Essay

Linking Literacy, Language, and Culture

Debbie Griffith
University of Saskatchewan

Views of literacy have changed considerably over time. Once defined as a set of skills, literacy is now seen to be a set of social practices that are contextually and culturally situated (Currie & Cray, 2004). The term multiliteracies has also come to the fore reflecting the notion that English Language Learners (ELLs) engage in diverse literacy practices across languages and contexts (Cummins, 2006). As an EAL literacy instructor within a federally funded language program, I am interested in examining how governing frameworks influence both pedagogy and practice and how learners are positioned within these frameworks. Reflecting on three critical incidents from my own praxis, I will examine instructional approaches that honour the social, linguistic, and cultural capital that adult learners inherently possess. I will also examine how these approaches allow ELLs to engage in identity work to counter negative positioning that stems from the way in which federal governing frameworks are enacted at the institutional level.

LIFE within LINC: Setting the context

I teach a unique group of ten adult ELLs within a Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program at a large post-secondary institution in Saskatchewan. The goal of LINC, a federally funded language training program, is to facilitate the "social, cultural and economic integration of immigrants and refugees into Canada, by providing language instruction in either English or French, as well as information that helps newcomers to become oriented to the Canadian way of life" (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, n.d.).

The group of learners that I teach, Learners with Interrupted Formal Education (LIFE), are unique in that they have had limited education in their home countries with significant periods of disruption due to war, famine, displacement, and other mitigating factors. What distinguishes LIFE from other learners within the LINC program is that while LIFE are a very diverse group in many respects, including first languages, religious backgrounds, cultural beliefs, life experiences, and interests, they are united by a common set of educational needs and challenges. In general, LIFE learners have strong listening and speaking abilities but lack literacy skills and basic learning strategies. In contrast, most LINC learners have post-secondary education and, consequently, not only approach print-based learning more strategically, but they are able to transfer skills gained in their first language which assists them with the acquisition of a new language. While views about literacy and learning, in general, are shaped by past educational experiences, LIFE learners' views, in particular, are culturally situated and reflect the educational systems and the political context of their homelands.

Literacy: Different contexts, divergent views

Given the limited educational experiences of LIFE learners and the educational, cultural, and political contexts of their home countries, their views of literacy and how it is best acquired tend to be very traditional and linear. They often view literacy as a finite set of skills that can be mastered and acquired through intensive rule-based instruction, drill, and practice with heavy emphasis placed on phonics and grammar.

LINC programs across the country are governed by the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) which comprise "a common national framework for describing and measuring the communicative ability of ESL learners for instructional and other purposes, ensuring a common basis for the development of programs, curricula, resources and assessment tools that can be shared across Canada" (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2012, p. III). The expectation of many LIFE students is that they will be taught and be able to master the finite set of literacy skills needed for CLB task completion, thereby allowing them to proceed to the next level within the system.

This decontextualized view of literacy is in marked contrast to current conceptualizations, in which literacy is viewed as a wide range of socially situated practices that are linked to social, economic, and political power (Currie & Cray, 2004; Norton, 2010). According to Williams (2008), this dichotomy of viewpoints reflects the notion that "literacy, how it is defined, who gets to employ it, and for what ends, is always culturally contextual" (p. 512).

As Canada becomes increasingly diverse both culturally and linguistically, the use of the term multiliteracies seems particularly appropriate. This is because it reflects multiple forms of literacy practices across contexts and languages, including digital literacies, in which ELLs engage for a variety of purposes (Cummins, 2006; Haneda, 2006). Furthermore, the term itself honours the linguistic and cultural capital that ELLs bring to the classroom.

As the LIFE Instructor, the challenge for me is to find a way to balance these two disparate perspectives on literacy. I am also faced with the challenge of working within a context that does not operate from a theoretical perspective that embraces multiliteracies. Given these divergent opinions about literacy and its contextual nature, concerns arise about how adult ELLs are positioned by interpretations of the national CLB language framework and the implications of this positioning on language and literacy learning.

The National Framework: Open to interpretation

The Canadian Language Benchmarks framework purports to be competency-based, learner-centred, and task-based, with emphasis given to community, study, and work-related tasks (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2012) – all laudable principles. However, because the CLB framework has been developed for use by a very diverse group of stakeholders, its broad nature has lead to differing interpretations at the program level, which are not be reflective of its original intent. The implications of how governing frameworks and policies are interpreted and enacted at the institutional level are cause for concern as these decisions heavily influence both pedagogy and practice (Simpson, 2011).

