



New Approaches to Literacy: Multiliteracies, Functional and Critical Pedagogy

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Abstract: This paper aims to introduce a new perspective on literacy (reading and writing) as a result of our ever-changing world, i.e. *multiliteracies*. In the social setting where information and communication technology (ICT) is developing rapidly and effective communication requires more than mastering linguistic knowledge, traditional literacy is no longer appropriate. Accordingly, traditional literacy teaching practices are not adequate to meet the needs of the modern society. Therefore, calls for reforms in literacy teaching and learning have been supported in many countries. Functional and Critical pedagogies are being increasingly applied in the world. However, little attention to these pedagogies have been paid in Vietnam. This paper attempts to call for a change in literacy education in Vietnam, especially at secondary level in the context that Vietnamese government is implementing radical reforms in general education curriculum and textbooks. By introducing a new notion of literacy and contemporary approaches to literacy in the world and recommendations for implementation, the paper aims (1) to give policy makers, educators, curriculum developers and teachers “food” for thought and (2) to provide teachers with more pedagogical choices in an effort to improve students’ literacy competence, which can help them integrate well into the globalized world of knowledge era.

Keywords: Literacy, Multiliteracies, Functional pedagogy, Critical pedagogy.

1. Introduction

1.1. The global context

In the traditional sense, literacy is the ability of reading and writing. Traditional

literacy learning involves learning rules and conventions such as spelling or grammar rules. Besides, students read texts seen to be of “literary value” and try to comprehend “meanings” that were thought by the author. Successful acquisition of literacy is manifested by giving the right answers in multiple choice comprehension tests or writing “correctly”, which shows that one has comprehended the “correct” meanings written in texts. Students passively accept the knowledge which is presented to them as “correct”. This approach to

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literacy, which is called “transmission pedagogy”, produces compliant learners who will be willing to follow directives of received authority at work [1]. In other words, they lack creativity or critical thinking which the modern society requires.

In real life, texts vary enormously in terms of rhetorical patterns and linguistic choices (grammar and vocabulary), depending on communicative contexts. An email sent to a company must be different from an email sent to a friend. The language of the former is more formal than the latter. The rhetorical pattern of the former is also different from that of the latter. Each text type or genre has its own purpose, organizational pattern and linguistic choices. “Genres are abstract, socially recognized ways of using language. It is a term for grouping texts together, representing how writers typically use language to respond to recurring situations” [2, p.9]. To achieve one’s communicative purpose, one needs to use language choices appropriate to one’s communicative context [2]. For example, the way a doctor explains a disease to his patient is different from the way he talks to medical students about that disease. If the doctor explains the disease to the patient in the same way he does to medical students, the patient will probably not understand his/her illness. This means that the doctor is likely to fail in this communicative situation. Therefore, to communicate well, we need to figure out differences in patterns of meaning making from one context to another. Conventions of meaning making are varied in different cultural, social or domain-specific situations [1]. For example, the format of a scientific report will be different from that of an application letter. Awareness of *social diversity*, i.e. diversity of social conventions in meaning making is a key to effective communication.

Recently, the advent of digital and media technology has changed the world of communication and meaning making. Written-linguistic modes are not the only means to make meanings. Written-linguistic modes can

be replaced or complemented by other modes of meaning making such as visual (e.g. colors, moving images), audio (e.g. music, sound effects), gestural (e.g. facial expressions, body language) and spatial (position of layout and organization of objects in space) patterns of meaning. Nowadays, texts are increasingly *multimodal*, which means that they are composed of written-linguistic forms with other modes of meaning making [1, 3, 4]. Webpages, picture books, posters, magazines, slides presentations are some examples of multimodal texts. Today’s young generation are surrounded by multimodal texts. Therefore, it is crucial to teach them how to comprehend and compose these types of multimodal texts.

