
Janice Bland

Children's Literature and Learner Empowerment

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Reviewer

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This is an important publication for all working in English language education, not only for those working and researching young learner and teenage learning, but for those involved in reading and in the reading of literature. As I read and reread this book, I became increasingly impressed with the range of reference, knowledge and understanding of the author, as well as the ability to both engage with more academic and theoretical issues, but also to show readers with varying levels of experience and knowledge how these ideas and principles can be implemented in classrooms and curricula. Bland writes clearly and intelligently and has productively absorbed and applied a wealth of relevant and recent research. It partly militates against the book that it appears with a respectable though less known international publisher, and is based on a doctoral dissertation. Nevertheless, I believe that readers in these fields will come to realise that the importance of this book far exceeds its apparent humble entry into the world. I am convinced it will become widely cited and known as more relevant readers find it, read it and see the need to recommend the author and the title to ever-wider circles of teachers and researchers, and I would be pleased if this review can contribute to a speedier uptake of the ideas found therein.

Let me justify my high opinion by giving a brief introduction to the content and concerns of the book, with the intention of prompting readers to read it for themselves. First, the title: this is not a book about (say) Children's Literature and 'Second Language Learning', though it includes well-informed references to Nick Ellis and others in the field; nor is it only about Children's Literature and 'Education', a wider interest in the place of such a concern in a larger curriculum. Bland goes beyond this and wishes to address a critical interest in learner education and the place of Children's Literature in a second language within that perspective, with reading as learner 'empowerment' conceived of as 'a reader-centred and sociocultural process' (p. 6). Following a useful background

'Introduction', Bland then pursues her theme through a clearly structured three-part approach: Part 1 'Visual Literacy in the EFL-Literature Classroom'; Part 2 'Literary Literacy in the EFL-Literature Classroom'; and Part 3 'Critical Cultural Literacy in the EFL-Literature Classroom'.

The 'Introduction' contains a useful schematic contrast of 'poorly crafted' and 'well-crafted' texts for children (p. 8) including the important idea of not patronising or short-changing younger learners (or any learners for that matter) as education too often does. In a similar spirit, Bland emphasises that learners learn much more than 'language' in a language lesson and that this readiness for learning should be encouraged and supported by stretching learners generally, but also through contextualised teaching of (for example) environmental issues. Children from a young age, in this view, should be learning autonomy and confidence in their reading practices, as well as any specific linguistic items or structures. They should be prepared for later learning, as in 'literary literacy' (how to read and benefit from reading demanding literary texts at a later stage of education), with their own perspectives respected, but also, with an eye to ongoing and future developments in reading technologies, learning should be encompassing direct attention to issues of multimodality in communication and digital literacies, as well as the importance of broader creativity and critical thinking for oneself: we are back to 'empowerment'. Language is not to be neglected in the approach explored by this book, but neither are literacy and literary reading, up to even the broadest and most imperative of educational aims.

Bland's book clearly comes out of much valuable experience in teacher training and education in German university contexts, but can be profitably read by constituencies well beyond those circles. The approach to language and wider issues is well exemplified in the way she points out (after Guy Cook, for example) that good literary texts are, strictly speaking, likely to be 'beyond' any simplistic metric of language learner competence but that, far from a difficulty, this is the promise and opportunity they offer. Learners don't learn what teachers teach, in the old adage, and arguably, also, learners learn best when teachers don't 'teach'! What teachers must do is offer stimulating environments for learning, including stimulating texts. In terms of SLA, Bland rightly draws here on research into chunking and re-structuring, and affordances of ludic or transgressive texts in

terms of repetition, foregrounding and memorability, as well as pleasure. Good education works with the imagination and creativity of the child and draws connections between text and life, word and worlds. The importance of 'booktalk' is a constant refrain throughout this book, thinking, engagement, argument and discussion against the idea of pre-set purely linguistic curricula which will limit the efforts of both teacher and students.

In Chapter 3, under the rubric of 'Visual Literacy', it is noted how boys generally seem to prefer graphic novels and comics, and how easily the expertise they bring to the classroom is incorporated into the use of good quality materials, rather than disparaged or patronised. Readers differ, but in the practical examples in this section, as throughout, Bland shows the valuable affordances for booktalk offered by illustrated and graphic narratives, not only in terms of more linguistic translations and representations, but also through conversational language (for example, through speech bubbles), filling the gaps (between 'frames' of a story or gaps between illustration and linguistic text) or in exploring with readers irony and related devices on to larger issues of perspective and narrative point of view, and not least the reader's own valued contribution to meaning and evaluation (which is the effort of literary criticism at more advanced levels of education). Bland shows very convincingly in pages like these how both teachers in preparation, as well as their students, can benefit from thoughtful uses of well-crafted literary text, in this case high quality children's literary text (or 'cross over' in many instances) of which there seem to be ever more high quality instances in recent times.

Moving on to Part 2, 'Literary Literacy', Bland shows how modern (or rather, postmodern) children's narratives and literature both demonstrate and contribute to the development of the knowingness of the contemporary child which can then be reflected on and developed further in classrooms. Indeterminacies, parodies, open endings, versioning and self-conscious metafiction are all effortlessly, unselfconsciously and certainly unpretentiously exploited in much of the best writing, as Bland shows repeatedly with a good range of examples in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 looks at patterning in children's poetry as well as its often surreal content and the opportunities offered there ('As I was going up the stair/ I met a man who wasn't there...'). Bland writes well and convincingly with particular references to children's poetry about features known more generally within pedagogical stylistics. Part 2 closes with Chapter 6 on uses of drama as embodied learning

within the general argument for empowerment being advanced. Here, as throughout, the modern phenomenon of adaptation and appropriation, indeed extended circulation and ongoing modification of texts, including uses of the internet, is shown to be of value for educators rather than a problem.

In part 3, Chapter 7, the relevance, indeed the importance of human rights to the children's curriculum is shown as part of the wider educational effort at empowerment via Amnesty International materials, and Oxfam's *Education for Global Citizenship: A Guide for Schools*. Less positively, through a reading of the Harry Potter saga, Bland investigates issues of gender and power, class, race and other identity issues whose importance to children in increasingly globalised classrooms in an increasingly globalised world, is sometimes overlooked. I liked the idea, here, as elsewhere, (for example, in considering simplified texts for learners) of 'texts worth bothering with'. Those of us who use literature in language classrooms and in education more broadly know from experience these *are* 'texts worth bothering with'; the challenge is to use them most effectively to engage the groups we work with.

What Bland shows overall, in her own closing words, is that: 'There is a treasure chest of supremely valuable worldwide children's literature in English that, for the sake of crucial educational goals, should be made widely available to the EFL-literature classroom with young learners and adolescents' (p. 298). If it is felt that the examples and ideas or the texts themselves, or that sometimes the assertions made, require more empirical investigation, the gauntlet is certainly thrown down here to teachers and researchers beyond Europe, beyond universities and highly trained developed countries, to do more of this work for themselves in their own contexts. It is clearly worthwhile work.

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