Building bridges: Reimagining adult literacy and language education

By Mercedes Veselka, Canada

When I started teaching an adult literacy and language classroom in a small community centre, I was not prepared for the tensions and joys specific to working with adult literacy learners (ALLs). These learners were not a culturally, linguistically, or educationally homogenous group. They differed in languages, goals, cultural knowledge, and educational background. This is not an experience unique to my own context (Belzer and Pickard, 2015; Katz, 1997; Pettitt & Tarone, 2015); however, the current educational system aims to place and categorize learners not by the diversity of skills and knowledge they bring to the classroom, but by a singular deficit: their lack of reading and writing skills (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2016). ALLs often face discrimination and experience shame due to this disconnect between their home literacies and schooled literacies, a problem more rooted in the educational system than a deficit of learners (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2019; Bloome & Greene, 2015; Katz, 1997; Schneider & Daddow, 2017). Educators, like me, often find ourselves caught between the needs of our learners, the prescribed curriculum, and our own values. Davies and Gannon (2006) describe this challenge as a way of seeing where "we cannot replace the disciplinary regimes in which we work, nor can we destroy them" (p. 82). My own experiences as an educator lead me to believe teaching is most often about our ability to truly see—our learners, our curriculum, ourselves—and this sight often compounds the tensions and challenges we face. For adult language and literacy educators, who so often experience unstable work environments with low-wages, little professional development, and limited materials (Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2007; Ozanne et al., 2005; Ranta & Zavialova, 2022), we cannot help but experience shame, overwhelm, and discouragement alongside our ALLs when we see the ways the educational system ignores and devalues their literacies. In this article, we will explore together how multiliteracies theory opens up new avenues for seeing ALLs differently. Furthermore, I will share two activities and how they supported the experiences of two adult literacy and language educators in fostering classroom community.

Addressing challenges through theory

As we have discussed, adult literacy and language educators are "frustrated by the system… a system where they are controlled, sanctioned, and tremendously over-worked, a system that tells them what to teach and how to teach it and then implies that they are responsible for society's failures" (Powell, 1999, p. 4).

Educators are asked to watch as adult literacy learners struggle and *fail* in an educational system which does not provide adequate professional development, materials, or a curriculum designed for the unique needs and strengths of ALLs (Beattie, 2022; Flynn et al., 2011; Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2007; Ozanne et al., 2005). How do we see our learners differently? How do support them in this system? In this section we will explore how multiliteracies theory offers opportunities to see our learners differently and build bridges between our own values, learners' needs, and the curriculum.

At the core, multiliteracies theory challenges the idea that literacy is synonymous with reading and writing (New London Group, 1996). Instead, multiliteracies theory asks us to reconsider literacy as *literacies*. This presents an opportunity to expand our understanding of literacy beyond reading and writing to consider digital, oral, linguistic, and cultural skills as literacies. Adult literacy learners often benefit most from literacy practices which are closely connected to their daily literacy needs (Currie & Cray, 2004; Lorimer Leonard & Gear, 2021; Pettitt & Tarone, 2015;). While they may have varied and limited educational experiences in their first language, they are not limited in literacy experiences. For example, Pettitt and Tarone (2015) follow an adult literacy learner named Roba who has linguistic literacy in seven different languages. Is Roba really illiterate with such a wide range of linguistic and cultural knowledge? Multiliteracies theory builds a bridge to demonstrate why illiterate should never be a descriptor for learners like Roba.

In addition to being a way of seeing, multiliteracies theory has concrete consequences for pedagogical choices we make in the classroom. Cope and Kalantzis (2009) outline how multiliteracies theory is a pedagogical approach as much as it is a theoretical one. There are three important elements to include when designing curriculum or materials in line with multiliteracies theory. First is including opportunities for peer-feedback and interaction (Crawford Camiciottoli & Campoy-Cubillo, 2018; Li, 2020; Turpin, 2019). Second, the activities need to contribute to supportive and low-risk environments (Choi & Yi, 2016; Qaisi, 2021). Third structural knowledge and instruction is critical to building skills and confidence (Burke & Hardware, 2015; Kumagai & Iwasaki, 2015; Lopez-Sanchez, 2015; Sagnier, 2015). These principles were foundational to building a unit of materials informed by multiliteracies theory (see Figure 1). Research demonstrates these elements contribute to learners being able to engage more deeply in both content knowledge and apply that content knowledge to their wider worlds (Burke & Hardware, 2015; Choi & Yi, 2016; Kumagai & Iwasaki, 2015; Li, 2020; Lopez-Sanchez, 2015; Sagnier, 2015; Qaisi, 2021; Turpin, 2019). Multiliteracies theory is not only a theoretical response to the limits of our current educational system, it is practical. The following sections will explore how the theoretical principles can shift our pedagogies in the classroom to honour the diverse literacies of ALLs.

