



Mark the correct answer? To whom? Deconstructing reading comprehension

Assinale a alternativa correta? Para quem? Desconstruindo a interpretação de textos

¿Cuál es la alternativa correcta? ¿Para quien? Deconstruyendo la interpretación del texto

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I argue that teaching reading comprehension can be based on the *read oneself reading's* view, which consists of reading a text at the same time that we read ourselves. In other words, we need to be aware, at all times, of the way we read texts and make meaning by taking responsibility for our own interpretations because both the writer and the reader are text producers. First, I begin by giving an example of how traditional ideals of reading do not include the plurality of ideas. I then explain how teaching through critical literacy can be used to reflect upon the identities of students, teachers and school community members in a classroom of English for speakers of other languages. I conclude by reaffirming the consequences of homogenizing readings and interpretations in addition to reflecting upon possible formative paths to the post-truth times we live in.

Keywords: Read oneself reading; Critical literacy; English language teaching; Teacher formation.

RESUMO

Neste ensaio, argumento que o ensino da compreensão leitora pode se basear na visão de *ler se lendo*, que consiste em ler um texto ao mesmo tempo que lemos a nós mesmos. Em outras palavras, precisamos estar atentos, em todos os momentos, à maneira como lemos os textos e construímos sentido, assumindo a responsabilidade por nossas próprias interpretações, porque tanto o escritor quanto o leitor são produtores do texto. Início dando um exemplo de como os ideais tradicionais de leitura não incluem a pluralidade de ideias. A seguir, explico como o ensino por meio do letramento crítico pode ser utilizado para refletir sobre as identidades de alunos, professores e membros da comunidade escolar em uma sala de aula de inglês para falantes de outras línguas. Concluo reafirmando as consequências da homogeneização de leituras e interpretações, além de refletir sobre possíveis caminhos formativos para os tempos pós-verdade em que vivemos.

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Palavras-chave: *Ler se lendo*; Letramento crítico; Ensino da língua inglesa; Formação docente.

RESUMEN

En este ensayo, sostengo que la enseñanza de la comprensión lectora puede basarse en la visión de leer leyéndote, que consiste en leer un texto al mismo tiempo que nos leemos a nosotros mismos. Es decir, debemos estar atentos, en todo momento, a la forma en que leemos los textos y le damos sentido, responsabilizándonos de nuestras propias interpretaciones, porque tanto el escritor como el lector son productores del texto. Empiezo por dar un ejemplo de cómo los ideales tradicionales de lectura no incluyen la pluralidad de ideas. A continuación, explico cómo la enseñanza a través de la alfabetización crítica se puede utilizar para reflexionar sobre las identidades de los estudiantes, profesores y miembros de la comunidad escolar en un aula de inglés para hablantes de otros idiomas. Concluyo reafirmando las consecuencias de la homogeneización de lecturas e interpretaciones, además de reflexionar sobre posibles caminos formativos para los tiempos de posverdad en los que vivimos.

Palabras clave: Leer leyéndote; Alfabetización crítica; Enseñanza de lengua inglesa; Formación de profesores.

THE ARGUMENT

The following two quotations serve as an epigraph to this essay and inspire me to have a deeper understanding of teaching reading and interpreting texts in language classrooms. In Menezes de Souza's (2011) words regarding critical literacy,

we need to take responsibility for our reading and not blame the author for their writing; we need to realize that the meaning of a text is an interrelation between writing and reading (Menezes de Souza, 2011, p. 293, my translation).

critical literacy consists of not only reading, but to *read oneself reading*, that is, being aware all the time of how I am reading, how I am making meaning ... and not to think that reading is a transparent process i.e., I read what is written ... we always need to think: "why did I understand it this way? Why do I think that? Where did my ideas, my interpretations come from?" (Menezes de Souza, 2011, p. 296, emphasis added, my translation).

Since I joined the Brazilian National Literacy Project¹, I have reconsidered my attitude towards teaching how to read texts in their various forms of representation i.e., written, visual, gestural, audio, spatial, oral, tactile, among others. As suggested by Menezes de Souza (2011, 2015), conflict of interpretations and *read oneself reading* as practices of critical literacy can play a key role in the classroom practices of those teachers who aim to do their job in a different and better way. I am aware that innovation is not only desirable but also required when it comes to teaching.

In College, I was trained to teach reading comprehension to my students by decoding texts and uncovering hidden meanings. My professors were not necessarily wrong. However, from the top of a teacher's hierarchy, I was supposed to lead my students to the "correct" way of

¹ The Brazilian National Literacy Project is led by Dr. Walkyria Monte Mór and Dr. Lynn Mario Menezes de Souza, from the State University of São Paulo (USP). According to the authors, it aims to develop an activity plan focused on studies, research and the promotion of critical language teacher education, covering topics such as, culture (plurality, diversity; hybridism; heterogeneity, etc.); social (concepts of societies and communities, individuals/citizens, social mobility, superdiversity and others); different ways of promoting education; linguistic (conceptions of language; multimodality in communication, interaction; critical literacies); technological (use of technologies; epistemological and ontological changes related to digital technology).

reading in agreement with the “specialized critic who has the authority to conduct analyses of works of art and literature” (Monte Mór, 2013, p. 37). This meant that, by guiding my students to interpret texts towards the “right” answer, they were required a particularly difficult exercise of abstraction. The case in point is: should students think like their teachers? Should the High School National Exam (ENEM) candidates think like those who created it? How can we do it, if we do not have the same life experiences or academic background? Our teachers’ readings may not be quintessential; besides they are not the only ones possible.

