



## Language and Literacy in Multilingual Settings

David Johnson, Isaac Isaacs

### ► To cite this version:

David Johnson, Isaac Isaacs. Language and Literacy in Multilingual Settings. Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion, 1999, Languages and Education: Parameters for Multicultural South Africa, 18, pp.158-168. hal-02346449

**HAL Id: hal-02346449**

**<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02346449>**

Submitted on 5 Nov 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# *Language and Literacy in Multilingual Settings*

## Introduction

The organisation of the workplace, public institutions and our private life-worlds are all affected by global change as well as local change. In our working lives, organisational changes have been accompanied by a change in technologies or tools, both technical and semiotic (Vygotsky 1978, Wertsch 1991) such as screen-based modes of interacting with automated machinery (New London Group). Also, our private lives have been transformed. For example, very few childhood cultures in many societies have escaped the invasion of "Telly Tubbies" from Britain, or Bart Simpson from the USA or "Super Mario," an Italian electronic game developed for the Super Nintendo (made in Japan). The lives of adolescents are interwoven with narratives from "Neighbours" (an Australian soap opera), and diffuse narratives from the world of Popular Music. These changes demand increasingly new forms of communication and interaction and it would appear that the role of school in mediating between subject and society is being remade, as cultural and linguistic diversity become central and critical issues.

We would like to open the discussion by exposing a contradiction. It is clear that world societies, including South Africa, are undergoing a period of rapid economic, political, social and cultural change. It is not necessary to elaborate much here, except that the world over, we find ourselves in a period of uncertainty. What is also obvious, is that in most parts of the world, education systems have not changed much, in that they are still modelled on the assumption that economies rest on stable industries with unquestionable long term futures. The assumption is that education systems will be providing skills necessary for long term jobs and stable workforces. Ironically, politicians and academics turn their attentions to education and accuse it of not being able to meet the "needs

of society." Schools are charged with the task of bringing back certainties — certainties in morality, sexual orientation, language (back to basics, where spelling and grammar are correct, and where we talk "proper"). It is in a time of uncertainty that many governments seek to restructure education systems — normally this means to centralise them, and to call for methods of teaching — pedagogy — designed for needs of an economy which no longer exists.

Language is at the centre of this contradiction. The assumption that language is a stable system continues to hold. Theories of language continue to propagate correctness and a certain kind of certainty. However, it would appear that we are in need of a different theory of language — one which treats language as a changing and dynamic phenomenon, subject to the influence of individuals — where speakers and writers of language are not merely users, but makers (Kress).

The aim of the paper therefore, is to reflect on the changing realities of society and organisations, and to examine, in view of this, the adequacy of current theories of language and literacy. Further, the paper looks critically at available models of pedagogy and poses the following questions in relation to Reunion (France) and South Africa:

Do current models of pedagogy demand that languages and cultures, other than those of the mainstream, be ignored or erased in favour of a standard, universal national language and culture? How do learners gain access to relevant knowledge in the form of culturally elaborated systems of knowledge? How do we ensure that differences of culture and language are not barriers to educational success and social participation?

The paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, "Language in education and the context of schooling," we will present short vignettes of inner city schools in Johannesburg, and probe the social context in which language and literacy functions. In the second part of the paper, we will develop the argument that current theories of language are problematic in thinking about and developing a literacy pedagogy which takes account of plurality and diversity and "futures." Finally, we look at

emerging research and theory on "multiliteracies" and propose an agenda for action.

## **Language and education and the context of schooling**

The three vignettes below attempt to illustrate the multilingual nature of schooling in South Africa. They raise questions about the extent to which schools are able to provide support for learners from different language backgrounds.

### **Case 1:**

One Primary School called Mdelwa Primary in Soweto, Johannesburg has mostly learners whose primary (home) language is Zulu. There are about 500 learners. In Grade one and Grade two, they are only taught in Zulu. In Grade three they are formally instructed in Zulu, English and Afrikaans as languages. Most of the teachers either have a Zulu or Sotho background. Most of the teachers speak Zulu, English and Afrikaans. They switch languages during the lesson with learners so that learners can comprehend. From Grade four to Grade seven all other subjects like history, geography etc. are being taught in English.

### **Case 2:**

Milnerton Primary in Eldorado Park, Johannesburg has about 800 pupils of which 300 are English speaking, 250 Afrikaans and 250 speak another primary language (Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Tswana etc.) All these learners begin Grade one in either Afrikaans (home language) or English (home language). All other learners with other primary languages also begin Grade one in English instruction. No other language is taught at this school. Out of twenty-three teachers only one or two speaks, reads and writes Zulu or Sotho.

