

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

**BEYOND FUNCTIONAL LITERACY, TOWARDS A  
MULTILITERACY PEDAGOGY\***

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The Philippines took an important step forward in 1998 when the Department of Education, Culture, and Sports-Bureau of Non-Formal Education adopted a new official definition of functional literacy. This important step is part of a continuing effort at redefining literacy and its important role in social and social development. In this paper, I will argue that we will still need to move towards new definitions of literacy that will be more responsive to the complex pressures of a globalizing environment. I will argue that with the changing definitions of literacy, we should also undertake a transformation of our pedagogies, as our current pedagogies are still actually sanctioned by our traditional definitions of literacy.

To develop my thesis, I will first briefly discuss some definitions of literacy and their concomitant pedagogies. I will first refer to conventional definitions of "mere literacy," and an international definition of functional literacy. I will then discuss the new definition of functional literacy adopted by the DECS-BNFE, and then proceed to two related concepts of literateness and multiliteracies. Finally, I will discuss what I propose to be features of a new literacy or multiliteracy pedagogy, and discuss some implications for educational processes in the Philippines, particularly in relation to language-related education programs. At this point I wish to acknowledge that my ideas in this paper have been strongly influenced by the work of the New London Group (henceforth, NLG, 1996), an assembly of scholars addressing theoretical issues related to literacy pedagogy.

**MERE LITERACY AND MERE LITERACY PEDAGOGY**

I refer to the traditional definition of literacy as "mere literacy." This definition of literacy is akin to the current definition of "basic literacy" used in the Functional Literacy, Education and Mass Media Survey (or FLEMMS). It is the ability to read, write, and comprehend simple printed messages. At the most basic level, it involves rudimentary cognitive processing skills of extracting meanings from texts and expressing simple concepts in printed form. At a more inclusive level, mere literacy is centered on cognitive processing skills associated with a specified language. This specified language is construed as a stable system based on rules. The most basic of these rules involves the mastery of sound-letter

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correspondences. The higher levels of these rules involve mastery of grammatical prescriptions, rhetorical, stylistic and other conventions. Historically, definitions of mere literacy have often been associated with the mastery of rules in a singular national form of a language. In the Philippines, particularly in the formal educational sectors, mere literacy is conventionally more strongly associated with language processing skills in English and to a lesser extent in Filipino.

This definition of literacy presupposes that there is a canonical form of a language and that we can specify and describe a singular standard of correct usage of that language. The attendant mere literacy pedagogy can be generally characterized as being directive and even authoritarian, with its emphasis on strict adherence to standards of pronunciation, spelling, tense, subject-verb agreement, even punctuation, and many others. Indeed, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, this mere literacy pedagogy was used by interventionary and colonizing states to maintain their desired form of public pluralism. In the Old World of continental Europe, this was expressed in edicts that imposed national standards over dialectal differences. In the New World of North America, this move involved the required assimilation of indigenous and migrant peoples to the standardized correct language of the colonizer.

The two major colonizers of the Philippines, Spain and the United States of America, imposed their own language and standards on the colony, effectively subjugating the literate practices in the various Philippine languages and dialects. The underlying pedagogy also emphasized obedience, discipline, and following the rules of behavior prescribed by the authority. Thus, the pedagogical idiom in the Philippines has always been, and still is, in the language and the agenda of the colonizers (see e.g., Constantino, 1996; Tinio, 1990). Now, several generations of Filipinos think that to be literate and educated means being so in the language of the colonizer. Discourse exploring the features of standard Philippine English (see e.g., Bautista, 2000; Llamzon, 2000) is sometimes vigorously opposed by stalwarts of a canonical form of English on the grounds that it is simply "wrong" English. Interestingly, even those who have taken major steps towards establishing Filipino as a medium of higher forms of discourse, particularly in education, often fall into the authoritarian tendencies of mere literacy pedagogy. For example, there is sometimes rather overzealous debate on what canon or standard of Filipino to use, on what is or is not a proper Filipino word or phrase, or on what spelling should be used. It seems that mere literacy pedagogy is still present, hardy, and resistant within our midst, even as we have moved towards more inclusive definitions of literacy.

