

WORD RECOGNITION OR SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR?: LITERACY ISSUES IN SECOND OR FOREIGN LANGUAGE READERS OF ENGLISH IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the four resources model of literacy (Freebody & Luke, 1999) in the context of the ESL/EFL reader in a poorly resourced public education system such as exists in many parts of the developing world. It critically examines the impact that issues such as globalization may have on the learning and teaching of English literacy. It argues that the special literacies that are often portrayed as essential in the so-called changed socio-political climate are, in fact, only relevant at best to certain social and economic groups in society and at worst to certain types of developed society. It argues that aspects of the four resources model and critical literacy in general are important aspects to take into account in literacy programmes, but they will impact differently at different stages of literacy and in different social and economic circumstances. The paper suggests that more attention needs to be paid to basic word recognition skills in second language readers and will review recent research done in Malaysia and Singapore with Bahasa Malayu speakers and Chinese which suggests that word recognition procedures in ESL readers of English may be radically different, that these differences should be taken into account when designing decoding programmes and thus when designing initial literacy programmes.

Keywords: Globalization; Special literacies; Critical literacies; Literacy programmes; Word recognition.

INTRODUCTION

The growth in global trade and the importance of the English language within this expansion has emphasized the importance of English in national curricula throughout the globe. In most countries in the world, English is the first foreign language to be taught (see Crystal, 1997), and with the parallel expansion of electronic communications and the internet which is currently dominated by English, the ability to read in English is an important aspect of education. Thus, there are large numbers of students approaching literacy in English whose first language of literacy is not English and this factor is an important one to consider when discussing literacy in English.

At the same time, education systems in the developed world have begun to reassess curricula in the light of the impact of the knowledge economy on skills needed by learners and literacy curricula are no exception. Literacy trainers working in developed countries whose first language is English emphasise the importance of a wide range of literacy skills which are essential for the post-industrial society.

It is the aim of this article to trace the development of these ideas and to question their relevance to teaching literacy in English to EFL/ESL students, particularly within developing countries. In particular, it will question the value of the shift of emphasis from seeing literacy as a process of code breaking, 'autonomous literacy', to that of conceptualising literacy *a priori* as a set of cultural practices.

In a similar way to philosophy's 'linguistic shift' of the 1950s, linguistics can be seen to have gone through a parallel 'social shift' from the 1960s until the present day. Linguistics in general has become much more concerned with language in its social context than about the nature of the code itself. Just as philosophers have recognised the importance of language in constructing meaning (note the post-modernist concerns with the way that language is intricately involved in social order and social construction), linguists have been involved in the uses of language to construct meaning and in the meanings of language in social contexts. Nowhere is this movement clearer than in applied disciplines such as literacy. Traditionally, literacy would be seen as concerned with the ability to read and write, and teaching of literacy concerned with helping the learner to crack the code, the so-called autonomous literacy approach (Street, 1984). In modern usage, the word means reading and writing at a level adequate for written communication and generally a level that enables one to successfully function at certain levels of a society.

NEW MODELS OF LITERACY

The widening definition of literacy from that of code cracking to communication and social interaction has considerably increased the list of skills which are seen as necessary for literacy. Even within the area narrow of decoding and encoding, the range of skills is often now widened to encompass the interpretation of visual information and the relationship between textual and visual literacy (Kress, 1996). As in the pedagogy of communicative language learning and teaching, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the use of top down information processing as the way of understanding the written text. Thus, skills such as relating the text to one's own personal and cultural background and experiences, are seen as an essential part of the pedagogy of literacy, and the macro aspects of the way that texts are constructed to make meaning are seen as important skills to be addressed. In addition to the communicative aspects of literacy, modern pedagogical approaches also emphasise the social aspects of texts; the necessity of recognising the way that texts are used in social situations (from application forms through to advertisements) and the recognition of the way that writers position readers and try to influence readers. Thus, literacy through its wider definition has produced a much increased set of competencies for the literacy teacher to address, even before taking on board the competencies involved in 'information literacy', argued by some as an important component of modern approaches to literacy. Perhaps the clearest exemplification of the pedagogic implications of this shift in meaning is the Four Resources Model of reading (Luke & Freebody, 1999) and this paper shall critically examine practice through the framework it offers.

