words that make people’s stories personal and interesting. While these stories were beneficial and helped readers understand Hurston’s choice of dialect, the activity required considerable time and at times the focus strayed from the connection to the novel.

**Student Lexicons**

The storytelling strategy prepared students for Janie’s story in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and after sharing their own stories, students listened to the audiotape of Chapter 1. As students listened to the tape, they kept a list of words associated with the dialect in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This list of words is based on the research of Janet Allen. Allen suggests helping students to become more familiar with words and dialect by keeping a list as they read. By writing these words in their lexicons, students became more familiar with Janie’s style of speech.

Discussions of the lexicon included comparisons to phrases students used to tell their own stories. When students were frustrated with the words Hurston chose to tell her story, I pointed out Allison’s word choice while describing a house on her neighborhood map that
was supposedly haunted. Allison had said that each time she passed by the house she was “weirded out.” This began a discussion of how to define words selected for the lexicons.

Lexicons were used with each of the three novel units. One way I held students accountable for the lexicon assignment was by asking them to write words and definitions from their lexicons on the board. They valued the lexicons more when asked to list, group, and label the words. For example, while students read *A Farewell to Arms*, they kept a list of Italian words and war terms in a lexicon. Each student chose one or two words and wrote the words and definitions on the board. Then, as a class, students were asked to group the words into categories such as disease, rank, weapons, and even food and drink. Students decided on the categories as suggested by Irvin, et al (130). If their lexicons were incomplete, most of the students looked up the words they had yet to define while waiting for classmates to add to the words on the board.

Some of the words students chose from *A Farewell to Arms* pertained to alcohol. For example, in his student lexicon, Tate defined terms regarding food such as *marc* (alcoholic beverage distilled from seeds, grapes, fruits of various sorts), *bock* (dark beer usually drunk in the spring), and *kirsch* (alcoholic drink distilled from black berries). This led to a discussion of the difference in cultures. Gehrig noted the difference between Italians and North Americans as he explained to the class, “It’s a different culture. They drink wine with each meal because it’s the normal thing to drink. They think of wine like we think of milk or water.” This illustrates the critical thinking skills students employed while using the lexicon as a reading strategy.
Students also discussed the themes that emerged as they grouped into categories the words from their lexicons. In Book Five of Hemingway’s novel, Catherine and Frederic travel to a home in the mountains. The couple experiences a period of happiness before Catherine goes into labor. The theme of love and home juxtapose Catherine’s death and the loss Frederic later experiences. Tate included chalet in his lexicon and defined the word as “a type of Swiss home made of wood, with overhanging eaves and balconies.” Words chosen by other members of the class followed themes of love and home.

Lexicons provided students a place to record words they wanted to explore further. Students used different strategies while recording these words. Some students wrote them in their journals, other students kept the word lists in the lexicon section of their class portfolio, while students like Sarah and Leo used sticky notes to keep a list directly in the book while they were reading.

While reading Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, we discussed the level of diction used by Conrad and kept a lexicon of additional unfamiliar words. Leo excelled at this study of vocabulary; while reading the final pages of Conrad’s novel, he included eighteen words in his lexicon even though he was only required to list five. Leo shared his findings with the class and explained, “The word voracious (having a huge appetite; very eager) is a synonym for our vocabulary word rapacious.” This strategy worked for Leo; he connected our discussions of synonyms with the study of vocabulary words and used his lexicon as he assimilated the word voracious and explored Conrad’s word choice.

The lexicons allowed students to choose the words they wanted to learn more about, and provided a strategy for students to increase their word knowledge. Many students like
Leo took ownership of this strategy; Leo and other students defined all of the words they did not recognize rather than ceasing to record words once they had met the assigned number. On the other hand, a few students chose not to complete the lexicons at all; they mentioned not having enough time. While some students refused to complete the entire assignment, other students would write down the words but not the definitions.

**Synonym Study for Tone and Style**

In addition to keeping a lexicon of words, students studied a list of words that I selected from each novel. Janet Allen suggests choosing words that students do not already know; I selected words with this in mind. I gave students the list of words and asked them to place the words in a chart based on how well they knew each word. Knowing what students already knew about the words helped me focus on those words they still needed to learn. *Heart of Darkness* clearly included the most challenging vocabulary, a point that was quickly conveyed with the use of this chart.

In addition to studying alone and with a partner during the first five to ten minutes of class, students used various strategies to remember these new terms. One strategy based on the research of Jim Burke was to create a list of synonyms for each of the words. Burke believes that asking students to find synonyms for vocabulary words they are studying allows students to examine word relationships. After students created a list of synonyms, I asked them to explain how the synonyms changed the tone of Hurston’s writing (see Appendix C).

In order to prepare for these small group discussions, students reviewed two chapters in their literature anthology that described tone and style. Students also used the lists posted in the classroom to articulate the tone they associated with the author’s word choice. In her
small group discussion, Megan described the tone of the word *cowed* as mysterious and threatening, but when the word *scared* is substituted she said, “It loses the mysterious feeling of wondering what it is about Joe.” Andy labeled Hurston’s use of *pugnaciously* as creating a sharp tone. Andy said substituting *fighting nature* “Gets in the way of the flow of the sentence.” Cassidy labeled the tone of *pugnaciously* as descriptive, harsh, and mocking. She said that substituting the word *upset* “changes the meaning” and the character “sounds less combative.” Many students noted the synonyms were general and lower diction than the words Hurston chose. Gehrig labeled the synonyms for *temerity* “less educated,” while Tia thought synonyms for *desecrating* and *incredulous* were “not as strong,” had “weaker imagery,” and were “not specific.” In their small group discussions, many students agreed on the tone conveyed by the authors. Their discussions fostered critical thinking about word choice.

While discussing tone and style during the unit over Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, students noted the shift in tone when another word was substituted for Hemingway’s original word choice. During the synonym discussion, Mary labeled the tone of Hemingway’s word *jaundice* (deposition of bile salts occurring as a symptom of hepatitis) as “mellow and irritated” with the idea that the onset of the disease was inevitable. She noted substituting *illness* “gives no specification” to the type of disease. Megan thought Hemingway’s tone was descriptive and sad when he used the word *jaundice*. She described substituting *disease* or *illness* as “less descriptive, less urgent” and “vague.” Andy labeled the tone of *chilblains* (inflammation and itchy irritation on the extremities of the body) as “sad” and a sense of “lack of hope.” He said substituting *inflammations* or *diseases* would
cause a shift in tone and stated, “The words would not fit as well because they describe a
broad range of problems as opposed to *chilblains* which describes specific problems.” Many
students noticed that the word choice also conveyed the setting. Students said words such as
*fezzes* (a man’s felt cap shaped like a flat-topped cone with a tassel hanging from the crown)
and *carabinieri* (members of the Italian police force) were a reminder of the Italian setting,
while *adjutant* (a staff officer who helps a commanding officer with administrative affairs)
reminded them of the military setting. Overall students noted the synonyms were less
descriptive, less technical, not as poetic, or they conveyed a different image altogether in
comparison with Hemingway’s words.

As in the first two units, I chose words from *Heart of Darkness* for students to study,
selecting a total of fourteen words from this novel. Most students did not know the meaning
to any of these words. Students discussed Conrad’s word choice as they listed synonyms and
then talked about the shift in tone when a synonym was substituted for Conrad’s word.
While discussing Conrad’s use of *rapacious* (taking by force; greedy), Sarah talked about the
difference in tone if the words *mean* or *greedy* were substituted. Sarah said, “Greedy is if
someone is pushing and shoving and grasping for something. I think of greed when I think
of money.” While these tone discussions were similar to those from the two previous units,
students’ enthusiasm waned. Students were not as eager to move to groups and share about
Conrad’s tone as they had been during the unit on Hurston’s text. Their body language and
lack of enthusiasm conveyed the notion that they understood, and this activity was becoming
redundant.
Vocabulary Maps

In addition to the synonym discussions, throughout each unit I used several strategies to help students learn the vocabulary words. During the first five or ten minutes of class, students were given time to study alone and with a partner. Studying with a partner allowed students to practice saying the words aloud. At the end of these brief study sessions, we discussed connections students made in order to remember the definitions of the words. Vivian shared her strategy for remembering the word *propensity* as she explained, "I think of the word *prop* which is at the beginning of the word; to prop means to lean, and then I can remember propensity means leaning toward or an inclination to do something." Many students made connections to the parts of words as they learned the definitions.

