

Language Assessment and the New Literacy Studies¹

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This paper is a reflection on a master's degree study regarding English language assessment from the perspective of the new literacy studies (Duboc, 2007). The starting point of our research was an investigation into both the conceptions and the practices regarding language assessment in some elementary schools in Brazilian communities, which led us to identify three recurring problems. Taking into account these results, and bearing in mind the epistemological transformations signaled by the recent literacy studies, this paper offers some outlines regarding evaluation with emphasis on critical literacy practices, inviting readers to rethink such issues for foreign language teaching contexts.

Keywords: language teaching, language assessment, new literacy studies, multiliteracies, critical literacy.

La evaluación en la clase de lenguas y los estudios sobre literacidad

Este artículo es una reflexión derivada de una investigación de maestría sobre la evaluación de la lengua inglesa desde la perspectiva de los nuevos estudios de literacidad (Duboc, 2007). Nuestro punto de partida fue una investigación sobre concepciones y prácticas de la evaluación en escuelas primarias brasileñas, que nos llevó a identificar tres problemas frecuentes. A partir de los resultados de este estudio y teniendo en cuenta las transformaciones epistemológicas señaladas por los estudios de literacidad, este artículo ofrece líneas de reflexión para la investigación sobre la evaluación con énfasis en la literacidad crítica en contextos de enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras.

Palabras clave: enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, evaluación, nuevas literacidades, multiliteracidad, literacidad crítica.

¹ This is a reflection paper based on the Master's research study: A questão da avaliação da aprendizagem de língua inglesa segundo as teorias de letramentos (Duboc, 2007), that was conducted between 2004 and 2007 at the University of São Paulo, Brazil, with CAPES (Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior) financial support.

L'évaluation en classe de langue et les nouvelles littératies

Cet article est une réflexion dérivée d'un mémoire de maîtrise concernant l'évaluation de la langue anglaise dans la perspective des nouvelles littératies (Duboc, 2007). Le point de départ de notre étude est une recherche sur les conceptions et les pratiques d'évaluation dans la classe de langue anglaise dans quelques écoles brésiliennes, étude qui nous a amenés à identifier trois problèmes récurrents. Ces résultats, analysés à la lumière des transformations épistémologiques issues de la recherche sur les littératies, nous permettent d'offrir quelques pistes sur l'évaluation en mettant l'accent sur la littératie critique et d'inviter les lecteurs à repenser de telles questions pour des contextes de l'enseignement de langue étrangère.

Mots clés: didactique des langues, langue étrangère, évaluation, nouvelles littératies, littératies multiples, littératie critique.

INTRODUCTION

We assume evaluation, along with Broadfoot (1996) and Rosati (2005), as one of the most relevant aspects in human development, since «knowledge, attitudes, norms, prohibitions, strategies, beliefs, ideas, values and myths inevitably surround the various social practices» (Rosati, 2005). In taking such notion, evaluation constitutes an important aspect in education, whose complexities and peculiarities have instigated many researchers to seek alternative evaluative practices in accordance with their local demands.

The high interest in evaluation concerning its purposes and outcomes began mostly in the 70s, when the educational field started to take into account the contribution of socio-cultural studies. As Ludke (2002) and Sousa (1995) point out, there was a shift in the paradigm of evaluation, much as a result of qualitative and ethnographic studies, which brought a sociological view to the strict technological dimension of assessment. Consequently, as Vianna (1995) states, several works started to be published worldwide in the 70s recognizing the limitations of traditional evaluation, for that was strictly aimed at quantitative aspects.

Such fruitful reflection in the last decades of the twentieth century had its effects and constituted, in its own time, a breakthrough for the re-conceptualization of several educational issues, including evaluation; still, new social demands towards the rising of a novel epistemological

basis in the beginning of this century calls for further discussion. For the purposes of such demand, the research whose results we now share in this paper refers to language assessment issues, focusing on current local conceptions and practices as well as their redesign towards new language theories.

LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT IN FORMAL EDUCATION: THREE RECURRING PROBLEMS

This reflection is based on a Master's study regarding English language assessment from the perspective of the new literacy studies. Before sharing our findings, some information concerning the research may be necessary for contextualization.

