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## A SOCIO-CULTURAL APPROACH TO LITERACY INSTRUCTION FOR ADULT ESOL LEARNERS NEW TO LITERACY

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### 1 Introduction

In this chapter I draw on socio-cultural views of learning influenced by Vygotsky (1997) to argue that cognitive processes have their origin in social activity. Compatible with this view of learning is a view of language which acknowledges that acquiring literacy is a sociolinguistic as well as psycholinguistic process in which learners need to make sense of language in context. This includes an awareness of not just the *what*, but the *why* of texts - why does X respond in such a way to Y for instance - commonly referred to as pragmatics (cf. Thomas 1995 for an introduction to this field). I will argue, drawing on several case studies, that literacy instruction for adult non-literate learners is best seen as induction into understandings of the function of literacy in social life and the manner in which we make sense of different text genres, as opposed to the teaching of discrete, sequential, autonomous skills. The distinction between literacy as social practice and literacy as skills instruction has been extensively explored through the new literacy studies (cf. Street 1984, Baynham 1995, Gregory 2008) and they point the way to a socio-cultural, sociolinguistic approach to literacy instruction for adult ESOL learners.

Adult learners of English as a second language who are new to literacy present a particularly interesting case of how interwoven identities and life experiences and culturally grounded views of learning impact on literacy acquisition. In this chapter, I shall talk about three learners who have had no or little prior education in their countries of origin. The vignettes illuminate in different ways the role played in present literacy learning by past learning and life experience.

### 2 A socio-cultural view of learning

The view I take here is that socio-cultural, Vygotskian models of learning are more appropriate for adult ESOL learners new to literacy than skills-based approaches. Learning-as-skill assumes that there is a set of competences which are universally applicable and culturally neutral. One example of this is the espousal of phonics instruction as the point of departure for all subsequent literacy instruction, regardless of the context of learning and teaching, the nature of the language being taught and the life and learning experiences of learners. A social view of literacy emphasizes the need for explicit teaching of knowledge about written language as related to speech but sees this relationship as linguistically and culturally variable and context dependent.

Socio-cultural theory, in acknowledging prior learning and thus the fundamental principle long argued by educators that new learning builds on existing knowledge, allows learners to draw on the tools and resources they bring with them to their acquisition of literacy. A Vygotskian model emphasizes the role of mediated learning, where resources available to learners from their cultural context are drawn on to develop new forms of knowledge or reshape familiar ones. Their real life experience is legitimized. As Luis Moll says: current policies (Moll talks of the United States but much the same would be said of the United Kingdom) 'effectively eliminate lived experiences and funds of knowledge from the learning and teaching process' (Moll 2002:266). A preoccupation with the teaching of decontextualised skills rather than with knowledge and understanding of principles leads frequently to phonics instruction of a mechanistic kind. Moreover, as Collins and Blot point out; phonics programmes tend to be 'visited on the disprivileged' (Collins and Blot 2003: 173).

Collins and Blot do not specify who is disprivileged, nor do they elaborate on which version of phonics they have in mind. However it has been frequently observed in countries like the UK and the USA that one consequence of differential instruction is

that those perceived as needing special assistance with language and literacy are confined to form-focused instruction of a cognitively unchallenging nature (cf. Mertzman 2008 for a recent discussion of research in this vein). Included in such 'disadvantaged' groups are second language learners, particularly those with limited or no prior educational background. This is in spite of the fact that the heterogeneity of second language learners, linguistically and culturally, is likely to mean a mismatch between their learning needs and the blunt tool of prescriptive, rigidly defined forms of literacy interventions, which Moll (2002:266) sees as 'desperate efforts to impose uniformity on diversity'. Second language classrooms or groups of the kind envisaged in this paper, which consist of new immigrants to English speaking countries, are typified by high diversity. Socio-cultural theory sees this as a resource for educational activities rather than a problem to be overcome or a basis for divisive classroom procedures, such as particular kinds of supposed 'ability' grouping, which allow early second language learners little access to rich models of language and literacy instruction.

