Language Arts in Asia: 
Literature and Drama in English, 
Putonghua and Cantonese

Edited by

C. A. DeCoursey
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The editor is grateful to all those who have assisted in producing this first volume exploring Language Arts in Asian contexts. This work involves a constellation of skills, efforts and minds. I am grateful to my friends and colleagues in the Department of English at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University for their experience and assistance in this process. I would especially like to thank Professor Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen, Head of the Department of English, for his goodwill and support, and for making resources available in the organization of the 1st Conference on Applying (Putonghua/English) Language Arts. This conference has provided a springboard for inquiry into this relatively young field in Hong Kong and Asia, and will continue to do so in the years to come.

I would also like to thank Ms. Eliza Li and Ms. Catherine Law for their administrative assistance with planning, monitoring and logistics.

It is my pleasure to thank the Organising Committee, who helped plan the conference, read papers, provide feedback facilitative in the planning, and editing processes. I am grateful to Professor Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen, Dr. Francisco Veloso, Dr. Marvin Lam, Dr. Gail Forey, Dr. Li Lan, Dr. Christopher Green, and Dr. Jozsef Szakos.

The work of assembling, editing, collating, and tracing changes across pages and versions, is onerous and requires a mind both detail-oriented and theoretically capable. I could not be more fortunate than to have as my assistant in this task Ms. Carman Ng.

It has been a pleasure to work with colleagues from different backgrounds in this project. I look forward to the 2nd APELA Conference and other Language Arts initiatives, and to working with an increasing circle of those interested in the Language Arts in Hong Kong and beyond.

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PART I:

LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE ARTS
INTRODUCTION TO PART I

C. A. DE COURSEY

This volume offers papers addressing the theory and practice of teaching Language Arts, as a means of teaching English language and beyond, in teaching other language-related abilities, in various Asian contexts. The papers deal with the use of three subject content areas in Language Arts as a means of teaching English, namely literature, drama and popular culture. Part I offers papers on the use of literature in Language Arts teaching (Chapters 1 through 9). Part II includes papers on the use of drama and pop culture in Language Arts teaching (Chapters 10 through 17). All three areas are important in the new Language Arts curriculum in Hong Kong. All three are in widespread use in first- and second-language English teaching, and gaining ground in English language curricula across Asia. Therefore papers in this volume explore academic approaches to understanding as well as employing these content areas in language teaching. They are the product of the first conference on Applying Putonghua and English Language Arts (APELA). This was held June 4-5, 2011 at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, home to the MA in English Language Arts, currently Hong Kong’s only postgraduate programme teaching the use of language arts subject knowledge areas in English-as-a-second-language (ESL) situations, and in English language teaching (ELT).

Language Arts often requires some introduction. Although many educators have experience using these subject content areas in the classroom, they are less familiar with the research basis, learning objectives and policy and professional motives for their use (Carless 1997). This introduction will identify important elements of the academic work which underwrites recent classroom practice and curricular developments, though given the breadth of current initiatives, it can do no more than indicate trends. Language Arts is well established in the US and Canada and in western-influenced school curricula beyond North America, but its inclusion within ELT curricula is relatively new in Asian contexts (Jeon and Hahn 2006). The merits of Language Arts have been appreciated by Hong Kong policymakers and educators for decades. In 1983, the Education Bureau (EDB) described Language Arts as a “broad and liberal
Introduction to Part I

study”, advocating its classroom use for aesthetic pleasure and noting the power of the creative use of English, a second language in Hong Kong, in the lives of ordinary students (CDC 1983). In terms of its classroom practice, the EDB set this creative power cooperatively alongside the “more utilitarian elements of the language curriculum” (CDC 1983, 85). As the place of Language Arts has grown in importance in the Hong Kong context, it has been seen not merely as an attractive aid to teaching, but as connecting to fundamental grounds of communication, including authentic language use, self-understanding and expression (CDC 1999, 2002).

