14
The significance of text in the teaching of reading in the early years

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Abstract

This paper will explore some of the issues relating to the significance of text in the teaching of reading in the early years. The focus will be on the relationship of the learner's community to the teacher and the school. The sociocultural nature of the practice of reading, it will be argued, means that the context in which young children learn to read is of great importance. When texts are chosen for the purpose of teaching reading the individual student's engagement with the texts found in school and the student's oral language development must also be considered. The paper will begin to explore some criteria that teachers may need to include when choosing texts appropriate for all students in a classroom regardless of culture, ethnicity, economic or sociocultural background.

Introduction

In this paper I will attempt to define and clarify the significance of text in the teaching of reading and to focus on the relationship of the development of reading with the types of texts chosen to teach reading. In this paper 'text' in the context of teaching reading, will refer to the written texts used in a school. This definition also includes digital texts.

The role of the community in educational achievement is also highly significant. There is a strong correlation between the social and economic profile of particular communities and the educational success of the majority of students from those communities (Lokan, 2001). This cannot be accepted as either a natural or unchangeable correlation without considering the role of the school in the literacy development of individual students from a particular community.

In Australia there is a current debate around literacy education, which is particularly concerned with the achievements of Indigenous students. When these students were assessed by The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000 they were under-represented in the highest category of reading proficiency and while some achieved very high results, the group was over-represented in the lowest category (Lokan, 2001, pxi). This paper will examine the relevance of text in the teaching of reading especially in Australian Indigenous communities, in which under achievement in literacy has been recognised as a barrier to educational success. The relationship of the school to the learners' community will be explored as this is the context in which the teaching of reading takes place. Reference will be made to a case study, which aims to provide local communities with the ability to produce their own texts. Reading will be defined as a sociocultural practice and the development of criteria for choosing appropriate texts will be defined in reference to their level of difficulty and how this is mediated by both the development of oral language and engagement with the text.

The importance of the relationship of the school to the learners' community

Freire (1985) and Connell (1994) both address the alienation of disadvantaged students and show how poverty can result in what Freire calls "The culture of silence" (p73). These students are doubly disadvantaged as not only are they unable to access educational resources as easily as some other members of society but they also bear the personal responsibility for failing to do so. As Connell (1994) points out:

> Disadvantage is always produced through mechanisms that also produce advantage … The beneficiaries of the current educational order are, broadly speaking, the groups with greater economic and institutional power, greater access to the means of persuasion, and the best representation in government and in professions (p15).

Freire (1985) reinforces the relationship of the dominated and the dominating cultures and how the poor are silenced by the oppressive social conditions under which they live. Connell and Freire, while not

condemning teachers and their personal efforts to support disadvantaged students, do identify education systems as part of the apparatus of the state and therefore the dominant culture which supports systems which work to their own advantage (Connell, 1994).

Many students might find school a 'natural setting' in which to learn, and may therefore be acquiring knowledge at school because their understandings about language and education predispose them to learning in such an environment (Bernstein, 1971, 1990). Bernstein's theory of elaborated and restricted codes (Bernstein, 1990), supports the conclusions drawn by Connell and Freire and provides an example of how this disadvantage is realised in the personal literacy development of particular students. Students using restricted codes will often find it difficult to achieve the same level of success as students using elaborated codes. Older students may have mastered some aspects of reading, especially a basic ability to decode written text, but still struggle to read age appropriate educational texts (Freebody, 2005). However as Freebody has indicated in the four resources model of reading, (Freebody & Luke, 1991) decoding is only one aspect of the process. The understandings about language development, which inform most current syllabus documents, including the *English K–6 Syllabus* (Board of Studies NSW, 1998), describe reading as a complex process, which includes the development of critical analysis, grammatical knowledge and contextual understandings. In educational settings the learning process usually requires students to be able to independently read written texts to support their learning, especially in the later years. The understanding about the differences and complementarity of spoken and written language are therefore crucial in developing a pedagogy which could help students to read effectively. This in turn relies on understandings about the relationship of speech communities to school communities. This can be exemplified by a multi-site case study, which is being undertaken to further explore the significance of text in the teaching of reading.

