

**EXPLORING FRIENDSHIP ACROSS BOUNDARIES AND
ENHANCING ESL STUDENTS' LEXICAL RESOURCES THROUGH
THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PAJAMAS BY JOHN BOYNE**

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Abstract: *This article examines the representation of friendship across social and ideological boundaries in The Boy in the Striped Pajamas by John Boyne and analyzes its educational value for ESL students. The study focuses on the relationship between Bruno and Shmuel as a symbol of innocence, empathy, and intercultural understanding during the historical context of the Holocaust. In addition, the article explores how the novel contributes to vocabulary development, reading comprehension, communication skills, and critical thinking among English as a Second Language learners. Through reflective and literary analysis, the article demonstrates that Boyne's novel functions not only as a historical and emotional narrative but also as an effective educational resource for language learning. The findings suggest that literature-based instruction can enhance lexical resources and encourage moral reflection in ESL classrooms.*

Keywords: *friendship across boundaries, ESL students, lexical resources, vocabulary development, historical fiction, John Boyne, The Boy in the Striped Pajamas, language learning, literature analysis*

Introduction

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas is a historical fiction novel written by John Boyne and published in 2006 [1]. The novel is set during the Second World War and presents the story of Bruno, a young German boy whose father works as a commandant at Auschwitz concentration camp. Through Bruno's innocent perspective, the novel explores important themes such as friendship, prejudice, discrimination, morality, and the consequences of war. Although the story is fictional, it reflects the emotional and social impact of the Holocaust while encouraging readers to think critically about humanity and tolerance [3].

In addition to its literary significance, the novel is also valuable in English language learning classrooms. Many educators consider literary texts important tools for developing vocabulary, reading comprehension, communication skills, and critical thinking among ESL students [5]. As Collie and Slater argue, literature offers teachers a rationale and a variety of imaginative techniques for integrating language work with meaningful narrative contexts [4, p. 9]. The emotional depth and accessible language of Boyne's novel make it especially suitable for learners of English as a second language. This article explores how *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* presents friendship across boundaries and how it contributes to the enhancement of ESL students' lexical resources and language development.

Friendship Across Boundaries

One of the central themes of the novel is friendship that develops despite social, political, and racial barriers. Bruno and Shmuel come from completely different worlds. Bruno is the son of a Nazi officer, while Shmuel is a Jewish prisoner living inside Auschwitz concentration camp. However, the children do not initially understand the political hatred that separates them. Instead, they recognize each other as lonely boys searching for companionship and understanding. As academic analysis confirms, the novel presents themes of

crossing ethnic boundaries and the rejection of racial prejudice through the lens of childhood innocence [2].

The fence separating Bruno and Shmuel functions as a strong symbol throughout the novel. Physically, it divides the camp prisoners from the outside world, but symbolically, it represents prejudice, discrimination, and ideological division created by society. Boyne uses this image to demonstrate how political systems and hatred create artificial barriers between human beings [3, p. 2]. Despite the fence, Bruno and Shmuel communicate regularly, share stories, and form a sincere emotional connection.

The friendship between the boys also highlights the innocence of childhood. Bruno does not fully understand the reality of Auschwitz, and his limited understanding allows him to approach Shmuel without hatred or prejudice. Scholarly analysis notes that the novel brings out stark contrasts between adult sophistication and hypocrisy on one hand, and the innocence and ignorance that characteristically comprise a child's psychology on the other [3, p. 1]. Boyne suggests that discrimination is not natural in children but is learned from society and authority figures. Through the relationship between Bruno and Shmuel, readers are encouraged to reflect on the importance of empathy, kindness, and intercultural understanding.

Furthermore, the friendship in the novel creates a strong emotional impact on readers because it develops in an environment dominated by fear and violence. Their relationship becomes a symbol of hope and humanity in a world affected by war. As Rich and Percy (2018) observe in their critical analysis, the novel is widely used by educators to engage students with Holocaust history, precisely because it approaches the subject through the emotional lens of a child's perspective [3]. According to literary analyses, Boyne intentionally uses the friendship between Bruno and Shmuel to criticize hatred and social division while emphasizing universal human values [1].

