Disciplines and Interdisciplinarity

in

Foreign Language Studies

edited by

Hans Lauge Hansen

University of Copenhagen

Museum Tusculanum Press

2004

Hans Lauge Hansen (ed.)
Disciplines and Interdisciplinarity
in Foreign Language Studies

Contents

'Advanced literacy'

Bridging traditions in the study of language and culture

by

Francesco Caviglia

Introduction

That the criteria for being considered a member of the literate community have changed in the last few decades is clearly reflected in two recent surveys on literacy, the *IALS* survey on adult literacy (OECD, 2000) and *PISA 2000* on literacy at the age of 15 (OECD, 2000b and 2001). The traditional approach, which is still represented in the *IALS* survey, measures literacy on the assumption that the subject is at the receiving end of communication, and primarily verifies his or her ability to extract information from a text and to deliver it back. The level of difficulty of the reading exercises is graded according to such parameters as the presence of distracting information or the number of inferences necessary to answer a question: that is, according to the *computational* effort required for processing the sentences (OECD, 2000, 93-97). Implicit in the underlying conception of the reading and writing process is the idea that information is received and transmitted as if it were an object that migrates from one container to the other, from the page to the head or the other way round: the student has understood a text if the 'content' in his head corresponds to the contents of the text, as far as this can be tested. This view of reading and writing is relatively easy to evaluate and makes sense as long as language and text are regarded as means for *representing* reality, and learning – for which *reading* is one prerequisite-skill – is understood (maybe implicitly) as storing facts and rules in one's head.

In contrast to the *IALS* survey, the more recent *PISA 2000* survey entailed a more active role for the reader, who was required to recognize *genre*, *function* and *point of view* in a text and to collaborate with the text in the production of meaning by drawing inferences from her or his knowledge of the world. In other words, a certain degree of 'criticality' is an explicit

requirement, in accordance with the spread of a view in which the function of communication is not only to transmit content but also to construct relationships and identities (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997); or, to use a formulation which I will prefer in this paper, 'to pattern expectations and values' (Raskin, 1982, 16; Raskin was actually referring to functions of art).

The claim of this paper is that much research on language and culture can be productively seen as a contribution to fostering *literacy*, which I would first define in general terms as understanding and mastery of the communication tools that permit us to orient ourselves and others in our complex world. However, like 'knowing' or 'learning', 'literacy' can be associated with a wide range of practices in our society. As an addition to this broad conception, I propose a distinction between two types of literacy: *basic literacy*, focused on the representational, face-value layer of language, and founded on a view of communication as the simple transmission of contents or as self-expression; and *advanced literacy*, which implies a view of reading and writing as a means for creating and transforming knowledge, for understanding and influencing others, and for constructing identities and relationships. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the concept of *advanced literacy* as a goal for the study of language and culture by providing examples of how this educational goal can become a source of research questions and a catalyst for dialogue between different paradigms in the study of language and culture[1].

A literacy for the knowledge age
Electronic archives have already changed the way we locate information, and computer simulations may offer new approaches to the human scien-

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[1] The definition of *advanced literacy* that I am proposing is heavily indebted to the research carried out by Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia over the last 15 years, into writing, learning and the mediational role of technology and social institutions. In the 1890s, supported by tools from experimental psychology and cognitive science, Bereiter and Scardamalia investigated the process of written composition and envisaged ways to assist it (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). Their subsequent work has focused on defining 'expertise' (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993) and on how to foster 'knowledge building', i.e. the ability to produce and manipulate new knowledge, which they consider a key skill for education that meets the needs of the *knowledge age* (Scardamalia & Bereiter,1999 and 2003; Bereiter, 2002a; Scardamalia, 2002). However, despite Bereiter's acknowledgement of the educational potential of the humanities (Bereiter, 2002a, 318-322), their work is mainly focused on elementary schools and on the natural and social sciences as content. An underlying ambition of my work in the last 10 years – most explicitly in Caviglia (2002) and Caviglia (2000a) – has been to help bridge their views of the learning process with some key conceptual tools developed within the humanities.

