

*The Literacy Approach to Teaching Foreign Languages*

Ana Halbach

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*The Literacy Approach to Teaching Foreign Languages* (2022) by Ana Halbach is a well-researched, compact book whose aim is to inform and instruct world language instructors who teach in primary and secondary schools the “literacy approach” to world language instruction, in order to enhance students’ and instructors’ engagement with respective target languages. This book is arranged in 7 chapters, each of which has its own abstract at the beginning, along with ample references provided to further inform the reader. Also included in the book are illustrative figures and tables which depict the concepts and frameworks the book is explaining. At the end of the text, the author includes 2 appendices and an index. Also, there is the “Forward” and “Acknowledgement” in the detailed “Contents” followed by a list of the “Figures” and “List of Tables”, both of which are numbered consecutively.

Halbach informs the reader that “shifting the focus of foreign language teaching to literacy development makes . . . a multilingual approach possible” (p. 96). The author’s approach is a seasoned one which has been developed, practiced, tried out in many classrooms, and based on numerous teacher trainer courses they have led over the years. They state, “What we are necessary for, is to make sure that students develop their ability to acquire, create, connect and communicate meaning in a wide variety of contexts, through a variety of languages” (p. 96).

Chapter 1, “Communicating to Learn: Giving Language Teaching a Content of Its Own”, delineates the basic characteristics of the Literacy Approach pointing out the contrasting overall aim of this methodology versus the more traditional approach in language teaching: literacy development operates by moving towards “communicating to learn” rather than the accepted process of “learning to communicate” (p. 1). And this approach necessarily takes some time and practice to develop effectively. The book’s aim is to provide instruction on the methodology of the literacy approach with ample examples, actual testimonials from teachers and from students, as well as copious tables and figures illustrating the fundamental structures of this approach to language teaching and learning. “Despite the fact that the communicative approach has dominated foreign language teaching for almost 40 years now, students in formal education settings often leave school without being able to truly use the language for communication” (Eurostat, 2020, p. 2).

The second chapter, “The Literacy Approach”, clearly explains the rationale for the Literacy Approach in terms of the foreign language classroom and its curricula. The literacy approach requires careful examination of the desired end results and proceeds to plan backwards from the desired outcome and then moves into developing the process or path of learning based

on where it is that students are expected to end up. There are three basic steps to Backward Design:

1. identification of the final result of the unit of work, or the question “What should students come away understanding [or being able to do]?” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005);
2. definition of learning goals and standards that we want students to achieve, or the question “What will count as evidence of that understanding [or ability]?” (ibid.) and
3. selection of contents, teaching tasks and materials, or the question “What texts, activities and methods will best enable such result” (ibid.) (Halbach, 2022, p. 14).

Detailed figures and tables are provided to offer instructors visual aids to elucidate the various phases in the literacy approach.

In chapter 3, we examine the Reception Phase of the Literacy Approach: “Designing the Learning Path: The Reception Phase”. Since the goal is to move away from the traditional language textbook, the first challenge the student will encounter in this phase will be to getting a grasp of/comprehending a text that, though appropriate to their level, will require an adaptation to approach and understand authentic material. And further, Halbach explains that “where the Literacy Approach definitely departs from normal classroom practice is in the work done on the question of “how the text means” (p. 33).

The next phase of Literacy Approach’s Learning Path is The Production Phase which is the focus of chapter 4: “Designing the Learning Path: The Production Phase”. The purpose of this chapter is to describe how students go about crafting a ‘production’, or a written example of a text which they produce through guided work.

Chapter 5 provides further illustration of the literacy approach when applied in the primary education context: “A Literacy Unit in Primary Education”. Herein, the author quite

exquisitely explains and illustrates how they envision the literacy approach functioning well in the context of primary school. “This unit exemplifies how literacy units work and illustrates how the planning grid can help give shape to this approach to foreign language teaching” (p. 61). This chapter deftly describes the necessary phases of a literacy unit with Table 5.2 (p. 65) to visually explain the process involved. There are two main components: Reception and Production. In each component there are specific phases of each process. Within Reception, there is phase 1: pre-reading, listening, open gateway to literacy, contextualize, aid understanding. Then, in phase 2, there is understanding and connecting, and so forth. An important aspect of the literacy approach is that the teaching starts from students’ experience of a specific text and that it helps them reflect on the nature and the effect of the given text.

The book’s penultimate chapter is “Integrating a Literacy Approach Into an Existing Curriculum”. The author here explains the importance of including this perspective because of the many instances in their experience when seasoned teachers have complained about fitting a literacy approach into the current (and mandatory) curriculum they are supposed to be delivering to their students. “This chapter focuses on long-term planning and on how to align literacy units with the existing curricula for EFL” (p. 73).

*The Literacy Approach to Teaching Foreign Language* by Ana Halbach is an excellent resource for teachers and administrators to guide them to enrich the foreign language curricula in a variety of contexts. It presents a fresh approach to pedagogy that has many advantages for successful, innovative and creative methodologies for updating and revolutionizing foreign language teaching. Just as important, Halbach’s book also has strong cultural components, bringing it forward in time to meet current pedagogical requirements and to benefit students’ appreciation for all kinds of texts in target languages, and for their learning in new ways.

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