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Book Review

Literacy Unbound: Multiliterate, Multilingual, Multimodal, by Toni Dobinson and Katie Dunworth (Eds.), Gewerbestrasse, Springer, 2019, 245 pp., 114.39 € (Hardcover), ISBN 978-3-030-01255-7

Literacy Unbound: Multiliterate, Multilingual, Multimodal (2019) is a collection of eleven articles on literacy edited by Toni Dobinson and Katie Dunworth. It is prefaced by an introduction in which the editors rationalize that the new definition of literacy is “domain specific” and “transcultural” and that their selection of the chapters is based on this logic. As the title suggests, the notion of literacy is extended to offer a novel interpretation through the inclusion of varying age groups, different educational settings, and distinct modalities. The chapters in the volume, targeted at language and literacy researchers and graduate students, investigate the concept of literacy as it is perceived in different contexts and approach it from different theoretical and conceptual frameworks such as sociocultural theory, reader response theory, critical pedagogy and communities of practice. The articles are summarized below with a brief evaluation at the end.

In Chapter 1, endorsing Sussex and Kirkpatrick’s (2012) “translanguaging” as a means of identity retention and Canagarajah’s (2006) belief that cultural backgrounds are resources rather than problems, the researchers in this emancipatory critical research studied 20 scripts written by international students from different backgrounds in an Australian academic setting and their lecturers’ feedback in the hope of extracting some WEs (World Englishes) features that are considered as errors by lecturers. To the surprise of the researchers, very few WEs features were found in students’ writings. Despite their findings, the writers urge pre-service and in-service teacher education programs to raise teachers’ awareness of WEs features in learner writings in tertiary settings. The researchers do not clarify, though, how much of tolerance towards WEs features should be allowed in postsecondary settings.

The multiple-case study in Chapter 2 illustrates how academic writing literacy is complexly multifaceted and how development in academic writing literacy is idiosyncratic contingent on the experience that students bring to the classroom. Implementing introspective and retrospective approaches, the study investigates how Turkish PhD students’ academic writing literacy develops as they read, reflect on and receive feedback from their tutors. The study results confirm that academic writing literacy features encompass not only linguistic mastery (awareness of processes and genres, for instance) but also cognitive (self-efficacy, criticality and ability to assess writing needs), social (belonging to a community of practice, and professional identity), and affective (awareness of their own motivation) development. Although their research expands the notion of academic literacies, one wonders if the multi-complexity in literacy can be applicable to graduate students from different disciplines and diverse social backgrounds.

Drawing on the concept of “community of practice” (Wenger 1998), the self-study (an amalgam of action research and reflective practitioner inquiry tradition) in Chapter 3 investigates the literacy development of a doctoral student through his interactions with his supervisor. Literacy development here refers to the student’s cognition of shared knowledge of the community realized through doctoral thesis completion. The analysis reveals that the student’s academic literacy and his progress from a peripheral to a full community of practice member is accomplished through four components of epistemology, voice, genre and specific language choices. The researchers conclude that development of literacy is not a

“becoming” process but rather “participation” and “performance” which lead to membership of and recognition in the community of practice.

In Chapter 4, the researcher adopts a RTTP pedagogy (reaction to the past pedagogy) in a CLIL context in Japan by drawing on contextual critical literacy that promotes the study of English through an understanding of its historical, social and cultural implications as well as rhetorical features. The observations of students, involved in different activities such as role-playing, debates and public speeches after reading several historical texts in both L1 and English, demonstrated that students not only benefited from history and culture content but were also able to use rhetorical features of argument in their debates. Although the application of contextual critical literacy in an EFL context is quite innovative, the concept of “context” in contextual critical literacy gets relatively lucid towards the methodology section.

Chapter 5 is inspired by Cope and Kalantzis’s (2009) theoretical framework of Learning by Design which emphasizes equality, multimodality and transformative, rather than traditional transmission. The model is based on four knowledge processes of experiencing, conceptualizing, analyzing and applying. The researcher set out to teach literacy to university pre-service STEM teachers using this model despite their early grumbling dissidence. Toward the end of the course, the students become cognizant why multimodal literacy matters. The chapter ends with a five-stage guideline on how to accommodate four knowledge processes. This chapter is a rare example in this book with clearly spelled-out pedagogical implications.

