

Understanding the Courses We Teach

**Local Perspectives on English
Language Teaching**

Edited by

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Michigan Teacher Training

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Chapter 16

A Theme-Based Literature Course: Focus on the City of Angels

Donna M. Brinton

As her chapter suggests, Donna Brinton loves the city of Los Angeles, California. Though students who take the course featured in her chapter may not end up as fond of the city as she is, they will have richer appreciation for its history, cultural contributions, and people. Traditional literature courses for advanced ESL students usually include a sampling of “great works” of literature written in English. These works are read either in their entirety or as excerpted materials. This chapter presents Brinton’s attempt to design an alternative ESL literature course around a single extended theme: the city of Los Angeles. The genres she incorporates in the course include essays, autobiographies, short stories, poetry, novel, and film. In all of the works selected, the city of Los Angeles takes on dimensions of a “character” and exerts a powerful influence over plot, theme, and character development.

After describing the setting for the course, Brinton explains her rationale for using sustained content in an advanced ESL course. She then discusses immediate course goals, highlighting the importance of a language-based approach to teaching literature. Integral to the course are activities that engage learners in analyzing the literary work along traditional lines (e.g., with reference to plot, character development, use of irony). However, equally important are activities that use literature as a vehicle for advanced study of language features. Among the course components Brinton describes are systematic use of instructional media, minilectures on literary style and techniques, guided group discussions, e-mail response journals, and in-class as well as take-home assessment measures. Brinton traces the evolution of these various components to her own view of learner and teacher

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