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Re-Writing the Goals of Foreign Language Teaching: The Achievement of Multiple Literacies and Symbolic Competence

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Abstract: Since the 70s, foreign language departments have seen communicative competence as the desired outcome of the language learning process and have used communicative teaching approaches—mainly Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)—to achieve that goal. The increasing demands that learners face due to the spread of globalization have called into question the appropriateness of those goals and methods. As a result of this questioning, FL departments are now in the process of rethinking their curricula and pedagogies. A construct that has emerged as a possible new organizing principle is literacy. In this paper, I explore the rationale and implications of using this construct (literacy) to articulate and redefine the goals of FL programs, and some of the characteristics of a literacy-based curriculum. I will propose that such curricula will deliver what Kramsch (2008) has called "symbolic competence". I will end by discussing some of the hurdles that lie in the way of the implementation of the changes proposed.

Keywords: Multiple Literacies, Foreign Language pedagogical model, Communicative Competence, Symbolic Competence

T**HE IDENTITY CRISES** that so pervasively populate our times, notoriously afflicting nations, institutions, and individuals, are not foreign to academic programs, and particularly to foreign language departments. The number of publications that in the last decade have explored the mission of these departments and contemplated a host of possible new frameworks and initiatives at program building suggest that, indeed, they have not been spared. In fact, in numerous articles and in several books—*Literacy and the Language Curriculum* (2000)*, Remapping the Foreign Language Curriculum* (2005), and *Educating for Advanced Foreign Language Capacities* (2006), among others—we find calls for disciplinary changes and proposals to overhaul the practices of FL departments. Though the proposals differ somewhat, they share the same premise, which is that the curriculum of college language programs be articulated with the notion of 'literacy', 'multiple literacies', or 'advanced literacies' in mind[1]. The claim is that by building their programs around literacy, FL departments can overcome the 'language vs. content' divide, merge the goals of communicative competence of the first years with those of the critical thinking of advanced courses, and thus attain integration and coherence in the curriculum. And most importantly, such an

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[1] Calls for the use of 'literacy' as an organizing principle started in the mid-1990s. But full explorations of the idea, including the identification of teaching practices and materials to achieve the 'new' goals, did not happen until more recently. A first effort at implementing a literacy-oriented program was seen in the curriculum overhaul that the Georgetown University German department undertook at the end of the last decade.

approach to language study will better equip students to become full participants in the multicultural globalized world.

In this paper, I will discuss the rationale for using literacy to articulate and redefine the goals of FL programs and some of the characteristics of a literacy-based curriculum. I will then contend that while adopting a 'literacy' model does indeed make sense, and, language practitioners should attend to its proposals, some of the thinking articulated around this (new) notion and the specific practices stemming from it may only contribute to maintaining the status quo. An additional (expected) obstacle to true transformation is, of course, the ever-present resistance to change, here only made worse by a lack of institutional support. It seems clear that while a new road map has been drawn, a number of questions about its implementation remain unanswered.

The CLT Paradigm: Its Rise and Fall

'Communicative language teaching' (CLT) became the buzzword among language teachers in the 1980s and has continued to fill the airwaves until the present. The 'movement' emerged partly as a reaction to audiolingualism, a method that came hand-in-hand with structuralism in linguistics and behaviorism in psychology. Language, according to those theories, consisted of a finite set of patterns that were to be learned through repetition and practice; once the rules were learned, the student was rendered 'linguistically competent'. This view of language came to be challenged, especially from the anthropologists' and philosophers' camps, who called attention to meaning and suggested that it is not inherent to words, but rather that it is contingent on contextual factors; it, in other words, resides in the total act of communication. With communication in the picture, a new understanding of language emerged whereby language came to be not simply a tool to 'explain the world', but a tool 'to do things'. This new understanding of language would, in turn, prompt new theories of language learning and of language teaching. Thus, the pedagogical method that would become the paradigm for language teaching for more than two decades was born.