ces (Parisi 2000). The overwhelming presence of visual stimuli from TV and videogames, together with the 'hypertextual' reading practices promoted by computers, are probably jeopardizing the role of 'sequential' and 'reflective' reading and writing in favour of easier and shallower associative processes (Simone 2000). Yet reflective reading and writing remains a crucial empowering tool in our society. I do not believe that developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) require of us a radically different literacy from that already part of the more open traditions within the humanities, with roots in the written word but a keen eye for a variety of genres and media. Studies on the role of technology in shaping culture and cognition with focus on the past (e.g. Ong 1982; Gumbrecht 1985; Zumthor 1987) still offer key insights for understanding recent developments brought about by the technology of communication.

However, levels of literacy which were once the privilege of an elite have become a standard requirement for participation in the adult life of our culture, for at least two reasons. Firstly, a high level of literacy is a prerequisite for many attractive jobs, since "virtually every high-tech tool reduces the range of skills needed to accomplish tasks and puts more power into the hands of those with [...] general intellectual abilities" (Bereiter 2002a, 246). Besides, even if intellectual unemployment becomes an even worse problem in the future than it already is (Rifkin 1995), the access to a rich intellectual life remains a goal in itself, given the correlation between education and 'social capital' (Putnam 1996), i.e. the disposition to civic engagement and trust that is largely responsible for the well-being of a community. Some examples of once elitist and now increasingly standard educational requirements in European countries are that:

- mastery of one or more foreign languages, and understanding of the associated cultures, is a prerequisite for a range of work activities and for social life at large;
- writing has become almost as important as reading, since many workplaces and also leisure activities require writing skills (with optional multimedia extensions), partly as a consequence of the growing pervasiveness of technology-mediated communication;
- he ability to evaluate the trustworthiness and the non-explicit agenda of a source is vital in a society with a multiplicity of voices but little dialogue, with large concentrations of power in the media and at the same time the opportunity for many to publish or broadcast (almost) anything.

On a more general level, in a world where "the autonomous capacity of generating new knowledge" (e.g. Castells & Ince 2003, 133) is considered the key to development, adequate literacy ought to encompass an attitude to reading and writing (or their equivalent in visual media) with the purpose of furthering understanding.

Advanced literacy as expertise in communication within a given domain.[2]
The idea that 'knowledge' corresponds to a list of items in someone's head, or in a text, is a persistent one and still in good health, although nobody in the teaching profession would defend it explicitly today. According to this view, *knowing* something means having in one's head a 'copy' – or better, a representation – of a real-world object. The more accurate the representation, the fuller the knowledge[3]. This view makes sense for many aspects of cognition (including not-trivial ones: Einstein's theory of relativity can be seen in these terms). However, the idea of a mind as a container of facts and rules cannot account for other aspects of cognition, such as the role of implicit knowledge or 'having a sense for something', where 'something' often refers to things that really matter (e.g. language, interpersonal relations), or the way cognition is embedded in social praxis and tools.

But the container metaphor really does a poor job, according to Bereiter (2002a), when it is applied to learning and teaching. Here it stands more or less explicitly behind two possible unfortunate scenarios, rote learning (trying to stuff facts and rules into heads) or programs devised for 'learning to think'. The first scenario assumes that the social need is to master a stable body of knowledge without ever needing to revise it, which is by no means the case in the contemporary 'knowledge age'. The second scenario can be encountered in education when a subject or activity is considered to have a special potential for fostering 'thinking skills': Latin, for example, in the '60s in Italy, computer programming in the late '80s. Considering a single activity an all-round cognitive booster contradicts what we know of experts in the real world, who have typically developed their expertise through long and committed engagement with a given domain (Scardamalia and Bereiter 1993; see also below).

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[2] For more details on and references to Bereiter's view of learning models, cf. Caviglia (2003, 18-25).

