Foreign Languages Teaching, Education and the New Literacies Studies: Expanding Views

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1. Introduction

Recent research indicates that there has been a perception in the Elementary and Secondary schools that the teaching of foreign languages – mostly related to the English language – shows below-average outcome in its evaluation in what concerns effectiveness, or even level of satisfaction of teachers, students, students' parents and school directors, leading to the interpretation of its need for improvements and changes. This perception may also apply to the Letras programs in the universities. When pointing out what should be improved, the school teachers sometimes refer to methodological procedures; sometimes to inappropriate textbooks; sometimes to the lack of discipline of the students and their parents' participation in their education; sometimes to the teaching conditions provided by the schools, or by the government; sometimes to the inadequacy of the pedagogical orientations/parameters provided by the federal government and the State Secretaries of Education; sometimes to the insufficient and inappropriate teacher education given at the universities.

These indications possibly describe the concerns of other school teachers that have not participated in the focused investigation. These data have been analyzed generating interpretations that lead to reflections and a proposal of change in the focused teaching environments. Both the reflections and the proposal are fully presented in the *Orientações Curriculares para o Ensino Médio: Línguas Estrangeiras-OCEM-LE* (2006) published by

the Ministry of Education (MEC), under the authorship of Menezes de Souza & Monte Mór. In this article, three of the theoretical conceptions that underpin the cited changes are expanded: the social changes observed in the last decades (Cope and Kalantzis) occurred as a consequence of technological advances that, by their turn, come to influence and reconstruct language and discourse, as well as social communication; the epistemological changes (Morin) that constitute the dialectics in the advances of language, technology and communication; the philosophy of education-pedagogy-practice dialectical relationship (Saviani) that comes together with the new literacies and multiliteracies theories, enabling the desired revision in the teaching of foreign languages, as identified by the mentioned research analysis. These three aspects constitute the focus of reasoning in this article.

2. Social and epistemological changes in the digital society

In the last decades, there have been undeniable social transformations. The social representations have visibly changed a mostly evident fact that can be noticed in written and electronic media. A comparison between advertisements of different decades would illustrate these differences with more clarity. For instance, the advertisings targeted to the female audience frequently represented women in the role of housewives; presently, women are represented in environments that associate them with other social participations, such as having public jobs. In the school photograph albums, one would often see well-behaved children, sat before the camera in two or three hierarchical rows, in trim uniforms, with well-combed hair, in a representation of school and social values of that age. In this same picture, the female school teacher –one would hardly see a male teacher, then – would tend to place herself in the upper row, signaling the inevitable superiority in the position of any teacher, who should be seen as knower, provider, and responsible for the control and discipline of the pupils. In a current photographic representation, some of these characteristics would not appear, reflecting the changes in the social relations, as well as in the teacher-student relationship, besides the way that teachers and students now deal with knowledge, communication and language.

As for these changes, Cope and Kalantzis perceive them in an intricate way in the working, public and personal lives of citizens. With

reference to working lives, these authors highlight that the era of fast capitalism or post-Fordism, both terms imbued with the neoliberal ideologies, praised the replacement of repetitive and underskilled work standards for another pattern that requires multiskilled workers, workers who show diversified experiences and flexibility, able to work in an environment in which flat hierarchy practices have substituted for the well-known vertical hierarchy. In public lives, the authors observe obsolescence in the concept of what 'civic' means. In their view, the term 'civic', that explains what is connected or related with the city, has been disseminated within a monolithic and monocultural perspective of what should be understood as 'national.' In this perspective, standardized values undermine dialect differences, for instance. In the words of the authors: "The expanding, interventionary states of the nineteenth and twenty centuries used schooling as a way of standardizing national languages. In the Old World this meant imposing national standards over dialect differences. In the New World, it meant assimilating immigrant and indigenous peoples to the standardized 'proper' language of the colonizer" (14). To extend their agreement, I suggest that the current representation of what is civic becomes perceptible in the popular participation in public events or celebrations with which the people find closer identification, and for this reason, widely express their support. To exemplify, nowadays the civic parade to celebrate Brazilian Independence Day on September 7th – through which spectators traditionally learned to value or reinforce values such as discipline, uniformity, national symbols – attracts fewer participants, according to media registers, than in other decades. Nevertheless, the Gay Parade – through which the audience learns about or integrates with diversities, an issue that really matters to them – has enjoyed growing popularity. As for personal lives, Cope and Kalantzis observe that the threshold between the public and the private has gradually turned thinner, considering "the increasing invasion of private spaces by mass media culture, global commodity culture, and communication and information networks." This invasion results in "culture narratives that are built up of interwoven narratives and commodities that cross television, toys, fast-food packaging, video games," and so on, as the authors assert (16), interfering in and reconstructing beliefs and life courses.

