Literacy in American Education and Its Relation to Teaching English as a Second Language

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Abstract

The construct of literacy plays a major role in educational research and curriculum design. How literacy is defined often reflects the degree of reform called for in education and the view of education taken by those calling for reform. In this paper I review the four major types of literacy: (a) conventional literacy, (b) functional literacy, (c) cultural literacy, and (d) critical literacy. I first define the types, discuss them in terms of ideological hegemony in the context of American education, relate them to current views on the topic of literacy, and then explain their implications for teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL).

Introduction

Literacy usually catches our attention when portrayed in the negative, that is, as illiteracy. Cries for school reform are often the result of the national census discovering a large percent of the population who can neither neither read nor write. However, the numbers counted can depend on how literacy is defined. And these definitions often reflect the degree of reform called for in education and the view of education taken by those calling for reform.

Literacy is often defined by one of four terms: (a) conventional

literacy, (b) functional literacy, (c) cultural literacy, and (d) critical literacy. This paper will define the terms, discuss them in terms of ideological hegemony, relate them to current views on the topic of literacy, and then explain their implications for teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL).

Conventional Literacy

Conventional literacy is usually seen as the basic ability to read and write. The problem with this definition is that we can find many degrees in reading and writing competence: reading a stop sign and signing one's name could categorize a person as literate under this definition, or reading a story and writing a summary could also be used as the measure of conventional literacy. What conventional literacy is probably depends on each person's view from his or her own literacy level. However, this view places the measure of literacy at the lowest level. Historically it might be accurate to say that the ability to read a short message makes one literate since in the past everyone did not have the opportunity to attend school, and consequently many could not read anything or write anything either. The classic example is having to sign one's name with an "X." Conversely, this is more likely an anachronism as schooling is more available and mandatory for most people.

Setting the standards for inclusion in the category of literacy at the lowest level causes more problems than solutions. On the one hand, this level can be used to point out the success of the American school system in that we can feel good about having so many literate members in our society produced by our outstanding educational institutions. On the other hand, it actually hides the need for solutions. If a person can be considered to be literate with just a short stroke of the pen and vocalization of a few words, then the level of literacy will be obfuscated; one might be able to sign one's name but not really be able to read what one was signing. Solutions to

problems will be found by pointing out the problems. The solution to the problem of defining literacy can best be accomplished by viewing literacy as consisting of many different levels rather than setting a cut off point at an arbitrary level. The attempt to define levels rather than setting a base and thus concealing differences has lead some to argue for a functional view of literacy.

Functional Literacy

Functional literacy defines literacy as the ability to perform a set of tasks. The tasks to be performed are delineated by the functions a member of society needs to perform in order to participate effectively. Tasks such as filling out a job application form, reading the rulebook for a driver's license test, or reading a restaurant menu. Usually related to everyday life situations, the tasks can also include on the job tasks like ready safety signs or marking a work-completed sheet. Although the functional view gives a clearer picture of literacy levels, it still functions much like a bottom-line; the bottom-line for industry. It sets a minimum level of literacy that a person should be able to meet, but this minimum is usually the minimum that industry requires for a functional work force. The functions reflect this in that they are usually mechanical functions which do not require very much thought; just enough thought to perform a task, but not enough to think about why one is performing that task.

If one views functional literacy as an acceptable literacy level, then computers would possibly be admitted to this category since they can perform many of these functions already. What is missing is the ability to understand the world in which we live through the modalities of reading and writing.

Cultural Literacy

Proponents of cultural literacy seek a definition of literacy

inclusive of an understanding of our world knowledge. This view takes as its base the theoretical constructs of schema theory. Schema theory notes that in order to understand a text one must have the background knowledge available because the reader and the text interact to produce meaning. Without the available schema or background, a reader is unable to relate their knowledge with the information in the text, and is, therefore, unable to draw out the ideas imbedded in the text. In his book *Cultural Literacy,* E. D. Hirsch (1988) takes a simpler view of schema theory in that his view is limited to cultural background knowledge. If a person does not know the cultural context of the information in the text, then they are unable to extract its total meaning.