## **FUNCTIONAL LITERACY AND FUNCTIONAL FORMAL PEDAGOGY**

Functional literacy is often conceived of as a higher level of literacy relative to basic literacy or mere literacy. For purposes of this discussion, I shall use the definition of functional literacy used in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) conducted and published by the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (or OECD) in 1997. The definition states that functional literacy refers to

"[t]he ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in the community – to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential." (OECD, 1997, p. 14)

The definition clearly goes beyond the very basic features of mere literacy. There is not as much emphasis on the structure of language. Indeed, there is less focus on the form and

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structure of the specific language, and there is more emphasis on the functional uses or processes of language in the printed form.

This conception of functional literacy is associated with a less directive and less authoritarian pedagogy as well. We can even characterize the concomitant pedagogy as being functional, with a focus on authentic and real world knowledge and skills. Under this broad category of functional pedagogies, we can include the communicative approach, which clearly emphasizes the functional elements of language and literacy. Such pedagogical approaches put more value on the process and functionality of linguistic knowledge, and literacy skills in particular. There is even an explicit de-emphasis on formal rules and standards, as these are conceived of as auxiliary to effective communication and understanding. However, I should underscore that the formal functional literacy definition and its concomitant pedagogy are still constructions that are based on the primacy of the printed language as a means of representing knowledge.

### FUNCTIONAL LITERACY AND NON-FORMAL PEDAGOGY IN THE PHILIPPINES

In the Philippines, one definition of functional literacy was adopted in 1998 by the Department of Education, Culture and Sports-Bureau of Non-Formal Education (DECS-BNFE) and the Literacy Coordinating Council (LCC). The definition states that functional literacy refers to “[a] range of skills and competencies – cognitive, affective and behavioral – which enables individuals to:

- live and work as human persons
- develop their potential
- make critical and informed decisions
- function effectively in society within the context of their environment and that of the wider community (local, regional, national, global)

in order to improve the quality of their life and that of society.”

The definition very clearly does not anchor the conception of functional literacy only on linguistic processes, particularly those related to the processing of printed language. Indeed if one looks at the major indicators of functional literacy as defined by the BNFE and the LCC, communication skills only comprise a small proportion of the total indicators. The other indicators refer to problem solving and critical thinking (e.g., ability to make critical and informed decisions, innovativeness and creativity), sustainable use of resources/productivity (e.g., entrepreneurship, ability to earn a living), development of self and a sense of community (e.g., self-development, recognition and practice of civil rights and political rights), and expanding one’s world vision (e.g., knowledge, acceptance, respect and appreciation of diversity, nonviolent resolution of conflicts). Notice that the indicators are not necessarily directly grounded on skills associated with the processing of language, much less printed text. However, one can imagine how the development of these indicators could be greatly enhanced if one has access to the wealth of knowledge and experiences stored in printed forms. Therefore, the definition of functional literacy adopted in the Philippines has made a major breach of the conventional notion that literacy is necessarily confined to skills related to the processing of printed language.

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In an earlier paper, I noted that there are specific issues associated with redefining functional literacy in a multilingual country like the Philippines, and some of these issues relate to the language for developing and assessing literacy (Bernardo, 1999). In this regard, the DECS-BNFE and LCC (1998) has also made a clear prescription about the language to be used for instruction and assessment. The prescription states that the learner's first language or mother tongue should be used for developing basic literacy. For elementary level functional literacy, the recommendation is to use Filipino, except for English language skills. The same recommendation holds for secondary level functional literacy, except that the language of instruction and assessment for science and mathematics may be in either English or Filipino depending on the choice of the student. In a very specific way, the new definition and prescriptions related to functional literacy adopted in the Philippines also constitute an important step forward in reassessing the roles of the local and the colonizer's language in literacy development.

