1995

Children's Books in the Foreign Language Classroom: Acquiring Natural Language in Familiar Contexts

Aleidine Kramer Moeller
University of Nebraska–Lincoln, amoeller2@unl.edu

Richard J. Meyer
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

3

Children's Books in the Foreign Language Classroom:

Acquiring Natural Language in Familiar Contexts

Aleidine J. Moeller
University of Nebraska—Lincoln

Richard J. Meyer
University of Nebraska—Lincoln

> You may have tangible wealth untold;
> Caskets of jewels and coffers of gold.
> Richer than I you can never be—
> I had a mother who read to me.
>
> Anonymous

Teaching literature is teaching language. When teachers are engaged with their students in a piece of literature, a language-rich experience is assured. While much research has promoted the use of authentic texts and literature in the second language classroom (Birckbichler and Muyskens 1980; Bredella 1985; Kast 1984; Moeller 1992), this practice is often problematic for the *beginning*-level second language curriculum. Authentic texts such as short stories, poems, and novels often exceed the comprehensible input of students, resulting in frustration. This article suggests the inclusion and integration of young children's books in the beginning-level foreign language classroom (at all levels—middle school, high school, and college) as a vehicle for second language acquisition.

Arguments for the use of young children's books in language, teaching, and learning are numerous (Power-Miller and Hubbard 1991; Butler and Turbill 1987; Harwayne 1992). Children's literature makes use of natural

language in familiar contexts. The familiar contexts of the stories allow the readers to make connections between the new information that the text provides and their own background knowledge. The information in the text includes more than just vocabulary—it involves syntax, flow of language, intonation, pronunciation, and genre. A children's story is typically short and can be read in one sitting. The affective domain is involved in the reading of a story, in that the student associates the reading of a story with recollections of the past. The experience of being read to as a child and the memory of stories told by family and friends set the stage for the positive involvement of the reader. These memories lower the affective filter as described by Krashen (1982) and allow for meaningful learning to occur. When anxiety is lowered, a sense of community can be established through the shared experience of reading and listening that optimizes the climate for learning.

The illustrations that are an integral part of children's books help the reader comprehend meaning without requiring skills in reading the language. The illustrations exist in a relationship with the text and support its meaning. Culturally authentic illustrations reveal the target culture without resorting to written description. Culture is thus experienced visually and further supported through the text. This mutually complementary process allows culture to be learned intuitively, much like oral language is learned in L_1.

Experiencing young children's literature can be both safe and predictable, two important conditions for optimizing learning. The climate is set by the nature of the text and the illustrations. The interactive experience will be short, enjoyable, and nonthreatening in nature.

Language

We know that there are conditions that make it possible for children to learn language. Cambourne (1984) summarizes them as:

- The learner is immersed in the language.
- The learner has ongoing demonstrations of language.
- There is the expectation that language will be learned.
- The learner is given responsibility to learn.
- Approximations are acceptable.
- The opportunity to use language is present often.
- There is ongoing response to language use (pp. 6-11).

The teacher who uses a children's book in the language learner's L_2 can provide all of these conditions. The teacher's oral reading of the text provides language immersion and language demonstration and signals to the students the expectation that the language will be learned. Discussion in L_2 before, during, and after the reading allows for use and response.

Krashen's (1982) theoretical model of second language acquisition distinguishes between language acquisition and language learning. Language acquisition is a subconscious process that is similar to the way children develop skills in their first language. Language learning refers to conscious knowledge of the rules of grammar of a second language and their application in production. According to Krashen, acquisition is the sole initiator of all second-language utterances and is responsible for fluency, while learning can function only as an "editor" for the output. Krashen maintains that acquisition of grammatical structures proceeds in a predictable order when that acquisition is natural. He suggests that there are certain implications for classroom practice if language instruction is to be consistent with this theory. These include:

- The main function of the classroom is to provide comprehensible input in an environment conducive to a low affective filter.
- The classroom is most useful for beginners who cannot easily utilize the informal environment for input.
- The requirements for optimal input are that it be (a) comprehensible, (b) interesting and relevant, (c) not grammatically sequenced, (d) provided in sufficient quantity to be aimed a bit above the comprehension level of learners ($i + 1$), (e) delivered in an environment where students are "off the defensive" (p. 127).
- Error correction should be minimal.
- Students should not be required to produce speech in the second language unless they are ready to do so. Speaking fluency cannot be taught, but "emerges" naturally in time with enough comprehensible input.

