



**Iranian
Journal of Society, Culture & Language
IJSCL**

Journal homepage: www.ijscl.net

Applying Earlier Literacy Research in Iran to Current Literacy Theory and Policy

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ARTICLE HISTORY:

Received January 2013
Received in revised form February 2013
Accepted February 2013
Available online February 2013

KEYWORDS:

Literacy
Literacy theory
Literacy policy
Literacy in Iran
Unesco

Abstract

In this paper, I attempt to bring together approaches to literacy in theory and in practice, drawing upon various activities I have been involved in over the years—research in Iranian villages during the 1970s; linking research and theory to literacy policy, with particular reference to a contribution to the Unesco Global Monitoring Report in 2004 and involvement in an ongoing adult literacy training programme appropriately entitled Learning Empowerment through Training in Ethnographic Research (LETTER). IJSCL is interested in publishing original research and review articles on the relationship between society, culture, and language and in particular ‘linking sound theoretical approaches on these fields with visible practical applications that can be used by specialists in anthropology, sociology, linguistics, education, intercultural studies, and policy making’. I hope that this piece on literacy, with due reference to work in Iran, will fit with that brief.

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1. Introduction

Teresa McCarty, in ‘The continuing power of the great divide’, her introduction to a recent book on *language literacy and power in schooling* (2005), addressed the issues I raised in *literacy and theory and practice* (Street, 1984) regarding ‘Great Divide’ debates and summarised my earlier fieldwork (p. xx):

Similarly, Street’s framework in northeastern Iran in the early 1970s identified three kinds of literacies: maktab literacy associated with Islam and Qur’anic (or maktab religious) schools, commercial literacy involved in village fruit sales (and based on prior development of maktab literacy), and literacy acquired in state schools (Street, 1984; see also Collins & Blot, 2003, pp. 54-61, for a summary and critique of Street’s research). Reflecting on this research more than 30 years later, Street (2001a) notes that there was “actually a lot of literacy going on”, but “there were quite different ‘practices’ associated with it” (p. 6).

In fieldwork in Iranian villages during the early 1970s (Street, 1984), as McCarty points out, what began to emerge as literacy practices were uses and meanings of literacy that were identifiable around three domains of social activity: the *maktab* literacy practices associated with the primary Qur’anic school and religious practices; schooled literacy practices in the more secular and modernising context of the State school; and the commercial literacy practices associated with buying and selling fruit for transport to the city and the market. The practices in this third domain of social activity were quite different from either of the other sets of literacy practices. Characterising them as literacy practices helped to explain those differences, and I could then talk about whether there were certain identities associated with particular practices. In that context, the identity

associated with *maktab* literacy was derived from traditional authority in the village located in Qur’anic learning, and from a social hierarchy dominated by men. Schooled literacy, on the other hand, was associated with new learning and with modernisation. Commercial literacy emerged in response to the economic activity of selling fruit to the nearby cities at a time of economic boom, and involved writing notes, cheques, lists, names on crates and so on, to facilitate the purchase and sale of quantities of fruit.

The framework for understanding literacy that I was developing at this time, including the concept of ‘literacy practices’ (see below), helped to provide an explanation for why commercial literacy was mainly undertaken by those who had been taught at the Qur’anic school rather than those from the modern State school, even though at first sight one might expect the literacy skills of the formal school to be more functionally oriented to commercial practices. Those with Qur’anic literacy had the status and authority within the village to carry on these commercial practices, whilst those trained in the State school were seen to be oriented outwards and lacked the integral relations to everyday village life that underpinned the trust necessary for such transactions. In this village context, then, ‘literacy’ was not simply a set of functional skills, as much modern schooling and many literacy agencies represent it, but rather it was a set of social practices deeply associated with identity and social position. Approaching literacy as a social practice provides a way of making sense of variations in the uses and meanings of literacy in such contexts rather than reliance on the barren notions of literacy skills, rates and levels that dominate much contemporary discussion of literacy.

2. New Literacy Studies

A literature has emerged that builds upon these insights and a growing body of ethnographic research describes and explains variation in

literacy practices across and within cultures, from outside of the dominant discourse (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 1999; Baynham, 1995; Maybin, 1993; Prinsloo & Breier, 1996; Street, 1993, 2005; Wagner, 1987). These newer developments in social literacies have sometimes been referred to as ‘new literacy studies’ (Barton & Hamilton, 1999; Collins, 1995; Gee, 1990; Heath, 1993; Street, 1993). Much of the work in this approach focuses on the everyday meanings and uses of literacy in specific cultural contexts, and links directly to how we understand the work of literacy learning programmes which themselves are becoming subject to ethnographic enquiry (Robinson-Pant, 1997, 2004; Street, 2005). Similar analyses to that in Iranian villages have been conducted in other contexts, where likewise multiple literacy practices are associated with different arenas or domains of public life. Literacy is not practised in a vacuum; it is always embedded within some socio-cultural set of activities, and it is these activities, not the literacy itself, which provide the material for the analysis of literacy practices. And since “the ways we learn about written language are shaped by the situation in which reading and writing are used” (Kalman & Street, 2012, p. 75; see Barton & Hamilton, 1999; Lewis, Encisco & Moje, 2007; Papen, 2007) it follows that the literacy practices learned in adult literacy learning courses are those shaped by schooling and the associated social and interactional meanings experienced there, rather than by ‘real’ life outside of such a formal framework.