The Congressional Commission on Education (or EDCOM, 1991) explicitly states that the entire formal basic education curriculum should be designed and constructed based on functional literacy. Unfortunately, however, the educational bureaucracy has been unable to respond quickly to this directive, particularly as the shift in definition of functional literacy happened quite recently. However, the new Standards for Quality Elementary Education prepared by the DECS Bureau of Elementary Education (2000) show very clear and significant movements towards the articulation of curricular standards similar to what the EDCOM, the LCC, and the DECS-BNFE recommend. But for now, the curricula and textbooks that are in place (see e.g., Bernardo, 2000a; Hornedo, Miralao, & Sta. Maria, 2000) follow the conventional content-based prescriptive curriculum design. It is therefore not surprising that the attendant pedagogies used in many of the classrooms, particularly in the public schools, are the traditional directive and authoritarian pedagogies we associate with mere pedagogy (see e.g., Bernardo, Clemeña, & Prudente, 2000, for the case of science and mathematics education). The strongest impact of the new definition of functional literacy can be felt in the non-formal adult education sector (see e.g., Doronila, 1999).

### **LITERATENESS AND MULTILITERACIES: APPROPRIATING NEW KNOWLEDGE TECHNOLOGIES**

There have been related but distinct moves in reconceptualizing literacy in other countries. I will refer to two such related reconceptualizations. The first is the concept of "literateness" and the second is "multiliteracies."

Narasimhan (1991) describes literateness as follows:

"Literateness' is characterized by the kinds (forms) of reflective processes deployed in one's interactions with the world, the inner world as well as the outer one." (p. 185)

"Levels of literateness...are determined by the varieties and kinds (forms) of reflective practice in use as well as the kinds of technologies that underpin them." (p. 185)

The description emphasizes that thoughtful reflection is founded on "technologies" for representing knowledge, and that there is a variety of technologies upon which reflection can be anchored. Text or printed language is one such technology upon which reflection can be based, and in many ways the reflection afforded by the printed work is more powerful than that afforded by oral language, for example. Other technologies are based on visual, musical,

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kinesthetic, digital representations of information, and each technology affords various forms and levels of reflection as well.

The construct of multiliteracies was best articulated by the New London Group (1996). Similar to the discussion on literateness, their discussion on multiliteracies focuses on modes of representing knowledge that are broader than language alone. The argument is that technologies, particularly modern digital information technology, afford a wider range of options for representing knowledge. However, different cultures may value and use these options differently. First, the different options for modes of representing knowledge differ across cultures and contexts. Second, the use of each mode of representing knowledge has very specific cognitive and social effects within a specific set of cultural meanings and practices. Thus, depending on the particular cultural goals and practices in place, certain modes of representing knowledge may be more valuable and useful than others. People with different purposes will actively engage the representation of knowledge according to these purposes. The critical notion here is that for every single unit of knowledge or meaning, there are actually multiple modes of representing knowledge and constructing meaning, and these specific modes vary in appropriateness or usefulness depending on the specific goals and purposes operating in the particular culture and context.

Consider an example from literature—let us say a specific tragedy, maybe *King Lear* by Shakespeare. The drama is available in text and can be appreciated by reading, imagining, and reflecting on the text. However, it is very likely that the specific meanings and understanding of the same tragedy constructed and experienced by those who actually saw the play actually staged by Shakespeare in the Globe theater during his time are very different from those who read the play now. Different meanings will also be constructed when the same play is re-staged as a drama about a declining political warlord in 21<sup>st</sup> century Mindanao. The very same play will also evoke different reflections when filmed and screened among the elderly Japanese compared to the young Japanese.

These variances can also apply to so-called universal knowledge like scientific and mathematical knowledge. Specific scientific facts can be also be represented differently and their specific meanings can also vary in each culture. Consider the current scientific knowledge about the genetic modification of rice varieties. The specific reflections evoked by this information would be different for farmers and their families whose livelihood depends on more abundant and more pest-resilient yields compared to some groups concerned about human beings overstepping the boundaries of their stewardship of nature's gifts.

*The point is, different meanings derive from the same object when the object is represented in different technologies and experienced within different goals and purposes in different cultures and contexts.*

## TOWARDS A MULTILITERACY PEDAGOGY

What is the pedagogy that is associated with these emerging conceptions of literacy? What would be the features of multiliteracy pedagogy?

Given the requirements of multiliteracy, two goals need to be realized in the concomitant pedagogy. First, there is a need to be able to flexibly, functionally, and critically engage knowledge in the various modes of representation. Second, there is a need to be able to engage these various modes to address various goals in context.

