

Reframing Literacy in Adult ESL Programs: Making the case for the inclusion of identity

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Abstract

Adult ESL programs in the Australian context are heavily influenced by neo-liberal notions of functional literacy and numeracy. This paper argues that such notions, designed to enable the learner to function within the workplace or community can fail to acknowledge the complexity of ESL program participation for adult learners. This may be considered especially so for pre-literate learners from refugee backgrounds who have low or minimal levels of literacy in their own language and are hence negotiating a new skill set, a new culture and arguably a new sense of identity. This paper is based on research which points to the need to position the learning of literacy and numeracy in the ESL context as a social and educational journey made meaningful by a learner's sense of (emerging) identity. In this context a holistic, socially orientated understanding of their learning and their progress is preferable to an approach which views and evaluates learners against preconceived functional literacy skills. The participants in this study were people of refugee background from Africa with minimal literacy skills.

Introduction

Institutional perspectives on delivering literacy instruction in the adult ESL context are highly diverse. Such perspectives are impacted by differing epistemological assumptions concerning the nature, purpose and meaning of literacy which can range from those with a narrow economic and functionalist focus to ones which are more social and critical in nature (Papen 2005). Evidence suggests however that many teachers are unaware that their literacy beliefs form part of a wider discourse which has ideological implications

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(Benesch 1993, Fairclough 1992). Nor are they necessarily aware of the impact such beliefs can have on student learning and the educational climate within an institution. As Smith (2004) has recently argued teachers can take for granted the correctness of the predominant literacy paradigm and be unaware that other understandings may exist.

In the Australian context, government funded adult ESL programs follow the worldwide trend towards functionalist notions of literacy (Hamilton & Pitt 2011). Such notions are based upon the perspective that literacy is a functional skill framed by the need to assist learners to acquire the skills necessary to function within the workplace or the broader community. As the 2008 Review of the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) for example notes:

The AMEP aims to help recently arrived migrants and humanitarian entrants to develop the English language skills they need to access services in the general community, provide a pathway to employment, training or further study and participate in other government programs offered. (DIAC 2008:8)

The quote above alludes to the impact of federal policy in influencing the manner in which ESL is taught in the adult context. According to Hamilton and Pitt (2011) the international trend towards a neo-liberal discourse has reduced social inequality to a simplistic lack of vocational literacy. As a consequence ESL teaching has been redefined by directly linking low literacy with economic marginality pursued through tightly controlled funding criteria. The pursuit of ‘accountability in the core business of producing literacy outcomes’ as evidenced by Cross (2009:514) is a ready example of such neo-liberal policy in the Australian context.

This ‘reductionist’, government induced model of literacy has, however, come under theoretical and practical criticism in the teaching of ESL to adult refugee learners who frequently have acquired at best only minimal school based literacy skills. Such functional orientations, it has been argued, are too economically focused allowing little recognition of the social context for the learning, the use, and even the construction of literacy (Auerbach 1992, Black 2002). Additionally, in pursuing a version of literacy that may be easily ‘managed, measured and monitored’ (Cross 2009: 514),

it lays the blame at the level of the individual in terms of failure to achieve culturally determined literacy outcomes.

By way of theoretical and practical contrast, New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Barton 2001, Street 2003), centred on the social practices and bodies of knowledge with which one's world and culture are interpreted, has been viewed as offering important insights into literacy and literacy acquisition (Hamilton & Pitt 2011). NLS views literacy not so much as a functional skill, but a social practice derived from the social context in which it is used. Such an approach shuns idealized versions of literacy to foreground and validate the learner's current use of literacy in terms of their contemporary social situation rather than possible future economic roles.

A debate on the merits of the functional versus the social is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice to show the divide and contestability that exists in terms of understandings of literacy and the impact of ideology upon the delivery of literacy instruction to preliterate refugee learners. Ultimately different perspectives as Robinson-Pant (2000) notes, can exist side by side in the one classroom. The important point in the context of this paper is that a reliance on a functionalist understanding of literacy is always going to be partial in terms of recognising the literate identity, whether imagined or real, of adult ESL learners of refugee backgrounds.