In the era of knowledge economy and rapid development of mass media and digital technology, traditional literacy teaching practices are not adequate to meet the needs of the modern society, so a group of scholars, the New London Group expanded the conception of traditional literacy and introduced a new term: *Multiliteracies* [1]. Accordingly, new literacy pedagogies have been introduced to meet the critical need of literacy education, e.g. Functional and Critical pedagogy.

1.2. The Vietnamese context

In Vietnam, traditional notion of literacy remains prevailing. Literacy teaching has placed emphasis on appreciating literary texts; real-life texts are missing in classrooms. Therefore, the content of knowledge is not really relevant to learners and thus demotivating [5]. The dominant literacy pedagogy is transmission pedagogy (knowledge-telling approach). As Dr. Duong Thi Hong Hieu indicated in an interview conducted by [6], teachers communicate knowledge. Learners passively accept the knowledge presented to them as “correct”, try to memorize the content presented and write down what they memorize in exam rooms. As a result, students’ papers are similar, which is clearly manifested in the results of national secondary graduation

examinations. Dr. Duong Thi Hong Hieu further stated that in literacy classrooms in Vietnam, there is no connection between literary texts and students' experience and contemporary social issues. Consequently, learners feel that they learn nothing from these texts, which demotivates them. A teacher from an upper secondary school, Ms Bui Thi Hoang Yen, maintained that the transmission pedagogy applied in most Vietnamese literacy classes "kills" learners' creativity. Therefore, she suggested that teachers need to change their ways of teaching literacy and to make this possible, innovations need implementing in literacy curriculum and testing which have shaped literacy education in Vietnam [7]. In short, literacy education in Vietnam is mainly based on print literacy; the approach to literacy teaching does not help learners develop their creativity, critical thinking or problem-solving abilities.

The modern world of knowledge economy and advances in technology demands the workforce who are not only well-disciplined and compliant but also able to think critically and negotiate different human contexts and styles of communication [1]. To meet the needs of socio-economic development and to integrate well into this modern globalized world, the Vietnamese government is implementing radical reforms in education, particularly revolutionary innovations in general education curriculum and textbooks [8]. In response to this, there have been strong calls for reforms in Vietnamese literacy education, especially at the secondary level [5-7, 9]. Therefore, it is essential that literacy curriculum developers, teacher trainers and teachers rethink the conception of literacy and consider latest approaches to literacy teaching applied in the world. In the following sections, this paper first presents a new notion of literacy, then latest literacy pedagogies and finally recommendations to make these pedagogies feasible in Vietnamese literacy teaching context, particularly in the secondary level.

2. New perspective on literacy: Multiliteracies

Multiliteracies refers to two major aspects of meaning-making: *social diversity* and *multimodality*. *Social diversity* means the variability of social conventions of meaning making in different contexts. *Multimodality* involves meaning-making through a variety of communicative channels such as written-linguistic, visual, audio, and spatial modes [1]. The theory of *multiliteracies* focuses on "the changing world and the new demands being placed upon people as makers of meaning in changing workplaces" [4]. The 21st century employees need to be able to communicate (make and participate in meanings) competently and appropriately in different social settings such as work, public and community life through a variety of communicative channels. For example, they have no problem figuring out the text of an unfamiliar ATM interface, writing a job application letter, designing a poster/e-poster for their clubs or researching information by using multiple sources.

Multiliteracies scholars do not deny the importance of traditional literacy which focuses on written forms of meaning making (print) and learning spelling rules, grammar rules or lines of great poets.

However, they claim that what traditional literacy provides learners is not enough. Therefore, literacy education must be reformed according to multiliteracies perspectives [1, 4].

3. Latest approaches to literacy teaching

This section discusses the latest approaches to literacy teaching including Functional pedagogy and Critical pedagogy in response to calls for reforms in literacy teaching in the world.

3.1. Functional pedagogy

Functional approaches to literacy focus on reading and composing the texts that enable

students to succeed at school and in society. These approaches aim to help learners understand why real-world texts exist and how this affects texts. Functional approaches start with the question “What is the purpose of this text?” and the next question is “How is the text structured to meet this communicative purpose?”. Functional pedagogy equips students with knowledge of genres- knowledge of how texts are organized to achieve different communicative purposes [1], which enables students to communicate effectively in different social contexts.

