



## ROLE OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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### Abstract

**In the context of the current global access and recession, it is argued that strategic literacy development and diversity of interest may act as a buffer against the deepening impact of the existing and widening crisis of inequities in education in India and abroad. With reference to study of language and literature, a link is made between identity and literacy as important cultural capital. This requires remediation of language development offerings, which are often based on outdated assumptions that participants are monolinguals who share the language and discourses of the institution. The author of this article suggests a shift towards learning ecologies which are designed to embrace linguistic diversity and that the following paradigms should be applied: linking literature literacy to social change, curriculum designing as a means for creative opportunity, subscribing to critical approaches to literacy, linking student language development to the institutional management strategy, and affirming linguistic hybridism within the institution. Finally, this paper presents a strategic tool as means for maximizing interest in the study of language and literature.**

### Introduction

Higher education literacy faces challenges in India, through the riddle of continued unequal allocation of resources, the ineffective application of language policy, the importation of Western notions of reading into a bookless landscape, and the absence of 'political will' to address these factors as a matter of priority, have persisted despite the change of governance since independence. All of these challenges have been further amplified by the current global recession.

While technology has indeed changed the world, it does not replace the need for mediation of academic and linguistic practices in education. Linguistic diversity is the norm in India and no core body of linguistic knowledge and meta-knowledge in any given language of education can be assumed. This raises questions around method of presentation of mainstream disciplinary teaching material as well as the mediation of language development practices in higher education.

The previously fairly straight forward presentation of course material, geared for largely monolingual student bodies, is inadequate in interfacing with the multi-literate discourses of students and lecturers in the system and the varied expectations on the part of the lecturers and students which this brings with it. Overall aims in higher education in India seems succinctly summarized by Professor Njabulo Ndebele (2009: 13) in the extract quoted below from his speech delivered at the 20th Sunday Times Literary Award in Johannesburg on 1 August 2009: Clearly, we cannot go through this radically formative period in our history without learning to re-imagine ourselves and our country. That is why the 'DVD' of our behind-the-scenes struggles must be played all the time. That way we grow our collective imagination. And Let's submit to the imperative of intelligent, creative, ethical and resourceful public institutions. According to Bakhtin's dialogic perspective (cited in Abasi & Akbari, 2008), academic practice includes particular ways of thinking, acting, believing and speaking which are not automatically acquired. Students write what they think the lecturer wants to read and try to gauge and anticipate lecturers' potential responses. This was evident in a comment by one of the students in a course evaluation in Canada : He [i.e., the professor] is always there at the back of

my mind, because he is the only one who's going to evaluate me; ... so I look at the outline, and yeah, he is there like a God in my mind, and it's scary. (Amorita's interview, November 2005) What this quotation illustrates is the extent to which studies in other parts of the world, reveal similar impacts of demographic shifts on challenges in language education to those experienced in India. Lecturers maintain that students, who are told to make claims, substantiate them, and then illustrate what they mean, litter their writing with quotations from preferred, esteemed sources. Lecturers may, however, not be explicit enough when it comes to what exactly they want students to do when they write.

The end result often does not match what the lecturer had in mind. What is handed in is widely divergent and often unpredictable, but categories, such as the distinction between localized and globalised patch writing, are useful in helping to ascertain to what degree student writing meets institutionalized criteria. Localized patch writing, relates to essays containing heavily borrowed language, bordering on 'plagiarism' and Globalised patch writing means sweeping statements, derivative views, lots of quoted material, but no integration with the student's own text. What is generally required of students is re-voiced source material, critical engagement, a statement of their own views, an integrated form of knowledge display and knowledge acquisition, and a strongly developed sense of the student's own voice. However, students are often not encouraged to talk with informed voices and some authority. They should respond by deeply processing all perspectives on an issue and showing their understanding in relation to the authoritative material provided. The challenge is to strike a good balance between students as consumers of ready-made ideas and students as apprentice critics of ideas to which they are exposed. Language practitioners in higher education ought to contribute to building a more equitable society in which a sense of agency ought to be one of the main outcomes of language development in higher education. In this article, I argue that certain paradigms should apply, namely, linking institutional literacy to social change, conceiving of curriculum design as a creative opportunity, subscribing to critical approaches to literacy, linking student language development to the institutional diversity

management strategy, and affirming linguistic hybridism within the institution.

