

20th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, 2008

Panel 31: Citizenship and Education in South Asia

'Literacy, identity and citizenship: a rationale for using a New Literacy Studies approach to exploring language and education policy in Pakistan and the UK'

Tony Capstick, Lancaster University, UK.

Abstract

Though few Pakistanis speak Urdu as a mother tongue, it continues to be used as the medium of instruction in government schools: how does this affect the language learning of first, second and third languages? This paper provides a rationale for using a New Literacy Studies approach to researching the literacy practices of Pakistanis as a means of investigating the links between reading and writing and the social structures in which they are embedded. What are the implications for Pakistani emigrants given that the socio-cultural function of language frames beliefs about citizenship? This paper explores this question through the lens of New Literacy Studies as a means of re-conceptualizing literacy as social practice, rooted in conceptions of identity, knowledge, and being.

1. Introduction

It is now a commonly accepted view that not only does fluency in a learner's first language facilitate the acquisition of a second or third language, but also that learners learn more easily in their first language than they do in a language that does not feature in their everyday lives (Rassool, 2007). It is on this understanding that this paper sets out a case for investigating how the educational experiences of Pakistanis in Pakistan and the UK affects how they learn first, second and third languages, and how this in turn forms notions of identity, as the basis for my PhD research in Applied Linguistics.

Having recently completed a preliminary research stage in Pakistan which involved refining research questions and identifying relevant literature, this paper seeks to identify issues in language-in-education policy in Pakistan which inform the debate on language acquisition as part of a rationale for using a literacy practices perspective to investigate literacy as used by Pakistanis in the UK. I use the term literacy practices as I will be taking a New Literacy Studies (NLS) approach by examining the multi-literacies used by Pakistanis in order to see literacy in relation to structures of power. The socio-cultural approach of literacy practices draws from Barton and Hamilton's work in this area which explains that:

"Literacy practices are the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives. In the simplest sense literacy practices are what people do with literacy. However practices are not observable units of behaviour since they also involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships" (2000).

Here, understanding how social relationships inform literacy research embraces notions of citizenship as well as migration, globalization, and multiculturalism. Rather than addressing theoretical questions in each of these areas, the paper aims to highlight these processes within a wider investigation of language-in-education policy as a way of identifying how each theme has influenced language-in-education policy in Pakistan. This paper does not deal with the UK dimension of the PhD which will be the investigation of language-in-education policy in the UK in relation to the discourses of social cohesion.

In addition to looking at education policy there will also be an analysis of practice as part of my aim is to attempt to identify how language and learning work at school and in wider society, thereby making more explicit the linkages with citizenship and education. In terms of education research practice the goals of the research are:

- To incorporate a literacy practices perspective to language-in-education research in the UK in order to understand literacy in terms of social theory rather than cognitive skills and educational measures (Street, 2007)
- To use a New Literacy approach to contribute to literacy data collection as deficits exist in both Pakistan and the UK, where, in the former, there is no indication of literacy levels in particular languages (Rassool, 2007) while also taking the view that within a given culture there are different literacies associated with different domains of life (Barton and Hamilton, 2000), domains, which the language and development researcher Naz Rassool (2007) cite as constituting a gap in current knowledge in Pakistan. Here a NLS framework provides the very types of questions that Rassool herself asks, such as 'Which languages are used by whom, where and when, and for what purposes?' and 'What are the levels of fluency in particular languages and amongst which communities?' (Rassool, 2007)

2. New Literacy Studies

Let me begin by summarizing what I mean by literacy as social practice. Barton and Hamilton set out the theory in the form of a set of six propositions about the nature of literacy. These are:

- Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts.
- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others.
- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.
- Literacy is historically situated.
- Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense-making.

(Barton and Hamilton 2000: p.8)

It is here that a literacy practices approach has much to inform debates on citizenship and education given that the cultural ways of using literacy are bound up in the blurring of boundaries between individual and social worlds, in Barton and Hamilton's words:

“literacy practices are more usefully understood as existing in the relations between people, within groups and communities, rather than as a set of properties residing in individuals.”

