

## CHAPTER THREE

# LITERACY EDUCATION: THE FIRST STEP TOWARDS LITERARY COMPETENCE<sup>1</sup>

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*Reading is supposed to make us think; and to help us feel*  
—Fred Sedgwick

*Children are active  
constructors of their own  
knowledge.  
What they need is evidence,  
guidance and support*  
—Gordon Wells

The development of literacy at an early stage in the education of young learners turns crucial in order for them to manage, analyze, critique and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information. The degree to which students can make use of language to read and understand texts in all formats (books, on-line newspapers, pictures, videos, etc) is a key indicator of their ability to make and communicate meaning. But as society and technology change, so does literacy. Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, twenty-first century learners face a multi-literacy landscape in which they must acquire the thinking skills that will enable them to learn on their own and apply their linguistic knowledge to another knowledge base. In this regard, literacy has evolved from a language process to an act of cognition (Kucer, 2005). Under these circumstances, how can teachers ensure that they

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include the necessary reflective practices to help children learn from their own actions? How can teachers contribute to foster students' growing ability to apply knowledge to new situations and create new knowledge, that is, to think critically? In this paper I present literary competence as the key and also the ultimate goal of literacy, one towards which teachers must endeavor in order to provide students with the opportunity to learn to think for themselves and come up with their own interpretations and conclusions. Based on the work of scholars such as Örjan Torell, Signe Mari Wiland, Stephen Kucer, Mihail Bakhtin and Lev Vygotsky, literary competence can be defined as the literacy education that enables a person to control the cognitive, linguistic and sociocultural dimensions of written or spoken language in an effective and dialogical manner. As will be shown, these three dimensions can be developed through the reading and study of literature but this is not to say that literary competence just entails learning and internalizing literary conventions as Jonathan Culler established in his *Structural Poetics* in 1975. In fact, this is only one of the aspects to consider along with the personal desire to learn and think creatively, and, ultimately, with the ability to construct meanings based on one's life experiences and cultural background.

### **Literacy education**

Today teaching reading and writing is part of the strategic instruction included in any school curriculum to help students begin to construct meanings. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) draws attention to this idea and how the use of language skills is indeed essential to share and create any information but, most importantly, to gain and develop knowledge. In the same way, among the “Standards for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” that the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) published in 2011, they include a series of common beliefs that establish reading as the foundational skill for learning, emphasizing in addition that “reading goes beyond decoding and comprehension to interpretation and development of new understandings” (p. 1). To put it briefly, reading is thinking. In this line of thought, literacy education must be understood as the teaching of a range of abilities and competencies—many literacies that allow students to become independent learners and use prior and background knowledge as context for new learning. As Wise, Andrews and Hoffman (2010) put it, a narrow definition of literacy would focus on the technical capacity to read and write, but it is also necessary to highlight that literacy (or literacies) constitutes “a socially embedded semantic system, in a co-evolutionary relationship with new technologies, and as

part of a multimodal framework that considers writing, reading, talk, and listening alongside other modes of communication” (p. 1). Literacy education, thus, is a dynamic and multidimensional concept that has become more complex as resources and technologies keep changing but whose main aim is still to provide learners, we can sum up, with the following skills:<sup>2</sup>

1. Evaluate information found in selected sources on the basis of accuracy, validity, usefulness or suitability for needs, importance, and social and cultural context.
2. Develop and refine a range of questions to frame the search for new understanding.
3. Use strategies to draw conclusions and apply knowledge to curricular areas and real-world situations.
4. Organize knowledge so that it is useful.
5. Collaborate with others to exchange ideas, reflect on the learning, make decisions and solve problems.
6. Pursue personal and aesthetic growth.
7. Read widely and fluently to make connections with self, the world, and previous reading.
8. Respond to literature and creative expressions of ideas in various formats and genres.
9. Maintain openness to new ideas by considering divergent opinions and changing conclusions when evidence supports the change.
10. Show an appreciation for literature by electing to read for pleasure and expressing an interest in various literacy genres. (AASL, 2011)

Being in command of these skills allows learners to develop a critical mind and be ready to build their own ideological interrelation with others. On the contrary, a poor literacy development could have serious consequences and put the individual in a risky future situation (Lundberg, 2005). Language use and literacy abilities are therefore a fundamental part of a person’s social intercourse and formation (Warshauer, Freedman & Ball, 2004, p. 29). What also becomes evident as Wells (1986) points out is the understanding of both the active role that students play in their own learning and that the variety of mental processes and strategies that are employed to construct meanings are always subject to the individual’s cultural and social background, what Bahktin (1978) refers to as the “ideological environment”.

