

University of Wisconsin-Madison

From the Selected Works of Heather Willis Allen

2011

Embracing literacy-based teaching: A longitudinal study of the conceptual development of novice foreign language teachers

Heather W. Allen, *University of Miami*



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/heatherwillisallen/27/>

Chapter 6

Embracing Literacy-based Teaching

A Longitudinal Study of the Conceptual Development of Novice Foreign Language Teachers

Heather Willis Allen

University of Miami

In 2007, the Modern Language Association (MLA) issued a formidable challenge to U.S. collegiate FL (foreign language) departments, stating:

[F]oreign language departments . . . must transform their programs and structure . . . [r]eplacing the two-tiered language-literature structure with a broader and more coherent curriculum in which language, literature, and culture are taught as a continuous whole . . . will reinvigorate language departments as valuable academic units central to the humanities and to the missions of institutions of higher education. (p. 3)

Since then, the FL profession has debated these curricular recommendations. One critical area it de-emphasized was how overarching changes in collegiate FL study should influence the professional development of future professors. Its only specific recommendations were to “teach graduate students to use technology in language instruction” and “enhance and reward graduate student training” (pp. 8–9).

This lack of specificity was discussed in several subsequent publications (Allen & Negueruela-Azarola, 2010; Pfeiffer, 2008; Schectman & Koser, 2008). Among these, Pfeiffer explained that FL departments granting Ph.D. degrees are sites where “future faculty is trained and socialized into a mode of professional thinking that will have repercussions long after the current professoriate has retired,” meaning any curricular transformations should require an “immediate effect on the education and professional training of graduate students” (p. 296).

Indeed, FL graduate students’ professional development has gained relevance in recent years given their role as TAs (Teaching Assistants), particularly for Ph.D.-granting departments, wherein they teach half or more of first-year language courses (MLA, 2007). Although the responsibility for TA development is now typically the domain of L2 education specialists rather than literature specialists (Katz & Watzinger-Tharpe, 2005), the dominant model of teacher education has not changed: the dominant model is a pre-service workshop followed by an in-service methods course focused on “a general sense of what rudimentary communicative language teaching should be about” (Rankin, 1994, p. 25).

This model is consistent with Freeman's (1993) notion of "frontloading," or attempting to equip teachers at the outset for all they need to know and be capable of doing throughout their career. Such a model is particularly problematic for FL graduate students typically socialized into teaching in departments embodying a "language-literature dichotomy" (Kramsch, 1993, p. 7), one consequence being the view that lower-level language instruction is less difficult or sophisticated than literature instruction. In addition, two different cohorts usually teach language and literature with "minimal or nonexistent" collaboration (MLA, 2007, p. 2). According to MLA data, 80 percent of teaching assignments for TAs are in lower-level language courses, even for those in their fourth year of teaching or beyond (Steward, 2006). Although documents like the MLA Report suggest that *what* future FL professors need to know and *how* they should teach are evolving, how they learn to teach is stymied by an outdated model of professional development for which research has largely failed to document its outcomes. Among the many critical questions to answer is how professional development experiences should be structured to establish connections between theoretical knowledge and teaching practices and to integrate linguistic and literary-cultural content.

Research Design

A comparative case study was conducted to explore two graduate students' evolving understandings of *literacy* and its application to collegiate FL teaching during their first years in the classroom. The research questions included the following:

1. What roles did the participants' beliefs related to language teaching and learning play in their evolving conceptual understandings of literacy and its application to FL instruction?
2. What difficulties did they encounter when attempting to instantiate literacy-based teaching?
3. How were their efforts to carry out literacy-based teaching constrained or supported by the departmental context, curriculum, and professional development opportunities?

Theoretical Framework

Lantolf and Johnson (2007) propose foregrounding one overarching concept to challenge teachers to re-envision everyday concepts related to instruction, a recommendation consistent with other researchers' arguments that doing so is desirable to unify curricula and provide teachers with coherent notions of teaching and learning (Smagorinsky, Cook, & Johnson, 2003). The concept centered on in this study was *literacy* (Kern, 2000), chosen to challenge TAs to rethink traditional perceptions of language versus culture or literature and "productive" versus "receptive" skills, and defined as follows:

[T]he use of socially-, historically-, and culturally-situated practices of creating and interpreting meaning through texts. It entails at least a tacit awareness of

the relationships between textual conventions and their contexts of use and, ideally, the ability to reflect critically on those relationships . . . literacy is dynamic—not static—and variable across and within discourse communities and cultures. (Kern, 2000, p. 16)

Kern further elaborated seven principles of literacy to guide teaching practice including *interpretation, collaboration, conventions, cultural knowledge, problem solving, reflection and self-reflection, and language use*. Whereas language, conventions, and cultural knowledge represent core elements of literacy-based instruction, they are taught in conjunction with the processes of interpretation, collaboration, problem solving, and reflection. Keeping in mind the varied instructional needs of learners, the New London Group (1996) articulated four types of activities to include in literacy-based instruction—*situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice*.

