

Literacy for All...most All, But Not Quite

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Introduction

The aim of this discussion is to consider where we have come in the last 10 years since the inception of the Commonwealth *Literacy for All* policy in 1998, with a particular focus on educational provision with respect to English as a second language (ESL). A review of such an issue is timely, not least because of the window of opportunity that we now have before us with the first change of government at the federal level for more than a decade. More than this political imperative, though, is a consideration of what contemporary research now shows us about second language development, and its implications for the teaching and learning of English to students from language backgrounds other than English.

However, I also aim to demonstrate that the intensely political nature of 'literacy' renders any discussion of the subject inseparable from a broader discussion of politics. While some argue that the changes to literacy we have witnessed in recent years have not been a matter of politics but responses to "shifting priorities" (Christie, 2003, p. 109) supported by both sides of government, my focus here is not partisan politics, but how the twin political ideologies of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, which have become increasingly pervasive across both sides of the political spectrum in recent years, have influenced our understanding of literacy and the broader framework for literacy education.

This presentation alone can't hope to resolve even some of the many of the problems it identifies on the current state of literacy education for ESL students in Australian schools. But by not only highlighting "what" should be changed, but also deliberating on "why" things are the way that they are, suggestions for future possibilities can at least be informed by a broader framework to enable more meaningful ways of moving forward.

The literacy wars

It is useful to begin by asking why there is value in examining a policy that is now a decade old. Indeed, we only have to look back another decade further still, to the *National Policy on Languages* [NPL] (Lo Bianco, 1987), to see how rapidly policy in a domain such as literacy can lose currency and influence. Not only was the notion of literacy set out in Labor's NPL completely lost in the Coalition's *Literacy for All* that followed 10 years later, the NPL, itself, was already being eroded by the early 1990s with the release of a subsequent Labor policy, *Australia's Language*, which has been described as "an aged removed" (Herriman, 1996, p. 54) from the NPL that preceded it only a few years before.

Literacy for All (DEETYA, 1998) has had a very different trajectory. While rarely the immediate focus of contemporary commentaries on literacy in Australia, the goals it set out to achieve have since been firmly established as a national frame of reference from which we now understand, discuss, and frame issues of literacy in Australian schools. The key premise of the policy was “that every child leaving primary school should be numerate and be able to read, write and spell at an appropriate level” (p. 9), with the related sub-goal: “that every child commencing school from 1998 will achieve a minimum acceptably literacy and numeracy standard within four years” (p. 9).

These statements laid the foundation for a skills-based approach to literacy: one with an emphasis on basic encoding (writing) and decoding (reading) strategies to cope with the everyday demands of print, but not necessarily the ability to then engage with texts at a higher level of critical reflection (Baker, 2006). *Teaching Reading* (DEST, 2005b), the report of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, consolidated the basic skills movement in 2005 when it stressed the importance of “systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency” (p. 14). Moreover, the Inquiry went even further to assert outright that “whole-language” approaches, which adopt a more comprehensive understanding of literacy without a direct or systematic emphasis on the development of discrete skills, were “not in the best interests of children” (p. 12).

Although acknowledging research that suggests an “integrated approach” – i.e., one which draws on aspects of both whole-language and skill-based approaches – provides the most effective approach to literacy instruction, the report nonetheless concluded that, even within an integrated framework, the primary concern should ultimately remain on basic skills. The report describes an “integrated approach to reading”, for example, as one that “explicitly teaches phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension” (DEST, 2005b, p. 11), and, argues elsewhere, that “only ... with systematic, explicit, and intensive instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension strategies” can students requiring special intervention be expected to “catch-up” (citing Lyons, 2003, p. 36). Indeed, this seems especially relevant when considered in relation to the ESL sector, and the increasing numbers of students from “non-literacy” cultures (e.g., refugees from Africa under recent changes to the Australian Humanitarian Program) who come to the classroom without even the most rudimentary print-related language skills (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006). For teachers, this raises serious (and also rather immediate) concerns for identifying teaching priorities and what might (or might not) be the “best” approach for dealing with these increasingly common situations.

