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Reshaping Curriculum to Enhance the Relevance of Literary Competence in Children's Education

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Reshaping Curriculum to Enhance the Relevance of Literary Competence in Children's Education

Twenty-first century learners face a multi-literacy landscape as they strive to acquire the cognitive skills needed for independent learning, apply linguistic skills to other knowledge base, and become computer literate. This article envisions a combination of skill sets and knowledge bases as the foundation of a literary competence-based curriculum. Such a curriculum would have the goal of enhancing young learners' critical thinking abilities; this would also help them take charge of the cognitive, linguistic, and sociocultural dimensions of written and spoken language in order to make learning transferable and applicable to the real world.

by Agustín Reyes-Torres and Amanda Rose Bird
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Traditionally, one of the primary goals of education was for students to be literacy competent with regard to reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. As society and technology keep changing, however, so does literacy. Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, traditional literacy is no longer sufficient. Today, 21st century learners face a multi-literacy landscape. In addition to becoming computer literate, students also must acquire the thinking skills that will enable them to learn on their own and apply their linguistic knowledge to another knowledge base. The acquisition of skills such as creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration have become essential for our students to succeed in education and life (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2011). In this regard, literacy has evolved from a language process to an act of cognition (Kucer, 2005). Given the circumstances, how can we ensure that primary school curriculum fosters young students' ability to apply knowledge to new situations and think critically and offers children the opportunity to elaborate their own interpretations and understandings? Combining 21st century skills and educational literacy may prove to be the best way to design a literacy competence-based curriculum that further engages young learners and heightens their learning of curriculum topics in order to transfer and apply that understanding to the real world.

What Is Literacy Competence?

Literacy competence may be defined as education based on the development of literacy skills that enable students to control and take charge of the cognitive, linguistic, and socio-cultural dimensions of written and spoken language in an effective way. It is the ability to understand both implicit and explicit meanings of words in a text in an autonomous manner (Brumfit & Carter, 2000). It is also the ability to demonstrate knowledge through quotations and summaries, as well as recognize and reflect on values and attitudes conveyed in a novel in such a way that leads students to their own interpretations—intellectual independence.

While it is evident that literacy competence is related to the study of language, it also includes a strong connection to the “Standards for the 21st Century” that the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) published in 2011, in which it is emphasized, for example, that “reading goes beyond decoding and comprehension to interpretation and development of new understandings” (p. 1). Other relevant skills highlighted by the AASL as part of literacy competence covers are:

- Evaluating information found in selected sources on the basis of accuracy, validity, usefulness or suitability for needs, importance, and social and cultural context
- Developing and refining a range of questions to frame the search for new understanding
- Using strategies to draw conclusions and apply knowledge to curricular areas and real-world situations
- Organizing knowledge so that it is useful
- Collaborating with others to exchange ideas, reflect on the learning, make decisions, and solve problems
- Pursuing personal and aesthetic growth
- Reading widely and fluently to make connections with self, the world, and previous reading
- Maintaining openness to new ideas by considering divergent opinions and changing conclusions when evidence supports the change. (AASL, 2011)

Being in command of these skills allows learners to develop a critical mind, but also to regard education “not only as professionally important but also interesting, insofar as their own identities and realities become represented and integrated in the classroom context” (Villacañas de Castro, 2013, p. 110). When learners establish an emotional connection to the specific content they are working on, “learning can be sustained longer, understanding can become deeper” (Trilling & Fadel, 2009, p. 34). Even in cases where students have mild or moderate learning disabilities, these skills can be achieved by incorporating differentiated instruction to meet the learning needs of each specific pupil.

What becomes evident as well is the understanding of the active role that children

play in their own learning. There is no doubt that 21st century skills help engage students in the classroom and enhance their literacy skills. In this case, moving one step further to achieve literary competence constitutes what is known as “grappling.” Grappling “presumes that the student has something to add to the story. Either hypothetically or actually, the student is asked to offer his or her input” (Sizer & Sizer, 2005, p. 133). As Wells (1986) indicates, “Unless students are given opportunities to formulate the sense they make of new topics in their own way, using their own words, an important means of gaining understanding is lost” (p. 236). This is a crucial aspect of education that cannot be emphasized enough. In this way, based on the work of scholars such as Örjan Torell (2001) and Stephen Kucer (2005), the development of literary competence can be organized as a field of forces that consists of: 1) the constitutional and cognitive dimension, 2) the performance dimension, and 3) the sociocultural and aesthetic dimension. All three areas are equally important, but it is the third that pivots around the central idea of having the students contribute with their own experiences and emotions to the elaboration of meaning and understandings.

