FUNCTIONAL DIGITAL LITERACY CALLS FOR SOS BY A SMUGGLED AFGHAN BOY: TEACHING PHONICS AND PRAGMATICS FOR SURVIVAL LANGUAGE

By

LUCIA Y. LU

Assistant Professor, Department of Reading and Literacy, Valdosta State University, USA.

ABSTRACT

On April 8, 2016 when the class was discussing "digital literacy", a shocking news story from London AP intrigued us. The news was about a brief text message delivered by Ahmed, a refugee Afghan boy of 6-year old. His text message flashed on the cellphone of Liz Clegg, a volunteer at a migrant camp in France. Clegg and other volunteers had handed out hundreds of basic cellphones to children living there, programming in a phone number for them to text in case of danger. The author read Ahmed's text message and tried to "sound it out". My students figured out that the message was "invented spelling" which was Ahmed's call for SOS. The text message was in the Pashto language, and was identified as "broken English"on a no-frills cellphone. The police in London quickly set off a trans-Atlantic search and rescued Ahmed and the other 14 migrants who were smuggled in a locked refrigerator truck which was heading toward England. The author and her students defined this shocking text message as "digital literacy". In this research, they embedded phonics and pragmatics into digital literacy to make literacy education more functional to ELLs like Ahmed whose first language is not English.

Keywords: Digital literacy, SOS, Invented Spelling, Pashto, Phonics, Pragmatics, Survival Language.

INTRODUCTION

Ahmed's text message reminds me of "process writing" in the inner city schools of Virginia where the author and her graduate students as the in-service teachers encouraged the struggling learners in grades to use "invented spelling"-accompanied with graphics to tell their families stories (Lu, 2010). Those students were two levels below Virginia SOL in reading, writing, and basic math. This paradigm shift from a print-based curriculum to multimodal transmediation (Seigel, 2006) opened an alternate pathway to literacy, causing the children from cultural and linguistical diversity to become actively engaged. Their graphic novels with "invented spelling" vivified their life experiences, alleviated their pent-up emotions, and made their struggles visible and their inner voice audible. In academics, reading comprehension and writing fluency are the ultimate goals of literacy education in school settings. In reality, against a harrowing high stakes situation, Ahmed also implemented "invented spelling" on a basic cellphone to sound an SOS call to whoever might hear. Ahmed, a young Afghan boy, unknowingly used invented spelling to ultimately save his own life and that of the other 14 children trapped in the locked refrigerated container (Katza, 2016).

1. Theories

1.1 Semiotic Theory

Based on Cunningham (1992), Deely (1994), Sebeok (1978: 2001) and Siegel (2006), semiotics is the study of signs like languages, arts, music, dance, drama, cultures, math, films, etc. that humans created to mediate the world. In this case study, the author likes to include "invented spelling" as one of the signs. It is not the matter of right or wrong spelling, but the principle of "phonics" – when children become aware of the relation between letter and sound, and use it to sound out (Savage, 2007) what they know in reading and what they need in communicating with the world by writing.

1.2 Phonics

Accurate and fluent word recognition depend on phonic knowledge. The ability to read words accounts for a

substantial proportion of overall reading success, even in older readers. In addition, phonics instruction improves spelling ability because it emphasizes spelling patterns that become familiar from reading. Studies show that half of all English words can be spelled with phonic rules that relate one letter to one sound.

Savage (2007) defined phonics as the conscious, concentrated study of the relationship between sounds and letters for the purpose of learning to read and write. The relationship between letters and sounds is the core of phonics. Learners need to know letter-sound correspondences in pronouncing verbal language and producing written language. The ultimate goal of phonics instruction is reading and writing. Decoding and encoding are the essential processes in literacy process. Readers decode print (letter) by attaching the appropriate sound(s) to the corresponding letter(s), and writers encode written messages by selecting the appropriate letter(s) for the sound(s) they want to represent. Phonics is the heart of this decoding/encoding process.

