THE ROLE OF LITERACY IN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the importance of literacy in primary language education, highlighting the different forms of literacy and their role in the learning process. Literacy is not limited to the ability to read and write but encompasses broader skills such as critical thinking, social participation, and the functional use of language in various contexts. The article analyzes four main types of literacy: school, critical, functional, and social literacy, emphasizing their interaction with social and cultural conditions.

Next, a comparative analysis is presented of two teaching units for third grade, taken from an old and a new language textbook. The new textbook unit promotes a more comprehensive and student-centered teaching model, combining theoretical knowledge with diverse practical exercises that enhance critical and functional literacy. In contrast, the corresponding unit in

the old textbook focuses on traditional methods, emphasizing grammar and spelling, without sufficiently highlighting skills in critical reading and social use of language.

Finally, the article stresses the need for teaching approaches that not only teach language skills but also cultivate students' ability to use language critically, creatively, and socially responsibly.

INTRODUCTION

Literacy is a complex concept encompassing multiple dimensions in its interpretation. It is closely associated with the notion of being literate—that is, possessing the set of linguistic elements and essential knowledge in writing, reading, and numeracy that students are expected to acquire. This conceptualization often leads to the classification and ranking of children based on their skills (Misiou, 2009).

Furthermore, social and cultural conditions are in constant flux, and as they evolve, so do the forms of literacy and the pedagogical approaches associated with them. In recent decades, the concept of literacy has become a central focus of theoretical and research inquiries in the field of language education (Mitsikopoulou, 2001).

Therefore, literacy is a multifaceted notion that aids children in developing their language skills, which they begin to encounter from the early stages of primary education. Notably, in today's societal context, literacy extends beyond the formal school curriculum; it introduces future citizens to the world in a manner that helps them define their position within it, in accordance with the values and boundaries established by society (Kostoulas, 2024).

Based on the aforementioned clarifications, this paper aims to present the various types of literacy, their significance, and their application within the Greek primary school curriculum. It also explores the conditions necessary for effective language instruction at the primary level.

To enhance understanding of the topic, a comparison will be made between a unit from the Grade 3 Language textbook as structured under both the old and the new primary education curriculum.

TALKING ABOUT LITERACY

The term literacy is conceptually broad and multifaceted. It first appeared in the 1980s, primarily in the Anglo-Saxon world, and it refers, on the one hand, to an individual's ability to read and comprehend written text and, on the other hand, to the ability to interpret, critically analyze, and engage with various types of discourse. Additionally, literacy enables individuals to exert control over their environment through written language. Thus, when we speak of literacy, we generally refer to language literacy (Chatzisavidis, 2007).

The term language literacy is defined as a comprehensive framework of ideological positions—both explicit and implicit—that constitute the educational foundation for understanding literacy. These positions underpin the development of policies that inform the design of educational programs, which are then implemented and shaped within the classroom context (Androulakis, 2021).

Furthermore, literacy encompasses the knowledge and skills students possess in order to participate in various activities that require literacy for their effective functioning within their social group. These include abilities in reading, writing, and numeracy, which allow individuals to continue developing these competencies for their personal and future growth (Baynham, 2002).

Several studies argue that literacy should be described as the use of linguistic and metalinguistic knowledge and skills based on the communicative context. This involves multiple forms of written and spoken texts, enriched by visual and auditory elements, such as those found in multimodal texts (Mitsikopoulou, 2001).

Another dimension of literacy involves listening, speaking, reading, writing, critical thinking, and numeracy. Within this framework, cultural knowledge is also integrated, providing speakers and readers with access to the ability to use and recognize language in accordance with the social and communicative contexts in which they operate. Moreover, literacy is associated with the concept of being literate—that possesses the set of linguistic elements and essential knowledge in writing, reading, and numeracy expected of students. This conceptualization often leads to the categorization and assessment of children based on these skills (Misiou, 2009).

