

Language and literacy

Overview

In this chapter we shall:

- ▶ briefly discuss theories about literacy, dating from the latter years of the 20th century;
- ▶ review debates over autonomous and ideological models of literacy, the former seeing literacy learning as a matter of learning basic technical skills, the latter as a matter of handling values and beliefs;
- ▶ argue that neither autonomous nor ideological models are adequate and that a functional model of language provides a better model, seeing language as a semiotic system, whose study considers both its meanings and values and the language structures in which these are expressed;
- ▶ outline some key concepts found in the functional account of language and literacy, including:
 - text and context (referring to the relation of a text or passage of language to its setting);
 - register and context of situation (referring to three elements of any situation that shape the context or setting in which language is used – field, tenor and mode);
 - three sets of meanings or metafunctions expressed in language – experiential (relating to field), interpersonal (relating to tenor) and textual (relating to mode);
 - text type or genre and context of culture (referring to the particular type of text or genre, and its status as part of the culture in which it is found);
 - the notion of language as offering options or choices for meaning-making, where these are often represented as system networks.

Introduction

So pervasive is language in our lives that it is easy to take it for granted, dismissing it as commonplace or even unremarkable. Language surrounds us, both in aural and visual modes, and while we all needed to learn a mother tongue, most of us have long since forgotten the effort that went into that, while we tend not to reflect on its significance in daily living. Yet it is because language is so pervasive that it is so important. It is a basic resource with which we negotiate relationship with others, construct our sense of our world, shape meanings, values and understandings. Above all, language is a basic resource with which we learn. Language is the fundamental resource or tool with which teachers and children work together in schools. This book is about language education in the primary years – those critical first years of a formal education in which children are initiated into many areas of learning that are relevant and significant in an English-speaking culture.

An important function of schooling is that it teach literacy, and in the minds of many in the community, the teaching of literacy is often held to be the most important thing that schooling provides. While literacy is indeed a very important matter to be learned in schools, the patterns of oral language are in fact just as important. It is in oral language that many of the basic understandings of schooling are established, whether these are understandings to do with appropriate patterns of interaction in the classroom, or to do with the knowledge, information and ideas that schooling seeks to impart. Teachers and children constantly move between spoken and written language, often mediated by visual images of various kinds. It is a wise teacher who recognises that oral language is as important as written language in the processes of school learning, and who actively promotes learning in talk as well as in reading and writing.

Having acknowledged this, it also needs to be recognised that the teaching and learning of literacy is a major responsibility of the primary school. While some children have some knowledge of literacy acquired before formal schooling starts, all will need the opportunities for learning to read and write that school provides. At the commencement of a primary education children know much more about oral language than about written language, and one would expect this, for a major developmental task of the years before school is that children learn a mother tongue. Possessed of that mother tongue, children can commence the formal tasks of learning to read and write. Without considerable proficiency in speech, children would not be able to take the necessary steps to learn literacy.

In contemporary Australia there are many children for whom English is not the mother tongue, and the language program of the primary school needs to acknowledge this, providing assistance for children of non-English-speaking background (NESB). Such assistance may take one of several forms: withdrawal of the children for intensive tuition by trained teachers; provision of English as a second language (ESL) teachers working along with regular teachers in mainstream classrooms; arranging of regular sessions with the ESL students by mainstream teachers while native speakers are provided with other tasks. The contemporary Australian classroom will have a mix of native speakers and NESB children, where some of the latter have considerable proficiency, while others are still mastering a great deal of English. This book addresses the language program of the contemporary mainstream classroom, and it makes no claims to address the needs of those beginners who may need some intensive assistance in withdrawal situations. Throughout the book, reference will be made from time to time to the needs of ESL students, indicating areas in which mainstream teachers should be aware of potential sources of difficulty for second language learners of English.

In this chapter we aim to establish some background theoretical assumptions about language and literacy, building a framework with which to proceed in greater detail in later chapters. We first examine recent interest in the concept of literacy, since it has gained considerable attention among researchers and teachers. We shall discuss debates over what are called ‘autonomous’ and ‘ideological’ models of literacy. We shall then argue the values of a social theory of oral language and literacy, of a kind that can provide a theoretical framework for development of a language program for the primary school.

