

# **A research paper analysing the main challenges and benefits of making a link between learners' outside literacies and those within the classroom.**

**Barry S Markwick**

Author: Barry S Markwick

Degree: Master degree

Major: Education

Academic year: 2022

Email: chitapa.y.rmutr@gmail.com

Traditional approaches to teaching and learning assumed that learners, 'enter the classroom as empty vessels to be filled with information about the world' (Hall, 2012, p.71). A sociocultural approach is now seen as a more effective way of enabling language learners to express their rich background of cultural identity and bring their literacy practices from outside the classroom into a more formal learning environment (Hall, 2012). It is important for modern teachers to be aware of the rich source of opportunities that are available for language learners outside of the classroom and how these can be utilised inside the classroom (Norton, 2000). It can be argued that one of the responsibilities of the modern teacher is to be able to understand the cultural experiences of the learners they engage with and how their sociocultural experiences can be of benefit inside a formal learning environment.

The way that we engage with literacy practices- 'general cultural ways of utilising written language which people draw upon in their lives' (Barton & Hamilton in Ivanic et al, 2007, p.706) - has changed significantly in modern times. A move away from paper based literacies towards more electronic based artefacts which are used in our daily lives. This has led to a creation of more genres which are available to be used to make meaning (Ivanic et al. 2007). Previous literacy practices like shorthand writing or composing telegrams have been joined and even replaced by more modern literacy practices like email and text messaging services (Ivanic et al, 2007). Literacy events - any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants, (Heath in Ivanic et al, 2007, p. 706) - are abundant in people's everyday lives and experiences despite crisis narratives to the contrary. (Ivanic et al, 2007). One of the challenges for modern teachers is to weigh up the benefits and possible drawbacks of utilising these new literacy practices within a formal learning environment.

The literacy practices that are used in formal learning environments in many examples are not altogether focussed on maximising the potential that learners have and do not always build upon the literacy practices that the learners engage in outside the classroom (Ivanic et al, 2007). Also, the learners have a rich linguistic and cultural set of experiences that are available to be utilised within the classroom that are largely ignored (Hall, 2012). The literacy practices that learners participate in outside of formal learning environments and that which are preferred are not always those which are used by education organisations when it comes to creating

curricula. Learners are engaging more and more in literacy practices which are collaborative, involve multimedia in non-linear reading paths, and include a clear idea of who the audience is (Ivanic et al, 2007). The diagram included in appendix a highlights the preferred literacy practices of learners in a study carried out by Ivanic et al, and contrasts with practices which are carried out in formal learning environments. Within formal learning environments some assignments are similar to the characteristics reported in Ivanic et al (2007) in which they are designed for students to work alone producing text in a linear format with unclear audiences (Ivanic et al, 2007).

Another issue to contend with is that learners from non-mainstream groups and communities have been brought up with and engage in different literacy practice from those which they find they have to deal with in school (Hall, 2012). Learners from a background where the language and literacy events mirror those which are practised in formal learning environments are better pre-disposed to succeed in school than those from backgrounds which are less aligned with those which are practiced in school (Hall, 2012). The students whose home practices are more in line with those at school are in a better position to succeed than those whose practices are not. What is needed is a move away from classroom-based curricula that only focuses on the mainstream sociocultural groups and a move towards a more encompassing and inclusive one that takes into account all of the non-mainstream groups that might be present in the society. Making school-based activities interesting and culturally relevant for all students is a step in engaging the learners and getting them interested in formal academic learning.

Utilising the literacy practices that learners engage in outside of the classroom in class-based activities starts to address these issues. Bringing the experience of the learners' sociocultural worlds outside the classroom and adapting these to be used in formal learning settings positions learners from a wider range of backgrounds to be able to succeed. Certainly this involves a degree of work from the teacher in researching what the particular literacy practices of his students are. The table in appendix b (Ivanic et al., 2009, p.29) is an example of how this process can begin to take place. The teacher requests the students to document their literacy practices outside and inside the classroom and this provides a starting point. The table would need to be adapted to suit the learners' abilities.

