



The Journal of Asia TEFL

<http://journal.asiatefl.org/>

e-ISSN 2466-1511 © 2004 AsiaTEFL.org. All rights reserved.



Book Review

English Literacy Instruction for Chinese Speakers, by Barry Lee Reynolds and Mark Feng Teng (Eds.), Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 382 pp., 109,99 € (Hardcover), ISBN 981-1-366-527

This is a jargon-light, practical book compiling a series of current topics in English literacy education for Chinese speakers at the pre-primary, primary, secondary, and tertiary levels across four Chinese speaking regions: Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan. English literacy instruction is addressed equally in the four parts of the book organized by educational levels. Based on front-line language teachers' experiences and reflections, the foci in each part encompass English literacy education at the curriculum level and easily-applied techniques in classroom teaching.

The book starts with an introduction in Part I (Chapter 1) where English literacy is conceptualized broadly as a multifaceted and dynamic concept involving basic language skills (i.e., reading and writing), and socially situated practices affected by sociocultural milieu. This broad conceptualization supports the practical purpose of the book: helping L2 learners develop a good knowledge base for academic success and enabling them to position themselves as competent language users in societal activities. This clear-defined theme runs through the following 21 chapters of the volume.

Part II (Chapters 2-6) discusses innovative English literacy instruction for pre-primary and primary students. Young learners' literacy can be cultivated through a school-based reading program, the flexibility of which allows teachers' autonomy in course design to cater for diverse learning needs. A variety of genres, such as songs and stories are conducive to younger L2 learners' literacy acquisition. For older learners (e.g., primary 5), tailor-made materials with an equal emphasis on subject knowledge and language learning have the potential of fostering literacy skills. The empirical study in Chapter 3 reports the pivotal role of lexical knowledge in enhancing young L2 readers' literacy. This is echoed by Chapter 5 that emphasizes young learners require teachers' constant scaffolding of new vocabulary during task engagement.

Moving the focus to secondary education, Part III (Chapters 7-12) concerns fostering learners' skills for their future academic studies. These skills are the fluent command of English, reading and writing competence, and critical thinking ability. One specific example discussed in Chapter 7 is learning formulaic language, such as phrasal verbs, which enables high school students to obtain a native-like fluent use of English. However, being literate means more than just obtaining basic language skills; higher order thinking competence and intercultural awareness should also be instilled.

Part IV (Chapters 13-17) focuses on the tertiary level, where students are expected to advance their writing literacy for academic success. L2 writing literacy can be enhanced through peer support, and continuous writing assessment that values both learning outcomes and motivation. Teachers are advised to consider the error types students make in their writing when determining the type of corrective feedback to administer.

Part V (Chapters 18-21) examines government policies regarding English literacy education in the four regions. It reveals that English literacy education has been shaped and directed by government initiatives within particular historical, political, and sociocultural contexts. What one finds behind these reforms are teachers' efforts in incorporating the policies into their instruction. Meeting the literary development

expectations of governmental bodies requires the joint effort of local governments and stakeholders, and an openness to the voice of English teachers and students.

Chapter 22 (in Part VI) concludes the volume and provides implications for L2 literacy development. Some directions for future research are also indicated, such as a need for more studies into EFL/ESL literary education at pre and primary school levels, and more practitioner-centered research conducted by teachers.

This book stands out for the following two reasons. First, it targets L1-Chinese English learners who make up the largest number of non-native English learners in the world. Second, it takes a comprehensive view of English literacy development in four culturally and economically connected regions of greater China. Proceeding through the chapters, readers will notice some common challenges in L2 literacy development across these regions, such as little exposure to L2 in daily contact, inadequacy in teachers' professional training, and insufficient government policy support. The discussions in the book may contribute to the knowledge in similar contexts where the goal is improving the quality of English literacy education.

Second, this book is teacher-centered with instructors' primary research and experiences reported throughout. It is a good source for researchers to probe the perceptions and practices of these teachers on issues of literacy development. It can be observed that even when aiming for a learner-focused instruction, some authors still taught using a teacher-centered approach (see Chapter 13). The divergence between teachers' conceptual shift and contextualized practices deserves further attention.

My final critique of this book is that it concerns L2 literacy in *formal* instructed contexts; it would have been meaningful to extend the focus to *informal* learning outside the classroom, where individual differences, such as learning motivation, play a critical role (Nassaji, 2017). Some related topics also seem to have been missed as well, including, for example, applying self-regulated collaborative tasks to foster strategic language learners (Finkbeiner, Knierim, Smasal, & Ludwig, 2012), and incorporating technology-assisted personalized learning (Ma, 2017). While the editors of the volume claimed they aimed for the book to encompass more than the teaching and learning of reading and writing, the volume did not extend itself beyond reading and writing to address issues of aural and oral literacy skills. As an EFL teacher, I found many of the chapters inspiring; however, without something more concrete, such as a lesson plan for reference, it was hard at times to imagine putting to practice some of the suggestions.

In sum, the book is well-organized with a clear focus for each section. This volume gets messages about English literacy instruction across with words, not numbers, which should be an inspiration to teachers, education researchers, and other stakeholders. '

References

- Finkbeiner, C., Knierim, M., Smasal, M., & Ludwig, P. (2012). Self-regulated cooperative EFL reading tasks: Students' strategy use and teachers' support. *Language Awareness, 21*(1-2), 57-83. doi:10.1080/09658416.2011.639892
- Ma, Q. (2017). Technologies for teaching and learning L2 vocabulary. In C. A. Chapelle & S. Sauro (Eds.), *The handbook of technology and second language teaching and learning* (1st ed.). (pp. 45-61): Oxford: Wiley Blackwell. doi:10.1002/9781118914069.ch4
- Nassaji, H. (2017). Language instruction and language acquisition: A complex interplay. *Language Teaching Research, 21*(5), 543-545. doi:10.1177/1362168817727203

Tianjiao Song

School of Foreign Languages, Guandong Ocean University, China
Faculty of Education, University of Macau, Macau
Email: yb97101@umac.mo