

An approach to exploring student literacy practices in an English university culture

Mary Williams,

Sheffield Hallam University, England, U.K.

With reference to the conference theme of ELT for academic and occupational purposes, this paper aims to encourage its readers to use a method of exploring literacy practices (or indeed language practices in general) to identify existing practices in either a specific workplace culture or an academic culture. This method for the identification of language practices can aid the design of courses for professional or academic purposes by basing teaching on sound knowledge of the language practices of practitioners and learners.

Literacy Practices

Literacy practices (also called literacies) have been defined by Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic (2000:7) as “general cultural ways of utilising written language which people draw on in their lives”. These practices are not only what people do with reading and writing in their everyday lives but involve values that a community attributes to written language (for example, a Pacific island community valuing the writing of letters to family members for financial and affective reasons in Besnier (1995)). Literacy is not seen as singular and ‘autonomous’ but as ‘ideological’ – involving aspects not only of culture but of power structures (Street, 1995). Vernacular literacies (everyday literacies) and literacies in languages other than school languages are often investigated as opposed to school and educational literacies. Indeed various researchers (e.g. in sociolinguistics, Heath, 1983; in social anthropology, Street, 1995) have found differences between literacies valued in education and those current and valued outside education. Academics such as Heath have as educationalists sought to mediate educational practices and change the curriculum for learners accustomed to other literacies in order to

minimise disadvantage in education. School or university is seen as one 'domain' in these studies, 'domain' being defined as "a social space in which literacy practices are embedded" (Baynham, 1995:68) The study described below focussed on two domains which were called for the purposes of the project 'study' and 'leisure'.

Research Method

This research, which serves here as an example of the use of a method of exploring literacy practices, looked at English university culture and the literacy practices of two Chinese undergraduates. The rationale for this study was that if differences in practices had been found across communities in the same locality using the same language (Heath, 1983), there was likely to be greater variation for bilingual participants, across national cultures (UK and China) and across learning cultures (ways of learning in China and the UK). The approach was ethnographic, using observation and interviews, and the procedure was as follows:

- Shadowing/ interviews for identification of practices
- Checklists of literacy practices (completed for a week)
- Interview (about one hour)

Observation, for instance of attendance at lectures and use of the library, was followed by interviews and both these methods were employed to identify uses of literacy by each of the two students. The information was then fed into personalised checklists of literacies known to be used by each individual student, which the students then completed over a week. For the first two stages of observation/interviews and checklist completion, information about language use in general was collected in addition to literacy use information. This was done because literacy uses are often integrated with oral uses and literacy use is sensitive, being subject to stigmatisation. Other researchers with more literate or reflective participants or participants with more time to give have used literacy journals (e.g. Jones, Martin-Jones and Bhatt, 2000); others with less literate subjects, for example children, have used photos (e.g. Hodge and Jones, 2000) to capture uses of literacy.

The final interview after completion of the checklist provided most of the data as it used the checklist as a starting point to investigate:

- mediation (help with literacy: given or received)
- collective or individual literacy practices
- procedures such as length of time spent, location
- affective factors linked to the language used for specific purposes
- past literacy transmission (how they had learned literacy)
- changes in their literacy practices over their lives and particularly in relation to the move to England
- important literacy practices (generally and according to specific domains)
- gender roles
- future literacy transmission (what literacies they planned to transmit to the next generation)

Many of these interview schedule topics could be used to explore other domains such as workplace language practices. The ethnographic approach enabled the identification of both practices and values underlying the practices and the exploration of the evolving identities of the participants (in this case, in academic life)

Selected Findings

Checklist findings for these two students included high frequency of English academic reading, regular diary use in Mandarin and regular literate communication both in Mandarin and English. These contributed to a picture of highly developed and currently practised literacies in Mandarin Chinese as well as frequent literacy use in English.

The interview elicited the how and why of the students' uses of literacy. They assessed the English study reading as important but the intensive reading required short bursts of reading to retain concentration. One student had a very positive attitude both to reading and writing, enjoying the self-expression it permitted. This attitude may be due to strong parental literacy practices and support. Group literacy practices were identified for both, with groups of Chinese or international students meeting to elucidate their reading matter. Academic writing, however, was generally done individually. Discussion of differences between Chinese and English education revealed a high investment in English academic practices with recognition of the symbolic and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1979) which they expect an English education to bring them. This also revealed positive evaluation of literacy practices in English academia and of perceived academic demands for autonomy and

criticality. These values and beliefs reveal the complexity of these students' literacy practices.

To sum up, the assets that these students bring from their literacy practices, both Chinese and English, are:

- Regular reading and writing, exploiting both individual and collective work
- Experience of regular and frequent self-expression and communication
- Positive attitudes both to literacy practices in general and to British academic practices.

Recommendations

The teacher take-up that is suggested from this study is:

- The recognition of these assets, which are key to the development of successful learners
- The exploitation of work outside the classroom, both group and individual, to enhance work in class
- The utilising of students' responsiveness to the new learning culture, by making the expectations of that culture explicit

Conclusion

The use of an ethnographic approach serves to identify both literacies and associated values and to explore the evolving identities of the participants. The in depth study of a small number of participants allows for probing both of target cultures and of the existing language practices of entrants to those cultures and for a teaching strategy to be elaborated to facilitate the 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave and Wenger 1991) of our students, whether they be accessing higher education or learning appropriate language skills for professional purposes.

References

- Barton, D., M. Hamilton and R. Ivanic, *Situated literacies: reading, writing in context*, New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Baynham, M, *Literacy practices*, Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1995.
- Besnier, N, *Literacy, emotion and authority*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Bourdieu, P, *La distinction*, Paris: les Editions de Minuit, 1979.
- Heath, S.B, *Ways with words: language, life and work in communities and classrooms*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Hodge, R. and K. Jones in Martin-Jones and Jones.op.cit.
- Jones, K., M. Martin-Jones and A. Bhatt in Martin-Jones and Jones.op.cit.
- Lave, J. and Wenger, E, *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Martin-Jones, M. and K. Jones, *Multilingual literacies: reading and writing different worlds*, Amsterdam, Holland: John Benjamins, 2000.
- Street, B.V.1995, *Social literacies*, Harlow, Essex: Longman.