This interpretative-qualitative research (Duboc, 2007) was conducted between 2004 and 2007 at the University of São Paulo, Brazil. Its main guiding questions were: a) how does language assessment evolve in English classes in some Elementary School communities?; b) what would the conception of language assessment be like from the perspective of the new literacy studies? While the latter referred to a theoretical reflection based on recent language theory, the former intended a characterization which was achieved through field research. Data was collected in 5th grade groups from three different Elementary schools located in the city of São Paulo (being one public and two private communities). Besides class observation, teachers were interviewed and written tests were analyzed, in order to corroborate an ethnographic study.²

After having investigated the three different Elementary schools, we came to the conclusion that both conceptions and practices of the research subjects regarding language assessment echoed strong influences of the paradigm of Modernity, whose most recurring problems were: (1) the interpretation of evaluation as synonymous with measurement; (2) the emphasis on objective, clear-cut and stable language contents, and (3) the predominant use of written tests. We shall now present further considerations concerning each of these problems.

² For further information, the full work can be found at <http://www.teses.usp.br>.

Evaluation as Synonymous with Measurement

The concept of language evaluation as measurement, our first identified problem, seems to be the result of the positivist model of education in the nineteenth century, whose origins are connected to the emerging scientific approach from that time, characterized by an emphasis on experimentation and fact observation on a strictly logical, rational and concrete basis. The positivist approach was a result of the Enlightenment movement at the end of the nineteenth century, which, surrounded by the 'New Science' project, helped consolidate Modernity. What interests us concerning those movements is their concept of knowledge: the paradigm of Modernity legitimated only one 'nature' of knowledge: scientific, objective, true and measurable. In fact, that was the kind of knowledge that would allow men to achieve freedom (Marcondes, 2002). As we will see later on, such notion of knowledge will mould the concept of pedagogy in subsequent times.

Specifically regarding evaluation, such positivist influence and its strict concern with objectivity and measurement could be seen in the first decades of the twentieth century, when the "Measurement Movement" aimed at measuring human changes during learning in a very precise, clear-cut way (Thorndike & Gates, 1931). That was the moment of a very strong influence of biological studies in education, when psychological tests were highly used.

The concept of evaluation as measurement is taken here as a limited one, since we assume evaluation as a process that goes beyond performance measurement procedures, that is to say, assessment. The word "assessment" itself is somehow an interesting outcome of such understanding. We refer to the already legitimated overuse of this term as a synonym of the broader notion of "evaluation" in the various social contexts (Broadfoot, 1996). In this respect, Luckesi (2003) dichotomizes both terms showing that while "assessment", stemming from the Latin *verum facere*, means 'the search of the truth', the notion of "evaluation", from the Latin *a-valere*, implies a further step in which positioning and appraisal should take place; to put it in another way, "evaluation" implies, in an early stage, measuring one's performance through formal assessing, whose results will then be interpreted and judged accordingly.³

³ This very frequent use of the term "assessment" in academic publications explains our choice when constantly referring to "language *assessment*" throughout the paper, including its title. It does not mean we assume a notion of evaluation as mere synonym of measurement, though.

When we looked specifically at our investigated schools, such conception became evident through the great predominance of grade reports to the detriment of other feedback alternatives, which would truly aim at improving both teaching and learning processes (Vasconcellos, 2003). The excerpt below (Figure 1), which is part of a class in one of the schools, is an example of such conception:

S1¹: Teacher, have you corrected the tests yet?
Aida: Yes, I have...
S1: Why didn't you bring them?
Ss: Ahhh!!! (showing disappointment)
Aida: Those tests will only be handed in to your parents, in our school meeting next Saturday.
S2: Tell us the grades!
Ss: Yeah... at least tell us the grades!!! (showing excitement)
Aida: I can share **the grades** with you... ²

Figure 1. Excerpt taken from an English class in one of the investigated schools (Duboc, 2007).

¹ S1= Student 1; S2 = Student 2; Ss = students. Aida is a 5th grade teacher in one of the investigated private schools

² My own translation.

The Emphasis on Objective, Clear-Cut and Stable Language Contents

Concerning the emphasis on the assessment of clear-cut and stable language contents, our second identified problem, we believe this is an extension of the conception of language assumed by the teachers. According to our analysis, they see language as a fixed linguistic code since the research participants used to assess only grammatical and lexical contents, neglecting other relevant aspects involved in the foreign language learning-teaching process.

