Book Reviews

New Language, New Literacy
Jill Bell
Toronto, ON: Pippin, 2013, 176 pages

Jill Bell's most recent text, *New Language, New Literacy*, addresses many of the key issues that concern English as a second language (ESL) instructors who are (a) assigned a literacy class to teach for the first time, or (b) faced with literacy learners in their classes when they have not had any previous experience or education in teaching ESL literacy. As Bell, explains, literacy learners present unique challenges for instructors because these students are unable to rely on the typical skills that most ESL learners have already developed and use on a daily basis to accomplish a variety of common literary tasks. The majority of students who tend to be classified as ESL literacy learners are not able to access and use printed texts, so they are unable to look up words in bilingual dictionaries or read and/or take notes in their first or an additional language to aid in their acquisition of English. Throughout this book, Bell provides instructors with practical advice for overcoming the challenges associated with teaching ESL literacy learners, as well as a wealth of excellent ideas for creating effective lessons and literacy programs designed to meet the diverse needs of learners with limited literacy skills.

New Language, New Literacy comprises an introduction; 11 clear, concise chapters ranging from 7 to 26 pages in length; and two appendices outlining a variety of activities and resources. The 11 chapters are organized in three sections: *Understanding Literacy and Literacy Learners* (Chapters 1–3), *Deciding What and How to Teach* (Chapters 4–8), and *Developing a Successful Coherent Program* (Chapters 9–11).

In Section 1, Chapter 1, Bell emphasizes the importance of conducting an initial assessment of literacy learners' background knowledge, skills, and experiences to develop learner profiles that can be used by instructors to guide programming, planning, and instruction. To assist the reader in understanding typical patterns of literacy learners' skills and needs, Bell presents five profiles of literacy learners from different linguistic/cultural backgrounds with varying degrees of education and literacy in their L1 and English, and discusses how these individual differences affect the ease and speed of literacy learning in English. This discussion is followed by a description of several excellent strategies for assessing learners' L1 and English literacy skills along with their current language learning needs. One minor error to note in this chapter occurs on page 19 where the author states that each Chinese "character represents a complete word or concept," which is not entirely

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true. Chinese uses an orthography that encodes language at the level of morphemes, which in general correspond to words and affixes (Chen, 1992).

Bell's purpose in Chapter 2 is to briefly summarize key theories of reading and writing to allow readers "to make informed decisions" (p. 10) about literacy practices; however, for a number of reasons, this chapter is not one of the more effective ones in the text. The author frequently refers to research and makes statements such as "current research into reading indicates that literacy teachers should encourage learners to read for the meaning of the text, rather than allow learners to devote their energy to perfect word-by-word decoding" (p. 33) but fails to cite any sources, so readers are unable to consult the actual research and theorists' work that the author refers to in this chapter and throughout the rest of the text. The lack of reference to major theories and primary sources of research does not foster practitioners' abilities to make overt connections between the research and theories that underlie educational practice. A second drawback is that the reading frameworks described primarily reflect Goodman's (1967, 1988) view of reading as a psycholinguistic guessing game and other dated top-down L1 reading frameworks that downplay lower-level reading processes (Nassaji, 2014). For example, Bell states that fluent readers read "just enough to confirm or negate their predictions" (p. 31); however, more recent research (e.g., Perfetti & Hart, 2001; Stanovich, 2000) indicates that "good readers do not typically guess what words will appear next in a text and good readers make less use of context for word recognition than poor readers" (Grabe, 2009, p. 103). Rapid, accurate word recognition, not guessing what words will appear next, is a critical feature of skilled reading that significantly contributes to successful reading comprehension (Perfetti & Hart, 2001; Stanovich, 2000). Although the last section of Chapter 2, *Understanding Writing*, also lacks citations to relevant theories and primary sources of research on second language writing, Bell provides informative descriptions of different aspects of the writing process that may present particular difficulties for adult ESL literacy learners, and then offers helpful teaching strategies for addressing these problems.