Key concepts in the field of new literacy studies include the concepts of *literacy events* and of *literacy practices*. Shirley Brice Heath characterised a ‘literacy event’ as ‘any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants’ interactions and their interpretative processes’ (Heath, 1982, p. 50). I have employed the phrase ‘literacy practices’ (Street, 1984, p. 1) as a means of focussing upon ‘the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing’, although I later elaborated the term both to take account of ‘events’ in Heath’s sense

and to give greater emphasis to the social models of literacy that participants bring to bear upon those events and that give meaning to them (Street, 2005). David Barton, Mary Hamilton, and colleagues at Lancaster University, have taken up these concepts and applied them to their own research in ways that have been hugely influential both in the UK and internationally (cf. Barton & Hamilton, 1999). The issue of dominant literacies and non-dominant, informal or vernacular, literacies is central to their combination of ‘situated’ and ‘ideological’ approaches to literacy.

In trying to characterise these new approaches to understanding and defining literacy, I have also referred to a distinction between an ‘autonomous’ model and an ‘ideological’ model of literacy (Street, 1984). The ‘autonomous’ model of literacy works from the assumption that literacy in itself - autonomously—will have effects on other social and cognitive practices. The model, I argue, disguises the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it and that can then be presented as though they are neutral and universal. Research in the social practice approach challenges this view and suggests that in practice dominant approaches based on the autonomous model are simply imposing western (or urban etc.) conceptions of literacy on to other cultures (Street, 2000). The alternative, ideological model of literacy offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another. This model starts from different premises than the autonomous model—it posits instead that literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles and power relations; and that it varies, therefore, from one context to another. The ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being. Literacy, in this sense, is always contested, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always ‘ideological’, they are always rooted in a particular world-view and a

desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalise others (Gee, 1990). The ways in which teachers or facilitators and their students interact is already a social practice that affects the nature of the literacy being learned and the ideas about literacy held by the participants, especially the new learners and their position in relations of power. It is not valid to suggest that 'literacy' can be 'given' neutrally and then its 'social' effects only experienced or 'added on' afterwards.

Because of the failure of many traditional literacy programmes (Abadzi, 2003; Street, 2001 academics, researchers and practitioners working in literacy in different parts of the world are beginning to come to the conclusion that the autonomous model of literacy on which much of the practice and programmes have been based is not an appropriate intellectual tool, either for understanding the diversity of reading and writing around the world or for designing the practical programmes this requires, which may be better suited to an ideological model (Robinson-Pant, 1997; Wagner, 1993). I will now discuss some of the implications of these conceptual and theoretical developments for policy debates.

3. Implications for Policy Debates

The question this approach raises for policy makers and programme designers is, then, not simply that of the 'impact' of literacy - to be measured in terms of a neutral developmental index - but rather of how local people 'take hold' of the new communicative practices being introduced to them, as Kulick and Stroud's (1993) ethnographic description of missionaries bringing literacy to New Guinea villagers makes clear. How people 'take hold' of literacy is contingent on social and cultural practices and not just on pedagogic and cognitive factors. This raises questions that need to be addressed in any literacy programme: What is the power relation between the participants? What are the resources? Where are people going if they take on one set of literacy practices rather than

another? How do recipients challenge the dominant conceptions of literacy?

This approach has implications for both research and practice. Researchers, instead of privileging the particular literacy practices familiar in their own culture, now suspend judgement as to what constitutes literacy among the people they are working with until they are able to understand what it means to the people themselves, and which social contexts reading and writing derive their meaning from (Aikman, 1999; Doronilla, 1996; Heath, 1983; Hornberger, 1997, 2002; Kalman, 1999; King, 1994). Many people labelled 'illiterate' within the autonomous model of literacy may, from a more culturally-sensitive viewpoint, be seen to make significant use of literacy practices for specific purposes and in specific contexts. For instance, studies suggest that even non-literate persons find themselves engaged in literacy activities so the boundary between literate/ non literate is less obvious than individual 'measures' of literacy suggest (Doronilla, 1996; Nabi et al., 2009). Academics have, however, often failed to make explicit the implications of such theory for practical work. In the present conditions of world change such ivory tower distancing is no longer legitimate. But likewise, policy makers and practitioners have not always taken on board such 'academic' findings, or have adopted one position (most often that identified with the autonomous model) and not taken account of the many others outlined here. These findings, then, raise important issues both for research into literacy in general and for policy in Education and Teacher Training in particular.