Two final notions germane to this study are conceptual and pedagogical tools. *Conceptual tools* mediate decision making for planning, instruction, and assessment and include theoretical principles, concepts, and frameworks, whereas *pedagogical tools* have more local, immediate utility and include instructional practices, strategies, and resources (Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999). The distinction between the two types of tools is significant as novice teachers often encounter difficulty instantiating pedagogical applications of theoretical concepts and frameworks. Grossman et al. (1999) further posit five degrees in the process of appropriation: *lack of appropriation* (due to incomprehension, resistance, or rejection of the tool), *appropriating a tool's label* but not its features, *appropriating surface features of a tool* yet not understanding how the features contribute to a conceptual whole, *appropriating conceptual underpinnings* and being able to use the tool in new settings, and *achieving mastery* in the tool's use.

Participants

From five students in a Ph.D. program in Romance Studies recruited for an ongoing investigation, Andrea and Maria (both pseudonyms) were chosen for analysis in this study. Criteria for their selection were shared characteristics including their L1 (Spanish), lack of previous teaching experience, and time spent in the U.S. prior to the Ph.D. Andrea, 27, was raised in Puerto Rico, where she lived until age 18, until her studies at a private university in the Northeast U.S. After majoring in International Studies, Andrea completed an intensive one-year Master's program in Spanish literature at the same university. She claimed to have made the decision to pursue a Ph.D. in Spanish literature to become a teacher. Two years into doctoral coursework, Andrea began specializing in contemporary Spanish Caribbean literature. Andrea is currently a fourth-year student preparing her dissertation proposal. Maria, 26, was raised in Cuba, where she lived until age 16 before moving to the Southern U.S. with her family. She completed her undergraduate studies, double-majoring in Spanish and Biology, at the same private university in the Southern U.S. where she later enrolled in her Ph.D. program. Maria said that she

had chosen to pursue her Ph.D. based on a passion for literature. Two years after starting her Ph.D., she began specializing in the contemporary Spanish novel. Like Andrea, Maria is now a fourth year Ph.D. student writing her dissertation proposal.

Teaching Context

During the participants' first year of Ph.D. coursework, they completed a required pre-service pedagogy seminar (hereafter the "methods" seminar). Given the communicative nature of lower-level courses and materials used, concepts related to several approaches (communicative language teaching, literacy-based teaching, task-based instruction) were introduced. Conceptual tools of literacy introduced included the seven principles of literacy and the four curricular components. Course requirements included a written assessment of key concepts, an analysis of the textbook, peer microteaching and classroom teaching, and materials for one instructional unit. In their third year of the program, both participants enrolled in an optional seminar on literacy and advanced FL teaching (hereafter the "literacy" seminar). This course focused on instructional design for advanced FL courses and culminated with a project requiring students to design a syllabus and sample unit for an advanced undergraduate course in literature or cultural studies. Conceptual tools introduced included design of meaning, available designs, the four curricular components and the seven principles of literacy. Examples of pedagogical tools of literacy introduced were reading matrix, journal writing, graphic organizer, directed-reading-thinking activity, and semantic mapping.

Regarding their teaching trajectories, beginning in their second year of Ph.D. coursework, Andrea and Maria taught Elementary Spanish and participated in teaching workshops, ongoing observations of teaching by the Spanish language program director (LPD), and monthly course coordination meetings. Andrea, having completed an optional seminar on bilingualism, had the opportunity during her third year to teach elementary Spanish for heritage speakers. During their fourth year, Andrea co-taught two different third-year Spanish language courses with two tenured faculty members whereas Maria taught an early intermediate Spanish course the first term and co-taught a third-year Spanish literature course with a tenure-track faculty member the second term. The same year the participants began their Ph.D., a new LPD attempted to integrate an explicit focus on literacy-based instruction.

Data Collection

Multiple data sources were collected over three years, beginning with the methods seminar, and ending at the start of the participants' sixth term of teaching. To gain a firsthand sense of their perspectives on learning to teach, three primary data sources were collected—interviews, written narratives, and teaching artifacts. Secondary data included participants' demographic profiles and students' evaluations of teaching.