Given the radical nature of such changes, it is important to examine the rationale for such a reorientation of pedagogic practice. The most influential proponents for the new literacy are those of the "New London Group" (Brian Street, James Paul Gee, Allan Luke, Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel). They argue that literacy is not autonomous or a set of discrete technical and objective skills such as reading and writing that can be applied across contexts. Instead, what counts as literacy is determined by the cultural, political, and historical contexts of the community in which it is used. Definitions of literacy are based on ideologies. Thus, what counts as literacy must be considered in the light of the cultural, political and historical contexts of developing countries. In this respect, many argue that globalization and the knowledge economy are central ideologies in the modern world and should be taken into account when considering literacy practices and this paper will use these as the prevailing ideologies within

which literacy practices are being evaluated. Furthermore, Luke and Freebody (1999) suggest that History teaches us that “literacy” refers to a malleable set of cultural practices that are shaped and reshaped by different, often competing, social and cultural issues. All cultures are ridden through and through with complexity and difference, with conflict over power. Thus the paper will also examine literacy teaching within the social and political situations existing in developing countries.

In pursuance of this, the paper will examine the following questions:

- (1) Is the range of practices suggested by new approaches to literacy teaching appropriate in developing countries?
- (2) Are globalization and the knowledge economy the appropriate ideologies for changes in pedagogic practice within these societies?
- (3) What are the competing social and political issues associated with these ideologies?

As an example of new pedagogical approaches to literacy, the Four Resources Model of Luke and Freebody argues that there are four areas which should be considered when teaching literacy at any level. They argue that each of these competences is a necessary component of literacy. The four resources, expressed as ‘roles’ which the reader must adopt, are:

- code breaker (coding competence)
- meaning maker (semantic competence)
- text user (pragmatic competence)
- text critic (critical competence)

The model postulates the necessity of being able to break the code, the traditional concept of literacy, but only as one of four other competences. Earlier cognitive models of literacy have been sensitive to the different roles involved in literacy to a greater or lesser degree, but within a hierarchical assumption that certain ‘higher order’ skills, such as critical analysis of text, are dependent on the acquisition of lower order skills, such as decoding and understanding meaning. However, the Four Resources Model emphasizes the importance of all roles within literacy teaching. In this sense critical competence is seen as equally important, and necessary, as code breaking, not as developing levels of literacy. This re-ordering of literacy priorities is reflected in their model where they state:

It [the model] shifts the focus from trying to find the right method to whether the range of practices emphasised in one’s

reading [and writing] programme are indeed covering and integrating a broad repertoire of textual practices that are required in new economies and cultures. (Luke & Freebody, 1999).

There are two aspects which are important here. The first is that one of the traditional goals of educational research, the search for better methods of teaching is less important than making sure that the program offered covers a sufficient range of literacy practices. The second is that these sets of literacy practices should be related to the social and political imperatives of the new economies and cultures. It is this statement which will be examined first and then, in the light of this discussion, the paper will examine the suggestion that attention should be diverted from attempts to discover better methods for teaching literacy.

POLITICAL/ECONOMIC POLICIES AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON LITERACY TEACHING PRACTICES

The idea that education policy should be driven by economic imperatives is not new, but it is certainly one which appears to be growing and becoming universally accepted. For example, if we examine the motivations for national foreign language teaching curricula in the 1960s and 1970s, one of the most often quoted aims was a general humanistic aim of learning a language to be able to understand another culture. However, in a recent survey of EFL curricula in Southeast Asia (Silver, Hu, & Iino, 2002), the main criteria for teaching and learning English were instrumental, involving the necessity of developing EFL/ESL competence for financial and trade purposes. This is not without criticism. As Luke (2004) puts it, the key question facing many educational systems remains; how and to what extent can and should the 'official' production of literacy reconcile community literacies with state institutional imperatives for the production of human capital for mainstream economies and social institutions, and for the advancement of dominant fields of knowledge and discipline (Luke, 2004, p. 332). However, on a more general policy discourse level, education is increasingly seen as the development of human capital as a resource for industrial/economic development.

