

“My Interest in Peace, Languages, and Cultures Grew”

Dr. Rebecca Oxford, University of Maryland

“Rebecca Oxford” is one of the most recognizable names in ELT and has been for years – in journal articles, book chapters, teacher handbooks, as a book author, and as a conference speaker. In recent years, Dr. Oxford has been devoting much of her time to peacebuilding and ELT, which she will speak on at KOTESOL 2022. The following interview with Dr. Oxford was conducted by Jocelyn Wright, creator of the global Peace Linguistics group active on Facebook and a longtime KOTESOL member. — Ed.

Jocelyn: I would like to start by thanking you, Rebecca, for taking time to chat with us! It’s quite exciting to be able to open this interview, and there are so many questions I’d love to ask you. Perhaps we could start with how you got started in peacebuilding?

Dr. Oxford: Sure! It’s amazing what you can learn as a child about peace. Jeannie, my mother’s distant cousin, worked in Africa most of her life as a missionary, teaching literacy and spreading peace and love, so I thought a lot about peace as a child. (Interestingly, my husband, Clifford Stocking worked for seven years in Africa, sharing peace, helping build dams and schools in deeply rural areas of Kenya, and teaching in an international school in Zambia. He, too, is a person of peace.)

In my elementary school in the hot state of Florida, we kids read stories about people in other countries. I especially remember reading a textbook story about the way of life of children in freezing Lapland, a huge Arctic region where you can see the midnight sun, polar night, and the northern lights and where there are as many reindeer as there are people. I was entranced.

My family had little money but many books, and I loved the international ones with photos of real places, like Germany, Russia, and Jamaica. Because of my love of books, as a child I traveled miles by bus to the library, where I eventually checked out all the children’s biographies of famous people. I remember being especially drawn to the biography of Jane Addams, an American

social worker who helped people in the downtrodden, industrial part of Chicago. She wrote peace books and received the Nobel Peace Prize. I loved everything she did for peace.

I also related to Miss Addams because of all the good

works she accomplished, despite her many health problems. I had my own health problems, too (polio at age five, resulting in complete paralysis). Even when the virus was no longer inside me, I could not attend school in first and second grades because I was weak and could not walk well or climb stairs. Despite p h y s i c a l

therapy for a couple of years after polio, I have since then continued to have some difficulties in walking, though for decades I pretended not to have such difficulties. I tried to “fit in” and be glamorous with color, chic clothes, and as an adult, high-heeled shoes. I still love color and clothes, but I ditched the high heels and realized how foolish it was to hide my physical disability, however subtle it might be. I still don’t talk about it much, but I do go to post-polio meetings when I can. I have also become very interested in and respectful of people with disabilities. I learned that peacebuilding includes ensuring that people with disabilities have all the opportunities other people do.

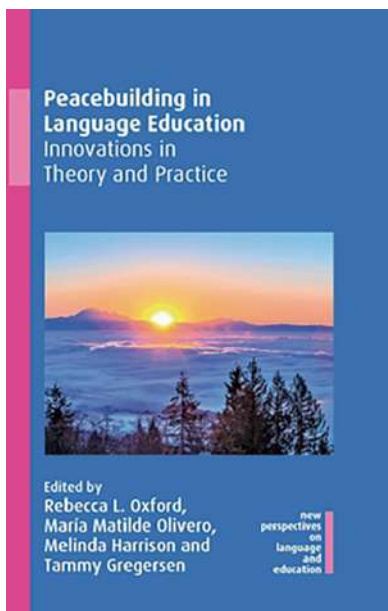
Moving back to childhood, when I rode the bus to the library, I noticed that people with dark skin had to sit at the back of the bus. Later, I realized the awfulness of racial hatred and discrimination and worked against it. I was powerfully affected by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis when I was a senior



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at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. A few days after Dr. King's death, I joined a peace march in his honor, despite my issues with walking long distances. I was always struck by this civil rights leader's acceptance and love of those who reviled him during his lifetime. Such people were glad he was murdered. There are still racists in my country, and they are becoming louder and more numerous, it seems. I view Dr. King as a symbol of peace and social justice, and he remains a great role model.