Among primary data sources, semi-structured interviews, digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, were conducted five times—at the methods seminar’s end, twice during the participants’ first year of teaching, before and after the literacy seminar, and at the conclusion of the participants’ most recent semester of teaching. Written narratives included language-learning autobiographies, self-evaluations, statements of teaching philosophy, discussion board postings from the methods seminar, and reading reaction journals from the literacy seminar. Teaching artifacts included materials developed in both seminars (e.g., model instructional sequences, sample unit, and syllabus project) and lesson plans.

Data Analysis

Analysis of data began with careful reading of transcribed interviews and written narratives. Next, each reference in interview and narrative data to conceptual tools of literacy (the seven principles of literacy and four curricular components) or their practical instantiations as pedagogical tools was coded as one *meaning unit* with each labeled with a code name based on the theme expressed. Thus, a meaning unit neither fragmented one idea into meaningless truncated segments nor confused it with other ideas expressing different themes (Ratner, 2002). If more than one theme was expressed within the same phrase, it was coded twice. Initial thematic codes were established and then revised, a recursive process leading to re-coding several times. Codes were compared and then clustered based on thematic resemblance into coding categories. The final analysis included five coding categories: conceptual tools, pedagogical tools, beliefs about teaching and learning, affordances, and constraints. In certain cases, a code was categorized under more than one category (e.g., textbook as both *pedagogical tool* and *constraint*). Among these categories, the first two contained the greatest number of codes.

Next, teaching artifacts such as lesson plans were analyzed for ways in which the participants attempted to instantiate literacy-based instruction at certain points along their trajectory as new teachers in comparison with their narratives. I sought to determine whether alignment was seen between what participants said regarding conceptual tools guiding their teaching practices and whether conceptual understanding was translated into pedagogical tools. As such, the study attempted to go beyond relying wholly on *subject reality* (Pavlenko, 2007), i.e., participants’ thoughts and feelings on teaching and professional development, the curriculum, and the local context, to gain a deeper understanding of how participants appropriated, reconstructed, and transformed their teaching activity in light of affordances and constraints present.

Findings

Andrea

Notions of literacy during pre-service professional development. Even before being introduced to literacy-based teaching, Andrea’s discussion board postings from the

methods seminar revealed her everyday concepts of language learning. In one posting, she described learning Italian in college as “very frustrating,” and, based on that, said teachers should avoid “infantilizing” students or “depend[ing] solely on the [text]book.” Without positing a preferred approach, she wrote, “How can we make beginning FL courses intellectually exciting when it’s a language where the student has had absolutely no encounter with?” Thus, the way that Andrea wrote about language learning was based on her own lived experiences rather than scientific concepts.

Several weeks later, she defined literacy in her midterm exam:

[N]ot merely alphabetization . . . a much more holistic approach towards language learning. In literacy the objective is to have students be able to understand not only words as a sequence but rather creating meaning through language and in language . . . the why, let’s say, of choosing certain words in certain occasions and the conventions that allow this to occur or not occur. (2/14/2007)

This response demonstrates that Andrea had begun moving from an everyday notion of literacy to describing several features of literacy-based instruction, including focus on meaningful *language use* and *conventions* informing communication, both principles of literacy as defined by Kern (2000).

Andrea’s initial belief in avoiding over-reliance on textbook materials was underscored in a written evaluation of the Spanish textbook. She criticized its separation of communication from grammar and lack of being “rooted in any specific cultural context,” stating, “If my goal is to develop my students’ FL literacy, I think the book itself is very generic . . . [exercises] seem drill-like and self-referential.” These comments point to Andrea’s notion of literacy as focused on meaningful, situated language versus the textbook’s “generic” language. Further, this was the first instance in the data where Andrea used the concept of literacy to name her own teaching activity and describe the object orienting it.

In the second half of the methods seminar, Andrea was exposed to the real challenges of text-based instruction when she taught an Elementary Spanish class as a course requirement. In a written self-reflection on the session she had taught, she said,

The students were taken aback by the fact that they were being asked to actually read an article that was geared towards native speakers. Once I explained to them that they didn’t have to understand EVERYTHING, just the major points . . . they calmed down. The text was challenging, but I think they all got something out of it. (4/9/2007)

Andrea’s comments reveal that her zeal for using texts was not mirrored in students’ reactions. The dissonance between her enthusiasm and their surprise did not hamper Andrea but underscored the importance of communicating realistic expectations to students and validated her belief in the viability of literacy-based instruction.