I will not enter here into a discussion of the pedagogical practices associated with CLT but will simply remind our reader that they were all geared toward developing *communicative competence*; that is, CLT aimed at rendering the speaker capable of "function[ing] in a truly communicative setting —that is, in a dynamic exchange in which *linguistic competence* must adapt itself to the total information input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors" (Savignon, 1972:8, cited in Omaggio-Hadley, 2001).

CLT, we have said, became the orthodoxy in language teaching—rendering those who question its principles heretics (Brown, 2001)—but with time a number of 'infelicities' emerged. On the one hand, the method and its implementation were wanting in several ways. Namely, it could easily lead to a shallow functionalism or leave students unaware of the connections between linguistic choices and contexts; also, it often morphed into an 'anything goes' approach in which the focus on speaking in the classroom typically cohabitated with rote activities (substitution and fill in the blanks exercises) representative of formalist approaches[2]. On the other hand, the findings of linguistic research put into question the ap-

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[2] A narrow understanding of the tenants of the pedagogy commonly encountered equates CLT to providing speaking opportunities, without consideration of their true communicative value; often the paired exercises are a version of ALM pattern-substitution drills (Lee & VanPatten, 1995: 11).

proach's assumptions about language acquisition[3], thus adding to the concerns over its limitations. Indeed, a growing body of work in SLA showed that neither *input* nor *input plus interaction* were sufficient for language acquisition[4]. Views of language and communication also continued to change, contributing to the sense that a readjustment of language pedagogies was in order.

The use of CLT also posed additional difficulties because, due to its focus on oral communication, it did not foster the kind of advanced abilities required in academic work. Students at the advanced levels of the curriculum are asked to engage in the analysis of literary texts and to confront activities and expectations that bear little to no resemblance or connection with those they encounter in the beginner and intermediate phases of their learning; the goal of such activities is not communicative competence but critical thinking and perhaps cultural (with capital *C*) literacy. CLT does not address and cannot resolve this separation between language to communicate and survive 'in the real word' with the use of language in certain forms of higher culture.

The mounting evidence against the once popular method sent practitioners searching in other directions. In the picture, there was, ready to fill the shoes of CLT and reorganize language programs, a possible substitute: literacy. As early as 1994, Kramsch and Nolden were speaking of a "new type of literacy in foreign language education" (Kern, 2000: 21). Others (Berman, 1996; Jurasek, 1996) followed suit with like-minded proposals. Their thinking was anchored in a much more nuanced view of language and communication and a better understanding of the processes involved in language learning.

The *Post- CLT* Times: Literacy and the Literacy-based Curriculum

> Communicating successfully in another language means shifting frames of reference, shifting norms, shifting assumptions of what can and cannot be said, what has to be explicit and what ought to remain tacit, and so on. In other words, using another language effectively involves more than vocabulary and structures; it involves *thinking* differently about language and communication. The question is, how can we begin to understand another way of thinking, how can we be sensitized to different cultural frames … ? One answer … is by reading, writing and discussing texts (Kern, 2000: 1).

The above quote sums up some of the thinking that informs the paradigm shift that we have been discussing; it also announces a 'formula' to make the new vision/mission a reality. And that formula is to put reading and writing, rather than oral performance, at the center of the academic language program. The proposal is, in other words, that programs work toward fostering *literacy* rather than *communicative competence*. While desirable, communicative competence falls short as a goal, because of its connection to the spoken language and its seeming neglect of the written code. Literacy, on the other hand, as it is traditionally understood (i.e., the ability to read and write), is also too limited an objective. The goal to reach should instead be a discourse competence that involves the ability to interpret and critically

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[3] CLT does not claim any particular theory of language as its basis, but its emphasis on speaking (communication) suggests it accepts the premises of the Interaction hypothesis.
[4] This is clearly a gross oversimplification of the theories and findings of SLA in the 1980s and 1990s, but space precludes a more detailed discussion here. For accounts of both, see, for example, Lightbown & Spada (1999) and Mitchell & Myles (1998).

evaluate a wide variety of written and spoken texts. That requires an understanding of not "'what texts mean' in some absolute sense, [but what] people mean *by texts*, and what texts mean *to people* who belong to different discourse communities" (Kern, 2000: 2, italics in the original).