Teaching how to guide students towards the “right” answer can be related, in this sense, to an attempt to homogenize ways of thinking. Critical literacy, on the other hand, does the opposite: reading should respect diversity of thought and experience, exercise of mind, meaning-making, cultivation of healthy conflict of interpretations, and plurality of ideas.

In this essay, I argue that teaching reading comprehension can be based on the *read oneself reading’s* view (Menezes de Souza, 2011, 2015). I begin by giving an example of how traditional ideals of reading do not include the plurality of ideas. I then explain how teaching through critical literacy can be used to reflect upon the identities of students, teachers and school community members in a classroom of English for speakers of other languages. I conclude by reaffirming the consequences of homogenizing readings and interpretations in addition to reflecting upon possible formative paths to the post-truth times we live in.

MARK THE CORRECT ANSWER? TO WHOM?

A news story (Figure 1) that was published in the Brazilian newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*, in 2017, demonstrates how teaching (and assessing) to interpret in the “right” way can be questionable practices. According to the article, the contestant Pedro Lacerda Quintanilha got two questions wrong in a Portuguese language test to get a tenured job. He was asked to mark the correct alternative concerning the interpretation of the lyrics *Vou te encontrar*, by Nando Reis. Quintanilha decided to contact the artist himself through his fanpage on Facebook and asked him to go over the alternatives. The next day, Reis replied and told him that at least two of the alternatives made no sense. One of them even analyzed the use of ellipsis, which, according to the singer, do not exist in the original version. The ones that the contest committee set as the right answers were definitely wrong. Nando Reis suggested that the candidate filed an appeal for the questions to be canceled. The news story did not inform the committee's decision.

Figure 1. Screenshot of the news story on *O Estado de São Paulo*.



Source: O Estado de São Paulo on-line (2017).

Read oneself reading consists of reading a text – and by text I also mean speech, images, sounds, gestures etc. – at the same time that we read ourselves. In other words, we need to be aware, at all times, of the way we read texts and make meaning by taking responsibility for our own interpretations because both the writer and the reader are text producers. The foregoing news story proves it: Nando Reis wrote the lyrics; the test writer read it in a way; the contestant read it in another; none of them made the same meaning as the artist. The text is the same, but the *loci* of reading are different. Tests such as the one Quintanilha took can lead to student formations that guide them to seek the right and wrong answers, that invest in unilateral ways of thinking, besides valuing dualities, binary or dichotomous relationships.

In an opposite direction, it is possible to consider that meanings are not pre-existing. We make them through culture, society and language. We construct them both socially – interacting with one another – and individually – internalizing narratives and representations, materializing socially significant phenomena (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Jordão, 2013; Kress, 2018). What would a language be but a social practice that expresses and negotiates our constantly changing representations about the world and the people who live in it? Kalantzis & Cope (2012) explain how meaning-makers act:

It is not simply a matter of applying the rules of language, or the conventions of image recognition. Meaning-makers do not just see things as they are; they also, to a certain extent, see things in their minds' eyes in ways that suit them, which fit their preconceptions. To this extent, they are always (re)constructing their worlds, seeing them in new ways, thinking new thoughts, envisioning things from fresh perspectives and imagining new possibilities. This is the source of human creativity and innovation (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 257).

We make meaning through critical literacy. The school is a pivotal milieu to learn and exercise criticism, to question legitimized representations of subjects and institutions. The teacher makes it possible to problematize the way society is organized, to raise confrontation with implicit interpretive methods as well as to question hierarchies generated by our system. Thereby, students may see themselves as meaning-makers and (de)constructors of meanings. Thus, not only students but also teachers begin to exercise practices of negotiating the classroom space “as a place to (re)position themselves actively as discursive agents and perceive themselves by establishing discursivities in the situationality of social practices” (Jordão, 2013, p. 46, my translation). Hence, reproductive and decontextualized practices are discarded.

FOSTERING READ ONESELF READING

For four years, along with two of my faculty colleagues, I was in charge of running the area of English language at the National Pre-service Brazilian Teacher Education Program (Pibid) in my university. At that time, we decided to challenge our student teachers to plan lessons in which critical literacy practices through *read oneself reading* should be the focal point. The example I give hereafter is from a lesson plan that was designed to be taught at a 6th grade of a public middle school. The subject matter to be taught was the verb to be, and the lesson plan was set under the supervision of my colleague Dr. Marlene Souza. Notwithstanding, each step of the class was discussed with the whole group, which was composed of three faculty members, three public school English language teachers and 45 student teachers.

During the class observations – which happened before planning the lessons – the student teachers noticed that the school equipment and facilities were not in good condition i.e, some desks were broken, white boards had permanent marks and the walls were dirty. We challenged them to work and explore communication beyond the classroom, resulting in closer relationships with other groups as well as the school staff members.