92 Heather Willis Allen

We see an echo of her classroom experience described above in her statement of teaching philosophy:

Authentic materials expose students to discourses, different genres, and different registers . . . Whether the lesson is focused on grammar, vocabulary, interpretative communication, classroom activities should be structured around these authentic materials . . . it is not the text that plays a role in what students understand, but rather how the students are guided and the strategies they are given to approach a text. (5/4/2007)

These comments reveal that Andrea has moved beyond her initial everyday concepts of FL learning, linking them to scientific concepts of literacy. Further, she now focuses on modes of engagement literacy involvement for students as facilitated by the teacher. Not evident in her comments was how literacy is instantiated and which tools and resources beyond texts facilitate it.

First experiences as a teacher. A week before starting to teach, Andrea was ambivalent about carrying out literacy-based instruction, stating in an interview that students' "intellectual skills are a lot higher than their linguistic skills." She admitted, "I'm not sure exactly how to go about it." A month later, she described a lesson for the next day:

The goal is speaking about likes and dislikes through what Spaniards like, how they use their time during the weekend . . . It is a little challenging, because it doesn't use like and dislike too much here, but I didn't just want to spoon feed them. (Interview, 9/13/2007)

Andrea explained that the lesson centered on a two-page article on Spaniards' preferred weekend hobbies, a text she worried might produce an "initial shock" for students. To avoid this, she planned to ask students to read and summarize a short portion of the reading, assigning various paragraphs to different students. When reflecting afterwards, Andrea was surprised the lesson had gone "so smoothly" but mentioned a new concern:

It was on the habits of Spaniards and only maybe two of them picked it up . . . everybody else was, like, vocabulary or grammar . . . they really reacted like that was the main point of the lesson, which I thought was strange. I don't know if it has to do with them not perceiving culture as part of a Spanish class? (Interview, 9/17/2007)

She brought up the situation with her Spanish LPD, asking for alternative courses of action. Later that term, on the basis of his suggestion to clearly state cultural objectives at the start of each class, she claimed to "lay it out explicitly" what her cultural objectives were, something she found helpful in raising students' consciousness of her focus.

This episode demonstrates how Andrea, in attempting to instantiate literacy-based teaching, reacted to the unforeseen dilemma of a reading being perceived as a mere vehicle for learning the verb *gustar*. Given her goal to teach meaningful language use through texts, Andrea thought students might feel overwhelmed linguistically but never foresaw their disregarding cultural elements. Yet the confusion and disappointment emerging from this incident served as a catalyst for Andrea's development as a teacher, supported through dialogic engagement with her LPD and needed cognitive assistance that pushed her to mediate her students' learning experiences more explicitly. Thus, a potentially disheartening formative experience helped Andrea to formulate a new strategy for literacy-based teaching.

Constraints to instantiating literacy-based teaching. Andrea's language program was in transition during her first years of teaching, something she experienced as a series of contradictions, including the textbook she nearly disregarded as a pedagogical tool and a "balancing act" she found between "how I want [students] to learn and how they are evaluated" (11/8/07). Because most Spanish instructors were adjunct faculty who did not learn about literacy in formal coursework, standardized exams that were created by TAs and adjuncts together were a site of struggle, with frequent disagreements as to what should be assessed and how.

For Andrea, having to administer an exam including multiple-choice questions and low-frequency vocabulary made her "very angry." Instead, she wanted open-ended prompts, which she viewed as more consistent with "what you do when you communicate" in reality. She described her resulting actions as follows:

I kind of took over . . . When it was my turn to create the exam it was very sort of literacy-based . . . about them taking a trip to Peru, it was the geography and environment chapter, so there was a picture of different areas, they had to fill in blanks to say what area they wanted to work in and why and sort of send a letter of application. So I created my exam in the way I wanted and everybody had to use it. (Interview, 1/21/2009)

When pressed as to how others had reacted, she said her LPD being "so excited about my exam" did not "leave any room for questioning," and afterwards, students' success on the exam showed her colleagues "this can work . . . they can do it."

Whereas Andrea's effort to create a literacy-based exam may have resulted in some shifts in her colleagues' take on assessment, convincing them to put texts at the forefront was a greater challenge. In an interview, Andrea explained that after attending a summer conference on integrating technology in teaching, she and another TA led a workshop on using film in FL courses. Andrea recalled her colleagues' skepticism when she projected a film short on a Muslim student deciding whether to remove her veil in a Spanish school, as they made comments like "There is so much dialogue in that!" and "You'd have to do so much work to introduce that." In response, Andrea told them to "have a little faith in [students]" and that a film-based lesson's success depended on asking appropriate questions to guide viewing and interpretation.