Theory made practice

In exploring the practical application of multiliteracies theory in adult language and literacy classrooms, this project focused on developing a unit of materials for ALLs implemented by two different educators. This project occurred in two phases. The first phase involved the development of a unit plan rooted in multiliteracies theory and aligned with the Canadian Language Benchmarks (see Figure 1). The structural, relational, and environmental principles in Figure 1 were then used to inform the development of four weeks of materials for adult literacy educators and learners.

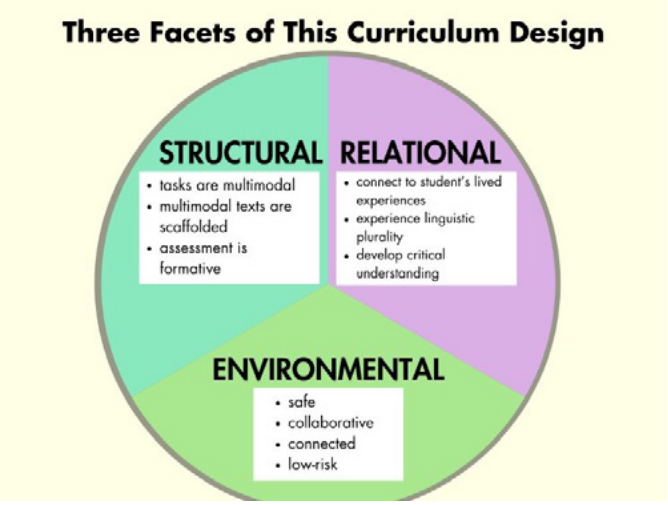

Figure 1: Multiliteracies theory and the Canadian Language Benchmarks

The second phase of this project included inviting two adult literacy and language educators to review and implement the unit of materials in their classrooms. Joy was an adult literacy educator for over 15 years and for the past seven years in adult English language and literacy classrooms in a correctional facility. For Joy, many of her ALLs had more developed oral literacy skills and would have been labelled as high-beginner or intermediate (Canadian Language Benchmark 4-5) in their oral English language proficiency. She valued community building through meeting students' goals and needs and giving room for autonomy and independence in the classroom. Sofia worked in a community-based English language program for the past two years. She works exclusively with beginner English language learners (pre-Canadian Language Benchmarks or Canadian Language Benchmark 1). As a multilingual educator, Sofia valued the use of additional languages to support inclusion and belonging as well as aligning tasks and activities to learners' goals and needs. Both educators had adult literacy learners in their classes alongside non-literacy learners. They both shared about the complexities and challenges of diverse, multi-level classrooms.

For both Joy and Sofia, differentiating instruction and building classroom community were central to their values as educators but also significant challenges. In developing the unit of materials, they were constantly seeking ways to negotiate between these values, challenges and the requirements of their curriculum. In the following section we will identify two activities, one from Joy's unit of materials and one from Sofia's, to explore how multiliteracies theory supported these educators as they fostered community and differentiated instruction for ALLs. The activities described are meant to be entry points for sparking your own curiosity. They are not meant to be prescriptive, but a launch point for your own ideas.

Activity 1: Picture Narrative Task

The first activity I will outline is a picture narrative task, co-developed with Joy to support vocabulary development in her classroom.

Figure 2: Picture Narrative Task

The purpose of the picture narrative task is to provide opportunities for learners to develop vocabulary in connection to a task for the week. For Joy's class, we chose a few target vocabulary but also discussed the importance of creating a shared vocabulary list with learners. We chose 6-8 pictures (see Figure 2 for examples) for them to organize in whatever order made sense to them to tell a story. Joy wanted to provide choice for learners about whether they complete this activity collaboratively or on their own. For those who

chose the collaborative option, learners tell the story to a peer while the other person listens for the target vocabulary. Then they switch roles. If learners want to work independently or want a focus on writing, they would use the collaborative word bank to write sentences or words underneath the pictures (depending on the learner). This writing could be done in English or in any of their most comfortable languages.

Activity 2: Multimodal sign creation

The second activity was designed for Sofia's Canadian Language Benchmarks 1 classroom and involved preparing learners for four weeks to create a park sign related to a problem in their community. The purpose of this activity was to develop learners reading and writing skills related to park signs and connect the images on a park sign to their understanding of problems in their community. This task was built up over four weeks through vocabulary activities, picture matching, and conversation. However, the assessment itself involved learners selecting a community problem (either individually or with a partner) and then choosing to create a poster related to this problem. Learners drew or created an image with the option to add colour, text, and other genre features of a sign. After learners created their sign, they were asked to reflect on the sign and languages they used. They were shown examples of other signs and asked to compare features of these signs to their own examples. After, they made any adjustments to their signs which were needed. Sofia considered colour, image, and including uppercase letters as part of the criteria for their sign. Additional criteria to consider when creating a sign could include: size of text, clarity of image in relation to the problem, uppercase letters, relevance of colours (is it a green warning sign?), languages, and cultural differences between signs in Ontario and other places in the world.

