

BOOK REVIEW

LEARNING TO BE LITERATE: MULTILINGUAL PERSPECTIVES

Viv Edwards (2009)

Bristol/Buffalo/Toronto: Multilingual Matters Textbooks.

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Learning to be literate: Multilingual perspectives is an excellent book that introduces the fundamental aspects of language in education with a particular focus on literacy, multilingualism and the necessary changes for the teaching and learning of literacy in multilingual classrooms. The book focuses on theory and policy with regard to prevailing practices in the teaching and learning of literacy in multilingual settings. The author evaluates the similarities among studies conducted in various multilingual contexts. These range from immigrant children learning English in North America, the UK and Australia, to immersion and bilingual education programmes, and to the efforts to maintain heritage languages in South America and Africa.

This book consists of eight chapters discussing issues surrounding multilingualism as it applies to individuals and societies. With the exception of chapter 1, each chapter is organised into the following parts:

1. Summary of the subtopics appearing at the beginning of each chapter
2. Discussion of theoretical issues
3. Case studies
4. Key points summaries
5. Activities and discussion points
6. Further reading list

The objective of the activities and discussion points is to help readers compare personal experiences to theoretical perspectives. In addition, these activities could be used during professional development seminars for teachers to reflect on the teaching approaches to second

language (L2) literacy and find areas that need improvement in order to facilitate literacy development in multilingual learners. Any reader wanting additional background information on subtopics discussed in any given chapter can accumulate substantial information by consulting the relevant further reading list provided.

Viv Edwards is based at the University of Reading where she is Professor of Language in Education. In addition, she is Director of the National Centre of language and Literacy. An award-winning book writer, Edwards edits the international journal of *Language and Education*.

Learning to be literate: Multilingual perspectives begins with an introductory chapter that presents the different ways in which children learn literacy. It also discusses literacy research conducted in a variety of multilingual environments and highlights the need to integrate common characteristics of these settings. This chapter concludes by presenting the scope and organization of the book.

Chapter 2 brings to the fore various environmental, scientific, economic and political reasons that lead to migration which in turn results in multilingualism. It outlines linguistic processes that result from language contact such as lingua francas, pidginization and creolization, and language maintenance and shift. In addition, it discusses how nation-building elevated some languages as majority languages while others were relegated to the status of minority languages. It explores the confusion surrounding the term language. Another discussion highlights the intellectual, social and economic advantages of multilingualism. Finally, the chapter discusses case studies differentiating language policy and planning approaches employed in India, the European Union and South Africa to deal with multilingual situations.

Chapter 3 explains how colonialism and imperialism led to the relegation of Indigenous and African languages to the low status of minority languages while English enjoyed the status of majority language. It shows how language shift is being reversed for Maori in Aotearoa/New Zealand. It further discusses how nationalism and globalization have helped minority languages regain status in the education systems. The author presents policy case studies on the UK, Australia, the US and international schools showing that minority languages are getting recognition. She also notes some limitations with regard to the reliance on education to promote minority languages. This chapter pinpoints the disconnection between theories advanced by linguists with policies that politicians actually implement in the classrooms. Marginalised languages such as African-American vernacular and sign languages are not being accepted as languages despite efforts by linguists to secure such recognition. Edwards provides further evidence of the disjuncture between literacy education agenda and education policies implemented in schools in chapters 5 and 6. At the end of chapter 4, the author cites immersion and two-way bilingual programmes that have been employed to help speakers of majority languages become bilingual.

Chapter 4 acknowledges the definition of literacy as constituting technical skills such as ‘letter formation, spelling patterns and word recognition’ (p. 54). This definition spells out what the autonomous model of literacy (Street, 1997) is all about. As opposed to the autonomous model, the ideological model takes into account the social and cultural aspects which are part and parcel of ‘people’s lives’. The author, then, introduces the term ‘multiliteracies’ to encompass the social and cultural dimensions, namely ‘children’s experience with literacy in minority languages’ and

new modes of communication such as SMS, emails, instant messaging and webpages. She uses '12 intersecting and nested continua of biliteracy' (Horneberger & Skilton-Sylvester 2003:39) to show the different clusters in which individuals become biliterate. In this connection, Edwards delves into a clear discussion of key theoretical perspectives that broaden the reader's understanding of the development of biliteracy (Cummins 2001). She reserves examination of implications of these theoretical perspectives on literacy education for further analysis in Chapter 6.