Rather than developing language and literacy skills by tapping into students' cultural and linguistic resources and situating literacy work within the home, community, school, and job contexts in which they will be used, it has been my experience that students are often asked to work on tasks that are linked to goals beyond their needs, interests, and experiences. For example, our program has interpreted the Canadian Language Benchmarks in such a way that learners assessed at a CLB 2 level are required to write greeting cards for a variety of occasions. This task, while popular within North American, holds little value or significance for learners from many other cultures. In fact, the notion of sending get well or sympathy cards is antithetical within some cultures where giving voice to anything unwanted or negative is equated with drawing it into one's life.

Policy: Positioning and pedagogy

According to Cummins (2006), "the cultural knowledge and home language proficiency that ELL students bring to school have little instructional relevance" (p. 5) within the K-12 system in Canada. I suggest that the same holds true within the LINC language training system for adult EAL learners. Rather than focusing on the strengths and resources that ELLs bring to the learning environment, including their social, cultural, and linguistic capital, the focus of instruction is often on the acquisition of language and literacy that fits within the more narrowly defined CLB sample tasks. These sample tasks, such as write a greeting card, although intended to serve as examples of ways that students can demonstrate mastery, are often, in my experience, used as the sole way that students are required to demonstrate their learning, regardless of how the sample task meshes with student's lives, needs, and interests.

Cummins (2006, p. 7) poses a question I had not previously considered: "What image of the student is constructed by the (implicit or explicit) language or literacy policy?" The answer is an unsettling one. In my opinion, ELLs within LINC programs are often viewed from a deficit position rather than being viewed as individuals who bring a wealth of resources – socially, linguistically, and culturally – to the language and literacy classroom. Not only are the learners' resources minimized and underutilized in language learning, but from my perspective the influence of the Canadian Language Benchmarks and the government's political agenda of facilitating the social, cultural, economic and political integration of newcomers into Canada (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, n.d.), has led to the adoption of an English-only language policy within our LINC program which actually limits the ability of ELLs to access the prior knowledge encoded in their home languages (Cummins, 2006).

The language program, as it is currently structured, does not recognize or draw upon the "repertoires of literacy practices that students develop outside school" (Haneda, 2006, p. 337). I became aware of this disconnect between home, school, and community literacy practices after accepting a Facebook friend request from Amir (a pseudonym), a young man from Eritrea who struggled in my class with relatively basic literacy tasks on a daily basis. I was astonished to see first-hand how he was able to use literacy in both English and his home language to position himself as a valued member within his online community. According to Haneda (2006, p. 339), "Research has shown that some who are struggling readers and writers at school use literacy competently outside school for their own personal ends." For Amir this was certainly true, as he was able to use literacy strategically to express himself in creative ways and to engage others in lively discourse centred on mutual interests.

In stark contrast, the federal government's use of the term English as a Second Language (ESL) minimizes the linguistic capital of many ELLs who speak multiple languages. Institutionally-based *English only* language policies further reflects a hegemonic worldview and the culture of power whereby those in positions of authority determine whose and what knowledge counts (Delpit, 1988). To counterbalance these inequities, Delpit (1988) outlines the importance of identifying and giving voice to alternate worldviews, while at the same time explicitly teaching the rules for participating in power (p. 282). Delpit's notion of the culture of power and the inequities which exist within educational systems has lead me to consider how I might tap into students' linguistic and cultural capital in ways that mediate power imbalances and that can serve as a bridge to enhancing the English language literacy skills of ELLs. As I expand on below, the incident with Amir, along with another even more resonant example, has led me to discover the power and promise of story as a pedagogical tool and how story might be used to balance out some of the inequities that exist systemically.

"Bringing the Outside In": The power of story

Some time ago, I noticed that whenever students talked about their homelands in class, Nok (a pseudonym), a young Karan man from Burma, would become very emotional. Nok and his family had spent their lives eking out a living in the jungles of Burma whenever they weren't being forced up into the mountains to hide from the Burmese army. Nok described his life poetically, stating that in Burma he was free, but there was no peace, while later his life in the refugee camp in Thailand was peaceful, but there was no freedom.