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<sup>2</sup> A more in-detail and extensive list of objectives can be found in the “Standards for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learner” (2010) established by the American Association of School Librarians.

Bakhtin and Medvedev (1978) claim that “human consciousness does not come into contact with existence directly, but through the medium of the surrounding ideological world” (p. 14). This is important in order to understand that literacy education is influenced by the multiple *learning* contexts where diverse people come together, be it the classroom, the workplace, the family, the group of friends or some other community gathering place. For this reason, as Kucer (2005) indicates, the development of literacy can be conceived as involving various dimensions and it should be approached considering the roles that learners take as they work with a written text. In this regard, Kucer (2005) explains that there is the role of meaning maker (cognitive dimension), the role of code breaker (linguistic dimension), and the role of text user and critic (sociocultural dimension) (p. 5). Such a view, as we will see, holds a strong relation with the notion of literary competence that Torell (2001) elaborates by which it is particularly significant to consider learners’ predisposition to read and reflect, their command of language and literary resources and “[their] own, unique experience of life, *outside the text*” (p. 374).

### **Literary competence**

The proof of the value of early storybook reading for later language and literacy development is basically reciprocally related. As Sulzby and Teale (1991) maintain, “storybook reading contributes to children’s concurrent writing, intellectual, emotional, and oral language development” (p. 731). There is a strong and positive relationship between the amount of reading that young learners do during the preschool years and subsequent language development and school achievement. Furthermore, through reading children learn that books portray fictional worlds and they discover how language is a magic vehicle that takes them on a journey to new places and adventures. Imagination is in this way of paramount relevance because children relate reading with playing. As Vygotsky (1932) states, “only when we learn to see the unity of imagination and play do we begin to understand the actual connection that exists between the child’s cognitive development and his social development” (as cited in Minick, 2005, p. 48). He argues that it is when the child plays and uses his imagination, and here I want to emphasize the very act of reading, that “thought and meanings are liberated from their origins in the perpetual field, providing the foundation for the further development of literacy and its role in advanced forms of thinking and imagination” (Minick, 2005, p. 46). The association between literacy and literature is thus totally evident as well as are the positive effects that they have on one another. Let us

focus now on how the skills to achieve both not only are comparable, but also on how literary competence, if we follow the next model, should in fact be regarded as the means and the final aim of literacy education.

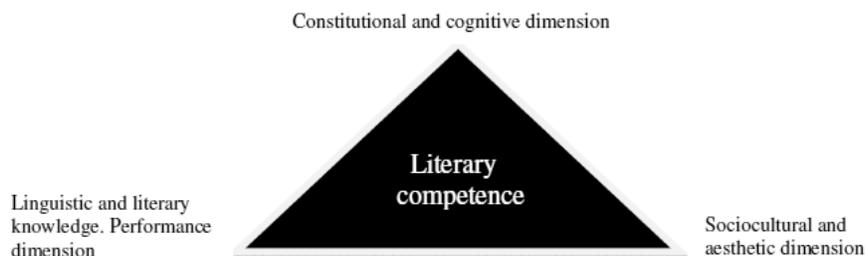


Figure 1: A model for the development of literary competence.

As the figure above displays, the development of literary competence can be organized as a field of forces that consists of: 1) The constitutional and cognitive dimension; 2) The performance of linguistic and literary knowledge; and 3) The sociocultural and aesthetic dimension. All three of them are equally important and turn around the central idea of establishing a dialogue with the text. In Torell's (2001) terms, achieving "competent literary reading is not a question of seeking answers to literary riddles or finding pieces of information or opinion. What motivates competent reading [...] is a constant will to understand our own selves, meeting 'the other'" in a literary work (p. 378). This thought, influenced by Bakhtin's dialogical principle, refers to the notion of finding a "consciousness inside the text" (Bakhtin, 1973). Literary competence in this way does not logically unfold but rather, interacts. Any discourse constitutes a dialogical word always in an intense relationship with another's word, being addressed to a reader or listener and triggering some kind of response. The competent reader, rather than trying to recognize a system of conventions within the text, must seek a human contact throughout its pages.

The constitutional and cognitive dimension, to start with the description of the model of literary competence proposed, refer to the learner's own identity, his attitude and his natural ability to approach a text and generate his own thoughts. As Kucer (2005) explains, it is "the desire of the language user to explore, discover, construct, and share meaning" (p. 5). In brief, we could refer to it as the basic machinery that readers need to bring to the text in order to process it. Here, what students have learned about literacy in their previous education constitutes a major

vehicle to feel confident when encountering and managing readings and disciplines for the first time in such fields as creative writing, critical theory, politics, social sciences, etc. Furthermore, these new areas of study may pose new demands that go beyond the mere functional abilities that had to apply before and now they are required to be more critical, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate texts in ways not experienced in earlier stages. At the same time, this dimension represents the connection between learning and development. According to Vygotsky (1932), human development is characterized by the ability to acquire knowledge and the motivation or will to use it (as cited in Hedegaard 2005, p. 225).