Opponents argue against the simplistic view of literacy embedded in cultural literacy. Admittedly, it is a step up from the mechanical view espoused in functional literacy. However, cultural literacy does not reach the level of critical thinking. It calls for knowledge of enough facts about the culture so as to be able to understand the writings of a cultural elite. This will give more power to those who write than to those who read. The modern social critic Jacques Ellul put forth the claim that the literate in society are most easily swayed by propaganda in written form because they have been educated to believe in the quality and veracity of the printed word. If literate adults are only expected to understand the ideas behind the text, critique of those ideas will not be needed. Also questionable is the status of the definition of our culture. Who is to set the parameters for delineating the required knowledge ? Because he presents a list of knowledge by which we can judge cultural literacy, some have criticized Hirsch's ethnocentric view of American culture. However, Hirsch's view does not present one single level of literacy. He explains that, "the level of one's literacy depends upon the breadth of one's acquaintance with a national culture" (1988, p.70). Therefore, one's cultural knowledge could go beyond the ethnocentric to include knowledge of other cultures within American

culture. A person with this knowledge would be seen as even more literate than those with only ethnocentric knowledge. Unfortunately, this subculture type of knowledge is not the cultural knowledge used in the writings of the power elite, and cultural literacy still fails to include a critical aspect.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy does include the important factor of requiring that a person judged to be literate be able to analyze the ideas presented in writing, critique those ideas for their truth value, and come to their own conclusions irrespective of the propositions in the text. The main purpose of critical literacy is to give power to those who read and write so that they are not just able to sign their names to support those already in power, or to function in a work capacity that supports the current power structure, or to accept the ideas and culture presented by the written word, but are able to think critically about the structure of society and to change it if deemed necessary. Critical literacy goes beyond the types of literacy discussed above because it argues that reading and writing do not guarantee thinking. Therefore, critical literacy is not limited to the two modalities of reading and writing, but includes speaking and listening, albeit critically.

Critical literacy promotes critical thinking for the purpose of understanding the relationship between knowledge and power, for understanding that this relationship can be used to oppress one group in society, and to comprehend the oppressive nature of the relationship and thereby act against it.

As literature is for the liberation of the human spirit, critical literacy aims at the liberation of humanity oppressed within social structures that use literacy as an oppressive tool.

Comparisons of Literacy Types

As tools of oppression, functional and cultural literacy can be used by those in power to maintain the status quo. In order to maintain hegemony with a certain ideology, those in power need to make sure that those not in power are not able to gain power. If the standard of literacy is based upon an ability to complete functions for daily life and work, the people at this level of literacy will never have a high enough level of literacy to challenge those in power because they would not be able to do more than complete a job application. They would not be able to comprehend the arguments needed to vote themselves more power, nor could they write in a convincing enough manner to influence others. Cultural literacy is almost more dangerous because of its focus on understanding and accepting the dominant cultural view. If one accepts that the dominant culture's ideology is most important, then one will work toward assimilating that cultural view without any critical understating of the concepts behind it. This serves to keep people from debating divergent viewpoints since they must accept the dominant culture even to begin to be heard, and then to be heard they must speak through the cultural limitations of cultural literacy, thereby negating their own views, if one accepts that a cultural knowledge imbues language with meaning.

E. D. Hirsch argues that language cannot be understood without the knowledge of the culture behind it. This view of literacy maintains the power of the dominant culture by denying access to language unless one wants to join and accept the ideology of the dominant culture. By delineating cultural knowledge to that of the dominant culture, Hirsch argues for preventing other worldviews from becoming incorporated with the power structure. However, cultural literacy misses one main point of the argument that is a basic element of psycholinguistics; many different world views and cultures can use one language, just as one culture can use many different

languages (Steinberg, Nagata, & Aline, 2001). It is not the language that matters, but who controls the language. The importance of white Anglo-Saxon male cultural literacy is only maintained as long as white Anglo-Saxon males dominate the writing and dissemination of information. Control of the media is control of language and also of culture and values. In order to be culturally literate one must be able to comprehend the culture as presented in mass media. In addition, control of publishing can control ideas as seen in the views presented by textbooks and reading materials for our nation's youth. Students are not taught to question textbooks, rather they are taught that the way to succeed is to believe the content of the textbooks so that they can pass tests and become members of the working community. If one does not believe the textbooks, one flunks the tests, fails to graduate, and becomes a member of the unemployed.