I invited students to map the words as a way to learn these unfamiliar terms. Jim Burke suggests using semantic maps, or word pictures, notes about the definition, three examples, and the part of speech (268). In order to implement this strategy, I gave each pair of students overhead transparencies and asked them to draw semantic maps. Each group mapped two of the words from the vocabulary list. The pictures from each AP Literature section of students were somewhat similar. Jimmy and Logan mapped *trireme* (an ancient Greek or Roman galley or warship) by drawing everything in triplicate. They included three suns, three birds, three fish, and three rain drops, as they drew a picture of an ancient galley with three oars. Quincy and his partner focused on the three banks of oars by drawing three different perspectives of a galley ship. While drawing vocabulary maps, Allison and her partner drew a hill and then spelled out the word *declivity* down the hill, while the group of partners in the other section drew a truck racing down a steep hill as they mapped the word
While Allison and her partner drew a simple word picture, Bryce and Megan added funny details to develop their map. Bryce added a fire at the bottom of the hill; he drew a flying super dog and explained to his classmates that this hero was flying to rescue the runaway truck of puppies. Bryce liked studying vocabulary and, like some of the other students, had fun with the word pictures. This activity increased students’ involvement in and analysis of the text.

I used vocabulary maps after the five-minute vocabulary study sessions at the beginning of the class by asking students if there were any words they still struggled to learn. We listed these words on the board and then students thought of ways to illustrate these words to attach meaning. Oftentimes students connected the words to their lives. Darby connected the word *fecund* (capable of producing offspring or vegetation; fruitful) to her animal science class. She drew a fish laying eggs. These additional drawings helped students visualize the vocabulary words.

**Dialectical Journals**

While reading each of the novels, students were asked to keep a journal in which they recorded the plot summary on one side of the page and their thoughts on the other side of the page (including questions, connections, and literary techniques used by the author). This reading strategy is based on the ideas of Ann Berthoff. The journals were used to help students connect with and critically think about the text, as well as develop insights they could add to small and large group discussions. Many students said they did not have time to complete both the reading and the journal. They said it took away from their reading rather than helping them comprehend. Through students’ self-analysis and my teacher
observations, I classified the students as either linguistic, tactile, or auditory learners. I noticed that the linguistic learners complained about the dialectical journal less than tactile and auditory learners. Even though many readers complained about the journals, those who wrote ideas were more prepared and had more to offer to the small and large group discussions. While many students expressed enjoyment with the lexicon and had fun with semantic maps, many students complained about completing the dialectical journal.

**Motivation for Continued Reading**

In order to determine students' level of motivation, I gave them surveys during each of the units (Appendix A and B). For example, after students finished reading Chapters 1 through 6 of Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and again after they had finished the entire novel, students answered survey questions regarding reading strategies and motivation. Oral interviews with case study students added depth to the statements students wrote on the surveys. One question on the end-of-the-unit survey asked students about their level of motivation while reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Seven of the students reported no change in motivation; they stated their motivation to read was low at both the start and end of reading the novel. Sarah reported no change in her level of motivation but stated, “I was interested throughout the book.” While only one reader said her motivation decreased, seven readers reported an increase in motivation. Plot and characters were two factors that motivated readers to continue reading. Megan noted, “As I got deeper into the plot, I got more interested and wanted to continue reading.” Andy explained, “I thought that the story got better as the characters developed.” In general students who became interested in the characters were motivated to read.
Students were also asked to explain whether there was an increase, decrease, or no change in the challenge of the dialect. Four students said the challenge of the dialect remained the same, while eleven students reported a decrease in the challenge of the dialect as they read more of the book. In interviews following the survey, Tia explained the decrease by stating, “I got used to it [the dialect]. The lexicon helped a little because I was able to go back and take a look at words that came up again.” Allison also noted a decrease in difficulty and explained, “After I’d been reading it for awhile I got into the language some and it ended up getting stuck in my head.” In general, the more students read, the more comfortable they felt with the dialect.

After finishing this canonical work, students were asked to identify why *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was included as part of the AP Literature curriculum. Sarah wrote, “I think it pertains to us because we are trying to find ourselves just like Janie.” In addition, Sarah noted the importance of female authors as well as those from different cultural backgrounds. Sarah wrote on her survey, “Hurston’s an important African American writer, and I think as AP students we should read a variety of writers and genres.” Tia noted the themes and Hurston’s writing style when she stated that the book is a “good example of great writing” and explained that she enjoyed the book. Many students wrote they enjoyed the book; they noted the style of storytelling and personal connections to Janie’s journey as reasons for their enjoyment. While many students grew to appreciate Hurston’s dialect, others did not. Earlier in the unit, in a large group discussion about dialect, Gehrig said he associated a southern dialect with a lack of intelligence. Even on his post-test he wrote about his lack of appreciation for the novel’s dialect. When comments such as Gehrig’s surfaced, I
invited other students to add their opinions. Many students would share positive examples of friends or relatives with a southern dialect and suggest Gehrig consider a more accepting view. While helping students develop their cognitive thinking, I offered an anecdote about linguistics. I shared the fact that some southerners view northerners or those in the eastern United States as rude because they avoid small talk or talk too fast. This surprised some students, and language discussions like these continued throughout the unit.

After reading the first book of Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, students were given a survey which asked them about the problems they encountered, their solutions to these problems, their level of motivation, and what might have held them back from being motivated to read the text (see Appendix A). Students listed three main problems at the start of the text. They encountered long sentences, military and Italian terms, and the historical setting of World War I. Students said they used several different strategies to solve these problems. Some reread the sentences, used context clues, or looked up Italian words to gain understanding. Others used their knowledge of Spanish to figure out the Italian terms. Students who noted a lack of historical knowledge cited listening to other students as well as asking parents as ways they gained knowledge about World War I.

Many students were motivated to read the novel due to Hemingway’s popularity. Several students noted that *A Farewell to Arms* was a favorite book of former students. Some students kept reading to find out about World War I, while others liked the interesting description and the exciting and unexpected action in Chapter Nine when Frederic is wounded.
Some students listed not enough time to read as one factor that weakened their motivation. One deterrent noted was Hemingway’s style; in fact 37.5% of students surveyed referred to style when answering the question regarding what held them back from reading. Students labeled Hemingway’s description of nature, dry language, and long sentences as stylistic qualities that inhibited their motivation. Tia said, “I liked his short sentences that got to the point, but sometimes he goes on and on.” Cassidy echoed Tia’s comment and stated, “[Hemingway uses] too many ongoing sentences.” Sarah discussed the style in terms of details used by the author and said, “The description of nature and towns seemed a bit much at times.” Jimmy stated, “I don’t like Hemingway’s writing style, and in general I’m not a fan of the story.” Many students noted frustration with the long descriptive sentences, foreign words, and war terms. Overall, the students who were motivated to read Hemingway’s novel noted the popularity of the author, his writing style, an interest in war, or an interest in the action genre.

After students finished reading *A Farewell to Arms*, they responded to the survey question regarding why the text is a part of the curriculum by noting the themes of love and war and their relevance to today’s world (see Appendix B). Students also wrote about Hemingway’s unique style. Many noted Hemingway’s fame; they labeled Hemingway as well-known and respected.

The end of the unit survey asked students to record how their level of motivation had changed over the course of the unit. Nine students said their motivation had increased. Leo was among the motivated students and expounded on his reading by explaining, “It was a decent book, and the abruptness of the changes incurred were masterfully done.” Leo, an
avid reader of contemporary action novels, wrote about the action scenes referring specifically to the portion of the plot when Lt. Henry gets wounded in the trench. Justine also experienced an increase in motivation, writing, “I became more motivated once I got into the book because the storyline became more interesting.” Vivian referenced her multigenre research project as she reflected on her level of motivation, stating, “As I researched more about Ernest Hemingway, I became more interested in the novel.” Five students reported no change in their low level of motivation, while one said she continued to be motivated while reading the novel. Although Sarah was among the readers who said her level of motivation remained the same, she added, “I lost a little motivation because the war plot became tiring and uninteresting.” Allison related her low level of motivation to a lack of interest in the plot and then stated, “I thought the characters were a little weird.” Three students said their level of motivation declined. Some students offered specific reasons for their decrease motivation. Tia explained, “I am not very interested in military things so those parts were boring to me. But it was good that he [Hemingway] alternated between war and love.”

Applying critical literature theories that allow students to view the novel from a different perspective might help readers like Sarah and Tia. As Deborah Appleman suggests in her book *Critical Encounters in High School English*, “Contemporary literary theory provides a useful way for all students to read and interpret not only literary texts but their lives—both in and out of school” (2). Viewing a text through a feminist lens or a Marxist lens might help readers focus on an aspect of the text of personal interest. Perhaps readers
like Sarah and Tia would have seen the novel as a book about a woman who is a nurse who falls in love with a World War I ambulance driver, rather than a book solely about the war.

Students were also asked whether the challenges in reading *A Farewell to Arms*, especially challenges associated with Hemingway’s style, increased, decreased, or stayed the same. Five students reported a decrease in challenges with Hemingway’s style. Andy stated, “I did not find many challenges in the book. Once or twice I had to go back to see who was speaking during dialogue.” Allison said, “Challenges decreased because I got used to the way they would talk.” Cassidy noted an increase in challenges “but only when there were words that I didn’t know as I was reading.” Four students reported the challenges stayed the same because they didn’t find the reading difficult to begin with. Eight reported that the challenge with Hemingway’s style remained difficult. Vivian focused on a particular portion of the book as she explained, “Book Three presented many challenges due to the war jargon.” Leo summarized his feelings about the style of writing by explaining, “Hemingway’s scarcity of the comma and the sentence structure” contributed to the challenge of reading this text.

