

Janice Bland

Compelling Stories for English Language Learners – Creativity, Interculturality and Critical Literacy

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Story as Compelling Comprehensible Input

For anyone who has followed Stephen Krashen's writing, interviews and webinars in recent years, the use of the word 'compelling' in conjunction with extensive reading will resonate. Indeed, Krashen and Janice Bland co-authored an article for *Children's Literature in English Language Education* in 2014, whose title added the adjective to Krashen's well-known notion of comprehensible input, defining 'compelling' as the quality of a text that is 'so interesting that the acquirer is hardly aware that it is in a different language'. Krashen's deceptively simple formulation in his earlier work that we acquire language when we understand messages has morphed into an equally passionate belief in the power of reading. Research into the benefits of extensive reading for language acquisition (e.g., Day and Bamford, 1998; Nation, 2015; Waring and Takaki, 2003), has tended to confirm the intuitive assumption that we acquire language when we read, and Krashen has extended this formula to '...when we read *compelling stories*'.

Bland's new book views compelling stories not simply as an essential means of acquiring a different language, but as a far-reaching educational resource that can support the development of 'interculturality, multiple literacy, metacognition, empathy, learner autonomy, critical thinking and creative problem solving, engagement in cross-curricular topics and global issues in the language-learning classroom, as well as focusing on language' (p. 9). The 'picturebooks, graphic novels, plays, oral storytelling, narrative poems, short films, verse novels and young adult novels' (p. 1) chosen to illustrate Bland's belief in the power of compelling stories, at both elementary and secondary levels, are presented primarily with English language learning contexts in mind, though

the multimodal, interactive and creative ways in which these texts are approached support the author's hope that her book will be 'useful in first language (L1) classrooms too' (p. 1).

Story as Gateway to a Literary Apprenticeship

Bland's central concept is that a foundational goal of language education should be to provide learners with a 'literary apprenticeship', which she describes as 'a doorway to reading', leading to 'deep reading' of compelling stories and a critical engagement with characters and cultures, language and creativity, a version of literacy that provokes curiosity, empathy and imagination. At the outset, she draws a key distinction between on the one hand, the purely functional goals of ELT, inspired by applied linguists whose work informs teacher training courses and teachers preparing adult students for tertiary education or the use of language in the workplace, and on the other, the experience of the global majority of teachers working in school settings. She goes on to cite a contrast from Scott Thornbury's A-Z of ELT blog (2017) between what Thornbury calls (English) Language Arts for L1 speakers and Teaching (English) language to L2 speakers. A little unfair perhaps to castigate Thornbury as though he were endorsing the limited aspirations of the ELT industry, whereas he is simply describing the status quo. However, many of the features he lists for Language Arts (literacy development with focus on style, interpretation, appreciation, expression, creativity, and developing higher-level thinking skills and problem-solving) would sit well within Bland's literary apprenticeship.

Bland's project is also driven by a strong belief (supported by the 2021 Pisa report) in the superior value of the experience of reading print rather than digital texts, which tend to encourage more superficial processing, skimming for gist, scanning for goblets of information and so on. The other obstacle that may inhibit literary apprenticeship is the coursebook, which if it includes literary texts at all, tends to exploit them for purely language learning purposes. Using literary texts – or more likely, short extracts from literary texts – for presenting grammatical or lexical items, or for testing comprehension, reduces the text to a vehicle for language learning, what Rosenblatt (1982) calls 'efferent reading', i.e., reading for what can be taken from the text. Graded readers, according to Bland, fare little better, given the caution of ELT publishers determined to maximize sales across a global market constraining their writers to tread carefully when it comes to content (the notorious PARSNIPS) that may be deemed unacceptable in some parts of the world.