Functional pedagogy follows a teaching-learning cycle of five stages (Figure 1). Derewianka & Jones [10] describe this teaching-learning cycle as follows:

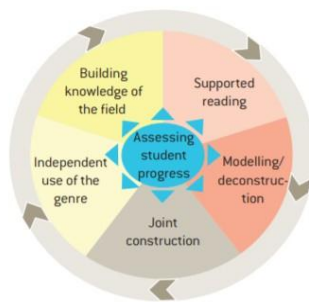


Figure 1. The teaching-learning cycle [10, p.52].

In the first stage, *building knowledge of the field*, teachers help learners build shared understandings of the topic, using activities such as discussions, brainstorming and think-pair-share activities, which are often combined with other types, e.g. field trips, guest speakers or jigsaw tasks to extend students’ initial understandings of the topic. This stage is important because curriculum topics may be the ones that students have not experienced or encountered.

The second stage, *supported reading*, aims to build learners’ reading skills (comprehension and fluency) and their understandings of the topic. At this stage, students read multiple texts in the topic area selected carefully by the teachers. Activities of this stage vary from

teacher-led reading, to shared reading, guided, collaborative, and independent reading as indicated in the table 1 below.

As shown in table 1, activities of the *supported reading* stage are organized with gradual release of teacher responsibility from the teacher explicitly modelling the reading process to student independence. However, activities selected during this stage do not necessarily follow this progression, rather, according to students’ needs identified.

The third stage, *modelling or deconstruction*, focuses on developing students’ conscious knowledge of characteristics of a target genre. At this stage, the teacher asks students to relook at several texts (in the target genre) they have read in the previous stage and asks questions that help learners understand the purpose of the texts: *What are the purposes of these texts? Where have you seen texts like this before? Who is the intended reader or audience?* After students understand why such texts are used, the teacher continues to ask questions that draw their attention to the rhetorical pattern and language choices of the target genre: *How are these texts similar? How are they different? What do they always/usually/sometimes seem to have? How is the information organised and communicated-language, image, or a combination (mode)? What are the stages of the texts? What are the functions of the stages?* For example, the stages of formal letters are *heading* (sender’s and receiver’s address and date), *opening* (Dear...), *body of the letter* and *closing* (e.g. sincerely yours). Another example is a narrative story made up of three main stages including *orientation* (introducing the scene and characters), *complication* (problems arising/sequences of events) and *resolution* (problems solved). Once students identify the stages of the text and their functions, the teacher draws learners’ attention to phases or patterns within its stages. It is crucial for the teacher to make students well aware that language choices are influenced by the communicative purpose of the text.

Table 1. The second stage of supported reading [10, p.60]

Teacher-led reading (“I do”)	Shared reading (“we do/I lead”)	Guided reading (“you do/I help”)	Collaborative reading (“you do together”)	Independent reading (“you do”)
Teacher selects a focus text relevant to genre, field and students’ needs in order to teach reading skills or features of the genre explicitly through modelling or “thinking aloud”.	Teacher engages students in reading a relevant text, supporting students to notice relevant features of text, to practise reading skills and strategies, in preparation for writing. Might be enlarged or read over series of lessons.	Teacher works with small groups of students with similar reading levels. Emphasis is on students reading relevant texts to practice skills and strategies with teacher supporting as necessary. Could include guidance on note-taking in preparation for writing.	Students read a relevant text, practising skills and strategies introduced earlier (without teacher support). Might include completing genre-specific research proforma as Figure 2 below.	Students select relevant texts within the field, reading for pleasure, to develop fluency, to further build background knowledge in preparation for writing. Might include genre-specific research proforma as Figure 2 below.
Whole class	Whole class	Small group	Pair/small group	Individual