### 3 *A sociolinguistic perspective on language*

A theory of language needs to accompany a theory of learning. The work of psycholinguists such as Urquhart and Weir (1998) and sociolinguists such as Stubbs (1980) and more recently Blommaert (2008) is seldom acknowledged in the reading acquisition literature, leading to a neglect of linguistic knowledge beyond that related to phonemic understanding at word level. Particularly important for instance is the role of syntactic parsing (cf. Urquhart and Weir 1998), which presents a challenge for second language learners, who concurrently with learning to read, are learning how English is structured at sentence level and beyond.

In spite of the clear relevance of lexical and syntactic knowledge for L2 readers, research on linguistic aspects of literacy has been largely confined to debates around phonics (and indeed the merits of two *versions* of phonics instruction, namely analytic or synthetic) in recent educational discourse, to the extent that both major political parties in the UK have pinned their colours to this particular mast in the wake of an apparently highly successful intervention in Clackmannanshire in Scotland (Johnstone and Watson 2005)<sup>1</sup>. Admittedly, there have been dissenters who note that the success of the primary school children was largely limited to word decoding with only slight improvements in comprehension (cf. Dombey 2005). One might add, too, that the school population in the Clackmannanshire study was more homogenous than in most inner city schools or colleges, thus side-stepping the difficulties presented by linguistically diverse learners whose language systems would not readily match up with a single monolithic phonetic target of the kind which synthetic phonics assumes.

I do not wish to argue against phonics instruction but to locate this within a richer and more comprehensive understanding of language. This embraces knowledge of grammar, morphology, lexis and pragmatics. In homogenous monolingual groups this kind of knowledge about language tends to be taken for granted, but it is highly relevant to the language and literacy development of second language learners. The linguist Michael Halliday (1994) takes a functional view of grammar by which linguistic choice is always motivated by social purpose. Function drives form which means that words and sentences cannot be readily interpreted outside of situational or textual context. (cf. Wallace 1987). Vygotsky notes that 'understanding cannot be reduced to naming the word' (Vygotsky 1997: 147).

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<sup>1</sup> The researchers conducted an analysis of the children's performance from Primary 2 to Primary 7, comparing the same children right through in word reading, spelling and reading comprehension. It was found for word reading and spelling that the gain in skill compared with chronological age had increased significantly over the years, even though the training programme had ended in Primary 1. In Primary 2, word reading was found to be 11.5 months ahead of chronological age, but in Primary 7 it was 3 years 6 months ahead. For spelling, in Primary 2 it was 1 year ahead, whereas by Primary 7 it was 1 year 9 months ahead. However, for reading comprehension, a different pattern was shown. In Primary 2 the children comprehended what they read 7 months ahead of chronological age, but by Primary 7 this had dropped to a 3.5 months advantage.

Rather than ‘reading words’ readers process the lexico-grammar of texts, making judgments not just about word meaning but word class. One pedagogic implication is that it is particularly important in the case of second language learners to encourage certain strategies such as backtracking and reading ahead to allow them to unpack and predict sentence structure. We see Anna, one of the learners I look at below, doing this in the case of ‘it’. She notes the discourse function of the item ‘it’ in the text and is thus ‘reading the grammar’ rather than reading the words.

*I go home and get a cup of tea  
I sit down and drink it*

Anna comments sotto voce to herself on encountering these lines: ‘What means ‘it’? It means tea’.

A sociolinguistic perspective means looking beyond language as form or meaning at individual word level, to language in use within whole texts embedded in a context of situation. Functional views of language which I want to argue mesh well with socio-cultural views of learning start with the text as a functional unit. Of course a text may be one word such as ‘Danger’ on condition that this word is embedded within a context which suggests the need for warning. The formal structure of extended texts is determined by social purpose. For instance academic essays such as the present paper are required to set out the premises of an argument at the start (at least in Western academic prose), unlike a personal letter. Once readers recognize a text’s macro function, choices at clause level within texts begin to make sense. Recognisability of the social purpose of texts ties in with pragmatic knowledge linked to cultural knowledge of ways of doing things in particular groups and societies. Readers draw on this level of language/cultural knowledge to relate what is said to what is meant. Frequently this relationship is indirect and the reader or listener needs to infer what is intended. In children’s stories for instance, the reader may be expected to understand an image or event metaphorically or ironically rather than literally.