The view of language as a code seems to be a legacy – or a burden depending on the reader's own view – of Structuralist Linguistics. This concept of language as a structure has its origins in the beginning of the twentieth century, with Saussure (1916), for whom language is a system of signs whose meanings are determined by social convention, leaving little room for individual interpretation and meaning-making. It is, thus,

a concept of language in accordance with the positivist approach since it emphasizes objectivity and the analysis of isolated parts of the language (Fidalgo, 2002). A more critical approach to language, however, sees the structuralist view as a limited one for it treats language in a isolated and abstract way (Costa, 2000), neglecting its social and cultural aspects and the fact that meanings are socially constructed and negotiated. In our interpretation, when a teacher chooses to teach and assess only grammatical and lexical aspects, he or she is actually revealing a more structural view of language.

For Baxter (1997), the choice of the content to be assessed in our daily teaching practices seems to be a simple task at a first glance. Yet the author points out the necessity of assessing not only linguistic contents but also those which would refer to the different language uses and the different abilities that one develops when learning a language. Baxter (op.cit) believes this emphasis on stable and clear-cut language contents in many language teaching contexts relies on the fact that they are easier to be measured. Thus, grammatical and lexical aspects, commonly taught in an abstract and decontextualized way, present such a high level of objectivity that allows teachers to comfortably assess their students' performance by simply following accurate and standardized criteria.

The following exercise (Figure 2), taken from one of the tests from our database, is a good example of this emphasis on objective and stable contents, since it aims at testing the accurate spelling of numbers and the identification of the appropriate currencies:

3- Write the prices below: (1,0)
CN\$ 41.20 - _____
US\$ 39,30 - _____
£ 68 - _____
R\$ 51,00 - _____

Figure 2. Exercise about numbers and currency taken from one of the written tests (Duboc, 2007).

Besides the testing of a linguistic content, which is, in this particular task, the appropriate spelling of numbers, one alternative approach that would go further could be the exploration of the students' understandings of those currencies, mainly whether they are able to establish the equivalence

among those prices in relation to our Brazilian currency, stimulating them to reflect on the purchasing power of different countries.

The Predominant Use of Written Tests

Finally, regarding evaluative modes used in the investigated schools, we could identify the predominant use of written tests, which is taken as our third problem. Among the reasons of such predominance and the difficulties in legitimating other alternative modes (Fidalgo, 2002), we mention the high influence of objective tests in the first decades of the twentieth century (Vianna, 1995), a fact that is related to the incisive concern with objectivity, refinement and neutrality at those times (Thorndike & Gates, 1931).

Widely spread in the late twentieth century, the objective testing were of two main types: norm-referenced testing and criteria-referenced testing. As Vianna (*op.cit.*) states, whereas the former stems from objective tests in the very beginning of the twentieth century and sought to compare individual performance at a percentage basis, the latter aimed at verifying individual learning in relation to educational objectives previously established.⁴ As we can see, although those late tests were still quite objective, the strictly emphasis on comparison among individuals was later replaced by a concern about the individual learning.

Our main critique regarding testing lies in its usual emphasis on objectivity, being the format issue, therefore, of minor concern. What worries us the most is that quite commonly such tests legitimate scientific, 'true' knowledge, that is, rational and objective contents, to the detriment of subjectivity, affection, and creativity (Morin, 2005).

In short, the identification of three main problems concerning language assessment in those different investigated schools seems to echo all the rationalist epistemological basis which founded the educational assessment view in the twentieth century and subsequent times. This general view of evaluation, mainly based on both contents and forms that focus on objectivity and stability, originates in the notion of 'knowledge' adopted by the paradigm of Modernity, which refers to a great emphasis on 'the' truth, thus, on strictly scientific knowledge, whose main consequence to our field was what Severino (1986) called a "scientification of education".

⁴ In this respect, the most prominent theorist was Tyler (1949/1975).

One could have interpreted such outcomes not as 'problems', but actually as coherent and adequate conceptions and practices, which would be perfectly acceptable depending on one's own assumptions regarding language and its teaching. Yet our interpretation of such data as 'problems' is justified by our loci of enunciation; during the research, we did identify a conventional view of language teaching and assessment which, in our viewpoint, no longer seems to respond to the new demands signaled by the new literacy studies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 2000, 2004; Kress, 2000, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003), specially when discussing the recent re-conceptualization of language and knowledge.