These examples reveal how Andrea positioned herself in respect to her colleagues, even when norms of instruction and assessment and beliefs about language of more experienced teachers were incongruous with her views. While Andrea demonstrated individual agency in externalizing her own understandings of teaching to others and in challenging them to rethink their own practices, she was not acting alone—in both instances, she received assistance from others including her LPD and her colleague who led the workshop with Andrea, essential forms of support in validating her emerging conceptions of literacy-based teaching. Further, she was receiving consistently high evaluations of teaching from students and, in response, she said, “They find it demanding and challenging . . . they never say ‘if I just read the book it would have been the same thing.’” Andrea’s longstanding belief in teaching beyond the textbook was thus reinforced, and despite numerous contradictions to her instructional priorities, her motive remained focused on literacy-based instruction.

Developing notions of literacy during in-service professional development. In Andrea’s third year of teaching, she participated in the literacy seminar. Theoretical readings on literacy and designing a Spanish cultural studies syllabus provided opportunities for further conceptual development and reconstruction of her teaching practices. An example of the degree to which she viewed literacy theory as relevant to her teaching can be found in one interview in which Andrea mentioned four different course readings, one (Kern, 2000) in four separate responses to interview questions. As she explained in a written reflection at mid-semester, “I had an idea of what literacy-based teaching was [but] it has become much more coherent.” She added that whereas before she saw literacy as primarily linguistic, she now viewed it as “cognitive, linguistic, and sociocultural.” In this regard, Andrea visibly shows a fuller grasp of how various features of literacy contribute to a conceptual whole, a new understanding she constructed using relevant constructs from course readings.

Evidence is seen around mid-semester of how Andrea was now thinking *through* literacy in concrete ways to teach. In a written reflection, she stated, “I have already incorporated the *reading matrix* in the course as well as the *four curricular components* . . . I am much more aware of the way my students create language from *Available Designs*.” Having learned about the matrix in a course reading, Andrea demonstrated its use in a presentation she made in class and began using it afterwards. She elaborated on this later, saying,

I realized that a lot of them knew the meanings of words but couldn’t put them together. It was very hard for them to understand how one sentence led into another . . . [Matrices are] a really good way to walk them through something, leaving the questions very open but very structured. (Interview, 5/5/2009)

These comments suggest that after multiple opportunities in the literacy seminar to learn about this pedagogical tool and receive assistance from her instructor and peers on its use, Andrea identified a specific difficulty that her students confronted,

driving her to try the reading matrix. Andrea's interactions with her own students and recognition of their struggles to construct textual meaning facilitated her trying the reading matrix, which became a psychological tool for Andrea to think about structuring literacy-based instruction. Further, this is an illustration of how she demonstrated a more advanced level of appropriation, i.e., *appropriating conceptual underpinnings of the tool*, and using it in a new context to solve new problems.

Andrea also stated that the syllabus project had been a critical force in pushing her to distill her understandings of literacy and "make ideas the idea of Kern concrete . . . articulating them in a way that it's approachable, it's not all jargon." Several times, Andrea contacted me to discuss and revise her course goals and objectives, a process that she struggled with, eventually adopting the notion of the three modes of communication as a way to incorporate *integrated* linguistic modalities, a key element of Kern's (2000) conception of literacy. As she described,

Just setting up the goals and objectives helped me to think about my ideas about language . . . but staying away from a four-skills approach and articulating it in a literacy vocabulary, that was very hard. Every time I wrote something, I immediately knew whether it was consistent with a literacy approach or not. (Interview, 5/5/2009)

Andrea's reflections provide evidence that the project challenged her to think through literacy at a level more abstract than lesson planning, something she found difficult, requiring several reformulations of her syllabus, which she chose to do in dialogic mediation with her instructor. Further, meshing the National Standards' construct of modes of communication with her literacy-based goals and objectives displays how Andrea did not simply appropriate concepts of literacy scholars but populated them with her own intentions and interpretations. For example, her linguistic objectives were formulated in part as follows in her course syllabus: "[T]his course will . . . develop students' ability to exchange, support, and discuss their opinions and perspectives on topics dealing with contemporary and historical issues of the Spanish Caribbean." Rather than focusing on speaking as an isolated skill, Andrea elaborates an objective related to the *presentational* mode of communication and infuses it with principles of literacy including *collaboration*, *cultural knowledge*, and *meaningful language use*.