While the multigenre research project helped students develop motivation for reading the novel, those who failed to connect with the historical context of the novel became less motivated to read. Many readers who were interested in the plot and liked reading about war reported fewer challenges with Hemingway’s style.

As with other units, the end-of-the-unit survey asked students to consider their level of motivation while reading *Heart of Darkness*, and the problems students encountered as well as strategies they used. Students listed problems regarding their lack of familiarity with
the words the author used and talked about being confused by Conrad's description. Tate noted his level of frustration with the author's detailed descriptions when he said, "Conrad throws in a whole bunch of comparisons." In order to solve these problems, students said they used strategies such as re-reading and paying close attention to characters.

Using the novel on the College Board exam and knowing about the author due to the multigenre research project were two ways students remained motivated to read Heart of Darkness. Some students noted discussing the book with friends and family members as a way they stayed motivated, while others like Cassidy said they were "intrigued to find out more about the Congo and colonization." Many students wrote about the novel's portrayal of Africa and compared it to Achebe's Things Fall Apart. One student connected her level of motivation to the topic of the novel; Darby said, "I was somewhat motivated cause I like the topic of African culture."

Students began to understand Conrad's message early in their reading. After reading the first assigned section, Andy wrote, "The story presents an interesting view of a voyage. It is more of a psychological journey than it is an adventure." Cassidy said that Heart of Darkness is a part of the curriculum "to portray the consequences of greed, wealth, and imperialism of the Congo." She said her level of motivation increased because she began to "see a better plot" and understand what was going on, but she said the challenges "increased as there were more details to take into consideration while reading further on." Many students said their level of motivation to read increased. They wrote about the attack of Marlow's boat and Kurtz's death creating suspense. Gehrig wrote, "The story became deeper and pulled me in more," and Vivian said, "The action sped up through fights and
deaths so it became more interesting.” One student became engaged with the characters and was unhappy when his expectations were not met. Tate said, “I was disappointed. I thought Kurtz was going to be weasely and powerful but he was crippled and half dead. It ruined the book for me.” Overall, students agreed that vocabulary, description, and narrative structure were the key problems they encountered while reading the novel. They solved these problems by rereading, looking up the new words, and using context clues.

In conclusion, when students had a context for the time period of the literature and knowledge of the author, they became interested in the text. If they had already developed a historical context or were interested in the plot or characters, students were more motivated to read. In addition, discussions and strategies to help readers consider word choice, theme, narrative structure, and style, generated confidence and empowered students to continue reading.

Critical and Creative Thinking

While the texts were the content used for the study, research projects, style and setting comparisons, story maps, writing opportunities, and critical essays promoted comprehension and helped students develop their critical and creative thinking skills. Students used both critical and creative thinking as they explored the novel selections.

Comparing Hemingway’s Style

Students began the unit over Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms by rereading a text they had read earlier in the year that is anthologized in their textbook. Students read Hemingway’s “Soldier’s Home” and discussed the author’s style of this work written early in his career. After discussing particular passages from this short story, we read aloud from
Chapter 1 of Hemingway’s novel, and I asked students to make comparisons between the style of the two texts. Students noticed the long descriptive sentences Hemingway used in *A Farewell to Arms* (written in mid-career) as opposed to the shorter sentences he used in “Soldier’s Home” (written in early career). Later in the novel, students noticed the similarity in theme, stating that both texts involve a soldier who was once at war and feels alone and out of place by the end of the story.

**Story Maps**

One approach to understanding plot, setting, and characters suggested by Neubert and Wilkins, author of *Putting It All Together*, is the use of story maps. Neubert and Wilkins note, “The story map is a material scaffold that focuses students’ attention on the essential properties of the narrative as they read” (59). Literary critics Brian W. Shaffer and Avrom Fleishman both write about Conrad’s narrative structure and characterization. They note the complexity created by the narrative framework.

In order to help students understand the narrative structure and characters present in the first five pages of *Heart of Darkness*, students divided into small groups and drew maps of the setting and characters. As students placed the characters aboard the cruising yawl, the *Nellie*, they noted how Conrad chose to name his characters by occupation rather than a first and last name. Vivian explained to her group, “They don’t have names. They have job titles like the lawyer and the accountant.” These maps required students to consider the details of the setting. Gherig asked, “Where is the narrator? Is he steering the boat?” Jimmy asked, “How many people are on the boat? It says ‘us four.’” Vivian responded “plus the director.” Allison asked her group, “Isn’t one of them playing dominoes?” Darby discussed with her
group the appearance of the characters and commented, “I picture Marlow looking attractive.” This activity helped students consider the narrator aboard the Nellie on the Thames River as well as Marlow’s role as narrator as the story continues and shifts to the African Congo. Students considered details of the story and understood the setting and characters as they drew pictures, labeled the characters, and noted the setting. Some maps were more detailed than others, and some students did not include the character of Marlow on their maps, so the students had to edit the maps during the large group sharing.

**Assessment: Timed Writing**

As a final component of each unit, students were assessed using a timed writing essay question issued by the College Board on a previously used AP Literature exam. At the end of the unit over *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, students responded to a question that asked them to identify a conflict a child faced with a parent or parental figure. Students chose to write about Janie Crawford and her grandmother. While describing Janie, Andy wrote, “The pugnacious nature of Janie’s character all came from her treatment as a child.” While this description of Janie addresses the prompt, it is also insightful due to Andy’s use of the vocabulary word *pugnacious* which was one of the words Andy and the class studied during the three-week unit on Hurston’s novel. As Janet Allen notes, the goal of any vocabulary instruction is to encourage students to use the words when speaking and writing.

During the unit over *A Farewell to Arms*, the timed writing question asked students to choose a character from the novel whose mind is pulled in conflicting directions. Students had the task of identifying the two conflicting forces and explaining how this conflict
illuminated the meaning of the text as a whole. The majority of the students wrote about Frederic Henry’s choice between war and life (or love for Catherine).

I never mentioned using the vocabulary words while writing the essay question, yet four students used the words they studied throughout the unit. When writing about Lt. Henry seeking rest, Jimmy stated, “After having been *bombarded* and attacked it would be supposed that rest is really needed.” Megan referred to the pivotal point at which Frederic Henry physically leaves the war by explaining, “Frederic is forced to lead a massive retreat and is stopped by *carabinieri* and is going to be shot for leaving his troops.” Cassidy also argued the conflict of love and war and explained the shift in Lt. Henry’s service in the war by writing, “At this time he cannot use his knee enough to continue driving the ambulance and is given *convalescent* leave. During his convalescent leave Catherine takes care of him and they continue to fall for each other.” Students studied the words *bombardment*, *carabinieri*, and *convalescent* over the course of the three-week unit on *A Farewell to Arms*. They were encouraged to use the words in meaningful ways and to discuss the author’s word choice and tone in a synonym activity (see Appendix C).

The essay question for the timed writing asked students to identify the “spiritual reassessment or moral reconciliation” apparent in the end of Conrad’s novel and explain its connection to the work as a whole. Many students chose to write about Kurtz, referencing his dying words, “the horror, the horror” as they connected these words to his moral reconciliation. Other students wrote about Marlow’s journey to find Kurtz, and Marlow’s realization of his own tendency to become greedy and corrupt. Some students described the actions of Kurtz as *rapacious*, a vocabulary word they studied throughout the unit. Mary
wrote that Kurtz’s heart was “blackened by rapacious thoughts” while Sarah wrote about Kurtz becoming a “brutal leader of his trading post and a rapacious hunter of his dearly beloved ivory.” Tia used the vocabulary word sepulchral to connect the beginning of the novel to the end as she wrote, “He [Marlow] referred to the Congo as sepulchral at the beginning but once he realized that the darkness and horror is carried within there was no distinction between that and the city he went back to.” Tia’s ideas demonstrate her thoughts about the novel as a psychological journey. This essay provided an opportunity for students to connect their ideas about the themes of the novel to the realizations and values of the characters created by Conrad. After each of the novel units, students wrote well-developed essays by offering support for their argument in the form of quotes and commentary and clearly addressing the prompt.

**Multigenre Research Paper**

Another strategy to help students develop critical thinking skills was students’ research regarding the three authors: Hurston, Hemingway, and Conrad. Using Tom Romano’s model for writing a research paper, students created Multigenre Research Papers in which they researched a topic and then wrote in various genres such as poetry, journal, short story, essay, drawing comics, and multi-media. This research paper allowed students to consider tone and style of writing as they created five different pieces of writing to show a particular thesis related to the authors and texts. Students created research questions based on an author or a topic dealing with the time period of the novel. Topics ranged from the Harlem Renaissance and World War I to the effects of Hemingway’s war experiences on his life. Some students chose topics such as imperialism or the people of the African Congo,
while other students wrote about Hurston and her extensive research in the field of anthropology. Students shared these projects in class as others listened and took notes about the research findings.