Because the nature of language processing involves so much more than word decoding even in its earliest stages, and crucially is tied to social and textual context, it is appropriate to see the reading event itself as sociolinguistic. It is characterized by a high degree of variability which procedures like miscue analysis are able to capture, as they take account of which aspects of text - semantic, syntactic, phonological or pragmatic - are miscue triggers (cf. Wallace 1988). In particular because the lexico-grammar can only be interpreted in context, individual words will be variably predictable and therefore variably readable (cf. Wallace 1987).

Researchers of child language acquisition also acknowledge the principle that readers need to embed the reading of words within wider structure. A study by Paterson et al. notes the complexity of interpretation of seemingly ‘simple’ items, phonetically considered, such as ‘just’ (Paterson et al. 2006). It may be for this reason that what learners sometimes call ‘the little words’ are harder to read than fully lexicalized items, such as *giraffe* or *explode* (cf. Wallace 1988).

Of course experienced readers are highly skilled word readers regardless of context, but emerging readers are, as it is widely agreed, dependent on context. This means that their reading will evidence greater variability, to the extent that textual and contextual supports are either provided or denied for them. It becomes particularly important to provide the most predictable contextualization of individual words within a whole syntactic, semantic and pragmatic context, rather than assuming, as phonics instruction tends to, that reading in the early stages is a matter of ‘reading words’ as evidenced by a number of studies which take reading words as the starting point developmentally (e.g. Ehri in Stainthorp and Tomlinson 2002).

In short, a sociolinguistic view of reading is posited on reading text rather than an accumulation of words. The whole is not the sum of its parts. At the same time the reader is a meaning maker, drawing on the meaning potential of texts. Overall such a view meshes with a socio-cultural view of learning where the reader is using textual

cues at all language levels as well as, crucially, her/his existing knowledge of the world, as tools to create meaning.

#### 4 *Three Adult Learners*

I shall present three vignettes of learners of literacy, two working one-to-one with a teacher, and the third within a small group. I should emphasize that these learners were not subject to formal testing. I do not wish here to make claims about ‘what works’, but in a more open spirit of enquiry, to raise some issues of approaches to the learning and teaching of literacy for adults who have received little or no formal education. Each of these learners illustrates in slightly different ways the role of social context in literacy instruction. For Hillyard we see that when guided to use overall text context, he is able more readily to read individual words. In the case of Anna and Zahib what emerges are more socio-cultural and pragmatic issues related to their expectations of oral narratives and other artifacts such as photographs, as experienced in their daily lives.

##### 4.1 *Hillyard*

Hillyard comes from Dominica and his first language is a variety of French Creole, but he has had some quite limited education, through the medium of English. Hillyard is reading *Toussaint l’Ouverture of the West Indies* (Bentley 1969) about the Haitian slave who led the successful slave revolt against the French. As his teacher, I am supporting him through this text (cf. Wallace 1999 for a fuller account of the case studies of Hillyard and Anna below).

*Notes on transcription:* Capitals are given where the learner renders the word successfully. Capitalized letter names are given where the learner is using the letter names to decode a word, as in C-R-U. When the teacher gives the word direct to the learner this is italicized.

##### 4.1.1 *Text Extract*

‘Some of the owners were very cruel. If they thought that their slaves were not working hard enough they beat them with big whips. In all the West Indian Islands, whether British or French, and also in America there were quite a lot of cruel slave-owners.’

Hillyard

Catherine

Some of the owner were very –very cruel.  
If they does – if they don’ T- H- O- U- G- H - T  
- thought that they –  
THEIR slave were not workin’ hard...

Start again from  
beginning of the  
sentence

If they thought that their slave were not workin’ hard  
ENOUGH they beat them with big hip – big whip. In all the  
West Indies,

*whether*

British and French and also in America there were  
Quite a lot of a lot of C- R – U – cruel slave owner

So who were  
cruel?