At the same time, the inclusion of the Language Arts within the ELT curricula has come as a challenge to many Hong Kong teachers (Adamson et al 2000). Prior to the introduction of the New Senior Secondary (NSS) curriculum, English teaching had focused largely on accuracy in grammar usage, requiring the concomitant understanding of a considerable body of metalanguage to describe grammatical items. Students had to learn vocabulary such as “modals”, “passive construction”, “reported speech” and “quantifiers” and apply this to English language vocabulary, which often diminished their enjoyment and confidence. They tended to learn English as a textbook subject, with isolated language structures as entities to be parsed and practiced through artificially constructed, repetitive exercises, but not something living and creative, to be used in enjoying themselves, interacting with others, and exploring the challenges and opportunities of contemporary life. At the same time, formerly, teachers’ classroom practices were framed to ensure students could gain high marks on exams which had the same rather mechanical emphases as the textbooks. As a system, this might reflect some aspects of Confucian learning styles, but it also inhibited active teaching and learning (Carless 1999, Education Manpower Bureau 2005). Teacher talk tended to dominate English classrooms (Tsui 1996). Overall, this kind of ESL teaching privileged “the formal features of the language at the expense of encouraging students to use the language” (Education Commission, 1994, 25).

The EDB began revising its English teaching curriculum in the 1990s (CDC 2001). The new curriculum, which incorporates Language Arts, was implemented in schools between 2005 and 2009 (CDC 2007). The learning objectives for the new curriculum, consonant with long-established Language Arts philosophy, combine language learning with whole person development, self-expression, and participatory learning styles, all of which are taught as integral with language skills (EDB 2005). New classroom learning objectives were articulated, along with new practices meant to enable students to gain and extend knowledge of
themselves, learn about other cultures, and experience English in ways that lead to personal growth and development (Wong 2009). Within this new vision, teachers were encouraged to take a “learn by doing” approach, and manage classroom activities so that the new learning objectives could be accomplished while students were actively using English (Wong 2009). Thus, new teaching materials were needed, structured so that students could gain pleasure from learning and using English, and further, gain an increased ability to work in the English language, in ways that facilitated them both using and producing English texts (EBD 2007). These changes are fundamental, and not easy to implement. The new Language Arts vision of ELT has meant involving students in interpersonal communications, and has recast the teacher’s role as assisting learners to apply subject knowledge across a variety of situations, real and imagined (CDC and HKEAA, 2007: 11). Yet teachers are also expected to achieve teaching the ESL grammar syllabus.

Reframing the teaching and learning culture of Hong Kong schools has been, and continues to be a significant challenge, in the classroom. This is compounded by the fact that the new Language Arts curriculum also incorporates subject knowledge areas that are new to many Hong Kong teachers, including literature, drama and popular culture (EDB 2005). While most people experience these in their own daily lives, Hong Kong teachers have only rarely experienced these in their own schooling, and have been offered little formal training in how to use such content areas in the ESL classroom. So they are uncertain about how to coordinate the new content with the new learning objectives, and both with the specific language structures required by the language syllabus (Bailey and Nunan 1996). Perhaps the greatest challenge has been the inclusion of assessment into teachers’ working practice. The evaluation of language learning must now include formative as well as summative elements. Previously, assessment had been kept separate from teaching (Driscoll and Wood 2007). But now, Hong Kong English teachers are involved in some degree of schools-based assessment, and facing new pressures from parents, division heads and students.