From this point of view, then, the various strands of study outlined for international policy statements on literacy, such as the Global Monitoring Report, (2004) and the forthcoming revision of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), need to indicate which literacies are under consideration, when they refer to such strands of policy as: 'Measuring and monitoring literacy', 'Strategies and policies for literacy', 'Literacy and human development', and

‘Pedagogical approaches to literacy ‘effective literacy learning and programme designs’.

I will argue here—and believe that this is an important direction for this new Journal IJSCL—that the justification for such an explicit, ‘academic’ rendering of the assumptions underlying literacy work, rests on the grounds that if policy makers and practitioners fail to take account of such perspectives and their implications, then we might end up putting our energies into unproductive directions and could be seen as acting without control and knowledge of the field in which we are engaged – an outcome that would be ironical since that is the reason why many claim to be bringing literacy to the ‘unenlightened’ in the first place! If we want literacy learners to acquire literacy because it will help them to become more critical, self aware and in control of their destinies, then we need to apply the same arguments to ourselves as we struggle with alternative approaches to literacy work itself. The implications of these scholarly debates for these strands are not, then, that we abandon work in this field – despite the occasional tendency in that direction as researchers question many of the supposed gains associated with literacy, but rather that we put it into perspective and recognise the limitations and constraints imposed by the different theoretical positions we adopt. I conclude, then, with some indicators of how we might identify these underlying perspectives in different programmes and what the implications might be for policy and practice in the provision of literacy programmes and the measurement of literacy.

As McCarty signalled in ‘The Continuing Power of the Great Divide’, referred to above, the ‘cognitive consequences’ of literacy are often cited as the key to literacy learning. If you believe that literacy leads to the consequences laid out in the ‘literacy thesis’ – more ‘logical’ thinking, facility with syllogisms, ability to separate myth from history and to overcome the tendency of oral cultures towards cultural homeostasis, and—perhaps the key claim for

educational purposes - that ‘Literacy and the accompanying process of classroom education brings a shift towards greater “abstractedness”, views often associated with a shift from ‘primitive’ or ‘underdeveloped’ to ‘developed’ or ‘modern’ - then it is likely that the design of the programme will not be too concerned with local knowledge and literacy, which will be seen as the ‘problem’ rather than a basis for the solution. Such an approach has led to top down, often urban centred and ethnocentric programmes that invoke the ‘literacy thesis’ to justify their dominance. On the one hand, as Abadzi (2003) argues that such new approaches to adult literacy should simply involve more sophisticated approaches to cognition: ‘Research on literacy is often carried out by adult education specialists who typically lack training in cognition and neuropsychology... There is limited technical understanding about enabling adults to read faster and more accurately. The instructional delivery of adult literacy could be reformulated based on state-of-the-art cognitive findings’ (2003, p. 9). On the other hand, if you start from the critique of the cognitive approach developed, for instance, by Olson (1994) and by Scribner and Cole (1981) amongst others, then the programme design will be less concerned with memory and speed of reading and will instead be more culturally sensitive and, perhaps, more tuned to specific literacy practices as facilitating the specific cognitive skills being targeted. Measurement will be dependent on which underlying position is adopted: a concern with memory skills, speed of reading and fluency will lead to tests that measure these factors; a concern for ‘specific practices’ associated with such specific cognitive skills, as those for which Scribner and Cole tested *Via literate* in different scripts—‘Communication skills; Memory; and Language analysis’ – will lead to more customised tests.

A different, though related set of outcomes is likely to follow if programme designers adopt a social literacies perspective (see Unesco, 2003; DfID, 1994, 1999 for a full account of how these approaches might be relevant to adult literacy

programmes). From this point of view, it would be important, as in a more ‘social’ cognitive approach, to build on local practices and, again, to engage in pre programme research. But the effect would also be to require more tailor made programmes rather than assuming ‘one size fits all’ and would focus on social practices rather than cognitive skills. This has led, for instance, to ‘community literacies projects’ – such as the DfID funded project CLPN in Nepal, (Chitrakar et al., 2002)–where the programme becomes a resource on which local groups can call. Women in credit groups wanting support in filling out forms or creating their own; people interested in reading wall newspapers; forestry user groups concerned to involve all users, from woodsmen to animal herders; all have different literacy needs that the programme team then work to support and enhance. Pre programme research may identify specific events - such as form filling at a credit group meeting - and then link these to broader literacy practices – such as design and use of layout to represent amounts of money or tasks - and then build a programme that enhances these practices for the target group.