There are some differences. As Robertson (2005) points out, the World Bank favours the market and individualism as the means for developing knowledge and skills for the knowledge economy whereas the OECD sees human capital formation through institutionally embedded

liberalism, but essentially the two are in agreement about the necessity to develop human capital as a means for economic development. The discourse is one of economic development not of personal growth. Olsen and Peters (2005) make the following points about Higher Education: the traditional professional culture of open intellectual enquiry, personal growth has been replaced with an institutional stress on performativity; universities are seen as key drivers in the knowledge economy; and highly skilled workers are required to meet the demands of the knowledge economy. Again, the discourse of economic necessity linked to the concept of the knowledge economy. The Olsen and Peters discussion (as is much of the discussion about educational goals) is primarily located in developed economies, but the outcomes of such re-thinking is often reapplied to developing economies without considering the different social and economic contexts. One is reminded of a similar movement in the 1970s where a model of high investment in education and especially higher education would lead developing countries to economic success. As often pointed out, there has been considerable expansion in this area with little observable change in the economic situation of the poorer countries (Dore, 1976). With such powerful arguments for aligning educational policies with economic goals it is important to assess the relevance of the economic political models to developing countries.

GLOBALIZATION

We have already suggested that the two most important models/ideologies involved in the consideration of EFL/ESL literacy in English are globalization and the knowledge economy. Globalization has an obvious impact on the importance of this debate; on the importance given to second language literacy in English in national curricula around the world. The increasing hegemony of English as a world language is not a new factor (and one that has received a good deal of critical comment, cf. Phillipson, 1992, Pennycook 1994 and others) and certainly predates the phenomenal rise of the impetus to reduce trade barriers as a result of the WTO and Free Trade agreements.

However, whilst earlier discussions were largely based around issues concerned with access to education and knowledge for 'traditional' personal development, particularly at the Higher Education level, the new discourse is much more structured around market access and other economic arguments. Although essentially an economic structure to support the expansion of global trade and through this capitalist enterprise, globalization has produced a discourse of its own which portrays the movement one of inevitable development (see Hasan, 2003, for a discussion of the way that

globalization has been positioned through such mechanisms as re-lexification). It is thus portrayed as a neutral and positive influence on development. Ethical dimensions are not considered, yet ethics are the manifestation of ideology.

The ideological nature of globalization can be clearly seen in the attributes of globalization as outlined by Gopinathan (2002) in his discussion of the effects of globalization on the Singaporean education system. Globalization, he argues, is characterized by:

- weakening of nation state in the face of ever closer integration of economies
- need for national economies to become even more efficient and competitive
- mobility of capital, talent, jobs, knowledge and accelerating technological innovation
- preference for markets, privatisation and corporatisation of education

The socio-political elements of this list are clear for all to see and their relevance to developed, post-industrial societies is equally clear. What is not so clear are the benefits which would accrue to less developed economies, and in this lies the ethical dimension.

Perhaps the most contentious of these is the benefits accruing to the mobility of resources. Leaving aside the economic aspects of access to markets (which is very clearly imbalanced in favour of developed economies as witnessed by the failure of the Doha round of trade talks in Hong Kong, 2005), the mobility of talent and jobs is clearly something which needs to be considered in the area of education and literacy. The concept of the free flow of talent and ideas around the globe is a noble and utopian ideal which should benefit all, yet, in reality, is far from equitable. As an Indonesian colleague ironically remarked at a recent conference on literacy, Indonesia is the world leader in the export of domestic servants. What are the literacy implications for this? Or for Filipino hotel workers? At the other end of the scale, the 'export' of highly literate and well-trained nurses and doctors from many developing countries to rich economies such as the U.S., U.K., Singapore and the Gulf indicates that mobility of talent is not equilateral and, despite the importance of repatriated salaries to the exporting country economies, is not of obvious benefit to development of healthcare in the exporting nation. It is also clear from this analysis that the benefits of the mobility of talent are not equally distributed within developing countries. The affluent sectors of society, often quite small, have access to high

standard and often private education. Their children gain good qualifications and are able to migrate abroad for well-paid jobs. For them the logic of globalization is sound and the possibility of participation in the knowledge economy is greater, but surely it must be of questionable benefit to the majority of the population and society overall.

