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Identity, literacy, and English language teaching

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ABSTRACT

In the field of English language teaching, there has been increasing interest in the way literacy development is influenced by institutional and community practices, and the way power is implicated in language learners' engagement with text. In this paper, I trace the trajectory of my research on identity, literacy, and English language teaching, informed by theories of investment and imagined communities. Data from English language classrooms in Canada, Pakistan, and Uganda suggest that if learners have a sense of ownership over meaning-making, they will have enhanced identities as learners, and participate more actively in literacy practices. The research challenges English teachers to consider what pedagogical practices are both appropriate and desirable in the teaching of literacy, and what practices will help students develop the capacity for imagining a wider range of identities across time and space. Such practices, the research suggests, will necessitate changes in both teacher and student identity.

Keywords: identity; literacy development; power; investment; ELT

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Introduction

Interest in identity in the field of English language teaching represents a shift in the field from a focus on psycholinguistic models of second language acquisition (SLA) to include greater interest in sociological and anthropological dimensions of language learning[1]. Those of us interested in identity and language learning are concerned not only about linguistic input and output in SLA, but in the relationship between the language learner and the larger social world.[2] Parallel to changes in conceptions of 'language' are changes in prevailing conceptions of "literacy" in the field of education[3]. As Luke (1997) notes, while earlier psychological perspectives conceived of literacy as the acquisition of particular behaviors, cognitive strategies, and linguistic processing skills, more recent insights from ethnography, cultural studies, and feminist theory have led to increasing recognition that literacy is not only a skill to be learned, but a practice that is socially constructed and locally negotiated. In this view, literacy is best understood in the context of larger institutional practices, whether in the home, the school, the community, or the larger society. These institutional practices, in turn, must be understood with reference to what is called the "literacy ecology" of communities, in which there is frequently inequitable access to social, economic, and political power (Barton, 2007; Hornberger, 2003). The complex ways in which families, schools, and communities interact and differ in their literacy practices provide significant insights into the ways in which people learn, teach, negotiate, and access literacy both inside and outside school settings.

These parallel trajectories in the fields of language and literacy education, respectively, have much in common, and have had a great impact on my own research in diverse classrooms in the international community. This paper has given me the opportunity to address three contexts in which I have sought to explore the subtle connections between literacy, identity, and English language teaching. The research projects, which were all collaborative, took place in schools in Canada, Pakistan, and Uganda, respectively. In Canada, we studied the appeal of Archie comics for young people (Norton, 2003; Norton & Vanderheyden, 2004; Moffatt & Norton, 2005); in Pakistan, we investigated perceptions of literacy amongst middle-school students in Karachi (Norton & Kamal, 2003); and in Uganda, we investigated the ways in which multimodal texts provided enhanced opportunities for learning amongst secondary school students (Kendrick, Jones, Mutonyi, & Norton, 2006). In this address, I will present the central findings from each of these three research projects, focusing on the relationship between literacy, identity, and English language teaching, with particular reference to my recent work on investment and imagined communities, as discussed next.

Theoretical framework: Investment and Imagined Identities

In ongoing research (see Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000; Norton & Gao, 2008; Norton & Toohey, 2011), I have sought to integrate poststructuralist conceptions of identity and human agency by developing a construct I have called "investment." Departing from current conceptions of "motivation" in the field of language learning, the concept of investment signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their sometimes ambivalent desire to speak, read, or write it. Investment is best understood with reference to the economic metaphors that Pierre Bourdieu uses in his work, in particular the

[1] See Norton & Toohey, 2001; Zuengler & Miller, 2006.
[2] See monographs by Block, 2007; Heller, 2007; Kanno, 2008; May, 2008; Norton, 2000; Potowski, 2007; Rampton, 2006; Stein, 2008; Toohey, 2000.
[3] Barton, 2007; Blommaert, 2008; Hornberger, 2003; Kress, 2003; Martin-Jones & Jones, 2000; New London Group, 1996; Prinsloo & Baynham, 2008.

