CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND THE NEW LITERACY: THE INDISPENSABLE NEED FOR CRITICAL THINKING

COMPETÊNCIA TRANSCULTURAL E NOVOS LETRAMENTOS: A NECESSIDADE INCONTORNÁVEL DO PENSAMENTO CRITICO

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Abstract: This paper draws attention to the importance of new literacy and contrasts it with old one, centred around the 'three Rs'. Furthermore, it argues against the belief entertained by some that the new approach is just a refurbishment of the old one, with its attendant circumstances updated. It upholds that changing circumstances have instead forced a complete rethink of what it means to be literate in the emerging new world wherein the old order is crumbling fast while new forms of communication are being fashioned at a staggering pace. The new conceptualisation of literacy must take into account the broader context of the world we inhabit today, with the urgent need to go beyond our narrow parochial interests and face up to the challenges presented by an ever-shrinking world and the role of different nations as jointly responsible in the task of attending to our common destiny. The paper also warns against the dangers posed by fake news and the constant misuse of the social media to spread disinformation and underscores the urgent need for investing in literacy programmes with a critical stance. It is argued that, as teachers, we ought to concentrate on encouraging our students to look for hidden meanings in texts, and in the process, helping them to learn to read between the lines, instead of simply taking the printed word at its face value.
Keywords: The three Rs; Shrinking World; The New Literacy; Globalization; Translanguaging; Reading between the Lines; Critical Literacy

Resumo: Este artigo chama a atenção para a importância do novos letramentos em contraste com o letramento antigo, centrado nos "três Rs". Além disso, argumenta contra a crença de que se trata apenas uma atualização do antigo e defende que as circunstâncias em processo de mudança forçaram um repensar completo do que significa ser letrado num novo mundo emergente, no qual a velha ordem está desmoronando rapidamente e novas formas de comunicação estão sendo criadas em um ritmo impressionante. É preciso levar em conta o contexto mais amplo do mundo em que vivemos hoje e a necessidade urgente de ir além de nossos estreitos interesses paroquiais, enfrentar os desafios apresentados por um mundo cada vez menor e o papel de diferentes nações como responsáveis pelo nosso destino comum. O artigo também alerta contra os perigos das *fake news* e do uso constante das mídias sociais para espalhar a desinformação, além da necessidade urgente de se investir em programas de letramento com uma postura crítica. Argumenta, ainda, que, como professores, devemos nos concentrar em incentivar nossos alunos a procurar significados ocultos nos textos e nos processos, ajudando-os a aprender a ler nas entrelinhas, ao invés de simplesmente se ater ao sentido literal do que está impresso.
Palavras-Chave: Os três Rs; Mundo em Processo de Encolhimento; Novos Letramentos; Globalização; Letramento Crítico.

THE THREE RS AND THE BUILDING BLOCK METAPHOR

A time there was, not so long ago, when it was quite fashionable to talk of the three 'Rs'—**R**eading, w**R**iting and a**R**ithmetic—as all that a child needed as the bare minimum of skills to be acquired from its early schooling days in order to emerge, later on in life, as a fully-fledged adult, ready to take on the challenges of the modern, literate society. It was tacitly assumed in those days that the three Rs constituted the fundamental building blocks of all learning. Of the three skills, the first two, i.e., reading and writing, meant mostly the ability to barely decode and encode written messages and third referred to the basic mathematical operations of addition and subtraction, often using finger-counting.

Such a view of what education was all about presupposed a number of key assumptions about knowledge and how one should go about in one's efforts to acquire it. The basic idea is all too simple and is suffused with a good deal of *prima facie* appeal: one builds a wall, brick by carefully laid out brick. That is to say, the surest and safest way to make progress in any activity is to start with the smallest and the most basic elements of the task at hand and work towards the more complex, the more elaborate.