[3] The mind-as-container metaphor has even been re-instated as theory in cognitive science and artificial intelligence in the '70s and later, with knowledge represented as a set of facts and rules on which a 'computational unit' can operate. Prior to any other criticism, the weak point of that approach was its (often inexplicit) assumption that a computer with a single processor could simulate the processes going on in a human brain, if only the programmer could write in the appropriate rules. Traditional computer programs can indeed outperform most humans in highly formalised domains (from chess playing to medical diagnostics), but they fare less well in 'understanding' language; at any rate, the underlying 'architecture' of brains and traditional computers cannot be compared. More recent research on 'computer cognition' attempts to simulate the organisation of a network of neurons with a network of processors.

Bereiter discusses and accepts several contributions to the notion of 'knowledge', especially from traditions that highlight how cognition is embedded in social practice and tools, and goes on to suggest that educational goals should be expressed in terms of *understanding*. For example (from Bereiter 2002a, 01-104), understanding a person means:

- the ability to act intelligently in relation to the person (of course, there are many 'correct' ways of understanding a person, depending on your relationship to her/him);
- becoming interested in the person;
- envisioning the person in a broader context (family, occupations, personal history, etc.);
- the ability to talk about the person (her/his underlying motives, dispositions, strengths, weaknesses).

A deep understanding is demonstrated by an insightful resolution of problems involving the person and by telling stories that have depth of characterization; not least, deep understanding can only arise from deep involvement. Finally, there may be no single optimal understanding, but there are wrong (and possibly corrigible) forms of understanding.

If we now substitute 'a person' with 'a tool' (e.g., a computer) or 'a story', our definition of 'understanding' still holds: there are many appropriate ways of understanding. For example, understanding a joke may range from laughing at it to re-telling and adapting it to another audience, or to a deep analysis of the genre (e.g. Raskin, 1992).

Deep understanding or expertise.
What does it mean to possess a deep understanding, i.e. to be an 'expert' in an area? According to meta-research conducted by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) on the nature of expertise, there is no such thing as problem-solving or 'thinking' skills, and the transfer of skills across different domains is by no easy matter (see also below, *Lie-detecting as a step towards 'criticality'*). But experts in given domains do exist: these are people who:

- know a lot (have learnt a lot) in a given area;
- can exercise progressive problem-solving (that is, they are able to introduce new insights when they solve problems; they work on the edge of their knowledge and learn more while working).

Progressive problem-solving in a given area is also at the core of effective learning and expertise: experts succeed where long-time practitioners fail, because the latter stick to their routine. But how do people become experts in the first place? Bereiter (2002a, 254-266) further suggests that we distinguish between two components of the process:

- learning as the process that changes the individual's understanding of a given subject;

- knowledge building as work done to produce, refine and amend shared conceptual artefacts.

Both learning and knowledge building are worthwhile aims in education. 'Learning' can be regarded in its own right as activity focused on the single student and on his/her skills and knowledge in a given domain (what individual learners acquire is important; it is what they take with them when they finish school).

'Knowledge-building', on the other hand, means the production in a given working group of such objects as texts, projects or policies which represent an improvement over the current status of knowledge. These objects can be appropriated (*learned*) by others and then discussed, improved upon, and possibly discarded when a better alternative is available.

Knowledge building, then, means creating something new, rising above the previous 'state of the art'. If, for example, I learn to use a new word processor or to understand enough Swedish to be able to follow a lecture, the outcome of my efforts is that I can do something that I could not do before, but I have not (yet) made any contribution to the state of common knowledge. If participants in a seminar analyse the Readers' Letters section in an Italian Catholic magazine, and make what they have understood available to others, the group has built new knowledge (Caviglia, 2000). Of course, this activity of knowledge building has required individual appropriation ('learning') of vocabulary, historical background, theories, and this is of no small importance. But it is the conjunction of the two dimensions of learning and knowledge-building that has produced both individual and collective progress.

The advanced literacy that I am proposing can be seen as expertise in communication and as both a prerequisite and a tool for knowledge building. For example, in the case of writing, *knowledge-telling* – i.e. writing according to a model of communication based on *transmission* of contents – is the strategy of the beginner writer ('basic literacy'), while expert writers use writing as a resource to transform and refine their understanding of a topic (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986).