A multi-site case study

The communities in this case study are spread across Australia but all have been identified as having a large number of Indigenous students achieving low levels of literacy. A specialist reading teacher, Margaret

Cossey, who recognised the need for reading materials which reflected the lives and language of contemporary Indigenous people has, over the last two decades developed Indij Readers. These books have been written and illustrated by Indigenous people and were produced collaboratively with consultation and advice from elders, community members and Indigenous organisations in each community. A Community Writers Kit is now being developed by Indij Readers as an extension of their original process of text development.

Many Indigenous students suffer the consequences of racial discrimination and marginalisation and the resulting inadequate health and education programs. This is coupled with a lack of cross cultural awareness and respect and has resulted in many Indigenous students performing below the benchmarks achieved by many other Australians. Many Indigenous students lack formal qualifications and fail to pursue higher or tertiary education and this can be directly related to their low literacy levels (Ewing & Rushton, 2007).

> Current literacy research (e.g. Cambourne, 2006; Louden et al., 2006) coupled with research about quality pedagogy (e.g. Education Qld, 2000; NSWDET, 2003; Lingard & Hayes, 2005) demonstrates that cultural relevance, links with prior background knowledge and engagement are vital factors if children are going to learn to read. Indigenous and non-Indigenous students alike need opportunities to read and engage with Indigenous stories. Literacy success correlates highly with self-efficacy and often leads to increased achievement at school and opportunities for higher education (p1).

The case study of the development of this Community Writers Kit is limited by its size, but it does include both urban and rural sites in three states. The data collected emphasise the importance of the relationship of Indigenous people to the land, the importance of local knowledge and understandings about communities and the development of literacy and its relationship to speech communities. Dr Robyn Ewing and Kathy Rushton (Ewing & Rushton, 2007) have prepared an Interim draft report for the project and quote one community author, who says:

It's not about Indigenous people getting language acquisition but it's about us using our language as a platform to say well we're going to make sure our kids read and write in terms of who we are as Indigenous people and our culture … This is not the end it's only the beginning … we look forward to what comes next! (p6)

Reading as a sociocultural practice

The model of reading outlined in many syllabus and support documents in Australia such as *English – a curriculum profile for Australian schools* (Curriculum Corporation, 1994), ESL Scales (Curriculum Corporation, 1994) and *English K–6 Syllabus* (Board of Studies NSW, 1998), acknowledge that reading is a sociocultural practice and that both the contexts of culture and situation (Halliday, 1994) define the meanings individual students will make when approaching a given text. The difficulty of any given text therefore varies for individual students, depending not only on their skills but their understandings about the cultural context and the situation in which they encounter the text. Every reader brings prior knowledge and understanding to a text and for teachers of students with low literacy levels, explicit literacy support must be based on a clear understanding of the reading process including how individual students approach a text. Meek (1988) demonstrates the importance of the text in the teaching of reading:

> The reading experts, for all their understanding about 'the reading process', treat all text as the neutral substance on which the process works, as if the reader did the same things with a poem, a timetable, a warning notice … Not only that, these experts often fail to remind themselves that reading doesn't happen in a vacuum. The social conditions and surroundings are important too. For so long we have been inclined to think of reading as a silent solitary activity that we have neglected those things that are part of our reading together. … The reading process has always to be described in terms of texts and contexts as well as in terms of what we think readers actually do (pp5&6).

Texts can be identified by the different audiences and purposes for which they are composed, and the structures and grammatical features which realise these choices. It is therefore of great importance to recognise that different types of texts make different demands on the reader and that these demands vary, especially in relation to the oral language development of the reader as well as their background knowledge of the subject matter of the text.