Similar programmes in S America, S Africa, and other sites have married the social practices approach with local philosophies, such as community action or neo Freirean approaches and ‘popular education’ in S America (Bartlett, 2003). In S Africa Kell (2001), likewise, links much of the work described above with that in the field of ‘Development’. She puts work in the tradition initiated by Paulo Freire concerning literacy programmes for ‘conscientization’, ‘liberation’ and ‘empowerment’ into the broader and newer context of ‘social literacies’, pointing out that some approaches to Freirean pedagogy have implicitly if not explicitly adopted earlier theories of learning and cognition that have led to more top down, hegemonic programmes. This is a classic example of how lack of attention to the underlying concepts and perspectives of a particular programme can blind its designers and users to hidden implications and unintended consequences: many Freirean activists would not

explicitly wish to be associated with such top down programmes and yet the underlying assumptions on which the programme is built may have this effect.

I will conclude this section on the application of these ideas in practice, with a brief summary of an ongoing project, in which I am involved with a colleague Alan Rogers who works in adult learning (cf. Rogers, 1992, 2005; Rogers & Street, 2012), that attempts to bring together the principles outlined above regarding literacy as social practice, rejecting the autonomous model and drawing upon ethnographic perspectives – a programme aptly entitled LETTER (Learning for Empowerment Through Training in Ethnographic Research). Started in India from discussions between a local women’s NGO, Nirantar, dedicated to Women’s Empowerment Through Education, the programme commenced in 2005 with a series of workshops held with participants from Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan and India. The main focus was on approaches to exploring everyday literacy and numeracy in local communities using ethnographic-style methodologies. A book was written and published by Nirantar based on the workshops, *exploring the everyday: ethnographic studies of literacy and numeracy* (Nirantar, 2007), and since then, Nirantar has been developing new teaching-learning approaches based on the findings of such surveys. The key element here is to help the literacy facilitators (teachers) to learn about the existing community literacy and numeracy activities of each particular learning group–indeed, to help the learners themselves to become more aware of what they do and what they feel about literacy and numeracy.

The project then moved to Ethiopia, where a group of about twenty trainers of literacy facilitators from around the country participated in a series of three workshops. The first was devoted to ethnographic approaches, with a field visit during the workshop; then each participant individually or in small groups, undertook a more detailed case study in their home context.

The second workshop finalised these case studies and began work on curriculum development for adult learning programmes. The third workshop finalised both strands, and again a book was written locally and published, *everyday literacies in Africa: ethnographic studies of literacy and numeracy in Ethiopia* (Gebre et al., 2009).

Currently a programme is being held in Uganda with the involvement of some of those engaged on the Ethiopia and India programmes to ensure that LETTER is a rolling programme in which both the trainers and the participant learners build on previous workshops. Ethnographic studies are being completed; curriculum building has been started. Two new features are the writing of reading material for learners, using ethnographic approaches to explore original (oral) material such as local stories (cf. Touray et al., 2010) and practices, and secondly, each of the participants has been asked to develop and teach a short training programme in literacy for adults using ethnographic material. Thus training for teaching is part of the LETTER Project now. A publication related to the everyday literacy and numeracy practices of individual case studies from Uganda is being prepared.

4. Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have drawn upon research and practice in the literacy field, from my own involvement in early field work in Iranian villages during the 1970s, to more recent engagement with literacy policy, notably the Unesco Global Monitoring Report in 2004; and ongoing involvement of myself and others in international contexts in an adult literacy training programme entitled Learning Empowerment through Training in Ethnographic Research (LETTER). These accounts speak, I believe, to the basic theme of this new Journal IJSL—that we cannot avoid the implications of the deeper conceptual frameworks that underpin our practice, in the field of literacy as in other domains. If we want to have some control over

the effects of our policy and practice, then we need first to make explicit what these underlying assumptions are and to take cognisance of what research tells us of their implications and of their consequences when they have been enacted in other contexts. Research, then, has a key role to play but on its own it might slide into academic navel gazing; but policy on its own runs the danger of succumbing to vested political interests; and practice that fails to take account of both of these—research and policy—for all their limitations, runs the danger of becoming narrow and out of touch with both local people and the larger world of which they are a key part. Understanding and defining literacy, then, lies at the heart of ‘doing’ literacy and the new understandings and definitions outlined above are essential to future development. Attention to this perspective, difficult though it is, can lead to quite different ways of ‘doing’, a principle that will, I believe, become more evident in the next phase of literacy work in the international domain.

[Parts of this paper originally appeared in a series published by Unesco as part of the 2004 Global Monitoring Report]

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