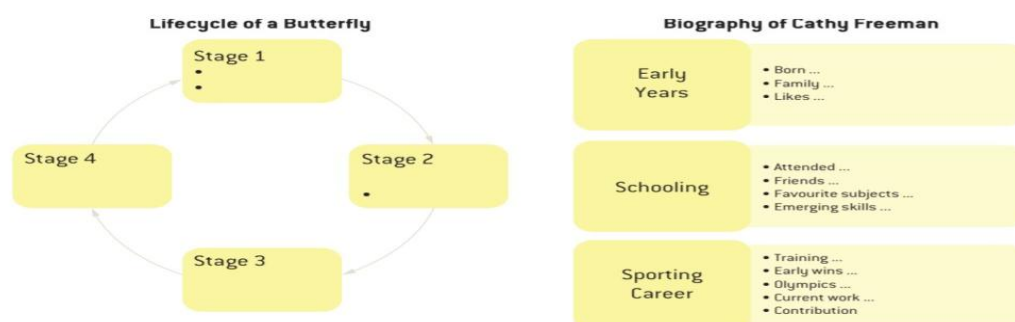


Figure 2. Genre-specific research proformas for different writing tasks [10, p.60].

Activities for giving practice in identifying important characteristics of the target genre include jumbled text, labelling, bundling information under stage labels (see Figure 2), and using relevant graphic organizers.

In the third stage, *joint construction*, the teacher provides learners with guidance through the process of preparing and writing a text of the target genre, using the patterns and language features learned in the previous stage. The teacher first helps students build the field (topic) knowledge which may be extracted from the stage of *supported reading*. Then the teacher and students work together to create a text. Students contribute to writing orally. The teacher works as a scribe. Students’ oral contributions are shaped by the teacher to approximate academic written-like language. In the last stage, *independent construction*,

students independently write a text in a topic similar but not identical to what students has written in the stage of joint construction. This stage involves students in researching a similar topic and writing their own texts (drafting, editing and publishing).

In a nutshell, Functional pedagogy helps learners to work out how to achieve communicative purposes through appropriate language choices, which enables them to move smoothly from one social context to another.

3.2. Critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is based on the view that learners are “subjects”, not passive “objects” of texts and that literacy is a tool used to change the world. Critical approaches to literacy focus on texts that address questions of concern and interest to learners and tackle social issues [1].

Therefore, Critical pedagogy places an emphasis on students questioning the ideologies of reading texts and challenging taken-for-granted, which helps develop learners' critical thinking. The aim of Critical pedagogy is to help learners (1) see how texts are constructed by people's ideologies and (2) use texts as a tool to transform the world [11].

Another area of focus in Critical pedagogy is the application of popular and new media in literacy teaching. Popular and new media includes popular literature, music, television, magazines, the internet, video games, etc. Obviously, nowadays, students' life is surrounded by popular media which they take pleasure in. Bringing popular media into the classroom is a way to connect students' schooling to their experience [1] and thus literacy learning is more relevant and accessible.

Below are two examples of critical literacy classrooms provided by Kim [11] and Kalantzis et al. [1]. The first example is about a reading class in which students read Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. When reading about the character *Ophelia*, the teacher encourages students to interpret this character in their own way (*Is she a virginal, innocent girl or a sexually knowledgeable woman?*). In order to help students to find their own answers, the teacher divides Ophelia's appearance into three sections such as 1) scenes with her father and brother, 2) scenes with Hamlet, 3) the mad scenes. Students work in small groups and identify the different viewpoints of each participant, looking for biases and alternative interpretations. After coming to a conclusion, each group discusses how readings of Ophelia's character may be produced from the male-dominant perspective. By discussing how different readings of Ophelia's character are constructed within dominant ideology, teachers and students together discuss how females and males are represented in Shakespeare's text [11].

As shown in the example above, unlike traditional literacy pedagogy, the teacher does

not present "meanings" put in the text by the author but encourages learners to make their own interpretation. Critical pedagogy helps learners to see how writers use texts to influence the world where we live.