TYPES OF LITERACY: A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

Understanding the various types of literacy contributes significantly to a deeper conceptualization of the term itself, as each type emphasizes key dimensions that support and expand its definition. Literacy, in its multiple forms, has shaped pedagogical practices within educational settings by promoting the connection between learning and social engagement. In this way, students are encouraged to develop into independent, critically thinking individuals (Chatzisavidis, 2011).

1. School Literacy

School literacy refers to students' ability to read and write across diverse text types. Through interpreting and critically analyzing school texts, and producing their own texts in a variety of genres and forms, students actively participate in constructing meaning within the classroom context. As Chatzisavidis (2007) notes, school literacy is one of the most fundamental forms of literacy that children encounter on a daily basis, given the structured and extensive communication that takes place in educational settings.

Matsaggouras (2007) further defines literacy as the capacity of individuals to utilize metalinguistic and communicative skills to achieve objectives related to oral language, comprehension, use, critical engagement, and the production of texts of varying content, form, and structure. To ensure the development of such high-level competencies, systematic and targeted instruction is essential (Matsaggouras, 2007).

Consequently, school literacy extends beyond mastery of linguistic structures or written expression. It enables individuals to function effectively across educational, professional, and social domains, employing strategic approaches to address diverse communicative needs.

Moreover, school literacy evolves in response to changing societal demands. For instance, the integration of new technologies into everyday life has introduced the need for specialized forms of literacy, particularly in digital environments (Mitsikopoulou, 2001).

2. Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is a framework through which individuals approach knowledge and social reality with analytical and reflective thinking. It involves a critical stance toward texts,

focusing on the author's intentions and the socio-historical context of text production (Chatzisavidis, 2011). This approach enables learners to engage not only with the content of what they read, but also with the ideological assumptions and power relations embedded in language.

Within this framework, students are encouraged to adopt a critical lens when interacting with texts and linguistic elements. They are guided to question the values and social norms reflected in texts, assessing whether these align with their own beliefs and with broader societal principles. As Intzidis and Paparizos (2005) suggest, language education under a critical literacy approach foregrounds practices of meaning making that extend beyond classroom settings, involving familial and community-based contexts as well.

Critical literacy also supports inquiry-based teaching, where texts are interpreted and negotiated within fluid and context-dependent social interactions. Meaning is not fixed but is shaped by shifting cultural and political circumstances (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001).

Thus, language is examined not merely as a system of rules or as a tool for writing, but as a dynamic social process—a medium for performing actions, expressing ideology, and articulating values and institutional identities (Baynham, 2002).

3. Functional Literacy

The concept of functional literacy emerges as a powerful framework for defining literacy according to its social purposes. It reflects the expectations that society places upon individuals to operate effectively within its structure, to participate actively, and to achieve personal goals (Baynham, 2002).

Functional literacy refers to the set of skills necessary for individuals to meet the demands of today's labor market. In this sense, education aims not only to fulfill broader social objectives but also to provide access to specific forms of literacy essential for integration and professional advancement (Mitsikopoulou, 2001).

Thus, functional literacy focuses on the body of knowledge and skills related to reading and writing that enable students to engage in literate practices. It requires the development of communicative competence, whereby language is taught as a tool for meaningful interaction within a specific social context. Emphasis is placed on the identification of different text types and their particular features (Gee, 2015).

4. Social Literacy

Social literacy encompasses the skills individuals need to be productive in their private, social, and professional lives within contemporary societies (Gee, 2015).

According to Halliday and Martin (2004), social literacy can be cultivated through an educational emphasis on:

- recognizing the central role of language in shaping social discourse,
- analyzing the types of texts that constitute social discourse, and
- fostering a critical stance toward the mechanisms through which discourse is produced and disseminated.

Schools are often the first institutional contexts in which students are introduced to formal social structures and their associated literacies. Through these initial encounters, students begin to form their social identities, which in turn influence their ability to comprehend and produce various genres and discourses (Mitsikopoulou, 2001).

To better understand how these forms of literacy are applied in real educational contexts, the following section presents a comparative analysis of two textbook units from the current and previous editions of the Grade 3 Language Textbook used in Greek primary schools.