Models of literacy

Teaching reading and writing have been themes in educational theory and practice for some time and we shall discuss something of the history of both in chapter 6 (devoted to reading) and chapter 9 (devoted to writing). But the word ‘literacy’, now so widely used in educational discussions, has had a relatively short history. The word comes from ‘literate’, and originally a literate person was a ‘person of letters’, though it sometimes also referred to a person who could read literature. This word ‘literate’ goes back several centuries in the history of English, but the noun, ‘literacy’, according to the *Oxford Dictionary*, dates only from the 19th century. What is more interesting and surprising, perhaps, is that the word ‘literacy’ has been extensively

used in educational theory and research only in about the last 20 years or so. Thus, for much of the 20th century, educational policy guidelines and research spoke of the teaching of reading, or of the teaching of writing, where these seemed to be independent entities. But the word 'literacy' began to achieve widespread use in educational discussions towards the end of the century. The year 1990 was the International Literacy Year, and this did much to bring the term to the forefront of people's thinking. But the holding of such a year does not in itself explain the new interest in literacy of the last few years, leading to large numbers of books and research papers on literacy and its teaching. Why has literacy achieved the significance it has, and is it in fact a good term for teachers to use?

It will be argued here that the term 'literacy' is a useful one, serving to emphasise as it does, the very close relationship of reading and writing. To learn to read or to write is to engage with using and interpreting the written code, and the best educational programs will stress the relationship of the two. Older educational practices, associated with the predisposition to see reading and writing as separate activities, tended to differentiate the two, so that the potential advantages of making connections between them were simply lost. It will be a good educational program that stresses the relationship of reading and writing, encouraging children to move between the two, using the experiences gained in one activity to inform and enrich the other.

Scholarly opinion began to turn away from seeing reading and writing as separable activities when it was realised that the two could more productively be viewed together, as two aspects of the same phenomenon: using written language. This development was a consequence of new research by linguists and others interested in language and its role in learning, dating from the late 1960s and 1970s. The new concerns led to a considerable body of research into literacy and oral language, much of it still ongoing, and some of it reviewed in this book. Such research examines, for example, the nature of written language and its relationship to oral language, the processes of learning language, oral and written, and the grammatical differences between speech and writing. The research has also addressed the nature of texts, where this term refers to any passage of coherent language, spoken or written (Halliday & Hasan 1985); the research seeks to characterise the types of texts that people learn to speak and to read and write. More recent research, stimulated by developments in computer technologies and the Internet in particular, has looked at **multiliteracies**, a term intended to refer to the range of forms of literacy often found in the one text, bringing together a variety of **semiotic** or meaning-making resources, visual, verbal and even auditory. Finally, and in this quick review of matters to do with literacy in the last few years, we should mention the emergence of an interest in

critical literacy – a term intended to capture a pedagogical concern to develop users of literacy who are critical and questioning about what they read, as well as discriminating about how they use writing themselves.

The new research and scholarly interests in oral language and literacy necessarily involve a profound interest in the nature of language as a social phenomenon. It is impossible in fact, to consider uses of language of any kind without addressing the social purposes for which language is used, as well as the social processes that control of language facilitates. Hence it is that this book will use a social theory of language that seeks to explain the nature of language and its role in human behaviour, as well as its significance in the shaping of social processes, including processes in school learning. Before outlining aspects of the social theory, it will be necessary to say rather more of debates about literacy in contemporary discussions.

Debates over ‘autonomous’ and ‘ideological’ models of literacy

In recent years a debate has developed (for example, Street 1993) over whether literacy is to be understood as what is termed **autonomous** or as **ideological**. An autonomous model of literacy, it is suggested, is one that sees literacy teaching and learning as a matter of mastering certain important but essentially basic technical skills in control of such things as the spelling and writing systems, and perhaps how to shape simple written sentences. In this model, it is suggested, literacy is a relatively simple and unproblematic matter, learned in the early years and then used and reused in whatever ways appear appropriate. A priority attaches to accuracy in control of the basic resources of literacy, and beyond that persons are assumed to be free to use literacy in ways that fit their purposes. Literacy in this model, it is implied, is a rather neutral thing, used to serve whatever purposes people may have, while the nature of the social contexts and meanings associated with literacy are not considered.

Writers such as Street (1984, 1993, 1997, 2001) have challenged what they hold to be such autonomous models, arguing that, far from literacy being a neutral thing, it is profoundly implicated in social experience and behaviour. In fact, argues Street, we can only understand the true nature of literacy if we accept that literacy is used in a range of different ‘literacy events’, and there are many ‘literacy practices’ involved. The term ‘literacy events’ is taken from Heath (1983), and it refers to occasions on which literacy is used in social contexts. The term ‘literacy practices’ refers to those practices that surround any event in which literacy is used: literacy events, it is said, will involve concepts and ‘social models regarding what the nature of the event is that make it work and give it meaning’ (Street 2001: 11). It is the values, beliefs and