How children learn to read

Williams (2000), following Bernstein and Vygotsky, states that the explicit teaching of reading also requires the teacher to have both a clear understanding about the features of texts and the metalanguage to develop a discourse around the text. He suggests that developing a metalanguage is analogous to the learning of a foreign language:

> it might be argued: for children, the acquisition of a metalanguage differs from the acquisition of language precisely because it uses the semantics of the language as its foundation.

> This way of thinking suggests a different starting point for developing children's knowledge of grammar and, quite crucially, a different way of thinking about what grammatical knowledge might be for. Instead of conceiving of grammar in primary school as 'basic' descriptive work on parts of speech in isolated sentences, an alternative is to make exploring **how texts mean** … Children's literature is a rich site for exploring these issues … (p116)

A focus on social interaction in the classroom as the basis for learning is completely opposed to psychological behaviourist understandings about learning as identified in some approaches to the teaching of reading (e.g. Castles & Coltheart, 2004; Hempenstall, 1997 and Reynolds & Wheldall, 2007). Wells has defined a social constructivist approach in his definition of Vygotsky's notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as "not a context-independent attribute of an individual; rather it is constructed in the interaction between participants in the course of their joint engagement in a particular activity" (Wells, 1998, p333). He goes on to identify the ZPD as a site, which may engender unexpected

understandings and may lead equally to change or stability. His understanding of the ZPD is that:

> the zone of proximal development is created in the interaction between the student and the co-participants in an activity, including the available tools and the selected practices, and depends on the nature and quality of that interaction as much as on the upper limit of the learner's capability (Wells, 1998, p318).

For teachers to support students effectively they need to take note of an individual's goals as well as the goals set by their communities and of the tools available to students including the texts they encounter in educational settings. This has implications for the classroom. Programs must be differentiated to meet the social, cultural and academic needs of the learners. It is also in contrast to a focus on the individual learner's reading ability being viewed, for instance, as a linear progression through a series of levelled texts designed by a publisher to 'test' or 'teach' reading 'skills'.

Developing criteria for choosing appropriate texts for teaching reading

Providing appropriately levelled texts for the teaching of reading

Marie M Clay (1991), who devised the Reading Recovery program, says: "that what is easy or difficult will vary from district to district, from school to school, and from child to child" (p201). The difficulty of any given text must therefore be seen to vary for individual students, depending not only on their skills but their understandings about the cultural context and the situation in which they encounter the text. Clay asserts that the difficulties in a text are always defined by the individual reader and that skilled teachers can develop an understanding of what constitutes an appropriate text for students learning to read.

Rose (Acevedo & Rose, 2007) in his work with Indigenous students states that students need support to read texts at the level of word,

sentence and whole text because he recognises the need to teach students the patterns of language that they will encounter at each of these levels. He argues that the patterns of language found in texts will also differ according to their audience and purpose:

> For example, the language patterns of factual texts in science or society and environment are very different, from those in literary fiction, and both are different from the language patterns in arguments and text responses which evaluate issues or literary texts (p2).

Rose also acknowledges that students who are experiencing difficulty with literacy are not engaged with schooling, or reading, and are at risk of educational failure. He has recognised the importance of background knowledge when a reader is addressing a text however he does not focus on the possibility of particular texts being more or less engaging or supportive of the reading process.

Engagement

The importance of engagement in reading, however, is further underlined by the conclusions from recent research which show that students with the lowest levels of literacy make minimal progress during the middle years of schooling and this is compounded by a general decline in reading achievement for many students in the first two years of high school (DEST, 2005). This situation at least indicates that there is a lack of understanding about how to support lower achieving students in all grades. As Lokan has noted in the PISA report (2001) there is a correlation between engagement in reading and literacy achievement:

> The engagement with reading scale was significantly related to reading literacy achievement. With a measure of attitudes, it is usually not possible to disentangle whether positive attitudes lead to better performance, or the other way around, or a mixture of both. Efforts to raise students' appreciation of books and motivation to spend time reading should surely be of benefit, irrespective of which of them causes the other (pxi).