COMPARISON OF TWO UNITS

This section aims to provide a detailed analysis of one unit from the new Greek Language textbook and the corresponding unit from the old textbook, both designed for the third grade of primary school. The subsequent comparison will be supported by appropriate argumentation, focusing on the types of literacy each unit promotes.

The Unit from the New Greek Language Textbook for Third Grade

The unit under examination is Unit 2, titled "At Home and in the Neighborhood," and more specifically Sub-unit 2, "Our Friend Argyro", from the new Greek Language textbook for third grade entitled The Amazing Pencils (Volume A'). This unit was selected because it aligns with the parameters being explored (Intzidis et al., 2006).

The sub-unit is designed to help students develop their language skills and recognize various grammatical phenomena. Spanning four pages, it includes a variety of exercises, such as

filling in blanks with appropriate verbs, identifying antonyms, forming compound words with the suffix "-laugh," vocabulary related to children's games, and adjective exercises. Additionally, the text "In Our New Neighborhood" is accompanied by accentuation exercises.

This unit integrates multiple forms of literacy, enabling students to better analyze the provided texts and consolidate their language competencies. The primary form of literacy evident in this unit is recognition literacy, as there is a direct focus on grammar (e.g., verb and adjective conjugations), and students are expected to write accurately, emphasizing correct spelling.

Furthermore, critical literacy is cultivated, as students are encouraged to think critically about the texts—considering questions such as why a text was written and what it aims to achieve.

A key element of this sub-unit is also functional literacy, as it requires students to use language for communicative purposes, reinforcing the practical application of linguistic skills.

Additionally, this unit reflects a particular didactic approach that supports language acquisition. Specifically, a structural approach is evident in exercises that require students to fill in the correct verbs or words in given sentences. This coexists with a traditional approach, as the activities emphasize spelling and grammatical accuracy.

Overall, the unit provides students with the opportunity to develop core linguistic skills, which are foundational for progressing to more complex language practices with greater cognitive demands.

Among the strengths of this unit is the variety of tasks, which aim to reinforce students' understanding of grammatical and linguistic phenomena. Importantly, each activity is preceded by a relevant grammatical rule, offering students a clear framework and orientation for the tasks, thereby enhancing their understanding of the unit's goals and learning outcomes.

Moreover, the visual illustrations included throughout the unit play a pivotal role in clarifying grammatical rules and concepts. These illustrations capture students' attention and foster active engagement in the learning process. In this sense, they function as a visual code that creates a sense of familiarity with the subject matter and aids in the interpretation of new grammatical content.

Despite these strengths, the unit also has certain limitations. Notably, one of its main weaknesses is the lack of detailed explanation accompanying each activity. To enhance clarity and accessibility, especially for students needing additional support, a brief analysis of the

grammatical and linguistic goals for each task would significantly aid comprehension and learning.

The Unit from the Old Greek Language Textbook for Third Grade

Regarding the older Greek language textbook for third grade, Anagnostiko Grade 3 (Varela, 1975), Unit 19 titled "Economy and Saving" is examined in this study.

This textbook was created within the framework of teaching the value of saving, highlighting its importance not only for better financial management but also for the overall improvement and quality of life, even at a psychological level. Saving is presented as a small but fundamental habit that all children, especially third graders, should develop early on in order to appreciate its significance and the benefits it offers them.

Furthermore, the textbook emphasizes differences in the teaching of grammatical and linguistic elements, while also focusing on how the learning activities are presented, which students are expected to complete successfully. This unit spans four pages and contains a main text entitled "Saving and Economy," which concurrently explains various grammatical and linguistic rules that students should effectively master during the learning process.

The unit also includes diverse exercises designed to help students understand the meaning of the text and the overall unit. Within this context, certain types of literacy are cultivated, such as recognition literacy, since emphasis is placed on students developing their language skills in grammar and vocabulary (e.g., Exercise 1: "Find which words they are," Exercise 2: "Can you say where we put…").

Additionally, functional literacy is emphasized, as through various activities students are asked to communicate based on their linguistic competencies, facilitating smooth dialogue and interaction according to their experiences (e.g., Exercise 2: "Do you know any proverb about economy or waste?").