Learning language is a socially constructed practice (Halliday, 2004). 'Children learn language by learning how to behave in situations, not by leaning rules about what to say' (Halliday, 2004). Language use is now understood to be a collection of choices to be made in context, not decontextualized rules to be followed (Andrews in Hall, 2012). Learning language and culture are inextricably linked (Hall, 2012), so by bringing in a learner's culture from outside of the classroom and allowing him to build upon this to further his academic study, has obvious benefits. It allows him to be more confident in dealing with language in a formal learning environment. It also has an opportunity to re-position himself within his own social environments. It affords the learner with an opportunity to move from a position where he is surrounded by practices which are alien and confusing to one in which he is comfortable and has the confidence to flourish and enable learning to take place. The example of Gutierrez in her study, 'Developing a Socialcritical Literacy in the Third Space' the author explores an environment which is occupied by the teacher and student jointly (Gutierrez, 2008). This is a 'Third space' (Gutierrez, 2008) where the teacher allows the students to bring in their cultural and literacy experiences from outside of the classroom and adapts these for use in a formal education setting. In this study, Gutierrez

focuses on students from nondominant communities and within this Third Space the students are allowed to reframe their sociocultural experiences into academic literacy practices (Gutierrez, 2008). In this environment, the teacher provides support for the students, so that they are able to re-position themselves as 'historical actors' (Gutierrez, 2008, p.155). They are able to reframe their past experiences and their own social position into one of agency rather than have the environment 'happen' to them, they are able to take more responsibility and jostle themselves into a position of more power within their own social communities. This notion of agency is discussed by Morita (2004), in which the author discusses the differing identities learners inhabit in the classroom. Morita's view of agency is derived from a Vygotskian approach of agency, 'arising from individuals' engagement in the social world' (Morita, 2004, p.590). He further argues that agency is 'co-constructed' with the individual's social group (Lantolf and Pavlenko, in Morita, 2004, p.590). Enabling learners to negotiate their identity with sociocultural practices and artefacts that are familiar with and resonate with them on a deep, personal level puts them in a more favourable position in which agency can be used to express their own identities. This is not an easy transformation for learners to make; it requires an effort for these learners to reframe their identities into one of a more positive position.

The opportunity for learners to express their identities is one of the main benefits for introducing learners' literacy practices and experiences from outside into the classroom. Language is how we make meaning in our socially constructed worlds (Halliday in Hall, 2012). Second language learners come into the classroom with a rich cultural bag of experiences in which their own identity is wrapped up. With the sociocultural approach, we now know that the diversity that is available for use in the classroom is to be utilised. Rather than see learners from nondominant sections of society and L2 learners who come from a different background and culture from that in which they are studying as having cultural 'deficiencies' (Hall, 2012, p. 72), this diversity and these differences can be incorporated into classroom activities and learning to obtain better academic performances (Hall, 2012). By bringing in literacy practices and sociocultural events from learners' worlds, it gives more opportunity for them to become stakeholders in these learning environments; more confidence to express and represent their identities.

The Third Space (Gutierrez, 2012) paradigm compares with Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky's theory focuses on the distance between the development level that is possible to be obtained by the individual and the level that is possible within collaboratively using more capable peers or a teacher (Vygotsky, 1994). However, what Gutierrez is proposing is an extension of this idea. The Third Space reorganises the outside literacy practices of learners into more academic uses in the classroom; 'everyday concepts into "scientific"' (Gutierrez, 2008, p.152). Within this Third space, the teachers engage the learners in ways which allows the students to engage with their surroundings and to positively make use of their rich cultural and historic experiences in a formal academic environment. The teacher provides support; scaffolding to allow the students to develop.

One of the practices used in the Third space environment is that of 'hybrid language' (Gutierrez, 2008, p.153). This use of the learners' first language is utilized in the classroom to improve the feeling of community within the group. Another key issue for this use of L1 in a L2 learning environment is to allow the speaker to have a wider range of language to make meaning (Gutierrez, 2008). It also allows the learners to feel more comfortable in communicating his identity.

The teaching context that I am currently working has a number of challenges in making the link between the learners' outside literacies and the classroom. I work in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in a technical vocational college. The ELT department is tasked with preparing the students for a Cambridge IELTS exam in which they have to obtain a score of 4.5 to 6.5 depending on their vocational course. Access to electronic-based multimodal literacy artefacts is difficult. The resources available to the teacher in my learning institute are a mixture of traditional and modern. There are smart boards in most of the classrooms, but Internet use is restricted, with all social media sites unavailable and with one CALL lab for students to use which has no Internet access at all.