Storyworlds through a Deep Reading Framework

Bland rightly takes us back to the learner's earliest engagement with story, to the use of picturebooks in the elementary classroom, where through supportive teacher talk, children can begin to imagine characters and contexts not physically present and to develop their propensity to play with narrative possibility, responding to and creating storyworlds and entering into the experience of others. This ability to view events from different perspectives is the beginning of a literary apprenticeship that can be boosted and nurtured throughout their school lives and beyond. The realization that stories are not repositories of absolute truths or single answers suggests a pedagogy that questions the authority of single readings, encourages young readers to interrogate texts, to create their own variant texts, to dramatize texts, to participate in choices and dilemmas faced by characters, to retell or rewrite texts from different points of view and with different outcomes. These forms of variation (Kramsch, 1993) or textual intervention (Pope, 1995) are proposed by Bland within a landscape of multiple literacies, including visual literacy, media literacy, information literacy, and literary literacy. The challenge to ELT is that its methods and materials so rarely go beyond the functional literacy of referential language used for purely transactional purposes. The mission of this book is to restore agency, criticality, playfulness to the uses of literature in education, in short, to develop classroom approaches that privilege the other type of reading described by Rosenblatt (1982) as 'aesthetic'.

Drawing on critical pedagogy, Bland proposes a four-stage 'deep reading framework':

- unpuzzle and explore
- activate and investigate
- critically engage
- experiment with creative response (p. 26).

In the chapters that follow, this framework is applied to each of the formats and genres discussed and forms a unifying approach that will support teachers planning work around compelling stories.

Story for Interculturality and Diversity Competence

Bland goes on to discuss the power of compelling stories to open children and teenagers to interculturality and 'diversity competence' through engagement with a wide diversity of voices

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from other times and other places, texts that offer different stories rather than just the comforting reiteration of familiar narratives. And returning to the language learner's need to learn the language, she offers 'Fifteen Reasons to Include Children's Literature in L2 Education' (p. 60), which should be seriously considered by all syllabus designers, materials writers and training providers. 'Children's literature' here covers the entire spectrum from picturebooks to 'crossover' young adult fiction that may be enjoyed by an adult readership. In further chapters, Bland explores examples of children's literature across this spectrum and their affordances in terms of 'global education – the environment, interculturality, human rights and diversity'. Bland discusses examples of different formats and genres of children's literature, demonstrating in depth how the texts can be used. These range from picturebooks – e.g., *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai, 2017); the refugee story, *Wherever I Go* (Copp, 2019); *The Day War Came* (Davies, 2019) – to poems such as Jenifer Toksvig's 'What They Took With Them' (Blanchett, n.d.); Warsan Shire's 'Home' (Facing History and Ourselves, 2022); Brian Bilston's (2019) 'Refugees' – to graphic novels such as *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (Selznick, 2007).

But Bland is concerned as much with learners' textual production as with their reception of texts, and subsequent chapters deal with creative responses to literature in forms that imitate or replicate the text, or respond to the text in formal ways such as acrostic poems or shape poems, combining language and graphic elements, or a kind of fanfiction that embellishes or extends the original. This approach is employed with drama, for example, exemplified by *The Playground* (2006), Beverley Naidoo's play set against the release from prison of Nelson Mandela, and Jack Thorne's play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (2016), and also with creative responses to verse novels (here Bland introduces the reader to seven examples of this neglected format).

A wide-ranging chapter on 'Encountering Global Issues in the Storyworld' addresses 'issues of inclusivity, gender expression, poverty and inequality, ethnocentrism and prejudice, and environmentalism' (p. 227). A synoptic view of identity draws our attention to ways in which multiple identities may intersect and the potential of compelling stories to reflect these complexities. And the final chapter, focusing on a Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008) and the graphic novel version of Orwell's *Animal Farm* (2019), examines the appeal of speculative fiction.

Story as a Force for Change

Bland herself tells a compelling story to English language teachers: her book reminds us that what we can do – and what we can get learners to do – with storyworlds can be so much more stimulating than is generally allowed for by the tunnel vision of mainstream ELT. This is at the same time a book that explores the power of stories as a force for positive change and a book full of practical ideas for teaching and encouraging learning. It is also a book that resists dominant functional educational ideology and reminds us of the role that story can play. It seems to me that Bland's book fulfils the need expressed here by Peter Brooks (2022, p. 23), 'We need to oppose critical and analytical intelligence to narratives that seduce us into the acceptance of dominant ideologies. We need as listeners and readers to resist a passive narcosis of response.'

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