The Constitutional and Cognitive Dimension

The constitutional and cognitive dimension refers to the learner’s own identity, his intrinsic motivation, his attitude, and his natural ability to approach a text and generate his own thoughts. As Kucer (2005) explains, it is “the desire of the language user to explore, discover, construct, and share meaning” (p. 5). Here, the previous formation that children have acquired and the literacy skills they learned do much to build their confidence when encountering and managing readings and disciplines for the first time in such fields as writing, poetry, social sciences, etc.

Beghetto and Kaufman (2013) see this cognitive dimension as a way for students to begin to harness their sense of creativity with support and guidance from their educators. The quality of the teaching, the classroom atmosphere and the students’ educational experience are extrinsic factors that also shape their initial formation (Alexander

& Fox, 2011). In consequence, a curriculum first must encourage and motivate all learners to love learning because what and how a student learns and thinks directly connects with his attitude and motivation toward learning and thinking. Hetland (2013) believes that the best way to step away from knowledge acquisition and step toward understanding, critical thinking, and literary competence is to “connect thinking to purpose” (p. 67). As such, in order for educators to consider this first step in fostering and enhancing students’ literary competence in the cognitive dimension, encouraging learners to be active and integrating basic extrinsic motivators into the curriculum will complement academic learning at the early stages of their education.

Toward this aim, “literate environments” that encourage children to discuss a particular reading in groups, interact with the book and its characters, and speak out their thoughts give opportunities for regular and sustained practice of literacy skills (e.g., encouraging learners to write in complete and meaningful sentences, draw and illustrate their ideas creatively, imagine themselves in different situations, broaden their vocabulary, use different resources to find information, elaborate their thoughts, apply the newfound knowledge to real-world situations, and reach final conclusions). Below is a good example of how to put this into practice with 6-year-old children with the renowned book *The Selfish Crocodile* (1998) by Faustin Charles and Michael Terry (see the Appendix for additional examples of picture books and activities that promote the three different dimensions of literary competence).

The Selfish Crocodile is a picture book about a selfish crocodile who would not let the other animals drink from or swim in the river, constantly telling them that it is “his river.” One day, the crocodile is in a lot of pain due to a bad tooth and no one helps him because they are all too scared of him. A little mouse, however, is brave enough to go inside his big mouth and takes out his bad tooth. The crocodile not only recovers and is no longer in pain, he also realizes how mean he was in the past. Feeling regretful, he decides to become friends with all the animals in the forest and allows them to drink from and swim in the river whenever they like. It is

an engaging story suitable for Reception to Year 3/4 students since it has both colorful pictures and dialogues that children can imitate in different animal voices.

To begin to work with the story, it is essential in the initial stages to have students develop some kind of emotional connection to the reading. Some questions that could be asked at this stage are: Have you ever been to the forest? What animals did you see? Have you ever swum in a river? Have you ever seen a crocodile? As students share their first responses and start talking about the main character, effective teaching means exploring the children's different reactions and having them establish personal connections with the characters in the story. Learners at this point become participants in the story, not just readers. From then on, it is their unique interaction with the book that brings up the literate environment and provides unlimited resources for learners to think about and for teachers to use in linking the book with other areas of the curriculum (e.g., emotional intelligence, ethics, learning how to make a description, acting in a play, participating in a one-day festival on "World Peace" in which all the animals come together as friends, or even understanding the relevance of natural resources like water). In essence, the objective is to engage learners through motivating and influential activities that connect literature to language, culture, and real-world topics.

The Performance Dimension

The next, equally important, dimension of literary competence is the performance dimension, which is directly related to the idea of using internalized linguistic and literary conventions to comment on texts rationally. According to Culler (1975), the question concerns "what an ideal reader must know implicitly in order to read and interpret works in ways which we consider acceptable, in accordance with the institution of literature" (p. 115). While a part of Culler's theory is controversial for failing to accept individual interpretations if readers do not grasp what they think are the most relevant parts of a text, it is certainly true that an implicit understanding of language and literary resources is necessary in order to analyze the text and to know what to look for in it (Reyes-Torres, 2014).

For this reason, when designing a curriculum that is focused on fostering young students' ability to reflect on and transfer their knowledge and understanding to other subjects, a curriculum must first begin with the building blocks of literacy (knowledge of vocabulary, familiarity with sentence structures, and knowledge of literary terminology and conventions) in order to build the necessary confidence for learners to approach an idea, a story, or a song with their own thoughts. Understanding and applying both literacy skills and literary knowledge effectively is a crucial step toward achieving literary competence. According to Wiggins and McTighe (2005), the words "to understand" and "to apply" are inextricably linked because "to understand is to be able to wisely and effectively use—transfer—what we know, in context; to apply knowledge and skill effectively, in realistic tasks and settings" (p. 7). Understanding and application are the ultimate goal for educators, as both demonstrate and activate students' knowledge. Notwithstanding, we insist that literature cannot and should not be institutionalized. Meanings should not be imposed or transmitted. Literary competence cannot be reduced to the study of selected technical functions and the discussion of particular theories and specific perceptions (McGillis, 1985). Instead, it should be approached as a vehicle to expand learners' minds and develop their critical thinking so they may become independent.