Using this strategy, students made connections to the authors and setting of the novels. Students presented these projects at the same time, but a preferable method might be having students present their projects during the corresponding unit. For example, Sarah and Justine researched Zora Neale Hurston, her experience as an anthropologist, and the Harlem Renaissance. It might have been helpful to other students to hear these presentations before or while they were reading Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* rather than afterwards. Students who initially thought the book centered only on one theme such as love might have broadened their thinking to see that the book also included other themes they could connect with such as family, journeys, or power. In addition, this would establish a historical and an anthropological context.

Sarah chose to research Zora Neale Hurston and the Harlem Renaissance. In her introduction of her project Sarah explained, “I really enjoyed reading her [Hurston’s] novel and was interested to see if there was a connection between her themes of self-discovery and the Harlem Renaissance.” Based on her research, Sarah wrote an interview with Zora Neale Hurston:

Sarah: As an African American woman in the Harlem Renaissance, do you feel many pressures or struggle with outside comments by the public and literary critics?
I definitely have. My novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, received a lot of criticism due to the fact that my story didn’t fit into the African American stereotypes. The African American community criticized me for using white funds to support my writing and then I wrote about themes “too black” to appeal to the white community.

Sarah’s project was typical of how students researched and wrote about the authors and the context and culture of the novels.

Allison researched Ernest Hemingway for her multigenre project. In her reflective essay Allison stated, “Learning about Hemingway while I’m reading his famous novel *A Farewell to Arms* makes it easy to see the connections to his own life and understand him and his story better.” Allison introduced her research project by explaining her lack of knowledge about WWI and WWII, both wars which Hemingway lived through. One of her genres included photos and captions about both world wars. In her reflective essay, the final component of the multigenre project, Allison commented, “Looking at some of the men in the photos I was amazed by how young they looked. Several looked to be about my own age and I couldn’t imagine fighting in a huge war like that right now.” Through her research, Allison connected her life at eighteen to the life of Hemingway at that same age. She referenced the current state of the U.S. during her lifetime as she shared what she had learned about Hemingway’s involvement in World War I.

**Creative Writing: Alternative Endings**

After discussing the last chapters of the novels written by Hemingway and Conrad, I asked students to complete a creative writing assignment in which they wrote their own
ending. This assignment was adapted from the lesson plan library for *Heart of Darkness* on the web site <discoveryschool.com>. By adapting the assignment to *A Farewell to Arms*, students could probe the end of Hemingway’s text as well. They could either add to Hemingway’s story by writing the next chapter, or they could change part of the story. Before writing, students discussed immitating traits of Hemingway’s style including similes and metaphors, symbols such as the rain and mountains and plains, stream of consciousness, very few dialogue tags, description of nature, and short terse sentences with little emotion.

The next day students shared their endings in small groups, and then a few students volunteered to read their ending to the whole class. As writers shared with the large group, the listeners noted the traits of style that paralleled those used by Hemingway. Students also noted the themes that writers focused on as they changed events of the original text. Some chose to focus on the theme of love as they kept either Catherine or the baby alive; these writers talked about wanting a happy ending for Frederic and Catherine. Allison wrote about Catherine’s death but kept the baby alive; she decided the baby was a girl, and Frederic was left to raise and care for her. Allison reflected on her ending by explaining, “First Henry wouldn’t want to take care of her. He’d blame her for Catherine’s death and leave her with a nurse most of the time. As she got older, though, he’d see more of Cat in the baby. Eventually she would end up meaning the world to him, and Henry would be a great father.”

Other writers focused on our discussion of the displaced soldier. As students compared Hemingway’s story “Soldier’s Home” to *A Farewell to Arms*, they talked about a soldier returning home and feeling out of place. Justine allowed Frederic Henry, the displaced soldier, to find a home. Justine ended her story with Frederic speaking to
Catherine as these new parents ride with their baby through the mountains, “You see Catherine, this is what it means to be happy. This is Home.” Justine’s focus on the theme of home and a smooth transition to a new home after war connects the beginning of the unit to the end. Justine draws the reader’s attention to her theme of home as she capitalizes the word home.

One consistent trend was for students to include rain at the end of the story when either the baby or Catherine died. In discussions throughout the unit, students noted Hemingway’s use of rain to indicate a sad tone or his use of rain to foreshadow sad events. Tate, who wrote about both the baby and Catherine living, added the explanation, “After a short stay in the hospital in which they all recuperate, the trio leaves and heads for safety in someplace or other. When they leave, it’s snowing gently.” After Tate shared his story with classmates, he explained the gentle snow as foreshadowing a happy life together rather than the sad tone the rain had created. Similar to Tate, many other students noticed Hemingway’s use of weather elements to suggest tone. They used rain or shifted the rain to another type of weather in order to create the tone they desired for their own endings.

While most students focused on Frederic and Catherine, one writer chose to emphasize his favorite character. Gehrig talked about how much he liked the character Rinaldi and this motivated him to write Rinaldi back into the story. In Gehrig’s ending, while Catherine is in labor, Frederic walks around the hospital and encounters Rinaldi, who is wounded. Gehrig used Hemingway’s style of dialogue to illustrate their meeting as he wrote, “‘Baby!’ Rinaldi shouted. ‘Rinaldi, what the hell are you doing here?’ I responded.” In Gehrig’s ending Catherine dies, and the baby lives but the baby is left at the hospital by
Frederic while he and Rinaldi board a train to Abruzzi to reunite with the Priest. Gehrig used symbols of a train traveling through a tunnel and the flash of light to convey new hope for Frederic as he travels to meet the Priest. Gehrig ends his story with dialogue between the Priest and Frederic, "'Priest, tell me about Jesus; I feel a strong need.' 'I’d be delighted.' And so as we talked, slowly it began a light rain." Gehrig shared with the large group and explained the light, tunnel, and light rain were all symbols to communicate to readers Frederic’s new knowledge as he talked with the Priest about religion.

At the end of the third unit, I assigned students the task of writing their own endings to *Heart of Darkness*. We discussed Conrad’s style of writing, and students agreed that Conrad’s word choice and dense description set him apart from other writers. Allison talked about Conrad’s description as she shared with the large group: “Sometimes I don’t know what Conrad is talking about by the time I reach the end of the page.” In addition to diction, students agreed that they could address the themes Conrad reinforced throughout the novel. They listed themes such as death, love, imperialism, and colonization. As students brainstormed for items they wanted to address in the alternative endings, they discussed wanting to solidify why Kurtz said, “the horror, the horror.” Many students were interested in writing about Marlow lying to the Intended about Kurtz’s last words. Vivian was passionate about this topic and shouted, “Yes! Why did he lie to Kurtz’s Intended? I thought that was wrong.” Justine asked the question, “How does Marlow feel about Kurtz’s death?” while other students wanted to know more about those aboard the *Nellie*.

After students completed this writing exercise, they shared with both small and large groups. Leo shared his ending in which he focused on imitating Conrad’s style by using
specific words such as *filch*, *incidentally*, and *evanescent* as he told his story. He explored the use of narrative structure as he shifted back and forth between Marlow's voice and the voice of the narrator. While sharing their endings, students noted how each writer chose to focus on the themes as well as the stylistic decisions they had made while imitating Conrad's word choice and description. This activity helped students form an emotional and imaginative investment in the novel.

**Comparing the Setting of Africa and its People**

During the unit on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, I took a more dominant role in the discussions by asking students specific questions and explaining any plot confusions. On their surveys after the *A Farewell to Arms* unit, I realized the need to focus on the plot first and then the elements of language such as narrative structure, style, and tone.

As an introduction to *Heart of Darkness*, students gained a concept of Africa before colonization by reading Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*. Before students began reading, I asked them to list five words that came to mind when they thought of Africa. After students created a list of their own, we created a list on the board together. Some of the words on the list included *disease, AIDS, safari, elephants, monkeys, jungle, dark, primitive,* and *uncivilized*. We talked about how our opinions about Africa were formed. Students noted the headlines in newspapers and the focus of newscasters as they discussed their concept of Africa. I finished our discussion by asking students to read and compare their view of Africa with the view Achebe offers in his novel.

As we discussed *Things Fall Apart*, students reported liking the novel because the plot and word choice were easy to understand. They said they liked learning about the
culture of the tribe. I provided students with a historical context by reminding them that Achebe set his novel around the time the British began to gain control. The goal was for them to develop a concept of the African culture. While time permitted only a partial reading of Achebe’s novel (six chapters), students read enough to appreciate the rich traditions and strong cultural beliefs of the tribe.

