

An Integrated Skills Lesson Plan for "A Postcard from America" by Robert Olen Butler

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In "A Postcard from America," author Robert Olen Butler details some thoughts on his writing, his work, and how postcards and America's past affect his art and life today. This rich essay can be a powerful instrument for developing students' English language skills and insights into American life, and perhaps, into the students' own lives. The following suggestions for using the essay for English language development help the teacher to explore, with his or her students, the richness of Butler's essay, "A Postcard from America."

Description:

This lesson plan is designed for EFL instructors who teach high intermediate to advanced English language learners. It is based on an authentic, contemporary essay by an accomplished American writer. The lesson plan includes various tasks and activities designed to assist you, the instructor, in developing your students' English language skills as well as increasing their understanding of American culture. Students will study Butler's essay, complete tasks both individually and in pairs or groups, and participate in activities that develop listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. The lesson is divided into five steps: Preparing to Read, Reading the Text, Understanding the Text, Making Connections Beyond the Text, and Integrating Language Skills.

You can choose the parts of the lesson that you find most appropriate and useful for your class. Approximate times for each part of the lesson are included, but these times may vary, depending on the individual class or teaching situation.

Step 1: Preparing to Read "A Postcard from America" (15 minutes)

In order to prepare your students to read Butler's essay, follow the suggested steps below.

A. Introduce the Subject: Postcards

1. Show or pass around various postcards to your students.
2. Ask questions such as the following:
 - a. What are postcards?
 - b. What are some common features (characteristics) of postcards?
 - c. Who sends postcards?
 - d. Why do people send postcards?

- e. Have you sent or received a postcard this year? If so, to or from whom?

B. Introduce the Lesson

Explain to your students that they will read an essay called “A Postcard from America” written by Robert Olen Butler, a well-known American author. Tell them that they might not fully understand this essay the first time they read it, but after reading it again and analyzing the essay, they will gain a better understanding of the writer’s message and will experience opportunities to communicate in English and improve their language skills.

Step 2: Reading the Text (30–40 minutes depending on students’ abilities)

Give your students photocopies of the [essay](#) (and [Glossary](#)) from this issue of the Forum. You can also have students access the essay online at: <http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/writers/>. Note: the online version does not have the numbered paragraphs and Glossary mentioned in some exercises below.

- A. Review the during-reading tasks below with your students. Then ask them to complete the tasks as they read the essay silently.
 1. Circle unfamiliar words or expressions.
 2. Underline ideas they do not understand.
 3. Make notes in the margins about sections of the essay they would like to discuss or ask about.
- B. Ask your students to read the definitions of their circled words in the Glossary provided or to look up the unfamiliar words in a dictionary. If they have access to the Internet, students can use one of the following on-line dictionary sites.
 - The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: www.bartleby.com/61
 - Merriam-Webster On-line–The Language Center: www.m-w.com/
- C. Ask your students to carefully read the essay a second time for better understanding.

Step 3: Understanding the Text

You may assign the following questions for class or group discussion, as journal or essay topics to be written in class, or for homework. To prepare your students for oral discussion, follow the steps listed below.

1. Arrange your students into pairs or groups of three to four students.
 - a. Ask each pair or group to choose one student to read the questions aloud.
 - b. Ask each pair or group to choose one student to record the the answers.
 - c. Ask each group to choose other members to present the answers to the class.

2. Give your students a fixed time period to discuss the questions and complete the tasks in Step 3 before presenting their responses to the class.
3. Call on each group to present their responses to the class.

A. Comprehension Questions (15–20 minutes)

1. At the beginning of the essay, Butler describes a postcard of a biplane. What is wrong with the upper wing of the plane?
2. How long has Butler been collecting postcards? What is the focus of his collection?
3. In [paragraph 5](#), Butler writes about a photo card of two women in a 1906 automobile. What is the name of the town from which the woman writes her message? Why was the town given this name?
4. In [paragraph 8](#), what game did the postcard writer play? On what date did this writer play the game?
5. Butler describes a photo of a soldier's mother in [paragraph 9](#). What is she wearing and where is she standing?
6. In [paragraph 10](#), Butler tells about a postcard addressed to a man. Where is the man and why is he dying?
7. In [paragraphs 13 through 15](#), Butler describes a writing project he did for his students during a Webcast on the Internet. What postcard did he write about for this Webcast?
8. In the final paragraph, Butler writes that “each day...artists emerge with visions....” According to Butler, what do these visions do?