The second example is about Ms Wheelbarrow's integrated science and literacy classes. The teacher asks the whole class what the biggest problems of their community are. After discussion, the class agrees to choose the polluted creek as their community problem. Next, the teacher asks students to search websites or read books from the library to find out information on water pollutants, how creek ecologies (fishes, birds, plants) work and how these ecologies are affected by pollutants in order to be able to write a checklist of things they will be looking out for when they visit the creek. (This activity provides learners with practice in reading skill with clear purposes in mind, using multimodal texts, i.e. websites, books). Several weeks later, Ms Wheelbarrow divides the class into three groups to document the state of the creek with a camera for each group. One group documents litter and dumped rubbish. Another group documents drains running into the creek. The last group documents the effects of pollution on the ecosystem of the creek.

When back in class, each group reports their findings by presenting PowerPoint slideshows (a type of multimodal text). After that, the teacher asks what they can do about this problem as community. After discussion, the class decides to write to the local city council. The group members work together on this letter - a type of formal letter [1, p.177].

As seen above, Critical pedagogy educates students to be activists dealing with real-world issues through reading and writing activities, using a range of multimodal texts (websites, books, letters, PowerPoint slides) in different communicative contexts (reporting to peers, reporting to the local government). In this classroom, students' learning is connected to their real-life experience, thus learning becomes meaningful and motivating. In addition, Critical

pedagogy helps develop learners' critical thinking, ability to work on multimodal texts and skills such as collaboration or presentation, which 21st century citizens need to possess.

4. Challenges of implementing the new literacy approaches and recommendations

Functional and Critical pedagogies are increasingly popular around the world but it is challenging to apply these two pedagogies in general education in Vietnam due to three main problems: (1) rigid and overloaded curriculum, (2) testing and evaluation focusing on measuring how much knowledge content have been learned, (3) lack of teacher autonomy. This section discusses why these three problems are seen as barriers to the implementation of the two latest literacy approaches and make recommendations to enable feasible implementation of these two approaches. The challenges and recommendations presented in this section have been identified and shared by many scholars and teachers such as Pham [5], Duong [6], Bui [7], Doan [9] and Do [12]. It is strongly recommended that Functional and Critical pedagogies should be applied in secondary literacy classrooms. This is not to say that these two approaches cannot be used at primary level. However, because of secondary students' richer repertoire of experience, it is easier for teachers to take full advantage of these two pedagogies at secondary level than primary level. In order to enable teachers to apply Functional and Critical pedagogies at secondary level, revolutionary innovations in literacy curriculum, testing and evaluation and teacher autonomy need to be implemented.

4.1. Curriculum

As scholars and teachers indicated, secondary literacy curriculum is rigid and knowledge overloaded [5, 7, 9, 12]. Teachers have to follow a fixed textbook and to cover all knowledge required in the textbook for the sake

of examinations. The content of the textbook is too much that time allocated for each lesson is limited. Consequently, teachers do not have time for discussion and resort to lecturing to ensure no missed knowledge. Besides, the curriculum focuses mainly on literary texts while informational/functional texts (e.g. reports, job applications, brochures, internet webs) are lacking. The ability to appreciate literature is necessary but not enough. Students need to possess the competence to comprehend and compose types of informational/functional texts which they are highly likely to encounter during their professional life. Therefore, to connect formal learning with real life and prepare learners well for future life in terms of both knowledge and competences, more informational/functional texts (print and non-print) needs to be put in the curriculum apart from literary texts. The curriculum should decide on text types (genres) but not on teaching materials to give teachers freedom to choose what materials to teach [5]. It is important not to introduce too many text types so that teachers can have enough time to help learners master each text type [5, 9]. The curriculum design should be competence-based, i.e. emphasizing what learners are expected to do rather than what they are expected to know [13]. This can help to reshape testing and teaching methodology.

