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Reading in a Multilingual Context: from Theory to Practice
2-4 June, 1998, SAAL (Singapore Association for Applied Linguistics) Seminar and STU (Singapore Teachers’ Union)

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While a number of research studies in Singapore report school-based studies on psycholinguistic and metacognitive approaches to the teaching and learning of reading skills and curriculum practices (Ng, 1987), researchers in the 90s have moved on to other concerns. Other researchers have challenged the assumption that literacy is a technical skill, that it is neutral and that it refers to a universal set of skills. Cheah, (1994), for example, has challenged the assumption that literacy is neutral and reexamined the cultural contexts in reading curriculum materials in English.

There have been fewer studies on family literary practices in Singapore. Sripathy’s (1998) current study contributes further to this field of study. A survey of biliteracy practices or alternative practices carried out at home and in the family domains, especially of minority communities that speak in two or more languages will inform us as to the varied social and cultural practices such communities carry out (cf Hornberger, 1992). Often teachers who view literacy skills as a mastery of a sub-set of technical skills, as skills in learning to decode sounds and letters and words of the language under instruction and are unaware of range of literacy practices in the home and family domains which range from religious practices and cultural practices. Teachers’ concerns are more with meeting the demands of the school curriculum and completing curriculum materials.

This paper reports on a small scale survey conducted on literacy practices in the home and family domains, (Sripathy and Saravanan, 1998). The survey is to raise teachers’ awareness about literacy practices at home and in the family domain. It is to provide a basis for parents and teachers to become partners in literacy education.

A survey of the literature on literacy practices of multilingual communities shows the concern in the role played by education in the production and reproduction of dominant languages, especially English being used to establish cultural identity. The other concern is the social inequality that arises as a result of the dominant role of English in minority multilingual communities. Reference is made to concepts that highlight the social construction of language values and practices and their central role in processes of symbolic domination (Marilyn Martin-Jones (1984:4)). Researchers have begun to reexamine the historical processes of colonisation, postcolonialism, globlisation, and minority rights movements, to linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992, Tollefson, 1995). Jones and Heller (1984) in their Canadian studies report on ideologies and struggles centring on bilingual education, to mother-tongue education, access to dominant language varieties,
and language revitalisation programmes.

While many of the Singapore based studies examine institutional practices and processes in establishing linguistic skills, in this paper we concentrate on another agency that contributes to literacy practices, the family and the home domain. What are some of these practices?

Sripathy (1998) raises the issue of how literacy practices have become assimilative to some extent and how these practices determine the multilingual communities' access to equity, power and mobility. As teachers we assume that there is only one set of literacy practices. Often these approaches are determined by mainstream practices, driven by current and prevailing theories of reading and of reading skills and strategies in English that have been imported from the dominant training centres of America, Australia, and New Zealand. As educators we have used many successful approaches and strategies recommended in the research literature based on mainstream literacy practices of successful middle class children and successful middle class families to train our teachers in similar practices in the teaching of reading skills and strategies.

We assume that all communities are homogeneous, as our pupils go through the same educational system. In the process of instituting and legitimising a large number of literacy practices, that come through our teacher training programmes and through our educational institutions have we neglected some of the literacy practices that are home and family based and that can in effect support literacy development in our children?

As educators we assume that all communities are equal, that the same amount of resources, linguistic, cultural, and economic resources are available to all the communities. The dominant Chinese community has its groups of dialect speakers, the Indian community has not only Tamil, but also Punjabi, Hindi, Bengali, Urdu and Gujarati speakers.

As language educators we also assume that there is only one current dominant theoretical basis for the syllabi and curriculum materials that we write and train our teachers to use. As many good practices and approaches arise out of these theoretical foundations this in turn is used to determine the theoretical basis for the production of syllabi and curriculum materials for other languages, for example, Tamil which is taught in our bilingual and multilingual setting. How appropriate is it to transfer in its entirety the linguistic approaches and therefore the discoursal and cultural approaches embedded in these approaches to mother tongue teaching? These issues were raised in the Tamil Review Committee’s report when it examined the Tamil language syllabus and language teaching materials. How appropriate are these for establishing biliteracy/multiliteracy and bicultural/multicultural practices in our young?

In advocating a particular set of school based practices, educators and teachers have perhaps sent a number of contradictory signals to parents and communities that some of the significant cultural practices that were handed down over the generations, especially the oracy traditions, are of little use in current child rearing practices, and in home and community driven literacy practices. Parents and grandparents may have been lead to abandon the many literacy and cultural practices that
they practised and passed down over the generations. Educators may have also suggested inadvertently that these traditional practices are all wrong and inappropriate and have to be replaced by one set of practices that schools practice and promote.

