

“New Literacies or New Challenges?”: The Development of the Concept of Literacy in the Context of Information and Communication Technologies and Language Teaching

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Abstract:

This article discusses the development of the concept of literacy in the context of IC technologies and English language teaching stressing the idea that literacy is no longer a stable concept which was always connected with the basic skills of reading and writing. The rapid developments of today have been changing, affecting and modifying this concept in such a way that it is difficult to say what it exactly means. Throughout the article the author traces the political, historical, social and cultural factors that have been influencing the development of this concept, with special focus on ICT's and how the continuous developments occurring to them gave birth to new literacies as a quite new concept that has come to the fore to mean different things to different people. The article proceeds to tackle the question, “who is to be considered literate?” stressing the idea that literate individuals nowadays know many things and master many skills other than the foundational abilities of reading, writing and calculating. It proceeds to compare between the new concept of literacy and the traditional one trying to answer an important question: “why is it essential to assimilate a new concept of literacy?”

1. Introduction

A common idea among simple laymen is that literacy means simply the ability to read, write and calculate. This simple conception of literacy is still dominant among many people nowadays. Literacy, as a concept, is not as simple as such; I see literacy as a dynamic and complicated concept that has encountered many changes throughout the course of

human history and language development. These changes have been depicted in the varying purposes, functions, attitudes, forms, channels, meanings and uses attached to literacy and the idea of being literate in different contexts. Historically speaking, literacy apparently meant different things to different people, depending on economic and historical conditions and their own unique cultural and social perspectives (Tyner 1998: p25). Besides, the changing meanings for literacy have been a direct result of a variety of forces influencing the development of new technologies and the literacy environments they prompt.

2. Historical, Social and Cultural Contexts of Literacy Development

In earliest societies, literacy was perceived in a simple, pragmatic way; it was a way to record land, livestock, crops and business transactions (Leu 2000). But later on, with the development of human activities and life patterns, it began to take other forms and be perceived in different ways. Tracing the development of the nature and function of literacy in different historical, social and cultural contexts, Leu et al (2004) notice that at certain times in the past literacy took a socio-political sense by becoming a way to communicate common experiences among the oppressed, often using a special symbolic system. Leu & Kinzer (2000: p112) cite many historical examples representing this functional use of literacy in many cultures and countries as a means of communication among the oppressed: (1) This happened in 11th-century Japan when a separate writing system was developed by the women at court and Lady Murasaki wrote the first novel, *The Tale of the Genji*; (2) it also happened in Czarist Russia when resistance to oppression led to politically charged forms of literacy. These included *samizdat*, a secretive system of self-publication for revolutionary texts and literature prohibited by the government. This form of writing and reading developed its own symbolic representations for revolution and resistance; (3) other examples of oppression shaping the form and function of literacy include the story of the Cherokee and of African Americans in the antebellum southern United States.

At other times, it took a religious sense in such a way that the need to spread religious dogma has shaped the form and function of literacy. In medieval Europe, for example, the Christian church used literacy as a vehicle to enforce a common religion in a world with competing religious viewpoints (Leu & Kinzer 2000: p112). In this context, literate Priesthoods used to copy, read and interpret common religious texts for the masses in order to assure their salvation. But later on, Luther argued that individuals need to read and interpret religious texts themselves without relying on priests, and thus a new distributed definition to literacy

emerged in post-Reformation Europe. It was recognised at this time that rising lay literacy was one of the preconditions for the reform and that the struggles for reform depended on print and reading (Graff 1987: p134).

There have been three major human contributions that have greatly influenced and developed the concept of literacy: the invention of writing, the invention of print and the current dominance of ICT technologies. Before the invention of writing, literacy took a certain form that was represented in the person's ability to express himself and orally communicate his ideas to his fellowmen. In this way, orators were considered highly literate individuals. With the emergence of writing, many changes occurred to the concept of literacy leading orators at this time, such as Socrates and Plato, to be reluctant to acknowledge writing as having anything good to produce to language, education or human culture in spite of the numerous benefits attached to writing in terms of literacy development among people.

Ryder (1996) argues that five thousand years ago the affordances of orality and rhetoric were extended by the technology of written text. Writing enabled the precision of recorded memory. It afforded cognitive communication across time and distance and gave birth to History. The written word introduced constraints of grammar and syntax, but out of these constraints emerged stability and permanence of language. It was a means of representing and archiving human knowledge for later retrieval by other people. Therefore, writing moved literacy into another advanced stage in which written communication began to spread as a means of contact among people beside oral communication that suffer some shortcomings in terms of space and time.

Generally, literacy was an essential component characterising the modern age, which became an age of reading and writing. Book learning changed the nature of basic education throughout the West as providers of education perceived it as a means through which they can foster morality, patriotism and citizenship. Education itself was primarily moral and secondarily intellectual and the textbooks, the lessons and the methods as educational technologies were designed to carry out the primary intention (Ryder 1996).

An important note worth of consideration, as far as literacy development is concerned, is that history tells us that when a new technology or literacy tool appears, it is always met by caution, and sometimes rejection, from people who doubt the benefits or potentialities that this technology or tool might have or the improvements it might achieve. For

example, it is surprising for us today to hear that Socrates and Plato objected to using writing as a new medium of communication considering it an insignificant waste of time that fostered ignorance leading people away from the proper literate behaviour (International Reading Association 2000). In the same way, it may be surprising for future generations to hear that the Internet has been attacked by many writers and thinkers in our present time who blame it for spoiling the basic literacy skills of young learners.