And finally, these changes in language education in Hong Kong have taken place within a context of profound social developments that impact their reception and ongoing operation (Li 1999). The teaching of Putonghua has become a priority for policy-makers, parents and schools. In part, this has resulted from the 1997 handover, and the re-encounter between Cantonese and mainland peoples and cultures. The increasingly important place of Putonghua in schools results also from awareness of the new opportunities that accompany globalization, and the ways in which
language enables trade and mobility. These are now greatly enhanced by
the significant role China is taking on, in the Asian and international
contexts (Olson and Prestowitz 2011, Attias 2011, Schuman 2011, Reuters
2011, Elliott 2007). For language education in Hong Kong, this has meant
the adoption of Putonghua teaching, with the aim of enabling Hong Kong
students to become bilingual and triliterate (Education Bureau 2011, Suen
2008). Putonghua teachers are also reviewing traditional teaching styles
(Chui 2007, Lee 2007).

Evidently, the new Language Arts curriculum constitutes a sea change
in Hong Kong English teaching and learning (Chen 2006). While many
involved in the English teaching community support the new approach,
teachers have experienced difficulty implementing new classroom
practices because little is known about the Language Arts, there has been
little training available to them, and the changes have occurred rapidly –
indeed they are ongoing (Tsui 2003, Mok et al 2006). This volume is
intended to address the current discussion about Language Arts theories,
methods, practices and opportunities, in the Hong Kong context and
beyond. Further this volume is intended to bring the various bodies of
academic research and understanding together with ELT classroom
practices and needs.

The papers in Part 1 of this volume focus on the use of English
literature in the Language Arts classroom. Literature has been used in
English language classrooms for decades. At the same time, developing a
theoretical basis for this has remained elusive. The past decades have seen
rapid growth in the theoretization of second-language acquisition, and in
stylistics, but little rapprochement between the two different approaches to
the study of language. In this regard, the APELA-1 paper by Prof. David
Butt (Chapter 1), Director of Macquarie University’s Centre for the Study
of Language in Social life, is a significant contribution. In recent years,
there has been a certain rapprochement between linguistic and literary
studies, a global trend which includes Hong Kong, Asia, and other parts of
the world. This rapprochement is underway in academic circles, as Butt’s
paper demonstrates. He sets out the difficulty of theorizing literature due
to the overwhelming breadth of its objects, elegantly illustrated by taking
the reader on a literary tour through example bookplates of major western
literary works, classical and modern. The strength of this paper lies in its
problematization of the fundamental question – what is literature and how
do we know? – and then in the application of Systemic Functional
Linguistics (SFL) theory and method to example literary works,
anatomizing the intricacy and complexity involved in articulating the
literary qualities even of brief literary works. Butt uses methods drawn
from Hasan (1985) to chart the lexicogrammar of American poet Robert Frost’s *The Silken Tent*, and in greater depth Singapore poet Dr. Ee Tiang Hong’s work *Dejection*. Butt’s paper offers a model for use in the ELT Language Arts classroom, reframing the way we understand language teaching and learning, offering both method and theoretical foundation with the power to underwrite both classroom praxis and curricula.

In some ways, teachers’ use of literature in the Language Arts classroom is well established (Gutierrez 2001, Chen 2006, Cheng 2008). Much academic research connects the classroom use of literature to student acquisition of reading skills (Hudson et al 2005, Galda and Pellegrini 2008). Reading narratives engages readers in telling their own stories (Holstein and Gubrium 2000, King 2000). Readers’ encounter with characters is constitutive of their engagement and learning of the world around them (Hoom and Konjin 2003). Children’s familiarity with the conventions of storytelling offer generic elements for use in scaffolding their second-language writing practice (Tompkins 1998, Hyland 2004). The APELA-1 paper by Tarusan (Chapter 5) focuses on activity-centered teaching strategies in Language Arts classrooms in the Philippines. Her substantive study of 628 tertiary students in the Philippines clearly indicates the value of students’ participation in the ongoing process of studying literature through various activities, beyond the achievement in terms of their understanding of a text. These results are likely to resonate with many teachers’ experiences in using literature in the classroom, and help to articulate the reasons why teachers experience literature as valid and enabling.