(Barton and Hamilton 2000: p.8)

This idea that literacy resides in people's heads has been described as the 'autonomous' model of literacy by Brian Street. In trying to characterize these new approaches to understanding and defining literacy, Street has referred to a distinction between an 'autonomous' model and an 'ideological' model (Street, 1984). The autonomous model of literacy works from the assumption that literacy in itself will have effects on other cognitive practices while disguising the cultural assumptions that underpin it, presenting them at a later date as though they are neutral and universal. The social practice approach challenges this view and suggests that in practice dominant approaches based on the autonomous model impose western conceptions of literacy on other cultures, where the ideological model of literacy offers an alternative, more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices, as they vary from one context to another. This model posits that literacy is not simply a 'technical and neutral skill', which is always 'embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles' but that the ways we conceive of reading and writing are themselves rooted in concepts of knowledge, identity and

being, and therefore literacy is always contested; hence particular versions of it are always 'ideological' (Street, 1984), they are always rooted in a particular world-view and a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalize others (Gee, 1990). Taking this view of social literacies suggests that engaging with literacies is always a social act, that the ways in which teachers and their students interact is already a social practice that affects the nature of the literacy being learned and the ideas being held about literacy by the participants, especially the new learners and their positions in relations of power. Street argues that it is not valid to suggest that literacy can be 'given' neutrally and then its 'social' effects only experienced or 'added on' afterwards (Street, 2006).

For Barton and Hamilton this means that there are '*different literacies associated with different domains of life*' (Barton and Hamilton, 2000). This is a central premise to my research which seeks to analyze two different domains of activity: school and home as a way of investigating the distinct practices by way of comparison; school, as this is where literacy as an instructed practice takes place, and home, as this is where James Gee argues everyday language begins and is therefore primary in people's 'literacy lives' (Gee, 1990) and therefore central to people's developing sense of social identity.

Let me then turn to Gee in order to emphasize the relation between this aspect of 'social identity' and what we are dealing with here, namely education and citizenship.

Gee (2004) counters the received wisdom of many western government's education policy which suggests that what is hard about school is learning to read by putting forward a case that what actually causes the problems is learning to read in academic content areas, such as Maths and Biology. He suggests that what is difficult about learning in academic content areas is that:

"each area is tied to specialist varieties of language that are complex, technical and initially alienating to many learners (just open a biology textbook). These varieties of language are significantly different from people's "everyday" varieties of language, sometimes called their "vernacular" varieties."

(Gee 2004: p.3)

With this approach it is clear to see how more and more research is using a NLS approach to look at learning environments where language-in-education policy puts children whose second or third language is English at a disadvantage if we are to believe that many children struggle with the complex language of academic content areas. Gee argues that the issue is not minority group status in and of itself but failing to be a member of a particular 'in group', which can lead to a feeling of alienation, suggesting that on-going debates about reading should have less to do with methods of instruction and more to do with understanding the links between access, opportunity and not being able to learn to read.

As an alternative, and by way of identifying what it is about school that manages to transform children who are good at learning into children who are not good at learning if they are members of certain minority groups, Gee suggests we should look at how those children who do learn to read successfully do so because learning to read is a cultural process which has its roots at home, “roots which have grown strong and firm before the child has walked into a school”.

(Gee 2004: p13)

The argument here then is that research into literacy for migrants and their families whose second or third language is English can take the ‘reading as cultural process’ approach and not merely view reading learned by instruction as a way of investigating how the latter can place learners at a disadvantage in school. In Gee’s words:

“As schools turn reading into an instructed process, today’s children see more and more powerful instances of cultural learning in their everyday lives in things like Pokemon and video games. Modern high-tech society – thanks to its media, technology, and creative capitalists – gets better and better at creating powerful cultural learning processes. Schools do not.”

