Latino Literacy: 500 Years of Resistance

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Literacy has been frequently defined using a Eurocentric frame that can certainly be applied to the dominant elite of the first-world and the middle class mainstream population. Traditional interpretations of literacy do not take into account Pre-Columbian systems that have shaped the way in which many ancient Pre-Columbian cultures have evolved (Boone, 1994). During colonization, Pre-Columbian cultures were forced to assimilate to a European [literacy] way of learning, doing, and thinking, after having their literary texts, culture and language dismissed or destroyed (Boone); they were forced, as Fanon (1968) points out, to see themselves through the eyes of the conquerors. For over three hundred years, each of the Pre-Columbian cultures continued to use their own “native imagery and language” mixed with a new imposed language and culture to tell their stories, or what was left of them to a European audience (Cummins, 1998, p. 188).

Latin American countries are no different to other countries. Their literacy has only been accessible to the privileged classes, leaving the rural and working-class behind. Many families have been forced to migrate to other countries, whether they share the language and culture with those countries or not. Such is the case of many Latinos in the United States (U.S.).

When Latino students join the U.S. school system, they are presented with an academic Discourse that excludes them, and limits, ignores or denigrates their use of their home language (Snow, 1990, & Gee, 2004). Williams (2005) argues that the values of the mainstream culture are projected on academic Discourses, which in turn give people access to cultural capital and power. Thus, the attainment of literacy is used mostly to move up from one social class to another, usually only accessible to the middle or upper-middle
classes (Spivak, 1994, & Jimenez 2003).

Research on social constructivism and bilingual education suggests that linguistic differences and academic achievement between minority students and mainstream students lie on the “decreased opportunity to use existing language skills”, not on students’ limited English proficiency (Au, 1998, p. 302). Delpit (1988) argues that students with a first or home language (L1) other than English (L2, or sometimes L3) are disempowered when their knowledge and personal experience are not acknowledged.

It is for this reason that Latinos in the U.S. have to create their own new literacy with a little or a lot of pre-Columbian literacy influence, as their ancestors had to do for several centuries after the Europeans arrived at this continent. In both scenarios, the elite was able to transfer its literacy skills while the working class struggled against a system with a definition of literacy that excluded and denigrated them, setting them up for academic failure.

**Pre-Columbian Literacy**

Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican systems evolved in an independent and unique manner, with no connection to the Egyptian and Sumerian systems (León-Portilla, 1996). Furthermore, several cultures in Mesoamerica were in contact and aware of each other’s literacy systems. However, as Jimenez (2008) points out, these groups’ literacy systems also evolved in different ways and while some writing systems were pictographic, some mixed iconic and pictographic forms (semasiographic), and some used phonetic and semasiographic forms, pictographic forms of writing used by any Mesoamerican group did not need translation into other languages or writing systems. These systems were developed by multilingual cultures in contact. Therefore, Aztecs, Mixtecs, Mayans, Cholultecans, and Zapotecs, to name just a few, were able to communicate and understand each other’s writings without the need of a translator. Even though scholars say that the native elite of these groups was literate, the nonelite group was also exposed to the pictorial histories (Boone & Mignolo, 1994). Such is the case of the forms of language used in Mayan and Mixtec texts that the elites could read figuratively and the nonelites could read literally (Jansen, 1985).

Boone (1994) points out that in order to preserve traditions and knowledge
among the Aztec people, their educational process used oral recitation and memorization of texts and discourses. It is due to this emphasis on oral recitation and memorization that contemporary Mexican oral forms maintain “content and messages once conveyed by Mesoamerican literacies” (Jiménez, 2008, p. 34).