## Case 3:

Firethorn Primary in Klipspruit, Johannesburg. One of the authors is a deputy head at this school. He has been at the school for fifteen years. In the first seven years or so of his time there, the school catered principally for one linguistic and cultural group, namely, Afrikaans speaking, "Coloured" pupils. In the last eight years, the school's enrolment grew, and significantly, it began to recruit pupils from a wide variety of linguistic backgrounds. Today, the school has 945 learners. We conducted a survey of the languages children spoke at home, and found the following:

Afrikaans	495
English	153
Zulu	156
Sotho	96
Tswana	40
Xhosa	24
Venda	14
Tsonga	6
Siswati	1

The policy at the school is to provide instruction in two languages. These are English and Afrikaans. Of the 495 learners who come from a Afrikaans background, only 200 have opted (or rather, their parents have opted for them) to be taught in Afrikaans from Grade one. The rest of the Afrikaans speaking pupils, as well as those whose language backgrounds are English, Zulu, Sotho, Tswana, Xhosa, Venda, Tsonga, Siswati are taught through the medium of English.

It is interesting to note, that most of the parents in this area who are Afrikaans speaking, opted for their children to be taught through the medium of English. When asked why they wanted to shift from the home language, the following answers were not uncommon. "It is better;" "It is better for my child's future;" "It is better because my child can get a reasonable position in commerce and industry;" "English is a mobile

language;" "English is spoken all over the world." These were the most common remarks expressed by parents.

There are twenty-nine teachers on the staff of the school. Only four can speak, read and write a third language which is either Zulu, Sotho or Tswana. This limits the extent to which the school is able to offer instruction in another language.

The survey of children's language background is in keeping with policies developed at provincial level. For example, in the Gauteng department of education, schools are required to record the home languages of children and significant others.

On the whole, the school has not done a great deal to encourage linguistic and cultural diversity, but we are working towards this. At the moment, all communications between the school and the home is carried out in English and Afrikaans, despite the fact that about a third of the pupils come from linguistic backgrounds other than these two languages. All the signs and nameplates around the school, are in one language only. The school uses only English as a medium of communication with Education authorities and vice versa.

### **Theories of language and models of pedagogy in the context of changing global and local realities**

We have argued in the introduction that we need to take account of new demands in our working, public and private lives. Also, that schooling and pedagogy need to take account of new trends such as the globalisation of economies, of production, of finance; of changes in the technologies of communication and of transport, to name but a few. As a consequence, the language and literacy curriculum in a multicultural society, needs to be built on theories which recognise that "making meaning" relies on a variety of forms, modes and materials, and not on language alone.



Where both the Chomskyan as well as the Piagetian accounts, treat language as an autonomous system and individuals as *users* of the system, we argue for a new pedagogy of *representation and communication*, which accepts that individuals are *makers* and *transformers* of the system (Kress).

Thus, rather than pursuing conventional debates about the value of bi-lingualism and multi-lingualism on cognition and learning, we draw on a social theory of representation and communication, and argue that the critical issue is not one of reproductive competence (in whatever language or languages we choose to use in South Africa) but one of *design*. Individuals, from different cultural and linguistic groups come to school, already as active makers of meaning, in any medium that is to hand. Recruiting cultural differences into a language and literacy curriculum is not simply creating more space for "other" languages—rather, it is rethinking the meaning of cognition and meaning making, and recruiting into the curriculum, modes and forms of communications from other cultures, such as gestural literacies, spatial literacies and visual literacies. Here, these different modes of communication are remade and transformed.

We shall return to this line of argument, but first we would like to turn our attention to the nature of schooling and pedagogy.

Schools have always had a critical role to play in determining the life opportunities of students. They have provided symbolic capital—symbolic meanings that have currency in access to employment, political power and cultural recognition. Because of the shifting nature of the world of work, private and public spaces, should schooling be remade?

It would seem that in most countries, schools are thought of as sites for the negotiation of "futures." According to the New London Group: "Every classroom will inevitably reconfigure the relationships of local and global differences that are now so critical."

It would seem that schools are charged with the task of shaping the new multi-lingual society. Hence, according to the new London Group:

To be relevant, learning processes need to recruit, rather than attempt to ignore or erase, the different subjectivities — interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes — students bring to learning. Curriculum now needs to mesh with different subjectivities, and with their attendant languages, discourses, and registers, and use these as a resource for learning. (72)

and

The role of pedagogy is to develop an epistemology of pluralism that provides access without people having to erase or leave behind different subjectivities. (72)

Examples of what can be done are taken from a number of successful projects in South Africa, for example, ELTIC (1997) and PRAESA (Project for the study of Alternative Education in South Africa). These are essentially in-service teacher education courses aimed at helping teachers to develop strategies to handle multilingual classrooms effectively. There are numerous activities, aimed at creating an awareness of the diverse range of languages South Africa, and which attempt to recruit these languages into the curriculum. These activities include, getting learners to develop language biographies, family language trees, greeting games, multilingual story telling, listening to popular songs in different languages, an awareness of vocabulary and concepts, building a multilingual class dictionary, and activities that involve reading in other languages, amongst others.