Some texts provide a bridge between the students' oral language and the written texts they will encounter within the education system. Within the

classroom the engagement of young readers, from a range of backgrounds, can be achieved by skillful teachers if they choose the type of texts, which resonate with the particular young children in their own classes. These are texts which allow students the opportunity to participate with some understanding. These familiar texts will reflect the subject matter, wordings and grammatical features of the oral or written texts a child regularly encounters through participation in the discourse of their community. If this discourse is not congruent with the discourse of the school time must be given to building that familiarity with new the new discourse of the school (Smith, 1999).

The role of oral language in the teaching of reading

Thus the criteria for choosing texts must be based on a teacher's understanding of the oral language and literacy practices of the wider local community, and how they are reflected in the learning community within the classroom. An understanding of the relationship between the school community and the local community is crucial in the selection of appropriate texts, which will engage young readers. As Halliday notes: "spoken language favours the clause, where processes take place, whereas written language favours the nominal group. The locus of the constitution of things" (p99). It is clear that the patterns of language change from text to text depending on the audience and purpose; that particular audiences and purposes are privileged in our society; and that at the heart of learning to read is a familiarity with a range of patterns (Meek, 1988).

Halliday (1985) has also noted that teachers recognise that there is a role for oral language in the process of becoming literate (p96). He also differentiates between spoken and written texts, by identifying spoken texts as dynamic – presenting knowledge as a process – and written texts as synoptic – presenting knowledge as a thing that exists (p96). However Halliday argues that:

> In a literate culture, we tend not to take the spoken language seriously. This is not surprising, since not only has writing taken over many of the high prestige functions of language in our society, but also our highly valued texts are now all written ones. Written records have replaced oral memories as the repositories of collective wisdom and verbal art (p97).

This written way of knowing and sharing culture between generations has been challenged by many Indigenous peoples. As exemplified by Smith (1999) and Scollon (2001) there are other ways of knowing that are more highly valued by Indigenous peoples.

Halliday (1985) addresses one aspect of this difference when he explains that:

> Aboriginal languages are not, in fact, equipped to express the semiotics of Western societies – nor are European languages suited to the meaning styles of Aborigines. Each would have to adapt itself in order to meet such different demands (p92).

Smith (1999) would argue that this adaption has only been one way and it began to take place in Australia from the earliest times. It was not led by the dominant cultural group but by those who spoke the Aboriginal languages to which Halliday refers. As so aptly summarised by van Toorn (2006): "From these very early days, the history of Aboriginal literacy cannot be separated from the broader experience of Aboriginal oppression and dispossession" (p15). In reference to Rose, the patterns of Aboriginal English spoken by Indigenous people differ from the English of other Australians at the levels of word, clause and text. Halliday (1985) contends that:

> Learning is essentially a process of constructing meanings; and the cognitive component in learning is a process of constructing linguistic meanings – semantic systems and semantic structures. These systems of meaning, the ideational and interpersonal realities that we create in and through language, embody, as we have seen, two complementary perspectives: the synoptic and the dynamic (p98).

On the simplest level it is clear that the language of the written texts young students will encounter will be more familiar to some students than others and that this is an important consideration in the selection of texts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, choosing appropriate texts for teaching reading must be based on an understanding of the learner's needs as defined by the

difficulty of the text for the young reader as well as the level of engagement the text produces. The difficulty of the text must not be reduced to a focus on the learner's skills as a decoder (Freebody, 2005) but must include the relationship of the young reader's community to the school, and what it means for the individual student learning to read (Bernstein, 1990; Connell, 1994; Freire, 1985). The choice of texts must above all engage young readers as poor and unmotivated readers spend less and less time reading and therefore compound the problem as they grow older (Lokan, 2001; Stanovich, 1986). If the teaching of reading is recognised as a sociocultural practice it is clear that the culture and social practices of the young student's community are important factors in the process of learning to read. Therefore, texts which reflect the social and linguistic resources of the local school community can provide important support to a young reader as it is this way of learning and knowing which will be most familiar to the young student.

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