The experience of immersion in a story supports both linguistic and literacy gains (Ryan 2001, Sandrock 2002). The value of this volume to those teaching and trying to further the theoretical foundation of the Language Arts lies in the ways that contributors have articulated both elements, and in some cases have connected them to each other. The APELA-1 paper by Wiratno (Chapter 8) explores a model from the Malaysian context, for integrating the teaching of both linguistic and literary elements of literary works in the English-as-a-foreign-language classroom. The APELA-1 paper by Wiyono (Chapter 9) focuses on the use of literature in the Malaysian classroom, by second-language students learning the English tense system. Both papers offer exceptionally detailed examinations of the links between literature and the Language Arts, in the Asian second-language learning context.

Significant new areas of research and theory currently impact the teaching of reading and literacy (Mok 2001). First, the rise of World Englishes suggests the degree to which production, whether written or
spoken, is a matter of self-expression (Nunan 1996, Canagarajah 1999, Jenkins 2003). The APELA-1 paper by Lin (Chapter 6) articulates a position in this area, using postcolonial theories to re-evaluate the value of teaching literature in English in the Asian context, in the present day. This paper offers a clear statement of the self-sufficiency of Asian writers and teachers in postmodern contexts where World Englishes prevail. Second, new research focuses on the affective impact of literature in teaching, due to its positive connections to affect and motivation (Richards 1998, Dipardo and Potter 2004). At the same time, it is difficult to help Asian students use English in authentic ways, when Language Arts teachers in Hong Kong and other Asian locations must borrow from materials produced by and for westerners (Flood et al 2003, Chambers and Gregory 2006) or draw on local, many of which reflect past practice. As yet, little research has been published to ground classroom practice in recent research, and connect it to curricular norms and requirements (Tsui, 1996, James 2008). Recent research into the use of literature in the classroom indicates the need for both authentic local as well as intercultural content, due to its impact on identity formation (Cambourne 2002, Ching 2005, Van Sluys 2003, Vardell et al 2006). Still, studies of Asian readers of English as a second language, within in Language Arts curricula, have mainly been in western contexts (Mok et al 2006). At this time, journals such as Language Arts and The Reading Teacher serve the needs of these western contexts, leaving scholars in Asian contexts to attempt to fit western models to their own very different contexts. Further, these journals serve the needs of teachers more than academics, and as a result, their research base lags behind contemporary developments. The APELA-1 paper by Rogers (Chapter 7) sets out the need for using authentic texts in the classroom, with examples from the Hong Kong context. The appendices at the end of this volume are intended for use by English teachers wanting to find literature written in, or translated into English by Chinese writers in various Asian contexts, for their own classroom use.

At this time, research in the Language Arts use of literature also includes foci such as literature as a door into identity and culture (Stearns 2004, Hermans 2002, Colby et al. 2003), citizenship (Abbinett 2003, Pavlenko 2004, Holmes 2005), psychology (Mackey 2008, Mangen 2008), reader response and the construction of meaning (Knapp 2002, Thomas and Schwarzbaum 2005). Relatively little research focuses on using literature for second language proficiency in Asian contexts (Parkinson and Thomas 2000, Hall 2005, Duff and Maley 2007). We can anticipate that this will change, as China and other Asian nations taken on global leadership roles in coming years. The APELA-1 paper by DeCoursey
(Chapter 2) explores the use of literature to teach intercultural sensitivity, focusing on Chinese readers’ interpretations of eastern European and Muslim texts. She employs an offshoot of SFL, Appraisal analysis, in combination with the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, Bennett and Allen 1999) currently in widespread use in educational contexts, to consider Confucian views of one poem and one short story.

