

## BOOK REVIEW

### HELEN DE SILVA JOYCE AND SUSAN FEEZ *EXPLORING LITERACIES*

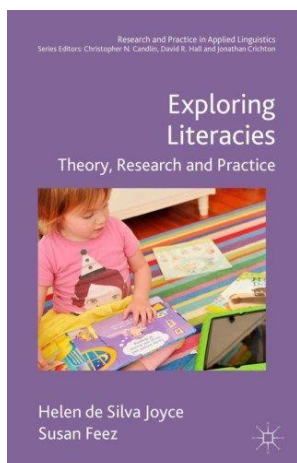
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#### Reviewed work:

#### **Exploring Literacies Theory, Research and Practice**

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and  
Susan Feez  
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*Palgrave Macmillan, 2016*

Series: Research and practice in applied linguistics

ISBN 978-0-230-54539-7 hardback  
ISBN 978-0-230-54540-3 paperback

A recent (October 2015) release of Palgrave Macmillan, under the series Research and Practice in Applied Linguistics, the book *Exploring Literacies. Theory, Research and Practice*, is written by two renowned academics from the University of New England, Australia, and leading researchers in Applied Linguistics: Helen de Silva Joyce and Susan Feez.

Helen de Silva Joyce is a coordinator, author or co-author of several books in the field, such as: *Language at Work: Analysing Language Use in Work, Education, Medical and Museum Contexts, Focus on grammar, Words and Pictures: A Multimodal Approach to Picture Books, Interpreting the Visual, Language in Uniform: Language Analysis and Training for Defence and Policing Purposes*, while Susan Feez has authored or co-authored works as: *Text Based Syllabus Design, Media Literacy, Montessori and Early Childhood, Grammar and Meaning, Using Functional Grammar: An Explorer's Guide, Montessori: The Australian Story, Early childhood education in Australia: Maybanke's legacy in the 21st century*. After other common endeavours for previous books, namely *Creative Writing Skills: Literary and media text types, Developing writing skills, Text Based Language Literacy*

*Education: Programming and Methodology*, the two authors have now assumed a new and laborious undertaking of thoroughly 'exploring' literacy's practice and education, debating on examples and putting forward models both from school and adult learning contexts, providing historical background and up to date state of art in research methodologies.

*Exploring Literacies* is not a book for anyone. It is addresses to informed readers, literacy educators or researchers. It is a complex work, a thorough study, with an elaborate structure. One of the motivations for the authors' approach is the idea of a crisis existent in the domain:

Everyone who believes there is a literacy crisis can give an example of the crisis in action: young people glued to their various electronic devices using text language instead of *correct* language; the young woman at the local store who can't add up the prices on a few groceries, young employees who can't follow written instructions and schools that fail to teach grammar or that teach a grammar parents don't recognize. (p.3)

*Exploring Literacies* consists of three main parts. After a preamble of conceptual delimitations, the reader is introduced to the evolution and types of literacies met along life, to be in the end presented with explicit models of literacy research.

The first part comprises two chapters introductory to the concept and its acceptations in time, containing definitions, classifications and historical models. Chapter 1 explains terminology, defines notions and brings elaborate descriptions, and details educational approaches. It presents a vast state of art as well as own opinions on the four views of literacy: as learned practice, as coding and skills practice, as individual practice and as sociocultural practice.

The second chapter deals with historical and geographical aspects and overviews literacy across disciplines particularly focusing on and using the frameworks of the Systemic Functional Linguistics model.

This model is not based on rules but is used to explain how language varies in response to changing social contexts, and to describe whole texts in terms of function and meaning, including how the language of a text is used to talk about the world and our experiences in the world, how it is used to develop interpersonal relationships and how it is used to bind the various features of language into whole cohesive texts that make sense in the social contexts. (p.19)

To exemplify how literacy specific to disciplines is discussed, we can note, for instance, that academic discourse is analysed with respect to features such as technicality, abstraction and evaluation.

The second part - chapters 3 to 5 - presents literacy development from childhood to adulthood, and as lifelong learning.