In Chapter 3, Bell focuses on similarities and differences between teaching English to young learners and to adults. She suggests that teachers of both groups need many of the same skills and strategies to create and manage successful learner-centred cooperative learning environments. Then she highlights six key differences between adult and child learners (life experience, involvement in learning, physical size, the nature of the teacher-student contract, motivation, and learning expectations) and discusses the implications of each of these for adult ESL instruction.

The most practical section of the text (Section Two: Chapters 4–8) is written to assist instructors in identifying what content to teach and determining the best ways in which to teach it. In Chapter 4, Bell emphasizes the importance of developing oral language to support literacy learning through the study of authentic environmental print materials such as street signs,

schedules, food labels, forms, and so on that adults need to read, understand, and complete in their daily lives. In Chapter 5, Bell illustrates how to use several practical classroom activities to develop learners' prereading and writing skills, including ways to teach shape discrimination, the alphabet, and numerals. Key issues affecting the development of learners' reading skills are discussed in Chapter 6. Bell presents step-by-step instructions for teaching reading, using meaning-focused approaches including (a) the Language Experience Approach (Ashton-Warner, 1963), which involves using the learners' oral language and experiences as the basis for beginning reading instruction; and (b) Total Physical Response (Asher, 1965), which consists of language learning through actions. Bell also outlines general procedures for teaching learners to read environmental texts, follow written instructions, decode, and read critically. In Chapter 7, Bell describes numerous valuable ideas for teaching letter formation, vocabulary, sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation, which build on previous oral work and reading activities such as the Language Experience Approach. The chapter ends with a discussion of ways to increase learners' awareness of the purpose of writing and the use of technology to develop a sense of audience. The goal of the last chapter in this section (Chapter 8) is to provide ideas for differentiating instruction to meet the needs of diverse groups of learners, such as seniors, disaffected young learners, and those with learning disabilities and other special needs.

In the final section of the book (Chapters 9–11), Bell covers program planning, assessment, and lesson planning. In Chapter 9, questions about learners' needs, strengths, and learning styles are provided to guide the development and specification of program objectives. Chapter 10 is an accessible introduction to methods of assessment, beginning with some key background issues in literacy assessment, including the limitations of standardized testing, and ending with ideas for documenting student achievement and using benchmarks to track and report learner progress. In the final chapter of the text, Bell applies many of the ideas presented throughout to four sample literacy lesson plans appropriate for four different teaching contexts.

In addition to the 11 succinct chapters, Bell includes two appendices. Appendix A contains a broad array of practical activities, many of which would be simple to create and easy to adapt for a variety of teaching contexts. Appendix B comprises lists of useful print, video, and online resources, featuring literacy references and resources for instructors and sources for additional activities for improving ESL learners' literacy skills. The annotated lists in Appendix B, which unfortunately are included for only the video and online resources, would be particularly helpful for instructors new to TESL, as the explanatory notes provide supplementary information on the suggested resources and ideas for their use in the classroom.

The text has two additional weaknesses. The first limitation is the lack of an index, which would be helpful for instructors who may not have had the chance to read the book cover-to-cover but wish to consult it for information

on a specific topic; a content index would be a welcome addition that would facilitate the efficient location of important literacy theories, concepts, issues, teaching strategies, or activities. A second minor problem is that the author's references to materials and resources contained in the appendices are at times difficult to follow. For example, on page 121, Bell indicates that "there are a number of websites that discuss this issue in more detail (see Appendix B: Useful Resources)," but fails to indicate the websites to which she refers. It would be particularly helpful for the reader if the subsections of the appendices, titles of the resources, and perhaps even the page numbers on which the information is located were specified.

Overall, *New Language, New Literacy* is an invaluable guide for instructors facing the challenges of teaching ESL literacy learners. The comprehensive advice offered throughout will assist instructors in making informed decisions about literacy practices and programming for their students. Despite the overemphasis on outdated, predictive top-down reading frameworks and the lack of citations, this book would nevertheless be an excellent text for an undergraduate TESL literacy course or a supplementary text in a graduate-level TESL literacy class, as it is generally a well-written, succinct, reader-friendly guide to ESL literacy teaching practice.

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Marilyn Abbott

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The Reviewer

Marilyn Abbott is Associate Professor in the TESL Program in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta.

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