This dissonance between the appropriateness of either a whole-language *or* skills-based approach to literacy has given rise to the “literacy wars” in public, academic, and political commentaries on educational standards of Australian schools in recent years (Snyder, 2008). However, whether real or perceived (Snyder in fact suggests that most teachers in fact adopt a more balanced approach in practice that reflects of

a blend between both extremes¹), the advocacy (and critique) of one approach over another within these debates highlights the need to recognise that *any* approach to literacy – skill based or otherwise – is far from objective, neutral, or value-free. Our understanding of what counts as literacy, and the choices we make about how it should be taught, stem from ideology, and our views about what is important, and what should be valued, within the world around us.

The ideology of the back-to-basics movement

How can decisions which otherwise seem so innocuous, such as whether to read one of the literary “classics”, or to read something downloaded straight from the internet – or a response to a question which seems almost too obvious, such as whether reading is the production of sounds that appear on a page, or the ability to see meaning in the “silence” of what *isn't* there in print – matter so much, and provoke such heated debates, about the standard and quality of education in schools?

Bialystok (2001) suggests that it matters because literacy has come to represent our “ticket of entry” into society: “the currency by which social and economic positions are waged” (p. 152). Questions that surround literacy are important not simply because they concern what might or might not be the best way to read and write, but because they are inseparable from broader, more profound concerns that are “tied up with the distribution of power, knowledge, and competence” in increasingly complex times (Luke, 1998, p. 311). As Cook-Gumperz (2006) explains,

Literacy rates have served as a barometer of society such that illiteracy takes on symbolic significance, reflecting any disappointment not only with the workings of the educational system, but with the society itself. An assumption often expressed is that if educational institutions cannot manage the simple task of teaching basic decoding and encoding skills, they cannot prepare future generations to deal with more complex questions of technological change (Kozol 1985). (p. 1)

The fundamental concern here is one of control (or at least the pretence of having control). The post-industrial era has seen in a period of governance that has been challenging for advanced capitalist societies. Nation states which were once relatively stable are now having to manage economic, social, and cultural global flows between and across borders over which they no longer have clear jurisdiction or control. The result has been an increasing intensification of the twin ideologies of neoliberalism and neoconservatism in attempts to manage control in these complex and changing conditions. As Apple (2004) explains,

a new alliance and new power bloc has been formed that has increasing influence in education and all things social. This power bloc combines multiple fractions of capital who are committed to neo-liberal marketized solutions to educational problems [and] neo-conservative intellectuals who want a “return” to higher standards and a “common culture Although there are clear tensions and conflicts within this alliance, in general its overall aims are in

¹ See, for example, Freebody's (2007) review of this area, including Xue and Meisel's (2004) study of “meaning-centred” and “code-centred” practice across 2690 classrooms in which “very few” (p. 48) teachers were found to draw exclusively on one approach over another.

providing the educational conditions believed necessary both for increasing international competitiveness, profit, and discipline and for returning us to a romanticized past of the “ideal” home, family, and school (Apple, 1996, 2000, 2001a; Apple et al., 2003). (p. 15)

The influence of both ideologies are evident in *Literacy for All's* conception of literacy in terms of both (a) educational accountability, and (b) social and cultural stability. While it is difficult to argue against accountability or social cohesion, it is not the “naming” of these broad values that I take issue with here, but how these ideological imperatives have been realised as educational practices, and, within the context of this presentation, their impact upon the provision of ESL education in schools.

Literacy for all ... neoliberals and neoconservatives

Focussing on accountability, neoliberalism has reduced literacy to an inventory of skills comprised of little more than the sum of its parts (e.g., sounding out words, reading quickly, filling in the blanks, etc). In so doing, it advances a framework for literacy that can be easily managed, measured, and monitored to provide accountability for the core “business of schooling”; in this case, the “production” of literacy “outcomes”. However, the cost of efficiency has been a “reductionist”, stripped-back model of literacy (Davison, 2001). Indeed, if literacy really is our “ticket of entry” into society, then it has to be asked if a highly manageable (“testable”) – but extremely impoverished (“basic”) – model of literacy of value?