This latter statement follows the lead of Gomez (2004) and others (Kanno 2003, Warriner 2008) who argue that one might profitably view literacy as a vehicle for facilitating the construction of one's identity and as a social and educational journey made meaningful by a learner's sense of (emerging) identity. As Gomez notes, 'literacy must start from the premise that we are multidimensional beings and that our nature is complex' (Gomez 2004:156). This challenge is seen as being particularly pertinent for pre-literate adult learners from refugee backgrounds. Such people frequently have low or minimal levels of literacy in their own language and are hence negotiating a new skill set, a new culture and arguably a new sense of self. ESL literacy learning, from the view of such learners, dramatically encapsulates a complexity of social issues including an individual's sense of integration and belonging within the broader society, the negotiation of gender roles within a community and an ongoing expression of cultural and religious based identity within a multicultural Australia. As Warriner (2008) notes, issues of language, ethnicity, class, gender, and culture are salient and

consequential for pre-literate adult refugee learners who find themselves in a dynamic and vulnerable position with regards to their role within a multicultural society. Such broader concerns however are seldom addressed or even acknowledged from a functional perspective of literacy.

Aligned with the foregoing perspective the approach taken in this research is one of valuing the meaningfulness of people's participation with literacy as identified by learners themselves. The research framework is based on a perspective that investigates the meaningfulness for learners of their engagement with their literacy learning in an adult ESL program inclusive of their sense of socio-cultural identity.

In the context of this research project the term 'meaningful participation' draws inspiration from Amartya Sen's concept of 'meaningful development' (Manyozo 1999:31). The 'meaningfulness' I am discussing concerns the recognition of what people value in their lives and the freedom people have to actively engage with these values. It carries with it a sense of connection with others, with ourselves, and a sense of broadening one's world. It is a concept aligned with the perspective of Barton et al (2007:138) who highlight how learners' *'histories, their current identities and life circumstances, and the shifting goals and purposes they have for their future—interact to shape their engagement in and experience of learning'*. Utilising an identity focused theoretical framework which draws on the social learning theories of Wenger (1999) and Freire (1993), the project reported here foregrounds the learners' aspirations, needs and their sense of cultural identity. Such a framework seeks to understand a learner's own sense of progress and motivation in an adult ESL course from within a broader more '*human-centered*' framework beyond ideological perspectives of literacy delimited by functional literacy skills.

A framework of 'meaningful participation' for teaching adult preliterate learners

Wenger (1999) elaborates upon three main premises that are particularly useful in the context of this research paper. Firstly, our ability to experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful is held to comprise the key purpose of learning. Secondly, the creation of knowledge is a socially situated practice which is dependent upon our active engagement with the world. Thirdly,

'meaningful participation' evolves from people's aspirations to be part of, develop and negotiate their own sense of identity within learning communities. According to this framework personal and social meaningfulness lies at the heart of learning and involves an extension of people's feelings of identity and the power to participate in, negotiate and construct meanings of significance in a personally constructed world.

Kanno and Norton (2003) build upon Wenger's understanding through introducing the concept of imagined communities. These authors note that while Wenger contextualises his understanding of a learning community primarily (although not exclusively) through learners 'immediate, accessible communities' (p. 242), a further important factor are learners' imagined communities and future identifications. As Norton (2001:166) has argued, 'a learner's imagined community invite[s] an imagined identity, and a learner's investment in the target language must be understood within this context' (p. 166). Miller (2007) also notes the importance of learner investment in literacy acquisition in her study on linguistic minority students in Canada. According to Miller investment and meaningfulness is often missing in common literacy based tasks where a prime focus on vocabulary, grammar and structure can ignore the essentiality of enabling learners to value their voices and be heard. Meaningfulness, in this context involves the provision of space for learners to negotiate their identities, explore their relationships with others and to display agency. In line with this portrayal Freire and Macedo (1987), have coined the term, 'reading the word and the world' to explicitly connect literacy learning with a deeper understanding of the world based on personal liberation for the learner. Literacy learning in this context is seen as a journey of empowerment where individuals recognise and can act on the impediments, both internal and external, which restrict their lives.

