

ADULT LITERACY INSTRUCTION IN A SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING SITUATION; SOME BASIC CONCEPTUAL AND OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

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Abstract

Instructions aimed at developing adult literacy (particularly, literacy in English as a second language) has been enriched in recent times by research findings and advances in knowledge in the area of second language acquisition, social interaction as an agent of language acquisition and human thinking processes. It is these issues that this paper aims to highlight. Specifically, the paper examines the various inputs into the controversy surrounding the definition of literacy. What constitutes literate behavior, and the kinds of knowledge required to develop it. It also highlights how second language proficiency relates to literate performance and the content and methodology of literacy education.

The Concept of Literacy

At this point we meet a practical problem, which takes us to the heart of our subject-what is meant by literacy? At what stage in his or her education should a person be considered literate?

In 1954 a UNESCO committee proposed the following definition for consensus purpose: "A person is literate who can with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement on his everyday life". This definition sets the standard of literacy at the very lowest acceptable level: it does not require the person concerned to be able to read or write anything beyond a short and simple statement on the most familiar topic.

A much more satisfactory definition is given by Gudschinsky (1973) thus "that a person is literate who, in a language that he speaks, can read and understand everything he would have understood if it had been spoken to him, and can write so that it can be read, anything he can say". This definition emphasizes understanding and it takes account of the danger that always exists in literacy education of memorization and rote learning instead of genuine reading. It also raises the question of the language in which literacy instruction should be given.

Another approach to the definition of literacy has been from the point of view of its function. Attention has been focused on the relation of literacy to practical needs of the learner and his community. For example, another UNESCO committee in 1962, in Paris adopted the following: A person is literate when he has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community, and whose attainment in reading, writing and arithmetic makes it possible for him to continue to use these skills towards his own and the community's development.

A definition of this kind has its strengths and weaknesses. On the positive side, it sees literacy, not just as an end in itself, or as something unrelated to the rest of life, but as intimately involved with the individual's own life and his place in his community. It recognizes, too, that the requirements of literacy will vary very much from one society to another. In short, a person is literate if he can meet the normal demands for literacy made on him by his society. On this issue, Brown and Okedara, (1981) observe that "the actual content of 'functional literacy' in a highly developed industrialized society will be very different from what is meant by the use of the same term with reference to a rural environment in a developing country".

A weakness inherent in the definition is that, there is a danger that, in an attempt to relate "functional literacy" to practical skills activities, its definition becomes so broad that the basic factor of reading and writing fades away, and may almost be ignored altogether.

Perhaps, it is because of the indeterminacy of the specific bounds of literacy that led Bell (1990) to opine that there is no universal agreement in defining literacy, but that there is a consensus emerging about how to understand many important aspects of literacy.

Media reports and the academia have not helped very much the situation, since they have tended to confuse political issues relating to literacy: creating a "mythology" which prejudices our understanding of what literacy is and does.

The Kind of Knowledge that Constitutes Literate Behavior

One aspect of literacy is that it is something people do using specific kinds of knowledge. From this perspective, the extent to which people can, or cannot perform specific literate tasks depends on the kinds of relevant knowledge which they have developed (Bereter et al, 1987; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984). These include:

Content knowledge (familiarity with relevant ideas and situation).

Procedural knowledge (how to think about and act with language, ideas and texts).

Practical skills knowledge (involving manipulative skills of specific practical tasks such as modern animal and plant husbandry).

Self-control strategies (i.e. how to control one's own behaviour and knowledge appropriately when interpreting or generating texts).

Such knowledge may be very practical, embedded in routine social functions, or it may be conceptual, relating to abstract ideas and analysis. It also includes, especially in developing countries, spoken language and development of writing skills. Streets (1984) also identifies other classes of knowledge which he subsumed under linguistic, orthographic and cultural factors.

In discussing what constitutes literate behaviours, the age-old controversy over the indeterminacy of literacy and varied meanings read to literacy in different societies rear their heads again. For instance, literate behaviours in most third world countries would stop short at basic reading and writing and numeracy. The conceptual and analytical capabilities and creativity in language use which Wells (1983) and Streets (1984) identify, as literate behaviours have no application to most third world countries.