In order to access those meanings, one has to become socialized into the practices in which those texts emerged. The practices, Gee points out, are never simply 'literacy practices' but larger social practices that also involve "ways of behaving, interacting, thinking, believing, speaking" (which Gee calls Discourses –with a capital D) (1996: viii). Literacy then is not only about reading and writing but also about social practices and gaining access to the meaning resources that permit us to become participants in such discourses. It is, in an expanded definition:

> [T]he use of socially-, historically-, and culturally-situated practices of creating and interpreting meaning through texts. It entails at least a tacit awareness of the relationships between textual conventions and their contexts of use, and ideally, the ability to reflect critically on those relationships. … It draws on a wide range of cognitive abilities, on knowledge of written and spoken language, on knowledge of genres, and on cultural knowledge (Kern, 2000: 16).

To capture these multiple dimensions and to distinguish this understanding of literacy from the traditional one, the New London Group speaks of *multiliteracies* (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000). Swaffar and Arens (2005) and others working with second and foreign languages have opted for the term *multiple literacies* to refer to additional literacies other than the native-language literacy (i.e., choices in multiple cultural and linguistic frameworks). The construct of *advanced literacies*, which includes literacies that involve the kind of meaning-making typical of secondary or postsecondary schooling (Colombi & Schleppegrell, 2002), has also been found useful for rethinking the goals that foreign language programs at the collegiate level should strive to achieve.

In none of these new constructs, does literacy amount to the acquisition and transmission of information. It is, instead, about control over meaning resources (*Available Designs*, in the words of the New London Group) and of choices. Language learning is, accordingly, about gaining access to that 'axis of potential meanings' and restructuring (or redesigning) those meanings as we become members of a number of communities that use the language.

So how do we gain access to those meanings? What exactly does a literacy-based curriculum 'look like'? And how is a literacy-based pedagogy different from the pedagogy of the 'traditional' model? After all, "reading and writing and discussing texts" were activities one encountered in 'traditional' language courses, especially at the advanced levels. Indeed, a good number of the activities that the 'new' pegagogy proposes are not novel; it is how they are approached and *when*, *where* and *how* they take place that has changed. Next, I explore some of these changes.

- **Texts, texts, texts: Texts always**. The critical shift is to extend the study of texts to the entire curriculum. Traditional approaches reserved the analysis of texts to the intermediate and advanced levels; at the lower levels of the curriculum, texts were only used to provide vocabulary and grammar practice. In a literacy-based approach, texts are read and analyzed from the start. The motto is "control tasks not texts". Texts give students a deeper understanding of how experience is organized in the other language, and serve as a gateway to the beliefs

and values that underlie the discourse. Texts are critical because they offer learners the chance to stand between two viewpoints and between two cultures. They can be the locus of the thoughtful and creative act of making connections between grammar, discourse, and meaning, between language and content, between language and culture, and between another culture and one's own (Kern, 2000: 46).

An added benefit to the use of texts is that the reading and writing tasks ('recursive tasks') students perform in connection with those texts are, from a cognitive point of view, more accessible and put less of a demand on them than listening and speaking tasks do, allowing for attention to language detail (Swaffar & Arens, 2005: 33).

- Texts of all sorts! The argument in literacy-based approaches is for exposing students to many different types of texts and for doing away with the privileging of literary texts at the advanced levels. The 'small c' type of texts need to have a place in the classroom, along with the 'big C', high culture texts; students should, in other words, have access to both *primary* and *secondary* discourses (Gee, 1996). In the lower levels, the majority of the texts belong in the sphere of primary discourses. As the curriculum progresses, the distribution of primary to secondary discourses is gradually inverted, so that at the most advanced levels, the focus is mostly on secondary uses of language (Byrnes et al., 2006: 93)[5].

A distinctive feature of a literacy-oriented program is the organization of the study of texts by genres. Genres here are to be understood as "an oral or written rhetorical practice that structures culturally embedded communicative situations in a highly predictable fashion, thereby creating 'horizons of expectations' for its community of users" (Swaffar & Arens, 2005: 99). Through the analysis of the set of characteristics that are associated with a genre, students can learn the forms of language in connection with their use and eventually produce those texts. The attention shifts from creating correct sentences or paragraphs to recognizing and dealing with genre formalizations. The use of genres across the curriculum also has the additional advantage of creating coherence and comparability among all levels.