In this project the concept of 'meaningful participation' refers to a framework designed to encompass people's sense of connection with the society they live in, their own community and their own emerging sense of self with literacy. While it foregrounds the emerging sense of identity of learners themselves it recognises that in the adult ESL class, meaningfulness is influenced by multiple factors. These factors may include the acquisition of functional literacy and the structures and practices from which ESL programs are positioned. However the notion of 'meaningful participation' acknowledges that

literacy itself cannot and should not be defined according to the views of any particular group or be framed by one or the other paradigm. Rather the use and the learning of literacy within the adult ESL context should be seen within a broader frame of reference based upon multiple perspectives of both literacy and the lived reality of learners themselves.

Such a framework differs markedly from the present adult ESL field contextualised as it is by neoliberal values. The stated goals of an adult English language program in terms of developing workplace skills potentially creates an environment where certain kinds and levels of ‘participation’ that are demanded by the increasingly ‘neoliberal economy’, are favoured over others. The aspiration of learners, and the unique social world which contextualises their learning, can be easily devalued to the demands for a low skilled labour market whose requirements are simplified to transactional skills in reading, writing listening and speaking. This is not to deny that such skills are of importance. It does however point to broad social (and potential pedagogical) limitations of such an approach.

Introducing the study context

The study took place in an adult educational setting in a non-metropolitan region of Victoria, Australia. The participants of the project were people of refugee backgrounds from Togo and the Sudan who were enrolled in a single class in an English literacy and oracy course. Of these ten participants eight were women reflecting the gender disparity within the class itself. These ten participants at best had minimal literacy skills in the official language of their country of origin, alongside a history of minimal and disrupted schooling.

All the participants were enrolled in a Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) at an intermediate, post beginner level having previously been enrolled at preliminary or beginning level classes. The CSWE is an adult English language course delivered through the Australian Federal Government’s Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). The CSWE is designed to guide teachers to create and deliver a syllabus that enables students to achieve specified competency outcomes against which a student’s progress is measured. The course is not only designed to standardise English language instruction for new migrants; it also aims to ensure a level of accountability to funding authorities and a responsiveness to labour markets.

The curriculum that the participants of this study were enrolled in was delivered over the course of a year and focused specifically on writing, reading, listening and speaking skills. These skills were further demarcated into sub skills designed to reflect the English language demands that learners may encounter both in the community and in the more formalised environment of work or further study.

Research design

The research was part of a masters project based on the question: What contributes to the ‘meaningful participation’ of learners of an adult second language literacy program?

The research design followed a case study within a phenomenological perspective where the case is clearly bounded by the experiences of a group of humanitarian entrants participating in an AMEP program delivered in a tertiary educational campus in Australia. The study was undertaken within research ethics requirements approved by the University of New England’s ethics board. The collection of data, which took place over the course of a semester aimed to uncover the deeper meanings of the subjective experience(s) of the individuals and their own perceptions of their life and world around them

The length of time of the study was influenced by the time taken for students to develop the practical and the social confidence to express themselves both orally and in writing. The researcher was ideally placed to collect observational material through his own position as one of the class teachers.

Data was collected through focused classroom discussion, participatory observation and written expression and included contributions to a classroom newsletter, the writing of personal narrative as well as reflections over key events. This latter activity was a significant feature of the research. Enabling learners to express their concerns and reflect upon the action taken is an important aspect of adult education and provided useful data for the research. On one occasion, for example a forum was developed between learners and invited members of the community resulting from expressions of concern in the broader life of learners. Invited members included representatives of the police force, a principal of a local high school and a representative from a settlement service organisation. The forum not only explored key issues but also developed further in-

class comments as students reflected upon their own lives and what they had learnt in the forum.

Personal narrative was a further important factor of the research where participants voluntarily wrote about their contemporary educational and life experiences in Australia, the meaningfulness of their literacy learning and how their learning impacted upon their life and their aspirations. These written stories were shared and thus provided space for participants to clarify their own meanings and to discuss further meanings of significance. Asking students to write stories was compatible with the expressed needs of students to build upon their writing and reading skills, and therefore comprised a research data collection tactic ‘sanctioned’ by the existing curriculum.