The Novel as a Tool for ESL Learning

Besides its literary themes, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is highly useful for English language learning. Literary texts provide authentic language exposure and help students understand vocabulary within meaningful contexts [5]. Since Boyne's writing style is relatively simple and emotionally engaging, ESL learners can follow the narrative while simultaneously improving their language skills. As Collie and Slater emphasize, literature used in the language classroom motivates learners because it holds cultural significance and offers more authentic language input than standard coursebook texts [4, p. 7].

One of the most important benefits of the novel is vocabulary development. Throughout the story, students encounter words and expressions related to emotions, family relationships, friendship, conflict, war, morality, and discrimination. Repeated exposure to vocabulary in context helps learners remember meanings more effectively than memorization alone. Nation (2001) argues that learning vocabulary from context may be the most important way of acquiring new words, and that it is possibly the only option for vocabulary improvement outside the classroom in foreign language environments [6, p. 232]. Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis further supports this view, asserting that learners acquire language most naturally when exposed to comprehensible input slightly above their current level — precisely the kind of input that literary fiction provides [7, p. 2].

For example, the novel includes vocabulary such as "significance," "efficiency," "catastrophe," "frustration," and "companion." These words appear naturally in the narrative, allowing students to understand meaning through context and dialogue. Vocabulary learning materials based on the novel frequently use these examples to support ESL instruction and classroom activities [8].

The novel also improves reading comprehension and interpretive skills. ESL students must analyze character emotions, understand symbolism, and

identify themes throughout the text. This process develops both linguistic and critical thinking abilities. Because the novel combines emotional storytelling with historical context, students remain engaged and motivated during reading activities. Research on reading and vocabulary acquisition confirms that exposure to contextual vocabulary through extended reading strengthens both lexical retention and reading comprehension in second-language learners [8].

In addition, classroom discussions based on the novel encourage speaking and communication practice. Students can discuss moral questions, character decisions, and historical issues while using English in meaningful conversation. Such activities help learners develop confidence in expressing opinions and interpreting literary texts [5]. Teachers often use discussion questions and reflective writing tasks connected to the novel in order to improve students' analytical and communicative skills.

Reflection on the Novel

Personally, I found *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* deeply emotional and thought-provoking. The relationship between Bruno and Shmuel demonstrates how friendship can exist beyond differences in nationality, religion, or social status. While reading the novel, I felt sadness because the children could not fully understand the dangerous reality surrounding them. The tragic ending especially emphasizes the destructive consequences of hatred and prejudice.

From an educational perspective, I believe the novel is valuable for ESL students because it combines accessible language with meaningful themes. Students can improve vocabulary naturally through exposure to contextual language and emotionally rich dialogue. Nation (2001) supports this by demonstrating that systematic vocabulary instruction integrated with reading produces stronger lexical outcomes than decontextualized learning [6, p. 144]. At the same time, the novel encourages empathy, reflection, and moral awareness. Learning English through literature allows students not only to

improve language proficiency but also to develop emotional intelligence and intercultural understanding [4, p. 30].

The novel also encourages readers to reflect on the importance of tolerance in modern society. Even though the events are set during the Holocaust, the themes remain relevant today because prejudice and discrimination still exist in different forms around the world. Through Bruno and Shmuel's friendship, Boyne reminds readers that humanity and compassion are more important than political or social divisions [2].

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* by John Boyne is both a moving literary work and an effective educational resource for ESL learners. The novel explores friendship across boundaries through the relationship between Bruno and Shmuel while also criticizing prejudice and social division. Boyne successfully uses the innocent perspective of a child to reveal the moral consequences of hatred and war [3, p. 2].

Moreover, the novel contributes significantly to vocabulary development, reading comprehension, communication skills, and critical thinking among ESL students. As Krashen's (1985) comprehensible input theory suggests, literary texts provide the ideal conditions for incidental vocabulary acquisition [7, p. 3]. Through contextual language learning and reflective discussion, students can strengthen both linguistic competence and emotional awareness [6, p. 232]. Although the novel presents a tragic story, its message about friendship, empathy, and humanity remains meaningful and educational for modern readers [1].

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