But then, there is an even more questionable presumption that seems to undergird the view of education thumb-nailed above. It is the abjectly jejune notion that education is all about the slow but steady accumulation of knowledge that is already out there (whereof the oft-invoked analogy with the idea of building an edifice, brick by brick!). That knowledge, in turn, is all a matter of gathering information that can be measured *quantitatively*—the more information one gathers, the more one can be considered knowledgeable! It does not at all seem to occur to the enthusiasts for such a view of education that the learner also needs to forge effective and adequate filtering mechanisms to sift through the plethora of information that they are routinely bombarded with—a crucial question that has acquired great urgency in our times of fake news deliberately being planted everywhere and start swirling around the cyber space at alarming ease and velocity. In other words, these learners, especially the ones that are in their early stages of education, need to be taught to examine *critically* every bit of the information they receive, no matter where it comes from. It is the only guarantee that we have for ensuring that educational programmes do not degenerate (or are not transformed) into massive, often state-sponsored, enterprises of brainwashing and indoctrination (à la Orwell's dystopian novel 'Nineteen Eighty-Four').

A DETOUR: STRUCTURAL LINGUISTICS AND HOW IT TACITLY PROMOTED THE 'THREE RS' *WELTANSCHAUUNG*

The "three Rs" approach had the backing of many academic disciplines. In the field of Linguistics, for instance, this idea of building up from simple to complex elements was simply taken for granted, especially in those days when Bloomfieldean structuralism reigned supreme. Thus, early on in his classic paper "From morpheme to utterance", Zellig Harris (1946, p. 162) sought to justify his approach by saying.

> If we now seek a clearer method for obtaining generalizations about the structure of utterances in a language, it should preferably deal with the simplest observables. These are the morphemes, which are uniquely identifiable and easy to follow. Constructs such as 'morphological levels' may be useful in particular cases, but there is an advantage in avoiding them if we can achieve the same results by direct manipulation of the observable morphemes.

The idea of starting with "the simplest observables" was taken up once again in Harris, "From Phoneme to Morpheme" (HARRIS, 1955), just two years before his more

illustrious disciple, Noam Chomsky, was to publish his *Syntactic Structure* (CHOMSKY, 1957), which would throw a monkey wrench into that simple structure of building blocks. Not that he threw the bathwater of language structure itself along with the baby, viz., the idea of simple observables leading to complex structures. This is so because, despite all his revolutionary zeal, Chomsky did stick to the idea of complex structures being decomposable to its atomic parts—only that there were the more tortuous operations of transformation in the process to reckon with. We will leave matters at that since any further discussion of the issue is far beyond the purview of this paper.

What has persisted, through thick and thin, in Linguistics of all stripes is the idea that language must be viewed as a self-contained whole, closed unto itself. Structuralism, especially as it was pursued with great fervour in the continent of Europe, incorporated that notion as one of its founding pillars. Much the same is true of the several variations thereof that sprang up under its influence. And, despite all the Copernican proportions (VOEGELIN, 1958) of the much-vaunted revolution it was acclaimed to have sparked off, Chomsky's bold initiative to upend some of old structuralism's trade-mark claims did leave intact the idea of language as a distinct and discrete entity, hardly ever calling it into question. The idea was actually reinforced every time claims such as that a grammar of a language should be thought of as "a device of some sort for producing the sentences of the language under analysis" (CHOMSKY, 1957, p. 13), often with the additional requirement that the reference to "sentences" in pronouncements such as this meant "all and only the well-formed sentences" of the language in question. Implicit in confident assertions such as these was the idea that the existence itself of the language as a discrete, identifiable entity could simply not be the object of contestation. Anyhow, such sweeping claims were made with the full certainty that no one in their right senses would dare interject with objections of the sort "But, hold on a minute, how can one can ever be absolutely sure of that?". "Ask any native speaker of that language, damn it!" would have been the brazenly glib reply one received off pat. The natives know their language and what they know is all that one needs to know about the language, period.

At bottom, the idea of languages as self-contained wholes drew its strength from the notion that there were individuals who could be deemed to be the sole proprietors of those languages which in turn retroactively propped up the very claims on behalf of these individuals to possess their respective languages in their entirety. How do you know for sure the speakers of a language know their language perfectly? And how do you also know that the language they speak is accessible to them in their entirety? No one was terribly bothered about not having any convincing arguments to bolster up the answers to either of these two separate questions severally; the fact that the two questions together seemed to answer each other rhetorically was taken as sufficient ground for leaving matters at that! In effect, then: the language was whatever the native speaker knew and one only qualified to be a native speaker of the language provided one knew that language in its entirety!