Data analysis was grounded in the identification of the recurring topics that emerged from the data. These initial topics were further analysed to identify sub-topics which, once identified, informed further data analysis (Muthukrishna, 2006). The next stage involved developing patterns of relationships between the categories identified through the coding leading to an understanding of the complex links between the beliefs, experiences, and perspectives of the participants. From the written stories and frequent reflective discussions over the course of the study a picture emerged revealing how the participants negotiated the meanings within their educational experiences and the broader society contextualised by their own socio-cultural needs and understandings.

The Findings

What emerged in the research were multiple understandings of what constituted meaningful participation. Far from being mutually exclusive the social and the functional aspects of the manner in which learners viewed their literacy frequently impacted on each other. Alongside these constructions of literacy was an identification of literacy acquisition as an individual journey, tempered by cultural and social factors which often travelled in parallel with the learner’s own sense of adjustment to Australian society and their emerging sense of self.

Functional English Language Skills

At an initial level a particularly strong sense of meaning emerges in relation to the English language skills students strive to acquire, and in particular their confidence and ability to read and

write. The three statements below typically express the understanding which many students held that English language and literacy skills are essential in order for them to have access to the opportunities afforded to members of Australian society within the context of employment, further study and social discourse.

English is necessary for speaking to neighbours, for reading things like letters, letters from Centrelink, bills many things, getting a job, talking with my child's teacher. These things we need English for.

If we want to do another course, like me I want to do a childcare course. We need English for this. We need to learn how to write.

Without English, without writing English you cannot get a good job in Australia. This is the difficulty I am facing.

Similar statements made by other students supported educational rhetoric concerning the importance of reading, writing, listening, speaking and grammar skills indicative of the functional approach of the AMEP program. This partial reproduction of the institutional discourse focused predominantly on the value placed on English literacy as a means to acquire a job or pursue further study. As the following quotes reveal however such statements reveal only a partial truth. In reality students' lives and their motivations and investment in learning is far more complex than the aforementioned linear arrangement between functional literacy acquisition and social integration suggests. The following statements indicate some of the challenges concerning this group of learners in the context of what they identify as their literacy practices outside of the school environment.

When I get home my bag I leave by the door and pick up the next day. I do not open.

Writing it is hard but I do not practice, I don't know why.

Writing, maybe in one year I will write (i.e., one year from the time the statement was made-author)

We do not read like you (westerners) do for pleasure. The paper we do not read, it is not part of our culture.

The statements above reveal a common pattern amongst many who are learning literacy for the first time in terms of their express lack of English literacy use in their broader social and out of class activities. This is not uncommon for people of low educational backgrounds. As alluded by the NLS framework of literacy, reading and writing may be viewed as socially constructed literacy events. To conclude, however, that these statements signify a lack of effort or conscientiousness on the part of these participants as implied by the functional approach paints a too simplistic an understanding of the complexity of cultural change being experienced by learners.

In order to understand the divide between what may be referred to as the broader engagement of class based literacy in the lives of students and their everyday literacy practices it is important to view literacy as both a skill and a social practice tied to constructs of meaning and identity.

Learning, literacy and journey

Within the context of a transforming cultural identity and the social vulnerability of students, the following statements are especially salient. They present specific examples of the wider meaningfulness of a literacy program in terms of developing a sense of identity applicable to the cultural world of the learner. The first statement emerged during conversation with one of the participants; I had expressed the concern that I was not teaching to their understanding in reference to the difficulties students experienced when learning to write. The second and third statement emerged during a reflective writing exercise.

Don't worry about what you teach. We know we have a long way to go. A very long way to go. It is our dream to write English and get a good job. But that is very far in the future. You just teach us what we need to learn. Someday we will get there.

I came through to B. and the people I know are all in Melbourne and I am living in B. I don't know what can I do, it was too hard in my life... I couldn't speak English ... now I keep myself busy learning more to get there very quickly to speak and write competently. It is very difficult to get there.