For the purposes of this paper, we phrase some of the challenges regarding language assessment as questions: what would the conception of language teaching and language assessment be like from the perspective of these new literacy studies? Which contents would be highlighted, which characteristics would be designed and still which evaluative modes would be more suitable? Prompt answers do not seem to exist, but we believe that those recent studies offer us some interesting insights to such re-conceptualization. Before discussing those issues, we shall present some of the most relevant conceptions signaled by the new literacy studies, primarily the notions of 'knowledge' and 'language' in the digital age.

THE NEW LITERACY STUDIES IN THE DIGITAL AGE: WHAT'S NEW?

In our ongoing attempts to reflect on language issues and improve our teaching expertise, we find the new literacy studies very promising for these recent theories seem to better respond to the new demands of digital age when it comes to language learning and teaching. Before we discuss such new concepts, we shall present a brief overview concerning their epistemological basis.

The Epistemological Origins of "Literacy"

In a broad sense, the emerging literacy studies from the last decades derive from Critical Theory and Education Sociology, specifically from the underlying principles of Critical Pedagogy. By presenting a new epistemological strand in opposition to the dominant traditional positivist basis, Critical Theory studies propose less regular scientific models by

presupposing diversity, discontinuity and the non-linearity of social phenomena (Torres, 2003). Therefore, it aims at understanding the society *modus operandi* as a historical totality through the deconstruction of common sense premises. On this basis, among several pedagogical practices, critical pedagogy is the one highly engaged in such process of unveiling by rethinking school within a language of critique (Giroux, 1997).

Concerning the concept of literacy itself, Soares (2004) states that beyond mere acquisition of a “writing technology” which enables us to both reading and writing practices, the concept of literacy from the 70s refers to an effective and competent use of a certain writing technology, which implies the use of several abilities. The same author (Soares, 2005) still pinpoints that learning a written language is not a technical matter, since it is surrounded by political and ideological issues in different cultural and social contexts.

As we can infer, Soares’s definition refers to the critical nature of the learning process, in a way that corroborates the understanding of Freirean pedagogy as one of the pillars of what nowadays constitutes “critical literacy”. In this respect, before we advance on more recent concepts of literacies, we find it relevant to discuss what it means to be “critical” or to teach “critically”, for the term seems to be overused by recent research as we can see in the spread of certain terms, such as ‘critical reading’, ‘critical literacy’, ‘critical citizens’, and so on.

Critical Reading and Critical Literacy

Cervetti, Pardales and Damico (2001) argue that the concept of critical reading lies in the liberal-humanist tradition. This philosophical thought mainly developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries poses great emphasis on rational and universal knowledge as a way to pursue liberty, placing the individual, formerly servant of feudal and church control, at the center of history.

Putting this in more practical terms, a liberal-humanist approach to reading focuses on neutral and rational discernment between facts, opinions and personal appraisals. In such perspective, being critical means to stick to the textual features and unravel its ‘true’ meaning by applying rational thinking. Typical questions based on such approach would be “To whom is the text addressed?” or “What is the author’s intention?”

Critical literacy, on the other hand, has its basis on Critical Social theory, about which we already discussed in the previous section when referring to the origins of the concept of literacy. From this perspective, knowledge is situated, rather than universal; ideological, rather than neutral. Therefore, being critical implies a wider notion of text, whose interpretation lies not only in textual features but also and mainly on the surroundings, that is to say, the underlying ideologies and relations of power. This way, critical literacy approach presupposes multiple meanings, since it views text as cultural and historically situated, thus, deprived from neutrality.

In short, the authors (*op.cit.*) explain that while the teaching of critical reading focuses on the textual comprehension abilities in a linear and rational way, critical literacy teaching proposes the development of critical awareness, bringing out wider social issues (Burbules & Berk, 1999). In our viewpoint, both approaches are quite interesting and useful to be applied during classes; yet it is important to bear in mind their different educational goals, since they are founded on different epistemological basis.

Hoping to have situated the author in relation to where the term 'literacy' comes from and what constitutes to be 'critical', we shall now discuss more specifically the new literacy studies or multiliteracies.