(Gee 2004: p13)

3. Language-in-education

Since Gee, Street, Barton and Hamilton began these debates over 20 years ago, they, and many other researchers, have continued to develop the application of literacy learning as social practice, particularly in the area of language and literacy. By taking a NLS approach, researchers are now able to look more closely at how institutions position learners in relation to language and literacy. For example, Eve Gregory from Goldsmiths College has recently looked at siblings as literacy teachers where parents are unfamiliar with the language and culture of the school thereby problematizing the notion that parents are the 'exclusive' 'teachers' in families. In the same volume: *Portraits of Literacy Across Families, Communities and Schools* Maguire and colleagues explore children's school experiences by focusing on how they negotiate multiple literacies in 'heritage language contexts' and how this impacts on their identity constructions by arguing that NLS provides the framework to research how different languages and cultures intersect at school (Anderson et al, 2005).

It is alongside these investigations that I see my research in that it involves comparisons across school and home and the changing circumstances of multilingual learners themselves. Significantly there will be a strong dimension of learners own interpretations of these circumstances and what Maguire et al refer to as the 'chameleon-like character' of such literacy practices. Just as the research aim of many of the *Portraits* is to assess the implications for the teaching and learning of immigrant children as well as making a case for policymakers and community leaders so too will my research focus on the implications for policy and practice based on the socio-cultural approach that NLS offers as an insight into multilingual children's lives.

Let us now turn to this issue of multilingualism in the research.

Article 251 of Pakistan's 1973 Constitution states that:

- (1) The National language of Pakistan is Urdu, and arrangements shall be made for its being used for official and other purposes within fifteen years from the commencing day.
- (2) Subject to clause (1), the English language may be used for official purposes until arrangements are made for its replacement by Urdu.
- (3) Without prejudice to the status of the National Language, a Provincial Assembly may by law prescribe measures for the teaching, promotion and use of a provincial language in addition to the national language.

(Rassool 2007: p222)

In his research on language policy and ethnic relations in Asia, Michael E Brown found that though codified in Article 251 of the 1973 Constitution, Zulfikar Bhutto's declaration that there be a transitional period of 15 years, Urdu has not

replaced English in official domains though it has, largely due to General Zia's goal of Islamicizing the nation, predominated across the country in other spheres (Brown, 2003). Zia attempted to install Urdu as the medium of instruction in all schools across Pakistan though he was forced to withdraw due to pressure from English-medium schools, contributing to the current situation where private English-medium schools remain, and have proliferated, while Urdu has remained the medium of instruction in government schools.

In relation to Clause three of the above Article, excluding Sindh province, Tariq Rahman, Pakistan's National Distinguished Professor of Linguistics argues that hardly any legislation has been formulated in the provinces to promote regional languages in official spheres (Rahman, 2008). The significance of this cannot be underestimated given that learners learn more easily in their first language than they do in a language that does not feature naturally in their everyday lives (Rassool, 2007). Rahman argues that:

“For the Muslims of South Asia, the language of the domains of power was generally a foreign language. Under the Mughals it was Persian and under the British it was English....Indeed, for most of north India and Pakistan, their mother tongue (if it was other than Urdu) came last.”

(Rahman 2008: p50)

Tariq Rahman and others write extensively on the topic of language planning and education in Pakistan, here I have referred only briefly to the background and the current situation. What this means for the future, I feel, is captured by Naz Rassool in her recent book *Global Issues in Language, Education and Development* (2007).

“At a meta-level, the policy statement of Article 251 of the 1973 Constitution provides insight into the complex language choices with regard to maintaining a cohesive nation whilst, at the same time, facilitating economic development by providing access to the global cultural economy.”

(Rassool 2007: p222)

Rassool also agrees with Rahman that not only has the transition to Urdu not taken place but English has come to be strengthened within the elite that run the country due to a lack of political will to change the language of proceedings, a situation which is compounded by the fact that the Pakistan Census Organisation of 1998 put Urdu as the language of only 7.5% of the national population as opposed to 44.15% Punjabi speakers (Rassool, 2007).