Learning English was a challenge for Nok, likely because many of the concepts that we talked about in class, which were based on tasks outlined in the CLB framework, were outside of his life experience or interests. Given the narrow and seemingly arbitrary nature of some of the CLB sample tasks, or at least the way in which our program interprets them, it is little wonder that Nok had difficulty identifying with the topics discussed, the books used, or even the ways he was asked to demonstrate his understanding and learning in class. However, when I asked students to write in their journals, stories of the horrors Nok had faced poured out onto the page.

The critical incident, which was illuminating for me in so many ways, stemmed from a class assignment. I asked students to conduct an Internet search for an image of their homeland that held deep personal significance. While other students enthusiastically searched and found a number of evocative images of their home countries, Nok seemed to have difficulty settling on the task. Finally, he asked me if he could show a short video of the situation in his homeland in lieu of a static image. Before making a decision, I viewed the video. It was very graphic and depicted the atrocities that had befallen the Karen people – villages burned, animals slaughtered, people killed, and families separated as they fled into the jungle to escape the army. I felt torn because I wanted to safeguard the emotional well-being of other students and, yet, I had a strong sense that showing the video would be cathartic for Nok.

I decided to discuss Nok's request with the class. I explained that the video was graphic and disturbing, and I provided students with a choice about whether or not they wanted to watch it. I told them that if they found watching the video too difficult, they had my full permission to leave the classroom. I also explained that a counsellor would be available afterward for anyone who might need to talk. When I put the decision before the class I was surprised by their compassionate response. They told me that if Nok wanted them to see the video, they would support him by watching it.

What transpired afterwards amazed me. As soon as the video ended, expressions of empathy for what Nok had gone through poured forth along with a flood of questions from his classmates. The discussion was rich and powerful. It was an authentic language experience that I could not have foreseen or planned. It honoured Nok's need to share information about his home country and the hardships he had faced, and at the same time it provided his classmates with an opportunity to ask meaningful questions that increased their knowledge and understanding of the situation in Burma. Students made incredible connections between Nok's story and their own experiences. Not only was Nok's past validated by this experience, but he was able to release some of the emotional energy associated with those experiences which opened up space for learning to occur. Following the visual presentations, students were asked to write the stories that they had just shared with their classmates. Their oral presentations created a strong foundation for writing about, and later reading, their personal stories. After this incident Nok's countenance changed and learning began to flow more easily for him. It became less emotional for Nok to recount his past experiences and he seemed more connected to not only what was being taught in class but to his classmates as well.

While time has passed since this incident, my understanding of the issues has continued to grow. To deepen my understanding of how story can be used as a pedagogical tool to enhance literacy development for adult ELLs, I turn now to the literature in the field of language, literacy, and culture.

Story as Pedagogy: Through a critical lens

Williams (2008) notes that learners whose "cultures had been discounted and marginalized" often devalue their own experiences believing that their cultural and linguistic identities must be forfeited once they enter the classroom (p. 511). I believe that story, as a pedagogical tool, provides a means by which instructors can assist learners to integrate these aspects of their identities within the process of acquiring English language and literacy skills.

Learners' personal stories, as defined by Nicholas, Rossiter & Abbott (2011), are "short, true stories told or written by language learners using the first-person narrative voice" (p. 248-249). For students whose lives and experiences in their homelands are vastly different from Canadian lifestyles and culture, the use of personal stories can form a powerful bridge between students' prior experience, language, culture and English language and literacy learning. From a language perspective, benefits include increased linguistic and metacognitive knowledge, increased knowledge of narrative forms and story conventions in English, and greater motivation and positive affect (Nicholas et al, 2011). From a socio-cultural perspective, the use of story as a language-learning tool builds on and extends the cultural and linguistic capital that students bring to the classroom (Cummins, 2006). From the perspective of the culture of power (Delpit, 1988), storytelling honours the historicity of the other by allowing students to share truths that are historically situated, embedded within culture, and which do not reflect the worldview of those in power. Accordingly, through the power of story, students' lived experiences, cultures, and worldviews are valued and honoured, forming the basis of language and literacy learning.

Another important benefit of incorporating stories into the ELL classroom is that stories "invite the learner to act primarily as a language *user* and not as a language learner" (Van den Branden as cited in Nicholas, Rossiter & Abbott, 2011, p. 252, emphasis original). When we choose to view learners' lives as curriculum (Auerbach, 1996), a plethora of instructional possibilities opens up within the ELL classroom. This shift in roles and perspectives from language learner to user can be accomplished in a variety of ways including task based language teaching, dual-language texts, and the use of storyboards, all of which can incorporate technology into the storytelling process.