When *Literacy for All* was being developed in the late 1990s, Lo Bianco and Freebody (1997) argued that literacy is far more complex than the model adopted by *Literacy for All* would otherwise suggest:

While it is essential that educational authorities seek to ensure that legitimate concerns about the foundational features of literacy – ‘the old basics’ of reading and writing – are addressed, it is crucially important that these concerns do not obscure either the wider senses of literacy ... or the changing demands of literacy caused by advances in technology and changes in the economy and society. (p. 17)

Lo Bianco and Freebody’s point here is not that the basics skills aren’t important, but that it is necessary to then extend those skills to engage students with a richer understanding of literacy than that required to “perform well” on a test. As Freeman and Freeman (2006) explain in their critique of the skills-based approach, having students identify how many sounds they can hear in a word, or adding, deleting, or changing sounds on cue, is “unlike anything people normally do with language” (p. 38).

But how is it that such a facile model of literacy has come to have such a powerful influence over curriculum? In addition the efficiency the model provides for managing accountability, it is also significant to consider the assurance a “back to basics” approach to literacy provides in maintaining social cohesion.

The teaching of basic literacy across the general populace is a simple but well-established method of generating social stability (Grant & Wong, 2003). In the face of

changing social (and linguistic and cultural) conditions, a long established strategy within language policy and planning has been “the mandating of a universal basal-style program (regardless of community culture or children’s linguistic diversity)” (Luke & Elkins, 2002, p. 670). As Luke (2003) elaborates elsewhere,

The linguistic, cultural, and educational calculus of European and Asian colonialism was inescapably simple: One nation = one race = one language (Hall, 1992; Willinsky, 1998; Young, 1995) A common stock of literate practices has been crucial for the building of national culture and identity. (p. 135)

A focus on “teaching the basics” within schools also maintains the existing distribution of power, knowledge, and skills within society more broadly. On the significance of identity in the construction of meaning, Pahl and Rowsell (2006) argue that when learners “learn to read, or put marks on a page, their cultural experiences goes before them, and their marks are inscribed with that experience” (p. 10). Emphasising the teaching, learning, and (especially) assessment of decontextualised literacy skills with the aim of “certifying” those who are (and aren’t) literate privileges those who come to schools having the “right” identity: the “right” social networks, the “right” cultural background, the “right” linguistic capital. As Heath (1981, in Cook-Gumperz, 2006) argues, “the school does not really change people; rather, it sorts, labels and grades children for the labor market. In other words, schools do not make children cleverer; they merely certify for employers which ones are cleverer ... *From this standpoint the school is primarily a testing, selecting, and distributing agency*” (p. 43, emphasis in original).

Finally, the reductionist model of literacy outlined in *Literacy for All* reinforces the view that success and failure is ultimately one’s own choice and responsibility. Not unlike the neoliberalist emphasis on equality, individuality, and competition, *Literacy for All*’s neoconservative focus on normative benchmarking puts the responsibility on the student to demonstrate how they have met pre-determined standards to justify why they should progress any further within the system. Indeed, it not until a student is “certified” (through assessment) as “failure” does the policy offer any strategy involving the actual teaching of literacy skills (i.e., four strategies relate to assessment, one to teacher development, and one other for literacy intervention), and then only to provide the student with the necessary skills to reach a “minimal acceptable level”.

In sum, then, with a broad ideological foundation that has as its core a focus on control, the result is a managerialist model of literacy education that values accountability over substance, and the preservation of existing social conditions through a core basic set of common skills. In contrast to a rich repertoire of social, cultural, critical, and multifaceted literacy competencies, *Literacy for All* offers a set of basic skills focussing on homogeneity and social cohesion, a benchmark for the certification and stratification of students into the existing social order, and a framework that encourages students to accept self-responsibility for conforming to the expectations of established normative benchmarks.