Identity, Nationhood and Globalization

Again, Tariq Rahman provides the link here with language, identity and nationhood when he argues that the role of language in language movements is not just a means of communication but stands for a way of life or a symbol of identity. He argues that modernity has changed the way group identity is seen in South Asia, where once it was related to shared blood, or essence, and was role-oriented, he argues that now linguistic identity is fundamental to ethnic language movements:

“Thus Punjabis, Singhis, Pashtuns, and Siraikis came to take language as the essence of their identity as if it were extended kinship, blood, or substance.”

(Rahman 2008: p52)

However, in terms of national identity Urdu was, from the beginning, linked to the founding principles of the country, and by 1956 when Pakistan became an Islamic Republic.

“Central to nationalist ideology was the view that Urdu represented a key defining principle of what it means to be a Pakistani and, *ipso facto*, of being a Muslim in Pakistan. In other words, Urdu was central to the state’s view of Pakistani nationhood. Thus it has potent symbolic influence (Rahman, 2000) representing as it did a cultural variable around which the nation could be constructed. Nevertheless, whilst it became a symbol of national unity..... Urdu is not a native language of Pakistan”

(Rassool 2007: p224)

I draw heavily from Rassool and Rahman here in order to sketch out the complexities of nation building and language planning in Pakistan as a means of problematizing language-in-education policy in the formation of my research questions. These complexities come to the fore through the planned and unplanned ways in which schools contribute to citizen formation, whether that be in Pakistan or in the UK, as, globally, shaping national identities has long been a primary role of education where curricula emphasize national languages and cultures while continuing to instill national values and notions of good citizenship, particularly among emerging nation states and postcolonial societies (Green 2006).

This said, I will now argue that not only are there two quite different agendas for education here: the citizen formation agenda and the skills formation agenda, but that both incorporate different models of literacy. Furthermore, I will argue that within both of these agendas we see a willingness to ascribe power to literacy in and of itself, which is then used to argue for literacy as a motor for both economic and social change.

On the first of these points, schooled literacy is often coupled with skills-based outcomes, Rassool draws on her investigation into language-in-education policy to call for increased research into the rapidly changing global environment in order to facilitate social and economic change in Pakistan. She links 'low' literacy to low educational outcomes in Pakistan and to the massive under-employment the country is experiencing "in relation to the requirement for highly skilled workers within the global cultural economy."

The skills discourse here, I argue, has been generated by education agendas in industrialized western states, and represents a wholly different, and possibly incompatible, agenda to that of the citizen formation and nation building which are central to Pakistan's school curricula but, nowadays, are less so in the UK. Here, bringing in the "global cultural economy" to education policy has much to do with what Green refers to as "the overwhelming policy priority given by governments to questions of skills formation and economic performance" which he links to the spread of global markets. However, Green adds that this is as a consequence of the rise of consumerist and individualistic identities in all western states and the erosion of community identities and beliefs (Green, 2006): thereby, I argue, posing an inherent conflict between the two education agendas we have seen described.

It would seem that Rassool illustrates this conflict when describing a continuum which sees a progression from first language medium of instruction to economic development and nation building:

"These factors [first language instruction] have implications for national educational achievement levels and, therefore, the possibility of improving the country's overall educational profile. This, in turn, impacts on employment possibilities within the formal labour market and, ultimately economic development. These factors also have implications for language in educational policy frameworks as these relate to the language mediums for teaching and learning within the different provinces and how these combine with a cohesive nationhood." (2007)

This blurring of the role of education raises questions about how these different agendas will be reconciled within Pakistan's language-in-education policy, as well as how this impacts on perceptions of education for Pakistanis in the UK where, though the scope for education to act as a socially integrative force has not yet necessarily been diminished by globalization, the political will of government to pursue the goals of social cohesion perhaps has (Green, 2006). Alongside this is the UK government's current policy debate over 'language and integration', a report last year concluding that speaking English is "fundamental to integration and cohesion" (The Guardian, 2008). Researching these contradictions through the lens of New Literacy means an interdisciplinary approach which would draw on previous research in areas such as migration and

multiculturalism, which have already contributed much to understanding these ambiguous effects of globalization.