As students began to read *Heart of Darkness*, we discussed the term Imperialism. A few students chose to finish Achebe’s novel on their own and told their classmates about the end of the novel when the British destroy the tribe and its cultural traditions.

**Discussing Racism: A Critical Look at the Text**

In addition to articulating critical thoughts, students considered the scholarly opinions regarding a canonical work. Reading an article by a literary critic was a way to expand students’ level of critical thinking. For some, this was their first experience with a critical essay like Achebe’s. Chinua Achebe’s ideas about Joseph Conrad and his novel *Heart of Darkness*, allowed students to see a scholar critically think through another scholar’s work. After completing the novel, students read Chinua Achebe’s critical essay entitled “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. ” Padmini Mongia addresses teaching Achebe’s essay as a part of a unit on *Heart of Darkness* in his essay “Why I Teach Conrad and Achebe.” Mongia poses the question, “Why should and how can one teach a novella that is considered racist?” (104). Mongia goes on to assess the canonization, or what he deems to be the “hypercanonization” of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe’s criticism calls into question the canonization of Conrad’s novella. Mongia states:
Achebe’s 1975 charge that the novella was ‘racist’ introduced a new set of concerns and threatened the terms established by mainstream critical approaches to Conrad’s work . . . Achebe’s essay has remained the single route whereby Conrad’s late-century constructions of race need to be addressed. (105)

Mongia suggests that most of the criticism since the 1970s that addresses Achebe’s article attempts to defend or rescue Conrad. Mongia suggests focusing students on two specific portions of Conrad’s text as he describes, “The first is Marlow’s meditation on empires early in the novel. . . . The second moment we focus on is Marlow’s erasure of Kurtz’s postscript. Marlow’s focus on ideas and the civilizing mission allow for a discussion about colonization and imperialism, while Marlow’s action of tearing off the postscript allows students to consider how knowledge is shaped.

As I began teaching Achebe’s article, I encountered the same issues Mongia warns about. Students argued that Conrad is not a racist because things were different back then. Students also argued free speech as they considered whether or not Heart of Darkness should be taught. Mongia advises:

In order to avoid being mired in a debate about whether or not Conrad was a racist, I focus instead on the beginning and end of Achebe’s essay. . . . I make them proffer their stereotypical views of Africa and suggest that they are not alone in believing that Africa is a primitive, backward place, prone to famine, poverty, and mayhem.” (108)
I began in this same way by referring to the list students created about their perception of Africa before they read Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. As students revisited their individual lists, once again we made a general list on the board. Students considered how their concept of Africa is shaped; they talked about news reporters choosing to report on AIDS and hunger as opposed to the rich traditions they read about in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.

Next, I followed Mongia’s ideas as I led a discussion about the end of Achebe’s article. Mongia states, “After we have examined the two anecdotes Achebe opens with, we meditate on the slippage between language and dialect of which he reminds us at the end of his essay” (109). Here students were eager to add their ideas about the lack of language given to the natives. While some argued that Conrad was not focused on the natives, others saw the point that the lack of his focus on the Africans and Africa served to strengthen Achebe’s claims.

As the discussion continued, students returned to the topic of whether or not the novel should be taught. Jimmy was passionate as he attempted to persuade the large group by stating, “I think Conrad’s novel should be taught, but how we were taught it—with *Things Fall Apart*. Otherwise our only ideas of Africa are negative or prehistoric.” Their large group discussion became focused on the word *native* and the connotations associated with the term. Many students were intensely involved in this discussion. Students felt passionate about their beliefs and at times I had to mediate and give all speakers a chance to be heard. At the end of the discussion, I felt the same way Mongia described when he wrote, “If my students leave with a sense that Achebe cannot be dismissed (despite their disagreeing with his call to ban Conrad), I feel I have been very successful” (109). Even on the very last day
of class students were still debating Achebe’s article. While not everyone fully understood Achebe’s points, many did understand, and everyone was motivated to continue the discussion.

Students started and finished the unit by considering Achebe’s views. They read *Things Fall Apart* and considered the culture and traditions before Europeans began colonizing Africa. Finally, students explored a critical article about Conrad’s novel as they explored Achebe’s thoughts about how *Heart of Darkness* should be taught.

Language instruction is an essential component of every literature unit. Critical and creative thinking skills are directly related to the instruction of the elements of language. Students developed their critical and creative thinking skills as they produced multigenre projects, compared style and setting, drew story maps, wrote essays and story endings, and analyzed a critical essay. Large and small group discussions, a consideration of themes, a focus on tone and word choice, and written essays were some of the ways students expanded their knowledge of these texts.

**Teachers Assisting Comprehension**

There are many ways to assist students with reading comprehension. Throughout this study, I relied on the knowledge of experts to identify the key challenges with each of the texts. AP Literature students already possess many reading strategies; I helped readers focus on the texts by introducing them to strategies that specifically applied to the challenges involved with each text. I applied a scaffolding technique to build readers’ confidence by arranging the texts studied. In addition, I encouraged students to apply reading strategies, led discussions, and inquired about comprehension by using surveys.
In any literature program it is important to consider the progression of works. I introduced Hurston’s novel first, Hemingway’s second, and saved Conrad’s challenging syntax and higher level diction for last. With this scaffolding in place, students experienced success with the earlier novels and gained confidence that allowed them to remain sanguine as they read the final novel of the year.

Overtly emphasizing the challenges with each text helped readers discuss their reading of the text and the strategies they used. During the unit on Hurston’s novel, we discussed storytelling and dialect as well as narrative structure. Large group discussions and individual surveys were ways students communicated about the strategies they used when reaching a difficult portion of the book. Similar discussions occurred with Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*; during this unit, I asked students about the vocabulary and Hemingway’s style. In the same manner, we discussed the vocabulary and dense description while reading Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Identifying the challenges each text presented and allowing students time to focus on the issues and how they solved these problems helped clarify comprehension needs and guide instruction.

Group discussions were valuable to clarify points in the plot as well as explore critical thinking questions. I organized both small and large group discussions during each of the units. While these were useful, at times only a few students would participate. Other times the transition from small to large group discussions prohibited a complete discussion of the topic.

Teachers can help readers comprehend challenging texts. Conducting formal and informal surveys helped me target key areas of deficiency. Arranging texts with the most
difficult text later in the course allowed students to experience and build on early success.
With a high level of confidence, they were more willing to stay motivated while reading a
work they perceived as challenging. Reading comprehension surveys supported discussion
that helped students pool their reading strategies. Formal and informal surveys, small and
large group discussions, and building confidence and motivation by scaffolding literature
selections were some ways I assisted students’ comprehension during this study.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"Language is a means of both understanding and changing ourselves and the world around us," writes Susan Hynds, author of Making Connections: Language and Learning in the Classroom (12). Hynds believes learning is a "transactive process where learners are transformed in fundamental ways by what they read and what they write, what they hear and what they say" (12). Language is one component of the English curriculum in high school classrooms today. While literature courses are centered on units involving novels of the canon, language discussions are essential if students are to fully comprehend what they consider to be difficult texts.

While considering Hynds’ conjecture regarding language, this study examined whether or not curriculum which includes language instruction affects reading comprehension, critical and creative thinking, and motivation in high school students. With the use of reading strategies that focused on storytelling, word choice, and narrative structure, I was able to see how language instruction influenced students’ reading comprehension and motivation. My research questions led me to investigate the complexities of reading in a high school classroom: (1) What strategies do students use to read difficult texts? (2) What motivates students to continue reading what they consider to be challenging texts? (3) How does language instruction influence critical and creative thinking? (4) How can teachers help readers comprehend challenging texts?

The use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods garnered a compilation of results and conclusions that unveiled many factors regarding language instruction. A
focus on vocabulary allowed students to expand their knowledge of words. It helped both high and intermediate level students to critically and creatively consider the words chosen by the writers. In addition, language instruction led students to develop critical thinking skills that allowed them to apply the language instruction to other texts and other genres. Students developed an awareness of the ways in which stories are told as they considered Hurston’s dialect. They did so by telling their own stories and reflecting on the effective strategies associated with storytelling. Students gained an appreciation for literature through dialect and storytelling discussions.

In addition to storytelling, students considered the narrative structure, especially while studying *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Heart of Darkness*. Both of these novels open with a narrator who tells a story. Hurston’s narrator rocks on her porch while telling her story to her best friend. Conrad opens his novel with a narrator who tells a story about Marlow telling a story to those aboard the *Nellie*. In both novels, the events have already occurred, so the storytellers have lived through their journeys and are telling their story as a way to pass on the knowledge and explain history. Narrative structures are an essential part to comprehending many texts as readers consider the storyteller and the story’s setting. Overall, the emphasis on language positively influenced the depth of the connections students made while in AP Literature.

