


Dimensions of Literacy: A Conceptual Base for Teaching Reading and Writing in School Settings, 2nd edition

Author:	Stephen B. Kucer (2005)		
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Written primarily for teachers and teacher educators, *Dimensions of literacy: A conceptual base for teaching reading and writing in school settings*, 2nd edition provides remarkably comprehensive, balanced and pedagogical explanations of research and theory about learning and teaching written language. In the first chapter, its author, Dr. Stephen Kucer, presents the view that literacy has linguistic, cognitive, sociocultural and developmental "dimensions," and he undertakes the daunting task of presenting the enormous amount of theorizing and research in all four dimensions. Using examples, charts, summary tables and narratives, the author provides a clearly teachable text, and his organization of a vast amount of material is commendable, even extraordinary. Teacher educators might, with some supplementation (to be discussed later), find this book an excellent foundation for an upper undergraduate or master's level course in teaching literacy.

With respect to the linguistic dimension of literacy, rather than beginning with aspects of language as syntactic system, Kucer begins by considering the functions that language serves, and the various text-types used in social life. He considers intertextuality, for example, pointing out that it refers to the links readers and writers build among various texts, and argues that it is of utmost importance to readers. Noting that particular registers of language are used in schools, Kucer points out that these registers will be more familiar to some students than to others. After this functional, discourse-based

beginning, Kucer discusses syntactic, morphemic, orthographic, graphophonemic and semantic aspects of language use, in all cases drawing readers' attention to how understanding these may have important implications for literacy instruction. While his explicit discussion of literacy teaching is contained in only one chapter (the last), throughout the book implications of findings in linguistics, psychology, sociolinguistics and other disciplines for literacy teaching are pointed out. I particularly appreciated these discussions, as I could see their potential to elicit fruitful dialogue with teachers, both practising and in-service.

The third and fourth chapters of the book, also concerned with the linguistic dimension of literacy, discuss oral/written language distinctions, links among letters, sounds and the English spelling system, and language variation. Again using many examples, Kucer shows how prestige dialects of language are privileged not for their linguistic superiority. This chapter, although focused on linguistic dimensions of literacy, overlaps with some of the later discussion on sociocultural dimensions of language use.

The cognitive dimension of literacy is treated in four chapters, which cover aspects of psycholinguistic research on memory and perception, a model of reading and writing developed by the author, the nature and role of background knowledge on reading comprehension, and cognitive interrelationships between reading and writing. This section is particularly comprehensive and gives a nuanced view of predominant cognitive and psycholinguistic research on literacy. This dimension of literacy has certainly been in the forefront of reading and writing research for about the past twenty-five years. While many teacher educators hope teachers do not build their literacy instruction solely on this dimension, the information in these chapters is helpful and important.

Literacy's sociocultural dimension is discussed in two chapters in which Kucer explains post-structuralist views of identity, and how these views understand literacy as sets of social practices. Kucer contrasts foundationist and social constructivist epistemologies and summarizes their differences in a concise and pithy chart (p. 229). Respectfully, he shows how a particular ideology guiding interpretation of sacred text might lead to political positions in the "literacy wars." Again, I appreciated the potential he provides for engaging students in important debates about these matters. He also provides a brief but trenchant example of critical literacy education and notes, "[c]ritical responsive activities . . . seek to analyze and critique issues of power and perspective that weave their way through any text and any response" (p. 242). In my opinion, his clear statement of the aims of critical language pedagogy would be appreciated by many students seeking to understand the diffuse and varied literature written from this angle.

The chapter on the developmental component of literacy provides instructive examples of children learning to "maneuver and orchestrate the various levels (dimensions) of language 'with more control, more flexibility, on expanding landscapes'" (Dyson, 2003, p. 174 in Kucer, p. 249). In some ways, this chapter serves as a good composite, since

the author considers how children develop the linguistic, cognitive and sociocultural dimensions of literacy.

The final chapter of the book addresses implications of the previously reviewed theory and research on literacy education. Kucer summarizes the dimensions in another helpful chart showing how attention to text, mind, group and growth are all necessary in effective literacy instruction. He also summarizes contemporary debates in language and literacy education (with respect to focus on decoding, skills or whole language) and contrasts these with critical literacy instruction. The book concludes with a description of how each of the dimensions might be used in classroom instruction. This chapter is an admirable summary of the rest of the book, and illustrates the extensive range of knowledge teachers must bring to literacy instruction.

As should be evident by now, I am wholeheartedly enthusiastic about this book. I think it is comprehensive and represents fairly a variety of perspectives on literacy and literacy instruction. While I myself am more interested in sociocultural approaches and critical literacy education, I think it is important for students to understand the traditions of scholarship that such perspectives were built upon; this book fulfills this well. In addition, I admire how clearly the author describes the perspectives in which I am most interested.

Earlier in this review, I noted that the book might need some supplementation as a text for a course on literacy education. There is little discussion in the book of emerging perspectives on multiliteracies, or of how electronic communication technology might be important in understanding the literacy worlds of contemporary childhoods. Instructors might find articles and other texts helpful in adding these views, but I think the frameworks for understanding most scholarship in literacy that Kucer sets up will serve as overarching principles to understand other aspects of literacy.

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