The depictions of changing societies presented by the authors promote reflection chiefly if contrasted with what is portrayed as representative of a network society, as Castells defines the society that transforms itself

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with the presence of new technologies, new language and communication modes, and new interactions. In this society, the work world is interested in a productive diversity, requiring that workers be empowered, critical, creative, innovative, because certain jobs certainly require decision making, initiative, and choice making. However, Cope and Kalantzis would again advert that "these new workplace discourses can be taken in two different ways – as opening new educational and social possibilities, or as new systems of mind control or exploitation" (12), leaving a challenging question for reflection: "how do we transform incrementally the achievable and apt outcomes of schooling?" (19). In the city living, according to these same authors, the civic sense imbued with the old and traditional patterns and standards of national values does not correspond to the perceptions of citizens in their communities. The civic sense has expanded to become a plural notion, incorporating global and local values, as well as the hybrid of the transcultural discourses, legitimating new civic spaces and new notions of citizenship. In relation to the civic, work and personal lives in the new societies, "the homogeneous imagined community of modern democratic nation states" (16) describes more of a desired society than of a real one. An attentive look would surely perceive the multilayered and diversified identities in the multilayered social communities.

In a dialectic process, it is known that the transformations occur on a two-way basis, thus making the transformer be the transformed as well. In this way, the relationships between subject-object, sender-receiver, knower-non-knower, technology-society have merged. On this two-way basis, it becomes difficult, and perhaps somewhat irrelevant, to identify what the starting point of the transformation is. It would sound like an innocuous search, according to certain authors, such as Simon (*apud* Monte Mor), to whom understanding why certain people are included in or excluded from certain communities, social activities and participation may lead to more transforming action than just searching for the origin, the very start of an action, without contemplating the process of social inclusion and exclusion.

An additional aspect in relation to the focused changes themselves would be the understanding that they are not only social but also epistemological. It is known that the mentioned old advertisements – that used the image of housewives to represent the social function of women in society, as well as photographs of school groups, where one would see

disciplined students and teachers that showed control in their milieu – were products of a certain production of knowledge, or of a knowledge built within the fundaments of conventional epistemologies, as it is described by Morin. This author criticizes this epistemology saying that it promotes reproductive education, instead of the development of a creative mind through the pedagogical action. He explains that conventional epistemology concentrates on constructing knowledge according to the principles of *reduction* – knowledge is reduced or fragmented from the whole to the parts – and *grading* – learning is designed in a pre-established scale of complexity that starts from an easy bottom line that gradually advances to more complex levels of difficulty of the subject to be apprehended by students. In the teaching of foreign languages, for example, the principle of reduction is seen in the planning of grammatical units through books and classes; grading is observed in the starting lessons and sequencing of what should be taught. Very frequently, the verb To Be is the starting lesson, followed by the Present Continuous Tense (…ing), the Simple Present Tense (do/does), Future with 'going to', Simple Past Tense (did; regular and irregular verbs) and so on.