The theoretical models of both Cambourne (1984) and Krashen (1982) regarding language acquisition support the notion that language learners who are immersed in active demonstrations and experiences in the language come to conventional language use via inventions. The nature of these inventions might be expressed through original spellings, approximations of pronunciations, and use of temporary syntax and semantics. From the inventions that students express in oral and written language, the teacher who understands that language is an emerging, developmental process will learn where the students are as well as what to teach them. Students' relationships with the authentic texts that literature provides support the students in their second language development.

A teacher who involves learners with the authentic text of a children's story has the opportunity to provide all of Cambourne's and Krashen's conditions. Learners will be immersed in the language of the text. They will see, hear, and feel the teacher's demonstration of language, and they will be expected to participate in discussion or perhaps read along. The students will assume the responsibility inherent in being in a discussion and will feel safe if their approximations are being accepted. This means

approximations of pronunciation as well as tentativeness of understanding. Of course, the daily use of such activities will provide the frequency and response needed for language acquisition.

We know that "language is learned from whole to part" and that "meaning is the intrinsic motivation for language learning" (Goodman and Meyer 1992: 7). This means that language is not simply a "collection of words"; it is not learned by the accumulation of individual words and explicitly taught as grammatical constructions. Language is learned because the learner is invested in making meaning. Indeed, meaning often precedes the 'calling' or pronunciation of individual words.

We also know that language is learned in personal and social contexts (Goodman 1986). The teacher has the responsibility to develop an environment in which all members of the class feel accepted and like an integral part of the community of learners. The teacher has to make the class like a club worth belonging to, as Smith (1988) has shown in his description of the literacy club, in which all the elements of literacy—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—play a part. This is where the importance of teaching and literature intersect with knowledge about language. Using teaching strategies with carefully selected children's literature makes membership in the literary club inviting and attainable.

Teaching

There are many strategies that teachers can use to make reading in a second language more motivating. Smith (1983: 23) suggests that "the only way to make learning to read easy is to make reading easy." He means that much of what we want children to learn about reading they can learn by being involved in reading. Krashen's (1982) notion of comprehensible input ($i +$ 1) is quite consistent with the idea of making reading easy.

Students "learn language, they learn through language, and they learn about language" (Halliday 1988: 36) all at the same time. Language learners intuit many of the rules of language. We do not need to teach the rules explicitly; rather, we immerse language learners in constant, quality demonstrations of language. Goodman (1986: 11) explains: "Language and concepts grow and develop depending on the settings in which they occur, the experiences that children have in those settings, and the interaction of the people in those settings."

Using children's literature to teach language is, therefore, rooted in relationships—between the reader and the text, the reader and other readers, the reader and past experiences with reading and with the teacher, etc. The sensitive second language teacher pays attention to the powerful nature of relationships in the classroom and works to cultivate a tenor of relationships that supports risk-taking with the learning community. Teaching is actively observing the language learners and making decisions that support them in their growth.

Literature

Some of the teaching of literature in whole language classrooms in the United States rests in the work of Rosenblatt (1978) who explains that when a reader meets a text, together they engage in a unique relationship that she calls a transaction. During this transaction, a reader: ". . . selects out and seeks to organize according to already acquired habits, assumptions, and expectations [and that] becomes the environment [in] which [the reader] also responds" (p. 17).

Reading is a personal experience in a social context—exactly like language acquisition. Rosenblatt (1978) defines two facets of reading—efferent and aesthetic:

In efferent reading, then, we focus attention mainly on the public 'tip of the iceberg' of sense: the meaning results from an abstracting-out and analytic structuring of the ideas, information, directions, conclusions to be retained, used, or acted on after the reading event.

The predominantly aesthetic stance covers the other half of the continuum. In this kind of reading, the reader adopts an attitude of readiness to focus attention on what is being lived through *during* the reading event (p. 5) [emphasis added].

Reading a text is a unique experience for each reader. Through conversations with the teacher and each other (Peterson and Eeds 1990), readers arrive at a mutual understanding or common ground where they can discuss what they lived through during reading. This happens with young and old, new and seasoned readers. Indeed, we should not limit students solely to reading. Literature-based classrooms encourage active use of expressive language (oral and written) as well as receptive language (reading and listening).