1.3 Phonics Knowledge and Phonemic Awareness

Phonic knowledge refers learner's ability to associate the appropriate letter with each sound, and phonemic awareness refers to learner's ability to perceive the individual sound in spoken word (Eldredge, 2004). Decoding is the process that readers determine the pronunciation of an unknown word (Dow & Baer, 2007), and encoding is the process that writers are able to associate the appropriate letter with each sound (Savage, 2007). To be good readers and writers, learners should be able to grasp phonic knowledge and phonemic awareness, and apply the sound-letter relationship in cognitive and sophisticated ways in reading and writing.

1.4 Language and Thought

For Vygotsky (1934/1986), thought and language are initially separate systems from the beginning of life, merging at around three years of age. At this point speech and thought become interdependent: thought becomes verbal, and speech becomes representational. When this happens, children's monologues internalized to become inner speech. The internalization of language is important as it drives cognitive development.

Inner speech is not the interior aspect of external speech - it is a function in itself. It still remains speech. If inner speech words die as they bring forth thought. Inner speech is, to a larger extent, thinking in pure meanings. Ahmed did not cry for help in the locked refrigerated container because he knew that the driver did not mean to stop the car or release them. Unlike another 6-year old child, Ahmed did not cry nor negotiate with the other children who must have been extremely hungry, thirsty, tired, and hopeless, instead, he thought about the basic cellphone which he was given when he was in the migrant camp in France. He was not sure if the cellphone worked. Most importantly, English was not his native language, and he was not sure if anyone receive his text message and whether or not they would even understand his "broken English" or they would simply ignore it. We can see Ahmed's cognitive connection of language (text message) and thought (survival).

1.5 Digital Literacy

From the text message created by Ahmed, social media has become one of the most pervasive tools for communication in the last decade. Almost all the e-generations in the world possess a smartphone and most users upgrade their device every two years. Many e-generations would probably never even dream of using a basic cellphone such as the one that Ahmed used to write the text message for his SOS. Ahmed did not know English except the "invented spelling," and he did not have a fashionable smartphone. He "invented" his own spelling in the crisis of "life and death" and successfully released his SOS. His text message is one of the best examples of "digital literacy".

2. Methods - Spelling is Part of Writing

Based on Ariza (2009), Dow & Baer (2007), Eldredge (2004), Laminack & Wood (1996), and Savage (2007), learning to spell is a complex and intricate process requiring cognitive and linguistic awareness rather than rote memorization. For functional purpose, the following strategies must be included in early literacy instruction:

2.1 Sight Words

Sight words are the high frequency words – Dolch list of basic sight words - should be included in the curriculum of early literacy stage, or of the ELLs from diversity. The Dolch

word list includes the most common 220 words and 95 nouns encountered in children's books. Dolch words, or sight words, are critical in early reading development because they represent high-frequency words and are difficult to sound out or to illustrate (www.k12reader.com/dolch-word-list/ersity).

2.2 Language Experience Approach (LEA)

LEA – Language Experience Approach - was initiated by Ashton-Warner (1965) in New Zealand, and was popularly applied in early writing classrooms by Ariza (2009), Chapman & King (2003), Cramer (2001), Eldredge (2004), and Lu (2010). LEA in whole language classroom (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988) makes writing more authentic. This approach can be multisensory by integrating technology like photos (Cappello, & Lafferty, 2016), and other digital devices (Calvert, 2015; Cappello, & Lafferty, 2016; Dwyer, 2016; Leu, Forzanni, Timbrell, & Maykel, 2015) into the processes of writing like thinking, listening, speaking, drawing, writing, and reading. Teachers can model LEA by demonstrating the following processes (Chapman & King, 2003; Lu, 2010).

If I can see it, I can think it;

If I can think it, I can say it;

If I can say it, I can draw it;

If I can draw it, I can write it;

If I can write it, I can read it.

In the early stages, teachers may demonstrate (Dwyer, 2016; Musti-Rao, Cartledge, Benett, & Council, 2015) the Language Experience Approach. Children will be invited to bring with them their family pictures in photo copy, and each child will follow the above 5 processes to (1) look at the photos, (2) think about the event happened in the photos, (3) tell the story in the photos, (4) draw pictures, (5) write one sentence in conventional or invented spelling to interpret the pictures, and (6) read-aloud the sentences. This is also the whole language experience approach.