Survey (Sripathy and Saravanan, 1998)
The survey set out to find answers from 200 parents who send their children to a kindergarten (where the language of teaching is both English and Tamil), to the following questions:

(i) To what extent do parents display an understanding, a knowledge of literacy and cultural practices?
(ii) To what extent do parents both classroom and their indigenous cultural practices?
(iii) What are some of the literacy and cultural practices, handed down by the grandparent generation - that are either followed or abandoned by parents?

The short survey on home practices showed the following practices. On the question 'do you read to your child and why do you read to your child', parents recorded the following responses. All parents recorded that they read to their child ranging from either half an hour everyday and one hour weekly. Parents gave the following reasons for reading to their children.

i) Only two parents said that their child enjoys reading.
ii) Only one parent said that it was to develop bonding between parent and child.

The more frequent responses were:

iii) to improve speaking skills and communication
iv) to help him read and express himself
v) to learn to concentrate better
vi) 'that their child must be clever in his work'
vii) to cultivate reading habits
viii) to improve their knowledge, and broaden their horizon
ix) to get the child interested in reading

Comments:
Generally parents want to do the right thing which is to follow classroom, school based practices. Kindergartens play their role in organising workshops to help parents prepare their children for their children's attachment to kindergartens. The following comments from parents show how they prepare their children for school:

1. Parent 1
'My son has speech problems. I buy assessment books for him to colour, write the alphabet and numbers and also flash cards.'

2. Parent 2
'Make her practice writing, alphabet and numbers at home. buy workbooks and colour books to prepare her for school. Have taught her basic mathematical concepts, identify numbers and alphabets.'

3. Parent 3
I have gone through some textbooks to determine what is expected of him. I am focusing on his reading skill as this is very important when he goes to primary 1.
4. Parent 4
'Yes, besides preparing her in her studies by giving her additional materials to practice (reading, writing, arithmetic, I have also described many times about school.'

5. Parent 5
'Yes, I’ll prepare her in advance by giving her assessment books and go through with her'.

6. Parent 6
'I enrolled him in some educational programmes and have also bought a lot of educational materials, including computer software so that I could coach him at home too'.

7. Parent 7
'Make sure he does daily quota of homework. Enrol him in extra classes like phonics for him to read'.

While all these parents do their best to prepare their children, what they do shows a familiar pattern, which is to repeat what is done at kindergarten. While practice does help in some areas of literacy and numeracy development it does not mean that that is all there is to a child’s development and growth.

Sripathy (1998) in a study on oracy practices noted that there is a tendency for some Chinese and Indian families to engage in ‘limited talk’ with their children. The talk in the families appeared to be restricted to giving instructions, asking questions pertaining to school work and telling children to get on with their homework. Most parents also suffer from an anxiety syndrome of wanting to do the right thing, and this leads them to follow, repeat some of the practices the kindergartens carry out in preparation for school based needs. The mother of a four year old from a kindergarten was told that her child suffers from ‘attention deficiency syndrome’. She was told that her child is not willing to complete worksheets given out in class. The mother states that her child is able to read on her own. But the child, the mother reports insists that she continues to read to her. The child has no problems completing the assessment books the mother buys for her. The mother’s query to me was whether she ought to take her child to a psychiatrist.

This episode shows the parent’s frustrations in trying to understand her role in helping the development of the child. The expected role of parents from the point of view of educational institutions, for example, kindergartens and schools is to get parents to practice some of the skills taught in kindergartens.

There seems to be little reference in the school curriculum to the emotional development, or social development which is tied to the child’s development of language acquisition, and to language skills, as many teachers rush to complete the syllabi. Little reference is made to the creative development of the child, the use of imagination, fantasy to create, recreate the child’s own world of experiences, the use of the child’s own language to describe his experiences. Both home and school play a crucial role in developing these aspects of development and growth in a child.
Types of book materials read at home

Q3: What kind of books do you read to your child?
A sample of the parents gave the following answers:
- story books (35)
- textbooks (12)
- information books (13)
- assessment books (13)
- newspapers (13)
- magazines (7)

Apart from story books, a larger number of parents chose textbooks, information and assessment books.

What activities do you organise for your children?
The most frequently listed by parents were:
- i games such as swimming and cycling
- ii word games, for example, scrabble
- iii board games: snake and ladders
- iv computer games

Only two parents chose 'imaginative story telling' while others chose physical and board games.