### **Linking literacy to social change**

A common assumption is that students will automatically and unconsciously be empowered by what happens in institutions. This is not necessarily the case: A more sophisticated sociological and economic analysis would shape educational policy as a subset of larger policies of social justice and economic independence. The effect is to place a caveat under the 'myth' that the improvement of pedagogy, curriculum and student performance on a range of measures in and of themselves can have sustainable and meaningful consequences in people's trajectories across highly unstable and volatile, structurally unequal and asymmetrical social fields of exchange (Luke, 2008: 677). Linking institutionalized literacy to tangible economic rewards is the ultimate challenge. Luke maintained that Bernstein's controversial claim, dates back to 30 years which states that education cannot compensate for society',... is a reminder that other kinds of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital need to be put into play before the full value of educationally acquired capital can be realized.

Higher educational institutes have the power to open access to dominant cultural capital through the curriculum and languages that they offer. It is established that particular forms of pedagogy that recognize difference and systematically bridge students' existing cultural capital with the mainstream forms of English language and literacy can indeed improve the acquisition of institutional capital. (Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies 2011, 29-1) It is also observed that the skills, sensibilities, and competencies needed for identifying, analyzing, and solving problems from multiple perspectives will require nurturing students who are curious and cognitively flexible, can tolerate ambiguity, and can synthesize knowledge within and across disciplines. They will need the cultural sophistication to empathize with their peers, who will likely be of different racial, religious, linguistic and social origins. They will need to be able to learn with and from them, to work collaboratively and communicate effectively in groups made up of diverse individuals. An education for globalization should aim at nothing more nor less than to educate the whole child for the whole world. In order to achieve what

Suàrez-Orozco and Sattin (2007) have suggested, language development needs to be fully integrated into the mainstream inquiry-based pedagogy, recognizing disciplinary-based constructed knowledge that needs to be mediated as well as modified. Leki (2007) proposed socio-academic framing of educational research, that is, ethnographies of student social networks and their reading and writing histories.

He has broadened the scope of research by delving more deeply into the wider constellations of experiences and conditions impacting on participants' literacy (as opposed to strictly their writing) development across their experiences in different courses and different learning contexts, because language development and agency do not emerge through writing in a structured university lecture hall or a tutorial alone. They are enacted and performed in all domains of the life of the individual. By focusing on the so-called 'inadequacies' of the student's work in relation to imposed norms, the identity of the learner is discounted, or worse, negated. At best, the student can learn how to pass while bypassing being 'educated'. Conceiving of curriculum design as creative opportunity A thick description of the trajectories shaping the lecture room and general institutional communication provides insights into the possible nature of learning for migrating world populations, with shifting conceptions of margins and centres. Student and community-based discourses need to be embraced and included in such a way that curriculum becomes a set of creative opportunities. Cummins (2007) advocated the inclusion of minority and immigrant languages in the classroom and provides evidence for the notion that policies of immersion and simultaneous bilingualism have some important linguistic and cognitive advantages. Significant positive relationships are formed in the classroom where no one is marginalized.

Furthermore, the inclusion of minority or marginal languages facilitates understanding between cultures, with positive spin-offs for community building. It goes without saying that fluency and competence in the dominant language of trade and commerce is to be promoted alongside community languages. Cummins's (2007) model of immersion is based on the recognition of a common underlying language proficiency which can be accessed through both languages of the bilingual speaker,

which is reminiscent of Chomsky's 'universal grammar'. The second principle to note is that prior knowledge is important, is embedded in the speaker's first language, and can be accessed and used in the immersion context towards acquisition of the language of power and learning, which, in our case, is English.

In practical terms, an example of the above could be as follows. It is apt to recommend an open but structured discussion of a 'burning issue' in the form of a talk show instead of giving a formal lecture. Following this, students are asked where they stand in relation to the issue under discussion. A manageable, volume-reduced, reading load is prescribed, in order to enhance deep processing. Initially, for first-year students, the often heavy emphasis on writing criteria needs to be downplayed. Equal emphasis ought to be placed on knowledge giving and knowledge transformation early on in the courses. Awareness of the difference also needs to be made explicit at the onset. This is done through exposure to classroom-based collaborative deconstruction of published articles and other literature in the field, early on in the courses. Such exercises emphasise the requirements of professional practices in the academic field. Students are exposed early on in the course to the preferred writing practices and their criteria, to the fact that they are indeed privileged and rewarded in the institution.

### **Conclusion**

Language development practitioners in higher education need to view themselves as mediators of discourse practices, and as linguistic mentors for students who indulge versus diversity complaint models of curriculum transformation. Transforming the curriculum from a traditional model to a diversity compliant inclusive model focus on correctness and preferred knowledge, attitudes and beliefs and focus on discourse as socially constituted and constituting, and focus on classroom community building engagement and active text production, strong performance orientation, unidirectional communication, monologue dialectical, interactive discrete skills taught as a 'list' out of context, should be the modeled paradigm towards development of higher education scenario ridden on context-embedded critical enquiry.

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