Morin's reasoning is corroborated by the studies developed by Lankshear and Knobel towards what is identified as digital epistemology. These researchers show that the new languages and technologies in the digital society introduce another way of knowledge construction. They also name it as "performance epistemology" and explain it as "knowing how to proceed in the absence of existing models and exemplars" (173). They verify that this way of building knowledge is highly stimulated in the user's interaction with the Internet and in the interactions with the new languages, new language modalities and new technologies to which, in the absence of specific knowledge to a required interaction, the user needs to create his/her own knowing. The authors call attention to the 'emerging practices' in these interactions, such as the case of "bricolage" (a practice of assemblage of elements), "collage" (a practice of transferring materials or knowledge from one context to another) and "montage" (a practice of disseminating borrowings in a new setting) (173). They represent mental processes that require more capacity for creation, and not only of reproducing models as in conventional epistemologies. In face of the digital epistemology practices, the teaching in elementary and secondary schools, as well as in

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universities, should be subjected to either reflection or revision, or both, in a way that meets the expectations of the new societies and its needs.

3. The changes in teaching and education

As already explained, society has been transforming languages, communication modalities, ways of communication, of interaction, of knowledge constructing at the same time that it is dialectically transformed by these new languages, new communication modalities, ways of communicating, of interaction, of knowledge constructing. The search for knowledge uniformity and for a standard guidance in teaching should thus succumb to a diversity of pedagogical and curricular possibilities which appear to be more congruent with the described changes. It is noticed that in this process the predominance and dominance of methodologies have become less important than the necessity to reexamine practices, with the support of pedagogies and philosophies of education.

Still referring to the changes in society, it is noticed that, besides the school pedagogies, there is another pedagogy that is rather effective in the out-of-school living and experiences. It is the one denominated by Giroux as public pedagogy. Giroux makes use of this term to describe a cultural policy that is present in society within, for instance, television programs, series, advertisings, choice of pictures in news building.[1] Among

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[1] Subjecting such public pronouncements to critical inquiry can only emerge within those pedagogical sites and practices in which matters of critique and a culture of questioning are requisite to a vibrant and functioning democracy. Public pedagogy not only defines the cultural objects of interpretation, it also offers the possibility for engaging modes of literacy that are not just about competency but also about the possibility of interpretation as an intervention in the world. While it is true that as Arthur C. Danto insists that images such as those associated with Abu Graib "tell us something worth knowing about where we are as culture," meaning does not rest with the images alone, but with the ways in which such images are aligned and shaped by larger institutional and cultural discourses and how they call into play the condemnation of torture (or its celebration), how it came out, and what it means to prevent it from happening again. This is not merely a political issue but also a pedagogical one (Giroux 231-32).

various examples, he refers to the photographs of a prison in Abu Ghraib, globally divulged in 2004, showing the instances of abuse and torture of Iraqi prisoners; the TV series *Survivor*; and TV programs such as *The Apprentice*. These would be some examples of media whose power dynamics is imbued with educative strength, and in this case, constituting a public pedagogy. As for the prisoners' pictures, the author understands that they have gained "their status as a form of public pedagogy by virtue of the spaces they create between the sites in which they become public and the forms of pedagogical address that both frame and mediate their meaning" (231). Their diffusion (talk radio, computer screens, television, newspaper, the Internet, and alternative media) has counted on no sociopolitical and ethical concern, considering that although the photographic registers are implicated in history, their conditions of production have been suppressed making them invisible to the viewers. Moreover, as stated by the author, "often framed within dominant forms of circulation and meaning, such images generally work to legitimate particular forms of recognition and meaning marked by disturbing forms of diversion and evasion" (231). Therefore, these photographs have generated, at the same time, critical questioning in relation to abusive acts and teachings about power, punishment and submission, allowing the doubt that the abusive acts may reflect the attitude of a few "bad apples" who may eventually have gone beyond the limits, as Giroux asserts in an ironic tone. As for the TV series and programs, this author believes that they convey an underlying teaching that humiliation is the beginning step for one's way to success or fame. He adds that the rituals in these programs "condense pain, humiliation, and abuse into digestible spectacles of violence or serve up an endless celebration of retrograde competitiveness, the compulsion to 'go it alone', the ideology of hardness (term by Adorno *apud* Giroux) and power over others as the central features of masculinity" (239). He concludes that this incitation to hyper-masculinity includes an exaggerated competitiveness that gives "violence a glamorous and fascist edge" (239).