While we have no real problems with these views, it would seem important to probe the ontological assumptions underlying neo-classical, technocratic, structuralist and poststructuralist theorising about teachers, students and the school curriculum. Moreover, we need to develop further diachronic analyses (taking into account dimensions of time and linguistic change) about forms of literacy and the cultural politics of continuity and change. We would want to add simply that schools are amongst several contemporary sites and not the only site for the negotiation of linguistic futures.



We need to take account of the cultural context of learning and thinking and ask how learners gain access to relevant knowledge in the form of culturally elaborated systems of knowledge (Starkey, Spelke and Gelman: 1990, Cole: 1991). According to Cole:

When one turns to this aspect of the problem — the way in which children come to acquire the complex systems of knowledge that organise joint activity among people in any culture — the issue of socially shared cognition jumps to the forefront, because nothing is so certain than those systems of knowledge are not "in" the child's head to begin with. Whatever the mechanisms of their acquisition, they cannot be acquired in a sociocultural vacuum. Hence, if one is to study human cognition as it is encountered in normal human adults, it is necessary to start not with cognitive process abstracted from their context, but with the structure of activity that provides the functional matrix of and structural constraints on their acquisition. (410)

Further, there is a need to understand how communities of practice and cultural processes of identity construction shape each other (Lave: 1990 80). Following this through, Lave suggests that this raises more specific questions about curricula of practice. She asks:

What are the characteristics of communities of practice that make broad accessibility to the whole steadily available to newcomers? . . . What are the conditions that make deep transformations possible? . . . Both transformations of understanding and relations with peers raise questions about the cycles by which newcomers become old-timers, who thereby become the community of practice for the next newcomers, transforming their understanding as they transform their identities. (81-82)

## **New research directions**

The paper derives its theoretical framework from the work of the New London Group which seeks, amongst other things, to develop a theory of pedagogy based on a view of how the human mind works in society and classrooms. The Group argues that we need to focus on how meaning is made in classrooms and in society in a multiplicity of ways. They argue that the multiplicity of communications which characterise the emerging cultural, institutional and global order can be described as "multiliteracies."

According to the authors, the term "multiliteracies" is a description of an approach to language teaching and literacy pedagogy which "focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone." Multiliteracies differ according to culture and context, and have specific cognitive, cultural and social effects. In some cultural contexts for example, the visual mode of representation is dominant (e.g. in some oral cultures or in a multimedia environment). Further, "multiliteracies" represents a different kind of pedagogy — "one in which language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve various cultural purposes" (New London Group).

The main thrust of the argument is that learners are active designers of meaning and thus active designers of their own social futures. It proposes the following elements of design in the meaning making process:

- Linguistic Meaning (genres, discourses)
- Visual Meaning (images, page layouts, screen formats)
- Audio Meaning (music, sound effects)
- Gestural Meaning (body language, sensuality)
- Spatial Meaning (meanings of environmental and architectural spaces), and
- Multimodal patterns of meaning that relate the first five modes of meaning to each other.

The objective of the International Multiliteracies Project is to develop in the initial stage an educationally accessible functional grammar, that is a metalanguage that describes meaning in various realms. These include the textual and the visual, as well as multi-modal relations between various meaning making processes (media texts and electronic multimedia).

For us, the notion of "mind, society and learning" is important. We are committed to the idea that the human mind is embodied, situated and social and that knowledge is embedded in social, cultural and

material contexts. Human knowledge is developed as part and parcel of collaborative interactions with others of diverse skills, backgrounds, and perspectives joined together in a particular epistemic community (community of learners engaged in common practices centred around a specific historical and socially constituted domain of knowledge).

We are beginning to turn the theoretical underpinnings of the international multiliteracies project into pedagogical possibilities. We have recently embarked on a research project in South Africa that is aimed at examining the impact of design and technology on literacy and learning.

In brief, the main thrust of the project is to expose learners to the concept of designing and making. Using low cost materials collected from the environment, and working within the technology learning area, learners will be exposed to a number of problems to which they will have to design solutions. Learners will work in small groups. The use of language and other forms of representation used to find and design solutions to the problems under investigation will be video-taped.

We hope to learn from this project to what extent learners from a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds can overcome the problem of communicating in either one or more dominant languages alone, and interact with others in a problem solving environment which allows them to recruit different ways of making and creating meaning, into the curriculum.

*David Johnson and Isaac Isaacs<sup>1</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> Pr David Johnson, Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol, (U.K.); Mr Isaac Isaacs, Fire Thorn Primary Scholl, Johannesburg (South Africa).

## REFERENCES.

**Kress, G.** *Before Writing: Rethinking the Paths to Literacy* (London: Routledge, 1997).

**The New London Group.** "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures," *Harvard Educational Review*, 66, 1, 1996, 60-92.