Given the description of 'experts' proposed above, a view of advanced literacy as expertise gives rise to an awareness that it can hardly be context-independent: it takes, for example, a solid knowledge of an area of language, society and culture to recognize potential lies on a given topic, and

this ability cannot readily be transferred across domains (Caviglia 2002a and below)[4].

From an educational viewpoint, advanced literacy should therefore be promoted in domains that are relevant and broad enough to be worth the effort, even when the transfer of abilities from one context to another may be problematic.

Advanced literacy at work: three examples

The study of language and culture offers a wide range of possibilities for implementing the model of teaching and learning proposed by Bereiter. Much of the work done in secondary schools and universities is indeed knowledge building: this happens whenever a topic is analyzed and/or a project is developed that involves and challenges students and teacher alike, and where the aim is to rise above the previous level of understanding. This is at least what I aim at in my own 'research-based teaching': not the transmission of the results of research, but research (*knowledge building*), on an appropriate scale, integrated into the learning process. I cannot claim that our work group has discovered anything new. We were, perhaps, the only ones to investigate specific hoaxes or items of crime news, or to attempt a given problem of word choice. I am aware that most of the analyses we have carried out can hardly be considered an advance in overall knowledge on the topics. But 'originality' ought to be considered in relative terms:

> One major prejudice must be overcome if knowledge building, as real productive work similar to what goes on in industrial laboratories and university research centers, is to find a foothold in educational policy. This is the prejudice that bestows credit only on the first person to come forth with an idea. Although this may be a perfectly reasonable principle in patent law, when generalized it virtually denies the possibility of children's being real creators of knowledge; for rarely if ever will a child produce knowledge that is new to the world. But originality is always relative to context. If it should turn out that there are intelligent beings on another planet and that everything scientists on earth have discovered is already old hat to them, would that mean that Newton and Darwin were not scientists after all? (Bereiter, 2002b, 22)

Bereiter is thinking, of course, of children, and it is reasonable to expect that university students should eventually become capable of original work. But in education the process is often more important than the product, and I don't believe that reinventing the wheel should be despised,

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[4] If we accept the idea of 'advanced literacy' as expertise in a given domain, then study programs keeping language and culture separate are likely to lessen students' chances of becoming 'experts' in anything. However, a discussion on this point would go beyond the scope of this paper.

as long as it means a better understanding of how the wheel works and why it matters.

Lie detecting as a step towards *criticality*[5]

While a survey of approaches to *criticality* suggests that general skills for lie detecting may not exist, there are professions in which expertise in discerning lies is a requirement: judges, politicians, policemen, journalists, lawyers and criminals ought to have a good grasp of lying and lie-detecting. What does it take to recognize a printed or broadcasted lie, which is potentially the most dangerous kind? And does it make sense to analyse and produce lies as part of a secondary school curriculum in advanced literacy?[6]

First of all, it is worth questioning the need for instruction on this subject, given that small children usually learn how to lie and to mistrust others' statements simply by taking part in social life. However, a lie mediated by the printed word can be more difficult to spot than one told in a face-to-face situation, since literacy is far less natural than the spoken language and is acquired more slowly than either speech or body language. Besides, its asynchronous nature frees the liar from the risk of self-betrayal by unintentional body signals, while the differences in language proficiency among the population are much wider with regard to the written word. Furthermore, the institutions in charge of fostering literacy seldom incorporate a culture of questioning the reliability of written statements.

How can a didactic of the lie be implemented with students aged 14-16? The approach I suggest involves three different activities:

1. Students are asked to examine lies from fiction in order to make them aware that meaning is always constructed with the cooperation of the receiver (and not simply transmitted and received). They should be instructed to consider the victim's expectations (fears and desires), the liar's aims, the form of the lie, the factual knowledge involved, and prompted to find similarities with real life situations;

2. Since a successful lie detector requires similar skills to a successful liar, students are asked to invent (innocuous) lies and discuss them,

3. Students are placed in controlled situations where they are lied to, and then discuss how they discovered (or failed to) discover the lie. The similarities with the other lies encountered in the course are highlighted.

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[5] This section is based on Caviglia, 2002.

[6] See Caviglia (2003, 27) to explain why I am here using the term 'advanced literacy' instead of 'critical literacy' (as in Caviglia, 2002).