The author's reference, besides evidencing the teachings that occur out of the classrooms, certainly put conventional school pedagogies at debate. If on the one hand public pedagogy shows a pernicious face to a society that matured within the conventional literacy which does not emphasize critique, as do the new literacies and multiliteracies of the

present network society, on the other hand it also offers reflection about its other characteristics which turn them attractive, interesting and effective. This perception, thus, requires more studies, investigation and expansion. What seems to be at stake is the need to define a new process of education. The current moment reveals a binary dispute between reproduction – which enables control, measuring, the identification of who learns more, or less, in the teaching-learning process – and creation, creativity and critique.

In this sense, it is observed that there has been much debate about what is done in classroom practices, contrasting with what is idealized for this same practice. Most of such concerns focuses on the practice, as if it existed isolated from pedagogy and philosophy. However, the concentration on classroom practices reinforces technicist values in which the technique-methodology competence of teachers gains centrality and becomes the indication of pedagogical efficacy and effectiveness. In an analysis of this view of practice, Saviani defends the necessity of apprehending the dialectics within the philosophy of education-pedagogy-practice relationship. According to him, the practice that focuses on itself veils an educational theory and politics that seem to be neutral. However, the apparently neutral practice ideologically acts in favor of an education in which the teachers are seen as the knowledge porters or depositors, those who know how to explain contents and inherited reality values, notwithstanding stimulating value reasoning and critique by their own students, and many times, not even by themselves. This conception of education would be, then, the one that values clarity in the explanation, and a methodology that eases this objective, influencing the teachers' pedagogical activities only superficially. The superficiality, in this case, would be due to the fact that this concern does not encompass the conceptions of societies, nor of people/citizens that should be developed for these societies, or even the social thoughts and views that should be brought to classrooms. In sum, a technique-oriented practice by itself lacks a critical approach that is often repressed by its reproductivist aims.

The reasoning exposed by Saviani, if metaphorically alluded to the image of a tree, would compare the didactic-pedagogical concerns to what has more visibility in the tree. That is, classroom practice (that requires interrogating which practices, approaches should contribute to the education

of individuals X or Y, or Z, societies X, or Y, or Z) would correspond to the tree top; its leaves can be seen from a distance. Nevertheless, it should be observed that these leaves are supported by a trunk, corresponding to a pedagogy (that enables interrogating which conceptions, thoughts, orientations are embedded in the education of individuals X or Y, or Z, societies X, or Y, or Z) that, by its turn, is nurtured by roots, representative of its philosophy of education (that enables interrogating which education should be promoted, to which individuals, to which societies). It should also be realized that this tree interacts with an environment, as well as practice, pedagogy and philosophy of education interact with a social, historical and cultural context. The dialectics in this metaphorical reasoning may contribute to a reviewing of what is practiced in classrooms, by enabling interrogations in relation to which perspectives, thoughts, people, societies are developed by certain practices that are chosen in teacher education, or when certain teaching methodologies are prioritized. This reflection may, as well, reinvigorate or explain certain assertions about what should be reviewed.

4. New literacies and the teaching of foreign languages

Under the denominations of new literacies and multiliteracies, these studies have emerged from the observation that in spite of the literacy practiced in various countries that has gradually lowered illiteracy rates and reached better results in the last decades, a great part of the literate shows characteristics of what is, then, identified as 'functional illiterate' (Luke and Freebody). These would be the literate whose reading ability is limited to literal comprehension of a text, representing a time in which literacy would mean the teaching of reading and writing, as it is also explained by Soares: being literate would mean "the state or condition of one who reads and writes" (20). This author thus adds that the technological society has greatly contributed to the change of meaning of 'reading' and 'access to reading.' If the literate was the one able to read a simple note or message or to write one's own name, nowadays it is the individual who is able to use reading and writing within a social practice. This observation comes from assessments done in various countries of several continents. The outcomes conclude that a great part of the investigated readers shows

difficulties in the comprehension of a text and in the synthesis of its content. Even more difficulties are observed in the readers' capacity of inference, perception of ironies, interpretation of the between-the-lines message; besides, they lack their own critique of what they read and find it hard to relate the content of a text with the social context or reality in which they live. These perceptions become, then, some of the reasons for the renovated studies on this matter. Acknowledging that the social changes demand the inclusion of various abilities in how literacy works, various researchers have been developing studies in the new literacies area, aiming at enhancing visual literacy, digital literacy, multicultural literacy and critical literacy (Cervetti, Pardales and Damico), among others.