Instead of writing the content on the board and have students copy, translate and do drills and exercises with the correct form of the verb to be, the student teachers decided to plan a lesson in which they started the class with a conversation about identities. They asked how students saw one another, and how they saw themselves in relation to others. They also explained that the forms of the verb to be – I am, you are, he is, she is, it is, we are, you are, they are – are used, among other functions, to express identities. Meanwhile, they clarified the structure of the verb and taught students how to pronounce it.

The next step of the class was to discuss the importance of respecting differences, seeking to understand how standards of what it means to be normal and what it means to be different are outlined in society. The concept of bullying was explored on its many different levels, and students also had the chance to list strategies to deal with it. Afterwards, they were supposed to go around the school with their notebooks introducing themselves and asking, “I am... who are you?” They should address people they had not met yet, such as the janitor, the secretary, the principal, the cook and the cleaning staff.

To the students' surprise when they returned to the classroom, there were photographs of the people they had just interviewed on the board. In order to practice language structures, in addition to using “I am” and “you are”, they also practiced the use of other persons of the verb to be in order to inform the interviewees' names, such as “he is Pedro, the secretary”, “she is Maria, the principal”.

As part of the lesson plan, the student teachers also got everyone to participate in cleaning the classroom, especially the permanent marks on the white board and the walls. The point they wished to emphasize was that participating in group activities such as those would have students feel an ever-important sense of ownership. In this way, the perception of emotional connection with other students as well as taking good care of the place where they spend most of their day could actually stimulate the feeling of belonging to the school as a community, helping students to maintain a clean environment.

The verb to be seems to make more sense when the class is focused on language as a social practice. We can think of how different the class could have been if the student teachers had written the inflections of the verb followed by a written exercise on the board. In addition to encouraging the use of language in real-life situations; that is to say students asked the names of people they did not really know, student teachers had them reflect upon identities and the ownership of school.

Curiously, the choice of the verb to be as a language structure to be taught in the program has a very interesting meaning if we consider the teaching of English in Brazil. It is common to hear that the only English verb tense students learn during Brazilian K-12 schooling is the verb to be. Yet, they do not know how to use it. As Paiva (2019) explains, “to study only the verb to be” is, as a matter of fact, a metonym for referring to teaching with an exclusive focus on grammar: “as most teachers have poor pre-service education in colleges that are not concerned with their students' proficiency, the only way out is to teach about the language as opposed to teaching the language” (Paiva, 2019, online, my translation). Historically, it seems to be rare to see language classes that experience the teaching of English as a social practice in Brazil, as we saw our student teachers do at Pibid.

WHERE ARE WE HEADING?

Teacher education in Brazil as well as the education of readers have to account for the complex world we live in, and in this regard, we need to problematize multiple choice test questions, not only in K-12 education but also in national college entrance exams and civil service exams. Some sort of change is needed and might be achieved by trying to offer more critical approaches to teaching that take into account interpretive processes based on critical literacy. Analogous ways of thinking do not acknowledge the diversity of ideas and may not be

a healthy alternative to teaching practices that intend to be innovative, especially in post-truth times, when the relationship between fact and fiction “has catapulted to the foreground of public discourse” (Freeman & Jones, 2018, p. 6).

In this context, a possible pathway to pursue an environment where “outside the box” ideas are heard seems to be read as dissent, as put forward by Menezes de Souza (2011) to encourage conflict of interpretation as a starting point to *read oneself reading*,

we need to realize that, depending on the place where we read, we will understand X. Another person in another context can read the same message, the same text in another way. Therefore, there will always be conflict of interpretations. Why did I understand it that way and he didn't? Why do I think that, and he doesn't? (Menezes de Souza, 2011, p. 297).

Encouraging reading as dissent in language classrooms seems to be an alternative to prepare students for the complexity of the contemporary world, where the digital media and the Internet have been used to spread fake news and hoax stories. Since the web 2.0, anyone can create content on the Internet with no editorial control. In this context, people are given ideal conditions for the dissemination of rumors, misinformation and disinformation, since sharing content is one of the appeals of social media (Santaella, 2018). Given this, do we want our students to believe everything they read?

In discussing criticism, Monte Mór (2013), aligned with the perspective of critical literacy I frame here, explains the constitution of essential components for a broader project, if we address students' and teachers' identities. Deeper analysis of how globalization and digital technologies impact our teaching practices are at stake, and so are the conceptions of curricula, language, and the relationship between school and society.

A possible path to be considered by our institutions is the fact that both pre-service and in-service teacher education need to be strengthened to support teachers' ongoing learning in Brazil. Engaging in professional development helps us to revisit our beliefs, conceptions and representations about our pedagogical practices. Continuing English teacher education keeps us up to date with the dynamics of the world and its complex interactions. Therefore, we can help to form students into readers of themselves, which may contribute to the construction of a fair world for everyone.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Paulo Boa Sorte: conception and design, acquisition of data, analysis and interpretation of data, drafting the article, critical review of important intellectual content, final approval of the version to be published.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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