

Beth Bogage  
Looking Back On Literacy: A Turning Point

So there I sat, a high school senior in level IV Spanish class, preparing myself to read a poem by Pablo Neruda in Spanish. By my side, and within reach (always within reach), lay my trusted English-Spanish dictionary, upon which I relied continuously, as though that dictionary were the key to unlocking the mysteries of the language I had been trying to learn throughout my high school career. My Spanish teacher had raved about the poet Neruda on several occasions and I was anxious to connect with the piece of text that lay before me. I surveyed the first line of the poem, and quickly began to look up every unfamiliar word for its English equivalent; I was committed to eliminating all lexical uncertainty before moving on to the next line. And then the inevitable occurred; as I looked back on the first row of text that I had tried so diligently to translate, I realized that the meaning I had extracted made little sense collectively. That is, the meaning *was not* and *could not* be the sum of those individually deciphered words. As I continued through the passage, my frustration intensified. For after trying to “decode” each subsequent line of poetry, the end result seemed the same; I had translated more and more Spanish words, yet the overall meaning of those words as a passage was out of reach.

I underwent a similar experience in my Spanish class that year with regard to my attempts at writing. This was writing beyond the sentential level—beyond grammar and vocabulary assignments. As students of Spanish IV, we were to write for the purpose of expression. I had established a good foundation for Spanish grammar (I could certainly conjugate well!) and had spent countless hours memorizing vocabulary, and I felt initially that I could easily bring these elements together to produce a good piece of writing. When I received my corrected paper the following day, I was stunned to find my carefully printed words drowning in a sea of red ink. Evidently, what I had intended to convey, the thoughts that I *tried* to express, did not travel well from my mind--in English, to that piece of paper--in Spanish. And from that point on, I saw the very long road that lay ahead of me.

These two experiences served as a literary turning point for me. As a high school senior then, I felt far removed from any sense of struggle I must have felt when I first learned how to read and write my native language as a child. It was difficult for me to have a true appreciation for the complexity involved in the *process* of reading and writing because literacy felt like an implicit ability. Everything changed when I began to study Spanish. Although I couldn't articulate it then, I began to comprehend the depths of literacy, and of language itself. My struggle with reading Spanish texts (which would continue on through college)

made me realize that ‘true reading’ is more than simply understanding words; infinite lessons in grammar and vocabulary and innumerable consultations with my dictionary were not enough to make me literate in Spanish. Similarly, simply applying Spanish lexicon to English syntax would not be sufficient to make me a ‘true writer’ of the language. I would need to develop many different levels of literacy in order to comprehend or write text in Spanish beyond meaning that was purely referential. Though this was a frustrating time for me, it made me immensely respectful of the many individuals I would meet in my life who *have* accomplished the incredible task of second language literacy. And I think the awareness that I have acquired with regard to the *second language* literary task has made me a better teacher to the ESL students I long to assist.