The owner of the slave

A major resource which mediates literacy for Hillyard is his expectation that text makes sense, so that words which do not fit the textual context are not tolerated in his reading aloud, as in ‘big hip – big whip’. Hillyard’s reading defies a view of reading as word reading, in that his miscues show he is reading not words but syntax, as he replaces the standard syntax of the text with his own typical variety when he reads ‘owners’ as ‘owner’. Hillyard is reading the grammar not words – or rather the words are embedded within a syntactic frame. This is clearly crucial in the case of function items such as ‘enough’. Culturally the text resonates not with personal life experience, but as a learner from the Caribbean, with a likely folk memory of significant events in that part of the world. Finally, we note that he uses a letter naming device to apparently decode words he is unsure about. Hillyard’s schooling has encouraged this strategy and it is as effective for him as phonic decoding might be for learners taught by synthetic phonics. For although phonics advocates will argue that the link between /m/ /a/ /t/ and <mat> is readily made, for many learners, especially when their pronunciation differs from that of their teachers as it does with second language learners, such connections may be elusive. For Hillyard, it seems that naming the letters triggers a memory of a word already known and offers an analytic tool which does the job.

#### 4.2 Anna.

Anna is from Pakistan, and at the age of nineteen has never been to school. She has been in the United Kingdom for about eighteen months. Her strategy is to comment on and question both form and meaning in the texts that she and myself as her teacher work with together. In taking the initiative to challenge what does not make sense to her, she guides me to provide constructive mediation and thus learns more about the nature of written text and the reading process. Anna’s reading is very hesitant, and I need to provide many words (these are given in italics). It will be noted that the text is written for children; it is part of an old, but still popular Ladybird series in the United Kingdom. However for a very early reader such as Anna, it proved hard to find simple narrative texts which could support her reading at this stage of reading development.

##### 4.2.1 Text Extract

‘Then before the fox could move she flew up to a high beam.’ (It is important to add that accompanying the written text is a picture of the fox in Little Red Hen’s kitchen. This shows a shelf with a plate rack above and cups suspended on hooks below. Anna’s attention is drawn to the cups hanging on the wall.)

Anna

Then before the fox could move  
 She...fly up to the – no  
 Miss she er...you know...  
 Cup here in the house...cup  
 Cup...she no use cup  
  
 No Miss...because she...  
 She you know. She...  
 She chicken you know  
  
 No miss...she took and maybe  
 Nice...she nice thinking, you know  
  
 No Miss...she eat in the floor

Catherine

*could move*  
*high beam*  
 What?  
  
 Why not? Why can’t  
 she use a cup?  
  
 Can’t chickens use  
 cups?  
  
 But you don’t think  
 she uses them to drink  
 out of?

She no use cup and plate

Um. But in stories  
things are different...I  
mean...in this story  
the hen can talk and  
the fox talks

Yes Miss. No in Pakistan. No him  
Talking and no her

Not even in stories?

Maybe story

Anna mounts a challenge to the text because it does not match her real world experience of stories. While the text is in many ways therefore not suitable as literacy support for Anna, it offers a space for talk about textual expectations and the degree to which these might be culturally shared. We see that what we might call pragmatic failure – due to lack of familiarity with culturally expected features of children's stories where animals take on human characteristics – offers a learning opportunity, one which is shared with her teacher. Anna, as a meaning maker, has no inhibitions in challenging what she sees as excessive anthropomorphism.