Social media sites are very popular in Saudi Arabia; the country has the highest per capita use of You Tube and Twitter in the world, and has the highest number of Facebook users in the Gulf (Black, 2013). This would be an ideal way to incorporate the learners' sociocultural experiences inside the classroom. Saudi Arabia is a deeply religious country, one which has segregation of the sexes. There are laws against large congregations outside of religious events and sports events or government sponsored events. Online social interaction is an opportunity for Saudis of all ages, but particularly the younger sections of society to express themselves and this is a rich source of literacy practices that is a challenge to bring in to my teaching environment.

A further challenge is that of the integration of hybrid language (Gutierrez, 2008) in the classroom. Whilst I agree that this has an opportunity for learners to express their identity in a L2 classroom with more conviction, it needs to be controlled. In Gutierrez's study (2008) the author found it key to allow L1 use to discuss home and community (Gutierrez, 2008), this only works in bilingual classes where the teacher has full control over the language used. The classes I teach in Saudi Arabia are ones in which all the learners are Saudi, Arabic speakers, but the language of instruction is that of English. I can see how this could be helpful for learners to build community in the social group using L1 to express their own authentic identities, but I do not possess the language skills or have the opportunity to have a L1 assistant in the classroom. It is possible to have controlled L1 use in the classroom, but it is difficult to manage and requires dependence on the stronger group students to maintain a responsible attitude.

There are limitations to how the students' outside literacy events can be adapted in my current teaching environment. However, one current literacy practice that I capitalise on is the use of text messaging services. We live in a more textually mediated world (Barton, in Ivanic et al. 2007), and this is certainly true in Saudi Arabia. As previously discussed, social media use is very high in Saudi Arabia. Within this sphere, Blackberry Messenger and WhatsApp are popular applications that are used by the students in my learning/teaching context. We utilise this in the classroom by setting up class groups so that the students have an opportunity to use L2 in and outside of the classroom to discuss any topics that are of interest. Whilst in the classroom this is used for interaction of more academic nature (role-play interaction, spelling quizzes etc.), outside of the classroom discussions are more varied. The most predominant topics discussed are football, and current news events that happen. This gives me an insight into the outside interests of the students and I have used the knowledge gained in this group messenger chats to inform in-class activities and certainly for discussion topics to frame more academic activities.

We all live our lives with multiple identities and in many different settings. If teachers can utilise the rich source of literacy practices that are available outside of formal learning environments within the classroom, this would lead to a more equitable situation for all social groups and classes. There are challenges involved, but a move to

more personalized learning environments where all students have the potential to succeed in equal measure no matter their background has to be the objective. A focus on sociocultural practices inside the classroom is a step towards attaining this.

## Bibliography

- Black, I. (2013) digital generation takes on Twitter, YouTube ... and authorities Guardian, 17 December [online] Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/17/saudi-arabia-digital-twitter-social-media-islam> (accessed 01/04/2014)
- Gutiérrez, K., Baquedano-Lopez, P. and Tejeda, C. (2000) 'Rethinking diversity: hybridity and hybrid language practices in the Third Space', *Mind, Culture and Activity*, vol. 6, no. 4, pp. 286–303.
- Hall, J.K. (2012) *Teaching and Researching: Language and Culture*, (2nd edn), Harlow, Pearson Longman (Set Book)
- Halliday, M.A.K. (2004 [1980]) 'Three aspects of children's language development: learning language, learning through language, learning about language', in Halliday, M.A.K. (ed.) *The Language of Early Childhood: Vol. 4 The Collected Works of M.A.K. Halliday*, London, Continuum.
- Ivanic, R., Edwards, R., Satchwell, C. and Smith, J. (2007) 'Possibilities for pedagogy in Further Education: harnessing the abundance of literacy', *British Educational Research Journal*, vol. 33, no. 5, pp. 703–21.
- Morita, N. (2004) 'Negotiating participation and identity in second language academic communities', *TESOL Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 573–603
- Norton, B. (2000) 'Claiming the right to speak in classrooms and communities' in *Identity And Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity And Educational Change*, London, Pearson Education.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1994 [1978]) 'Interaction between learning and development' in Stierer, B. and Maybin, J., (eds.) *Language, Literacy and Learning in Educational Practice*, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters Limited