Chapter 5 starts by providing historical evidence showing that politicians make the most decisions on teaching methods used in schools. Research comparing the phonics approach to the whole language methodology as literacy teaching methods has turned up inconclusive evidence. Consequently, educational researchers have recommended the use of a balanced approach for literacy teaching in schools. Politicians, however, have disregarded this recommendation and have implemented the phonics approach. In a bid to increase our understanding of ways in which bilingual learners learn to read, the author focuses on phonological and phonemic awareness, principles underlying writing systems, influence of writing systems on reading and strategies of bilingual readers. Ways in which bilingual students learn to write differ greatly. While other languages use the alphabet, others use non alphabetic symbols that 'fit within a notional square' (p. 76). Directionality is also an issue in L2 writing. In some languages one writes from left to right, while in other languages one writes from right to left. By raising the issues of writing directionality and symbols, the author emphasises the challenges bilingual learners meet when learning to write in the L2. The author branches into the discussion of the relation between writing systems and reading in order to emphasise that learning to 'read and write simultaneously' in the first language and in English does not impede the development of literacy. She illustrates this point using a case study from South Africa. This observation clearly introduces an area of research that should be front and centre of all efforts to improve the quality of literacy teaching methods in most African countries.

Chapter 6 demonstrates how the autonomous model discussed in Chapter 5 has been replaced by 'New Literacy Studies' focusing on 'multilingual contexts'. This chapter provides a classic example of the disjuncture between educational research agenda and education policy. For instance, the New Literacy Studies agenda lay emphasis on *literacies* rather than on *literacy* whereas current educational practices favour *literacy*. Another case of disconnection is that educators wrongly assume that minority groups do not engage in any literacy activity at all. In another scenario, educators engaged in home-school reading programmes and assumed that the mother would be able to help the child at home while in reality she may not be able to read at all. Edwards does not cease to present opposing views in any debate tackling multilingual issues. She brings up the conversation between Hirsch (1987) and Bourdieu (1997) in relation to reasons for differences in literacy achievement levels amongst children. On one hand, Hirsch's (1987) theory of cultural and literacy attributes low literacy achievement to the 'lack of background information and linguistic conventions' (p. 86) on the part of 'children and families'. On the other hand, Bourdieu (1997) attributes this problem to the lack of economic, social and cultural capital. Taking the debates further, Edwards discusses the following models of critical pedagogy in order to show how schools can support literacy in minority learners:

1. Pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 1970)

2. Pedagogy of differences (Giroux, 1992)
3. Louis Moll and associate's 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez *et al.*, 2005)
4. Transformative pedagogy

Newcomers to the field of literacy education looking for background information on these methodologies can use reference details which are provided. The implementation of the transformative pedagogy is illustrated by case studies from South America and Canada. In the first case study, teachers encouraged the use of minority languages and content in school. In the second case study, a teacher working in an urban high school asked her language class to 'perform a local peasant story with local materials and local music' (p. 95) rather than use a foreign story. Use of local story, local music and local materials helped learners value their own social and cultural environments. Another case study showed how using *identity texts* helped a student who had recently arrived in Canada to transfer 'knowledge and skills' between English and Urdu. Through these discussions the author clearly shows how 'social and cultural aspects' of learners' lives introduced in Chapter 4 can be valued in the school system to the extent of being conveyed in written form. In my view, language teachers in former British colonies where local languages are not valued in schools could use the transformative pedagogy and *identity texts* to add value to local languages and cultures. In addition, the use of *identity texts* for literacy learning is an excellent idea. Edwards has demonstrated brilliantly that incorporating minority cultures and languages which were previously excluded from school literacy programmes can facilitate literacy development in students from minority backgrounds.

The central theme of Chapter 7 is that multilingual material production is very expensive. While acknowledging that teaching materials for the development of biliteracy are in short supply (Michael, 1989), the author begins by presenting various challenges as follows:

1. Uneconomical print runs.
2. Imported books do not match children's local experiences and linguistic levels.
3. Sub-Saharan countries use books 'written in former ex-colonial languages' (p. 102).
4. Limited supply of writers, illustrators and editors who can work on African languages and cultures.