Sometimes I get to class a little bit late. But the English is our future. From the other language English is the best. But it is very difficult to get there.

The statements reveal something of the acknowledged importance of functional English. They also reveal insight into the language aspirations of learners and their imagined futures. Such futures, expressed in terms of metaphorical journeys, reveal also a sense of ownership and responsibility. It is a journey not only in terms of acquiring skills but also in terms of acquiring a sense of place in the wider society.

The insights gleaned from the statements above may be contrasted with those statements concerning the out of school literacy practices reported earlier. What is collectively significant about these out of school literacy practice statements is not just what is being said but also what is not said. My observations made through informally conversing with students indicate that the use of literacy out of school, although not extensive, does occur. Learners for example, frequently cited the practices of reading religious texts such as the Bible, reading books to and with their young children and texting each other or members of their own community in English. Put differently, learners utilise their learning of English literacy in their social lives but do not view these uses as significant literacy practices. This was found to be a common theme in the responses of the participants of this research project. There was a frequent mismatch between institutional priorities based on the acquisition of functional skills and the cultural lives of the students based on negotiating and navigating a cultural landscape very different from that espoused in class based literacy. In other words, by constructing literacy purely in ideological terms we are in danger of missing the relevancy of literacy skills acquisition for our learners in the context of their everyday activities and their participation in a literacy class. Rather than contextualising the acquisition of workplace skills only as the end goal of a literacy program (thereby denying ownership of the literacy journey which learners themselves aspire to travel along) such a learning process may be profitably viewed by those involved in the teaching of literacy to pre-literate adult refugee learners in terms of one aspect of a broader cultural journey.

The cultural journeys of learners' lives

Viewing participation in a literacy course as a part of a broader cultural journey reveals learners' lives as a complexity of ongoing negotiated cultural meanings, of which one aspect is literacy, both in its social and its functional variant. The following statements, of which variations were frequently produced and reproduced by the participants, show something of this negotiated complexity and the broad cultural challenges that learners face.

You know we have our ways of disciplining our children. But in this country our children learn new ways. At school they learn new things. They learn Australian ways. They do not listen to adults. What do we do with our children? How do we discipline our children in this culture?

I saw a lady take something from the bag of another lady on the station. The train person asked if anyone had seen anything. I said nothing. My husband said to be quiet. In my country where I come from, the police will take me away if I talk to them. I need to be quiet. I don't understand this country. If I do something I might do the wrong thing. First we must understand this country. This is why I don't say very much. I want to understand. Then we can know if we do the right thing.

The statements above bring to focus aspects of intense significance for learners both in terms of their understanding and feelings of cultural difference and concurrently their role in a very new cultural environment. Each of the statements above highlight aspects of cultural learning. What is notable about the comments generally is the diversity of topics participants expressed in terms of the cultural challenges they experienced. These challenges include the use of money, relationships between married couples and the importance of handing down a sense of cultural identity to their children. What connects these experiences is a strong focus on reflection of the cultural challenges in life and even a sense of cultural change through engaging in a wider cultural landscape.

In the lives of the participants of this study the literacy program potentially enabled learners to discuss the cultural landscape they found themselves in and reflect upon their own lives and identity. It provided a safe environment to explore the meanings that mattered to them, inclusive of, but not confined to those associated with literacy. The statements below locate this wider significance of the adult ESL

class for this group of learners. They serve to showcase this direct interface between identity and engagement with an ESL class.

When that woman from human rights came and asked us about our experiences I felt very good because I know someone can help us. I pray someone can help us.

You know, with that man when he taught us, I learn so much about Centrelink and money and about payments. I learn about forms. This was good. I need this information.

Indeed it appears to be this juxtaposition between a student's transforming sense of identity and their participation in the program which enhances the meaningfulness of their participation. This is not to advocate for a widespread adoption of socially orientated workshops for learners. Rather it points to the need of tailoring classes to the emerging identities of students inclusive, but not reduced to their emerging literate identities. It points to the value of enabling students to claim ownership over their learning as part of a wider cultural journey of social belonging in mainstream society.