New Demands, New Concepts: The New Literacy Studies

The recent development of new terms which are related to literacy issues have been considerably discussed worldwide. Lankshear and Knobel (2003), for instance, have used the expression *new literacy studies* revisiting the notion of literacy from the 70s towards the very recent social transformations. Cope and Kalantzis (2000), on the other hand, have coined the term *multiliteracies*, in a way that prioritizes the great multiplicity of language use towards the development of new digital representational modes.

In our understanding, it is not a matter of replacing terms; on the contrary, the emergence of such new concepts, which are, broadly speaking, engaged in defining the new abilities and strategies necessary to the new meaning-making process brought by the digital age, has its origins in the most significant changes in the field of communications and information technologies.

The implications of such changes are huge. From a conventional notion of text, we start to consume and produce new post-typographical texts, that is to say, texts which have hitherto been predominantly linear and verbal now become multimodal by the juxtaposition and approximation of different representational modes, such as images, sounds, videos, emoticons, hyperlinks (Lankshear & Knobel, *op.cit.*). Such multimodality in different digital media has changed the design of texts; consequently, the way we interpret and produce them can no longer follow the deeply entrenched traditional language teaching (Monte Mór, 2006).

The notion of multiliteracies, stated by Cope and Kalantzis (*op.cit.*), emphasizes this new text configuration, whose educational practice would bear in mind much wider representational modes rather the 'language' *per se*. To put it another way, whereas traditional literacy teaching is centered on the teaching of a stable and homogeneous language system, a multiliteracies pedagogy would view language as a wider meaning-making system, whose representational modes, verbal and non-verbal, print and digital, are dynamic, flexible, heterogeneous and much more complex than ever.

This new concept of language lies on the emergence of a new concept of knowledge in the digital age, whose key elements are no longer the stability, objectivity and neutrality from the traditional positivist epistemology; on the contrary, the notion of 'knowledge' on this new digital basis implies new key words, like construction, collaboration, distribution, negotiation, mobility, dynamism, and instability.

Since the new digital epistemology understands knowledge construction as flexible, dynamic and collaborative, we see critical literacy as a fruitful pedagogical approach, for it seeks the development of critical thinking in a way that students could identify positioning in different kinds of media, as well as claim their own assumptions and viewpoints, negotiating and transforming meaning whenever they find it necessary. Such critical literacy practices can be developed during classes, in different kinds of activities, including formal language assessment, our subsequent issue.

ASSESSING LANGUAGE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CRITICAL LITERACY

In order to discuss assessment in relation to such new theories and their underlying new notions of knowledge and language, we selected some tasks that were used in the investigated schools during formal testing. We do not mean to establish any categorization as a way to standardize assessment practices from the perspective of critical literacy; on the contrary, the activities that we share below constitute interesting starting points for us to outline alternative assessment regarding its characteristics, contents and modes. As we have said, these suggested activities are very much based on the concepts of language and knowledge signaled by the new literacies theories as previously presented.

Redefining the Concept of Assessment

Concerning its characteristics, our research has come to the conclusion that from the perspective of the new literacy studies assessment is expected to be collaborative, situated and negotiated, in accordance with the emergent notion of 'knowledge' in the digital age. A more 'distributed and collaborative' evaluation process would refer to the sharing of personal appraisals among teacher and students in a much more open atmosphere, more public and less vertical in opposition to the highly hierarchical assessment that takes place in conventional teaching contexts. As for its situated and negotiated nature, evaluation would no longer be taken as 'right versus wrong', 'true versus false' and other fixed binary pairs; rather, it would be founded on the notion of 'provisional truths' or 'mobile validity', a novel notion that sees validity as emerging from the context of use.

We find it prudent to clarify that this notion of 'mobile validity' is not a matter of "anything goes", in which all evaluative criteria would be suspended. On the contrary, taking the premises of Critical Theory, we understand that validity in students' work comes from their own context of use and the way they negotiate meanings. It is all about the concept of 'multimodal truth' presented by Lankshear and Knobel (*op. cit.*), in which fixed binary pairs such as 'correct' versus 'incorrect' take a situated and flexible meaning.