notion of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1977; 1991). Cultural capital is situated, in that it has differential exchange value in different social fields. In my work, I have argued that if learners "invest" in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. As the value of their cultural capital increases, so learners' sense of themselves, their identities, and their opportunities for the future are re-evaluated. Hence there is an integral relationship between investment and identity. This notion of investment has been taken up by other scholars in the field, and is proving productive for understanding the complex conditions under which language learning takes place.[4]

With reference to "imagined communities" and "imagined identities" (Norton, 2001; Kanno & Norton, 2003; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007), we refer to groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination. In our daily life, we interact with many communities whose existence can be felt concretely and directly, such as our neighborhood communities, our workplaces, our educational institutions, and our religious groups. However, these are not the only communities with which we are affiliated. Imagined ties can extend both spatially and temporally (see Anderson, 1991). Thus, in imagining ourselves bonded with our fellow human beings across space and time, we can feel a sense of community with people we have not yet met, including future relationships that exist only in the learner's imagination. We suggest that these imagined communities are no less real than the ones in which learners have daily engagement, and might even have a stronger impact on their current actions and investments. Further, we have made the case that an investment in an imagined community assumes an investment in an imagined identity, one that may constantly change across time and space.

Research across time and space

Archie comics and the power of popular culture in Canada

Archie comics, which address the lives of a group of adolescents in the United States, are popular in Canada, and indeed, many parts of the world, and are widely read by pre-adolescent children, 60% of whom are girls. In embarking on this research (Norton, 2003; Norton & Vanderheyden, 2004; Moffatt & Norton, 2005; Moffatt & Norton, 2008), our aim was not to promote or denounce Archie comics, but to better understand the ubiquitous Archie reader, and to determine if insights from Archie readers might have significance for language and literacy education. The research was conducted in a Vancouver, Canada, elementary school from 1998-1999, and involved 55 elementary students, aged ten to twelve, 25 of whom were English language learners.

In our research we found that Archie comic readers were subject to an interesting set of power relationships in their home and school contexts. Students noted that their parents and teachers were frequently dismissive of their love of comic books, describing them as "garbage" and "a waste of time". Archie readers had incorporated such views in their own understandings of literacy, drawing a distinction between what they called "real reading" and "fun reading". "Real reading", in their view, was reading that the teacher prescribed; it was "educational"; it was "challenging"; but it was seldom "fun". The reading of Archie comics was "fun" because readers

[4] Arkoudis & Davison, 2008; Cummins, 2006; Haneda, 2005; McKay & Wong, 1996, Pittaway, 2004, Potowski, 2007; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002.

could construct meaning, make hypotheses, and predict future developments without trying to second-guess the teacher. The findings suggest that the inequitable relationships of power between teachers and parents, on the one hand, and children, on the other, may limit a child's engagement with text, sometimes rendering it a meaningless ritual.

Two related observations from the research are relevant to an exploration of the relationship between identity and literacy. First, the Archie study suggests that the pleasure children derive from comics, in general, and Archie comics, in particular, is associated with a sense of ownership over meaning-making, whether the readers are native speakers or English language learners. It is this sense of ownership that gives children the confidence to engage with comic books both energetically and critically. For the Archie comic readers in our study, their goal in debating the merits of characters, events, and stories was not to anticipate other interpretations and critiques, but to draw on their own knowledge and experience to reflect, engage, and defend. However, although the study provides much evidence to suggest that the Archie reading community was vibrant and social, and helped to strengthen relationships between native speakers and English language learners, the children's reading preferences received little recognition or validation from teachers or parents. The study suggests that literacy educators need to better understand rather than dismiss those practices that students find engaging and meaningful, whether in or outside classrooms.