2.3 Childrens' Writing Samples based on LEA

The three children: Ahmed, Josephine and John were five years old when their writing samples were collected:

2.3.1 Ahmed's Text Message on T-Mobile

Figure 1. Ahmed's Text Message

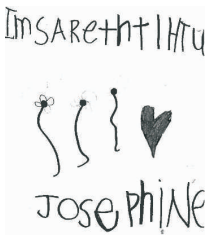


Figure 2. Josephine's Apology

The text message flashed on the cellphone of volunteer Liz Clegg, "I ned halp darivar no stap car no oksijan in the car no sagnal iam in the cantenar. Iam no jokan valla" (Figure 1). It was written by Ahmed, an Afghan boy of about 6, trying to say: "I need help. The driver won't stop the car. No oxygen in the car. No signal. I'm in a container. I am not joking. I swear to God."

2.3.2 Josephine's Apology

On Josephine's 5-year old birthday, the teachers in Sunday school prepared a nut birthday cake for her. But her

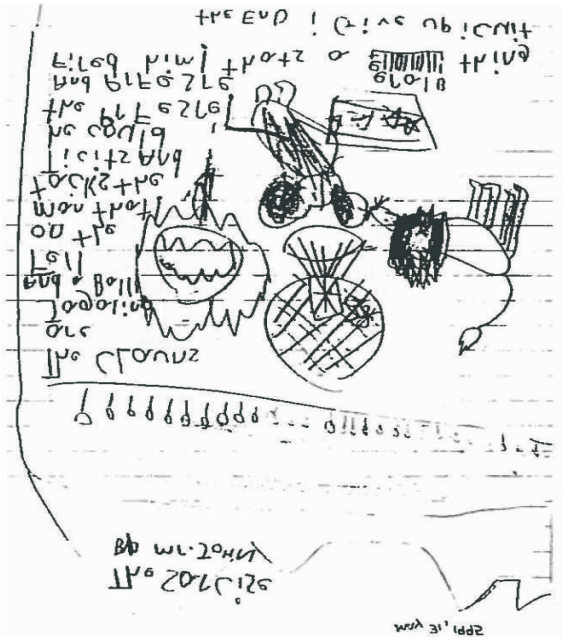


Figure 3. John's Circus Story

concerned mother worried that she would choke, and removed the nuts. Josephine became upset, and jabbed her mom with a plastic fork. The teachers in the children meeting chided her and firmly asked her to say an apology, but Josephine refused. She quietly went to the corner of the room and used crayons to make the apology card (Figure 2) and inserted it into her mom's handbag. She meant, "I am sorry that I hit you. I love you (with the symbol of a red heart and three flowers)".

2.3.3 John's Circus Story

John was five years old when he went to the circus and later wrote the story of "The Circus" on a piece of paper. In his writing, John used "invented spelling" instead of "conventional spelling" for the words like "sarcise" (for Circus), "jagaling" (for joggling), "tacks" (for take), "ticits" (for tickets), "prfesre" (for professor – circus manager), "teeralb" (for terrible), and "cuit" (for quit). Those words are definitely not in the word list of a 5-year old. But John dared to convert what he heard (sound) to letters (Figure 3).

2.4 Basic Language

Based on Alberta Education (1992), in the early stage of second language teaching, there are 300-500 words referred to for Basic language learning, consisting of about ten words or phrases in each of 30-50 categories. Basic language would include much of the categories a native speaking child of two or three has been exposed to. Categories include words for food, clothing, family members, buildings, numbers, weather, time, greetings, interactional phrases, questions, description, verbs of motion, verbs of request, nature, furniture, household objects, transportation, etc.

2.5 Survival Language

Alongside BASIC language, learners need to develop SURVIVAL language consisting of the words and phrases encountered in daily situations. For many ELLs, survival language is classroom language related to school rules, playing games, giving and getting instructions; while a long-term visitor or immigrant is immersed in the cultural milieu where the language is used then SURVIVAL language will include words and phrases associated with daily shopping, filling out application forms and making appointments (Alberta Education, 1992).

