



Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

This may be the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

Freebody, Peter & [Luke, Allan](#)
(1990)

Literacies programs: Debates and demands in cultural context.
Prospect: an Australian journal of TESOL, 5(3), pp. 7-16.

This file was downloaded from: <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/49099/>

© Copyright 1990 The authors

This work is covered by copyright. Unless the document is being made available under a Creative Commons Licence, you must assume that re-use is limited to personal use and that permission from the copyright owner must be obtained for all other uses. If the document is available under a Creative Commons License (or other specified license) then refer to the Licence for details of permitted re-use. It is a condition of access that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights. If you believe that this work infringes copyright please provide details by email to qut.copyright@qut.edu.au

License: Creative Commons: Attribution-No Derivative Works 3.0 Australia

Notice: *Please note that this document may not be the Version of Record (i.e. published version) of the work. Author manuscript versions (as Submitted for peer review or as Accepted for publication after peer review) can be identified by an absence of publisher branding and/or typeset appearance. If there is any doubt, please refer to the published source.*

PETER FREEBODY AND ALLAN LUKE

'Literacies' Programs: Debates and Demands in Cultural Context

Our notions about what constitutes satisfactory literacy performance are historically and culturally determined. Since it is not possible to determine any final, categorical criteria for 'adequate' or 'functional' literacy (Resnick and Resnick 1977), we can describe expectations only in terms of the shifting civil, socio-cultural, and job-credential demands that any particular culture places on its members in their dealings with written text (we use the term 'dealings' to cover both reading and writing). Similarly, there are currently many theories of literacy and literacy pedagogy that attempt to describe the conditions that are both necessary and sufficient for successful literate performance. The line that we will take in this paper is that only the necessary components of literacy success can be documented; everything that a member of our culture can take from or bring to a written text can never be pre-specified, any more than can everything that a culture demands or expects from its members in their dealings with written text. Here therefore we will argue for the necessary status of four components of success, based on our perceptions of what our culture expects, here and now, from people in their management of text.

In drawing attention to these components, we want to direct attention away from the question of 'which method affords adequate literacy?' toward the larger and necessarily prior question of 'which aspects of literacy, or indeed which "literacies" are offered or emphasised by various programs?' We develop these notions with particular attention to reading, although we would argue that many of our observations apply at least indirectly to writing as well. We will elaborate the position that a successful reader in our society needs to develop and sustain the resources to adopt four related roles: code breaker ('how do I crack this?'), text participant ('what does this mean?'), text user ('what do I do within this, here and now?'), and text analyst ('what does all this do to me?'). We use these categories as a heuristic guide for literacy educators to consider what 'literacies' are offered in various instructional programs. This issue thus becomes not whether a 'basic skills', a 'communicative', or a 'critical' approach to literacy instruction is most appropriate or necessary, but rather that each of these general families of approaches displays and emphasises particular forms of

literacy, such that no single one will, of itself, fully enable students to use texts effectively, in their own individual and collective interests, across a range of discourses, texts and tasks.

Learning Your Role as Code Breaker

To be a successful reader, an individual needs to successfully engage the technology of the written script. There are two aspects to this technology: the nature of the relationship between spoken sounds and written symbols, and the contents of that relationship. With respect to the nature of sound-symbol relationships in English, the degree of consonant clustering and the diversity of English vocabulary together are associated with the necessity for an alphabetic or at least semi-alphabetic script. The actual content of current English sound-symbol relationships is, of course, arbitrary. A particular letter representing a particular sound simply does not need to look that way in any meaningful sense of the term. Furthermore, while English is largely alphabetic, the fact that the spoken language changes more rapidly than does the written and the fact that there are 44 sounds in English and 26 letters together result in a slippery set of conventions that are at work in current English script.

The significance of alphabetic awareness for reading acquisition among children is now well established by research (see Stanovich 1986; and Ehri, in press, for summaries). In Stanovich's overview of research relating to reading acquisition, for example, he concluded that if there is one identifiable source of early reading failure then it is the failure of the individual to acquire proficiency with the structured nature of spoken language – its components and their combinations – and thus with the alphabetic script, and that, given the ways in which early schooling is organised, this failure can quickly lead to a cascade of avoidance strategies and other motivational problems beyond the first year or two of schooling. Such a conclusion is compatible with Johnston's (1985) study of adult illiterates, all of whom reported feeling successful as readers in their very early schooling since they could remember stories and use pictorial aids with which to read aloud, but that their lack of resources in engaging technology of the script rapidly became a source of withdrawal from a range of school activities, resulting finally in their status as adult illiterates.

