Cognitive, social and cultural aspects of primary school teaching
Topic: Literacy theories and language teaching
Instructor: Villy Tsakona (villytsa@otenet.gr)
8/5/2015

1. The communicative/text-based approach to language teaching

- The basic assumption and starting point of the communicative/text-based approach to language teaching is that language is always used as a text in relation to a communicative setting.
- Both the teaching objective and the ensuing methodology are determined by communication.
- The aim of this approach is to encourage students to produce and understand oral and written discourse in various natural or simulated communicative settings, in which they participate with a specific and explicit intention.
- Students are faced with the challenge of perceiving and producing oral and written discourse, using –and thus acquiring– the appropriate vocabulary and grammatical and syntactical means.
- Consequently, they come to understand that it is the social context in which this text is embedded (and not some grammar rules) that determines the vocabulary, phraseology, register, and text structure.

2. On genres

- Genres are the categories in which texts can be classified, and constitute integral parts of a sociocultural community.
- They are constructed in such a way as to serve the social needs of that community.
- Genres are characterized by a sum of communicative purposes recognizable by the members of the community.
- Each member of a community is expected to be familiar with the linguistic and structural conventions of a genre.
- Each sociocultural community has its own genre repertoire and certain genres are more widespread and popular in some communities, whereas they become progressively less popular in others (e.g. personal handwritten letters in Western societies).
- New genres (e.g. internet pages, email, texting) are gaining ground in technology-oriented Western-type societies.
- The education system is expected to facilitate and accelerate students' familiarization with genres, so as to enable them to understand the variety and dynamics of their linguistic and structural components, and to use them both effectively and critically.

3. Summary of the main points of the communicative/text-based approach to language teaching

- Emphasis on the text
- Generic structure
- Teaching not only of written but also of oral discourse
- Emphasis on the actual use of genres and on their context
- Students' sociocultural characteristics and needs

4. From the communicative/text-based approach towards (critical) literacy

In language textbooks the communicative/text-based approach is often followed superficially rather than systematically:

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- The activities aimed at creating a communicative setting suitable for the production of texts with the students' active involvement and creative participation are very limited.
- The selection of texts is problematic, since the discourse produced in students' everyday interactions, and in particular spontaneous discourse, is not exploited at all.
- The social characteristics of the student population are not taken into account.
- The application of this approach has very often been limited to creating ideal, predetermined, and standardized communicative circumstances in class, while it usually avoids collecting ethnographic information on students' social environment, their difficulties, needs, goals, and objectives.
- The communicative/text-based approach does not take into account and does not make reference to the critical diagnosis of the presuppositions for communication as this evolves in a specific context. It does not raise questions such as the following:
  o For what reason and for what purpose has a text been created?
  o Whose interests and expectations does it serve and whose does it undermine?
  o Could the text be created and function differently?

5. On literacy
- Literacy programs in contemporary societies are particularly relevant and complementary to the communicative/text-based approach to language teaching.
- Their objective is not limited to the ability to read, write, and understand a text, combined with learning and applying a technical, grammatical metalanguage.
- They are directly associated with citizens' ability to function effectively in various contexts by critically understanding, producing, and handling a variety of genres, whether written, oral, or multimodal ones.

6. Autonomous and ideological literacy
- Within the framework of *autonomous* literacy, education policy makers assume that we all know, and agree on, what literacy is; that literacy is invariable, useful, and appropriate for all the communities in the world.
- The main objective of the autonomous model is to make people competent in a predetermined nexus of decontextualized linguistic, textual, and metalanguage skills.
- Particular emphasis is placed on the 'objectified' study of language (i.e. learning vocabulary lists along with grammar and syntax rules) and on the so-called powerful genres (e.g. expository, argumentative, and essay texts).
- The core of autonomous literacy and the lever to achieve homogeneity are exams and diagnostic tests of 'neutral', 'a-social', and 'universally' accepted linguistic and cognitive skills.
- Such tests presuppose students' individual silent efforts, without social and collaborative objectives and practices, while at the same time they aim at the classification of students.

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- Within the framework of *critical* literacy, emphasis is placed on how students will comprehend the social and ideological character of the linguistic resources they adopt and the texts they use.
- The question concerning which literacy is suitable for each sociocultural context is predominantly a political question, which cannot be answered only by experts, without taking into account the sociocultural particularities of each community and the genres that may be associated with, or result from, such particularities.
- Literacies and their social importance vary depending on the sociocultural context in which they emerge. This recognition and the ensuing research on multiple literacy practices presuppose an ethnographic approach to literacy.