Indeed, the Archie comic study led us to rethink the very notions of reading, literacy, and learning. The written word, while still important, is only one of the many semiotic modes that children encounter in the different domains of their lives. From popular culture, drama, and oral storytelling to television and the Internet, children in different parts of the world are engaging in diverse ways with multiple "texts". The challenge for literacy educators is to reconceptualize classrooms as semiotic spaces in which children have the opportunity to construct meaning with a wide variety of multimodal texts, including visual, written, spoken, auditory, and performative texts. Scaffolding such a curriculum is a theory of meaning making in which children are not only the users but also the makers of systems of communication.

Literacy and imagined communities in Pakistan

In this 2001-2002 research study (Norton & Kamal, 2003), students in Karachi, Pakistan, took part in a global social action project called the Youth Millennium Project, in which 80 middle school students, calling themselves "The Reformers", collected stationery, books, and supplies for a local orphanage serving Afghan refugee children. Part of the project was also to teach the Afghan children "some simple English phrases". We were intrigued by the students' interest in literacy, and their promotion of the English language. We were also curious about the vision of the future held by these students at a time of great social and political instability. We collected data on these issues through questionnaires, interviews, observations, and e-mail exchanges. The following findings inform our understanding of the relationship between identity, literacy, and English language teaching.

First, we were interested to find that the students' conceptions of literacy were consistent with many current theories of literacy in the scholarly literature. The students held the view that literacy is not only about reading and writing, but also about education more broadly. "Literacy plays a vital role in the progress of a country," said one, while another noted passionately "without education our beloved country Pakistan cannot develop." Other students, however, extended this view to include the notion that a literate person has greater ability to reason than one who is illiterate. One student, for example, noted that a literate person "can make better

decisions" than an illiterate person, while another said that "if we are not literate we cannot do any work with thinking." These same students noted, in addition, that material resources are needed to promote both literacy and development. They pointed out, for example, that what they called the Afghan "childlabours" in their community could not access literacy classes because they were supporting their destitute families. The students were well aware of the resources of wealthier countries, noting somewhat optimistically "we know that in developed countries everyone is educated and goes to school; that is why they are rich and have no problems." For students in Pakistan, literacy must be understood with reference to social, economic, and political power.

Like their notions of literacy, the students' responses to the importance of English were complex and best understood in the context of Pakistan's ambivalent status in the international community. In seeking to teach the Afghan children "some simple English phrases," students were invested in the belief that English is an international language and the language of science, technology, and the media. As one said:

> The English language is an international language spoken all over the world and it is the language of science. Therefore to promote their education and awareness with modern technologies, it is important to teach them English.

Students noted that English serves as a common language not only across nations, but also within nations, and expressed the hope that knowledge of English would redress imbalances between developed and developing nations. With only a few exceptions, the students demonstrated little ambivalence towards the English language, and perceived it as an important tool for social, economic, and political advancement, both within Pakistan, as well as the international community. When students were pressed to consider whether the spread of English had any negative consequences, only two students noted that a country's native languages could be compromised, and only one noted that the spread of English would be accompanied by the spread of western culture, what he called "a bad sign." In sum, students expressed the hope that a future Pakistan would be one in which all inhabitants were literate, knowledgeable about English, and technologically advanced. They desired a peaceful society, true to the principles of Islam, and respected in the international community.

Insights from these students are best understood in the context of their complex identities in a time of social and political instability, both nationally and internationally. The research suggests that the struggle for literacy, access to English, and technological progress are interdependent, and reflect the desire of a country in a post-colonial world to engage with the international community from a position of strength rather than weakness. The findings suggest further that English and the vernacular can co-exist in mutually productive ways and that the appropriation of English does not necessarily compromise identities structured on the grounds of linguistic or religious affiliation.