Maria

Notions of literacy during pre-service professional development. Maria's early discussion board postings from the methods seminar centered on constructing teaching for "different types of learners." In one, she wrote:

Since every student has a different way to learn and respond to what is being taught . . . an eclectic class (in which a combination of several approaches is used at the same time) would be most effective . . . a possible combination could be students [using] the textbook along with some visual and auditory

aids. This can also include communication and learning grammar and vocabulary inductively. (1/31/2007)

Her belief in eclecticism had strong implications for how Maria positioned herself vis-à-vis literacy given her reluctance to embrace any one approach. In the following weeks, the instructional materials Maria created showed attempts to combine approaches and relied primarily on textbook exercises. In a written evaluation of the Spanish textbook, she praised its use of “several methods and approaches” and concluded that its shortcomings “can be overcome with the imagination, creativity and consciousness” of the instructor. Maria evidenced difficulty understanding several concepts introduced in the seminar, for example, writing several times about the “sociocultural approach,” which she seemed to equate with including cultural elements in teaching. In her midterm exam, Maria provided problematic responses for how “communicative language teaching” and “sociocultural perspective on language learning” relate to instruction. Thus, it is not surprising that she wrote in a discussion board posting around that time, “I am confused with so many theories going on at the same time.” Despite wanting to embrace eclecticism, Maria felt confusion as she attempted to make sense of her teaching by combining disparate concepts from various theories and approaches.

Maria wrote in her end of semester teaching philosophy that the choice of approach should depend on “the class’s needs and interests.” She also stated, “As a teacher, I will situate myself in the middle of the two extremes: literacy-based approach and communicative approach.” These comments suggest that although Maria *appropriated a tool’s label* for several concepts related to FL teaching, she did not demonstrate awareness of their features or how to align them with pedagogical tools. Unlike Andrea, who appeared to internalize a view of literacy and CLT as complementary approaches, Maria seemed to view them as opposites. Although data from the methods seminar did not provide a clear explanation for *why* this was the case, when asked about it in a later interview, she replied, “[T]he book has a more communicative approach but it never talked about the literacy approach . . . at that time I was not able to make clear connections.” This statement implies that lack of alignment between the textbook’s approach and literacy-based instruction was one element that made it difficult for the concept of literacy to cohere for Maria.

First experiences as a FL teacher. Just before beginning teaching, Maria described her instructional goals as “not giving priority to anything but everything,” naming several “tools I learned from the methodology class” as important—authentic texts, inductive grammar lessons, and contextualized vocabulary presentations. Although Maria named texts as one pedagogical tool she planned to use, her first priority seemed to be teaching structural aspects of Spanish. In an interview a month later, she explained that she organized her teaching to “cover the most important things first . . . grammar points that I consider kind of hard.” This outlook was evident in a lesson she taught on pastimes using a Powerpoint of images representing her weekend. Maria identified “[t]he main goal is that students learn

how to use *me gusta*, that they know how to conjugate it, that they know how to use the infinitive.” Afterwards, she wrote in a self-reflection that she was pleased that “students were able to understand the grammatical point [and] were able to make verb conjugations correctly.”

This episode provides both a contrasting counterpart to Andrea’s lesson on expressing likes and dislikes based on a text and an illustration of how Maria tried combining various pedagogical tools, i.e., contextualized vocabulary presentation and inductive grammar presentation. Although alignment is, in fact, seen in her stated goals and strategies to carry it out, the lesson could not be construed as literacy-based. Further, Maria did not articulate functional or cultural objectives as per the lesson plan template but instead fashioned grammatical objectives.

Later that term, in an interview, Maria described a lesson on expressing future plans she created using the song “Como Quisiera.” As a comprehension check, she planned to have students fill in blanks in the lyrics as they listened to the song. When her LPD asked if an interpretive activity would follow, she responded “I couldn’t think of anything that would work.” Even when he drew her attention to interesting metaphoric language in the song, she had difficulty brainstorming ways to use it, finally offering a partner interview on future plans for the winter holidays as a possibility.

We thus see Maria attempting to carry out text-based instruction, yet failing to grasp the conceptual underpinnings of literacy or their pedagogical implications. The song served as a prop for focusing on grammar. Her omission of a meaning-focused activity and struggle to plan one, even during dialogic mediation by her LPD, underscores that her teaching was not yet oriented toward literacy.