With hindsight, it is today possible to speculate as to why this type of circular reasoning remained for long unchallenged, except for occasional voices of dissent such as those from Nelson Goodman and Willard Quine. The linguistics of the period was very much under the influence of an essentially 19th century *Zeitgeist* and is still so to a considerable extent (cf. HUTTON, 1996). And this was the time when a whole raft of identities, among them, those of the nation, the state, people, country and so forth, were thought of in mutually reinforcing unison with one another, giving rise to slogans such as "*Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Sprache*". In other words, the idea of a self-contained language (with its much-celebrated "clôture"—a corner-stone of Saussurean structuralism) and a group of people as its genuine proprietors was well grounded in a certain ethos which lent it great credibility (cf. RAJAGOPALAN, 2019).

What is most remarkable about all those identities is that all of them were conceived in all-or-nothing terms. The sentence "*x*" either belonged to language "*y*" or it didn't. Similarly, a person either was a native speaker of language "*y*" or decidedly wasn't. The logic that oversaw these identities was thus eminently *exclusionary*, a byproduct of the "*cloture*" principle. That automatically kept out of the picture the millions of multilingual speakers all over the world (that, by the UNESCO statistics, by far outnumber the supposedly "monolingual" speakers, whose claim to their putative linguistic "purity" is fast being eroded thanks to exposure to other languages resulting in growing signs of translanguaging).

THE CHANGING WORLD-ORDER AND THE NEED TO RETHINK SOME OF THE BASICS

But times have changed and nowadays it makes little sense to think of nation-states as insulated from the rest of the world, given the relentless advance of globalisation. Leaving aside the internal squabbles amongst postmodernists and late modernists Giddens (1991), Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994), there is widespread consensus today on the "liquid" nature (BAUMAN, 2000) of many of the identities. To be sure, this loss of self-same identity, once deemed stable and not subject to the whims and fancies of spatiotemporal circumstances, does cause jitters in many people, but as Bauman (2006, p. 6) consoles us by observing: "Like all other forms of human cohabitation, our liquid modern life is a contraption attempting to make life with fear livable." And part at lease of the secret of the "livability" that Bauman is speaking about lies in our increased capacity as well as readiness to adapt to ever-changing circumstances. The famous 1983 Hollywood blockbuster movie called *Zelig*, starring Woody Allen, in which the title character has a strange "disorder" that makes him fit in with all those he comes into contact with, was billed at the time of its release as a "mockumentary" and the character was seen as a "human chameleon". But barely three decades on, it seems to be true to say that more and more of us that walk the face of this earth are beginning to take on some of the characteristics of that mysterious figure. When it comes to language, what we need to deal with today are the new challenges posed by the more-and-more widely recognized phenomenon of *translanguaging*—whereby languages, long considered distinct and with their boundary lines clearly demarked, reveal themselves to be actually oozing into one another—that, come to think of it, calls the structural linguists bluff of "*cloture*" and makes a mockery of it.

Going back to the question of literacy, which was what led to our discussion thus far, it must be fairly evident by now how the dramatic changes that have taken place in our thinking about ourselves and our place on planet earth, especially in relation to the nearly 9 billion others like us, calls for equally dramatic changes in the way we conceptualize literacy. It is only to be expected that some equally dramatic changes should also be forthcoming in what can be considered an adequate account of literacy for the times we currently live through. And, with the growing, exponential use of the internet as the tool for transnational communication, along with mass movements of sizeable chunks of population across the continents for reasons of a quest for better living conditions or fleeing persecution at home, the whole issue has gained an added sense of urgency. Add to that the phenomenon of global tourism that has exploded in the past decade or so and shows no signs of abating any time soon. In the words of Hui-Lin & Ching-Jung (2015, p. 78),

> Nowadays, tourism turns out to be a major source of income for many countries, and affects the economy of both the source and host countries significantly. In order to train the employees to provide best services to multicultural customers from different countries, multicultural literacy turns to be a crucial subject in developing cultural understanding of employees in tourism industry.