In addition, NLS provides a much-needed critique of this commonly-held view of literacy, as illustrated in Rassool's previous comment, which clearly relies heavily on the empowering potential of literacy where, Graff argues, the 'literacy myth' is seen in terms of contributing to cognitive as well as economic development (Graff, 1979), a critique of which is prevalent among NLS researchers (see Street, 1984).

In contrast to the literacy myth, Elsa Auerbach works on the premise that social change is not achieved through literacy per se, but that its transformative power comes from how it is contextualized and placed in service of broader struggles. She argues that we must take care not to suggest that literacy is the source of knowledge and that knowledge leads to power which she argues can become a justification for a new apartheid where it is literacy, not race, that creates the lines of segregation. (Auerbach, 2005).

Conclusion: Citizenship and Literacies

The relationship between literacy and identity here that I argue supports taking a literacy practices perspective in my PhD is Auerbach's discovery that people acquire language and literacy through a process of informal socialization through immersion in the practices and values of their particular context (Auerbach, 2005). By moving beyond school settings to include domains such as homes, communities, and religious institutions, Auerbach argues that literacy research has made the important move of examining the 'multiplicity of literacies' enacted in these domains while "recognizing, valuing, and including local ways of knowing". She argues that by researching through the lens of NL we come to see how literacy practices, languages, and cultural knowledge shifts the balance of power promoted by traditional schooling, which I argue provides a context in which to meet the challenges of reconstructing notions of citizenship and nationhood raised in the conflicting education agendas described earlier.

It has been argued that one of the major dilemmas for governments and educationalists in the coming decade will revolve around how to reconstruct these cultures of citizenship and nationhood in ways which are appropriate to modern conditions and yet conducive both to a deepening of democracy and to a strengthening social solidarity (Green, 2006). The difficulties around the competing claims of local, regional, national and supra-national that Green describes can be, I argue, addressed through research using a New Literacy Studies framework given that literacy practices reveal much about multiple identities thereby providing a merging of the citizenship formation / skills formation agendas where the latter would deal much more with skills which enable active participation in democratic society at community and national levels thereby unlocking the potential in New Literacy to see 'context' not only as situated (Barton and Hamilton 2000; Gee, 2004) within school or home but also as situated within the socio-cultural currents of globalization.

Bibliography

- Auerbach, E. (2005) *Connecting the Local and the Global in Anderson, J. and Kendrick, M. et al (Eds) (2005) Portraits of Literacy Across Families, Communities and Schools: Intersections and Tensions*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum
- Barton, D. and Hamilton, M. (2000) *Literacy Practices in Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context*. Barton et al (Eds) Oxon: Routledge
- Brown, M.E and Ganguly, S. (eds) (2003) *Fighting Words: Language Policy and Ethnic Relations in Asia*. Cambridge Mass: MIT Press
- Gee, J.P. (1990) *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in Discourses*. London: Falmer Press
- Gee, J.P. (2004) *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling*. Oxon: Routledge
- Graff, H. (1979) *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth Century City*. New York: Academic Press
- Green, A. (2006) Education, Globalization, and the Nation State in *Education, Globalization and Social Change* (2006) Lauder, H. et al (Eds) Oxford: Oxford University Press
- O'Leary, D. (2008) The Language of Integration, *The Guardian*, April 29
- Lewis, C. et al (eds) *Reframing Sociocultural Research on Literacy: Identity, Agency and Power*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
- Rahman, T. (2008) *Language, Ideology and Power: Language-learning among the Muslims of Pakistan and North India*. Karachi: Oxford University Press
- Rassool, N. (2007) *Global Issues in Language, Education and Development: Perspectives from Postcolonial Countries*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters
- Street, B. (1984) *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Street, B. (2006) *Understanding Literacy*. 'Paper Commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006, Literacy for Life. UNESCO.