My interest in peace, languages, and cultures grew throughout my education. I majored in Russian at Vanderbilt. After graduating, I taught Russian, German, and English in high school, after which I wanted to earn a master's in Russian language education. I wrote about that goal in my application to Boston University. I guess the admissions office did not read carefully, because they let me in and gave me a general master's degree fellowship.



▲ **Peacebuilding in Language Education (Multilingual Matters, 2020), co-edited by Rebecca Oxford.**

I went to see my advisor and found out that the program I wanted, Russian language education, did not exist at Boston University. Having only a few minutes to decide which other master's program to select, I quickly chose educational psychology. It was almost an accident, but what a glorious choice it became. That decision added a tremendously rich psychological strand to my language background. While I was at Boston University, I was even able to do some psychology reading and writing at the great library at Harvard University, which was close by. Some years later, I earned a doctorate in educational psychology at the University of North Carolina.

Without planning it, I had combined psychology with internationalism, language education, and peace. This combination became the bedrock of my career. I loved teaching university courses, especially graduate courses, in foreign language and ESL/EFL education, preparing future teachers for those areas, and a small voice inside me said that I was teaching peace through language education. I didn't tell anybody, because they might have thought I was crazy; nobody was talking about teaching peace through language education at that time. Things are changing now.

In any university where I taught, the students closest to my heart were international students, though I loved the others, too. I had many South Korean doctoral students, one of whom was Young Ye Park, who gave her daughter not only a Korean name but also my name (Becky). It

was the sweetest honor I ever received – the honor of a lifetime, because it signified love and understanding. Young Ye Park is now a professor at Daegu National University of Education. At the University of Maryland, where I arrived in 2000, I understood that peacebuilding, linked with language education, would be my direction for the rest of my life.

Jocelyn: Wow! I really loved hearing about your various experiences, except for the one about polio, of course! It is amazing how revelations of peace – Can I call them that? – appeared in each case. Now, you have already mentioned a few people who have influenced you in the area of peace. Who would you say influenced you the most?

Dr. Oxford: Definitely, Martin Luther King Jr. and my dear friend Jing Lin, a University of Maryland colleague who specializes in international education and peace, have been my greatest influences. Jing gathered students and faculty to form a Peace Study Group at the university around 2008. I was an avid member. Jing became my guide and inspiration. Together we edited a book, *Transformative Eco-Education for Human and Planetary Survival* (2011), which taught me that ecological peace is a huge aspect of peace.

At some point Jing asked me, "Why don't you write a book about peace?" So I did. The manuscript was so long that Jing's friend Ian Harris, a prolific peace author and editor who mentored me on the book, suggested that I split it into two volumes. The resulting volumes were entitled *The Language of Peace: Communicating to Create Harmony* (2013) and *Understanding Peace Cultures* (2014). These are in the Peace Education series for Information Age Publishing. *Understanding Peace Cultures* has a chapter

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by a New Zealander, Carol Griffiths, a language education colleague of mine, who wrote about her eye-opening years teaching English in North Korea. Carol knew she was working for peace and representing other parts of the world, as well as teaching English.

Jing and I decided to create a book series, *Transforming Education for the Future*, for Information Age Publishing. Jing, Ed Brantmeier, Sachi Edwards, and I initiated another book series, *Spirituality, Religion, and Education*, for Palgrave Macmillan. Both series are full of peace ideas woven into books on different topics.

Jing and I proposed a special interest group (SIG), "Contemplative Inquiry and Holistic Education," for

the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES), a strongly peace-oriented organization. The SIG has blossomed. Starting with just a handful, it now has around 30 members globally, and many more come to our conference sessions. We now present workshops, talks, videos, and meditation sessions online instead of in person due to Covid, but the pandemic has not slowed down the SIG's work. I am not a leader of the SIG; I am a presenter and participant, watching peace spread through holistic and contemplative education. One of the SIG leaders, Tom Culham of British Columbia, Canada, has written books with Jing on Daoism, a religion that, along with Buddhism, has been highly significant in my life, along with Christianity, in which I was raised.