Atwell's (1987) reading-writing classroom is one example of context in which children explore their literacy and grow individually and as a community of readers and writers. The classroom is a rich demonstration of readers and writers actively engaging in transactions with texts as they read and write texts of their own. Atwell describes her middle school students making choices of what to read, writing responses, and engaging in discussions about texts. She presents more than seventy genres of written language that her students have chosen to write (pp. 269-70). They read broadly across genres, too. Such activity need not be limited to a student's L_1. We can cultivate genuine reading experiences in L_2 by providing a wide selection of literature that is developmentally appropriate to our students' cognitive level of understanding.

Harste and Short (with Burke 1988) describe an authoring cycle in which students from the very beginning of school are actively constructing texts in the safety of an environment where approximations are seen as opportunities to learn and grow. These are classrooms in which a child's emerging

concept of story is supported and nurtured (Applebee 1978). Learners are encouraged to "have a go" with their spelling, reading, writing, and responses to literature. Other researchers (Harwayne 1992; Calkins 1994) have described active classrooms in which learners of all ages engage in literature to learn language, learn through language, and learn about language (Halliday 1988). They are classrooms in which teaching literature is teaching language.

We are suggesting the works mentioned in the paragraph above are applicable to our students' experiences in the L_2 classroom. Students need the opportunity to write, discuss, edit, share, and publish their own writing. Their writings contribute to the wealth of written text that we use to teach and learn language. The writing and reading will be mutually supportive of their growth in their second language. It becomes our responsibility to give students the time they need to engage in authentic reading and writing experiences. Our use of outstanding young children's literature will provide a strong foundation that supports them in the reading, writing, speaking, and listening of their second language.

A Concrete Example

Eric Carle is an internationally popular author of numerous children's books. He was born in the United States but raised in Germany, receiving his education as a graphic illustrator at the Academy of Formative Arts (Akademie der bildenden Künste) in Stuttgart. One of the most popular books that can serve as a model for the integration of children's books into the foreign language classroom is his *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. This is a well-loved children's book in many nations that is readily available in several languages. A cassette that tells the story in the voices and language of native children from the culture may be available with the text.

The most enjoyable part of reading a children's book like Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* is for the teacher to read dramatically while students look at the illustrations and listen to the words. The story is simultaneously interpreted by the reader, the artist, and the listener. It is especially effective to read a big, oversize book while students are gathered around the teacher/reader in a circle of chairs, or on the floor, removed from the environment of the desk.

A second reading of the text might have the students listen with purposeful intent for specific content such as: Who is the main character? What did you learn about this character? Is this character positive or negative? What did you learn about the content of the story through the pictures? The use of overhead transparencies based on the text allows the students to focus on the words. The intent of these preliminary activities is to provide second language learners with a holistic understanding of the content of the story while motivating them to want to hear and learn more about the story.

A more hands-on activity for the intermediate-level foreign language classroom begins with the distribution of key pictures (using cut-up and laminated pages) from Carle's book. As the cassette tape narrates the story, the students line up when the picture they are holding matches the narration on the tape. Other students receive a sheet with a word written in the target language. Once the pictures have been organized chronologically according to the story on the tape, the students holding the words find the pictures that match their words. In pairs (picture and word), the students retell the story in the appropriate order. The remaining students become language advisors who assist students in articulating their sentences in retelling the story. All students are involved in the activity of retelling the story, an effective strategy that promotes an atmosphere of community among the learners and supports comprehension. All are involved in meeting the language objective, namely to retell a story using pictures and words as cues.

An extension of this activity in smaller groups might involve pictures from the text that have to be matched with the text itself. This holistic comprehension activity further exposes the learner to language in the context of the story. A more personalized approach to a similar task could involve groups of three students who are presented with a graphic organizer resembling a tic-tac-toe chart on an overhead transparency. Students then receive the following instructions: (1) After reading the story, complete the following chart by writing the sequence of events in chronological order, focusing only on the main ideas—what happened first, second, and so forth. Do this in the target language. (2) One of you should serve as recorder, one as leader, and one as presenter. You will then present the results to the class.