To summarise, many adult literacy clients, particularly those with ESL background, argue that they need the 'basics', conceived of in terms of phonics, letter knowledge, spelling skills, and so forth. Rather than dismissing this proposition as 'naive' or as distorted beliefs left over from their prior schooling experience, we should recognise that the characteristics and conventions of the technology of text are vital aspects of reading and that students' development is often hindered by misunderstandings about how to crack the code (see Cole and Griffin 1986). However, this should not necessarily be seen as a justification for isolated packets of 'skill and

drill' – an approach we clearly would not endorse; for rudimentary knowledge of alphabet, grapheme/phoneme relationships, left to right directionality, and so on, are necessary but not sufficient conditions for using literacy for particular social functions and uses in actual contexts. As Cole and Griffin suggested, it is a matter of providing understandings of what the technology entails and practising its use with the aid of an accomplished text user. Part of using that technology entails developing your role as text participant.

Learning Your Role as Text Participant

By this term we mean developing the resources to engage the meaning-systems of the discourse itself. Much recent research on comprehension (see Anderson and Pearson, 1984; Schallert, 1982) has drawn our attention to the importance of relating topical and textual knowledge to the task of reading written texts in common genres. That is to say, the processes of comprehension call upon the reader to draw inferences connecting textual elements and background knowledge required to fill out the unexplicated aspects of text. Such an orientation is summarised in Anderson's (1977: 365) comment that 'the meaning is not in the message. The message is a cryptic recipe that can guide a person in constructing a representation.' Researchers working within the framework of, for example, schema theory, have drawn attention to the centrality of the reader's role in using appropriate knowledge sources – knowledge not only of the topic of the text but also of the generic structures commonly found in written texts, that is, the sub-categories of narration and exposition. One of the tasks for teachers of early literacy is to display the appropriateness of personal reference and personal estimations of the characters' feelings and of what might happen next. Teachers display to students versions of 'comprehension', indicating, for example, that the pictures can be read to infer the emotional state of the characters, and that the reader's personal responses to these states and to the information of the text generally, as well as the reader's estimates about what may happen next, are relevant and necessary parts of understanding the text. The argument here is that these displays to the student are in fact a form of teaching not only about how to read the text but also about what counts as comprehension and what processes are entailed in it.

The significance of the reader's having and using background knowledge resources in reading a text successfully has been well established in recent research. For example, Reynolds, Taylor, Steffensen, Shirey, and Anderson (1981) investigated the relationship between cultural knowledge and reading comprehension. Students from black inner-city and white suburban schools in the 8th grade read a passage that dealt with an instance of 'sounding' or 'playing the dozens', a form of verbal ritual insult predominantly found in the black teenage community. These researchers

found that the black subjects tended to interpret the passage (correctly) as being about verbal play, whereas the white students tended to read the passage as being about physical aggression, importing notions of a race riot and a large-scale fight. The evidence here, in particular when it is taken into account that the black inner-city students would have received substantially lower scores on most standardised tests of reading, indicates that the interpretation of the text, the ability to use appropriate inferences to connect parts of the text and fill in the gaps of meaning, are crucial components of reading success. As these researchers concluded:

The reaction that many white middle-class teachers and students have to inner-city black students trying to work their way through culturally loaded material was mirrored by one of our black male students. Upon being told that white children understood the letter to be about a fight instead of about sounding, he looked surprised and said, 'What's the matter? Can't they read?' (p. 30).

That question is quite relevant. In a very real sense, the white students in this experiment could not read the material in that they could not construct a meaning which in any sense reciprocated the intentions of the writer, in spite of the fact that their decoding skills were as good as, if not better than, those students who could successfully construct the meaning of the passage.

Hence, prior knowledge figures prominently in various versions of 'reading'. What this should signal to adult literacy workers is that the use of texts about which learners have limited background knowledge can be a hindrance to comprehension. This would seem particularly significant in the case of ESL instruction, where learners bring varying bodies of cultural knowledge and competence to bear on the text. It also suggests, in cases where occupationally specific tasks are involved, that 'reading' cannot be optimally enhanced independently of knowledges and understandings of the topic/content in question (for example, a particular repair procedure or report). However, beyond the use of 'relevant' text – it also suggests the need for explicit and guided instructional introduction to those texts and genres that make meaning demands on students.