Chapter three reviews the early years literacy development and shows how participation in school and the literacy entailed by school context are influenced by the discourse and practices of the home. It is also in this chapter that we are presented with an overview of opinions about language and literacy development,

such as behavioural, cognitive, social and biological views. The authors argue that such conceptual frameworks underlie any valuable research:

The researcher's task is to make principled choices from the array of possibilities along several dimensions, including theoretical frameworks, data collection procedures and analytical tools. This is necessary so that the design of any particular study is unified conceptually and remains dynamic enough to account for the many variables of any situation in which language is being used and learned. It is also necessary so that a study produces results that provide insights for practice and which have the potential to be generalised to other teaching and learning contexts. In other words, researchers in the field of language and literacy need a conceptual framework through which to view possible theoretical and analytical orientations. (p.95)

Literacy at school is covered in the fourth chapter, where notions as 'teacher *bricoleur*' or 'genre based pedagogy' are explained, curriculum design is debated, domains with their corresponding types of learning and dimensions of contexts are correlated, and categories for organising literacy resources are summarised. Discussing this classification of resources, the authors explain how research work and studies are generally produced – and incidentally show how the very book under review was designed:

The four resources model is a *generic* framework researchers can use to navigate in a principled way the expanding literature and recurring debates that continually push out the boundaries of the literacy terrain. The whole of this vast and rocky terrain is beyond the reach of any one individual, study or publication, and so literacy teachers, literacy researchers, and authors of books such as this one, can only ever be *bricoleurs*, creating their work from the elements that are within their reach. One means of unifying these elements in principled ways, often used in tandem with the four resources model, is to focus attention on the contexts in which *specific* types of literacy use are situated. (p.136)

It is also shown that the 'crucial shift' – from initial literacy skills to the skills necessary for learning the curriculum content – is made possible by qualified educators with a sound knowledge of teaching methods and of how, what and when to teach.

The fifth chapter outlines adult literacy contexts: further education, community, workplace or literacy for specific purposes. It presents dimensions of competency assessment at this level, in literacy, numeracy or problem solving, sheds light on the mode continuum technique and illustrates the use of intertextuality and literacy events, talks about special language features of diverse disciplines and about academic language, shows aspects of the disadvantaged categories and discusses concerns of the plurilingual world.

The third and final part – chapters 6 and 7 - puts forward a well grounded research methodology and depicts instances of actual research in the field of literacy, performed in various contexts.

The Methodological map provided in the sixth chapter is a useful and, in our opinion, quite ample tool for researchers, from where one can select the method

most suitable for each type of research: qualitative, quantitative, action research, case studies and so on.

The final chapter is based on exemplifications of research projects on literacy in different contexts, with direct assertions of the researchers. While this approach is innovative and much welcomed ensuring readers' effective encounter with the actual facts explained by the very people who applied these methods, one can argue that there are some cases of less relevant studies or rather briefly presented by the researcher (as for instance the 'Classroom interaction in a Danish history classroom'). Still, it is exactly this diversity of selection and the unaltered preservation of authenticity that gives the book a genuinely encyclopaedic dimension. This adds value to the well written previous theoretical chapters, providing credibility of arguments and uniqueness of an exhaustive approach.

Helen de Silva Joyce's expertise in spoken language and intertextuality in social and work contexts transpire from the pages of *Exploring Literacies*, her main research areas proving a solid base for a deep understanding and an accurate interpretation of facts. Susan Feez's specialization in language and literacy as well as in Montessori education ensured a widened and at the same time individual-centred perspective, which proves effective in analysis of phenomena.

Abounding with explicit and eloquent exemplifications, the book proves readability, due to the authors' keen attention catching technique of writing, to the utter clarity of the discourse and the straightforwardness proven by visual aids. The sharp, trained eye of the experimented researchers constantly indicates the right directions of exploration and the most valid methodological approaches for each, keeping discussions on track and maintaining a flawless focus throughout the complex enterprise.

Composite and yet unitary, the book *Exploring Literacies* is no less than a masterpiece in the field of education and research on literacy, complex and still orderly, apprehensible though highly professional, extensive and nevertheless consistent.