

Special Issue

Living Literacies: L2 Learning, Textuality, and Social Life

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

It is my great pleasure to present to our readers this Special Issue of the *L2 Journal* on *Living Literacies: L2 Learning, Textuality, and Social Life*, guest edited by Chantelle Warner and Kristen Michelson.

Both Chantelle and Kristen have a background in second language acquisition/applied linguistics, Chantelle with an additional training in literary studies, Kristen with a specialization in language education. They are both professors in a foreign language department - Chantelle in German at the University of Arizona, Kristen in French and Applied Linguistics at Texas Tech University. Both are intimately familiar with the two-tiered split between the study of language and the study of literature in foreign language departments. Together they form the ideal team to revisit the issue of literacy in L2 learning and the role of textuality in academia and in social life. The collection of papers they have assembled for this special issue offers a variety of perspectives on literacy, understood as more than just the ability to read and write; as defined here, literacy is the ability to make meaning through the production and use of texts, the ability to talk about texts, and to put texts in relation with one another and with one's own living experience.

The communicative approach to language learning and teaching, that originated in Europe in the seventies, was a reaction against a grammar-translation approach centered around literary texts. It was mainly an attempt to link L2 learning to the communicative needs of L2 learners in everyday life, namely the functional needs of workers crossing the borders in search of employment in an emerging Europe after WWII. They had to be able to speak and ask for directions, but also to read train schedules and workplace instructions, and to develop the functional literacy necessary to know how to use texts in social life. But "texts" in those days were seen as emblems of institutional power, they had the authorial authenticity of native writers, with their standardized spellings and correct syntactic structures. They were linked to a structuralist view of language inherited from philological and literary scholarship.

The advent of the computer in the nineties—especially word processors and networked computers—got rid of the sanctity of the written text. It opened up the text to hypertextual practices and multiple interpretations. Scholars in the Humanities started realizing that there was another way of studying texts, namely not "literature" but "literacy." For foreign

language educators, the term was so new that they didn't even have a name for it and had to invent one—*littératie* in French, *Literalität* in German. This sudden emergence of literacy as a skill in its own right at first exacerbated the split brought about by the communicative language pedagogies of the seventies between the language and the literature tiers of foreign language departments. But in recent years, it has been seen as offering the possibility of bringing language and literature scholars together around a common inquiry, namely textuality itself and its relation to real life concerns.

The New London Group's manifesto in 1994, led by a group of scholars in education and applied linguistics, put literacy on the map of researchers and teachers in foreign language education. It confirmed the priority of learners' lived experience and identity over the authorial voice of the authentic text. As digital technology enabled learners to manipulate texts at will, to send and transfer, share and discuss texts with other text readers and producers across wide geographical distances, the pedagogy of texts was changing. The question was no longer: "What does the author mean to say?" but "What does the text mean to *you*? How is the text designed to make such meaning? And how can *you* design your own text to fit a particular context?" The new reading and writing pedagogies that developed in the nineties were based on a variety of modes (print, digital, environmental) and modalities (verbal, pictural, filmic) that appealed to the lived experience of learners and that went far beyond the learning of grammar and vocabulary at the level of the sentence. L2 literacy today is indeed, to use Richard Kern's felicitous phrase, about learning to read not new words, but new *worlds*, not only face-to-face and online worlds, but also multilingual and multicultural, real and imagined worlds, and the enhanced lived experiences that these worlds make possible.

I wish to thank the two guest editors and the nine contributors for taking us on a rich journey full of new ideas and intriguing possibilities. I hope our readers feel inspired by them and can use some of that inspiration in their research and practice.

Claire Kramersch
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