Creating "a storied classroom" (Wajnryb as cited in Nicholas, Rossiter & Abbott, 2011, p. 247), which refers to a space in which students feel free and safe to share their personal stories, is key to this pedagogical practice. Creating this environment requires teachers to open up "possibilities for the telling rather than closing them down" (Simpson, 2011, p. 12). While this type of discussion often occurs in school hallways and at the periphery of lessons, opening up interactional space for meaningful and authentic narrative telling of the events in students' lives within a lesson, rather than incorporating storytelling into a lesson plan, can be challenging. This may require that instructors shift current approaches towards a pedagogy that creates a space for rich and meaningful discussions to occur without forcing them (Simpson, 2011).

An example from my own experience that illustrates this point occurred recently when several LIFE students took a day off school to celebrate Eid Mubarak, an important religious ceremony in the Muslim faith. Just before class began the following day, the excitement of returning students poured forth as stories flooded the classroom, along with gifts of traditional food and blessings in Arabic. Curiously, I found myself caught between the desire to proceed with the lesson I had carefully prepared and the need to flow forward with the energy of the moment. Thankfully I chose the latter. The language generated was longer, more fluent, and more complex than usual utterances (Nicholas, Rossiter & Abbott, 2011; Roberts & Cooke, 2009; Simpson, 2011). This incident exemplifies the "unexpected irruptions of student lived experience which can interrupt and derail the planned pedagogical sequence" (Baynham as cited in Simpson, 2011, p. 12). Yet, it is precisely these types of disruptions that can lead to the most authentic and meaningful language and literacy learning opportunities.

As students are afforded opportunities to speak from within about matters that are immediate and rich with deep personal resonance, they are also claiming space and involved in identity work. They are in the process of repositioning themselves as competent human beings with valuable social, cultural, and linguistic capital; vibrant histories and lived experiences that are honoured within the learning environment. In doing so, they are able to counter and resist "the limited set of identities imposed upon them by policy and institutionally" (Simpson, 2011, p. 13).

While there are numerous benefits to creating discursive space and incorporating story into language and literacy learning, it is important to be mindful of pitfalls and challenges that may arise. First and foremost, it is crucial not to assume that the stories or experiences of a learner from one cultural group are reflective of the experiences of others from the same cultural background. "No matter how much a teacher encourages students to open up and talk about their lives in class, a lack of knowledge of individual experiences might lead to a 'tribalising' of students (Duff & Uchida, 1997) or a dependence on dominant discourses which may not serve the interests of the people whose identities they help to construct" (Cooke, 2006, p. 70). Learners' stories may become trivialized if storytelling is employed as simply another language learning technique (Sauvé as cited in Nicholas, Rossiter & Abbott, 2011). Honouring individual experience, careful listening, providing supports as required, and allowing students the right to exercise choice is key. Controversial issues may surface and counselling or other self-care strategies may need to be put in place. It is important to remember that if a student chooses silence it is a valid choice (Nicholas et al, 2011).

Personal Reflections

When I reflect back on my experiences inside and outside the classroom with both Amir and Nok, the learning for me has been profound. These experiences have validated the importance of creating a classroom culture in which it is safe to express personal stories that honour students' social, cultural, and linguistic capital and their lived experiences. I have learned that healing is a critical part of the teaching-learning process, especially when students have experienced trauma in their lives, and that attending to the emotional well-being of students is as important as addressing their language needs. I have learned that stories are very powerful catalysts for learning and that creating a discursive space for students to share past and present experiences enhances instruction. As Norton (2010) contends, "If learners have a sense of ownership over meaning-making, they will have enhanced identities as learners and participate more actively in literacy practices" (p.1). I have learned that trusting my instincts and following my intuition as an instructor can lead to incredible outcomes, and that sometimes the best decision is to set the planned lesson aside and allow the urgency and immediacy of learners' lives, and the need to express their stories, paving the way for language and literacy learning.