When reading *The Selfish Crocodile*, it is therefore crucial that it is not the teacher who produces the meaning for students. It must be the students themselves who construct it. For instance, when the crocodile repeats the line, "Stay away from my river! It's MY river," it is important to point out the significant repetition of the possessive pronoun "my" and guide students through the connotations it denotes, but not to give them a specific set of meanings. From the context of the story and how the teacher presents it, students will be able to draw their own conclusions: Why is it "his" river? How do the other animals feel about that? Similarly, students should learn or be acquainted with other linguistic terms, such as "sentence" and "noun" or "adjective." This also entails differentiating between "description" and

“dialogues,” and identifying what the most important extracts are in the texts as well as their meaning both figurative and literal. In the same way, it is necessary for students to learn the concept of “character,” “protagonist,” or “hero,” and to distinguish between the beginning, the conflict, the climax, and the end as parts of the story. Through repetition, learners are able to infer the structure and the significance of the book, and figure out the sequence of the events. Most importantly, by using and learning all these different terms and concepts, students can not only engage in the same discussions, but also transfer and apply them to the discussion of other stories in the future.

Sociocultural and Aesthetic Dimension

Finally, the sociocultural and aesthetic dimension completely shifts attention from the text to the reader, thus keeping the student as the central purpose. What is sought through the development of literary competence is an encounter with literary texts that triggers forms of reflectivity and the experience of aesthetic reading or reading for pleasure. “Reading is to imagine. We could even say that by reading you can achieve another life” (Ballester, 2014, p. 56). As Torell (2001) puts it, “Competent literary reading is not a question of seeking answers to literary riddles or finding pieces of information or opinion” (p. 378). It is not the act of reading itself that provides pleasure, but rather the thoughts that it triggers. In the same way, for Rosenblatt (1986), the meaning of any text does not lay in the work itself but rather in the reader’s interaction with it. This interaction may include an emotional response of pleasure or delight that enables learners to tap into their feelings and memories and even gain a new awareness of one’s inner self. As can be expected, this event is absolutely personal—no reader will experience the text exactly as another reader does. Literary competence, as already argued, should not be treated just as internalized clichés or as a newspaper report from which every individual can easily extract the same information. In pedagogical terms, educational processes, literacy education and literary competence included, are expected to produce some kind of knowledge and deeper understanding

(Reyes-Torres, 2014). If knowledge is not created by the learners, but only disseminated by the teacher, that knowledge is being imposed. Students then become just passive receivers, not active learners.

In *The Selfish Crocodile*, once the reading is complete, teachers have the opportunity to foster active learning by taking advantage of the story to address particular needs or topics that are pertinent to the classroom at that moment. For instance, there may be classroom issues that relate to daily hygiene, and more specifically to dental hygiene. Not all children will experience the reading and its message in the same way, as some of them already brush their teeth while others are still acquiring the routine. Likewise, it would be interesting to have students discuss their feelings about what it means to be selfish or brave, feel left out, feel sick, or even to be a friend. Would they ever do what the little mouse did for the crocodile? There is no question that each student, depending on their personal experiences, will have a different approach to the topic; these approaches can be used by teachers to help them demonstrate that everybody is allowed to have a different perspective. In order for students to have an open mind and to accept different ideas, sharing and integrating the different realities and understandings in the classroom is a technique that fosters diversity and acceptance of others.

Conclusion

In essence, a literary competence-based curriculum is one that contributes to students’ education by prompting them to engage in their own learning through external incentives, build their own knowledge, and apply that knowledge to approach any subject with a critical mind so that they can express their ideas efficiently while respecting others’ perspectives. As Costa and Kallick (2010) comment, such a curriculum “gives students practice engaging with complex problems, dilemmas, and conflicts whose resolutions are not immediately apparent” (p. 212). With the classroom being seen as the tool to engage all students and develop their literary competence, teaching students to first notice and make observations to internalize and deeply understand subject matter is what will build students’ confidence to think

critically and continue to learn. Thus, instead of teaching in the old-fashioned way, where students memorize and repeat what the educator dictates, ask students what they observe, what they feel, and what catches their eye, and then motivate them to share those thoughts and emotions without fear of judgment or giving a wrong answer. This simple action of accepting and working with all students' thoughts and reflections is what stimulates learners and reaffirms their conviction to continue reading and learning on their own. Extrinsic motivators thus contribute to developing children's natural intrinsic motivation to learn, both in and outside of school. Examples of additional external motivators include communicating with confidence, praising and rewarding children for spontaneous participation, expressing their thoughts, and interacting with their classmates.