Reports on Literacy

In *A Nation at Risk* (1983, full text in Stevens & Woods, 1987), a report by the national Commission on Excellence in Education, the view of literacy is not taken very far beyond the cultural literacy level. The purpose of the recommended content is to teach what "constitutes the mind and spirit of our culture" (Stevens & Wood, 1987, p. 309). For teaching English, this means the students must be able to write an "effective" essay, discuss their ideas "intelligently," and know the literature of our heritage so as to relate it to "the customs, ideas, and values of today's life and culture" (Stevens & Wood, 1987, p. 309). In most of *A Nation at Risk,* the purpose of learning is to relate the current state of affairs to our past history and heritage so as to justify the status quo. Social studies should "enable students to fix their places and possibilities within the larger social and cultural structure" (Stevens & Wood, 1987, p. 310). "Fix" is the key word here; to find out where they are and to have them stay there. The purpose of education as described in the report is to teach the

students to accept the culture and accept their place within it. No mention is made in the report of trying to teach the students to take a critical view of the organization of our society or of its institutions. Critical understanding of our history is not to be part of the curriculum. The only criticism will come in the form of teaching the students to "grasp the difference between free and repressive societies" (Stevens & Wood, 1987, p. 310), and to criticize those repressive societies from the stand point of American society being "free."

With the advent of economic recession, cultural literacy was abandoned in light of the danger to one of the cornerstones of American culture, business. The pragmatic realities of world competition colored former President Bush's report on *Education Reform for an Adaptable Work Force.* The basic level of functional literacy called for in this report was to allow the work force to adapt to changing conditions in the economy. The report stated that education "should provide the foundation that enables workers to adapt and respond to changing workplace technologies and economic conditions" (Stevens & Wood, 1987, p. 315). This type of functional literacy is different from the functional literacy discussed previously. In the previous functional literacy, literate persons should be able to complete the functions that are apparent in society at the time of their graduation from educational institutions. Bush's view was that the literate not only be able to function in today's world but be able to "adapt" to functions that will appear in the future. With the rapidly changing technologies and economic situation, today's functional literate will be lost tomorrow. This places more demand on teaching students to be able to see future trends and to know how to meet those trends through self-study or continued education. The culture of the past is not deemed to be as important as the technological culture of the future. And critical literacy will need to focus on the ability to access the value of new technologies for the future. However, Bush's report does not mention the need for critical

literacy since the functional literacy of the work force is supposed to maintain the dominant forces in power as technologies and economies come to represent power in the modern age.

The English as a Second Language Context

In the English as a Second Language (ESL) context, these forms of literacy present the teacher with a number of challenges. In order to discuss the challenges faced by the teacher and by the student, we need to clarify the context. The context of this discussion will concern ESL students in primary and secondary education learning English as a second language in America. First, the students' immediate needs will demand a curriculum that can provide at least the level of conventional literacy. The students will also need a level of functional literacy that will enable them to support themselves and perhaps their families during school or upon graduation from school. However, if the students are going to have a chance to compete for a better standard of living within the context of American culture, they will also need a high enough level of cultural literacy to understand the literature of the dominant culture and to speak and communicate with that culture so that they are not locked out of opportunities because of lack of communicative pathways of cultural knowledge. However, and extremely important, this will not mean giving up or not learning about their own culture. Knowledge of their own culture will be just as important as knowledge of the main culture since a strong sense of self will be needed upon which to build the self esteem necessary as a basis for further education and growth. In addition, just as cultural literacy in a culture will enable a person to operate in that culture, cultural literacy within two cultures will enable a person to communicate within both cultures and across cultures more effectively, making that person both more valuable to the work force and more valuable to society. Literacy in the ESL classroom must not stop at cultural literacy, however. In order to

ensure that the ESL student becomes a member of American society, the tools necessary to not only break down barriers but also to build bridges will be essential. The ESL teacher will need to teach critical literacy so that the ESL student will not simply become a loyal subject or serf of the dominant culture, but will be able to change the structures of society so that all members are given a place within the culture. The promise contained in the American dream is not a promise of perfection, but a promise of available change so that society can continually be reconstructed along lines that ensure the American dream for all its citizens.

References

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