The author mentions that textbooks are more cost-effective than real books because they can be produced in large quantities. However, these two types of books are not effective for biliteracy development because they are monolingual books. The chapter enumerates innovative approaches aimed at incorporating bilingual children's linguistic and cultural backgrounds such as dual language books, the multivariate approach, multilingual multimedia and self-made materials. While monolingual textbooks are cost-effective, the production of bilingual textbooks in large quantities is very costly. The author recommends co-publishing agreements as a way of reducing the cost of producing multilingual books in large amounts. Another possibility is to sell multilingual books to other multilingual markets. In this connection, the author suggests that English and Punjabi books produced in the UK could be sold to Punjabi speakers in Canada and the US. This proposal fails to address the need to cater to dialectal differences in Punjabi. Turning to Africa as a market for multilingual books, the issues of the cost and marketability of

multilingual books in Africa get more complex because the continent has about 2,146 living languages (Paul, Simons & Fennig, 2013) belonging to some unrelated language families. The author proposed text, audio and ‘web-based resources’ as ways of storing multilingual materials. However, internet-based materials may be out of reach in developing countries where internet access is extremely limited and very expensive.

Having elaborated the issues of the cost and storage of multilingual learning materials in Chapter 7, the author elaborates the theme of training teachers to working with multilingual and multicultural learners in Chapter 8. Currently, these teachers adapt monolingual teaching strategies to the needs of multilingual children, as specialist L2 teachers, bilingual educators and heritage language teachers are in short supply. As the focus is shifting to incorporating strategies that cater to multilingual learners in order to improve educational results, the author highlights the need for teachers to take ownership of this change process. One such way is for teachers to get involved in continuous professional development (CPD). There are two forms of CPD that view the teacher either as a ‘technician’ or a ‘reflective practitioner’. The following criticisms have been raised against CPDs:

1. ‘force-feeding’ teachers with information
2. Content receive more attention than learning processes
3. CPDs fail to take into account the variation in teachers’ levels of experience
4. Piecemeal initiatives
5. Lack of follow-up.

The author presents the ‘cascade’ training model which has been touted for its cost-effectiveness. Within this model, a small number specialists or teachers initially learn the knowledge and skills, and in turn this group trains other classroom teachers who will return to schools to train their colleagues. For the ‘cascade’ training model to be successful it must have the following characteristics (Hayes, 2000: 138):

1. Experiential and reflective approach
2. Open to reinterpretation
3. Wide diffusion of expertise
4. Involvement of a cross section of stakeholders in the preparation of training materials
5. Desire for decentralization of responsibilities.

In addition, the author outlines elements of effective CDP such as statement of clear goals, systemic process and an ongoing process. The concept of CDP is just one way of collaboration necessary for the development of biliteracy in multilingual learners. Other collaborative means of implementing changes that facilitate the introduction on multilingual literacies are presented as follows:

1. Collaboration between the school and the wider school community
2. Collaboration at local, national and international levels.

A classic example of international collaboration involves the creation of an international community of practice between scholars in the UK and in South Africa. As part of this collaboration, scholars exchanged learning materials which they adapted to the specific needs of their multilingual situation.

While great care was taken in the writing of this book, there is a typo that was missed during editing. On page 68, it is said that ‘the crisis over pedagogy appears to be more manufactured than real’ when actually the text was supposed to read ‘than real’. One typo, however, does not take away from the key contribution this book makes to the field of multilingual education. The book does not have a subsection entitled “conclusion” because the author acknowledges the vastness of the domain of multilingual education. Edwards discusses multilingual theories and research in a thought-provoking manner that leads readers to re-evaluate their personal experiences with multilingualism and draw their own conclusions. The book does not suggest a one-size-fits-all solution to problems affecting multilingual education worldwide.

This book leaves no stone unturned because it touches on all the key components of the educational system from educational researchers, politicians, multilingual learning materials, parental and community involvement, teachers and teacher training to multilevel collaborative efforts. The majority of case studies come from countries where English language speakers are in the majority such as the US, the UK, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Few case studies deal with research conducted in places where English language speakers are relatively in a demographic minority such as South America, Asia and Africa as compared to speakers of local languages. Much as English language speakers are a demographic minority in Africa, English is the official language in former British colonies. Inspired by research done in multilingual contexts in countries where English is a majority language, African countries need to adapt those strategies to cater to their unique multilingual contexts.

This book was written in a language that is very accessible to graduate students and researchers who are new to the field of multilingual education. As introductory reading material, the book concisely explains the historical background of particular concepts in order to increase the readers’ understanding of the ideas being discussed. The author illustrates major points of discussion with relevant and well-summarised case studies that broaden the reader’s understanding of current research in multilingual education. She does not hesitate to include opposing points of view dealing with multilingual matters in education. Graduate students, researchers, practitioners and policy-makers will find this book especially appealing because it comprises literacy research from a very wide variety of multilingual contexts.

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