**Quantitative Conclusions**

The quantitative data showed the need for study, the amount of growth, and the level of student confidence. Over the course of the study, the majority of students improved their comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, and level of confidence with each text. Pre- and
post-tests indicated growth. On the post-test students scored an average of 90% to 94%. While these scores might be considered high, they also show probable cause for intense language instruction during each novel unit. In most cases, merely reading the book would not garner these results, but these levels can be obtained when instruction is focused on strategies related to language. Vocabulary quizzes taken at the end of each unit indicate growth after studying the words using strategies. A total of 68% of students scored 100% on vocabulary quizzes after the units on *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *A Farewell to Arms*. A total of 47% of students earned 100% on the vocabulary quiz after the unit on *Heart of Darkness*. This might suggest the level of difficulty with the vocabulary terms from Conrad’s novel.

**Qualitative Conclusions**

The synonym discussions, surveys, and writings illustrated the progress students made on their journey to becoming complex thinkers as they study complicated texts. Students built strategies during each unit which they were able to apply to the following unit. As the level of difficulty with vocabulary increased, many students increased the number of words they added to their lexicons. Many students would ask to add words to the word wall and arrive early to use the classroom dictionary to look up words. Students would talk about words within the text before class began. Therefore, most students appeared to gain a sense of power and appreciation by an intense study of words.

The survey questions explained how students were using the strategies discussed in class. The surveys early in the novel unit reinforced the difficulties with each text, while the post-reading surveys revealed influences on students’ level of motivation.
The writing assignments gave voice to the critical thinking skills students gained while considering the texts. Timed writings showed students’ application of their knowledge to a specific question addressing a theme from the novel. Students used creative thinking skills as they wrote their own endings. During this writing assignment they considered the major themes of the text as well as the development of characters.

**Recommendations for Teaching**

*Build on the knowledge of other scholars.* Research using the plethora of scholarly pedagogy is essential to consider when organizing curriculum. Teachers of high school students must continually consider the research data regarding how to teach specific works of the canon.

*Help readers examine word relationships.* Asking students to find synonyms as well as antonyms for the vocabulary words chosen from a literature selection or asking students to create metaphors from synonyms assists students in considering word choice. Literature students develop an appreciation for the specificity of an author’s language. Discussions involving synonyms help readers answer why writers use the words they choose to use.

*Encourage metacognition.* Reading is an internal process and therefore difficult for students to explain. Even though students might be reluctant to communicate regarding how they read, it is important for teachers to guide them in thinking meta-cognitively about their reading. Usually conversations between readers of any text entail a discussion of the plot and characters but not an analysis about the point at which a reader understood a symbol or the specific point where the dialect shifted from a stumbling block to a more natural flow of the
Scaffold texts to build confidence. Readers are motivated when they experience a level of success. Teachers must continue to provide successful learning opportunities for students as they arrange the curriculum in a course. Placing Conrad’s text at the end of the year allowed students to develop strategies as they read less complicated texts.

**Limitations to the Action Research**

As with almost every study, this study contained several limitations. One of the flaws to the study was the small group of nineteen students. I might have been able to see more and clearer patterns with a larger group. Also, there was no control group because all students completed the same activities. In an ideal study, this group could have been compared to another group or school system who was given the same pre- and post-tests but not the same intervention.

In addition, the study lacked a diverse population of students; of the nineteen students participating in the study, eighteen were Caucasian. A more diversified student population might have provided richer discussions about dialect while reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as well as *Things Fall Apart* and *Heart of Darkness*.

This action research study analyzed only the work of the second semester, but did not include the entire year; therefore, the study reflects only a portion of the actual course content. For a more complete examination of students’ knowledge and the effects of the action research, it would be helpful to give students a pre-test at the beginning of the course. In addition, the study did not consider long-term retention; students finished the three novel
units and then completed the post-test. The proximity of the final unit including Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* may have influenced student performance on the post-test.

In conclusion, according to pre- and post-test data, growth occurred with the majority of the students in both reading comprehension and confidence level from the first novel unit to the third. While the study represents action research conducted with only nineteen students, comprehension and vocabulary grew an average of 23% to 35% and confidence levels grew an average of 0.9 to 1.7.

**Recommendations for Future Study**

*Establish a control group.* Comparing a group of students who did not undergo instruction described in this study might provide further data. A control group could aid in the discovery of the most effective reading strategies. A control group might also highlight the level of comprehension without a specific focus on reading strategies.

*Explore motivation.* This is one area that is less explored than others possibly due to the fact that motivation is harder to measure. While vocabulary quizzes produce tangible results, surveys that ask questions about motivation proffer subjective evidence. A possible area to examine might be the role of motivation in relation to historical context, prior knowledge, and peer interest to help students internalize a motivation for reading.

*Incorporate novel companions.* Student motivation improved when students were encouraged to use reading strategies. Consequently, students who were not interested in the topic found the content unappealing. According to Pamela S. Carroll in *Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the Classics*, one way to improve readers' interest in the topic is to pair canonical novels with young adult books. Carroll's chapter "*Their Eyes Were
Watching God and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry: Voices of African-American Southern Women,” describes pairing the novel Their Eyes Were Watching God with the young adult text Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry.

Conduct a study using alternate novels. Reading comprehension strategies can be used with any texts. When teaching any literature selection, teachers could assist readers by emphasizing a focus on language.

Consider all levels of learners. This same study could be used with average and struggling readers rather than advanced readers. While the pacing of the unit might be adjusted, all learners could benefit from instruction that includes storytelling and narrative structure, vocabulary, style and dialect.

Contemplate motivation as it relates to gender. Researchers could study motivation as it relates to the gender of the reader. Are males and females interested in learning about different characters and plots? Studies could examine the characters from the viewpoint of the students. For instance, in Their Eyes Were Watching God, students could analyze the characteristics of Logan, Joe, and Teacake and whether they are static or dynamic characters. Researchers could then study whether an emphasis on characters of a gender opposite of the protagonist increases student motivation.

Summary

I began this study by asking the research question “What strategies do students use to read difficult texts?” Although AP Literature students are adept at approaching literature, the more complex a text, the more assistance they require applying useful strategies. By monitoring student learning, teachers play an essential role in the development of students’
critical thinking. Asking students about the strategies they apply in order to comprehend a
text reinforces their metacognitive thinking.

The second question for this study asked “What motivates students to continue
reading what they consider to be challenging texts?” Reading comprehension cannot be
accurately calculated unless students are actually reading the texts. Therefore, I was curious
to find out more about student motivation. In my pilot study and prior years teaching AP
Literature, I noticed that many seniors experience declining levels of motivation as the course
comes to an end. This year students were motivated to finish Conrad’s Heart of Darkness; in
fact, one section of students asked several times to continue discussing Achebe’s claim
regarding Conrad being racist.

From this study, I have noticed that setting a historical context for the novel helps
readers engage with the text. A focus on vocabulary assists reading comprehension and
minimizes frustration. Addressing the author’s style as it relates to dialect and syntax allows
readers to consider the effective traits of storytelling. Letting students tell stories about their
own lives helped them make connections to an author’s use of stylistic devices. Finally,
understanding the narrative structure of a text is essential to motivation. When students
could picture Janie sitting on her porch telling a story and Marlow on the cruising yawl
telling a story, they were able to grasp the shift in narration.

Another element of my research involved third question: “How does language
instruction influence critical and creative thinking?” Both the quantitative and qualitative
studies indicate the direct connection between the overt teaching of reading strategies and a
reader’s level of comprehension and analysis. The quantitative study provided tangible
evidence that let me see the level of comprehension and vocabulary retention of those students participating in the study. The qualitative study allowed me to probe individual students as I attempted to understand the factors that motivated students to keep reading texts they found difficult as well as the effects of their level of comprehension on the quality of their writings and discussions.

My final research question focused on the teacher's role in reading comprehension and asked: “How can teachers help readers comprehend challenging texts?” Due to the fact that each learner acquires knowledge in different ways, this question invites many responses. From this study, I can draw the following conclusions:

While engaged in small group discussions, students used reading strategies to construct meaning of the texts. Story maps, vocabulary maps, and synonym discussions were essential to students’ development of complex ideas. Students used several reading strategies as they dynamically questioned the literature and

Reading strategies were accessible to both high and intermediate students. All students in the AP Literature course applied reading strategies as they performed a close reading of the novels.

Using reading strategies involving vocabulary and tone helped students to appreciate the author's word choice and style. Students notice and question the words an author chooses to use. Readers develop an appreciation for the specificity of an author’s diction as they analyze individual words.

Some students lacked motivation to read texts but developing a historical context helped reader motivation. Students who understand the time period associated with the
setting of the novel are more likely to develop connections to the text. These connections help readers appreciate and understand the plot of the novel.

While reading strategies offer students access to texts they perceive as challenging, there are many other factors involved in a deeper level of reading comprehension that includes both critical and creative thinking. Students must invest in becoming aware of their reading process. They must attempt to understand their own level of comprehension if they are to actively employ the strategies necessary to comprehend any text they encounter. In order for students to develop the skills necessary to apply these reading strategies, students need to begin to define their own problems and question how meaning can be made.