Speaking of the Canadian reality, Taylor and Hoechsmann (2011, p. 222) note that "this context poses an urgent challenge to educators wishing to build upon social diversity to develop a diversity of knowledge and understanding within our society as the basis of a larger movement to transform inequitable cultural and materials relations." It is clear to both teachers and education policy makers that they need to think big under these circumstances, casting aside old and outmoded practices. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that, in its *Handbook for Advancing Comprehensive Internationalization,* the American Council on Education (cited in SEEBERG; MICK, 2012, p. 2) states that "Global citizenship cannot be achieved by merely learning things in a traditional classroom experience, but rather requires *active engagement* with the world." (italics mine)

Active engagement with world means, among other things, coming to terms with different and, not infrequently, conflicting cultural norms and mores that come to the surface in the arena of intercultural contact. This in turn often implies touching on highly sensitive issues that can make or break attempts to build bridges between people belonging to different cultures. Varis (2010, p. 16) captures the idea in the following words:

> In an intercultural world communication necessarily mediates different values and cultural behaviours. Great civilizations and cultures have very different patterns of communication and use different senses in a different way. In consequence, if a truly global information society is to be created, more attention should be given to the diversity of cultures and the co-existence of different civilizations and cultures.

To summarise the discussion thus far, our age of multimodality and digital literacy is a far cry from the good-old days of the three Rs. Many argue however that they presuppose them in the sense that both aim at functional literacies. But in their reach and their ever-changing complexity, they are poles apart. And what they aim at cannot be more starkly different.

MULTICULTURALISM, MULTIMODALITY AND THE NEW LITERACIES

The old literacy (as we shall call the now-démodé "three Rs" approach), had the explicit aim of forming "good" citizens, ready to function as cogs in the wheel of the society at large. It presupposed the existence of inward-looking nation-states whose sole interest was to promote their own well-being. These citizens would be apt to take on their preordained role in ways most convenient to those whose only interest was to maintain the status quo at any cost, avoiding unexpected ruptures in the order of things.

By contrast, the new literacy is more in tune with the aspirations and needs of the citizens of globalized world where the spirit of transnationalism and the awareness of a common destiny for all of us (regardless of the country of origin, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, language, … well you name it!) prevails over the narrow, parochial interests of the mediaeval nation-states that draw their strength from permanent distrust of their neighbors and consequently are engaged in frequent bouts of one-upmanship with one and all.

In our contemporary globalized world, to be literate is to able to find our way through the welter of images, messages, ideas, news-flashes and what-have-you that overwhelm us with their presence. It is to be, in short, multimodal in our dealings with the world around us, to parse it in ways congenial and meaningful to us and, furthermore, to be digitally savvy in achieving many of the goals that we have set up for ourselves. And, in our age of "post-truth" and fake news, there is an urgent need to promote information and media literacy—the ability to sift through what is being passed on to us through the social media,

often posted by anonymous sources, and weed out postings designed to spread false rumors. This in turn calls for inculcating in our young children a critical attitude, thus underscoring the need for a critical literacy.

In the new emerging world of shortening distances and time spans and ever-widening contact among peoples from different geographical regions, we urgently need to hitch our wagon to the future that is already here on pain of running the risk of condemning the new generations to a by-now-long-superseded world built on mores and values that no longer hold good. As Rex Miller (2005, p. 33) put it eloquently,

> Digital media combine text, graphics, sound, and data in such a way that we experience things in a much more integrated format—multisensory, multimedia, and multinetworked. As a result, boundaries separating disciplines, organizations, structures, and people begin to dissolve. We see convergences of things that once were sharply separated. The message and the messenger become a holographic reality capable of infinite change and complexity.

But we can only hope to achieve this goal, by discarding time-honored approaches to literacy education that have nevertheless proved themselves to be thoroughly out of tune with the times we live in and woefully unable to step up to the challenges we currently face.