7. Functional and critical literacy

- *Functional literacy models* emphasize social goals and settings and enable students to effectively adapt themselves to social conditions and needs.
- *Critical literacy models* contest such social goals and contexts and enable students to critically scrutinize them as part of their language education. Critical literacy disputes every conceptualization of literacy which appears as given and 'natural' by asking questions such as the following:
  o Why is a specific linguistic variety, register, or text structure suitable for a genre – and not some other?
  o Who decided on it?
  o Who benefits from it?
  o Does this variety, register, or genre empower some people and silence others?
  o Why does communication in a specific context evolve (or should evolve) in a specific way and not in another?
  o What kinds of communication does a variety, register, or genre encourage? What does it constrain against?
  o Why are certain varieties, register, or genres valorized?
  o What kinds of social organization and institutions are put or kept in place by such valorizations?
  o Which representations of the world are favored or (even imposed) by such valorizations?
  o When and with what consequences could someone decide to deviate from what is expected in a certain communicative setting?

- Students as literacy ethnographers record what literacy practices are used in their homes or communities by their parents, relatives, and friends, in what circumstances, and with what repercussions on the participants' relationships.
  o There is no single literacy but rather there are many alternative literacies.
  o Literacies are accompanied by different social evaluations that result from different cultural views of the world.
  o The literacy projected as the 'correct' literacy is none other than the dominant one.

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8. A model for critical language education

- Literacy and language education in general should not be confined to enhancing grammatical, textual, and communicative skills selected independently of the students' social and cultural environments.
- Students' language experiences reach the classroom through collecting oral, written, electronic, multimodal texts originating in their social everyday reality. Such texts are then studied in relation to their particular sociocultural dimensions and in critical comparison with other available material.
- Differences do emerge both between the sociolinguistic repertoires students bring to class as well as between such repertoires and the skills developed by the formal curricula. Such differences are not downplayed or even suppressed to the advantage of the dominant sociolinguistic and textlinguistic norms. On the contrary, they are highlighted and stimulate students' constant critical reflection.

9. The multiliteracies model

- *Situated practice* pertains to the utilization of students' experience via the use of texts with which they come into contact in their everyday lives and the sociocultural communities they participate in.
- *Overt instruction* pertains, on the one hand, to the teacher's guidance through the use of comprehensible metalanguage and, on the other, to students' awareness of ways in which specific language mechanisms contribute to the organization and comprehension of texts.
- *Critical framing* pertains to the critical interpretation of a text on the basis of its inclusion in local or wider sociocultural contexts, and to the investigation of the goals it is expected to accomplish.
- *Transformed practice* pertains to *recontextualization*, that is, the transfer and the adaptation of a text from one sociocultural and/or communicative context to others with different characteristics.

10. An example: Teaching about/with humor (see Τσάκωνα 2013)

- Humor is a basic element of contemporary culture and is found in many genres (e.g. oral interaction, advertising, political discourse, literature, digital discourse).
- Humor is generally based on incongruity, that is, on deviation from the norm or a generally accepted convention. Hence, a precondition for humor to exist is a situation, an idea, an event that contradicts what we know about the world around us, about the reality in which we live.
- Humor is able to bring into the limelight the values and implicit convictions in relation to which incongruity is found.
- Humor contributes to the familiarization of individuals with what the group perceives as acceptable or unacceptable behavior and possibly protects them from acts that would endanger their integration, position, and status in the group.

Text 1: Cartoon

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Text 2: Joke

Ο μικρός δεν μπορούσε να κοιμηθεί μέχρι αργά την νύχτα. Η μαμά του προσπαθεί να το ηρεμήσει.

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– Σώπα παιδάκι μου, όπου να 'ναι θα 'ρθει ο μπαμπάς και θα μας πει ένα παραμύθι.
– Τι παραμύθι μαμά;
– Πού ήταν μέχρι αυτή την ώρα...

Text 3: Joke

Του λένε μια μέρα [του Νασρεντίν Χότζα] πως η γυναίκα του τριγυρνάει διαρκώς κι όλο επισκέψεις κάνει.
«Μπα, δεν το πιστεύω. Αν πράγματι ήταν έτσι, θα πέρναγε κι από το σπίτι καμιά φορά» απαντάει ο Χότζας, αλλά οι φίλοι του επιμένουν.
«Κοίτα, καημένε, να της πεις να κάθεται στο σπίτι της» του λένε.
«Εντάξει! Αν τύχει και τη συναντήσω, θα της το πω».

Essay writing (500 words)
Describe how you would design and implement a language course based on the multiliteracies model. Then, summarize the main differences between the language course you designed and current language teaching practices.

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