For ESL students, the most significant concern that arises from such a reductionist framework – particularly in terms of the emphasis it places the decoding and

encoding letters and sounds – is the conflation of language with literacy (Davison, 1999), and the subsequent positioning of this as a “basic” need for *all*, rather than recognising the distinctive problems of English second language learners with *specific second language* needs. Under the policy, ESL students with difficulties, other than those identified as requiring early literacy intervention (which is a problem in itself, and an issue to which I will return later), are identified within a broad group of relatively undifferentiated student needs, in which having a “language other than English” falls within the same category as “socioeconomic disadvantage, poverty, low parental expectation, disability ... family or personal difficulties, geographic isolation, Indigenous background and gender” (DEETYA, 1998, p. 6). Allocating States with a pool of “general support funds” to address this broad group, the Commonwealth has been able to rescind dedicated funds for ESL support in schools. As Michell (1999) explains, *Literacy for All* earmarked ESL provision as “a ‘sunset program’ Instead of transparent funding cuts triggering adverse public relation, ESL would wither on the literacy vine, hidden behind a foliage for enhanced literacy funding” (p. 13). If fortunate, some ESL students receive specialist instruction for an initial period following their placement in a new school. For most, however, there is no ongoing support that addresses or recognises their specialist needs as non-native speakers within the broader curriculum.

Finally, another significant problem that has stemmed from *Literacy for All* for ESL has been the connection it established between literacy and assessment (which, in turn, has been tied to specialist support and intervention funding). Of particular concern has been the issue of “broadbanding” (McKay, 1999) – the belief that the same benchmarks should apply across the board for all students, be they native or non-native speakers. Broadbanding assumes “that the stages (and strategies) of EL development are the same as mother tongue English, and that they can be measured by the same linguistic criteria” (Davison, 1999, p. 67), despite studies of second language acquisition clearly establishing that:

ESL patterns of literacy development do not conform to English speaking norms They may display many similar reading and writing strategies to their Anglo-Australian peers, but there are also significant differences. They may make many errors in reading and writing, but their ‘second language errors’ are not an indicator of a failure to acquire English literacy, but an indication of their learning. (p. 69)

Put simply, the assessment framework within *Literacy for All* is problematic not only because it relies on a test designed for native speakers to assess non-native speakers, but because the test is assessing two different constructs: for native speakers, it identifies what a student has “failed” to acquire (i.e., in their first language (L1)), for non-native speakers, it actually reveals the progress the student has “achieved” (i.e., in their second (L2)). The results are therefore meaningless because ESL students’ skills are either “underestimated (because the Literacy Benchmarks do not capture what they can do, only what they cannot)” or “over estimated (because it will be assumed that if they can perform selected literacy tasks at a level equal to their peers, they are the same as their peers)” (Davison & McKay, 2002, p. 88). The framework can therefore not identify the types of literacy needs and problems experienced by ESL learners, instead rendering them invisible with no clear differentiation between native and non-native speaker outcomes.

Three steps forward, how many steps backwards?

Clearly, ESL is in a difficult position within the current policy context for literacy in Australian schools. In attempts to find a solution, the natural response is to look back to a model that we know already works: one that reclaims the spirit of earlier ESL programs which have been lost under the current *Literacy for All* framework. Authors critical of the policy when it was first introduced (e.g., a special 1999 issue of *Prospect* (Vol 14, No 2)) could anticipate many of the problems that lay ahead, and argued, quite understandably, to preserve the status quo at the time. Given what was to become of ESL under the new policy framework, it was thought the then existing model offered a far better option.

However, I would also argue that any attempt to move forward now, by attempting to reclaim what has been lost, would be, in the present context at least, a serious mistake. A distinguishing feature of the previous ESL model was a clear distinction between language and literacy. At the time, *literacy* encompassed a far more comprehensive understanding of “literacy as a social practice”, with whole-language and genre-based approaches the norm in many mainstream classrooms. In contrast, ESL, was a skill-based approach to *language* development that recognised the need for non-native speakers to acquire basic language competence before going on to the more complex literacy demands of the mainstream.

It might appear that ESL’s focus on “language skills” reflects what now occurs in mainstream classrooms under *Literacy for All*. On the surface this might seem to be so, but ESL instruction is characterised by a significant difference: skills are developed on the basis of theories of *second* language acquisition, and a specialist knowledge of non-native students’ needs when learning a language *other than* their mother tongue. Acquiring second language “skills” for communication is not comparable to how mother tongue students learn to identify and manipulate discrete sounds in their native language (e.g., see Freeman & Freeman, 2006).