Just as the actual outward mobility of individuals from developing countries is severely limited, a related aspect is the mobility of capital and talent from the developed to the developing world and the outsourcing of a large number of commercial functions to developing countries. These range from the exploitation by developed economies of cheap labour to manufacture goods, through to the provision of specialized services such as call centres, computer programming or, at the top end, health services by developing countries with lower wage costs. The tourist industry is another major user of English language skills and this is one which has again seen phenomenal growth under the umbrella of globalization. These new areas of economic development provide clear contexts for English language literacy, yet the degree to which they provide sufficient or ethical goals within the context of local development surely is a question which needs to be raised. Again, this analysis merely shows the inequitable balance between the developed and developing world within globalization.

THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

We shall now consider the associated model, the knowledge economy, which has provided a great deal of discussion about the need to reform the goals of education in general and literacy teaching in particular.

The knowledge economy, according to the World Bank, rests on four pillars:

- Education systems
 - which ensure that citizens are equipped to acquire, use and share knowledge
- Innovation systems
 - that bring together researchers and businesses in commercial applications of science and technology
- Information society infrastructure
 - All people access to affordable and effective information and communications
- Stable economic and institutional framework

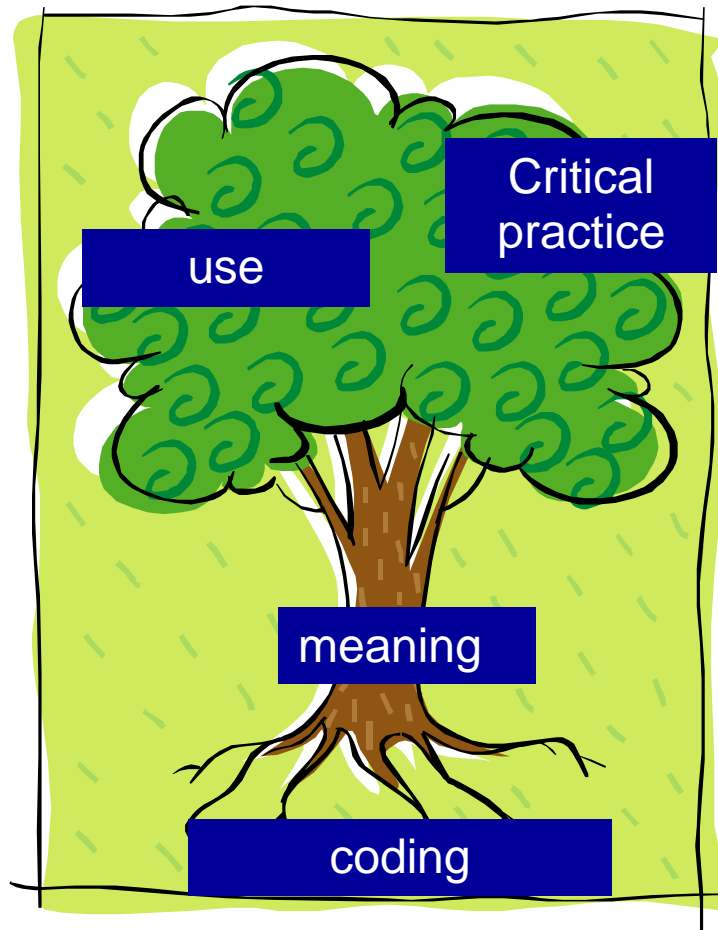
The relevance of this model to the changing role of literacy education is clear in its emphasis on innovation (related to the development of critical reading skills) and the use of information technology (related to the development of using texts and information literacy). However, whilst most of the pillars are in place in developed economies, very few exist in developing countries. It is interesting to note that the countries whose educational and economic systems are debating the move to a knowledge based economy are all the highly developed industrial economies, plus relatively rich, highly developed or rapidly developing economies such as Singapore, Hong Kong and to some extent, Dubai. It is such economies where the necessary conditions exist for a move to a knowledge economy. For example, the universal access to affordable and effective information and communications are available in all such economies. In such societies, it makes sense to develop information literacy as a major aspect of literacy. Whether such a focus is sensible in societies which lack such sophistication is another question.

