Review of the book Children's literature in second language learning edited by J. Bland & C. Lütge

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Children’s Literature in Second Language Education

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Children’s Literature in Second Language Education, co-edited by Janice Bland and Christiane Lütge, challenges teachers of English language learners (ELLs) in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts to move away from primarily teaching grammar and speaking skills and using simplified texts. Instead, this volume encourages teachers to cultivate a joy of reading and critical literacy skills in their students by using authentic young adult and children’s literature written in the target language. The editors compile research and teaching practices from international perspectives, in which contributors discuss effective uses of young adult literature, picture books, and graphic novels with ELLs to foster linguistic skills, intercultural competence, and multicultural awareness.

In the introduction to the volume, editor Janice Bland provides a rationale for this collection of studies by identifying a lack of research and resources on the use of literature with primary, middle, and secondary ELLs, in the English language teaching (ELT) field. This comprehensive volume is then organized by theme into four parts with three to six chapters each: “Extensive Reading with Children’s Literature,” “Visual Literacy with Picture Books and Graphic Novels in ELT,” “Intercultural Encounters with Children’s Literature,” and “Empowerment and Creativity Through Story.” In the concluding chapter, editor Christiane Lütge calls for future studies that address electronic fictions as well as the inclusion of media literacy and multiliteracies in the EFL contexts. Additional materials and resources are included at the end of the volume.

Part One, “Extensive Reading with Children’s Literature,” includes empirical studies that address the multiple benefits of extensive reading. The chapters, written by experts in their field such as Stephen Krashen and Beniko Mason, collectively reveal that self-selected, free voluntary reading promotes students’ engagement with texts that leads to increased language and literacy development as well as cognitive and affective competence. For example, Beniko Mason summarizes empirical studies that were conducted in university English language classes in Japan. Describing a study about the changes in reluctant EFL students after pleasure reading for a semester, Mason argues for the positive effect of the combination of free reading and listening to stories on vocabulary acquisition.

Part Two contributors argue that authentic picture books and graphic novels are especially beneficial to ELLs in fostering literary and literacy competence. They provide practical ideas about how to help ELLs read visual images to arrive at an enhanced understanding of the text. For example, Sandie
Mourão presents excerpts of class conversations “making use of the peritextual features in picture books supported these students’ analysis of narrative meaning” (p. 82). Janice Bland promotes the use of postmodern literature in primary to secondary EFL classes. By describing visual and linguistic meanings of two fractured fairytales, David Wiesner’s *The Three Pigs* and Anthony Browne’s *Me and You*, Bland argues that salience and “the colour and size as well as the content of the images add layers of meaning to the story” (pp. 92-93). While readers would appreciate the close reading of images in specific picture books discussed in these chapters, they might benefit more from specific strategies on how to use visual literacy analysis tools with ELLs.

Going beyond language competence, the six chapters in Part Three, “Intercultural Encounters with Children’s Literature,” focus on how high-quality young adult literature can help ELLs critically examine their own and others’ culture and identity, which leads to Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). For instance, Sigrid Rieuwerts describes Benjamin Zephaniah’s novels that often depict experiences of British teenagers with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Rieuwerts includes specific EFL class discussion and writing prompts as well as post-reading project ideas that address critical issues of otherness, discrimination, and race through Zephaniah’s literature. From a different perspective, Grit Alter cautions against a stereotypical and incorrect representation of otherness in children’s literature. By examining examples of children’s fictions about First Nation and Native American cultures, Alter argues that “children need to be provided with literature that allows them to engage in balanced intercultural encounters” (p. 156). Promoting the discussion of sociopolitical issues and challenging one’s point of view is critically important in second language education. However, readers might be left wondering how exactly to scaffold the authentic literature for meaningful discussion given the linguistic challenges that ELLs would still encounter in these texts.

Part Four centers around how teachers can empower ELLs and promote their creativity through other literacy activities, such as storytelling and creative writing, in tandem with reading and discussing children’s literature. The five chapters introduce interactive and multimodal literacy tasks that could be directly implemented in an EFL classroom. For instance, Alan Maley includes various types of brief poems that ELLs can compose and describes ‘the Asian teacher-writers project,’ in which teachers of non-native speakers of English from various Asian countries created more culturally-relevant stories for their students.

This volume, representing diverse voices of EFL communities, ranging from Austria and Spain to Taiwan and Japan, could appeal to a variety of audiences. EFL classroom teachers will appreciate specific examples of young adult literature, picture books, and graphic novels as well as practical ideas about how to teach with these authentic texts in the their classroom. Teacher-researchers might be inspired to carry out similar action research projects in their own context to further investigate the themes of this volume. Teacher educators of second language education will likely find this volume to be a useful resource in their own courses as the contributors of the chapters grounds their arguments and teaching practices on respected second and first language research.

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