ESL learners are therefore caught in the middle – they are not provided with opportunities to acquire *second* language skills, but nor are they acquiring useful communicative skills from the impoverished model of literacy currently being offered in mainstream classrooms. Again, using Freeman and Freeman’s (2006) earlier example, even if a second language student can manipulate, add, delete, or insert the correct sound in a skills-based task, what use is the “skill” beyond assessment – especially when students need those skills to communicate, both socially and academically, with peers and teachers across the curriculum and community?

Having considered the ideologies the underpin the education system’s present engagement with literacy, I don’t believe it would be “unimaginable” to see opportunities arise in the near future that would allow us to re-establish a model of ESL not that dissimilar from past models. To do so would require three pivotal moves: (1) establishing an “evidenced-based” case that a specific problem exists for ESL students, (2) proposing a “manageable” solution, and (3) meeting “deliverables”.

First, it is essential to demonstrate that ESL students are a *quantitatively* different to mother-tongue speakers. In contrast to discursive appeals to policy makers about how and why second language learning is *qualitatively* different from first language

acquisition (i.e., a focus on process), there is a need for an “evidence-based” case to demonstrate that a “real” problem exists (i.e., a focus on results). Within the neoliberal tradition, “evidence-based research” reflects the product of “scientific rigour”: the basis for rational decision making and thought. Following positivism, the focus therefore becomes objectivity, quantifiability, and generalisability – “if it can’t be measured, it doesn’t exist” (see Bahm, 1971, p. 394) – while postmodern and qualitative traditions are dismissed as “untested anecdotal rhetoric” (DEST, 2005a, p. 5) and “ideological-driven opinion” (p. 37).

As I explained earlier, the problem with current assessment framework under *Literacy for All* is its inability to identify problems specific to ESL students. Instances of under-performance are reduced to “general” educational disadvantage (of which there could be any number of different causes (e.g., “socioeconomic disadvantage, poverty, low parental expectation, disability, a language background other than English, family or personal difficulties, geographic isolation, Indigenous background and gender” (DEETYA, 1998, p. 6)), instead of recognising that, even within this group of “disadvantaged” students (who are otherwise all first language learners), ESL students have additional, specific needs as second language learners. Current tests are simply not sensitive enough to identify these second-language specific concerns, but then nor were they meant to be, being based the assumption that language developmental trajectories are the same for all students. In short, there is a need for new tests that are specifically attuned to identifying the problems of ESL students within the system to produce the type of quantitative evidence that is currently not available. Although such tests would ideally be administered by the same educational authorities responsible for literacy as a whole, the initial onus will fall on academics and other stakeholders, such as the Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA), to take the lead in developing an “evidence-based” case for ESL within the current framework, given that evidence is the first concrete step towards having the problem acknowledged in the first instance.

Having then established that ESL students have a “*quantitatively negative*” impact on literacy outcomes because of their needs as second language learners, the second “move” requires the identification of a workable “solution”; that is, the provision of an ESL curriculum that addresses the needs of ESL students within the existing framework. This is something that we, as ESL educators, are clearly most strongly positioned to offer, not only because it can build on a model of ESL that we have seen work in the past, but also because ESL’s primary emphasis on language skills lends itself well to a framework that appeals to neoliberal accountability. However, this is where the third move becomes essential.

Although moves one and two satisfy the neoliberal imperatives of identifying problems and solutions on the basis of evidence and accountability, the idea of an “alternate” curriculum, especially for speakers of “other” languages without the basic skills of the common curriculum, is inconsistent with neoconservatist ideals of universal benchmarks and cohesion through homogeneity. Any move forward would therefore require an understanding that the alternate provisions for non-English speaking students are only temporary to support the ultimate goals of the existing literacy framework. Put crudely, the “deliverables” would be ESL students equipped with the skills necessary for a successful transition into the *Literacy for All* mainstream, and achieve better results than they currently do at present.

Is this what we really want?

The goal seems laudable, and surely the aim of ESL is to support non-English speaking students to become more capable learners in the mainstream. The problem, however, is that such a model is “justifiable” because it extends, and even enhances, an existing literacy framework that identifies ESL learners as a “problem”, and offers a solution that perpetuates a system which, from a second language and biliteracy perspective, is ultimately unjust.