In second place, the performance dimension is directly related to the idea of using internalized linguistic and literary conventions to comment on texts rationally. According to Culler (1975), the question is “what an ideal reader must know implicitly in order to read and interpret works in ways which we consider acceptable, in accordance with the institution of literature” (p. 115). Whereas a part of Culler’s theory is controversial for failing to accept individual interpretations if readers do not grasp what he thinks are the most relevant parts of a text, it is certainly true that an implicit understanding of language and literary resources is necessary in order to analyze the text and to know what to look for in it. In this way, I find useful Kucer’s view of the reader as a “code breaker” because it denotes how language is a symbolic sign system and all meaning making involves being acquainted with it. Nevertheless, it is also important to note that with the advent of computer technology, nowadays texts may also be nonlinguistic and nonsymbolic in nature. The use of pictures, tables, various font sizes, internet, sound, and video, expands the notion of what texts are traditionally considered to be (Kucer, 2005). This is the technological aspect of literacy that now is integrated as a part of all the linguistic, nonlinguistic and literary tools that learners have to put into use in order to interpret all kinds of texts and construct their own interpretations.

Moreover, although there is a lack of consensus as to the exact literacy that learners must own, there is no question that having a substantial knowledge of linguistic rules and literary resources will enable them to identify significant aspects of a literary work such as the structure of the text, its genre, particular connotations of the words selected, the themes, the type of characters, and the functions and intentions of the language user. On this note, Halliday’s (1975) model of the pragmatic system of language represents, for instance, a clear example of how readers and writers must have an implicit understanding of the functions of language for their appropriate use:

**Instrumental function:** Language is used as a means of getting things.  
**Regulatory function:** Language is used to control the behavior, feelings, or attitudes of others.  
**Interactional function:** Language is used to interact with others and form personal relationships.  
**Personal function:** Language is used to express personal feelings and meanings; awareness of self.  
**Heuristic function:** Language is used to ask questions, learn and discover  
**Imaginative function:** Language is used to create a worlds of the imagination  
**Representational function:** Language is used as a means of communicating information.

Figure 2. The Pragmatic System of Language (Halliday 1975, p. 11-17)

Halliday (1975) established that language always fulfills at least one of seven functions although in many cases multiple purposes are served. As we can see in many literary works, such as *Gulliver's travels* (1726), *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) and many others, it is possible to find how a particular text fulfills the imaginative function, but it is also informative and may carry beneath a satire or astute critique of society. In the same way, it is important to differentiate among specific discourse forms with distinguishing features such as narration, poetry, drama, argumentative essays, etc., and to be aware of what patterns are always present that help to construct meaning from the text. For instance, in the case of a story, we can always attempt to identify the setting, conflict, climax, and resolution.

Finally, although literary conventions are recognized as a key component of literary competence, scholars such as McGillis (1985), McRae (1994), Torell (2001) and Wiland (2009) concur that those are only one of the dimensions to be considered. Literary competence cannot be reduced to the study of selected technical functions and the discussion of particular theories and specific understandings. As McGillis (1985) critically argues for Culler, “to be competent is to assimilate and reproduce institutional language and thought” (p. 144); and he could not disagree more. Literature cannot and should not be institutionalized. In contrast, it is important to approach literary competence and the reading process as a means to expand the mind of the readers and develop, as McRae proposes, the thinking skill, an imaginative interaction with the text (McRae, 1994, p. 37). This is in fact what the sociocultural and aesthetic dimension of literary competence entails. What are sought in the encounter with literary texts are forms of reflectivity and the experience of aesthetic reading or reading for pleasure. As Rosenblatt (1986) puts it, the meaning of any text does not lay in the work itself but in the reader's interaction with it. This interaction may include an emotional response of pleasure or delight that enables learners to drift into their feelings and memories and even gain a

new awareness of one's inner self. As it can be expected, this event is absolutely personal in the sense that no reader will experience the text exactly as another reader does. Literary competence, as a result, should not be treated just as internalized clichés or as a newspaper report from which every individual can easily extract the same information. In pedagogical terms, educational processes, literacy education and literary competence included, are expected to produce some kind of knowledge and deeper understanding. However, when knowledge is not created by the learners, but only disseminated by the teacher, that knowledge is being imposed and not reflected. Students then become just passive receivers, not active learners.