To finish, let us clarify that fostering literary competence, creativity, and critical thinking throughout the curriculum is not about enforcing change in a school's academics. Rather, it is about demonstrating a school's growth and progression. Often, change in education is met with rejection and hesitation, whereas growth is met with more acceptance and an open mind because it constitutes a deeper, meaningful idea. Deep understanding and transference of ideas and opinions is the precise growth and progression that current education standards for the 21st century aim to promote in schools. To that end, maintaining a positive attitude and adopting a literary competence-based curriculum while teaching is encouraging and promotes teachers and students to work together, to think critically, and to elaborate new understandings of the contents covered.

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APPENDIX

Example 1

Picture Book	Purpose	Dimension	Activity
<i>Go, Dog, Go.</i> (1961). By P. D. Eastman. (learners 4-6 years old)	Learning opposites	Constitutional and Cognitive Dimension	Before reading the picture book, make a connection with students about dogs. Ask them what they know about dogs, if they have a dog, what dogs are like, etc. Show them pictures of dogs (one small and one big to demonstrate opposites) and ask them what the differences are. Show them a picture of one dog and then another of several dogs. Then ask them about the difference. Likewise, you can show them two similar pictures with several dogs and ask them to find the differences among them (the aim is to focus on opposites, such as “the dog sits” and “the dog stands,” etc.).
		Performance Dimension	Working with the notion of opposites learned throughout the reading, the teacher places a picture on the board that illustrates the <i>noun</i> “morning” and students are asked to make a connection with its opposite: “night.” We can then ask what dogs do during the day to promote the use of action <i>verbs</i> . Lastly, with the same pictures provide a series of <i>adjectives</i> to describe what dogs are like in the morning and then at night to implement opposites. Emphasize the use of linguistic terms, such as “nouns,” “adjectives,” and “verbs,” so they can distinguish between them and use them appropriately.
		Sociocultural and Aesthetic Dimension	Give students plasticine and have them recreate either their pet dog (if they have one) or create a dog they would like to have in the future. Have them work in pairs to imagine a conversation between their dogs and even to come up with a new story.

Example 2

Picture Book	Purpose	Dimension	Activity
<i>Hop on Pop.</i> (1963). By Dr. Seuss. (learners 5-6 years old)	Recognizing rhyming structures and prepositions of direction and location/ Commenting on and interpreting the pictures in the book	Constitutional and Cognitive Dimension	To introduce the story and rhyme scheme, set students up in pairs and give one flashcard from the story to each student. For example, one student has “cup,” while his/her partner has the flashcard “pup.” Students take turns pronouncing the words back and forth for 30 seconds. The teacher then asks, “What did you notice about your words?” Students may respond with: “They sound the same,” “They match,” or even “They have the same letters.” Give students a worksheet with other vocabulary words and encourage them to try to find other words that have the same sound or rhyme. Once they do this, switch the flashcards around the class so each pair of students has a different rhyme.
		Performance Dimension	After reading the story, students will try to implement the grammatical structures and vocabulary seen in the story. First, put one picture on the board and ask students what it is. Then put four more flashcards on the board and ask students to find the word from the story that rhymes. This word could be any part of speech, so it is also important for students to differentiate between nouns, adjectives, and verbs. Equally important is that students are able to explain why the pictures match. Why do the words rhyme? Do they repeat letters at the end? What is the repeated sound? Books can help young children identify colors, shapes, numbers, and letters, as well as names of people, places, animals, and everyday objects.
		Sociocultural and Aesthetic Dimension	Here, the teacher aims to develop students’ thinking skills by inviting them to express their ideas in relation to the content of the book. A way to do so is, for example, to comment on and interpret the different pictures using various questioning techniques. These questions may range from simple initial knowledge- and comprehension-based questions (What is it? Where are the characters? What are they doing? Describe...), to application-based questions (When do you use a tent? Where do you use a tent? Have you ever used a tent before?) or to more imaginative ones (If your tent could fly, where would you go? Are there any specific pictures that called your attention and why?). The teacher starts the questioning and students work in groups to answer the questions together. When they are more comfortable, encourage them to share their answers with the class and start a discussion.