Redefining the Contents of Assessment

Regarding the content which is being assessed, we share with the readers the possibility of assessing not only fixed and stable linguistic aspects, such as grammar rules and lexical acquisition, but also and mostly the students' ability to make and transform meaning critically. During our research, we were able to collect several written tests that were planned by the teachers and kindly shared with us for our further data analysis. In one of those tests, we found a very interesting exercise (Figure 3) that could be worked on from the perspective of critical literacy:

Write the name of a food that you eat for each of the meals below
(1.0)

BREAKFAST _____

MID-MORNING SNACK _____

LUNCH _____

MID-AFTERNOON SNACK _____

DINNER _____

Figure 3. Exercise about meals taken from one of the written tests (Duboc, 2007).

It is an interesting exercise whose approach will depend on the teacher's own language assumption. In that specific case, since the teacher had a structuralist view of language, we could identify the assessing of very stable and objective contents, that is vocabulary related to food and drink, each of them strictly categorized in their right 'labels' (as it was taught in previous classes), as if for each meal students would have a limited range of options from which to choose and write their answers.

What we question, however, is this categorizing process commonly found in language textbooks and classes specially when teaching lexical aspects, such as food and drink, family members, clothes, occupations and so on. Taken from a critical literacy perspective, such notion of language as a fixed system would be replaced by a notion of language whose meanings are situated, that is contextualized in accordance with the student's own loci (Gee, 2004). Let us say that one of those students

had written the word 'rice' referring to the meal 'breakfast'. How would we have evaluated such answer? Which evaluative criteria would we have adopted in order to give our personal appraisal of what constituted 'right' and 'wrong' in that specific answer? Eating rice for breakfast may not be a typical habit in Brazil, but it may be in other cultures, such as Japanese. Wouldn't this simple background information concerning cultural differences have been sufficient to blur the boundaries of 'rights' and 'wrongs' established in that exercise the way it was designed?

The notion of 'breakfast' itself as well as the other meals presented in the task and in many foreign language teaching materials is a European concept which was transferred to colonized peoples. That explains the standardization of local language and local meaning-making process, despite its validity in that context of use.

We claim, along with Giroux (1993), that fixed and stable meanings constitute one of the influences from the paradigm of Modernity, whose search for totality and true knowledge result in standardizing cultural and linguistic varieties. Post-modern studies, on the other hand, privilege issues such as diversity, locality, specificity and the contingencies (Giroux, *op. cit.*), inviting us to rethink the way we present language contents to our students, considering global and local differences to the detriment of fixed and standardized language meanings.

From this perspective, the same task could be a starting point for discussing with students their own notion of 'breakfast' based on their own community contexts as well as the meaning of 'breakfast' in the different regions of Brazil and in different countries. We believe that such pedagogical activity may offer them the possibility of making meanings in a more flexible way, in which 'right' versus 'wrong' answers would no longer be fixed, but contextualized and negotiated towards cultural differences.

Another interesting task taken from one of the written tests refers to the use of an image as part of a blank-filling exercise. The task (Figure 4) brings a text about a fictitious family in which students have to fill in with the appropriate words:

Read the text and complete the spaces. Use *my, she, her, he, his, they, their* or *our*:



This is a picture of my aunt and her family. ____ is Clara and ____ is a dentist. The man on the right is ____ husband. ____ name is Paulo. ____ is an engineer. ____ are both forty years old. ____ 've got two children. ____ daughter's name is Cristina and ____ son's name's Marcos. Cristina is 14. ____ 's tall and ____ 's got long black hair and green eyes. Marcos is 12 and ____ is quite tall for ____ age. ____ cousins and I are good friends. ____ are crazy about computers games. ____ favorite game is Mad Dog II.

Figure 4. Blank-filling exercise with a picture taken from one of the written tests (Duboc, 2007).

As we can see, the task aims at testing students' knowledge regarding subject pronouns and possessive adjectives in English. This means again the assessing of objective, clear-cut language contents which are easily measured. If taken from a critical literacy perspective, the same exercise is very fruitful, for it could assess the students' ability to 'read' not only the verbal text, but also the non-verbal one, that is, the image of the family, by making meaning, positioning themselves, negotiating and transforming their own assumptions.