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The New London Group (1996) proposed four important goals of a new pedagogy. First, the new pedagogy does not define a specific set of standards or skills. The goals of this pedagogy do not specify a set of minimum learning competencies that are defined in terms of content knowledge or domain-specific skills. There shall be less emphasis on this as there is an acknowledgement that there is no longer a canon of knowledge and skills that carries the same weight for all contexts and cultures. Instead, the emphasis shall be on domain-general skills that will enable students to engage problems and knowledge in a constantly changing environment across varied goals, contexts, and cultures.

Second, the new pedagogy shall have as a goal the dynamic use of various modes and channels of knowledge representation. The new pedagogy will not be solely or even primarily dependent on printed word technology; instead, it will necessarily utilize the widest possible range of technologies for representing and processing information. The use of multiple modes of representation will allow information to be meaningful to as many different types of learners who may value and effectively engage the different modes of knowledge representation in different degrees. Thus, this new pedagogy respects the fact that people come to know and give meaning to knowledge in different ways.

Third, the new pedagogy shall also aim to develop in learners the sensitivity to the various features of the context, and the awareness that usefulness of content and form of knowledge is specific to goals in context. This goal takes into account the notion that all knowledge is socially and culturally embedded. Even educational goals, social and individual development are all embedded in cultural meanings and practices. What learners need to learn is the ability to study the goals and purposes of the presenting problems or challenges, and to find or generate approaches or solutions that are appropriate to these specific goals and purposes.

Fourth, the new pedagogy shall strongly emphasize the goal of developing in learners the ability to work with diverse peoples, contexts, and problems. There will need to be a shift from highly individualized and narrow or highly specialized learning processes. The focus shall be on collaboration, competition, strategic alliances, networking in order to maximally respond to the various challenges posed by complex problems in context.

If we wish to summarize some of the critical features of multiliteracy pedagogy, we can do so by contrasting it to mere literacy pedagogy, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of features of multiliteracy and mere literacy pedagogies

Multiliteracy Pedagogy	Mere Literacy Pedagogy
Knowledge viewed as constructed and embedded in goals and purposes in culture/context	Knowledge as universal, canonical, and standard
Open, flexible, negotiated curriculum	Prescriptive, standardized curriculum
Domain-general skills and knowledge	Content-based, domain-specific skills and knowledge
Various modes and channels of knowledge representation	Strong preference for linguistic and textual knowledge representation
Context sensitivity in knowledge use	Universal applicability of knowledge
Social learning processes	Individual learning processes
Adaptability to varied problems and contexts	Specialization and mastery

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The New London Group (1996) argues that the notion of multiliteracies and the new pedagogy will be more responsive to the pressures of a fast changing environment being driven by economic and cultural globalization which is strongly enabled by the information and communication technology revolution.

### SOME IMPLICATIONS

What do all these mean? As I acknowledged earlier in the paper, the Philippines has taken an important step in adopting a new and broader definition of functional literacy. This new definition and the higher benchmark it sets for basic education processes shall hopefully help us develop generations of citizens that will more effectively participate in the human and social development goals of our country. However, we noted that the current pedagogical practices do not seem to be attuned to these changes. In line with the emerging notion of multiliteracies, I think that we should aim not only to align our pedagogies to the new definition of functional literacy; more than that we should drastically redesign our pedagogies so that we will be able to meet the requirements of multiliteracies in the age of information and communication technology and globalization. In other words, we cannot stop at defining literacy in more appropriate ways, we should also endeavor to redefine the pedagogies that will help our students become truly literate, whatever that may come to mean. And we should do so with deliberateness and haste, as the demand for these multiliteracies is becoming more essential.

I would like to focus on specific implications of this type of discourse on issues related to language in education and I shall do so by considering some of the issues related to language in education.

**Grammatical vs. communicative competence.** One of the key struggles among language teachers is whether to emphasize grammatical or communicative competence. The advocates of more recent pedagogies akin to the communicative approach seem to be arguing on the side of function rather than form. The opponents of such approaches argue that students end up having no mastery of the rules of language and therefore end up using the language ineffectively. A multiliteracies perspective would take form and function as essentially unified or integrated. Thus, particular forms are appropriate for specific purposes and contexts. The goal of language education, therefore, should not simply be mastery of grammar and other language standards, nor just communicative competence, but the ability to judge which linguistic forms of communication are appropriate for specific purposes and contexts.