Jocelyn: Your relationship with Jing seems to have been very peace productive! What else have you been doing recently for peace?

Dr. Oxford: I co-edited the book *Peacebuilding in Language Education: Innovations in Theory and Practice* (Oxford, Olivero, Harrison, & Gregersen, 2020) for Multilingual Matters. The book is a song of my heart, mind, and spirit. Reviewers described it much better than I could. Researcher Nathan Thomas wrote, "At a time of great sociopolitical tension globally, this volume is a beacon of light for understanding and reconciliation." Religion professor Nicole Johnson remarked that peace should be "the presumed norm for human community and thriving," as the book shows. Finally, language educator Martha Nyikos described it as "a jewel of a book and a labor of love realized." I was grateful for such comments.

Currently Matilde Olivero (from Argentina) and I are co-editing a special issue of *Peace Research: Canadian Journal of Peace and Conflict*. Work will soon be in full swing as well on a Cambridge University Press book, *Language Learning and Teaching for Peace, Positivity, and Intercultural Competence* (Oxford, Gregersen, & Ortega). Yecid Ortega is a critical language educator whose recent dissertation studied a program teaching peace through EFL in a poor, dangerous area of Bogota, Colombia, where he grew up. His research inspires me greatly.

Jocelyn: Although you retired from teaching three years ago, you're certainly not slowing down! I'm sure TEC readers will look forward to reading your works. They might also be interested in your talks at the upcoming 2022 Korea TESOL International Conference. The title of your main session is "Teaching Language, Teaching Peace: Bridges to a Better World." Not everyone makes the connection between language teaching and peace. Why is this awareness so urgently needed?

Dr. Oxford: *Communication* is one primary connection between language teaching and peace. Teaching people to communicate peacefully with each other around the world (and next door!) is part of this link. Everything we do in language education, from teaching verb tenses to setting up English language discussion groups to providing extracurricular opportunities for cultural learning, is a step toward greater *interpersonal, intergroup, international, and intercultural peace*. Teaching people to communicate gently with their own inner selves through positive self-talk and mindfulness leads to *inner peace*. Communicating about ways to save the environment (e.g., reducing carbon emissions that exacerbate climate change, decreasing the

clear-cutting of forests, planning in advance for floods and wildfires, and nurturing and enjoying nature) are related to *ecological peace*. We urgently need this awareness to increase peace within our own beings, among people here and everywhere else, and with the environment. Language educators are probably already peacebuilders because they are involved in teaching students to communicate.

Jocelyn: Right, this point is so important. We all have this potential to be peacebuilders through our teaching and interactions, especially if we intentionally set this as a goal! So, what can we all start doing right now to transform this goal into action?

Dr. Oxford: What you can do is to start talking with each other about how language teaching and peacebuilding

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go together and why this is important. You could have students ask themselves, "What does peace mean to me?" There are many ways to follow up with additional activities if you'd like. (See Chapters 1 and 15 in *Peacebuilding in Language Education*.) Peace activities can be integrated into teaching EFL or other languages without any major changes in the curriculum, as I will show at the KOTESOL conference. Touching the topic of peace will raise your students' awareness of and interest in peacebuilding in their lives. You could also read books, chapters, or articles about peace and language education. Finally, you could partner with someone else in South Korea or another country or even join an international research team on peacebuilding and TESOL. Some readers may even want to talk to you about your work in Peace Linguistics, Jocelyn! Our work is complementary.

Jocelyn: Thanks, Rebecca! That would be fantastic! I sincerely hope that we can cultivate more discussions around the important topics of peace, language, and language education and, especially, do more transformative work in these areas. Again, we appreciate your being with us today.

Dr. Oxford: Thanks, Jocelyn, for the great questions. Readers of this interview, I hope to see you online at KOTESOL 2022! It will be a great and inspiring adventure. I hope to share my ideas at the conference and learn from you about TESOL in South Korea.