Constraints to instantiating literacy-based teaching. During Maria’s first two years of teaching, she received inconstant student evaluations, ranging from fair to good. She said during an interview that teaching Elementary Spanish One and Two twice each allowed her to “go back, sit, and think [about] what did and did not work and why are these things not working.” When pressed to elaborate, Maria explained that she had grown dissatisfied with the textbook, saying,

Sometimes you have to create your own materials based on your students’ needs . . . I teach the main ideas of the chapters but I try to change the activities. Some chapters, I don’t think they are authentic at all . . . the cultural aspects of the book are not engaging. (Interview, 1/21/2009)

This view pushed her to “introduce [texts] more and more”. She mentioned that a recent student evaluation of her teaching read, “She’s not using the book and that’s very good.” As with Andrea, this was an important confirmation for Maria that going beyond the textbook was positively received by students. Whereas Maria continued describing her approach as “eclectic” at that time, involving pedagogical tools including TPR, visual aids, videos from Youtube, written texts, and inductive grammar lessons, she referred much more often to texts’ role in her teaching and the inclusion of culture, even within inductive grammar lessons.

Maria's shifting view of the textbook, from thinking that it would be an important resource to her later realization of its inauthenticity suggests that continued reflection on the textbook and her students' perceptions of it pushed her to rethink her teaching practices and how she constructed students' language learning. While still not *appropriating conceptual underpinnings of literacy*, Maria was beginning to come to terms with the contradiction between her goal to meet students' needs and interests while becoming increasingly disenchanted with the tool of the textbook.

Developing conceptual notions of literacy during in-service professional development. Given Maria's evolving conceptions of teaching and openness to trying new tools and strategies, she enrolled in the literacy seminar. Yet initially, based on several theoretical readings and in-class discussions, she questioned literacy-based instruction's viability, writing that it could make learning more "dynamic and meaningful" but was "challenging for instructors" (Week Four Reflection), "very difficult to implement" (Week Five Reflection), and "requires more efforts from the instructors and the students" (Week Six Reflection). Maria seemed to struggle in deciding whether to orient her teaching more toward literacy as she gained awareness of the effort required of her as a teacher to transform how and what was taught.

Nonetheless, by semester's mid-point, Maria's written reflections pointed to shifts in her understanding of literacy: "[Before] I had a notion-definition-abstract idea about literacy . . . I was not able to make concrete in [my] courses . . . I was able to do some components of literacy, but not as integrated and a continuum as Kern explains." She later explained in an interview, wherein she compared her current understandings with her earlier ones: "We had this definition, we had examples . . . I was more concerned about trying to fit in all my lessons than to think about [literacy]." Her comments suggest that in addition to Maria's initial *lack of appropriation* of the concept of literacy based on incomprehension of its features and applications, her preoccupations as a new teacher were focused on daily pragmatic aspects of teaching (i.e., textbook-dictated coverage), a fact that she later acknowledged.

A few weeks later, after demonstrating a literacy-based lesson for seminar peers and watching and critiquing others' presentations, Maria began experimenting with what she called in a later interview "using some of Kern's ideas" by implementing the four curricular components, as she had done in her presentation, which she said left "more room to be creative." For example, she described redesigning a cultural project, typically prepared by students outside class, to span several class sessions:

The first part was overt instruction. I explained everything they had to do, to support their research with facts, details, provide me a bibliography, I gave them the idea of this transformed practice, so they [had] to pick a topic, they [had] to do this critical framing—give me these sociocultural and political facts but then go further in the investigation . . . They had an oral presentation in

which they had to defend their ideas and present an argument . . . they would come to me for feedback and I asked them to feedback each other, and we had a general discussion after the presentations . . . it turned out that they all liked it . . . Their comments were “at the beginning I didn’t know what I was doing and I was kind of afraid, this was new . . . but because we had a lot of help and guidance, we were able to do it.” (Interview, 5/5/2009)

This passage provides the first evidence of Maria describing specific conceptual tools of literacy to name her teaching practices, and, going beyond merely *appropriating a tool’s label*, she uses several tools of literacy to reorient her students’ modes of engagement with the cultural project. She explained how the New London Group’s (1996) curricular components provided an organizational framework to better scaffold the project’s components, facilitated more feedback for and between students, and led to more *collaboration* and *meaningful language use*, themselves principles of literacy elaborated by Kern (2000). Maria further explained in a post-seminar interview that the way the literacy seminar’s final project had been organized had served as a sort of model that got her thinking of redesigning her student’s project.