A significant challenge for the use of literature in ELT has been recent developments in multiliteracies and multimodal publishing and reading (Kress 2003). Visual images are now incorporated into texts in ways that go beyond decoration and illustration, and shape our everyday views and opinions (Albers and Harste 2007). New media genres are experienced by children and teens as forms of narrative (Wardrip-Fruin 2004). Books written for children and teens are now commonly associated with movies, internet sites, games and other digital media (Lanham 2001, Tobin 2000), offering new kinds of connections between the classroom and the social world (Hull and Schultz 2002, Lankshear and Knobel 2006). They shape identities and opinions, and impact language teaching and learning habits (Abilock 2003). A significant contribution to understanding multiliteracies in the ELT classroom is found in the APELA-1 paper by Lam (Chapter 4). This paper uses SFL to articulate the concept of “interpersonal distance” between characters in literary texts. Lam explores this through an example, The Da Vinci Code (Brown 2003), for which both a book and a film version (Howard 2006) exist. By conceptualizing and quantifying elements of social interaction, Lam is able to get at why this novel has received criticism as a literary text. This paper is particularly valuable for its ability to articulate questions of literary stylistics – or we could say, the lack of them – in ways which are theoretically grounded as well as methodologically applicable to the media ESL students use in their daily lives, literary content. As Language Arts curricula respond to profound changes in our globalized, media-driven worlds, changes which reshape the character with the contexts of literature, its teachers must only embrace new methods for teaching traditional literary works. Lam offers tools for understanding how to assist learners in developing critical and creative awareness of multimodal texts.

Multimodality requires us to put images together with words, an art which is currently receiving extensive academic attention. The reading in English students now engage in most often entails collating pictorial with verbal elements of the page, often via richly layered narrative formats (Bearne 2003). This process involves the individual in interpreting and constructing the text’s meaning (Jewitt and Kress 2003). In particular,
media and popular genres have the ability to encourage the formation of strong connections between individual students and the texts they read, the imaginary worlds they experience immersion in, and the characters they feel connected to (Veletsianos 2010). Multimodal texts involve the second language learner’s identity in ways that traditional texts do not (Jones 2006, Duncum 2002). This tends to reduce barriers to written and spoken production, and facilitate language use (Gee 2007). It tends to encourage response and engagement (De Freitas and Griffiths 2007). Exactly because this is not straightforward, it has a lot to offer the processes of teaching and learning. The APELA-1 paper by Veloso (Chapter 3) treats the use of comic books in the ELT classroom. He applies current multimodal theory to the history of American comic books, in particular the characters Superman, Batman and Captain America, superheroes who have been implicated in Depression-era social escapism, World War II propaganda, post-war atomic ideologies, and more recently, explorations of the relationship between heroism and authority. Veloso delineates the many ways in which this popular medium engages readers in constructing meaning in context. This paper indicates the many opportunities comic books provide Language Arts teachers, for exploring identities, and critiquing rather than merely reflecting and reproducing current affairs and social issues. Veloso offers a convincing meditation on the value of using this often scorned kind of text in the ELT classroom.

Part I of this volume offers papers addressing both academic research into and the frontline practice of Language Arts. These include theoretical and methodological perspectives derived from SFL, and a variety of approaches to its use in second-language teaching, as also in the service of teaching broader abilities such as critical thinking and intercultural sensitivity. These papers help to establish Language Arts as an area which is both theoretically informed and empirically grounded. This volume is among few exploring Language Arts within Asian contexts. Reviewing these papers, it is fair to conclude that variety, interdisciplinarity and the Asian focus are key contributions of this volume to the understanding of Language Arts overall. This will be among its greatest attractions for teachers, for those writing and implementing curricula, and for policy makers interested in how Language Arts is developing. Language Arts has emerged as a study which bridges differences between native and non-native speakers and writers of English. It offers attractive subject content able to motivate students. It presents a curricular means of linking the many skills and abilities that are all called language learning, from grammar to creative writing. It is hoped that this volume will provide scholars with new challenges in understanding the art and the techné of
Language Arts, providing new platforms from which to explore the extraordinary range of things that are included in its foundational elements. It is a matter of pleasure and interest to note that there is still much to explore, as Language Arts connects with new literacies and cultures.

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