**Standards of English.** Recently, we have been hearing and reading a lot about World Englishes and Standard Philippine English (see e.g., Bautista, 1997, 2000). For English language teachers and applied linguistics scholars, the core question is what shall we do with this so-called Philippine standard of English. Is this form of English "correct"? Shall we allow students to write essays using this standard? It seems to me that these questions can only emerge from teachers and scholars who are operating within a mere-literacy-pedagogy perspective. The very notion of World Englishes is a rejection of the notion that English is a singular and stable system with a definable canonical form. Simply stated, there is no singular "correct" standard of English; and that applies to pronunciation, grammar, and even style. But a question remains, "How can English speakers in other countries understand us?" The answer may be, "They will have some difficulty, but the difficulty can be overcome as English speakers come to accept the fact that there are different forms of English." Part of what will need to be developed in multiliteracy

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pedagogy is the appreciation for and the ability to engage different Englishes, as different Englishes may be valued and useful for different purposes in different contexts.

**Standards of Filipino.** Attempts to intellectualize Filipino and to use Filipino for scholarly and other forms of formal discourse (see e.g., Sibayan, 1985, 1991) have given rise to heated debates about standards of Filipino. Some issues relate to choosing between “pure” Filipino words and phrases as opposed to “Filipinized” foreign words or to lexical borrowing or to code-switching. There is still the issue of spelling with the new “alpabetong Filipino.” And what to do with “Taglish”? Generally, the same arguments raised regarding standards of English should apply to standards of Filipino. Rather than emphasizing form, we ought to be emphasizing the cultural and social embeddedness of using specific forms and structures of Filipino and the fact that using one form over another has real functional consequences for the user in his/her social and cultural milieu.

**Medium of instruction.** Perhaps the most passionate and enduring of debates in Philippine education relates to the medium of instruction issue. Should the medium of instruction be English, Filipino, or the vernacular? I do not wish to go over all the various arguments for and against the various options. What we ought to consider is the multiliteracies notion that whatever language we use will have distinct consequences for the various stakeholders and processes in education. Educational processes embody a complex network of specific goals and purposes, all of which are culturally rooted in one way or another. Using one language over another might be appropriate for a specific purpose but not for another. Using English so that Filipino students might access the wealth of knowledge presently available in English materials shall also have the consequence of making certain Filipino students feel marginalized or alienated from the learning environment. Using Filipino or the vernacular so that students may explore and express their thoughts more effectively will also have the consequence of giving the students less time to learn the effective use of an important second or foreign language. We also ought to remember that the new multiliteracy pedagogy values multiple representations of knowledge, and that in a multilingual global environment, different activities in different contexts may require the use of different languages. So we should consider giving students opportunities to develop competency in as many languages as possible. The challenge is in designing the educational systems and processes in a way that will allow for the development of the complex skills needed for the flexible, context-sensitive, and effective use of different languages. This design should take into consideration the often-unstated cultural and social values underlying the different specific purposes of educational goals in the Philippines.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

In this paper, I attempted to delineate the shifts in how we define literacy. I also attempted to show that there are concomitant pedagogical assumptions and practices that are associated with specific definitions of literacy, and that these definitions and pedagogies are still changing. The Philippines has taken an important step in adopting a more inclusive definition of functional literacy, but I have argued that we should also endeavor to redesign our pedagogies as the requirement of multiliteracies is becoming essential in the changing world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I also considered the implications of multiliteracy pedagogy on some language-related issues in Philippine education.

In my discussion, I tried my best not to be prescriptive and directive, and I apologize if I sounded too forceful when I did not intend to. Indeed, we should also remember that each definition of literacy we come to consider is also rooted in specific

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cultural and social meanings and practices (Bernardo, 2000b). What I hope all of us will remember is to critically engage the various ideas about literacy that will be presented, to try to discover the social and cultural meanings and practices that envelop these ideas, and to think about what these ideas mean in so far as our educational beliefs and practices are concerned.

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