A reassessment of that experience confirms that working with lies can be a productive strategy for raising students' communication awareness, but also that lie detecting can hardly be learned on a general basis. I still believe that focusing on the motives and expectations of all the actors involved in communication, and on the identities and roles that they construct through discourse, would help lie detecting across different genres and topics. On the other hand, however, personal motives and factual knowledge about a given topic are decisive in triggering a critical attitude. Furthermore, though the categories of 'lie' vs. 'truth' used in the paper are appropriate for explaining the need for critical literacy, they may prove to be inadequate in many real-life cases.

Another limitation of a didactic of the lie as advanced literacy is that today's most dangerous lies are likely to be presented as scientific truth. While a sensitivity to potential lies might certainly help to develop antibodies against generic claims of scientificity, it would take a better and more widespread understanding of the areas involved to raise public awareness on issues that require a degree of sophisticated pre-knowledge, for example in biology or statistics or computer science.

In conclusion, language education and discourse analysis can cover an important portion of a curriculum in lie detecting. However, only a multidisciplinary approach could effectively respond to a need for 'critical information awareness', and here there are a number of options for language education.

Making sense of different discourses on crime and violence[7]
Though my work with lie-detecting ran into difficulties, the reactions of students and colleagues to the emancipatory goal of teaching how to read between the lines has been encouraging, and I have thus been induced to look for a more defined domain and genre. I have therefore progressed to various discourses on crime and violence, which I made an object of analysis in courses and seminars with Danish secondary school teachers and university students of Italian.

Examples taken from the coverage of crime in the Italian media offered a repository of source material for fostering 'advanced literacy' through better understanding of conflicting value systems (in this case, a shoot-the-perpetrator vs. a put-the-blame-on-society attitude to deviance) and of monological vs. dialogical approaches to discourse.

George Lakoff's analysis of liberal vs. conservative ideology in the USA, based on the hypothesis that both value systems are internally consistent (Lakoff, 1996), provided a model for describing the rationale behind different attitudes, while making it clear that taking a stand between value

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[7] This section is based on Caviglia (2003, 88-111 and submitted).

systems is not a matter that can be settled with the tools of discourse analysis alone. But can the tools of discourse analysis substantiate the impression that a text or discourse is self-righteous or, on the other hand, open to dialogue?

Using examples from the press coverage of a murder committed in Northern Italy, Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogical principle[8] was applied as a benchmark for distinguishing dialogic texts from monologic (or self-righteous) ones. It could be easily recognized that whilst the dialogic texts grant an important role to the reader in meaning-making and a voice to the subject(s) written about, this is denied by the monologic texts. In addition, as in the previous experience with lie detecting, it was evident that creative storytelling, like the narratives constructed by such writers as James Ellroy or Georges Simenon out of the raw material of crime reporting, can be an expression of understanding and criticality at least as powerful as non-narrative criticism.

Tools for language awareness: an experience using text corpora as L2 writing tools[9]

Teaching Italian composition to Danish university students gave me the opportunity to look more closely at problems involving syntax and word-choice that the students were not able to solve with the tools at their disposal. In consulting the grammar or the dictionary (both mono- and bilingual) they often failed to recognize the most appropriate syntactic rule or the word which would have been the typical lexical choice for an Italian native speaker. When a low-cost, medium-sized Italian corpus became available, I proposed that it should be used as an alternative tool for dealing with language problems. Instead of consulting the rules to decide which preposition should go between word X and word Y, the student should search the corpus for occurrences of words X and Y connected with a preposition. This was likely to be the correct solution. In the case of word-choice problems, a search for patterns around keywords was likely to provide a list of co-occurring words, including, with luck, the one required (s. figure 1).

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[8]   E.g. Bakhtin 1986, 161; Bakhtin 1984, 318; Todorov 1984, x; also re-read in the light of the notion of 'involvement in dialogue' developed among others by Deborah Tannen 1989, 1997.

[9]   This section is based on Caviglia, 2000b.