In Chapter 6, the writer traces the current literacy crisis of teachers in Australia to the definitions of the term “literacy” ranging from literacy as simple decoding of semiotic signs to literacy as a critical and emancipatory act. Literacy crisis here refers to the perception that students who begin teacher education programs are not adequately skilled in literacy, which often leads to poor language practices in classrooms. The study investigates factors such as government policy and pre-service teacher education programs that lead to literacy crisis of teachers. The chapter presents the findings of a case study that conclude that pre-service teachers have been undermined by definitions that are not applicable to their daily classroom life.

Chapter 7 is an action-research which studies students’ perceptions of oral assessment through video-recording. The students, enrolled in Chinese and Japanese as L2 programs in an Australian university, wrote a script, practiced an oral presentation, filmed, edited and uploaded it on YouTube. The findings suggest that video-recording could enhance engagement and encourage self-reflection, although the students demonstrated less enthusiasm about collaborative opportunities that video-recording offered. The researchers also found out the more advanced students were reserved in their evaluation of the video project, and they suggest that the level of language competence of students should be attended when incorporating online elements.

Chapter 8 draws on Kress’s (2014) concepts of “transduction” and “translation” of literary texts (in which students pick literary images and communicate their meanings to their peers and teacher). The author offers a tripartite model of critical voice in literature, with elements of 1) critical voice as evolving self-awareness, 2) critical voice as participation and engagement and 3) critical voice as grasp of literary conventions. In this study, multimodal design of a lesson in literature allowed students to develop their critical voice. They used multimodal means to communicate their meanings in literature, which had particularly positive impacts on critical responses and the agency of less engaged students. However, students also experienced some discomfort in the process, which the writer attributes to Bourdieu’s idea of *habitus* (an interplay of self and structure) and *field* (a system of social differences) (1986), and the disjunction between present field (English classroom) and their habitus. Multimodal expression also helped students’ participation and collaborative engagement as it allowed critical responses to not only texts but also to others.

Chapter 9 investigates Facebook as a digital platform wherein Aboriginal Australians can express their identity through translanguaging. The writers argue that even “the both-way” literacy policy adopted by the Australian education system in which aboriginal students’ vernacular language is often invested in course content does not seem to be effective. They advocate multimodal translanguaging to redress the

lack. The longitudinal study investigated the participants online posts and replies over a 24-months period with the results showing that Facebook can be utilized as a translanguaging conduit through which not only their identity as multilingual Aboriginal individuals is expressed but their knowledge of the features of SAE (Standard Australian English) also develops.

Chapter 10 starts with a critique of synthetic phonics, a popular approach in Australia. This qualitative project investigated an innovative early literacy approach based on Reggio Emilia pedagogy (a pedagogy that stresses collaboration, engagement and inquiry) and on the premise that children are early semioticians. Instead of rote learning of grapheme to morpheme correspondence, the young children in this study were exposed to storytelling, and activities in which students learnt objects and characters through shapes and graphemes. The writer argues that this semiotic approach to literacy bestows agency on learners.

Chapter 11 focuses on blogging and enumerates its pedagogical implications through a critical analysis of empirical research conducted on CMC (computer-mediated communication). Conceptually grounded on the sociocultural theory and the ideas of ZDP and social learning, blogging has several pedagogical benefits such as promoting learner autonomy, reducing learning anxiety and enhancing student engagement.

In short, the book unbinds the archetypical notion of literacy by extending it to wider domains and diverse contexts and is less concerned with early literacy (except for Chapter 10). The varied theoretical and conceptual frameworks covered in the book such as sociocultural theory, critical pedagogy and communities of practice familiarizes readers with theories underpinning current literacy research as well as their varied methodologies. At the same time, despite the variety of contexts in the chapters, an Australian perspective and concern about the notion of literacy is dominant throughout the book. The book could have included several instances of research on literacy in Europe and North America to offer a veritable translation of “unbound” literacy. Furthermore, although the multiplicity of theories, research methodologies, and interpretations of literacies could make the book an inspiring resource for researchers and graduate students in EFL/ESL or literacy programs, the pedagogical implications are too broad to make it a user-friendly manual for teachers.

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