Half the groups will receive the same instructions except that they will be asked *to illustrate* the main events of the story rather than use German, French, or Spanish words. Groups who were asked to illustrate the story in graph form will then join the group who retold the story in words. They compare results and then present their illustrated and narrated graphs to the entire class. By matching words with pictures, re-examining the content of the story, and retelling the story through a graphic organizer, vocabulary learning is reinforced, as are reading and speaking skills in the target language.

Webbing

An effective way to give students a voice in decision making regarding the content that will be discussed in regard to this story is to conduct a webbing activity at the onset of the unit. Webbing serves as one technique to activate prior knowledge on the part of the students, allowing the teacher to evaluate

what the students already know; it can also serve as an organizer for the instructional plan of the teacher. Thematic webbing allows for the incorporation of "subject content in its interdisciplinary dimensions so that students can see the relationship of the theme or book to many areas of the curriculum (Curtain and Pesola, 1988: 105)." A book can serve as a focus to develop a web of oral and written language activities. All subject content areas can be integrated into the second language learning process. This technique is particularly appropriate for middle school and high school students, in that a connection is made between children's literature and the curriculum for their appropriate age and cognitive levels. Using the second language as a tool to reinforce the content of other subject areas makes the learning more meaningful for these learners. A thematic web based on The *Very Hungry Caterpillar* might look like this:
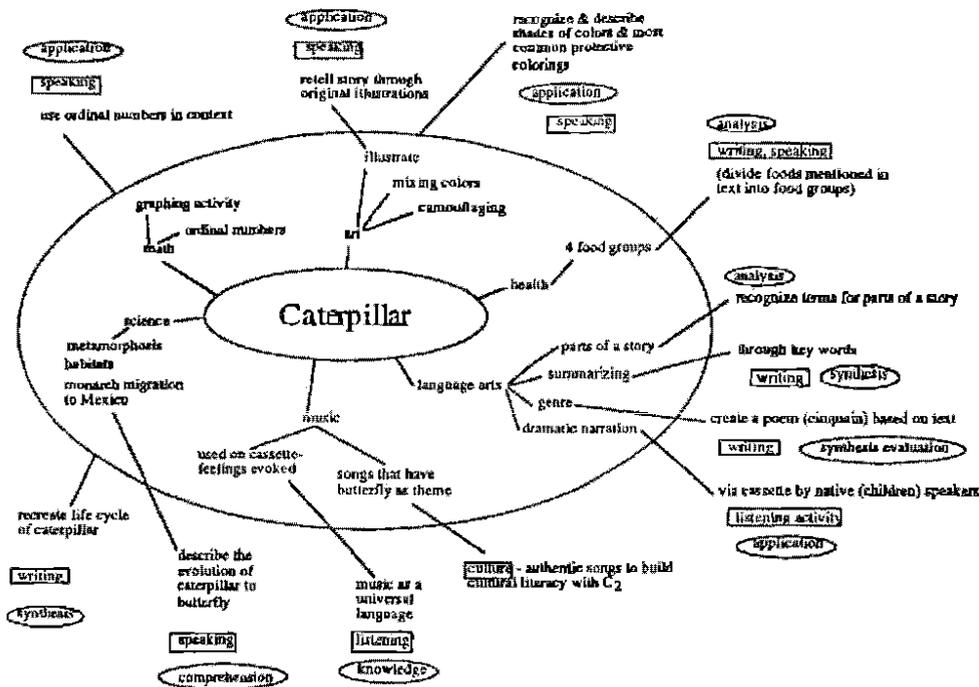
The inner circle of webbing provides the interdisciplinary connections, followed by the desired language functions and structures, as well as practice in all skills and taxonomy levels. The web is constructed with the input of students in order to personalize the instruction and, as mentioned, to activate prior knowledge. The teacher, in conjunction with the students, can choose as the basis for classroom activities those topics or connections that best meet the language goals of the students. It is helpful to note the skill that is being practiced (reading, writing, speaking, listening) in planning instruction in order to address all learning styles (hands-on activities, visuals, reflective activities) and to integrate culture effectively. Another important step is to identify the level of Bloom's (1956) taxonomy to ensure that the activities challenge students by involving them in analysis, synthesis, application, and evaluation processes, not merely knowledge and comprehension tasks.

The teacher uses this web as a framework from which to plan second language objectives and to ensure that the contents of other subject areas are integrated in a meaningful way. The following creative writing strategy serves as a model. Have the students create a cinquain poem that is representative of the metamorphosis of the caterpillar.