In the earlier era for ESL, previous policy contexts (e.g., *National Policy on Languages* (Lo Bianco, 1987), and *Australia’s Language* (DEET, 1991)) adopted a dual perspective on language *and* literacy. Although they were considered interrelated, both were still seen in policy terms as being distinct. The recognition and value placed on “languages” reflected an ideology of pluralism that accepted, and even celebrated, linguistic and cultural diversity and difference. Literacy within mainstream classrooms, while surely not perfect then either, was nonetheless influenced by broader social movements at the time imbuing it with a strong sense of social justice (Lingard & Garrick, 1997). However, as discussed earlier, literacy in mainstream classes today is framed and driven by different ideological imperatives. I believe it would be erroneous, and even dangerous, to return to a model of ESL that was successful in the 1980s and 1990s to “support” the transition non-native speakers into a mainstream that has now all but “expunged” discourses around social justice, diversity, and difference (McInerney, 2003, p. 253).

In short, to aim for a model of ESL that attempts to reclaim the past is precarious. While it might seem defensible on the basis that it supports ESL students to do better under the current literacy framework, it fails to challenge mainstream assumptions about monolingualism or the privileging of English above others. In Australia, ESL education has historically been very good at developing *English* skills, which, ironically, makes any move towards doing more of the same a development that would not be without clear problems.

Previous models were successful because they focused on the *English* second language needs of non-native speaking students. Drawing on research at the time that argued language acquisition was dependent upon high levels of exposure to comprehensible input (e.g., Krashen, 1981; Long, 1981, Swain, 1985), pedagogy privileged the target language (i.e., English). Little explicit attention was given to the use or maintenance of the students’ first language, and the approach was effective in developing the students’ English second language skills to enable a successful transition into the mainstream school.

However, and very significantly, the importance of students’ first language, and of community and ethnic languages within Australia more generally, was being recognised and supported through other provisions within the broader policy context for languages at the time. These included dedicated Commonwealth funding for the teaching of community and ethnic languages in schools and after-hour school programs, the expansion of translating and interpreting assistance to support community services, and the establishment of the Special Broadcasting Service to “meet the broadcasting needs of non-English speakers, to add diversity to the

broadcasting mix and promote multiculturalism” (Hawkins, 1999, p. 174; Wyatt et al., 2002). In addition to these specific strategies, other measures included national curriculum initiatives to expand the study of languages other than English in mainstream schools, and the protection of Australia’s indigenous languages (Lo Bianco, 1987). Today, many of these initiatives no longer operate in the same way as they did in the 1990s, if they exist at all. Instead, a very different perspective has been ascribed to the value, importance, and even “threat” of multiculturalism to contemporary Australian society. This is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in the Howard government’s decision to remove “multicultural affairs” from the title of the former Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (Topsfield, 2007).

However, I still believe there is hope in finding positive ways of moving forward. In the decade since ESL first fell out of favour under the new literacy framework, and the last 2-3 years in particular, research on second language teaching and learning has moved in a considerably different direction to the “target language” centric pedagogies that dominated ESL in the past. Although the L1 has long been recognised as important for both identity (Norton-Peirce, 1995) and the subsequent acquisition of an L2 (Baker, 2006) theories of second language acquisition themselves have traditionally held that learning begins with “comprehensible input” (i.e., exposure to the target language), maintaining the primacy of the L2 in the actual *teaching* of language. It is to these developments I turn in the next section of this paper, and a discussion of how they not only acknowledge the value of students’ L1 in the classroom, but draw on them to facilitate acquisition of the L2.

Rethinking monolingual instruction in bilingual contexts

A strong relationship between the L1 and L2 has long been recognized within second language acquisition, although early work in this area tended to characterize the link in largely negative terms. Based on a behaviourist view of learning and the repetition and practice of specific skills, errors were attributed to the “negative transfer” of old behaviours in the L1 that impeded the student’s ability to acquire new behaviours in the L2 (Ellis, 1994). Even with the advent of cognitivist theories of SLA in the 1950s – including Chomsky’s (1957) notion of “universal grammar”, and Cummins’ (1981) theory of “common underlying proficiency” – the dominant perspective since the late 1970s has continued to emphasize the primacy of the L2 within an “input, interaction, and output” model of second language teaching, resulting in what Howatt (1984) describes as the “monolingual principle” (p. 289) of L2 pedagogy. Cummins (2007) summarises the implications of the monolingual approach for second language instruction with reference to three key assumptions:

1. *The direct method assumption*: Instruction should be carried out exclusively in the target language without recourse to students’ L1
2. *The no translation assumption*: Translation between L1 and L2 has no place in the teaching of language or literacy
3. *The two solitudes assumption*: Within immersion and bilingual programs, the two languages should be kept rigidly separate. (pp. 222-229)

However, the rise of Vygotskian (1978, 1987) perspectives within SLA since the early 2000s have begun to challenge these assumptions which have been dominant for more than 30 years. In particular, Vygotsky’s understanding of development as a

synthesis of the cognitive *and* social highlighted a long-standing neglect of the “social” within early theories of language acquisition, together with an understanding of learners as complex social entities who bring to learning their own history, experience, and background (Block, 2003). The result has been a growing awareness of the first language as much more than simply an aspect of identity, or even a “take-off” point for the subsequent acquisition of the second language. Rather, and in contrast to being seen as a potential source of negative interference in learning the L2, new approaches have come to see the L1 as an integral cognitive and social tool in the acquisition of the L2.

These developments have resulted in the need to rethink even the most fundamental assumptions underpinning current approaches to second language teaching and learning, including the positioning of our students in the ESL classroom. Cook (2007), for example, argues of the need to no longer view language students as “L2 learners”, but “L2 users”, with the latter being an understanding of the student “rooted in difference rather than deficit [... whereas] *L2 users* are exploiting whatever linguistic resources they have” (p. 241). As he explains,

It recognizes that L2 users are different kinds of people from monolingual native speakers, and need to be evaluated as people who speak two languages, not as inefficient natives. The L2 user concept arose in the context of the multi-competence approach to SLA. *Multi-competence* is the knowledge of two or more languages in the same mind. It extends to the concept of interlanguage by recognizing the continual presence of the L1 in the learner’s mind alongside the second language, assuming that *there is little point in studying the L2 as an isolated interlanguage system since its raison d’être is that it is added to a first language*. Indeed, it may be wrong to count languages in people’s minds – L1, L2, L3 – as the language system exists in a single mind as a whole, akin to Chomsky’s notion that the mental reality is a grammar, not a language (Chomsky, 1986). If the L2 user is the norm in the world, the monolingual has a more basic system because of its impoverished exposure to languages. (p. 241, emphasis added)

Within the former monolingual paradigm for second language education, learning is considered “successful” when the language learner reaches a level of competence consistent with how a (monolingual) native speaker would use the target language. However, as Cook (2007) points out, “phrasing the goal in terms of the native speaker means L2 learning can only lead to different degrees of failure, not degrees of success” (p. 240). It is by definition, after all, impossible to “become a native speaker”, and the goal of language learning becomes an elusive fallacy which will always remain unattainable for the “L2 learner”.

“L2 users”, by way of contrast, do not aim to replicate the L1 monolingual speaker, but, instead, build on their own first language to *extend* their existing repertoire of skills as a single holistic and more complex system of communication and meaning making. In other words, users extend their first language skills (i.e., as a monolingual) to the second language, thus enabling them to use “language” (without a clear distinction between one language or another) as a “true bilingual”, rather than an “imitation monolingual”. In this sense, skills typically associated with “using a second language”, such as translating and code-switching, are instead viewed as an

extension of those already present within a monolingual L1 system (e.g., paraphrasing and register-switching), albeit the latter being a restricted, less developed, and less complex form of the former (Paradis, 1997). Within the prevailing paradigm for second language education, this presents something of a paradox, given that it has historically been the L2 student who is positioned as having the deficit, rather than the goal (i.e., the monolingual L1 speaker of the target language). As Cook (2007) argues, however,

L2 users have to be credited with being what they are – L2 users. They should be judged by how successful they are as L2 users, not by their failure compared to native speakers. L2 students have the right to come L2 users; not imitation native speakers. (p. 245)