Learning English through multimodal texts in Uganda

In one of our diverse research projects in Uganda, we have found that multimodal texts that include drama, photography, and drawing, while by no means new pedagogies, could be incorporated more systematically into English language teaching in the country (Kendrick, Jones, Mutonyi & Norton, 2006). In one study, by way of example, we examined the ways in which

drama was used in HIV/AIDS clubs to communicate information and advice to the student body (Norton & Mutonyi, 2007). As one student leader said,

> You see, students will usually not turn up in big numbers when you are giving a talk on HIV/AIDS. So we thought that maybe if we organize the drama as a sort of entertainment for the school, we could have many students attending and we can use the opportunity to talk about HIV/AIDS. The drama is always about HIV/AIDS but it is also fun so students come to watch and listen.

We found that drama gave students, and girls in particular, the opportunity to adopt new identities, and speak from different subject positions. In this context, in which discussions of sexuality and sexual relations are frequently taboo, drama gave students the opportunity to "perform the unsayable" (Stein, 2008) and raise gendered issues that are traditionally marked by silence. In this regard, the motto of one of the HIV/AIDS clubs is compelling, "Talk what others think you can't talk."

In another project, we worked with 19 secondary school girls in Senior 3 (ages 16 to 19) to explore the use of photography as a multimodal pedagogy (Kendrick & Jones, 2008). The purpose of this activity was to provide the girls with a visual, artistic way in which to explore and view specific aspects of their lives through the lens of the camera and to develop communicative English capacity by using photography as an entry point for discussion, reading, writing, and critique. Through journal writing and conversations, the girls discussed what they had learned through their participation in the photography project, such as the way in which their experience with the camera made them feel more confident about learning about other types of technology. Of particular note, however, was that almost all of the girls also mentioned their improvement in their English language competence. When asked directly how (if at all) they believed that this project facilitated learning English, the girls mentioned reading comprehension (as a result of studying the manuals); writing (writing in their research journals); and listening and speaking (from group discussions, meetings and presentations). In addition, they said that their participation in this project also served to improve their 'school' English. In a conversation with Shelley Jones, a member of our research team, one of the girls (Rose) expressed the following point in relation to learning English:

Shelley:	How is learning English through doing a project like this different from learning English in the classroom?
Rose:	In class teachers write on the blackboard and we just listen.
Shelley:	In the … project how do you use English?
Rose:	Communication.
Shelley:	Do you learn more by studying English or by communicating in English?
Rose:	Communicating.
Shelley:	Why?
Rose:	Because when you communicate, you think your own English.

Kendrick and Jones (2008, p.396) have argued further that the visual images provide a key to understanding how and why the girls engaged in particular literacy practices, and what this engagement meant for their imagined identities and desired futures. As they note, "For these girls, the freedoms associated with English, education, status, safety, space, and time were not

only fundamental to their imagined communities, but represent the pre-requisites for full participation in the literacy world."

Discussion

In these three research projects, English language learners had complex investments in their respective literacy practices, each of these investments associated with a range of identities, including those of the imagination. The readers of Archie comics in Canada were invested in these popular cultural texts because they had a sense of ownership over meaning-making. With respect to reader identities, students were in a position of relative power, in which they could actively construct the meaning of the popular cultural text. In teacher-controlled texts, in contrast, the students were in a position of relative powerlessness, and sought primarily to second-guess the teacher.

In Pakistan, language learners were invested in literacy and the English language because they wanted to appropriate identities as "educated" people, living in a "developed" country, with access to both symbolic and material resources. However, it is of some concern that students might in fact overestimate the benefits that can accrue from the development of literacy and the spread of English (see May, 2008; Pennycook, 1998). Ahmed's assessment, for example, that people who are educated "are rich and have no problems" may lead to a crisis of expectations. Of even greater concern is the way in which pedagogical and social practices may be serving, perhaps inadvertently, to reinforce the view held by the students that people who are literate are more rational and intellectually able than those who are not literate. If students in Pakistan, and perhaps in other parts of the world, equate literacy with rationality and intellectual ability, while at the same time embracing English as *the* international language of science, media, and technology, is there a danger that they may consider people who are literate in English as more rational and intellectually able those who are not?

