

Literacy Development of Aboriginal Students

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I. Introduction

Received a grant from Australia-Japan Foundation (AJF: オーストラリア政府・豪日交流基金), I visited Batchelor College (Batchelor Campus) in 1997. Next year, in 1998 with Dr. Chakravarty and Professor John. G. Ingram's help, I had the privilege of visiting Batchelor College annexed at Tennant Creek and Milingimbi Community School which has proven to be invaluable for my research of Aboriginal bilingual education. In 1999, advised by literacy teachers of Milingimbi School, I visited another school, Maningreda Community Education Centre which has an excellent reputation with its delivery of bilingual programs. In 2009, with assistance of Principal Education Officer of Northern Territory Department of Education, I visited Yuendumu Community Education Centre and Areyonga School in NT.

II. What is Literacy

To understand the importance of literacy, first we must define it. The traditional meaning of the word "literacy" is 'the ability to read and write' as Gee. J. described (1996). Regarding this meaning he noted that this meaning of the

word “literacy” appears innocent and obvious, however he also defines literacy as ‘an ability to write and read situates literacy in the individual person, rather in history. He also claimed that the history of literacy leads us to reject the traditional views of literacy and replace it with a socially and culturally situated perspective. He also claimed that school-based literacy holds within itself values that are important to the replication of the status quo. For those of the people who have ‘succeeded’ at higher-level school-based literacy, it is hard not to believe that such practices make for better minds, better people, and a better society. According to the literacy myth which he and those who dispute this omnipotent view of literacy refer to, across history and across various cultures, literacy has seemed to many people to be what distinguishes one kind of person from another kind of person, and literate people are, more intelligent, more modern, more moral. This view of literacy leads to that countries with high literacy rates are better developed, more modern, better behaved, furthermore, literacy freed some of humanity from a primitive state, from an earlier stage of human development and literacy is what makes us civilized.

To answer the question of “What is Literacy”, Wells described a four-level taxonomy which is proposed for categorizing the ways in which literacy is defined operationally in education. They are performative, functional, informational, epistemic which distinguished in terms of conceptualizations of the relationships between writing and speaking and between writing and thinking. He calls the first level of literacy the performative; the emphasis at this level is on the code as code. At this level, it is tacitly assumed that written messages differ from spoken messages only in the medium employed for communication. He calls the second level the functional whose perspective emphasizes the uses that are made of literacy in interpersonal communication. At this level, to be literate is to cope with the demands of everyday life that involve written language such as a popular newspaper, a job application, the instructions that explain how to

use a household gadget, or an official form. The third level is called the informational, and at this level the curricular emphasis on reading and writing, especially reading is on the student's use for accessing the accumulated knowledge that it is seen as the function of schooling to transmit because the code tends to be treated as transparent. At each of the preceding levels, particularly at the second and third, the concern is with literacy as a mode of communication, so as to focus only on.

The interpersonal communicative functions of literacy is to fail to recognize the changes that reading and writing can make in the mental lives of individuals and the societies to which those individuals belong. In his proposed account, the fourth level is the epistemic, and at this level, to be literate is to have available ways of acting upon and transforming knowledge and experience that are unavailable to those who have never learned to read and write. Finally he conceives of these four levels as forming a series of levels, with the fourth level representing the most adequate answer to the question, "What is Literacy?" (Gordon Wells, 1987)

Hartman. G. H. (1996) proposed as working definition for an expanded notion of literacy which weaves together linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural strands. However, it is often difficult to translate these definitions into the concrete realities of classroom teaching and curriculum design, so he considered seven principles that arise out of this definition; (1) Literacy involves interpretation. (2) Literacy involves collaboration. (3) Literacy involves conventions. (4) Literacy involves cultural knowledge. (5) Literacy involves problem solving. (6) Literacy involves reflection and self-reflection. (7) Literacy involves language use. He summarized the seven principles by macro-principle: literacy involves communication then suggested this seven-point linkage between lit-

eracy and communication has important implications for language teaching as it provides a bridge to span the gap that so often separates introductory ‘communicative’ language teaching and advanced ‘literacy’ teaching. Regarding reading and writing, he identified writing also requires active thinking and problem solving as reading does. He cited Thorndike’s characterization of reading (Thorndike 1917: 431) and recognized both reading and writing can be seen as acts of meaning construction, in which individuals make connections between textual elements and existing knowledge structures to create new knowledge structures.

III. Views of Literacy

The Australian Government considers that literacy and numeracy are the corner stones of all learning and that it is crucial for children to develop these foundation skills at the earliest possible time in their school years. A key priority has been to focus on achieving real, sustained improvements in the literacy and numeracy skills of Australian children to better prepare them for their futures. Ensuring all students gain at least a minimum acceptable standard in literacy and numeracy is critical in overcoming educational disadvantage. This means that gaining literacy and numeracy skills is a central equity issue in education today. (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations)

The first position of literacy, especially sanctioned by the Australian Government, could be described as functional literacy. The second position of it, proposed by a small but growing number of participants, nearly always in bilingual schools, would be described as critical literacy. McLaren (1988) defines functional literacy as referring to the technical mastery of particular skills necessary for students to decode simple texts such as street signs, instruction manuals and newspaper articles. On the other hand, Flower (1990) distin-

guishes critical literacy from critical thinking:

...which is not dependent on literacy (Scribner and Cole 1981), by emphasizing the specific contribution of writing. Flower's critical literacy involves more than evaluating other people's arguments — it involves making and supporting one's own. It is therefore rhetorical in nature. Critical literacy is absolutely essential in academic contexts, Flower's claims, because...it is the means by which students enter the conversation of their disciplines and learn to talk and think like historians and physicists... (Hartman 1996)

McLaren (1988) maintains that mainstream literacy programmes perceive being literate as having only the requisite fund of knowledge and skills necessary to participate in industrialized capitalist society. The mainstream NT core curricula also embodies a literacy that is perceived as the sole agent for social change and economic participation. In 2008, the NT Government made instruction in English for the first four hours of each day mandatory from the start of 2009. Supporters of this measure expect a transformation in performance. NT Chief Minister, Paul Henderson claimed the affected children will do as well as native speakers in year three tests, once standard Australian English (SAE) is the sole language of instruction. Eventually after visiting Yuendumu Community Education Centre, I knew through a letter from a literacy teacher that NT government decided not to practice this measure.

