

**GORDON O. ADE-OJO, MIKE ADEYEYE, F. FAGBOHUN**

## **SITUATED LITERACY PRACTICES AMONGST ARTISANS IN THE SOUTH WEST OF NIGERIA: DEVELOPMENTAL AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

### **Abstract**

This paper reports an aspect of a larger study on literacy practices, needs and perceptions of artisans in a part of the South West region of Nigeria. Using an ethnographic approach to research, it identified a variety of literacy practices, events and mediums, thus confirming the notion of literacy as social practice. The study employed a modified form of ethnographic research which was specifically designed for this study, a density of literacy practices approach to ethnographic research, data was collected through a mixture of observation, participation and a series of interviews and dialogues. The data were subjected to qualitative and quantitative analysis which enabled a range of themes and distributional patterns to emerge. It concludes by highlighting implications for governance and pedagogy.

### **Introduction**

While it is true that the notion of a dominant discourse has in a way dominated discussions on perceptions of literacy (Ade-Ojo, 2011), it is also now evident that the acknowledgement and introduction of other discourses are now being firmly entrenched within the discourse of literacy. This emergent acknowledgement, mostly anchored to the seminal work of Street (1984, 1995) and which acknowledges an autonomous as against an ideological model of literacy has now yielded numerous terminologies including; multiple, social, situated and local literacies (Street, 1995; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2000). The central thrust of these studies has been that literacy should be seen as a social practice which draws from more than just the cognitive essence of its users (Satchwell and Ivanic, 2007). Developing from this perception is the notion that literacy is employed for purposes other than learning. This view is encapsulated in the submission of Satchwell and Ivanic (2007, p. 305) that, 'It is crucial not to conflate 'literacy' with 'learning', since each can exist without the other. Literacy, therefore, should not be restricted to an interpretation that sees it as merely a set of skills typically employed for interpreting linguistic structures, but as something that possesses a range of varieties which should be situated in different social contexts'.

While many studies anchor their exploration of literacy practices on the dictates of a social perception of literacy, it is paradoxical that many of these studies end up by looking at literacy mostly in the context of education. This, in our view, reinforces the notion of the inexorable link between literacy and schooling. Illustrating this paradoxical alliance are the works of Satchwell and Ivanic (2007) and the study by Ngwaru and Opokwu-Amankwa (2010). The latter in particular, while lamenting the one-sided nature of existing literature on literacy practices in terms of regional distribution, paradoxically limits its own scope by looking at these practices mainly in the context of education and learning. In response to the predominance of studies such as this, the present study aims to explore literacy

practices in contexts other than those related to schooling by focusing on subjects who are not engaged in learning and, therefore, reinforce the notion of literacy as social practice.

The second rationale for this study is closely aligned to the notion of generating a universal dimension for postulations that are made on literacy. In setting the scene for their study, Ngwaru and Amankwa (2010, p. 295) identify as one of their goals, the need to 'broaden the debate' by including 'a picture of the challenges faced by sub-Saharan Africa'. It is in line with the acknowledgement of the need to provide universal validity to claims that are made on literacy that this study focuses on an area in Sub-Saharan Africa with the hope of providing the avenue for comparison and for drawing a more universal conclusion on literacy practices.

### **Perceptions of literacy**

There is an established dichotomy between various perceptions of literacy in the literature. The more commonly used terminology to represent the two dominant conflicting perceptions are the ideological and the autonomous perceptions of literacy (Street, 1984; Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Barton, 2006; Ade-Ojo, 2011). While the latter perceives literacy as essentially located in the cognitive realm which is often mediated through the ability to read and write, the former is perceived as having a social essence which is more focused on the specific context in which written language is used to get something done (Stachwell and Ivanic, 2007).

This research is anchored to an orientation of the ideological perception of literacy which has been particularly espoused in the works of the New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1984 and 1995; Barton et al., 2000; Satchwell and Ivanic, 2007; Gebru et al., 2009). The allegiance to the ideological perception of literacy in this research is informed by two factors. First, because the study is essentially an ethnographic study, this perception provides the opportunity for ethnographic researchers to better understand what they observe as a range of literacy events. This offers a unit of analysis of events which the cognitively defined alternative perception would not have admitted and, therefore, facilitated a better understanding of the 'culturally specific characteristics' (Satchwell and Ivanic, 2007, p. 304) of the events they observe. The second implication relates to the goal of the research itself. This report is an aspect a larger research which sought to explore literacy in the context of the overall social existence of a group of people. This is distinctly different from an exploration of literacy in the context of learning. In order to acknowledge the different ways, other than in the learning context, in which literacy is employed, it becomes inevitable that a perception of literacy that acknowledges its social practice essence is subscribed to.