This way, the picture of a 'happy family', used as mere illustration of the verbal text, would be taken here as a text as well, whose implicit ideologies could be interpreted as we commonly do with any verbal text in our classes. Interesting questions, then, could be shared with students as a way of stimulating them to position themselves towards

their surroundings and critically reflect on certain issues: “What is the notion of ‘family’ suggested in such image?”; “Does this image picture the families you know? Why? Why not? Justify your answer”; and so on.

Our concern with the visual is related to a wider and more complex context. The recent changes in the field of communications and information technology have increased the number of visual representational modes in different media (Kress, 2000; 2003). In other words, we now live and work in much more visual spaces, especially in the digital sphere and its varieties of modes (websites, cellular phones, digital cameras to name a few). Among the implications, we find it relevant to investigate how our students view such images, that is, whether they see them as meaning-making modes or simply representations of linear verbal texts. When navigating the web, for instance, do students ‘read’ the different available visual modes as texts (such as emoticons, hyperlinks and others)? Are they able to identify the ideological positioning carried out by such modes? Do they critically manage their navigation towards those several texts? Those are issues that deserve further research.

Redefining the Ways of Assessing

Finally, with respect to evaluative modes that would be more suitable to the premises of the new literacies, we invite our readers to rethink pre-existing ones. Any mode, including the traditional written tests predominantly used in many schools, can be quite useful for critical literacy practices. In this sense, we point out it is not a matter of simply replacing one mode by another one, but mainly reflecting the concept of language and knowledge that underlies such assessment format, from its design until its correction and feedback processes.

Naturally, some recent evaluative modes seem to be more adequate to the new epistemological basis since it favors its notion of language and knowledge, as it is the case of the electronic portfolio⁵ (Barret, 2001) or the *edublogs*, the educational blogs (González, 2005), whose main features and implications to education still need to be investigated. Either from the print or the digital world, we believe testing from the perspective of the new

⁵ Barrett (2001, *Why Portfolios*, ¶ 4) defines the concept of ‘electronic portfolio’ as “the use of electronic technologies that allow the portfolio developer to collect and organize artifacts in many formats (audio, video, graphics, and text). A standards-based electronic portfolio uses hypertext links to organize the material to connect artifacts to appropriate goals or standards.”

literacy theories must optimize the notion of “agency” among teachers and students, emphasizing social construction rather than individual and concentrated knowledge, in a more open and democratic atmosphere.

SOME FINAL REMARKS

Planning language assessment from a structuralist view of language has been a fairly easy task, since it aims at testing the correct use of grammar and lexical structures. This has been a very comfortable way to evaluate students’ performance in many regular schools or language institutes due to the stability of standardized answers. From the perspective of the new literacy studies, the comfort of teaching and assessing objective and homogeneous linguistic contents is replaced by a wider spectrum of language teaching and assessing possibilities, whose key elements turn to be difference and critique. Typical activities based on this new approach would enable students to make and negotiate meanings in a much more flexible way, corroborating the novel notion of unstable, dynamic, collaborative and distributed knowledge.

The inclusion of contents of such nature in language assessments may be, at a first glance, a very laborious process due to the fact we are simply not accustomed to that. Actually, we sometimes find ourselves deprived from the teaching skills necessary to apply a more critical teaching approach, a fact that is much the result of our positivist educational background.

Nonetheless, since the emergent digital epistemology will require subjects more capable of designing and redesigning meaning critically towards a great deal of representational modes, we need to reconsider our teaching approaches, go further and seek theories that take such issues into account. By redefining the notions of language and knowledge, we, thus, assume that the new literacy studies from the last decades may offer very good insights to the field of foreign language teaching.

The re-conceptualization of language assessment according to the new literacies project presented in this paper does not intend to suggest prompt fixed answers, but it takes the risk of outlining possible activities, signaling certain changes regarding its characteristics and contents, as previously shared.

The increasing importance of the new literacy or multiliteracies studies and their fruitful theoretical insights for the rethinking of pedagogical issues invite us to review our foreign language teaching practices in a different perspective. By sharing some of our local findings, we attempt to corroborate the collaborative and distributed knowledge discussed by the literacies theory itself and hope to be contributing to the new educational demands of the emerging epistemological basis.

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Fecha de recepción del artículo: 23-01-2009

Fecha de aceptación del artículo: 17-04-2009