Raupe	Caterpillar	noun
klein, hungrig	small, hungry	two adjectives
suchte, frass, baute	sought, ate, built	three conjugated verbs
gross, dick	big, fat	phrase or two additional adjectives
Schmetterling	butterfly	synonym

The following writing assignment allows students to interpret the text individually and analyze the story to determine the most important phases of the caterpillar's life as depicted in the story. Writing such a poem accomplishes numerous learning objectives: summarizing the story in a new genre; involving students in higher-level thinking skills (synthesis, application, analysis, evaluation); and reinforcing the form of the cinquain in the context of second language skill development.

Semantic webbing, or contextual clusters, allows learners to make vital connections between vocabulary words that facilitate long-term retention. In this activity pairs of students are given the task of finding all the words associated with "caterpillar" in the text. Terms such as food, cocoon, leaf, ate, butterfly, and egg are identified, receive a context, and thereby become

more meaningful to learners. A follow-up activity in which these words are placed on a continuum tracing the development of the caterpillar reinforces language acquisition.

Another motivating strategy to expand vocabulary skills consists of placing a series of words from the children's text onto a transparency in no particular order. The students must then place these words in appropriate rubrics, or categories. These categories (e.g., desserts, days of the week, entrees, caterpillar) can be provided by the teacher; or to add more of a challenge, students create the categories themselves and place the appropriate vocabulary underneath. The more freedom the learner is allowed, the more creative the results. One of the categories one student created was words that end in -chen. This allows for a teachable moment in grammar as the teacher explains diminutive endings in German.

Building Language Proficiency and Accuracy

Student second language learning is maximized in an interactive, low-anxiety atmosphere that emphasizes cooperation and language development. Children's books also allow for a series of activities that build language proficiency in all skill areas. An excellent way to review word order is to place five sentences that summarize the story of the caterpillar in an envelope. Each sentence is written in a different color and is cut up into pieces (verb, subject, object, etc.) and placed into an envelope. The students, in groups of three, spread out the words on their desks by color, then formulate sentences, and finally place them in chronological order. They record these five sentences and are then given another envelope containing five more sentences. The result is a complete retelling of the story in written form, with the emphasis on reading skills. All students are engaged in completing the task: one places the words into the appropriate place, while one thinks and advises, and a third records the sentences on a piece of paper.

To optimize interactive information exchange while practicing the past tense, the following pair-work activity is communicative and useful. Partners A and B each have a list of sentences. An asterisk next to Partner A's number one sentence indicates the sentence is in the present tense, and Partner A must read this sentence in the past tense to Partner B. B's paper has the past tense of that sentence so that the student may listen for correctness of form. If A reads the sentence correctly, B records a check mark, if incorrectly, a minus. It is then B's turn to convert sentence number two into the past tense and read the sentence to A. Once the ten sentences have been completed, B and A re-do those they missed during the first round. This process is repeated until all sentences are correct.

Partner A	Partner B
*Das Ei liegt auf dem Blatt (The egg is lying on the leaf)	Das Ei lag auf dem Blatt (The egg was lying on the leaf)
Die Raupe frass durch den Apfel (The caterpillar ate through the apple)	*Die Raupe frisst durch den Apfel (The caterpillar eats through the apple)

In pair-work activity, the affective filter is low and students can practice grammar in the context of a familiar story while concentrating on a grammar skill. Incidental learning is optimized through exposure to additional vocabulary. Another variation on practicing tenses through children's books is to have students rewrite paragraphs or parts of the story in the present or past tense.

Conclusion

There are many ways to build second language proficiency through the integration of children's literature into the foreign language classroom. The familiar contexts of the stories, the relative short length of the story, the multiple levels of interpretation of the story, and the supporting illustrations that aid understanding, provide a strong rationale to integrate children's books into the foreign language curriculum. Children's literature is powerfully entertaining and interesting. It provides a text that students can enjoy at many levels, and their increased interest will support language learning. Carefully selected children's literature has many possible levels of interpretation, offering teachers and students a broad range of possibilities for conversations that support the development of vocabulary, syntax, and understanding a of second language. The basically universal human need for story in combination with the added meaning offered by illustrations provide a context for learning that is less threatening than many other instructional strategies. As students' desire to make sense of the story increases, their willingness to take risks as second language learners will increase, too. For some of the students, the experience of living (or re-living) favorite stories will resonate with a time in their lives when they sat with their parents and listened to books being read. Children's literature has the power to change the classroom environment to one that is more authentic as learners are immersed in language activity that is real, rich, and stimulating.