While considering the literature classroom, language instruction may not be the perfect panacea, yet many characteristics make it a powerful tool for any learner. A focus on language offers an emphasis on reading comprehension and motivation. This study indicates language instruction empowers readers to be critical and creative thinkers who are able to assess details and make larger connections while considering structure, word choice, and theme.

In addition, a focus on language instruction offers many useful skills applicable to learners as they progress to college and careers. Vocabulary is essential to success on college placement exams, or when students are reading texts to meet academic requirements or solely for pleasure, and across the curriculum. Each new text students begin possesses a narrative framework which influences how the story is told. If readers are to remain motivated as they read, they must make connections to the historical and social context. Also, storytelling is an everyday part of life. Retelling events of a weekend or a long journey involve effective
storytelling. Therefore, by placing a focus on language instruction, teachers can encourage literature students to develop critical and creative skills that empower them to be lifelong learners.
WORKS CITED


APPENDIX A

BEGINNING OF UNIT SURVEY (WHOLE CLASS)

1. What problems did you encounter while reading this novel?

2. What strategies did you use to solve these problems?

3. Besides this being an assigned work, what motivated you to continue reading this novel?
   (try to be specific)

4. What held you back from being motivated?
APPENDIX B

END OF UNIT SURVEY (WHOLE CLASS)

1. Why is this novel a part of the advanced placement literature curriculum?

2. Did your motivation for reading this novel change over the course of your reading?

3. Did challenges in reading the book (e.g. vocabulary) increase, decrease, or stay the same? Explain.
APPENDIX C

REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF SYNONYM WORKSHEET

Directions: As you read the sentences from Hemingway’s novel, note the tone. Then choose one of the synonyms and explain how the tone changes when that synonym is substituted.

1. “Since you are gone we have nothing but frostbites, chilblains, jaundice, gonorrhea, self-inflicted wounds, pneumonia and hard and soft chancre” (12).

What is Hemingway’s tone in the sentence above?

How would substituting inflammations or diseases change the tone?

2. “At the Villa Rossa. It was very edifying, baby. We all sang. Where have you been?” (32).

What is Hemingway’s tone in the sentences above?

How would substituting educational or beneficial change the tone?

3. “We passed a long column of loaded mules, the drivers walking along beside the mules wearing red fezzes.” (44).

What is Hemingway’s tone in the sentence above?

How would substituting cap or hat change the tone?

4. “I'll look up their adjutant to do your papers and it will all go much faster” (59).

What is Hemingway’s tone in the sentence above?

How would substituting assistant or helper change the tone?

5. “I was to have three weeks’ convalescent leave and then return to the front” (135).

What is Hemingway’s tone in the sentence above?

How would substituting recovery, or recuperation change the tone?

6. “The whites of the eyes were yellow and it was the jaundice” (142).

What is Hemingway’s tone in the sentence above?

How would substituting disease, health concern, or illness change the tone?
7. “At the far end of the bridge there were officers and carabinieri standing on both sides flashing lights” (221).

What is Hemingway’s tone in the sentence above?

How would substituting police, law enforcement, or law change the tone?

8. “There were many fishing boats along the quay and nets were spread on racks” (277).

What is Hemingway’s tone in the sentence above?

How would substituting dock, pier, landing stage, or harbor change the tone?
APPENDIX D

PRE-/POST TEST

Part A. Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Directions: Read the sentence and choose the correct definition of the underlined word.

1. “The vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree, but Janie didn’t know how to tell Nanny that” (13).
   a. to offend
   b. to violate the sacredness of
   c. to bother

2. “She knew the world was a stallion rolling in the blue pasture of ether” (24).
   a. mossy grass usually found in swamp regions of the southern United States
   b. a volatile, highly flammable liquid
   c. the regions of space beyond the earth’s atmosphere; the heavens

3. “They tried hard to hold it in, but enough incredulous laughter burst out of their eyes and leaked from the corners of their mouths to inform anyone of their thoughts” (35).
   a. skeptical; disbelieving
   b. hearty
   c. uproarious

4. “There was something about Joe that cowed the town” (44).
   a. to frighten with threats or a show of threats
   b. to anger with lies
   c. to mock with hatred

5. “The town had a basketful of feelings good and bad about Joe’s positions and possessions, but none had the temerity to challenge him” (47).
   a. wisdom
   b. brute strength
   c. foolhardy disregard of danger

6. “His prosperous-looking belly that used to thrust out so pugnaciously and intimidate folks, sagged like a load suspended from his loins” (73).
   a. carefully
   b. combative in nature; belligerent
   c. forceful in nature
7. “Yet in its concern with the project of finding a voice, with language as an instrument of injury and salvation, of selfhood and empowerment, it suggests many of the themes that inspirit Hurston’s oeuvre as a whole” (187).
   a. the sum of the lifework of an artist, writer, or composer
   b. the intrinsic reward of an established goal
   c. the operatic tone and style of a work

8. “That which she silences or deletes, similarly, is all that her readership would draw upon to delimit or pigeonhole her life as a synecdoche of ‘the race problem,’ an exceptional part standing for the debased whole” (192).
   a. a dominant theme or central idea
   b. figure of speech where a more inclusive term is used for a less inclusive term or vice versa
   c. a recurrent thematic element in an artistic or literary work

Directions: Read the passage and answer the questions that follow.

“The people all saw her come because it was sundown. The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky. It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long” (1).

9. This passage reflects the rich cultural tradition of
   a. working.
   b. storytelling.
   c. enjoying nature.

“Ah don’t mean to bother wid tellin’ ‘em nothin’, Pheoby. ‘Tain’t worth de trouble. You can tell ‘em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat’s just de same as me ‘cause mah tongue is in mah friend’s mouf’ (6).

10. This passage is best paraphrased as
   a. my friend would tell the same story
   b. my tongue and my friend’s are similar
   c. all people communicate the same way
"Out in the swamp they made great ceremony over the mule. They mocked everything human in death. Starks led off with a great eulogy on our departed citizen, our most distinguished citizen and the grief he left behind him, and the people loved the speech. It made him more solid than building the school house had done. He stood on the distended belly of the mule for a platform and made gestures" (57).

11. At the mule's own funeral, Joe Starks stands on the mule to give the eulogy. This reveals Joe's character as
   a. concerned.
   b. candid.
   c. conceited.

“So Janie began to think of Death. Death, that strange being with the huge square toes who lived way in the West. The great one who lived in the straight house like a platform without sides to it, and without a roof” (79-80).

12. What literary technique does the author use in this passage to illustrate her ideas?
   a. alliteration
   b. personification
   c. synecdoche

“So Janie began to think of Death. Death, that strange being with the huge square toes who lived way in the West. The great one who lived in the straight house like a platform without sides to it, and without a roof” (79-80).

13. In this passage the young girl’s hair symbolizes
   a. religion.
   b. pain.
   c. freedom.

14. Please rate your confidence level with the questions you have completed so far.

A  B  C  D  E
low  high

15. Please rate your level of experience with the author’s writing style.

A  B  C  D  E
low  high

Now use the back of your answer sheet to explain 1.) why you rated your confidence level this way and 2.) why you rated your level of experience this way.
Part B. Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*

**Directions:** Read the sentence and choose the correct definition of the underlined word.

16. “... helping ourselves to wine from the grass-covered gallon flask; it swung in a metal cradle and you pulled the neck of the flask down with the forefinger and the wine, clear red, **tannic** and lovely, poured out into the glass held with the same hand; after this course, the captain commenced picking on the priest” (6-7).
   a. a beverage lacking carbonation  
   b. flavorful  
   c. obtained from a substance that has a tanning effect

17. “Since you are gone we have nothing but frostbites, chilblains, jaundice, gonorrhea, self-inflicted wounds, pneumonia and hard and soft chancre” (12).
   a. a deadly disease appearing first to be only the common cold  
   b. inflammation and itchy irritation on the extremities of the body  
   c. a virus with symptoms much like the common cold

18. “At the Villa Rossa. It was very **edifying**, baby. We all sang. Where have you been?” (32).
   a. decisive  
   b. uplifting  
   c. somber

19. “We passed a long column of loaded mules, the drivers walking along beside the mules wearing red **fezzes**.” (44).
   a. silk-like vests worn traditionally in the eastern Mediterranean region  
   b. an overcoat made of cotton or wool  
   c. a man’s felt cap shaped like a flat-topped cone with a tassel hanging from the crown

20. “I’ll look up their **adjutant** to do your papers and it will all go much faster” (59).
   a. code which identifies a soldier’s rank, religion, and military number  
   b. a staff officer who helps a commanding officer with administrative affairs  
   c. commanding officer