3. The Changing Idea of “Who is to be Considered Literate?”

The changing concept of literacy is clearly represented in the changing idea of *what means to be literate* which has taken several forms and shapes depending on the nature of the invention or innovation that comes to the fore and the specific requirements which it imposes upon the individual to cope with it. Eagleton & Dobler (2007: pp45-46) exemplify this point stating that with the advent of the printed press and the subsequent mass production of bibles, people had access to text and needed to be sufficiently literate to read a bible. In today’s world, the advent of the computer, the World Wide Web, and most specifically, hypertext itself, has caused our expectations for being literate to change to include proficiency in locating, understanding, and using information on the Web. In this regard, Rassool (1999: p3) argues that the impact of information technology on literacy and culture has been equated with that of the print revolution during the 19th century.

This means that the idea of being literate is changing with time as far as new technological advances are concerned. Thus, the expectations for being literate have evolved from simply writing one’s name, to reading a bible, to reading a survey, to the current expectations that to be successful in many endeavours and fields, one must be skilled at accessing, understanding, using and creating information through technology. Being literate today involves more than learning how to use language effectively; today, literate individuals know how to gather, analyse, and use information resources (which are not restricted to books and printed materials) to answer questions, solve problems and make decisions (Kasper 2000).

Another aspect of the changes occurring on the concept of literacy and the meaning of who is literate is the current and continuous endeavours to redefine basic literacy itself that any individual needs to be considered literate by his/her society. Today, many writers (e.g. Warlick 2004: p17) notice that in the 21st century, not only have additional new literacies (e.g.

information literacy, digital literacies, electronic literacies) come to the fore, but also a redefinition of basic literacy (i.e. reading, writing and basic mathematics) within the context of an information environment has occurred. That is to say, the basic abilities required to encode and decode the language still count, but there are more other advanced reading and writing abilities and skills which are required in the context of the massive amounts of information emerging everyday. In such a context, the individual is increasingly challenged to read quickly and selectively without wasting his/her time reading every word.

4. A New Concept of Literacy Vs the Traditional Concept

Traditionally, literacy revolved around the ability to read, write and comprehend printed texts. For five centuries, literacy, as Leau & Kinzer (2003: p18) argue, has been largely defined by the skills and strategies required to effectively obtain information represented in books and other printed forms made possible by the invention of the printing press and other technologies. This definition is reflected in comments often heard from preservice education students who, when challenged to articulate a definition of literacy, make the statement, "It doesn't matter what form it's in. If I can write it and read it, I'm literate!" This is known as traditional or foundational literacy skills.

This narrow concept of literacy, which is still dominant in schools and teacher-education institutions nowadays, is no longer valid. In this regard, Warschauer (2002) states that many theorists prefer a broader definition of literacy that extend beyond the basic ability to read and write taking into account the social contexts of literacy practice. They point out that what is considered skilful reading or writing varies widely across historical, political, and socio-cultural contexts. The Internet, as one of the best and dominant information resources, has changed the traditionally-held concept of literacy requiring new forms of reading, writing and viewing skills and competencies that were never required with traditional books (Leu et al 2005: p2).

As students nowadays increasingly involved in electronic environments, they need new skills and strategies that they have not been familiar with; the ability to communicate through graphics, hypertexts, and other information resources necessitates the development of new literacy skills (Karchmer 2001: p442). The current technological revolution, as Kellner (2002) argues, demands a major restructuring of education today with new literacies, new pedagogies and new curricula. As a result, it has

become important to understand and identify the new skills, strategies and competencies that the Internet requires to include them in education.

This does not mean that we, as English teachers and English-teacher educators, should undermine the ability to read and write. Instead, we are required to look upon it with a new perspective (i.e. a new literacies approach) within the new context of information and communication technologies as a new perspective about the nature of literacy is beginning to emerge. This perspective, often referred to as “new literacies,” is still in its initial stages, but it is clear that it will be a powerful one, redefining what it means to be literate in the twenty-first century (Leu et al 2007: p41).

This involves building upon the foundational literacy skills that students master. In this respect, Leu (2000) suggests that it is likely that reading and writing ability will become even more important in the future than it is today. This is due to the increasing need for acquiring and communicating information rapidly. Consequently, one's ability to quickly locate useful information to solve important problems and then communicate the solution to others will be a strong determinant of his/her success. In an age when speed of information access is central to success, reading proficiency will be more critical to students' futures.

5. Why is It Essential to Assimilate A New Concept of Literacy?

Throughout the previous discussion, it has become evident that there are many factors that make it essential to assimilate a new concept of literacy, especially in the context of education and English language learning:

1-The unprecedented rapid advancements, improvements and changes occurring on ICTs have affected education in general, and literacy practices inside the classroom in particular.

2-The new era of ICTs imposes new challenges in the educational, social and economical contexts in such a way that new skills and competencies are increasingly required from students to find a place in the competitive work market.

3-The nature of the basic literacy skills, such as reading and writing, has changed to cope with the new information age, and therefore, online reading, for example, requires additional skills and strategies that cope with the Web environment.

4-The teacher and the book are no longer the main and only sources of knowledge. Other sources, such as the Internet, have begun to replace them in an unprecedented quick rate. This will open the minds of students to many ideas and this will necessitate the modification of the concept of literacy to cope with this new state in which the student can be more informed than his/her teacher is.

6. Conclusion

Literacy is one of the most perplexing concepts nowadays, especially after the emergence of other concepts attached to it (e.g. new literacies, digital literacies and multiple literacies). It is easy to recognise that the continuous and rapid development occurring in IC technologies on one hand, and the practices related to English language teaching and learning on the other, will always be the main factor affecting the shape and form of new literacies. In this way, the development of new literacies as a dynamic concept will continue in the future because of the interdependent relationship between technology and English language teaching.

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