

Novel Study Using Google Meet and Audiobooks

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Summary: This article highlights the challenges faced in conducting novel studies in a diverse fifth-grade ELA classroom and proposes an effective solution utilizing Google Meet with Breakout rooms and audiobooks. By incorporating high-interest novels and bilingual approaches, educators facilitate language development, comprehension, and engagement. The method fosters individualized learning, boosts student confidence, and maximizes class time efficiency. As a solution to pandemic disruptions, this strategy has emerged as a valuable tool to promote language acquisition and a love for reading among students.

Keywords: novel study, English language arts, language acquisition, bilingual education, student engagement, differentiation, Google Meet, audiobooks

Introduction

An important part of teaching English Language Arts is exposing students to a wide range and variety of texts. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, our goal as educators is to inspire a love of reading in our students. In order to accomplish this, we utilize different novel studies in our classroom. As curriculum focused on novel studies promotes critical reasoning and language skills (Hameed, 2021), we try to incorporate high interest novels into our language arts classroom.

However, novel studies posed a challenge in our fifth grade High Intensity English Language Arts classroom of twenty students. As the classroom is composed of learners ranging from Newcomers to level 4 WIDA Multilingual Learners, the diverse linguistic needs of each student made traditional novel study a complex task. Novel study in class involves selecting a common book for all students to read and analyze, ensuring that it addresses the appropriate grade-level standards and content. The classroom is truly diverse in that each student brings with them a unique set of experiences and background knowledge. In the classroom, there are students at different stages of their academic and linguistic development, as well as students who have interrupted formal education. We had the challenge of devising a plan to study one book, as one unified class, in order to make it work for all students and their varied needs.

In years past, we would purchase the novel chosen by our students in both English and in Spanish and take turns reading aloud to the entire class as they followed along in their own books. Firstly, trying to purchase the correct number of books in each language proved to be overwhelming, not cost effective and inaccurate when new students joined our

class. Secondly, while trying to alternate reading in English and Spanish, students would lose focus and interest when the other language was being read, which was not conducive to their learning. It also took twice as long to get through novels, so for time management sake, this method was simply not working. It was necessary to reflect on our own teaching practices and think of a better strategy to keep students engaged.

During COVID, when our school was shut down completely, we went to virtual learning and had to figure out a way to continue doing novel studies. As necessity is the mother of invention, we found it was easiest to share our screens with PDF versions of the book during our Google Meets and utilize breakout rooms for the varying levels in the classroom. One teacher would read the novel aloud in English and the other in Spanish to a predetermined point, and then as a whole group the class would discuss what was learned and build academic vocabulary together. This proved to be highly effective, as students were engaged in listening to only one language. It also helped greatly with time efficiency, as all students were listening to the story at the same time in different languages. It also gave our students access to high interest books such as *Esperanza Rising*, *They Call Me Guero*, and *Wonder* during a period when they were more isolated at home and had far less access to in-print books.

A “silver lining” of the pandemic, we realized this way of doing novel study was highly effective for our group of unique learners, so we have continued using this strategy since the pandemic. Integrating novel study with Google Meet has allowed us to get through more novels during the school year and encourage language growth through our novel study as a class.

How we make it work

This method of bilingual novel study requires the use of student computers, teacher computers, headphones, Google Meet, as well as audiobooks in your languages of choice. Amazon and the Kindle platform have a wealth of audiobooks that are available at decently fair prices in multiple languages.

Students begin by logging into Google Meet (either the one embedded on your Google Classroom page or a link posted by the teacher). They have their copy of the novel ready to follow along with the audiobook. The teachers establish breakout rooms in the Google Meet according to the different languages available for the audiobooks. For example, in our classroom we read the book and listen to the audio in English and in Spanish. Thus, one breakout room is for the English audiobook, and one breakout room is for Spanish. We adjust the speed of the audiobook playback to suit the needs of our students, and make plans where to stop to get back together as a class and complete activities or have group discussions.

Positive outcomes we have seen

As teachers utilizing this technique, we have seen many positive outcomes and we have continued to use Google Meet for novel study post pandemic. Students are focused throughout the entirety of the audiobook, as they are only having to focus on one language and one voice. This then correlates to an increase in their comprehension of the novel. When the class leaves their respective breakout rooms on Google Meet and come back together for discussion with both teachers, more students are volunteering answers and insights, as they feel more comfortable and confident.

Since we are reading and listening to the same novel simultaneously in different breakout rooms, we are utilizing class time more efficiently. With the typical novel study method, it would have taken us double the time to complete even just a few chapters. We are able to read and listen to the same amount of high quality, grade-level, and age appropriate text in the same amount of time, therefore we have more class time to dissect the novel together and encourage higher order thinking. We are able to practice the four modes of communication (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and encourage more language production as a basis for discussion and learning.

The breakout rooms provide a low stakes environment and lower students' affective filter so that they feel free to take more language risks. Many of our learners are often self-conscious and aware of their content knowledge and language differences when compared to peers, and this awareness can lead to low self-esteem and social emotional difficulties (Morgan, Farkas & Wu, 2012). As students can discreetly decide which breakout room they wish to join, we have seen more students make the transition to listening in English or testing out their listening skills in English with less hesitation

or embarrassment. This also affords students the opportunity to return to their L1 if they are struggling to follow along with the English language version and reattempt at a later date. Our goal of novel studies is to expose all students to grade-level, age-appropriate text regardless of the language it is written in. By doing so, we are also able to highlight and teach the grade-level standards through grade level text, as well as use our skills as teachers to differentiate activities and encourage more production and interaction with English. As the teachers, we have been able to develop students' grade level skills on standards that address theme, character development, influence of point of view, figurative language and context clues. This method of bilingual novel study provides all students in a mixed English proficiency classroom access to rigorous content. The novel content then serves as a tremendous unifier in the classroom to promote language production and language acquisition through rich activities and scaffolding of critical thinking tasks having read a story together.

Conclusion

As educators, we encountered several challenges over the years when conducting novel studies in our diverse classroom such as time constraints, maintaining student focus and attention, as well as properly addressing grade level standards. We have found that the method of using Google Meet with breakout rooms combined with audiobooks has helped us to continue and appropriately expose all of our students to grade-level content, rich vocabulary, and high-interest novels. We have also seen that spark in our students where they truly enjoy reading. There is a sort of class bond created by experiencing the same novel together, and even more so when students feel empowered to use English in their reactions and analysis of the novels we read. The pandemic was so challenging for society and educators, but it did force us to think outside of the box in our profession, and this strategy has proven to be an amazing tool in the language learning classroom.

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