2.6 Basic English Language and Technology for Digital Literacy

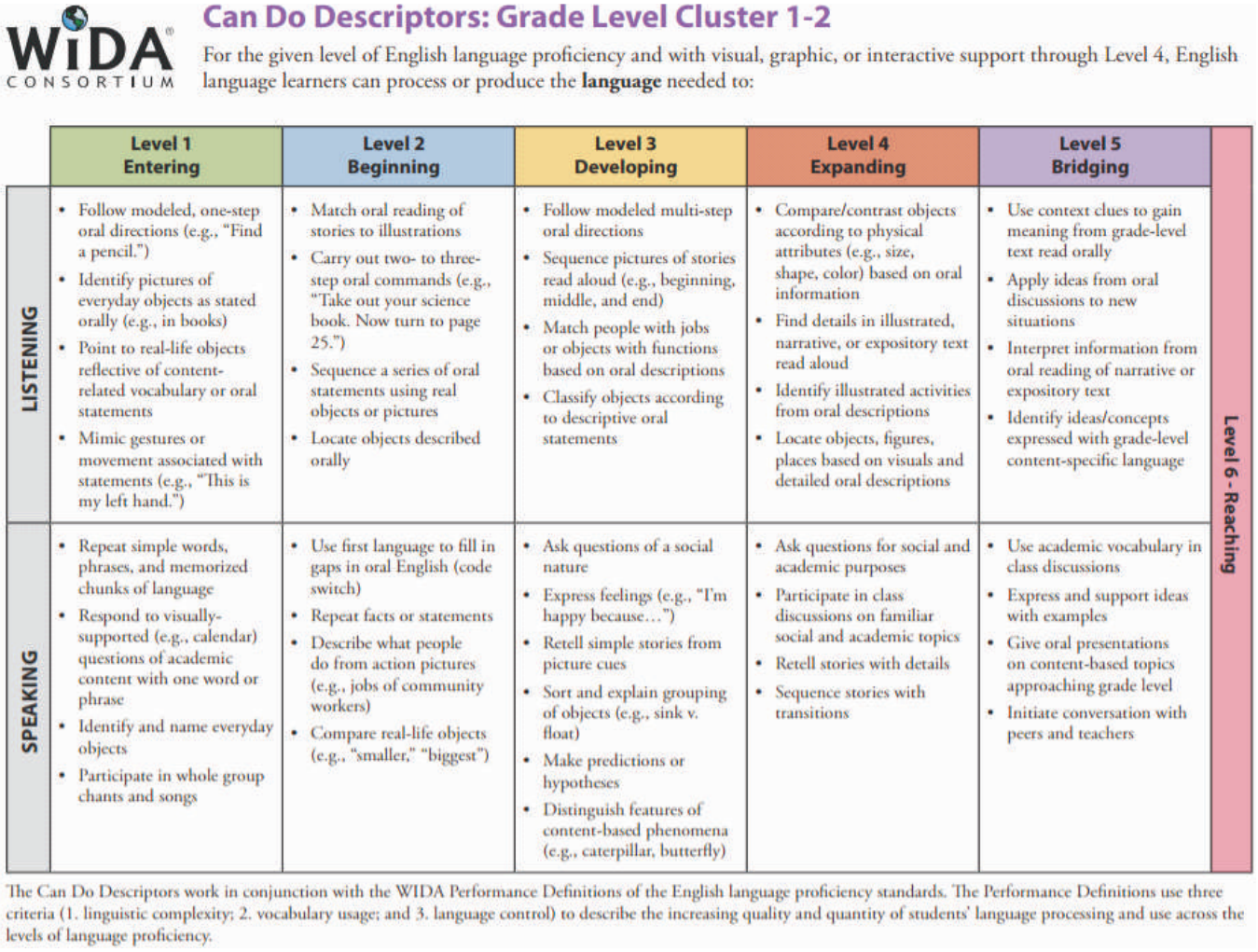
The Easel Schools established by Dr. Spires (2015), a passionate educator, and his social workers from NGOs in the border of Thailand provide basic English language and technology to the child survivors and those at risk of human trafficking. It is evident that the world's great educators like Freire (1993), Spires (2015) and Liz Clegg, the volunteer in the migrant camp in France teach survival English as the global language (Rajaendram & Khor, 2015) and basic digital tools to the children in the remote areas of the world consider the whole world as their classrooms.