- A different sequence, (slightly) different tasks. As mentioned earlier, the literacy-based curriculum advocates the control of tasks, not of texts; texts are central to all levels of the learning process. The focus on textuality from the beginning is made possible by breaking away from the traditional pedagogical sequence.

Conventionally, as Kern (2000) rightly points out, the reading and writing of texts took place mostly outside of class and was considered individual work. Class-time was reserved for (group) discussion. The activities followed a well-established sequence, with reading coming first, followed by talking, and ending with writing; "the phases [were] typically discrete and sequential, rather than recursive" (2000: 132). In a literacy-based approach, a good part of the reading and writing is moved inside the classroom and is done collaboratively. The essay, I will add, is not the end product of the reading-talking process, nor is it the only form of writing students engage in. Summaries, prediction exercises, and the rewriting of the analysed texts for other contexts, among other activities, can be woven in with the discussion and reading. That is, all three activities are made to overlap. It is in this overlap that the difference between a literacy–based approach and the traditional curricula lies (ibid).

To pave the way to literacy, the New London group has proposed the use of four curricular components, which can be thought of as "the 'basic food groups' that will meet language

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[5] This is representative of what the German department at Georgetown University proposes in its curriculum, where the shift from primary to secondary discourses occurs over five levels.

learners' literacy 'nutritional needs'" (ibid). These components are *situated practice*, *overt instruction*, *critical framing* and *transformed practice* [6]. I will briefly introduce the 'food groups' and provide one or two examples of representative activities.

Situated practice: Situated practice is immersion in the language without conscious reflection. In the context of literacy, situated practice activities are those where students are involved in writing (using the 'Available Designs') to express their personal ideas and those activities in which they read and justify the spontaneous reactions they have to a text. Directed Reading-Thinking Activities (DRTA) are one such type of activity that is most useful in the early stages of learning the language. In DRTA, teachers engage students in a "cyclical process of predicting, reading, and thinking by carefully selecting stopping points in the text and asking two principal questions at each juncture: 'What do you think is going to happen next?' and 'Why'" (Kern, 2000: 135). Working with those questions, students are made aware of how their own expectations influence their reading and learn how to reconcile those expectations with the textual facts; any difference in the cultural schemas (of their native language vis-à-vis the foreign language) related to the topic in question might also then become evident, creating a space for critical framing tasks (see below). The activity is also useful because it develops procedural knowledge about how to go about the reading process.

Overt instruction: Activities that lead to the "conscious awareness and control over what is being learned" (New London Group, 1996: 83) are considered overt instruction activities. They typically involve developing a metalanguage. They can focus on the relationships established in the text, for example, among words (thus focusing on vocabulary) or on parts of the text at the syntactic level (e.g., structure of the sentence). Working with syntactic relationships can bring the awareness necessary for the student to render a text into a different form, (e.g., a summary or an essay), thus engaging in transformed practice (see below). Teaching genres is another form of engaging in overt instruction.

Critical framing: Critical framing has to do with the reflective dimension of literacy instruction. It involves "conscious attention to the relationship between linguistic forms and social contexts and purposes" (Kern, 2000: 204). Critical focus questions, for example, direct students' attention to specific lexical and structural choices in a text and to the effect those choices have on the reader. Summaries, especially those with a set limit of words, are acts of interpretation and of transformation that ultimately confront the reader with what a text says and how that is accomplished. Critical framing activities are, in short, activities that allow students to gain the necessary distance from the text and their own assumptions to further learn about both.

Transformed practice: Transformed practice is the redesign and reformulation of existing texts in order to make them appropriate in new contexts of communication or the creation of new texts on the basis of existing ones (Kern, 2000). Most activities of this type 'activate' other instructional categories; that is, while writing or rewriting, students also engage in critical framing or situated practice activities.