I have come to other realizations about language, literacy, and culture. Language and literacy are situated in culture, which has highlighted, for me, the importance of historicity – of providing a place and space for students to recount, with historical accuracy, their lives and the history of their peoples from their own unique perspective, unbiased by interpretations of other more dominant groups. I now realize the importance of creating space for students to give voice to their own stories and worldviews and that, in doing so, we honour and respect otherness. Through the act of sharing personal stories and recounting their experiences, students are engaged in powerful identity work enabling them to resist the limited identity positions imposed upon them through governing frameworks and institutional practice. In this way, power imbalances that exist within the system can be mediated.

Yet challenges remain. I work within a system that minimizes the linguistic capital of ELLs through use of the term ESL, employs a national benchmarks framework without sufficient training which would enable stakeholders to use the framework in a way that honours its intent, and, by the very nature of its ambiguity, that has led to the adoption of an *English only* language policy within our institution.

While I am able to exercise some liberties within the classroom, I am still tied to a governing framework that positions students, particularly those for whom literacy and language learning is challenging, in ways that devalue their cultural and linguistic capital, and the richness of their life experiences, both of which lie at the heart of learner-centred instruction. Instead, I am required to assess students' abilities to perform various tasks within the Canadian Language Benchmarks. The outcome of these assessments is not often reflective of the learning that occurs within the classroom.

In closing, I would like to return to Amir and the rest of his story. Frustrated that the literacy and language skills he had acquired during his time in the LIFE class – which both he and I can attest to – were not being reflected on benchmark assessments, Amir chose to leave the program. The gap between his skills, from a multiliteracies perspective, and his benchmark test results remained. Within an online environment, Amir is successful in communicating in multiple languages, including English, for a variety of purposes. Within the LIFE class, he is able to share stories of his culture and past experiences with passion and skill. Yet, when asked to write a letter to a landlord about an apartment problem or to write a greeting card to a sick neighbour, both of which are sample tasks outlined within the Canadian Language Benchmarks framework, he is unable to demonstrate these skills. I believe that it is the decontextualized nature of these tasks, which stems from our program's interpretation of the CLB framework, coupled with the fact that they hold no personal meaning or value for Amir that contribute to our failure to meet his needs. While story as pedagogy is a powerful and valuable language and literacy learning tool, changes at the micro and macro levels are desperately needed in order to keep learners like Amir within government-sponsored language programs.

References

Auerbach, E. (1992). *Making meaning, making change*. Center for Applied Linguistics and ERIC Publication. McHenry, IL: Delta Systems.

Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks. (2012). *Canadian language benchmarks: English as a second language for adults*. Retrieved from http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/pdf/pub/language-benchmarks.pdf

Citizenship and Immigration Canada. (n.d.). *Evaluation of the language instruction for newcomers to Canada (LINC) program*. Retrieved from http://www.cic.gc.ca/ENGLISH/resources/evaluation/linc/2004/exec-summary.asp#s1

Cooke, M. (2006). "When I wake up I dream of electricity": The lives, aspirations and 'needs' of Adult ESOL learners. *Linguistics and Education, 17*, 56-73. doi: 10.1016/j.linged.2006.08.010

Cummins, J. (2006). Multiliteracies and equity: How do Canadian schools measure up? *Education Canada, 46*(2), 4-7.

Currie, P., & Cray, E. (2004). ESL literacy: Language practice or social practice? *Journal of Second Language Writing, 13,* 111-132. doi: 10.1016/j.jslw.2004.04.008

Delpit, L. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review, 53*(3), 280-298.

Haneda, M. (2006). Becoming literate in a second language: Connecting home, community, and school literacy practices. *Theory Into Practice, 45*(4), 337-345.

Nicholas, B., Rossiter, M., & Abbott, M. (2011). The power of story in the ESL classroom. *The Canadian Modern Language Review, 67*(2), 247-268. doi: 10.1353/cml.2011.0003

Norton, B. (2010). Identity, literacy, and English-language teaching. *TESL Canada Journal, 28*(1), 1-13.

Roberts, C., & Cooke, M. (2009). Authenticity in the adult ESOL classroom and beyond. *TESOL Quarterly, 43*(4), 620-642.

Simpson, J. (2011). Telling tales: Discursive space and narratives in ESOL classrooms. *Linguistics and Education, 22*, 10-22. doi: 10.1016/j.linged.2010.11.005

Williams, B. (2008). Around the block and around the world: Teaching literacy across cultures. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 51*(6), 510-514. doi: 10.1598/JAAL.51.6.7