Learning Your Role as a Text User

Since reading and writing are nothing if not social, then being a successful reader is being able to participate in those social activities in which written text plays a central part. Not only do people learn about the technology of script and about how to work the meaning or possible meanings of written texts, but they also learn through social experiences what our culture counts to be adequate reading for school, work, leisure, or civil purposes. Being a successful text user, then, entails developing and maintaining resources for participating in 'what this text is for, here and now'. These resources are transmitted and developed in our society largely in instructional contexts, some of which may bear comparatively little

direct relevance to the ways in which texts need to be used in out-of-school contexts, in particular in the case of job literacy (see Mikulecky 1981; Heap 1987). As Snow and Ninio (1986) have demonstrated, parents of very young children engage in certain basic instruction in the function of books and the reader's role in interacting with the book. It is through social interactions around literacy events that we learn our position as reader and our notion of what for us the texts are for. The most obvious site for learning what texts are for and what one's role is as a manager of texts is of course the classroom. Again, it is important to take the view that classroom instruction in reading is not just a matter of transmitting the skills of decoding or the processes of comprehension, but is as well a display to students of what counts as reading in the here and now of the classroom and what reading more generally is thus about. What counts as having successfully read for a classroom is displayed and authorised in teacher-student discussion. Classroom discussion about texts can be seen as displays of how students ought to have read a particular text. The kinds of readings that the students provide are made available in classroom discussion, in which the teacher either confirms, disconfirms, or calls for more or different kinds of answers as a guided, jointly built talk about what was read and how it was read. In the following example, students are discussing the novel *Z for Zachariah* with a view to writing two character studies, one for each of the main characters. Throughout this lesson, it is clear that the teacher takes for granted that the students know the contents of the book and are able to provide character descriptions for the two main characters. The work that the teacher does is essentially to model a procedure, indicating to the students through the flow of her questions and interruptions that the crucial feature of their production of a character study is the knitting together of character descriptions and supporting statements from the narrative.

- 1 S Well she's very independent. She's kind, and caring. I guess she's creative in a way, able to um () you know, cooking and that.
- 2 T OK. Ann, can you add something?
- 3 S She's got a lot of courage and //
- 4 T // a lot of courage. How do we see that?
- 5 S Um like, she keeps herself alive, and she thinks there's no-one else around on earth.
- 6 T She keeps herself alive when there's no-one else around. Good. Yes, Sandra can you add to that?
- 7 S Um she's very soft-hearted, she () like, she thought Mr Loomis was bad but she ... when he got sick she still looked after him.
- 8 T Yes.

We see here in eight turns early in the lesson a feature that predominates throughout the remainder of the lesson, that is, the teacher's working together of character-descriptive statements and narrative-supporting statements. In turns 1 and 7 above the teacher receives these two types of statements joined together. In the student turn 3 a character description is provided and the teacher interrupts with a request for a narrative support, which she then receives before she positively evaluates the answer (in turn 6). In this respect the teacher is demonstrating to the students not only the desired form of a character study, that is, the provision of descriptive and supporting statements, but is also in a sense retrospectively building a picture of what an appropriate reading of the novel is taken to be. She is also, we should note, building a picture of how one legitimately accounts for human action – an account that entails fixed character traits and behavioural symptoms. Little attempt, throughout the whole lesson, is made to describe characters' motivations or behaviours in terms of the historical contexts of their lives, or in terms of the potential transience of certain styles of behaviour. The students in this particular lesson are well versed in the ways of classroom discussion and pick up quickly on the generic expectations of the teacher. They have, in a sense, learned to participate in reading-related events, being aware of their own role in the classroom as answerers of questions of certain sorts rather than, say, askers of questions, and of the teacher's necessary role of eliciting from them summaries and recalls of specific textual information.

In the case of adult literacy, such a position suggests the need for due consideration of the social conventions of the literacy event in question. Heath (1982) argued that literacy events are conventionalised, in effect constituting a culture of objects and ways of talking about them. Those proficient in particular 'readings' also must know how to participate in particular interactional sequences, with a particular material technology (for example, books, contracts). What are at issue here are the interactional roles and activities that are required for 'appropriate' participation in a literacy event.

If we view literacy as not entailing a solitary, individual act or process, but rather as a set of social practices undertaken with others, then indeed students must also know what to do with text in particular social context other than those of the specialised site of the classroom. For, as the transcript above suggests, context of acquisition may be highly specialised and may bear little direct resemblance to the contexts of use which the adult literate encounters on a daily basis. Further, as Mikulecky argued, the actual 'transfer of training' of many school-based reading tasks to other contexts may be much lower than is conventionally thought. Hence, 'communicative' approaches which replicate actual contexts of use and foreground interaction around text would be a significant component of learning how to deal with texts in the world.

