Read It All: Simultaneous Multiliteracy in the Classroom
by Brendan Gillett

Recently, I asked a class of New York City sixth-graders if they had ever read comics. This class is 88% ELLs, and their relationships to reading ran the gamut from devouring novels that were above grade level to struggling with literacy in their home language, not to mention English. For most, the walls of text they encounter in textbooks and other assigned reading can border on opaque, and it takes the expected amount of scaffolding and support for them to comprehend and interpret any meaning. When asked about comics, however, every hand shot up, and so began a lesson on one of many types of literacies that we, as teachers, can use in the quest to get students to read anything and everything they can.

When I say "anything and everything," I am thinking very broadly about what it means to read. ELLs already tend to bring complex sets of literacy practices to the classroom, their varying abilities with different language systems blending to produce sometimes surprising results. This understanding of deriving meaning from many sources can work to their advantage when thinking about expanding their literacy set. Here, we can begin to think about the concept of *literacies,* ways of reading almost any object as a decipherable *text* that contains information.

There has been a growing body of work on different literacies (Blake, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Juul, 2005; McCloud, 1993). Some forms of communication are more traditional—graphic, visual, textual, critical, historical—while others are either born of new technologies or new ways of understanding the act of reading—digital, search, emotional, symbolic, gestural. We are not able to define each of these here, in the limits of publication, so I encourage you to search for further readings and use your critical literacy skills to evaluate which definitions hold valid information. Many of these are skill sets are those we use daily to interpret the textually saturated landscape we live in, and thus this theoretical work is largely a matter of putting a name to practices already in use.

One of the most important literacy practices and skills to have is that of *simultaneous multiliteracy.* By this I mean the ability to read everything all the time and everything at the same time. When one navigates to a web page, for instance, it is necessary to understand how web addresses are interpreted and created, which parts of the page are links, how visuals relate to the text (if either are even present), how that page is situated in relation to other pages—basically, the reader must take in a large amount of information and quickly figure out what is going on. Many of us do this without conscious thought, having practiced and applied our cultural knowledge to a large range of objects; you yourself may even be engaging in this practice right now, as you read this on the Internet. Chances are that you are not giving it much thought.

In a classroom full of ELLs, then, developing the metacognitive level of simultaneous multiliteracy practices is often a matter of calling attention to *how* students derive meaning. Present them with different objects—comics, web pages, videos, books of all kinds, spreadsheets, advertisements—and ask them just two questions: What does this tell you? How do you know? You can, of course, ask more questions as needed, but allow room for the surprises of interpretation and opinion; see which frames of reference your students draw on. When I asked the sixth-graders about comics, they named everything from golden-age superhero comics to translated Japanese *manga*. Curiously, nothing was in the students' home language, and yet they were able to have rich experiences with these texts, which I believed stemmed in part from the immediate accessibility of comics as a visual medium. Students also tend to be well versed in

many digital literacies, chatting and texting like nobody's business. Connecting the reading skills from different contexts will help students develop a robust set of literacies and reading abilities—a development that can occur simultaneously with, and even reinforce, the language and literacy development that is already at the core of English as a new language education.

Fostering the development of different literacies in the classroom will take work, of course. Knowing—i.e., how students construct and derive meaning, what languages and language systems they can work with, and the most effective ways to present and practice these skills—is as essential here as it is with any other classroom activity. As such, I ask you to reflect on your own literacies. Look around you and answer a simple question: how many things can you read? (Perhaps this is not a simple question, depending on how far you want to push what it means to read something, and what you consider a text.) Consider the ways in which you understand what you see and how you first learned to comprehend these objects. Think through the ways you could bring these different texts into your class to support your current content. Most important, ask yourself how you can take advantage of the literacies that students already use to give them the chances to be the experts in their own development. And for everything you and your students encounter, encourage everyone to read it all.

NOTE: This article is adapted from a presentation given at the NYS TESOL Annual Conference in November 2015.

References

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