4.2. Testing and evaluation

Currently, testing and evaluation rely only on paper tests or examinations which focus on measuring how much content provided in the textbook have been learned. Consequently, to pass a test or an examination, what students need to do is to try to memorize what is taught and copy down [9, 12]. In order to reshape current secondary literacy practices, testing needs innovating in a way that boost learners to think critically and to apply what is learned to tackle real-life tasks. For example, students are asked (1) what they learn from a text (in or outside the textbook) and how to relate what is learned from the text with students' life or

social life, (2) to write to an organization/institution to apply for a scholarship for an academic course or a short training course in music/arts/chess/dancing (Students decide on the course to take). Besides, the test/exam questions should give students options to choose what to write to arouse their interest and marking criteria should value different perspectives as long as writers provide good justification. In addition, new forms of evaluation such as composing multimodal texts in the form of reports, presentation or team project (as illustrated in the second example of 3.2) need introducing into classrooms, which helps to train learners in soft skills such as presentation skills, teamwork skills, problem-solving skills or ICT skills.

4.3. Teacher autonomy

Teachers play a key role in the success or failure of curriculum implementation [14]. According to Moon (2009), although teachers are only one of many factors that impact on curriculum outcomes, they are an important one, especially in low resourced and low exposure contexts. However, Vietnamese secondary teachers are not given enough autonomy to make their own classroom decisions. As Bui [7] and Doan [9] indicates, teachers are constrained by knowledge-based curriculum and testing. In the following years, as part of innovations in general education curriculum and textbooks, schools and teachers are allowed to choose what textbooks to teach among those accredited by Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training [16]. This a good opportunity for teachers to make some changes in their ways of teaching. However, in the future, it is essential that textbooks should be used for reference and teachers should be given enough autonomy to decide on their teaching materials and how much time spent on each lesson because teachers are the only ones who best understand their students' levels, backgrounds, interests, strengths and weaknesses and no textbooks can cater for learners' needs in all contexts. Based on their

understandings of their students, teachers can make appropriate choices on teaching materials, evaluation and teaching methodology to develop learners' creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving ability.

To enable teachers to make good pedagogical choices in their teaching, they need to be well prepared in both their subject matter knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge.

Once the literacy curriculum is competence-based with clear set of course objectives, testing and evaluation are competence-based and teachers are given enough autonomy to make their own decisions in teaching, Functional and Critical pedagogies can be applied successfully in Vietnamese teaching context. Combining Functional pedagogy and Critical pedagogy would most benefit learners. For crowded classes in low-resourced contexts, crowdedness and low resource are disadvantages but they should not be seen as barriers to refuse the application of these two pedagogies because the core of these two approaches is to make learners aware of how to achieve their communicative purpose and develop their critical thinking via teachers' guiding questions. In crowded classrooms, organizing groupwork may be difficult but it is not impossible to do this. To help students to work well in groups, teachers should give clear instructions for group discussion and nominate (or ask the group to nominate) a student as the group facilitator. Regarding the application of Critical pedagogy in low-resourced classrooms, multimodal texts can be found in magazines or newspapers, etc., not only from electronic sources like Internet webs and instead of making PowerPoint presentations, learners can present their talks in the form of diagrams, flowcharts, bullet points on big sheets of paper. Depending on their current teaching contexts, teachers can adapt these two approaches to their students' needs and teaching facilities to optimize learning outcomes. However, for the sake of students, problems like crowdedness and low resource need tackling gradually.

5. Conclusion

In the context the Vietnamese government shows strong commitment to fundamental and comprehensive innovation in education to integrate well into the globalized world, it is high time for policy makers and curriculum developers to free teachers from barriers to approaching new pedagogies. It is important for literacy teacher trainers and teachers to rethink the notion of literacy and consider new approaches to literacy teaching. Functional and Critical pedagogies help to equip learners with important knowledge and skills to function well in a variety of social settings. Therefore, it is worth considering the application of these two pedagogies in Vietnamese classrooms, especially at secondary level.

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