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Storybridge to Second Language Literacy. The Theory, Research and Practice of Teaching English with Children's Literature

Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc., 2013, 231 pp.

ISBN 978-1-62396-277-7

Reviewer

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As a strong advocate since the late 1980s for the use of children's literature in the primary English language classroom as a rich and powerful teaching and learning resource, I was delighted to read Ghosn's recent publication, *Storybridge to Second Language Literacy*. As I enthusiastically read from chapter to chapter, my inner voice was agreeing with everything I was reading. Ghosn makes a strong case for using authentic children's literature as a medium of instruction in teaching English to children, particularly in contexts where children must access general curriculum subjects in English. She shares her 30 years of experience as a teacher, teacher trainer and researcher, and we are taken on a journey around the world as she presents research projects, including her own, from various countries and contexts to provide evidence for her case.

The book is aimed at MA students in TESOL, members of special interest groups related to primary education, EFL and bilingual education, teacher educators and pre-service and in-service teachers. Because of the book's clear and accessible yet informative and authoritative style, it meets the needs of these diverse audiences.

The book brings together three perspectives: theoretical bases, empirical foundations and how teachers implement story-based instruction in their classrooms. It is structured into four parts. Each chapter opens with a quote from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, as the quotes reflect what the author believes about second language teaching and language teacher training: 'it is a journey through a wonderland of surprises, a wonderland that can sometimes be confusing, even frustrating. But most of the time, the journey has been wondrous and pleasurable, filled with magic and discovery'. The reader senses this magic and discovery throughout the book. There

are particularly useful *Think about it* or *Exploring it* questions or suggestions at the end of each chapter which encourage further reflection in relation to one's own experience and teaching context. These make ideal discussion and reflection points for teacher education or for mini-research projects as part of ongoing professional development.

Part 1 presents the theoretical foundations for literature-based instruction as an alternative to the internationally marketed global coursebook. Ghosn discusses the significance of narrative in general and outlines the developmental benefits of literature to children and of literature as instructional material for the cognitive and language development of children. She compares the language of typical coursebooks with the rich language found in children's literature to highlight the quality of the latter, and compares coursebook and storybook content. She concludes that storybooks provide socially more appropriate content and context for learning as they address themes and topics of immediate interest and concern to children. She also discusses how children's literature can be used to make useful links to other subjects in the primary curriculum and how it can develop cognitive academic language proficiency and different levels of critical thinking skills. There is a useful table on page 35 which shows how literature can activate these academic language functions. Part 1 ends with a discussion on the motivational power of stories, how children's literature impacts on children's interest in learning and can stimulate emotional reactions from learners, thus contributing to their holistic development.

In Part 2, Ghosn presents research evidence to support story-based instruction and shows how it impacts on motivation, reading skills, vocabulary learning, grammar learning, writing skills and subject matter learning thus testifying to the power of literature in language learning.

In Part 3, classroom vignettes show practical applications of a story-based approach and examples of discourse around stories, including the types of questions teachers need to ask to generate meaningful student responses. The vignettes also demonstrate how a practical model for literature-based instruction emerges which is sufficiently general to be applicable in a variety of contexts. This is presented in diagrammatic form on page 120 as a cyclical process moving from preparation for the story to arouse curiosity and activate prior knowledge and set a purpose for listening or reading. This moves on to various

forms of story reading such as interactive, dialogic reading, shared reading, read-aloud, storytelling with props or independent reading, to reflecting on the story through shared whole-class discussion, small literacy circles and answering teacher questions. Finally, children are invited to return to the story through a variety of activities such as retelling, making story maps, writing news reports, writing new stories with additions or changes. The class storytelling transcripts are particularly interesting and useful as they highlight how teachers skilfully validate children's mother tongue contributions. This empowers and motivates children as it enables their active participation in classroom discourse. Children feel successful when their contributions are validated and the teacher can recast them in English to introduce new language that is personally meaningful to the children since it expresses their own ideas. Like Ghosn, I also believe that making strategic use of the mother tongue or shared classroom language is one of the keys to a successful story-based approach.

There is also emphasis throughout the book on promoting intercultural awareness, empathy and tolerance for diversity of opinions, beliefs, values and ways of life through the use of quality stories which generate meaningful dialogue about issues that are important to children and worth talking about. There are references to many stories; well-known stories such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1987) and other Eric Carle titles and tales such as *Jim and the Beanstalk* (Briggs, 1970) and *Stone Soup*, and lesser-known stories such as *The Day of Ahmad's Secret* (Heide, 1990), *The Giving Tree* (Silverstein, 1963), *The Great Kapok Tree* (Cherry, 1990), and *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (Step toe, 1987). As teachers often ask which stories are suitable for a particular age, it is very helpful that Ghosn makes the point that different stories can be used with different ages as they can be interpreted at many levels.

In Part 4, Ghosn provides a summary of the evidence in favour of story-based second- language instruction, bringing together the theory and evidence from the previous chapters. Finally, selecting authentic children's literature can present a real challenge, so the guidelines and list of criteria for selecting picturebooks are particularly useful for teachers as they will help ensure that the potential of a picturebook matches the needs and interests of a specific group of learners. The book ends with an extensive list of the

references including the picturebooks cited, and useful subject, author and children's book indices.

The motivational aspect of illustrations and their role in supporting children's understanding is discussed, but I would have liked to have seen a little more on how book design and illustration often give children their first impressions of the world outside and introduce other cultures. A picturebook, as a work of art, (British Council/British Library, 2002) also plays an important role in developing children's visual literacy as they respond to the illustrations which interact with the text as part of the meaning-making process. Given that the book is also aimed at pre- and in-service teachers, I would have liked to see a scheme of work around a storybook as an example in order to enable teachers to generate their own lesson planning around titles of their own choice.

That said this title makes a valuable contribution to the growing collection of books dealing with children's literature. It is evidence-based and bridges theory and practice, by focussing on shared classroom experiences. I would highly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in using children's literature as an alternative to a coursebook, and as a means of addressing universal themes which, to quote Ghosn (2002, p. 175), go beyond the "utilitarian" level of basic dialogues about mundane daily activities' so often found in ELT coursebooks.

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