### **Methods of data collection**

This research employed a number of methods for the collection of data. Central to this is a modified form of ethnographic approach which focused on the density of literacy practices in the South West region of Nigeria and amongst the subjects under investigation. This approach starts by identifying the critical periods in which literacy events occur and focuses the ethnographic representation and participation

of the researchers on this period. The approach was recommended by the goal of the research and by the legacy of the success that mainstream ethnographic approach has achieved in literacy research in different settings (See e.g. Satchwell and Ivanic, 2007 and Gebru et al., 2009). As argued in the preceding section, this research takes its orienting theory from the ideological perception of literacy and, therefore, sees the major units of analysis as literacy events which are mediated in a number of ways. In order to collate an accurate account of the various events which represent different literacy practices, it was important for the researchers to 'get to the heart of people's understandings of their own literacy practices and literacy events rather than supposedly objective study on them' (Thomas, 2009). Hence, the use of an ethnographic field work approach which required researchers to continuously interact with subjects for a period of six months. The data recorded through researchers' fieldwork was further supplemented through the use of a questionnaire and interview. The overall effect was that the combination of the three methods promoted data triangulation – which also helps in triangulating the results.

### **Data Analysis**

The goal of this section of the study was to identify distribution of practices and the frequency of their occurrence. To achieve this, data collected through researcher fieldwork and questionnaire were codified numerically and subjected to statistical analysis to map out frequency of distribution. Further data collected through interview were subjected to content analysis (Thomas, 2009) which was used to classify the semantic import of the subjects' views on their own practices and literacy events. Responses to interview questions were codified on the basis of the semantic notions they signified and these were subsequently used to discuss the pattern emerging from the quantitative data collected.

### **Selection of research sample**

The sample of subjects for this study is a convenient sample (see Kerr, 2009). The element of convenience arises from the willingness to participate and from the location of the subjects in terms of residence. The choice of participants in this respect was dictated by the consideration of whether they reside within the geographical area the research was focused on. Given the ethnographic nature of the data collection method, it was important that only potential subjects who reside within a particular radius were considered as subjects. Of these, all willing participants were recruited as subjects of the study. To avoid selection bias which is sometimes seen as a weakness of convenience samples (Thomas, 2009), the researchers ensured that all known artisan vocations were objectively represented while gender was equitably distributed among the subjects.

### **Research findings and discussions**

#### ***Respondents' gender***

The subjects were split equally in terms of gender with each gender accounting for 50% of the subject group. This split, while incidental, allowed us to use gender distribution to address on of the potential problems of using a convenient sample

group; representation. The expectation was that with the equal representation of gender among the subjects, findings that might be gender-significant will have more authenticity.

### ***Literacy practices***

Identified literacy practices were spread across four distinct areas. The first, social represented the use of literacy in a range of social interactions which were neither formal nor predictable with only 2.7% of subjects recognising this as a part of their literacy practices. Researchers observed that many of the events representing this practice were not mediated through any formal written text. Rather, they found a myriad of ways in which these events were mediated including pictures, songs and electronic devices like the telephone and the television. For example, a researcher observed how invitation to a social event was mediated through a song. This reinforces the argument that literacy is best seen as a social practice which is and can be mediated through several mediums (Street, 1984, 1995; Barton, 1994; Barton et al., 2000; Satchwell and Ivanic, 2007) and not only through the written text as argued by Olson (1997).

The second identified practice is academic. In this context, researchers observed that 2.7% of the subjects employed their literacy in furtherance of academic or learning pursuit. One subject who was observed engaging with written text regularly explained that it was towards learning specific requirements towards becoming ordained as a pastor in his local church. Another engaged with literacy texts because he wanted to become recognised as a seamstress for a big fashion chain, which required that she demonstrated her ability to write down information for and from customers.

By far the most highly represented is literacy practice in professional context. This was observed amongst 83.8% of subjects and reiterated during interviews. The various events include using text messaging for advertisement, using diagram to inform clients and to display their products, using labelled sample products to advertise, writing out receipts, using empty product containers to place orders for replacement, using sample materials to signify availability of products. Many of the subjects indicated that written texts would not have adequately replaced their chosen. First, written text in their situation would not have attracted their clientele and second, many of their clientele would not have been able to engage with written texts.

The final literacy practice category, 'all aspects of my life' has been created to cater for findings based on interview sessions. When questioned about other aspects of their lives in which literacy is practiced, 10.8% of the subjects stated that they employ one form of literacy or the other in all aspects of their lives. These aspects include religion, social, academic, professional and political practices. This again confirms that literacy is situated in different social practices and that individuals may use different Literacies in different aspects of their day to day existence (Barton et al., 2000).