21. “I was to have three weeks’ **convalescent** leave and then return to the front” (135).
   a. the period needed for returning to health after illness  
   b. a period allotted for recreation time  
   c. a period of time to grieve

22. “The whites of the eyes were yellow and it was the **jaundice**” (142).
   a. a severe ulceration of the eye  
   b. deposition of bile salts occurring as a symptom of hepatitis  
   c. a disease causing blister-like contusions
23. “It was a very tall gaunt captain of artillery with a red scar along his jaw” (158).
   a. very thin especially from hunger or disease
   b. barbarian
   c. old and craggy

24. “I rode to Gorizia from Udine on a camion. We passed other camions on the road and I
    looked at the country” 163).
   a. a passenger train passing on a duel-track system
   b. a large truck used to carry heavy loads
   c. a low flying plane much like a crop duster

25. “The wind rose in the night and at three o’clock in the morning with the rain coming in
    sheets there was a bombardment and the Croatians came over across the mountain
    meadows and through patches of woods and into the front line” (186).
   a. a break in the storm
   b. a training session producing a united plan of attack
   c. to attack with bombs, shells, and missiles

26. “At the far end of the bridge there were officers and carabinieri standing on both sides
    flashing lights” (221).
   a. high ranking officials
   b. minute men ready to fight on a moment’s notice
   c. members of the Italian police force

27. “There were many fishing boats along the quay and nets were spread on racks” (277).
   a. the port side of a large fishing tanker
   b. a wharf or reinforced bank
   c. a beach filled with large stony sand

28. “‘He’s a chamois hunter,’ I said” (303).
   a. an extremely agile goat antelope
   b. a rare European amphibian related to the crocodile
   c. a large bird much like the osprey
Directions: Read the passage and answer the questions that follow.

“There were mists over the river and clouds on the mountain and the trucks splashed mud on the road and the troops were muddy and wet in their capes; their rifles were wet and under their capes the two leather cartridge-boxes on the front of the belts, gray leather boxes heavy with the packs of clips of thin, long 6.5 mm. cartridges, bulged forward under the capes so that the men, passing on the road, marched as though they were six months gone with child” (4).

29. While this passage presents an image of pregnancy, the guns represent
   a. security.
   b. death.
   c. peace.

30. The words “clouds,” “muddy,” “heavy,” and “bulged” suggest a _____ tone.
   a. majestic
   b. bemired
   c. dismal

“Anger was washed away in the river along with any obligation . . . I was through. I wished them all the luck. There were the good ones, and the brave ones, and the calm ones and the sensible ones, and they deserved it. But it was not my show any more and I wished this bloody train would get to Mestre and I would eat and stop thinking. I would have to stop” (232).

31. What rhetorical device does the author utilize to convey his message?
   a. Assonance
   b. Repetition
   c. Synecdoche

32. The tone of this passage is best described as
   a. childish.
   b. vibrant.
   c. hollow.

33. After reading the passage above, the title A Farewell to Arms might signify
   a. an honorable end.
   b. a soldier leaving a battle.
   c. the loss of a limb.
“If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry” (249).

34. The tone of this passage is best described as
   a. poignant.
   b. giddy.
   c. pessimistic.

35. Hemingway’s diction is best described as
   a. general and abstract
   b. specific and concrete
   c. high or formal

36. The structure “very good,” “very gentle,” and “very brave” is a literary device known as
   a. apostrophe
   b. metonymy
   c. parallelism

37. Please rate your confidence level with the questions you have completed so far.
   A  B  C  D  E
   low  high

38. Please rate your level of experience with the author’s writing style.
   A  B  C  D  E
   low  high

Now use the back of your answer sheet to explain 3.) why you rated your confidence level this way and 4.) why you rated your level of experience this way.

Part C. Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*
Directions: Read the sentence and choose the correct definition of the underlined word.

39. “It was difficult to realize his work was not out there in the luminous estuary, but behind him, within the brooding gloom” (2).
   a. sands of time
   b. arm of the sea
   c. polar regions
40. “He had sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, an ascetic aspect, and, with his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards, resembled an idol” (2).
   a. a person who lives without the usuals of life
   b. a pleasant scent
   c. a doomed creature

41. “We looked at the venerable stream not in the vivid flush of a short day that comes and departs forever, but in the august light of abiding memories” (3).
   a. challenged due to a perceived weakness
   b. able to be consumed
   c. respected because of old age

42. “But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernal but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine” (5-6).
   a. ability
   b. anxious hope
   c. natural tendency

43. “Two women, one fat and the other slim, sat on straw-bottomed chairs, knitting black wool. The slim one got up and walked straight at me – still knitting with downcast eyes – and only just as I began to think of getting out of her way, as you would for a somnambulist, stood still, and looked up” (14).
   a. sleep walker
   b. appeasing pet
   c. kind assistant

44. “I am not such a fool as I look, quoth Plato to his disciples,’ he said sententiously, emptied his glass with great resolution, and we rose” (16).
   a. in a crafty manner
   b. given to pompous moralizing
   c. to be overcome with guilt

45. “A rocky cliff appeared, mounds of turned-up earth by the shore, houses on a hill, others with iron roofs, amongst a waste of excavations, or hanging to the declivity” (23).
   a. a downward slope, as of a hill
   b. a bountiful supply
   c. a bridge designed of metal rather than wood
46. “But as I stood on the hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly” (25).
   a. destructive
   b. apathetic
   c. cunning

47. “His little eyes glittered like mica discs—with curiosity—though he tried to keep up a bit of superciliousness” (41).
   a. a yearning hope
   b. the trait of displaying arrogance by patronizing those considered inferior
   c. suggestive longing for lost love

48. “I let him run on, this papier-mache Mephistopheles, and it seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing but a little loose dirt, maybe” (44).
   a. the devil in the Faust legend to whom Faust sold his soul
   b. the angel in Milton’s Paradise Lost
   c. the shrew in Shakespeare’s works

49. “There were either no villages, or the people were hostile, or the director, who like the rest of us fed out of tines, with an occasional old he-goat thrown in, didn’t want to stop the steamer for some more or less recondite reason” (72).
   a. obtuse
   b. knowledgeable
   c. concealed; hidden

50. “And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul” (110).
   a. deadly
   b. capable of producing offspring or vegetation; fruitful
   c. peculiar

51. “The wastes of his weary brain were haunted by shadowy images now—images of wealth and fame revolving obsequiously round his inextinguishable gift of noble and lofty expression” (124).
   a. full of or exhibiting servile compliance; fawning
   b. dangerously
   c. oscillating in arabesque formations
52. “I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams” (129).
   a. holding sacred value
   b. astonishing; evoking admiration
   c. gruesomely indicative of death or the dead

Directions: Read the passage and answer the questions that follow.

“I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago—the other day . . . Light came out of this river since—you say Knights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker—may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday. Imagine the feelings of a commander of a fine—what d’ye call ‘em?—trireme in the Mediterranean, ordered suddenly to the north; run overland across the Gauls in a hurry; put in charge of one of these craft the legionaires—a wonderful lot of handy men they must have been, too—used to build, apparently by the hundred, in a month or two, if we may believe what we read. Imagine him here—the very end of the world, a sea the colour of lead, a sky the colour of smoke, a kind of ship about as rigid as a concertina—and going up this river with stores, or orders, or what you like. Sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages,-precious little to eat fit for a civilized man, nothing but Thames water to drink” (6).

53. In this passage, Marlow alludes to
   a. a mysterious battle in the near future
   b. the Roman occupation of Britain as a historical parallel to the contemporary European “occupation” of Africa.
   c. a past historical time period that is unrelated to the setting of the novel

54. Conrad’s diction is best described as
   a. high or formal
   b. general and abstract
   c. specific and concrete
“I assured him Mr. Kurtz’s knowledge, however extensive, did not bear upon the problems of commerce or administration. He invoked then the name of science. ‘It would be an incalculable loss if,’ etc., etc. I offered him the report on the ‘Suppression of Savage Customs,’ with the postscriptum torn off. He took it up eagerly, but ended by sniffing at it with an air of contempt. ‘This is not what we had a right to expect,’ he remarked. ‘Expect nothing else,’ I said. ‘There are only private letters.’ He withdrew upon some threat of legal proceedings, and I saw him no more; but another fellow, calling himself Kurtz’s cousin, appeared two days later, and was anxious to hear all the details about his dear relative’s last moments” (130-131).

55. In the passage above, a man from the company speaks with
   a. Kurtz
   b. The Intended
   c. Marlow

56. What is the effect of Marlow tearing off the postscriptum?
   a. the true knowledge is not conveyed
   b. the truth provides an accurate history of the past
   c. his close friends abandon him for his poor morals

57. Please rate your confidence level with the questions you have completed so far.

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58. Please rate your level of experience with the author’s writing style.

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Now use the back of your answer sheet to explain 5.) why you rated your confidence level this way and 6.) why you rated your level of experience this way.