Acquisition of Literacy

Unlike the ability to talk, walk or reason, literacy is not an innate human characteristic. It is not acquired spontaneously, but is learned from others, usually in educational environments (Scribner and Cole, 1984).

Acquisition of literacy is aided by some suitable social, environmental and psychological situations which are enriched and or equipped with the capability to impact literacy. Wells (1983) observes that people acquire literacy by participation in environments where social meanings and activities are conveyed through texts in routine behaviours. This is referring to schools where there are deliberate efforts at inculcating literate behaviours through planned curricular and co-curricular activities. A literate environment predominates in diverse school environments where both spoken and printed languages are used purposefully and meaningfully for regular communication, interpretation and expressions, and learners are encouraged to participate whole heartedly in it. Over time, this leads to literacy acquisition.

However, literacy could be achieved in other environments outside the four walls of the school such as social clubs, the home and other human interactional settings. The rate at which people acquire total literacy through these settings however, is too infinitesimal that they do not constitute major agentive factors for literacy acquisition. Instead they aid perfection in literacy because most often they afford learners out of school opportunities for practice.

Bell (1990) observes that much interesting research is now being carried out to describe the stages which people pass through in acquiring literacy. However it is virtually difficult to distinguish the phenomenon of literacy acquisition from initial socialization, cognitive, maturation or other kinds of development.

In discussing literacy acquisition, therefore, its implication has to focus on the conditions, which appear to foster literacy development. These conditions include:

- 1) Participation in an environment where literacy is used purposefully on a regular basis, i.e. schools.
- 2) Access to appropriate models of literate behaviour and texts.
- 3) Self-controlled practice in developing the skills, strategies and knowledge to perform literate tasks independently.
- 4) 4) The Media.

Organising A Literacy Programme

Having identified the importance of the literacy school or class, the question now is how do we organise a literacy programme or set up a literacy class to impart appropriate literate behaviours (especially, adult literacy class). This is in view of the fact that enthusiastically starting a literacy programme can sometimes make it harder for people to learn to read. Sometimes, efforts in literacy

have an effect that is quite the opposite of what we intended. The above assertion calls for the appropriate planning of the programme.

Gudschisky (1975) identified 4 basic stages by which a literacy programme should be planned and implemented. These are:

1. Pre-reading stage.
2. Basic instruction in reading and writing.
3. A bridge to a second language.
4. Independent reading.

The pre-reading stage, according to him may have two phases: an informal phase which includes matters of motivation and first experiences with understanding pictures, handling books, and using paper and pencil. The formal phase includes specific instructions in recognizing pictures, seeing similarities and differences in figures, following instructions, and the like.

The instructional stage includes the actual teaching of reading and writing to the point of independence. Materials for the stage will include all the primers, graded readers and teaching aids in the vernacular.

In some cases, he observes, the bridge to a second language may be an integral part of the basic instruction. It includes the methods and materials for acquisition of a second language; both oral competence and reading and writing.

The independent reading stage includes all the reading materials made available to the new literate. There should be a wide variety and sufficient materials to justify the motives for which he learned to read in his own language. He needs some of his own oral literature: information about the world (science, geography) how-to-do-it books (health, agriculture), religious and problem-centered literature (how does a person face his problem); entertainment etc.

The Relationship Between Literacy and Second Language

One of the central issues for English as Second Language (ESL) instruction is how a second language learner interacts with literacy acquisition. Recent research reports have demonstrated that literate expertise and second language proficiency are quite different things. However people who have high levels of literacy in their mother tongue, are usually able to transfer much of this knowledge to their performance in their second language. The literate aspects of reading and writing in a second language will be less of a problem for such people because they know how to read and write effectively.

People who have neither literacy nor proficiency in their second language have lacked two major knowledge in literate tasks: literacy and the second language. Moreover for ESL learners, having entered a completely new society, there is the additional complexity of accommodating different cultural values and ways of interacting often while coping with personal and economic hardships.