However, critical literacy, which is a very important form of literacy for students' comprehension of the text, is less explicitly addressed in this unit.

Moreover, it is observed that various teaching techniques are employed that play a supportive role in helping students develop their linguistic skills through multiple methods, which are given considerable attention. Specifically, the traditional approach is utilized, as students

engage with activities aimed at learning correct spelling and grammar related to the unit's content (e.g., the two vocabulary exercises in the unit).

An important role is also attributed to the text-centered approach, since activities encourage students to cultivate communication skills and exchange opinions based on their perspectives (e.g., the two questions in this unit).

Overall, based on the teaching approaches identified, the unit appears generally suitable, as it supports students in developing essential skills related to communication, grammar, spelling, and vocabulary. These skills enable students to engage with more demanding tasks while simultaneously understanding the purposes and grammatical phenomena presented in this third-grade language unit.

General Evaluation of the Two Units

This section presents a comparison and evaluation of the aforementioned units from the old and new third-grade Greek language textbooks, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses.

Based on an overall examination of the two units, significant differences can be observed between them. Regarding Unit 2, "At Home and in the Neighborhood," from the new third-grade language textbook Ta "Apithana Molyvia" (Volume A), and more specifically Subunit 2, "Our Friend Argyro," it becomes evident that the goals and aspirations of educators, as well as the educational objectives in general, are largely achieved. This success is contingent upon the availability of appropriate resources for this grade level, which contribute to the acquisition of the competencies required from the students. The unit provides sufficient teaching material, the theoretical framework is effectively applied, it is well organized, and students' interest remains high (Xanthopoulos, 2010).

In contrast, regarding Unit 19, "Economy and Saving," from the older third-grade language textbook Anagnostiko Grade 3, it is apparent that the unit does not adequately support students in achieving the intended learning objectives, as the teaching approach is flawed. Specifically, explanations and various comments concerning the unit are absent; there is no engaging content in the activities for students; and the educational goals and teachers' expectations during the instructional process are not met. Furthermore, the theoretical framework cannot be effectively implemented because essential elements are missing,

resulting in insufficient emphasis on the unit, which consequently diminishes students' interest (Bonidis, 2005).

Additionally, this unit lacks clarifications regarding the activities and questions posed to students, making the tasks considerably difficult for them. Moreover, there are no illustrations accompanied by explanations, which hinders students' ability to connect the text with the requirements, causing their attention during the lesson to wane.

In general terms, it is observed that the teaching method used for this unit in third grade is not appropriate and does not facilitate students in meeting the expected goals. As a result, instruction "falls short," and the teacher's expectations concerning the knowledge to be imparted to the students are not fulfilled (Mitsikopoulou, 1997).

CONCLUSIONS

School literacy plays a fundamental role in bridging the gap between educational institutions and the wider social context, a role that has been extensively studied and emphasized within contemporary academic discourse. This role is best understood through the lenses of sociocultural theory and critical literacy frameworks.

From a sociocultural perspective, literacy extends beyond the basic skills of reading and writing to encompass a range of communicative and cognitive competencies. These include the ability to decode and comprehend written language, apply grammatical conventions, engage in logical and abstract thinking, and generate creative ideas. Importantly, literacy is viewed as a socially situated practice, embedded within cultural norms and mediated through interaction with others. Through this lens, literacy education enables students to actively participate in their communities and construct knowledge in socially meaningful ways.

Critical literacy further expands this understanding by emphasizing the role of literacy in empowering learners to question and challenge dominant discourses, social inequalities, and power relations embedded within texts and society. It encourages students not only to interpret texts but also to review underlying assumptions and to become agents of change within their social worlds.

By integrating these theoretical frameworks, school literacy emerges as a multifaceted construct that prepares students not only for academic success but also for responsible and informed citizenship. It facilitates the internalization of social values and norms while

fostering critical awareness of the complex social structures they inhabit. Thus, literacy education in schools contributes significantly to shaping learners' identities, social participation, and lifelong learning trajectories.

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