### 4.3 *Zahib*

Zahib works as a maid in London with a wealthy Saudi Arabian family. Like Anna she has had no schooling. Unlike the other two cases, Zahib is being taught in a small group of four women. On the occasion I observe the class, she and several of the women in the group use a strategy comparable to Anna's to make sense of their learning experience. This is a strong resistance to culturally unfamiliar scenarios. They challenge the story of a fictional person, based around a photograph of a young woman, on the grounds that the woman, Sara, cannot be allowed to 'have three children' because she is only 22. Narratives produced about fictional characters – triggered in this class by photo prompts – have to be seen to mesh with the real world experiences of this class of women. Any text has to be meaningful in the terms of the learners' own worlds. This moment recalls the famous one described by Luria (1976) where learners' real life experience over-rides claims presented in syllogisms. Here it is not a matter of logic but of genre (namely that in invented texts we need not bother too much about what might be the case in real life). It seems likely that fictional texts which 'allow' counter-experience events – as with hens drinking out of cups and very young mothers with many children – are not part of the life world of these new-to-literacy learners. It must be added though, in anticipation of any notion of 'deficit' in these readings, that plausibility remains a part of response to texts for *all* of us, even experienced and sophisticated readers.

As a helper in Zahib's class, I assist her in constructing a story on the whiteboard. The tools are therefore the board and pen which she uses to scribe the story, the picture of Sara as a prompt, my support and, most importantly, Zahib's own life experience. What happens is that even though the intention is to tell the story as in the picture and as rehearsed earlier in the whole group, Zahib decides to give an account of her *own* daily life instead. The process involves me, as a scaffold to this event, spelling out the tricky words. We see that the letters are needed here, not the sounds. This makes the point about how work with letters and morphology help in a language experience approach of this kind. As Zahib and I build the text together, we need to talk not about the sounds /i/, /e/ or /a/ but the letters. We see then that letter names or morphemes as in directions such as 'add an ed' to make it past or an 's' to make it plural offer tools in the Vygotskian sense to support this early learner as she constructs a simple text. She is thus gaining an understanding of what it is to be a writer, a sense of story and crucially, an understanding of basic lexico-grammar, made more visible in the concrete form of written symbols than in talk.

## 5 Conclusion

Each vignette sheds light in a different way on ways of teaching early literacy. They also, I would argue, offer evidence for the value of a socio-cultural view of early literacy. I shall conclude with some implications for practice under three headings: the need to nurture existing language and world knowledge resources, the role of miscue analysis in the learning to read process and the need to scaffold learning to new levels of understanding.

*The importance of nurturing a range of existing resources in low educated adults which mediate in the manner in which they make sense of text.*

The learners here have come to literacy instruction with limited resources, educationally speaking. However they are expert, mature users of language, with varying degrees of bilingual skill and knowledge. Above all, they expect language to make sense. And we see the sense making process in evidence here as Anna challenges a text which does not mesh with her real world knowledge. At the same time, she is able on another occasion to work out through access to print some of the principles of written language, as we see in her comment 'what means it'? In fact it is easier for learners to develop a meta-language for lexical and syntactic features of text - looking beyond individual words and grapheme/phoneme relationships - than it is for phonology. Features such as word order and morphology are more transparent and more readily talked about. For instance, at one point in our lessons, Anna comments: What means 'ed'? 'Ed' means past'. She is learning about the way English creates past tense through access to text itself.

*The value of fine grained miscue analysis which allows teachers and learners together to see why errors occur, that indeed some errors are to be viewed positively, rather than to judge error in terms only of failure.*

Miscue analysis is commonly seen as assessment tool but can be a teaching/learning tool documenting for both teacher and learner which aspects of texts are creating difficulty at particular moments of learning. Miscues may be grapho-phonetic, syntactic, semantic or related to the overall intention of a text. THE strength of miscue analysis is first that it looks at all levels of language in context. Second, it acknowledges that errors can represent a development in the meaning making process and are not always to be judged negatively.

*The importance of building on the real life experiences of learners in ways which take their learning to a new level. The teacher's role is to make use of various kinds of scaffolds to support this learning.*

The use of scaffolds or tools to mediate in learning is a key principle of Vygotskian learning theory. For adult learners these may consist of all kinds of artifacts, such as images or simple texts which resonate with daily life. Carefully chosen material allows learners to be the experts – for instance an image of a particular kind of water pump used back home or visuals/texts which represent salient aspects of their lives in the new country. Such key texts can trigger a different level of debate around what these artifacts might represent, offering learners' experience of critical engagement with print which must ultimately be one aim of any adult literacy programme.



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