In this new conception of literacy, Luke and Freebody state that within the understanding of what reading means, the teaching of reading should accompany the teaching of cultural modes of seeing, describing, explaining. According to these authors, the readers should be required to understand textual representations, values, ideologies, discourses, take positioning, have views of the world, in addition to understanding that reading is related with knowledge and power distribution in a society. Within such educational parameters, it is expected that the interdisciplinarity in the areas of Literature and Languages, for instance, aims at reaching the objectives of reading as a social practice, as it is defended in these new studies.

Noticeably, thus, the proposal focused on here shows pedagogical-philosophical concerns, as it turns to a critical perception of the societies in which we all live, to the development of people who interact in these societies having more capacity of choices and decision making. Therefore, it is possible to conclude, first of all, that the teaching of foreign languages that integrates elementary, secondary and university education should not be seen as merely instrumental, it must be seen as part of a larger educational commitment, if it is assumed that foreign language studies may contribute to education.

In this way, the focus of concern in the teaching of foreign languages that used to lead to classroom practices and issues – referring to old-fashioned methodological procedures; inappropriate textbooks; the lack of discipline of the students and their parents' participation in their education; the teaching conditions provided by the schools, or by the

government; and various other aspects – should expand the angle of perspective , exercising the dialectic look as suggested by Saviani. It should, then, look further than the leaves of the tree, as in the metaphor previously mentioned, having in mind that this exercise would not disregard or erase the relevance of what has frequently been indicated or listed as 'classroom problems' by teachers and students.

According to the new literacies concept, the teaching of foreign languages would not be excluded from the educational process; it should surely be revisited. This reviewing should include the redefinition of the objectives in this teaching that should expand from the linguistic and instrumental focus to the educational one; the redefinition of the meaning of citizenship to be adopted in the schools and universities, thinking of the development of citizens that live in changing societies that, by their turn, are entrenched in plural perspectives in relation to what is 'civic,' and not in a traditional pattern that has predominated during long decades; the adoption of a concept of language and culture that is local as well, and not only globalized and universalizing; the expansion of cultural concepts that foster plurality and diversity.

In this sense, Gee (*Situated Language*) adverts that the conventional contents – limited to facts and principles of a certain knowledge domain – represent barriers in the implementation of a new educational perspective. In foreign languages, these conventional contents would be recognized in the concentration on language materiality, that is, in the limitations of a pedagogical proposal that would contemplate only the knowledge about the language, the information, the linguistic aspects, even knowing that one of the reasons for this choice is the fact that language materiality provides measurable evaluation of the students' learning. The author emphasizes that the abilities become the content of teaching in a society that practices new epistemologies. This premise is reinforced by the theories by Lankshear and Knobel when they explain about performance epistemology that turns to promote the importance of "knowing how to proceed in the absence of existing models and exemplars" (173).

These considerations set the challenge of a foreign languages teaching that is not 'ready to use,' but that can count on much experience about what should be reconstructed, as it is said in the *Orientações Curriculares para o Ensino Médio: Línguas Estrangeiras-OCEM-LE* (2006). The students

will certainly continue to study foreign languages, however, according to perspectives that may approach what they learn with their social living. This may be an alternative to deconstruct the belief that foreign languages as disciplines are misplaced in the school curriculum; and to construct a plan to enable the school to accomplish a meaningful proposal of such teaching.

5. Final considerations

The issues approached in this text possibly do not reflect only the teaching of foreign languages, considering that they refer to an educational practice of a historic, social and cultural moment.

The exposition about social and epistemological changes as well as the new conceptions of language and education intends to explain the reasons for the widely defended need for the foreign languages teaching reviewing. It should be noted, though, that this 'renovated way of doing' requires much learning and maturing while it is implemented. It represents a knowledge that has been constructed and reconstructed and that possibly nurtures and renews the tree leaves at which teachers have been taught to look, or the practices in which they search for more satisfaction.

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