If we agree with Luke and Freebody that literacy practices are related to ideologies and closely related to existing social and economic realities, the reason for the shift in foci for literacy practices from the decoding of print to the wider aspects of the use of text is closely related to the concept of the knowledge economy. We have argued that the knowledge economy model is of questionable relevance to developing countries and thus not appropriate as a model on which to build literacy practices. We have also argued that globalization as an ideology is likely to increase, rather than decrease differentials both between developed and developing economies and between social groups within the developing economies. The question then becomes where should the emphasis be placed within literacy programmes in developing countries.

RE-EXAMINING LITERACY PRIORITIES

The immediate alternative to structuring programmes according to global considerations is for literacy practices to be determined by local, not global concerns. The first concern of literacy practices, especially in poorly resourced rural areas, should be to equip the students with the basic tools for decoding printed matter. Literacy then should be directed more to empowering individuals to access meaning for their own benefit rather than as part of national economic strategies. Emphasis should be placed on the individual as a learner, not as a unit of human capital. As part of this, attention should be re-directed towards the problems of decoding. The four

resources should not be seen as equally important at all stages of literacy, but should be seen as a hierarchy, with the more socially-orientated and critical reading skills resting on the successful acquisition of decoding and encoding skills. Borrowing the tree metaphor from Wolvin and Coakely (1996) and adapting it from listening to literacy we can see the following relationship between the four resources:



The centrality of such basic skills can be illustrated by examining two ELT exercises. The first concerned an elementary reading text being taught to lower elementary Arabic speaking students in a small rural school in Oman. The textbook writer had complied with the current literacy and communicative teaching practices by asking the students to quickly look at the passage and determine who it was about (there were two characters mentioned in the passage). This was part of training students to examine passages for meaning rather than form and to set up expectations to help

them relate to the text. However, the task produced no meaningful response from the students and it turned out that they had no automatic processing strategies for finding names. Finding out who the passage was about involves the code-breaking knowledge that, in English, names start with capital letters. This was a vital clue to accessing the 'meaning' element of the text. They could not access the meaning of the text as they did not possess the coding principle, present in English but not in Arabic, that proper nouns begin with a capital letter. This feature is a key to identifying the actors in the text and thus accessing the meaning.

The second concerns the much-used exercise of scanning for specific information. Tied in with the reading of different types of text (e.g. information handouts, telephone directories and classified advertisements), scanning is a typical example of the new pedagogic techniques associated with the emphasis on the social/pragmatic usages of text. Whilst not wishing to deny the importance of using such texts in literacy programmes, it is important to note that the exercise only works on the basis of rapid and automatic word recognition skills. Indeed, it can be argued that the exercise in itself is valuable *a priori* as a contextualization of word recognition practice, rather than as a separate and important literacy skill in itself. It is highly likely that ESL learners will have already acquired the macro-skill in their first language, what they lack the micro-skill of word recognition in English.

NEED FOR RESEARCH INTO METHODS OF WORD RECOGNITION IN ESL

The acceptance that decoding skills are an essential prerequisite for later literacy development brings us on to the second implication in Freebody and Lukes (1990) argument that this paper would wish to question: the change of emphasis within pedagogy from methods to content. They argue there has been a beneficial movement within literacy teaching from an emphasis on methods towards a concentration on materials, a movement from the how towards the what. The implication is that educationalists spent too much effort trying to explain reading in cognitive terms and from this to develop methods which would help to address cognitive problems faced by readers. In this they are quite congruent with many approaches to reading such as the real books and whole language movements, and there is no doubt that the concentration on content and the relevance of the content being read to the reader has been extremely beneficial to the construction of reading materials. However, the suggestion

that cognitive problems involved in decoding print are in some ways less important than the content and use of the texts themselves is one that is increasingly being challenged in first language reading teaching, and is certainly one which needs to be examined in the context of EFL literacy.

Reading skills in EFL methodology have historically focused a great deal on the top-down processes in reading and have paid little attention to the problem of basic literacy skills and decoding, with the possible exception of course books written for schools in the Middle East. This can be explained by the context in which much EFL takes place. The most influential and profitable (if not the most common) contexts for EFL teaching have been with adult or young adult learners where it has been tacitly assumed that, as the learner has already learnt to read in the first language, no specific literacy training will be needed in the second language. Yet, there is increasing evidence that cognitive processes derived either from the phonology of the first language, from the orthography and phonotactics of the first language, and from initial literacy training in the first language play a part in the way that EFL/ESL learners may approach word recognition in English.