But what does this mean for the practical concerns of language teachers in the ESL classroom? Drawing on various strategies from the work of Lucas and Katz (1994), Manyak (2004), and a series of other L1-based techniques for the L2 classroom, Cummins (2007) suggests that the monolingual assumptions which currently underpin mainstream approaches to second language teaching – the direct method assumption, the no translation assumption, and the two solitudes assumption – need to be confronted head on, with the use of techniques that otherwise go against the grain of established pedagogical principles that privilege the L2. Some examples include:

- Writing stories in the students' L1, which they then talked about in the L2 with other students
- Pairing students from the same language backgrounds together so that students who were more fluent in English could help those less fluent
- Encouraging students to use bilingual dictionaries
- Encouraging students to discuss school work and get assistance at home in their native languages
- Provide books in the students' L1s that they were encouraged to read
- Using translation as a way to promote the acquisition of English, to support biliteracy, and to promote identities of competence (i.e., "linguistic agility" (p. 228))

(see Cummins, 2007, pp. 226-230)

None of these techniques require the teacher to be a speaker of the students' first language themselves, and interestingly, I believe that a few (if not many) of these strategies are already being adopted by some L2 teachers. Although they conflict with much of the existing literature on L2 teaching and learning, there is a great deal of theoretical and empirical support for these techniques in the recent work of Cummins (2007), Cook (2007), and others, which may confirm what some practitioners have already learned through their own professional experience in working with ESL students. This body of new research will therefore be useful for revising the existing knowledge base of second language teacher education to better prepare future pre-service language teachers, as well as to provide an informed research basis for reflective practice amongst in-service teachers to refine and affirm their own professional learning on the use of the L1 in L2 classrooms. In this sense, it gives teachers "permission" to deviate from prevailing norms of accepted practice that have assumed "good teaching" can only occur when the target language is used. Finally, and of special importance given the issues I have raised in this particular

presentation, I believe these developments are especially useful for establishing an evidenced-based way forward that champions an additive-pluralistic, rather than subtractive-monolingual, basis for the development of future ESL policy, curriculum, and pedagogy.

Conclusion

Taking stock of what has become of ESL education in the last decade since the introduction of *Literacy for All*, this presentation began with a rather pessimistic assessment of the current reality for ESL students within Australian schools. With no special provision for the needs of second language speakers, the current reductionist literacy framework – and its focus on “the basics” – has left ESL students without any specialist or ongoing support to address their specific needs as non-native speaking students in the mainstream curriculum.

To redress those concerns, the temptation is to argue for something we know already works: a model of ESL that runs separate, but parallel, to the mainstream curriculum, with a focus on developing English second language specific skills that will enable students to become successful in the mainstream (i.e., under *Literacy for All*). The ideological foundations that shape the current provision for literacy in schools, however, suggests this would be problematic, given its emphasis on homogeneity and the maintenance of the existing social order rather than recognising or accepting linguistic and cultural diversity and difference.

However, in spite of this bleak appraisal of the current state of ESL in schools, and the problems associated with a return to models that we know would nonetheless be successful based on past experience, there is still room for optimism as we attempt to find a new way forward. In the decade since ESL fell out of favour under the current literacy framework, the monolingual principle that once dominated second language teaching and learning is gradually being displaced by an emergent paradigm that realises the significance of the L1 in the acquisition of the L2. By moving in this direction, we have the possibility to develop ESL frameworks that challenge prevailing norms of homogeneity, as well as repositioning our students in a way that celebrates their ability to be L2 users, rather than always attempting to become an (unattainable) native-English monolingual speaker.

Clearly, there are many challenges that still lie ahead. With the current neoliberal imperatives that drive government and policy making, there is a need for further “evidence-based” research to identify the language specific problems and needs of ESL students within the existing framework, together with further evidence to support the effectiveness of a pedagogy reliant upon the students’ L1 to acquire the L2. But more than simply strategic moves, we need to begin making decisive ones. Even a year ago – under a former government that removed “multicultural” from one its largest ministerial departments and actively cultivated a “fear of the other” – I’m not sure any of these developments could have been imaginable. However, with the first change in government at the federal level for more than 10 years (and under the leadership of a prime minister who is himself bilingual), we have been afforded an opportunity to consider what possibilities might exist that embrace diversity and difference, and a new space for thinking of ways to move forward that are not necessarily dependent upon having to recreate the past.

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