Note

* *Die kleine Raupe Nimmersatt,* Gerstenberg Verlag, ISBN 3-8067-4081-x; *La Oruga muy Hambrienta,* Scholastic Inc., ISBN 0-590-43105-6, accompanied by tape; *La Chenille Affamée,* Philomel Press, ISBN 0-399-21870-X.

References

Applebee, Arthur N. 1978. *The Child's Concept of Story: Ages Two to Seventeen.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Atwell, Nancie 1987. *In the Middle: Writing. Reading. and Learning with Adolescents.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Birckbichler, Diane, and Judith A. Muyskens. 1980. "A Personalized Approach to the Teaching of Literature at the Elementary and Intermediate Levels of Instruction." *Foreign Language Annals* 13,1: 23-27.

Bloom, Benjamin, et al. 1956. *Taxonomy of Education Objectives. Handbook I: Cognitive Domain.* New York: Longmans Green.

Bredella, Lothar. 1985. "Literarische Texte in Fremdsprachenunterricht: Gründe and Methoden," pp. 352-93 in Manfred Heid, ed., *Literarische Texte im Kommunikativen Fremdsprachenunterricht.* Munich, Ger.: Goethe Institute.

Butler, Andrea and Jan Turbill, eds. 1987. *Towards a Reading-Writing Classroom.* Rozelle, Australia: Primary English Teachers Association.

Calkins, Lucy. 1994. *The Art of Teaching Writing.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Cambourne, Brian. 1984. "Language, Learning, and Literacy," pp. 5-10 in Andrea Butler and Jan Turbid, eds., *Towards a Reading-Writing Classroom.* Rozelle, Australia: Primary English Teachers Association.

Curtain, Helena Anderson, and Carol Ann Pesola. 1988. *Languages and Children—Making the Match.* New York: Addison-Wesley.

Goodman, Kenneth, and Richard Meyer. 1992. "Whole Language: Principles for Principals." *School Administrators Association of New York State* 22,3: 7-11.

Goodman, Yetta. 1985. "Kidwatching: Observing Children in the Classroom," pp. 9-18 in A. Jaggar and M. T. Smith-Burke, eds., *Observing the Language Learner.* Newark, DE and Urbana, IL: NCTE, IRA: .

Halliday, Michael A. K. 1988. "'There's Still a Long Way to Go . . .' An Interview With Emeritus Professor Michael Halliday." *Journal of the Australian Advisory Council on Languages and Multicultural Education,* vol. 1: 35-39.

Harste, Jerome, and Kathy Short, with Carolyn Burke. 1988. *Creating Classrooms for Authors: The Reading-Writing Connection.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Harwayne, Shelley. 1992. *Lasting Impressions: Weaving Literature into the Writing Workshop.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Kast, Bernd. 1984. *Literatur im Unterricht: Methodisch-didaktische Vorschläge für den Lehrer.* Munich, Ger.: Goethe Institute.

Krashen, Stephen. 1982. *Principles and Practices in Second Language Acquisition.* New York: Pergamon.

Moeller, Aleidine J. 1992. "Literature: A Rich Resource for Teaching Language and Culture in Context," pp. 32-49 in William N. Hatfield, ed., *Creative Approaches in Foreign Language Teaching.* Report of the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook.

Peterson, Ralph, and Mary Ann Eeds. 1990. *Grand Conversations: Literature Groups in Action.* New York: Scholastic.

Power-Miller, Brenda, and Ruth Hubbard. 1991. *The Heinemann Reader: Literacy in Process.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Rosenblatt, Louise. 1978. *The Reader, the Text, and the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work.* Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

———. 1988. *Writing and Reading: The Transactional Theory.* Technical Report No. 13. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Writing.

Smith, Frank. 1983. "Twelve Easy Ways to Make Learning to Read Difficult and One Difficult Way to Make it Easy," pp. 35-47 in F. Smith, ed., *Essays into Literacy.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

———. 1988. *Joining the Literacy Club: Further Essays into Education.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.