A semester later, Maria explained a second way that she had used literacy-based pedagogy to restructure her teaching in relation to an oral assessment she viewed as “memorizing the lines” and “not authentic at all.” She approached her LPD with a proposal to redesign it as an in-class debate. As Maria described in an interview,

They have to watch the movie . . . and I give them a list of discussion topics. I don’t tell them which one is the target one, but they all connect at some point. I give them a word bank with the main social issues, and I tell them grammar objectives, so they still need to produce, you know? But they are not going to memorize something . . . [It’s] a class debate, but it’s not a one-on-one thing, so everybody is trying to talk. (12/03/2009)

This episode shows how Maria demonstrated agency in realigning her teaching toward literacy. Whereas in previous semesters, she did not find the oral assessment problematic, according to her statements, her conceptions of teaching and learning had shifted, motivating her to use new pedagogical tools (e.g., movie, word bank) and modes of engagement and interaction. Further, grammar and vocabulary are no longer at the forefront but are tools to facilitate students’ meaningful interaction in Spanish.

Discussion

The findings in this study illustrate that the “twisting path” (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 156) of concept development experienced by two first-time teachers of Spanish as evidence of the ability to think through concepts of literacy in structuring teaching practices did not emerge for either participant until four semesters after they started teaching. This demonstrates what a gradual and often difficult process teachers’

conceptual development is, requiring multiple, sustained opportunities for dialogic mediating, scaffolded learning, and assisted performance (Johnson, 2009).

The findings also provide evidence that whereas everyday notions of language learning and teaching and daily pragmatic concerns dominated participants' early semesters in the classroom, their thinking about teaching and the ways in which they claimed to construct their teaching practices gradually integrated conceptual underpinnings and pedagogical applications of literacy. Catalysts that facilitated that development included both constraints faced in the participants' local setting and affordances related to their professional development experiences.

The participants encountered two major constraints to instantiating literacy-based teaching. The first was grappling with the contradiction between the approach of the textbook and principles of literacy-based teaching. This was a struggle particularly for Maria, who initially thought the textbook would be useful but later discovered that neither she nor her students found it authentic or engaging. Her evolving mindset regarding the usefulness of the textbook as a pedagogical tool also highlights the mediating role of students' own intentions and behaviors in shaping teachers' cognitions. The influence of students' beliefs and reactions to teaching practices also mediated Andrea's cognitions and constructions of teaching, as demonstrated by the episode when students did not view culture as an appropriate instructional focus.

The second constraint that participants faced was a lack of alignment between literacy-based instruction and assessments designed at times by colleagues who did not hold the same concept of literacy-based teaching. For both participants—albeit at different points in their developmental trajectories—perceived curricular limitations led them to exercise agency in modeling literacy-based assessment and examples of how to instantiate text-based instruction. In this way, not only did conceptual and pedagogical tools of literacy reshape the participants' teaching practices, tools they created had a potential spin-off effect in their local setting, challenging their colleagues' traditional notions of language teaching and learning. In this sense, novice teachers *can* serve as agents of change and models of how to translate theoretical concepts into meaningful classroom practices. This is particularly heartening for university FL departments wherein LPDs often feel like the “lone” force driving curricular change and carrying out professional development.

Finally, the findings in this study illustrate several ways in which participants' conceptual development was supported by their participation in dialogic mediation, scaffolded learning, and assisted performance with others, both peers and “experts.” Although course readings on literacy theory, particularly in the second seminar, provided valuable opportunities for participants to more fully grasp conceptual underpinnings of literacy, presenting a literacy-based lesson to peers and designing a literacy-based syllabus were the activities that participants viewed as most useful for learning to instantiate literacy-based teaching and, eventually, applying tools of literacy-based teaching to their own instructional dilemmas. Beyond the TAs' participation in two pedagogy seminars, ongoing dialogic mediation with their LPD represented another valuable affordance, both

in helping them rethink and reconstruct their teaching practices and in validating their agency and decision-making in relation literacy-based assessment.

Given new understandings of literacy and transformations in teaching practices emerging during and after the literacy seminar, this study demonstrates the value of expanding formal pedagogy instruction for FL graduate students beyond the methods course and focusing on one framing construct relevant to language and literary-cultural teaching. Given financial and structural constraints in higher education today, this should be viewed as one possible form conceptually driven TA professional development might take. In addition, LPDs should maximize existent forms of professional development (e.g., the methods seminar, TA observations) and articulate alternative means of supporting conceptual growth. This continued focus on conceptually driven, literacy-oriented based TA education and further study of its outcomes can bring about a recognition that enhancing graduate student professional development is the first step in dismantling the language–literature divide and transforming the nature of teaching in tomorrow’s FL departments.