In Uganda, the secondary schoolgirls were invested in drama and photography because these diverse media gave the girls the opportunity to explore a range of identities, many hitherto unexplored. In particular, the girls could reflect on the conditions that constrained the range of identities available to them, and those that provided an enhanced range of possibilities for the future. With regard to gendered identities, Stein (2008) notes that in a world in which adolescent sexuality is culturally marked by silence, and young girls are vulnerable to sexual assault by boys and older men, a range of semiotic modes should be drawn upon to express fear, violation, pain and loss. The implications for English language pedagogy are profound.

Implications for English language teaching

This research trajectory raises two central concerns that have particular relevance to English language teaching. First, consistent with the research of scholars such as Canagarajah (1999), Luke (2004), Ramanathan (2005), and Street (2001), I learnt from many of these students that if we wish to understand the meaning of literacy in students' lives, we cannot ignore the imperatives of the material world and the ways in which resources are distributed—not only nationally, but internationally. Canagarajah (1999) makes a compelling case that in developing countries in which there is a daily struggle for food, clothing, shelter, and safety, researchers cannot indulge in theoretical debates and abstract policies, but need to address the material realities of the

communities in which we conduct research. Luke (2004), similarly, argues that while we as educators might debate the meaning of critical literacy, we may not do justice to the lived experiences of physical and material deprivation in diverse communities throughout the globe. The students in Pakistan, and Uganda were well aware of the relationship between literacy, the distribution of resources, and human possibility. For these students, and many other students in poorly-resourced contexts, a community that is literate and skilled in English is also a community that has social, economic, and political power.

Second, it was 20 years ago (Norton Peirce, 1989) that I raised the question of how notions of communicative competence are framed within the field of English language teaching (see also Leung, 2005; Wallace, 2003; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008). I made the case that a concern for the "rules of use" in the teaching of English internationally is an inadequate pedagogical goal if teachers are concerned about the relationship between language, identity, and human possibility. In raising the question, "Whose interests do such rules serve?", I made the case that theories of communicative competence need to address not only what is 'appropriate', but what is *desirable* in the teaching of English internationally (see also McKinney & Norton, 2008). The research I have conducted over the last 20 years suggests that these concerns remain current in the field of English language teaching, and that the debate has now been extended to include the impact of global technologies on language teaching (Kress, 2003; Lam, 2000; Rassool, 1999; Snyder & Prinsloo, 2007; Warschauer, 2003). Rassool (1999), for example, argues that communicative competence within a technological global world refers to the interactive process in which meanings are produced dynamically between information technology and lived experience. The extent to which we are informed will, in turn, affect the extent to which we respond to and act upon our understanding. In this regard, she argues, the very principles of democracy are at stake.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have drawn on my critical literacy research in Canada, Pakistan, and Uganda to make the case that literacy is not only about reading and writing, but about relationships between text and reader, student and teacher, classroom and community, in local, regional, and transnational sites. As such, when learners engage in literacy practices, they are also engaged in acts of identity. As English teachers, we need to take seriously the findings which suggest that if learners have a sense of ownership over meaning-making, they can engage actively in a wide range of literacy practices, both inside and outside the classroom; however, if there is little ownership over meaning-making, learning becomes meaningless and ritualized. Further, the studies suggest that meaning-making is facilitated when learners are in a position of relative power within a given literacy event. Students in different parts of the world have suggested that parents and teachers are often dismissive of the range of texts, including oral, written, drawn, or performed, in which they are invested. My research suggests that many of these texts provide students with the opportunity to explore a range of identities, including those of the imagination, which enable them to "think their own English". As language educators, the research challenges us to consider what pedagogical practices will help students develop the *capacity* for imagining a range of identities for the future. What shifts of teacher identity will such practices necessitate? These are intriguing and important questions for English teachers internationally.

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