Simply put, critical thinking is a short term for the ability to separate the relevant, truly informative sheep from the sensational, untruthful goats when it comes to the enormous plethora of information routinely being made available on the Internet and which some unscrupulous agents exploit in order to spread disinformation with the explicit aim of sowing dissent in the society at large and reap the benefits of the tumult it creates. Critical literacy helps the reader to get inside the innermost recesses of the text that is presented to them and flesh out the hidden ideological agenda that texts often harbor. Jordão and Fogaça (2012, p. 74) point out the underlying assumption:

> Texts are to be perceived as culturally produced units of meaning, constructed in specific social and historical moments, establishing and being established by the interplay of many discourses. This view claims that the subject has an active role in understanding the world and in interpreting texts.

This "active role" of the reading subject (who, let us remind ourselves, ceases to be a mere passive participant in the whole process—as signaled by the time-honored reference to hearing and reading as "passive skills", in opposition to speaking and writing, considered their respective active counterparts) is also highlighted by Kleiman (2014, p. 80) in her remark:

> In digital literacy, the text or the hypertext has an organization in which language itself, image and sound have an important role in the process of meaning-making, calling for a [technique of] reading in which the reader himself decides what elements to focus on, in what order, whether they are proficient or just incipient in the process of the acquisition of written language. (my free translation)

To reinforce a point already made in the paragraphs above: whereas the traditional "three Rs" approach is laser focused on the word, with the new critically oriented, cross-culturally informed and multimodality-based literacy we glean the world at large, using the word as a window on it. And, in the process, the reader is invited to take the reins of the process of reading in ways truly meaningful to them. Nothing could be more Freirean than that! During a dialogue with his long-time associate Donaldo Macedo, Freire makes the following observation:

> Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world. […] this movement from the word to the world is always present; even the spoken word flows from our reading of the world. In a way, however, we can go further and say that reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of *writing* it or *rewriting* it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work. For me, this dynamic movement is central to the literacy process. (FREIRE; MACEDO, 1987, p. 50)

Incidentally, there is also here something unmistakably Derridean too about the suggestion that rewriting is, in and of itself, transformative in the sense that what gets rewritten is never quite the same as what was written before—the iconically Derridean notion of "iterability" in action! With the allied notion of "*différance*" writ large all over the place! What Freire underscores in the passage just cited is the active, interventive role of the reader—in stark contrast with the docilely passive role traditionally assigned to them.

WRAPPING UP: A QUICK GLANCE AT SOME OF THE LARGER LESSONS

The new literacy that we having been looking at in the foregoing paragraphs is much more than a simple improvement upon old practices. Contrary to what many may be tempted to think, it is far from being old wine in new bottle! In many ways, it even goes against some of the fundamental principles that undergirded the three Rs. It highlights the need for a radically new approach that centres around the notion that literacy is a social phenomenon, not an individual achievement. Anyone who is inclined to think that the new literacy is nothing but a rehash of good old practices is overlooking the indisputable fact that, in many societies where the oral tradition still prevails, it is not uncommon to come across someone who is unable to read or write, but still qualifies to be considered educated—a status which many would regard as conditional upon the person being literate in the first place. But, believe it or not, it is equally true of so-called 'advanced' societies, as a story that appeared on the B.B.B. official site on April 15, 2018, entitled "I was a teacher for 17 years, but I couldn't read or write" (MCDERMOTT, 2018) reveals.

The new literacy considers the printed word as at best allusive, often symptomatic, of larger messages and the hidden premises that make them legible at all in the first place. The teaching of literacy in its new sense, therefore, calls for a whole raft of methods and specific techniques geared towards cultivating a critical attitude. In the words of Soares (2016, p. 140), it "is important to adopt […] methods that foster an interactive facet" in the elaboration of literacy programmes. She is of the opinion that this can only be done by dint of initiatives "to stimulate metatextual comportments: reflection that accompanies, regulates and controls the production of texts in their micro- as well as macrolinguitic aspects [and also] reflection that identifies and analyses these aspects in the texts [that we have already read]"

As teachers we ought to bear in mind that our task is to open the minds of our students to the larger meanings of the texts they are presented with, while avoiding treacherous ideological trapdoors set up all over the place, and not stifle their inborn curiosity by forcing them to attend only to the printed word and nothing else besides. And, as and when possible, we ought to cultivate among our students the habit of reading between the lines.

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