Initial literacy training and its effect on reading in English was investigated by examining the spelling mistakes and orthographical knowledge of Chinese and Malay students in two separate studies (Randall, 1997, 2005a). Research on spelling mistakes in Malaysian secondary schools showed high degree of similarity between BM, Chinese and Tamil students who have common BM literacy background (Randall, 1997). However, research on spelling mistakes with Mandarin and BM students with separate L1 literacy backgrounds suggested differences based on L1 literacy background (Randall, 2005a). This would suggest that the common BM language and literacy experience of the students in the Malaysian secondary schools (where BM is the medium of instruction) outweighed the effect of first language on their knowledge of English; yet, there were differences when similar groups of students, who had identical levels of English but different literacy backgrounds (i.e. BM and Mandarin), were studied.

The effects of the first spoken language on spelling can also be clearly demonstrated. All studies done with Southeast Asian students show effects of L1 phonology on spelling words in English. They show:

- problems with final clusters, especially if final clusters contain morpheme
- problems with certain vowel distinctions which do not exist in BM or Mandarin

A study of primary school children in Singapore also suggested a strong effect of local variety of English (“Singlish”) on spelling (Randall, 2005b). It is suggested that these spelling effects will also influence the basic word recognition processes used by EFL/ESL learners in these countries.

The effect of different scriptal systems on cognitive processing has also been studied. Some studies have shown that phonological awareness and word frequency effects may be effected by logographic/alphabetic factors (Muljani, Koda & Moates, 1998). The problems caused by the Arabic consonantal script and ‘vowel blindness’ in Arab readers of English has also been noted (Ryan & Meara, 1991).

The use of a common script as the first language does not necessarily mean that word recognition skills will be transferred to another language in the same script. For example, BM and BI both use the Roman alphabet and thus should provide less difficulties for L2 BL in English. However, the syllable structure of both is basically CVCV, and is very different from English. Thus, students will not process English words in the same way that L1 readers are thought to do, e.g. ONSET + RHYME

Thus, there is a lot of evidence emerging that suggests initial literacy and word decoding skills are far from universal and are sensitive to first language factors. This implies that more attention should be paid to the way that initial literacy is taught, taking into account the cognitive difficulties that can arise from different first language contexts.

CONCLUSION

Starting from the standpoint that literacy practices and the teaching of literacy should be sensitive to wider social and political contexts, this paper examined two of the most powerful economic/social frameworks which are often used to define educational and literacy goals: globalization and the knowledge economy. The paper has argued that, although globalization provides perhaps an irreversible driving force for the teaching of EFL literacy in most countries, beyond this, its use as an appropriate model for literacy practices in developing economies is questionable. Similarly, the concept of the knowledge economy has limited applicability in the same countries, outside limited elite groups. It is therefore suggested that education systems in general and literacy programmes in particular, especially initial literacy programmes, should look at local needs. These needs should look at the development of the individual learner and their

competence in the language, rather than the overall development of human capital. As part of this, there should be a re-emphasis on basic skills such as decoding, rather than the current emphasis on the content of literacy programmes and their contexts. This is not to suggest a return to the notion of autonomous literacy; much light has been thrown on the wider importance of texts in their social contexts and this work should inform literacy teaching. An appreciation of the wider context and the skills involved is important, but the skills must be supported by sound decoding skills. These decoding skills, studies have shown, may not be universal and further research needs to be carried out in the area of cross-linguistic word recognition processes, and the results of such research fed back into the methods used to teach basic literacy.

The implications of such an approach are that more emphasis should be placed on SL literacy within the teaching of EFL. In addition, materials should be devised with L2 learners and their likely cognitive problems in mind. This will mean that within programmes the areas for concentration will be determined by contrastive analysis of the first language and English based on research and not a 'one size fits all' approach to EFL literacy. At the level of tertiary education and teacher training, applied linguistics programmes (e.g. phonology) in colleges and universities should address the problems of basic literacy and spelling rather than try to provide overall descriptions of the English phonological system.

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