Figure 1.
A few verbs associated with "problema" (= *problem*): see the collocations "risol-
vere", "aggirare", "costituire", "sollevare", "individuare" (the query "*re proble-
ma"/3 means "take all the occurrences of '*re' endings (= likely infinitives) follo-
wed by 'problema' at a maximum 3-word distance").

It soon became evident that this approach could be applied to less trivial
problems: for example, whether or not to use the subjunctive, or deciding
which of two words with apparently the same meaning is the more appro-
priate to a given context.

   With four year's experience behind me, I can claim that at least eight of
10 syntax or word-choice problems acknowledged as such by my Danish
students can be resolved by putting an appropriate query to the corpus.
However, only half the students eventually become regular users of the
text corpus, although they all receive instruction and support in learning
the technicalities. Why?

   Formulating a query on a text corpus, the activity I had devoted most
emphasis to, is less difficult than I believed at first: I would now consider
it a matter of *basic literacy*, a skill slightly more complex than locating a
word in a dictionary on paper. The real difficulty with text corpora is

making sense of the results of a query, i.e. how to recognize patterns of form and meaning within raw, unprepared data. This requires two skills which I consider to be aspects of *advanced literacy*: sensitivity to similarities and differences in syntax and semantics, and the ability to induce rules from examples.

Does it make sense, from an instructional point of view, to begin using text corpora at the stage of Second Language Acquisition (L2)? Using a text corpus in L2 confronts students with two difficulties at the same time: understanding the tool and decoding the target language. It might well be preferable to start familiarizing students with text corpora in their first language (L1), and thus overcome the *Catch 22* condition. Students are on shaky ground in respect of both language and meta-language when talking about L2 syntax and vocabulary; and when meta-language is taught as subject matter in L1 students are seldom confronted with language problems which they perceive as relevant,. In a more ambitious perspective, a curriculum in language education from a joint L1/L2 perspective might be a challenging project for researchers and innovative teachers and a sorely needed tool for teachers and students.

Conclusion
My long-term project is to further explore the requirements of advanced literacy and on this basis develop a *toolbox for advanced literacy* in the form of a list of *conceptual tools* with associated teaching material. Experience with the three projects outlined above suggests the expediency of focussing on a few general goals:

- an attitude to reading and writing (or their equivalent in visual media) with the purpose of furthering understanding;

- an awareness of the role of the subject's expectations in guiding the process of understanding (of a situation as well as of a text; see Tannen, 1993); this entails in turn that understanding the context of communication is crucial, and that advanced readers are conscious of their own expectations and the limits of their background knowledge; the same is true of advanced writers' understanding of their audiences;

- an ability to consider texts (in the broad sense) as *solutions*, as tools to gain leverage over aspects of personal and social life, as problem-solving actions devised to satisfy a need; a *functional* approach as proposed by Raskin (1982) for the analysis of art can act as the unifying rationale for a set of concepts developed in language and cultural studies, from Bakhtin's *dialogical principle* to more recent 'cognitive' approaches (cf. a discussion in Caviglia, 2003,13-14, 26-33);

- an awareness of the connection between, on the one hand, the form and function of communication, and on the other, the ability to recognize,

imitate and discuss structures of language and communication (e.g. words, sentences, images, narrative or argumentative patterns). Examples of recent research on the 'function of the structure' are Nølke's (2002) extension of Bakhtin's dialogical principle to linguistic analysis or Raskin's (2001, 2002) conceptual model for analysing the ways in which a short fiction film tells its story.

Hans Lauge Hansen (2002) and Hanne Leth Andersen (2002) have recently proposed teaching as one common ground for cooperation and dialogue across disciplines and traditions. This paper is an attempt to take up their suggestion and to demonstrate that teaching ought not to be considered a by-product of research activity, but rather a source of questions for research, and a field of cooperation and also competition among the sub-disciplines in the quest to answer those questions.

This is not to say that any research ought to be subordinate to teaching, but is rather an attempt to address the problem of the lack of impact of much research in the humanities. My point is that a body of research exists which has the capacity to enhance our understanding of culture and communication, but which remains disconnected from teaching practices due to poor mediation between the culture of research and the culture of teaching.

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