As McGillis (1985) states, “we can give our students the power to dress themselves or we can clothe them in our old garments” (p. 144). The sociocultural and aesthetic dimension shifts the attention from the text to the reader. Here, learners should be given the opportunity to relate the text to their own world of experiences, which in Bakhtinian terms is the ideological environment that we saw before. Doing that not only allows them to put into use the constitutional and cognitive dimension discussed in the first place, but also to react and reflect on what they are reading. As Bleich (1978) points out, the aim is

to provide a means for presenting literature in a way that will produce an internal motive for reading and thinking about literature. This motive is the awareness that reading can produce new understanding of oneself –not just a moral here and a message there, but a genuinely new conception of one's values and tastes as well as one's prejudices and learning difficulties. (as cited in Wiland, 2011 online)

Learners' approach to the interpretation of a literary text is thus related to their own lives, their personal outlook and sociocultural background. The reader creates an internal dialogue with the text that produces a reading experience, and based on that, he can generate his own response to the text. As Wiland (2011) highlights, one of the most visible characteristic in these responses is the weight of associative emotional reactions.

On a different level, another key aspect to bear in mind within the aesthetic dimension is that the reader respects the distance between reality and text. It is not about getting involved in the fictional text but about reflecting on it and letting oneself feel and capture anything the content makes you evoke. As Bakhtin (1973) puts it, “in the game itself there is no aesthetical moment” (p. 73). It is not the act of reading that brings pleasure but the thoughts and reflections that it triggers. The awareness of this conclusion is basic in order for teachers to endeavor in providing students

with more opportunities to experience aesthetic reading and avoid, in turn, the use of activities that just extend the problematic and frequent approach known as efferent reading. As Wiland (2011) explains:

Very often textbooks and teachers together sabotage the aesthetic reading by introducing exercises and questions that are incompatible with the aesthetic reading attitude. When literary texts are accompanied by comprehension questions in order to check that the learners have understood the text, the textbook writer and the teacher using these questions silently subscribe to a simplistic and anti-aesthetic view of literature. Generally these questions tap into the action, plot and characters of the text, and more often than not, the questions can be answered by simply reading a plot summary. Aesthetic reading requires time, not comprehension questions, nor summaries. (online)

A case in point, teachers must reflect on their own attitudes and approaches in relation to working with literature and differentiating between efferent and aesthetic reading. Exploring a literary work and trying to facilitate the aesthetic experience may not always be easy and confronting responses that we may find immature or farfetched. In this regard, there are some questions on which teachers should reflect: Are we, as teachers, establishing the right learning atmosphere in which students feel comfortable to share their feelings and ideas? To what extent is it really plausible to situate students at the center of the activities? How can we get students used to expressing their inner thoughts in the classroom? Are we prepared to receive comments and interpretations different from those that we had anticipated?

Developing appropriate curricula and instructional mediation through scaffolding have become critical components in the teaching of literacy and literary competence. As we have seen, in order to achieve those goals teachers are responsible for selecting the appropriate tasks that encourage and challenge students to expand their critical thinking skills and guide them to make connections with other disciplines, including their own personal life experiences. As Gunn and Hollingsworth (2013) suggest the traditional classroom is no longer sufficient for today's learners. Educators need to incorporate more technology and new approaches to increase the availability of information and communication to our students and have them reflect on it and think creatively (Gibbons, 2009). Reading and literature for that reason not only can be seen as an ideal complement to literacy but also as an extensive and ideal area of study that can definitely contribute to learners' success in school and in life.

In conclusion, this paper has shown how literacy activities in current society involve more than just reading a piece of conventional text. As

Ingvar Lundberg (2005) points out, navigating in the sea of textual information provided by the media, internet, libraries, etc., “requires complex procedural memories and advanced cognitive strategies for locating items, for finding the right entries; using the right keywords; [...] and remembering passwords, PIN codes, and efficient search procedures” (p. 14). It is a question of organizing knowledge and learning how to have access to it. These and many of the skills established by the AASL as the standards for the education of 21<sup>st</sup> century learners are reachable and can be put into practice through the development of the three dimensions of literary competence. Because in the end, the characteristics of both disciplines and their objectives merge and they both aim, first, to avoid students’ regurgitation of facts and, second, to prepare them to produce by themselves new understandings, engage in inquiry-oriented activities to think creatively, draw conclusions by asking critical questions, transform information, be acceptant of new ideas and comprehend that reading is an essential source of knowledge as it is technology. Whatever the challenges are that lie ahead for current and future generations of students, it is in the end what each person learns and thinks for him- or herself, what ultimately shapes the individual.

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