B. Vocabulary and Idioms (15 minutes)

Explain to your students that scanning is a reading skill that is useful for quickly finding specific information such as new vocabulary words or idiomatic expressions.

To scan, students should read through a text quickly as they search for specific words, expressions, names, or numbers. Ask your students to practice the skill of scanning as they complete the tasks in this section.

1. Early in the essay, Butler questions whether to “take on the voice in the message on the back of the card,” or “the voice of the recipient,” or “the voice of someone mentioned in the message.” Scan the essay to find this passage. Explain what the author means by *take on the voice*.
2. Scan [paragraph 7](#) to find the word *memento*. Try to guess the meaning of this word using the context—the ideas in the paragraph surrounding the word *memento*. *Memento* comes from the root word *mem*, which means “recalling the past.” Make a list of other words that use the root word *mem*.
3. Find the word *caption* in [paragraph 9](#). Use the context in the paragraph to guess the meaning of this word. What is another word for *caption*? In addition to postcards, where do we find captions?

C. Dictionary Practice (15 minutes)

Tell your students that they will practice using the dictionary as they complete the tasks in this section. They may use the on-line dictionary sites listed under Step 2.

1. Find the word *convention* in [paragraphs 11](#) and [17](#). The meaning of this word is different in each paragraph. Use the dictionary to find the specific meaning as it is used in each of the paragraphs.
2. Find the word *piazza* in [paragraph 8](#). Use the context to guess the meaning of *piazza*. Then compare your meaning with the definition in a dictionary. Many words we use in English are borrowed from other languages. Scan the dictionary entry for *piazza* to learn which language this word originates from.
3. Scan [paragraph 10](#) to find the word *doughboy*. How do we pronounce *doughboy*? Use a dictionary for help if you need it.

D. Discussion Questions (15 minutes)

For instructions on how to present these questions for oral discussion, refer to the steps provided above for part A, Comprehension Questions.

1. Butler has been a collector of old postcards for more than ten years. Why is he interested in collecting these postcards? How does he plan to use his collection?
2. Each postcard that Butler writes about expresses a special message from the writer. Choose one or two of the postcards. Discuss the meaning and the feelings that the writers communicate through their brief messages.
3. During the Webcast in which Butler wrote a short story in real-time, his students were able to witness the “artistic process” from the beginning to the completion of his story. What did Butler do each night for two hours on the Internet? What was he trying to teach his students about writing with this Internet project?
4. Where does Butler claim art comes from? Do you agree? Explain your point of view.

Step 4: Making Connections Beyond the Text (15–20 minutes)

You may assign questions for class or group discussion, as journal or essay topics to be written in class, or for homework.

1. Do you send postcards? Do you ever receive them? When you choose a postcard to send or you receive one, what does the picture on the card express to you? Think of postcards you have seen and remembered. Explain why you remember them.
2. What does it mean to be a collector? Besides postcards, what are some other things people collect? Do you know someone who is a collector? What does that person collect and why?
3. Butler mentions the celebration of America’s Independence Day in [paragraph 8](#). How do you celebrate a national holiday in your country? What is your favorite national holiday?

4. How do you prefer to communicate: by postcard, letter, phone, fax, e-mail, or instant messages? Has modern technology (e-mail, cell phones, faxes) affected the practice of sending postcards and letters by regular mail? Explain how.

Step 5: Integrating Language Skills

You may assign your students one of the following projects or ask them to choose a project to complete individually or in a group of three or four students. Ask your students to complete their projects as written reports or to prepare oral presentations.

1. Design a postcard that represents an important event in your life. Write a message on the back that reveals how this event has influenced you.
2. Select a postcard and compose a fictional story about the event, action, or image on the postcard. Include the following elements of fiction writing: setting, plot, character, theme, and tone.
3. Research the history of postcards on the Internet or in a library. Present your findings to the class.