Learning Your Role as Text Analyst

Under the heading of text analyst we include an expanded notion of what has traditionally been called critical reading. Here we refer to an awareness of the fact that all texts are crafted objects, written by persons with particular dispositions or orientations to the information, regardless of how factual or neutral the products may attempt to be. We are arguing therefore for the necessary status of a role for the reader that involves conscious awareness of the language and idea systems that are brought into play when a text is used. It is these systems that make the text operate and thus make the reader, usually covertly, into its operator. The general line here is based on the notion that all discourse entails a particular construction or 'picture' of its readership, not only in the sense of the reader's knowledge, but, equally importantly, in the sense of the ideological position of the reader (Luke, Freebody and Gilbert, in press).

Consider the following text from a secondary resource book. Note how the factual material is presented in a neutral way and that, at first reading at least, such a text appears to be an authoritative and fairly comprehensible description of the topic:

The Aztecs were Indian people who controlled an empire in Central Mexico when the Spaniards opened up the New World to exploration, conquest, and settlement. Under Hernando Cortez, the Spanish reached Mexico in 1519, when the Aztec civilisation was at its height.

The Aztecs came from the North and arrived in the so-called Valley of Mexico in the 12th century. This area is located between mountain ranges in the middle of the country halfway between the gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. The Aztecs were nomadic until they established their capital at Tenochtitlan.

Aztec civilisation was not the true creation of the Aztecs. Their artistic and technical achievements were based on the more advanced cultures of the Toltecs, Mayans, and Zapotecs, earlier tribes they conquered and displaced. Aztec culture combined elements of these earlier civilisations. Their language is related to that of several of the Indian tribes of the South Western United States.

Aztecs developed a culture that included a distinctive stonewheel calendar; their own methods of weaving cotton, feathers, and maguey fibres ... (text continues to describe Aztec craft and architecture; Purdy and Sandak 1982: 1-3).

Again, we may be able to decode this passage adequately; we may also be able to bring to bear the relevant knowledge concerning, say, North American geography, the components of culture, and so on. We may further be able to make relevant inferences to link various aspects of the text (for example, the temporal sequencing of the dates) and in order to understand certain ambiguous, general, or specialised terms (for example, 'nomadic'). That is, we may successfully possess and deploy sufficiently accurate and complex knowledge schemas that would help us understand

this text in terms of its ideational 'content'. However, our positioning as readers in this text is not only with respect to our topical knowledge; it is intrinsically associated with ideology. Sense can be made of these topic-facts only within a textually unexplicated ideology. What is missing from the above account of how we may successfully read this text is due to consideration of the clearly Eurocentric discourse that is introduced from the first paragraph, and the sequence of accompanying textual devices that in effect position us as readers as we make sense of this text. For instance, the Spanish are described as 'opening up' the 'New World' for 'exploration' and 'settlement'. These particular metaphors for the Spanish invasion of Central America endorse a benign ideological reading of colonialism and its effects on indigenous peoples. What is implied by the structure of this first paragraph is that indeed exploration, conquest, and settlement did not occur prior to the Spanish presence, and that the Aztec empire simply happened to decline after the Spanish 'opening up' exercise. This passage does not provide any documentation of its source or of the ideological position of the writer, thus inviting its characterisation as authoritative statements of truth. That is, the passage proceeds simply as a documentation of a covert ideological position through an anonymous but totally authoritative source.

The point here is that it is crucial to an understanding of successful reading as our culture currently requires it that we view the particular options exercised by the writer of such a text as covertly positioning us as readers into ordering our sense-making procedures within an ideological perspective. A reader can make sense of, for example, the first sentence of this passage only by positioning him- or herself within a Eurocentric ideology. The second half of that first sentence simply will not go unless the reader, however, transiently, adopts the only position in which the words can make sense – the position of Eurocentricism, that is, the underlying ideology that indigenous cultures derive their significance and in fact can mark the beginning of their documented history from their contact with European society. In this way the text itself becomes a covert agent in the building of such a perspective.

Conclusion

We have argued here for the necessary status of four roles in any characterisation of successful reading as it is currently demanded and expected in our society: the roles of code breaker ('How do I crack this?'), text participant ('What does this mean?'), text user ('What do I do with this, here and now?'), and text analyst ('What does this do to me?'). We are more 'successful' readers and writers if we are prey to manipulative texts than we are if we cannot decode or spell. Texts can effect both opportunity and exploitation: initiation into the roles of code-breaker, text-participant, and text-user can open up new and powerful forms of bureaucratic colonisation, unless that initiation offers the tools of discourse analysis and critique.