IV. The Aboriginal Approach to Learning

The Aboriginal approach to learning stands in sharp contrast to the mainstream one. It is a life long education process and each story has three elements. Firstly there is the element of lore (collective knowledge or wisdom) or rule which involves education about greed, sharing and respect elders etc. Then there is information about the environment and how to deal with the spirits and how they watch over them to make sure they obey the rules.

These stories are told at a very basic level for young children and questioning is inappropriate. If you were a European or Japanese child you might be asked questions about whether you understand the story. However in Aboriginal culture you are watched and it is seen whether you have understood the story by the way in which you behave. Then later when you return again you are told the same story at a higher level again, and so on and so on. If you show ignorance about the last story then your punishment is not to be told any more. It is a clever way of controlling things and making sure the stories are kept alive. So you have people with basic knowledge and other who have the full story. The Pitjantjatjara use the term “growing up the country”, which means that as you grow up and become a man or a woman, you have responsibilities for sights (the sacred sights or places which important to the tribe) and it is your job to maintain those sights. That means maintaining the stories that go with those sights. A friend who is a linguist in South Australia told me how he was trying to find the traditional word for a ground. And the Aboriginal people he was speaking with just couldn't remember. One of them lapsed into song cycle which in parts described, the cutting up of a turtle. By doing that he was able to remember the specific name of the ground. The song cycles didn't just represent pop music, they represented encyclopedic knowledge about the environment they lived in. Topography, history, culture, relationships, politics and law were all related in dances, songs and ceremonies. All is linked with land and topographical features which represent historic figures in Aboriginal history. (From an interview I conducted with Mr. Greg J. Wilson, Project Officer Aboriginal Languages, Department of Education of South Australia, 1997)

Regarding multiculturalism, Aboriginal people say that they are suspicious of it and keep a distance from it. Multiculturalism is rooted in the ethnic communities and naturally has the political interests of those group at heart.

Multiculturalism should be recognized, as not coming from a single group of people, but a collection of different ethnic groups. It must be remembered that these groups are different and might not like each other at all. They may even be racist toward each other and to Aboriginal people. So it must be remembered that multiculturalism is not a homogeneous block of like minded people. As it says multiculturalism is culturally and linguistically diverse in terms of its own political aspirations in Australia it is diverse. The needs of Greeks for example are different from needs of Vietnamese. However broadly they do have the same needs and that is acceptance in a multicultural Australia. Yet this excludes a lot of Aboriginal Australia because many of the new ethnic groups do not appreciate the richness of the Aboriginal culture. It's this aspect that Aboriginal people are suspicious of and so they distance themselves from. They can see that its in their interests to be recognized in multicultural Australia but at the same time remember that they are the indigenous people of Australia.

Lankshear (1987) arguing for the notion of literacy as a social construction claims that to the extent that education is a hegemonic process where people of a minority or subordinate group are inducted into the values and beliefs and ideological perspective of the dominant group, literacy acquired by subordinate groups serves to undermine their interests and support the interests of dominant group.

...literacy can be seen to be itself shaped and defined within the process of competing interests groups pursuing their respective interests under conditions of unequal access to structural power...At the same time, the very practice of literacy by subordinate groups becomes a factor in their own domination; a structural factor in the elevation of dominant group interests...Moreover, according to the ideological model, conceptions and practices of reading and writing evolves and exist within power structures and reflect tensions between power and interests groups.

V. What is Essential to the Education of Aboriginal Children?

1. Areyonga School (Pitjantjatjara)
2. Lajamanu CEC (Warlpiri)
3. Maningrida CEC (Burarra and Njdebbana)
4. Milingimbi CEC (Gupapuyngu and other traditional languages)
5. Numbulwar CEC (Wubuy)
6. Nyirrpri School (Warlpiri)
7. Papunya School (Luritja)
8. Shepherdson College (Djambarrapuyngu and other traditional languages)
9. Willowra CEC (Warlpiri)
10. Yirrkala CEC (Dhuwaya and other traditional languages)
11. Yuendumu CEC (Warlpiri)

(Two-Way Aboriginal Schooling in Northern Territory, Bilingual Education Program, NT Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2009)

A qualified linguist as well as a teacher is essential to the education of aboriginal children especially in remote schools. Tonkinson (2009) illustrate this point:

Though a full bilingual curriculum may be unachievable, there are undeniable benefits in school-based support for maintenance of local languages and cultures, and in avoiding placing teachers where the children do not understand them, and where they understand the children even less. Aboriginal Education Workers assist teachers with communication, but there is seldom structured or consistent use of children's first languages as an educational tool. At least, ESL training for teachers in the early grades should be a requirement. It is disgraceful that this is not already the case. If Aboriginal children were non-English-speaking immigrants they would have access to ESL-trained teachers, intensive English classes and appropriate resources. Teachers in remote schools are often unaware of basic language obstacles, like the fact that some Aboriginal languages do not distinguish the unvoiced and voiced consonants 'b' and 'p', 'd' and 't', and 'g' and 'k', thus children may not 'hear' these distinctions that are so significant in English.

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