
In Pursuit of a Multilingual Equity Agenda: SFL Teacher Action Research

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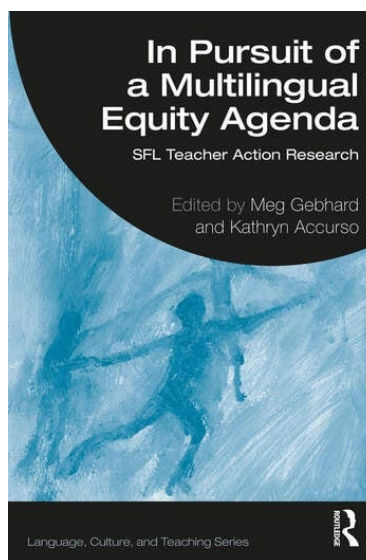
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Book Review

In Pursuit of a Multilingual Equity Agenda: SFL Teacher Action Research

In Pursuit of a Multilingual Equity Agenda: SFL Teacher Action Research, edited by Meg Gebhard and Kathryn Accurso, examines the use of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) to promote equity in multilingual classrooms. The book provides practical insights into applying SFL K-12 contexts but does not address systemic issues and perspectives beyond this framework. With a focus on teacher action research and social justice, the volume urges educators to consider the intersection of language, race, and power, even as reliance on descriptive pedagogy limits critical engagement with deep-rooted educational inequalities. This book describes the Expanded Teaching and Learning Cycle (ETLC) by Gebhard (2019).

As educators who have long advocated for SFL in language teaching, we were eager to read this volume. We found a collection that not only underscores the importance of language-centered pedagogy but also pushes boundaries in how we think about teacher action research, social justice, and education reform. We believe that English teachers should focus on language-centered discussions to engage students in the meaning of texts. Teachers also need to be able to assess language patterns to help students understand situational context (register) and cultural context. Registration is about language variation in different social situations based on situational elements such as participants (tenor), discourse field, and discourse mode. This requires genre pedagogy, which teaches and analyzes language in different genres.

At its core, this book is an interface between theory, practice, and advocacy. Gebhard and Accurso have compiled a volume highlighting teachers' role as agents of change, equipped with the tools of SFL to address inequities in multilingual education. Although the book succeeds in providing practical insights, its main contribution lies in challenging the reader to reflect on the deep-rooted biases and structures that stand in the way of genuine educational reform. The authors ask: Can we truly support multilingual learners without challenging the fundamental power structures in our schools?

Practical insights, but for whom?

The book's strength lies in applying SFL to real-world classroom scenarios, but we will pause here. Although the case studies are compelling, a clear focus on K-12 settings limits the book's reach. Higher education or adult learners, which are critical to promoting multilingual equity—are largely absent. This narrow framework can be perceived as limiting for educators working outside these contexts. Furthermore, while the book claims to focus on multilingual equity, the perspectives represented could be more diverse, particularly from non-native English-speaking educators.

The opening chapter frames the book's commitment to equity, but it is in the individual chapters that the book's core message comes to life. Holly Graham's exploration of SFL in

middle school biographies (Chapter 2) and Diana Gómez-Pereira's work with heritage language learners (Chapter 3) provide concrete examples of how SFL can empower multilingual students. These chapters are insightful. They often read like practical guides. However, where is the criticism of the broader systems in which these students operate? This absence is particularly evident in a book intended to address educational equity.

Crossing boundaries: SFL as more than a tool

One of the most provocative sections of the book is Chapter 6, in which Shelby Perez documents her journey challenging raciolinguistic ideologies in ESL classrooms. Perez's honest account of successes and failures in advocating for an inclusive, SFL-based curriculum is a reminder that systemic change is an uphill battle. Her criticism of reading to learn (R2L) shows the limitations of well-intentioned concepts that do not take into account deeply rooted racial prejudices. This chapter elevates the book from a collection of teaching strategies to a meaningful conversation about the intersection of language, race, and power in education.

Similarly, the chapter on mathematical word problems (Chapter 7) sharply critiques traditional approaches to mathematical education for neglecting the linguistic barriers faced by multilingual students. By using SFL to break down the specific language of mathematics, the authors show that equity is not just about access but also about understanding the complex relationship between language and content. Here, the book effectively pushes educators to rethink what equity looks like in a classroom.

But, for all its strengths, the book occasionally retreats into the safety of descriptive pedagogy. Many chapters focus on how SFL can support learning, but few critically consider how educators can use SFL to challenge the policies perpetuating inequity. Where is the courage to question stagnating educational paradigms? How can teachers use their SFL-based insights to disrupt the power dynamics in schools, not just in classrooms? The book would benefit from more voices questioning these entrenched systems.

Where the book excels

One of the book's most notable achievements is its commitment to collaboration. The university-school partnerships (Chapters 5 & 8) serve as powerful models for educators to work together to improve multilingual learners' experience. By documenting successes and setbacks, these chapters provide a realistic overview of what is required to create truly equitable learning environments. Chapter 9, in particular, portrays a pre-service teacher using critical literacy principles to empower students. This chapter illustrates the intersection between SFL and social justice as students write about real-world issues. It is the kind of radical, student-centered work that more educators need to embrace if they are serious about advancing equity.

Final thoughts: A call for action

Ultimately, *In Pursuit of a Multilingual Equity Agenda* offers valuable insights for educators, particularly those in K-12 settings. It provides a framework for using SFL to promote classroom equity but does not fully address the larger systemic issues. The book would be more meaningful if it looked more critically at the power structures that create and maintain inequities in education. This book is for readers looking for practical applications of SFL. But for those hoping for a deeper examination of the relationship between language, power, and justice, it leaves some questions unanswered. Nonetheless, Gebhard and Accurso have provided an essential starting point for educators who want to integrate SFL into their practice while working toward a more equitable educational landscape.

This is a timely and useful resource, but it is just the beginning of the conversation about how we can use language to transform not just classrooms but entire education systems.

References

Gebhard, M. (2019). *Teaching and Researching ELLs' Disciplinary Literacies*. Routledge.