Chapter 9
Beyond Comparisons: Frameworks for Developing Digital L2 Literacies

JONATHON REINHARDT
University of Arizona

STEVEN L. THORNE
Portland State University and University of Groningen

PREVIEW QUESTIONS
1. Think of your own experiences becoming “literate” in your first and other languages. How was this experience a process with a beginning and an end, and how was it (or is it) an ongoing process? How might you think of your literacy in the plural, as ‘literacies’?
2. How would you define literacy? What are some problems with traditional definitions of literacy with regard to second/foreign language (L2) learning and teaching? In what ways do you think traditional definitions of literacy are challenged by technology-mediated uses of language and other forms of meaning making?
3. In your experience learning an L2, how did you use comparison as a means to learn about the new language and culture? How was comparison used in learning activities that you did? As a teacher of L2, how have you incorporated comparison as a teaching and learning technique?
4. Examine the ACTFL Comparisons standard below. What aspects of this standard involve the development of literacy as you understand it? How does the notion of comparison and contrast develop critical awareness?
5. Although the standard mentions comparing one’s own language and culture with the language and culture being studied, many teachers believe that the learners’ first language (L1) should rarely, if ever, be used in the classroom. In the case of comparisons, when might it be pedagogically appropriate (if ever) to use or analyze the learners’ L1, or to explicitly contrast L1 and L2 languages and/or cultural practices?
ACTFL STANDARD 4: COMPARISONS
(National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996, p. 6)

4.1 Students demonstrate understanding of the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own. This standard focuses on the impact that learning the linguistic elements in the new language has on students’ ability to examine English and to develop hypotheses about the structure and use of languages. From the earliest language learning experiences, students can compare and contrast the two languages as different elements are presented. Activities can be systematically integrated into instruction that will assist students in gaining understanding and in developing their abilities to think critically about how languages work.

4.2 Students demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own. As students expand their knowledge of cultures through language learning, they continually discover perspectives, practices, and products that are similar and different from their own culture, and they develop the ability to hypothesize about cultural systems in general. Some students may make these comparisons naturally, others may not. This standard helps focus this reflective process for all students by encouraging integration of this process into instruction from the earliest levels of learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

As articulated above, the ACTFL Comparisons standard states that “through comparisons and contrasts with the language being studied, students develop insight into the nature of language and the concept of culture and realize that there are multiple ways of viewing the world.” With this in mind, L2 learning activities should assist students to develop “their abilities to think critically about how languages work,” as well as “discover perspectives, practices, and products that are similar and different from their own culture.” In this way, the Comparisons standard encourages the development of L2 literacies through the raising of critical awareness of the intimate co-weaving of language and culture.

L2 literacy has been reconceptualized in the last few decades, especially with the rise of the Internet. Until the mid-1990s, L2 representations in instructed learning environments were limited to textbooks designed for learners, realia and cultural products such as magazines or movies meant for expert/native users, and the instructor her- or himself. Outside of class, learners at that time might have seen static representations of the L2 in popular media, or if they were lucky and had the means, they might have visited a place where they were exposed to people who spoke the L2. With the widespread growth of the Internet in the mid-1990s, however, L2 texts, practices, and expert/native speakers became accessible in new ways, both in and outside of the classroom. At the same time, the Internet began having profound impacts on language use more broadly, changing the nature of
I am unfortunately unable to offer this entire article online freely, because of copyright restrictions. If you cannot access the article via your library, please send me an email and I’ll be happy to send a copy of the work directly to you.

-Jon Reinhardt
jonrein@email.arizona.edu