This sense of literacy program participation as an aspect of a broader cultural journey is an incredibly powerful one as the following two statements indicate.

When I first learn I feel very small. Like I cannot do anything, I have no confidence so I cannot learn. But now, now I think better of myself. I can learn because I think myself better now. I have a place in this society.

I need to be told that I can do things that people believe in me. Being told that my writing is no good. This does not help me. We know this already. We need more than this. We need to have confidence in ourselves.

These latter statements reveal that a literacy program can have a huge bearing, both in a positive and a negative sense, on the lives of learners. Although as teachers and teacher administrators we may think of our roles solely as one of providing literacy instruction within an English speaking context as defined by the curriculum our learners may view it as far more than that. Unless we recognise this we may not only deprive learners of ownership over their own learning but fail to recognise the broader gains they make in the

context of their cultural journey arguably at a time when they are at their most vulnerable.

Discussion

In this paper literacy is contextualised through learners' emerging and transforming selves. Such a positioning offers a unique and different perspective to literacy teaching and learning in the adult ESL classroom aligned with the position of Gomez (2004) that human beings are diverse and multidimensional rather than linear and simplistic.

Aligned with the theoretical framework of meaningful participation, and the social practice approach to literacy learning it was contended that the manner in which literacy is presented can act as a space for learners to examine their realities through foregrounding their sense of identity and giving voice to their meanings. Likewise it can also potentially impact negatively on learners' emerging sense of self through reproducing the dominant social discourse and denying difference (Cooke, 2008). It is contended that it is acknowledging and understanding this process of emerging identity, and reconciling this process with the multiple meanings of ESL literacy programs, which creates the space for participation to be made more engaging for learners.

The orientation of the AMEP program towards the acquisition of functional skills does not expressly acknowledge difference. Nor does it acknowledge the importance of connecting literacy with learners' lives (Kral & Schwab, 2003). Arguably the lack of recognition of the cultural challenges in the acquisition of literacy does little to enable learners to understand themselves, their experiences and their roles within a very different cultural landscape from their own homeland. Not including identity concepts within literacy programs is both a pedagogical and social silence which ignores the importance for learners to rethink and reflect upon their own sense of self within a safe and secure environment.

This is not to deny that many teachers are inclusive of the identity of their learners in their delivery of class based ESL instruction. After all it has been a basic practice in communicative and transformative pedagogies for a very long time (Cummins 2000). Neither is it to deny the importance of functional English skills. The push towards greater accountability in the classroom however fails to acknowledge the emerging sense of identity of learners and the

potentially fragile nature of their own sense of self. It is thus a serious omission within the context that literacy programs are often a key gateway for students to understand the cultural landscape and the challenges they face. Reducing literacy to the acquisition of skills, such as in the AMEP English language curriculum, limits the participants' own sense of emerging literate identity to values concomitant with the institutional discourse itself rather than values in their own lives.

Implications for the delivery of literacy programs in the pre-literate classroom.

Given the powerful and pervasive neo-liberal discourse which frames literacy delivery to preliterate refugee learners it may be asked however, what, if anything, can and should be done about this situation. After all the global trend towards greater economic transnationalism is likely to put greater pressure on governments to frame teaching in terms of measurable economic outcomes. For answer I return to the point made above. This concerns the potential lack of awareness of the ideology(ies) to which teachers as well as administrators and curriculum designers deliver, frame and design programs in the adult ESL context (Benesch 1993, Fairclough 1992).

Through understanding the prevailing ideology which we, as teachers and administrators work under, it becomes possible to understand its limitations and thereby create a shared space of multiple ideologies and alternative viewpoints. Through focusing on constructions of identity, as well as constructions of workplace skills, we can begin to ask much more informed questions regarding the effectiveness of the programs we deliver, design or administer from the perspective of our students rather than government departments In the present complex society it may be time to reframe literacy programs, particularly the AMEP English language program, in terms of multiple ideologies, including the social, the functional and the ideological, to acknowledge emerging identities and enable those on the margins to develop their own understanding of themselves in their new society.

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