The analytic essay is the most common representative of this curricular component. Another task of this sort consists of rewriting a text, changing one or more of its parameters.

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[6] These tasks are also represented in styles of teaching considered communicative. In fact, Hall (2001) presents what these activities look like organized around the modes of communication that substitute the atomistic categorization in terms of skills proposed in the National Standards.

Stories, for example, can be reformulated by changing the narrative point of view or the sequence of events presented. More complex transformations include genre reformulations.

The curricular components I have just described are not recent inventions now being delivered to the classroom via 'the newest approach'. In fact, situated practice and overt instruction activities have constituted the bulk of traditional language teaching at the introductory and intermediate levels (ibid), while critical framing is the main activity of the advanced levels. It is the integration through different tasks of all four types of activities in lessons across the curriculum that brings about a different result. To privilege immersion and many sorts of overt instruction, the New London Group (1996: 85) warns us, can "render learners quite uncritical and unconscious of the cultural locatedness of meanings and practices". If exposed to a 'balanced diet', however, learners will not only achieve communicative competence but will also gain the cross-cultural and critical understanding necessary that can make them capable interpreters and producers of the discourse. Instruction through a literacy-oriented curriculum will help them achieve what Kramsch and Whiteside (2008) have labeled *symbolic competence*.

FL Departments Reimagened through Symbolic Competence

Kramsch & Whiteside (2008: 664) contend that

> [s]ocial actors in multilingual settings seem to activate more than a communicative competence that [enables] them to communicate accurately, effectively, and appropriately with one another. They seem to display a particularly acute sensibility to play with various linguistic codes and the various spatial and temporal resonances of these codes.

Kramsch and Whiteside call the ability that these social actors display *symbolic competence*. If students are to become full participants in language communities other than their own, they need to acquire this type of competence. Without this competence, their ability to simply exchange information can be compromised. Needless to say, learning vocabulary and communication strategies alone will not render students 'symbolically competent'. They will also need to be acquainted with symbolic forms that include "embodied experiences, emotional resonances, and moral imaginings" (Kramsch, 2006: 251). Access to those symbolic forms, I would argue, can be gained by "[teaching] students the social and linguistic frameworks of texts and genres for spoken and written communication—across time periods, across cultures and in multicultural frameworks" (Swaffar and Arens, 2005: 5). That is to say, the knowledge to manipulate symbolic systems can be gained through literacy-based curricula.

Foreign language departments are, of course, in a privileged position to deliver symbolic competence. However, for them to become the sites that 'make it happen', it is imperative that we restructure the curricula around literacy. As things stand now, such scenario still seems quite distant.

Indeed the road map to foreign language literacies has been available for some time, yet the instances of its implementation are few and far between. This is partly because the responsibility for such implementation falls on individual departments that cannot spare the human resources to work on "á la carte" integrated curricula. The examples that we have of successful overhauls—i.e., cases that culminated in an integrated curriculum—were only

made possible because of grants that allowed for the necessary dedication on the part of the faculty. The curriculum of the German department at Georgetown is, we have said, the most salient example of such implementation, and it was indeed made possible by a major grant. The limited presence of literacy-driven courses in FL departments cannot, however, be attributed only to outside forces, but also to internal ones. There is a true resistance to change the old ways. While paying lip service to the new approach, many practitioners, including the authors of the books that present the programmatic changes, have not moved much beyond their traditional treatment of texts and the privileging of literary ones. In fact, a good number of the texts used to exemplify literacy practices both in Kern (2000) and Swaffar and Arens (2005) —constantly referenced throughout this paper— are literary texts. And the activities or tasks being proposed to analyze them —which mainly fall under the 'critical framing' and 'transformed practice' categories— might be limited to those typical of the traditional classroom. Examples of activities that foreground the intimate relationship between form and meaning and the specificity of cultural patterns —the unique contribution of literacy-based approaches— are, unfortunately, mostly missing from their proposals. If true change is to happen in the classroom, these elements need to be attended to, and the premises of the approach need to be fully accepted. This is indeed a tall order for FL practitioners, but one that has to be taken on.

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