2.7 Pragmatics – Teaching Natural Language

The author and her students as teacher candidates conceptualized "Pragmatics" – the teaching of natural language – with their ELLs from diversity (Houck & Tatsuki, 2011). They believe that social media can be used in almost any discipline to enhance teaching and learning by inviting students to watch movies or movie clips from the Internet as supplementary materials in the instruction integrating (Nordmeyer, 2010) arts, languages, math, music, dance, science and social studies into literacy education. Because of the aesthetic characteristics of audio-visual devices, young children will be attracted to the lessons and learn the knowledge of the contents. They can be actively engaged in the use of verbal language and paralinguistics (Magraph, 2015), or nonverbal communication skills (Cherry, 2014) for comprehension in listening and more effective communication in various social/cultural/linguistic/religious context (Lu, 2015) through speaking and writing.

2.8 WIDA Consortium for Immediate Assessment and Instructional Framework

Most assessment tools are designed to follow the national or state performance standards, and it always takes time to obtain the result and minister analysis. The educators in Wiscons in state initiated the consortium in 2002, and recently become popular in ELL as well as in the main stream curriculum. WIDA is World-Class Instructional Design Assessment with six proficiency levels across PreK – 12 grades on the literacy skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Educators and parents may use WIDA for



WIDA CONSORTIUM

Can Do Descriptors: Grade Level Cluster 1-2

For the given level of English language proficiency and with visual, graphic, or interactive support through Level 4, English language learners can process or produce the **language** needed to:

	Level 1 Entering	Level 2 Beginning	Level 3 Developing	Level 4 Expanding	Level 5 Bridging	Level 6 - Reaching
LISTENING	• Follow modeled, one-step oral directions (e.g., "Find a pencil.") • Identify pictures of everyday objects as stated orally (e.g., in books) • Point to real-life objects reflective of content-related vocabulary or oral statements • Mimic gestures or movement associated with statements (e.g., "This is my left hand.")	• Match oral reading of stories to illustrations • Carry out two- to three-step oral commands (e.g., "Take out your science book. Now turn to page 25.") • Sequence a series of oral statements using real objects or pictures • Locate objects described orally	• Follow modeled multi-step oral directions • Sequence pictures of stories read aloud (e.g., beginning, middle, and end) • Match people with jobs or objects with functions based on oral descriptions • Classify objects according to descriptive oral statements	• Compare/contrast objects according to physical attributes (e.g., size, shape, color) based on oral information • Find details in illustrated, narrative, or expository text read aloud • Identify illustrated activities from oral descriptions • Locate objects, figures, places based on visuals and detailed oral descriptions	• Use context clues to gain meaning from grade-level text read orally • Apply ideas from oral discussions to new situations • Interpret information from oral reading of narrative or expository text • Identify ideas/concepts expressed with grade-level content-specific language	
SPEAKING	• Repeat simple words, phrases, and memorized chunks of language • Respond to visually-supported (e.g., calendar) questions of academic content with one word or phrase • Identify and name everyday objects • Participate in whole group chants and songs	• Use first language to fill in gaps in oral English (code switch) • Repeat facts or statements • Describe what people do from action pictures (e.g., jobs of community workers) • Compare real-life objects (e.g., "smaller," "biggest")	• Ask questions of a social nature • Express feelings (e.g., "I'm happy because…") • Retell simple stories from picture cues • Sort and explain grouping of objects (e.g., sink v. float) • Make predictions or hypotheses • Distinguish features of content-based phenomena (e.g., caterpillar, butterfly)	• Ask questions for social and academic purposes • Participate in class discussions on familiar social and academic topics • Retell stories with details • Sequence stories with transitions	• Use academic vocabulary in class discussions • Express and support ideas with examples • Give oral presentations on content-based topics approaching grade level • Initiate conversation with peers and teachers	

The Can Do Descriptors work in conjunction with the WIDA Performance Definitions of the English language proficiency standards. The Performance Definitions use three criteria (1. linguistic complexity; 2. vocabulary usage; and 3. language control) to describe the increasing quality and quantity of students' language processing and use across the levels of language proficiency.