In the Nahuatl, Mayan, Mixtec, Quechua and other Mesoamerican groups, there was an oral tradition which was part of their everyday lives and was taught in school; such is the case of the calmecac where the wise men and ancient priests would teach young people songs, speeches and other literary texts in their native language (León-Portilla, 1996). Karttunen (1998) describes the ways in which oral tradition was carried on towards the twentieth century and exemplifies it with story-telling in Milpa Alta by Doña Luz, “a major figure of twentieth-century Nahuatl literature” (p. 438). In the case of the Nicaraos, it was the “sacerdotes” who would read and interpret written texts to the people (Leon-Portilla, 1996).

During the conquest, Franciscan priests created schools, or used the calmecac, to train young men and boys into alphabetic writing (Karttunen, 1998 & León-Portilla, 1996). Some of the graduates from those schools went into civil careers and served as interpreters, notaries and creators of codexes. Some continued as evangelists’ assistants, as interpreters or creators of written records, or as teachers of alphabetic writing (Karttunen). It could be assumed that all of the graduates held important positions in the new hybrid socio-cultural and linguistic system. However, oral tradition and syncretic works, like the Books of Chilam Balam, continued to be used despite Spanish efforts and destruction of books. Such is the example of Diego de Landa who burned ancient Maya Texts and punished those who mixed the old knowledge with the new European material (Karttunen, 1998). Nevertheless, it was the surviving native elite of the conquest who tried to recover texts they knew by transcribing them into their native language using alphabetic writing. This effort was supported by some friars and native informants (León-Portilla, 1996). As time went by, the Western book, and writing and reading practices were reinforced to make the natives read the word and stop reading the world (Mignolo, 1994).

After the Conquest, the new Spanish-speaking cultures created a new hybrid literacy with a wide array of levels of literacy, and assimilation to the imposed
European language and culture. The different levels of literacy were based on access to education and resources. This access was determined by the assimilation of the native elite who was in charge of transmitting the conquerors’ knowledge to the other strata of the indigenous society (Sartre in Fanon, 1968 & Spivak, 1994). It seems that the lower the strata, the less access to resources they had, and have had for centuries due to a succession of economic and political upheavals, and foreign invasions at different times of history (Jimenez 2003 & Spivak, 1994).

The ones whose L1 skills are well developed, seem to be the ones who have had access to schooling or have been able to move into the middle upper classes (Durgunoglu, 2002 & Jimenez, 2003); or they may have been part of the “native elite” with the opportunity to develop their L1 skills well enough and, possibly, access to L2 culture and literacy skills while in their L1 culture. Those who are literate can transfer L1 skills to L2 skills, process known as cross-linguistic transfer; and those who are not literate or whose L1 skills are weak cannot transfer those skills to L2 and, in turn, L2 is weak (Proctor, August, Carlo & Snow, 2006; & Durgunoglu, 2002).

Today, in the U.S., many Latinos fall into the group of students who have not been able to transfer L1 skills to L2. This may be due to lack of access to schooling either in their countries of origin or in the U.S., or to low-quality instruction in English-only environments where their L1 is not valued (Au, 1998 & Gee, 2004). This influence can be represented by the language spoken at home, which might have been a language other than Spanish; being Spanish a second or third language imposed by the Europeans centuries ago. This is to say that their mother tongue (L1) might have a low social status compared to their L2 (Au, 1998 Gee, 2004 & Boone, 1994). This might be a consequence of L1 not being acknowledged or valued at school. Or as Gee says they are “assessed at school for what they have learned, not at school, but at home.” (p. 37)

These new ‘immigrants’ need to assimilate into the English-speaking culture and educational system with a completely different set of rules and assumptions, which has nothing to do with their literacy, partly inherited from their pre-Columbian ancestors and the level of skill development in their L1. The system is set on a dominant European-centered pedagogy that cannot serve the interests of a non-European oppressed minority (Freire &
Macedo, 1987). Thus, history is repeating itself by having new Latino immigrants and their children struggle in a system that cannot understand them due to its western (Eurocentric) point of view. Latinos will have to find a way to create a Latino Literacy of their own that would take into account their live experiences, their home language or languages and cultures, their non-Westernized scientific theories, and, as a result, would let them read the world, not just the word.

References


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