Suggestions for literacy practices at kindergartens and home
It is time for educators to reconsider the value of children's talk, rather than the practice of asking children to 'shut up and stop talking' or 'shut up and put a finger on your lips'. Dyson (1994) quotes Vygotsky (1978) 'when children go beyond themselves to express themselves to share experiences, ideas and opinions, they engage in their most intellectually demanding work. Dyson’s study was to consider children’s talk and children’s right to talk' and the social interactions that went with it. The study sought to find out (i) what purposes did children’s talk serve and (ii) what intellectual tasks did they accomplish.

Dyson’s study showed how children constructed imaginary worlds, and the ways in which children used language to represent real and imaginary situations or worlds to monitor and direct the behaviour of themselves and others, to seek information, to express their feelings and attitudes, and to manage social relationships. Story ideas were developed by kindergarten children and the teacher helped being scribe to the child by copying down dictated stories. Similar approaches need to considered in home literacy practices.

Conclusion and Discussion
Sripathy (1998:280) observes that learning in the three cultures, in the Chinese, Indian, and Malay communities is considered a serious pursuit and not one of enjoyment, or discovery learning. School based observations showed that the perception of teaching was seen as transmission, which emphasised careful listening on the part of the child and reading and writing were seen as learning activities and not personal meaning making. The study shows that literacy practices need to include activities that include exploring language, taking risks with the
language the child is encouraged to develop, building confidence in using language to express oneself, to use language to express feelings, opinions, and to describe experiences.

The kindergarten survey (Sripathy & Saravanan, 1998) shows parents repeatedly following practices that they think will help their children become successful with school work. Parents are made to accept the belief that 'practice makes perfect', that 'learning involves repetition'. Parents feel secure following school based practices of 'repeated learning'.

Nigel Hall in 'The emergence of literacy' quoting Snow states that Snow identified three characteristics of parent child behaviour which occurred during literacy events and terms them 'semantic contingency', 'scaffolding', and 'accountability' procedures.

When using semantic contingency, adults continue topics previously introduced by children. Snow uses examples of semantic contingency which include 'answering questions, about letters and number names, answering questions about words, reading out loud on request, answering questions about pictures in books, carrying on coherent conversations with children about the pictures and text in books.

The mother in Snow's study did extensive scaffolding, by allowing the child to explore language and in this way child was allowed greater success. In 'accountability' procedures, the mother makes demands that the task be completed so that the child displays his knowledge.

Similarly Singaporean parents can be encouraged to do activities that develop and extend the language the child is attempting to use. Parents can explore the language the child uses by using common family based activities, such as, when watching television, video or movie programmes, when listening to radio programmes or music tapes, etc. As been observed by other researchers young children do not imitate adults. Parents need to be encouraged to use different approaches, and a different set of materials to develop the creativity of the child.

What are some of the literacy practices that our own teachers need to made aware of in a multilingual setting? Teachers need to be made aware that there is no single, homogeneous approach to literacy practices. In using a single approach as educators we have tended to marginalise the varied literary and cultural practices that multilingual communities practice. Each cultural group has its distinctive set of practices, for example, the Muslims send their children to acquire Islamic cultural and religious knowledge, the Hindus send their children to 'dewaram' classes so that they can acquire religious knowledge and religious and cultural practices. Each distinctive cultural, religious community whether Buddhist, Confucianist, or Christian send their children to acquire their distinctive set of literary, cultural and religious practices.

Unfortunately many communities may have already lost the tradition of oracy literacy practices. One example is the various activities related to the story telling tradition, ranging from the Chinese tradition of street wayang to the classical forms of Chinese opera, the Indian tradition of folk talk, of kaata kaalachebem to villupattu. Many inter-generational activities are
handed down to the next generation, for example, the Indian grandmother telling folk stories or stories from Indian literature while she coaxes the child to eat is contributing in her own way to maintaining an age old literacy tradition.

The home, family and community domains allow for a varied set of literacy and cultural practices and these need to be recognised, acknowledged, revived and promoted. Both dominant majority and minority groups and their languages need support for activities that help in maintaining their languages and cultures, access to mother tongue languages and cultures, access to linguistic and cultural revitalisation programmes. Community organisations amongst both the majority Mandarin and dialect communities as well the minority communities of Malay, and Indian communities with Tamil, Malayalam, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali speakers have begun to organise a range of linguistic and cultural activities. They range from pop, folk, to classical dance, drama, musical activities, religious and cultural festivals which carry a rich tapestry of values and cultural artifacts, social and cultural identities. There is some awareness that the loss of these identities and practices loss of these multi-varied literacy practices will be catastrophic.

Educational institutions need to recognise these efforts and develop integrated approaches rather than develop fragmented approaches that separate, or worse still ignore and reject the literacy and cultural practices and functions of home, family and community. This will help make parents and teachers partners in the literacy development of the child.

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