Figure 4. WIDA Consortium

immediate assessment like pre-assessment, on-going assessment and final assessment, and use the Can-Do-Description to establish the instruction framework across the various proficient levels and contents (Fisher & Frey, 2015) for literacy skills. The author and her students, the teacher candidates, found the benefits of using WIDA for designing the instruction after the initial stage of pre-assessment, for modification of the instruction after the on-going assessment, and for final assessment. Teachers can easily minister this consortium by students' oral performance, and especially in the informal settings (Figure 4).

Conclusion – Humanizing Digital Literacy

Because of the popularity of social media, children can do many things with technology (Rowsell, 2016). As the department editor of Digital Literacy in The Reading Teacher (July/August, 2016), published by International Literacy Association, Dr. Rowsell embarked on a road trip to digital literacy by visiting international researchers exploring how they take up the notion of digital literacies from diversity:

- USA: Play literacies with toys, popular media, and iPad puppets (Wohlwend, 2016)
- USA: Composing E-books with iPads and digital cameras (Rowe, 2016)
- Canada: A is for App, not Apple (Burke, 2016)
- UK: Communication, literacy, and diverse technologies (Flewitt, 2016)
- UK: Children's cultural worlds (Marsh, 2016)
- South Africa: Placing digital literacies (Prinsloo, 2016)

- Australia: Indigenous ways of literacy (Mills, 2016)
- China: Cross-locale trips to get out of information filter bubbles: A (cross-cultural) digital literacy training curriculum (Liao, & Lin, 2016).

In this research, with the belief that children can do many things with technology, technology is set upon the theoretical foundation of literacy education of phonics, semiotics, pragmatics and aesthetics. Educators should be able to integrate social media into literacy education to enhance teaching and learning across interdisciplinary subjects with the goal of searching wisdom and insight for globalization.

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Appendix 1

Boy's Trans-Atlantic Text, Fast Police Work Save 15 Migrants

By GREGORY KATZ Associated Press April 08, 2016 6:29 am

London (AP) - The text message is from a young boy, writing in broken English on a no-frills cellphone, was frightening enough to set off a frantic, trans-Atlantic search that saved the lives of 15 migrants trapped in a locked truck in England.

The text message flashed on the cellphone of volunteer Liz Clegg, who was attending a conference in New York: "I ned halp darivar no stap car no oksijan in the car no sagnal iam in the cantenar. Iam no jokan valla." It was written by

Ahmed, an Afghan boy of about 6, trying to say: "I need help. The driver won't stop the car. No oxygen in the car. No signal. I'm in a container. I am not joking. I swear to God".

In March, Clegg and others volunteered at the squalid migrant camp in Calais, France, had handed out hundreds of basic cellphones to children living there, programming in a number for them to text in a crisis.

She knew Ahmed wouldn't text something like that if he wasn't in danger. So she called Tanya Freedman, from the Help Refugees charity in London, to tell her the boy seemed to be suffocating.

Freedman called police in southeast England to tell them of the emergency. The police response was swift and effective, she said:

"I conveyed to them that it was a life-and-death situation," Freedman told The Associated Press on Friday. "I had Ahmed's number and the first thing they did was find an interpreter who spoke Pashto to talk to him. They called him and immediately they realized it was an emergency, and they were able to put a trace of his cellphone and find out he was in a lorry (truck) in Leicestershire."

Kent Police said in a statement they received a call at 2:50 p.m. Thursday reporting that migrants were believed to be in danger in a truck, and that police established the truck was in Leicesters. The information was given to police in Leicestershire, who quickly found the truck parked at a highway service station, broke into the back and freed 15 oxygen-starved migrants. Leicestershire Police said 14 migrants were detained on suspicion of entering Britain illegally, with their cases to be handled by immigration officials, and one man was arrested on suspicion of illegal trafficking.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Lucia Y. Lu is currently working as an Assistant Professor of Reading and Literacy at Valdosta State University, USA. She earned her BA from National Taiwan University and her Ph.D. from Indiana University. She conceptualizes Semiotics, Hermeneutics and Pragmatics into her teaching and research on reading and literacies in teacher education.