Acquiring literacy in English as a Second Language, therefore, is a matter of acquiring;

1. Literate knowledge and expertise.
2. A second language.
3. Different cultural practice, knowledge and values.
4. New ways of interacting with people.

The question now is, how these understandings about literacy can be synthesized into principles, which are appropriate for adult ESL literacy and instruction. The present discussion will focus on the review of the three approaches to instruction, which seem to make use of the understandings about literate expertise, and its acquisition as outlined above.

Approach I

Language Experience - A Situated Approach to Facilitating and Modeling Relevant Literate Interactions

The language experience approach has been widely advocated for adult ESL literacy instruction. The methodology of this approach, which features several principles for literacy learning include the following:

- 1) The content of the literacy programme is developed in conjunction with the adult learners and this

- ensures that the texts are relevant and comprehensive and that the student's own ideas are valued and schematically organised as texts.
- 2) Whole literate tasks are performed successfully and situated in a meaningful context. That is, instruction does not fragment literacy skills, making them hard for students to conceive of together, and performance of literate tasks are not far removed from their every day routine and environments.
 - 3) A teacher models the scribble aspects of writing, as well as the thinking that goes into making decisions about refining texts and planning them. This makes clear how [he teacher approaches and thinks about writing, so that the learners can model their own behaviours in line with the teachers. It also facilitates learners' involvement in literate tasks, without burdening them with all the responsibilities at the same time, more so, that learning the art of writing is through simulation of the teacher's models.
 - 4) Learners' participation in literate performance is gradually phased in: they assume increasing responsibilities for writing and reading as they come to be familiar with it and confident about it.

Approach II

Cognitive Apprenticeship - A Direct Approach to Displaying Literate Knowledge and Thinking

One way of using cognitive apprenticeship is through a procedure called "reciprocal modeling" (Brown et al, 1984). In a tutorial situation, a teacher and a student read a passage one after the other, saying all the things they are thinking about while reading. This allows the students to clarify the problems they encounter in reading, while the teacher demonstrates effective strategies for reading the same material.

Bereiter and Scandamalia (1987) also describe a similar procedure for writing instruction. In addition, they suggest other ways for teachers while they write or read. A teacher can prepare specific prompts in the form of cues to help students think in productive ways while they are performing literate tasks. This might involve open statements and the use of sentence connectors to link ideas together and to guide their thinking.

A related procedure is to have students set specific goals for their own learning. They choose one or two goals, which they feel they need to and can attain. The learners will monitor their own progress towards these goals while they perform several different literate tasks. They then reflect on their successes or problems afterwards with the teacher or fellow students.

However, Bell (1990) warns that the effectiveness of the cognitive apprenticeship may be limited in the long term, since a teacher assumes control over many literacy functions, and individual learners are not actively involved in much intensive practice writing and reading themselves as obtained in the language experience approach.

Approach III

Purposeful Communication - A Situated Approach to Sustaining and Fostering Literate

Participation

People need worthwhile reasons to read in order to interpret texts carefully, and worthwhile reasons to write in order to express information faithfully. Otherwise, there is a tendency for students and instructors to see the completion of reading or writing tasks as individual goals in themselves. This reduces the value and meaning of literacy learning. To provide strong reasons for using literacy, it is important to establish a social environment where information is clarified and conveyed through texts. This can be fostered within a literacy classroom. However, it may be difficult to sustain meaningful written communication for a long time, unless there is an audience to interact with within and outside the classroom.

Ways of establishing the use of literacy outside the classroom situation include: collaborative production of newsletters to establish broad communities of mutually interested readers and writers; personal letter writing to people at distant places or within close proximity.

Another way is to develop a community of interactive readers and writers is to prompt students to work together, collecting, refining and understanding information about topics of particular value to them.

Conclusion

It should be stressed at this juncture that all the three approaches discussed above emphasize the processes of interaction, thinking and participation that are important for literacy acquisition. They aim to be, especially, responsive to individual learner's personal interests, performance and situations. They also stress students performing literacy tasks holistically, meaningfully and practically and they are compatible because they complement each other.

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