Many teachers and researchers in the area of literacy would agree with much of what we have said so far. Our profession, however, is divided on two crucial points: (a) the sequencing of instruction in these four roles; and (b) the necessary degree of explication in instruction of these roles. It is on these points that our theories of reading are intertwined with our theories of learning and development. Do we begin with the basics of script and meaning engagement and later 'filigree' students with functional and critical reading resources? Do we regard certain aspects of our engagement with text as coming 'naturally'? Are some ways of thinking simply too hard for beginning readers and writers? Might we in fact disrupt and disturb beginners by the presentation of an orientation that conflicts with that of the text? The hard line that we put here, at least for the purpose of argument, is that all of these roles form part of successful reading and writing as our culture currently demands them; therefore, any program of instruction in literacy, whether it be at kindergarten or in adult ESL classes or at any points in between, needs to confront these roles systematically, explicitly, and at all developmental points. Further, any program can be examined to see how its emphases put varying 'literacies' on offer.

Thus theories of reading are necessarily intertwined with particular normative conceptions and ideologies about what literacy should be used for. The argument made by many adult educators is that those actual uses are up to the learner. However, we have suggested here that literacy is a multifaceted set of social practices with a material technology, entailing code breaking, participation with the knowledge of the text, social uses of text, and analysis/critique of the text. In order for learners to even be in a position to decide where/when/how, they would want to deploy the technology, and to be able to draw upon a range of strategic uses of print, all of these aspects are requisite. This does not, of course, provide a simple answer about which procedure or sequence of teaching is most optimal: we deliberately have avoided suggesting a developmental or taxonomic priority of these aspects of literacy, particularly because adults seeking literacy instruction will arrive with a range of competencies, perhaps including para-literate skills in the social uses of text, or some rudimentary knowledge of the code, or background knowledge and expertise about a particular text, or a critical stance towards the world and the social, or variations and combinations of these. Further, one can be learned within the context of the other. What we have suggested is that advocates of 'skills-based' and 'critical' approaches to reading may indeed be giving an implicit priority of one aspect of literacy use over another. We operate from the position that literacy is a social practice, with political and economic potentials and ramifications. It is not that one program affords 'literacy' and one does not; rather, distinct programs afford distinct 'literacies'. □

References

- Anderson, R.C.** 1977. The notion of schemata and the educational enterprise. In R.C. Anderson, R.J. Spiro, and W.E. Montague (eds), *Schooling and the Acquisition of Knowledge*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Anderson R.C. and P.D. Pearson.** 1984. A schema-theoretic view of basic processes in reading comprehension. In P.D. Pearson (ed.), *Handbook of Reading Research*. NY: Longman.
- Brice Heath, S.** 1982. Protean Shapes: Ever shifting oral and literate traditions. In D. Tannen, (ed.). *Spoken and Written language: exploring orality and literacy*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 91-118.
- Cole, M., and P. Griffin.** 1986. A socio-historical approach to remediation. In S. de Castell, A. Luke, and K. Egan (eds), *Literacy, society, and schooling*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ehri, L.** Forthcoming. Development of the ability to read words. In P.D. Pearson (ed.), *Handbook of Reading Research*, Volume 2. NY: Longman.
- Heap, J.** 1987. *Effective functioning in daily life: A critique of concepts and surveys of functional literacy*. Paper presented at National Reading Conference, Arizona.
- Johnston, P.H.** 1985. Understanding reading disability. *Harvard Educational Review*, 55, 153-77.
- Luke, A., P. Freebody, and P. Gilbert.** Forthcoming. What counts as reading in the secondary classroom: Selective traditions of reading practices and positions. In K. Watson and W. Sawyer (eds). *Teaching English: The State of the Art*. Sydney: AATE Press.
- Mikulecky, L.** 1981. Job literacy: The relationship between school preparation and workplace actuality. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 16, 400-19.
- Purdy, S. and C.R. Sandak** 1982. *The Aztecs*. NY: Franklin Watts.
- Resnick, D. and L. Resnick.** 1977. The nature of literacy: An historical exploration. *Harvard Educational Review*, 47, 263-91.
- Reynolds, R.E., M.A. Taylor, M.S. Steffensen, L.L. Shirey, and R.C. Anderson.** 1981. *Cultural schemata and reading comprehension*. Center for the Study of Reading. Technical Report No. 201, Urbana-Champaign.
- Schallert, D.L.** 1982. The significance of knowledge: a synthesis of research related to schema theory. In W. Otto and S. White (eds), *Reading Expository Material*. NY: Academic Press.
- Snow, C.E. and A. Ninio.** 1986. The contracts of literacy: What children learn from learning to read books. In W.H. Teale and E. Sulzby (eds). *Emergent Literacy: Writing and Reading*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Stanovich, K.** 1986. Matthew effects in reading: Some consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 21, 360-407.