### **Gender Vocational distribution**

After subjecting the data to interrogation through the ANOVAs and co-efficiency instruments of SPSS, the distribution of professional vocations was found

to be gender sensitive. This research took a conscious decision to investigate the extent to which gender is significant in the distribution of literacy practices because there is some evidence that a significant percentage of literacy practice is employed in the context of professional engagements. As studies have established that professional engagement in Nigeria is gender sensitive, it was felt that any gender sensitive findings needed to be flagged up, as this study is expected to have pedagogical as well as developmental implications. Both the ANOVA and Coefficient tests confirm that the correlation between gender and literacy practices is significant at the 0.01 level 2-tailed.

## Conclusions

Studies in Europe have long confirmed that there are multiple and situated Literacy practices particularly amongst learners in further education colleges in England. This study has taken this a step further by confirming that there is some evidence that the notion of multiple and situated literacies might well be universal and that it is not limited to learners but extends to other groups such as artisans. This has both pedagogical and developmental significance.

From the pedagogical viewpoint, this challenges us to start thinking of the form of literacy that might be developed to accommodate the multiple and situated nature of literacy particularly in the way in which literacy is pedagogized. The perception of literacy as an autonomous model is already well-entrenched in the literacy teaching and learning processes through the concept of schooling. This is manifested through the breaking down process suggested by Street (1995, p. 114) which has come to lead individuals to 'construct an autonomous model of literacy... often against their own experience... to conceptualize literacy as a separate, reified set of neutral competencies, autonomous of social contexts...'. What this study has highlighted is the need to re-think the ways in which we pedagogize literacy in order to adequately meet practice-specific needs. Towards this, we suggest a pedagogy of literacy for specific needs which will focus on a construction and internalisation of an ideological model of literacy. We, therefore, propose along with Street (1995); the objectification of literacy at work in contrast with school, re-thinking space and label of learning and creating new teaching methods and procedures, all geared towards recognising that literacy can be learnt, developed and utilised in social contexts.

Secondly, this study has implications for policy makers at local levels. The recognition of multiple literacies and an acceptance of the fact that it can be promoted in situations other than school setting require policy makers to identify and allocate resources to enable the development of literacy outside the school setting. This will involve resource allocation and creation of infrastructure. As developmental policies aimed at improving literacies, both for societal and personal development is an established goal of local policies, recognising the multiplicity of literacy, its situated nature and the potential for different ways of providing it becomes a first step in achieving this goal.

## References

- Ade-Ojo, G. O. (2011) Practitioners' perceptions of the impact of the vision of policy makers on practice: the example of the recommendations of the Moser Committee. *Research Papers in Education*, vol. 26, no. 1.
- Barton, D. and Hamilton, M. (1998) *Local Literacies: reading and writing in one community*. London, Routledge.
- Barton, D., Hamilton, M. & Ivanic, R. (Eds.) (2000) *Situated Literacies: Reading and writing in context*. Routledge: London and New York.
- Barton, D. and Hamilton, M. (2000) Literacy Practices. In Barton, D., Hamilton, M. & Ivanic, R. (Eds.) (2000) *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Practice*. Routledge, London and New York.
- Barton, D. (2006) *An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed)*. Blackwell Publishing.
- EDRS (2001) *Training manual for Local Government representatives in Non-Formal Education*. UNESCO/EDRS.
- Gebre, A., Openjuru, G., Rogers, A. and Street, B. (2009) *Everyday Literacies in Africa: ethnographic studies of literacy and numeracy practices in Ethiopia*. Fountains publishers limited: Kampala, Uganda.
- Kerr, H. (2009) Dyslexia and Adult Literacy: Does Dyslexia Disempower? In Fletcher-Campbell, Soler and Reid (Eds.) *Approaching Difficulties in Literacy Development Assessment pedagogy and Programmes*. Sage, The Open University: Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, pp. 277 – 289.
- Olson, D. (1997) From utterance to text: the bias of language in speech and writing. *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 47: 254-79.
- Mgwaru, M. and Opokwu-Amankwa, A. (2010) Home and school literacy practices in Africa: listening to inner voices. *Language and Education*, 24:4, 295-307.
- Satchwell, C. and Ivanic, R. (2007) The textuality of learning contexts in UK colleges. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, Vol. 15, No. 3: 303-316.
- Street, B. (1995) *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Development, Ethnography and Education*. London: Longman.
- Street, B. (1984) *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thomas, G. (2009) *How to do your research project*. Sage: Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC.

Dr Gordon O. Ade-Ojo  
Department of Professional Learning  
School of Education  
University of Greenwich  
London, England, UK  
g.o.adejo@gre.ac.uk