Multiliteracies-informed activities

Both of these activities share three key features which are especially relevant to adapting and expanding upon multiliteracies-inspired activities in our classrooms. First, both activities were multimodal. These activities focused specifically on written, oral, and visual literacies and notably included a combination. Second, this activity connected to learners' lived experiences and helped both learners and teachers to build bridges between their school and home literacies. Finally, these activities provided opportunities to build community in low-risk and collaborative environment.

Both activities provided choice for learners to engage through writing, oral language, and visual literacy skills. In other words, they were multimodal. Joy noted that "In my class I have a lot of people [ALLs] who speak and understand English better than my non-literacy learners.... So they that's where they shine right." Sofia shares a similar experience noting "And I find I found that I think [multimodal activities] it's universal for all levels.... Give them one picture, like a real-life picture and some words, some vocabulary. They just

do." Exploring multimodal activities provided opportunities for ALLs to shine no matter their English level. For ALLs who may often feel sidelined or inadequate in classrooms not designed for them (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2019; Katz, 1997), multimodal activities ask them to move beyond passive understandings of a text (Burke & Hardware, 2015) and enhance their communication practices (Crawford Camiciottoli & Campoy-Cubillo, 2018).

Connecting to learners' real-life experiences was another key element of these activities. The picture narrative we chose to explore was one Joy identified as relevant to her learners' experiences and goals for the future. "It's got, it's real-life context, which we know that our learners thrive in that.... It makes more sense for us to have relevant tasks, right?" Sofia even expanded upon this activity by having learners go out into their communities and take pictures of the community signs they found. This led to the realization that uppercase letters were part of the sign genre and ended up on her assessment as a result. When sharing about her learners' *aha* moment, she discussed how this activity promoted noticing of a grammar form they hadn't connected with before. "This is some kind, something of awareness, right? And yeah, most of them didn't aware that.... They cannot connect with the words they have learned before just learned yesterday, and now they are aware of it." This connection between their school learning and literacies and their communities and experiences is crucial for ALLs (Lorimer Leonard & Gear, 2021) but also for all learners. It is through multimodal, relevant tasks learners gain complex knowledge and extend this to the wider world (Choi & Yi, 2016; Kumagai & Iwasaki, 2015). In multiliteracies theory, understanding how and when to apply knowledge is just as critical as gaining new knowledge (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009) and multimodal activities offer ALLs opportunities to make connections between their own knowledge and the wider world.

Finally, both activities were built on the foundation of a collaborative and low-risk environment for learners. Both Joy and Sofia deeply valued learners' autonomy and these activities gave room for learners' choices. Whether it was in providing opportunities to work with a partner or on their own, or honouring that not all learners like to draw and providing options for tracing and copying, Joy and Sofia adjusted these activities to the actual learners they had in their classrooms, not an idealized vision. Research suggests safe and open environments where learners don't fear making mistakes is crucial to supporting their learning (Choi & Yi, 2016; Qaisi, 2021). In adjusting activities to the interests, level, and goals of their learners Joy and Sofia were fostering a safe, collaborative and low-risk environment.

Conclusion

Multiliteracies-informed activities can't eliminate the problems we face as adult literacy and language educators. What it does offer us is a bridge towards more equitable ways of seeing our learners. As Joy and Sofia highlight, often what we need are creative theories and activities to shift our perspectives and light up

our curiosity. Joy articulates this by noticing how "it still boils down to the fundamental concepts like, you know, community of practice and realistic relevant tasks, everyday life tasks, right?... And you know, small group learning and you know, social interaction, and like things like breakdown to the same fundamental concepts that engage adult learners." With so many challenges and barriers for ALLs, Joy and Sofia invite us to see how multiliteracies theory might help us get unstuck (paraphrase from Joy) and inspire the creativity (paraphrase from Sofia) we need to do things differently.

Adult literacy learners may have unique goals and literacies (Currie & Cray, 2004; Lorimer Leonard & Gear, 2021; Pettitt & Tarone, 2015;). By questioning the deficit perspective of the curriculum, we may find creative ways to respond to their needs without labelling ALLs as 'illiterate' (Ade-Ojo & Duckworth, 2019; Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2016). Multimodal activities which are connected to learners lived experiences and rooted in safe and low-risk classrooms are not only supportive to ALLs, but also to every learner in our classroom (Burke & Hardware, 2015; Choi & Yi, 2016; Kumagai & Iwasaki, 2015; Li, 2020; Lopez-Sanchez, 2015; Qaisi, 2021; Sagnier, 2015; Turpin, 2019). With diverse and multi-level classrooms, multiliteracies-informed curriculum opens up possibilities for seeing the diversity of our learners as an asset and not only a challenge. To respond to an educational system which devalues the learners we are trying to support, we need an alternative vision to guide our curriculum development and classroom cultures (Powell, 1999). Multiliteracies theory proposes a vision of literacy which does not value some literacies above others but trusts educators and learners to explore with curiosity the gaps and skills learners need for their futures.

If you are interested in learning more about multiliteracies theory, you can find a YouTube video here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSupHJnDdLs&feature=youtu.be

If you are interested in the curriculum plan developed with Joy and Sofia, find it on Tutela here:

https://tutela.ca/Resource_52056

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