Models of Literacy Learning: purposes, functions and communicative practices

A seminar organised by the British Association for Literacy in Development (BALID) and hosted by SOAS University of London

17th May 2018

This half-day seminar provided a forum for exploring models of multi-lingual literacy-learning, their purpose, function, and impact on communities. In the post-colonial era of the 20th century, educationalists emphasised the value of establishing standard systems for writing local languages. The pressure for centralisation to some extent mirrored the desire for political, religious, and cultural cohesion. Political elites, commercial publishers and entrepreneurs all benefited from the drive to foster such standardisation, which is often at odds with the linguistic reality on the ground.

The seminar sought to address some of the issues that arise from attempts to marry cultural and linguistic landscapes with models of literacy learning. Our two panellists shared visions that challenge the tendency to standardisation

- Professor Friederike Lüpke, of SOAS University of London, heads the Crossroads project in Senegal, which develops language-independent literacies for inclusive education in multilingual areas (LILIEMA). She presents research on language as an abstract system with the social reality of creative and versatile language use.
- Professor Leketi Makalela, Head of the Division of Languages, Literacies and Literatures, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa, presents a constant disruption of language and literacy boundaries, and the simultaneous recreation of new discursive ones. Professor Makalela is Founder and Chairman of Balang Foundation, and Founding Director of HUMEL (Hub for Multilingual Education and Literacies).
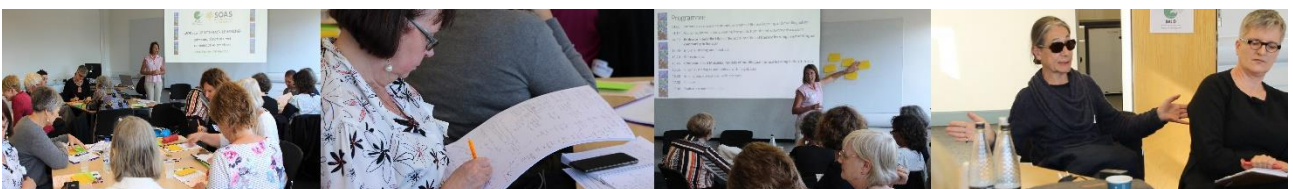
This report outlines the presentations by Professors Lüpke and Makalela; practical and academic queries and critiques of the studies put forward by experienced practitioners in the field; and a brief discussion of the themes which emerged. Participants' expectations and feedback are integrated. Video clips of each presentation and of the overall discussion are signposted in the relevant sections

below. A video of short highlights from the seminar as part of a playlist of the event is available on YouTube here goo.gl/9D4Rgt

What participants were looking for
The seminar was chaired and facilitated by Dr Katy Newell–Jones, chair of British Association for Literacy in Development (BALID). It was aimed at practitioners, researchers, students, policy makers and NGO staff in the fields of literacy and education. There were round–table discussions, Q&A and other forms of interactive participation and networking. Initially, participants emphasised several themes of interest, such as the challenge of working with 'motivation' defined by learners as literacy for money, power and status; and how literacy is made meaningful, e.g. through social practice approaches, addressing agency and equity, as well as integration, human fulfilment and multicultural empowerment.

As part of this, celebrating and incorporating multilingualism into literacy learning was mentioned, and the need for adult literacies learning, which is often short of wider study skills, to appropriate learning resources and wider participatory approaches. Lower 'academic–type' skills and knowledge contexts are inclusive of teachers (as well as learners), particularly in areas of high mobility. Facilitation utilising technology was of interest.

Professor Friederike Lüpke, SOAS University of London
'The social realities of literacy learning in Senegal' presented the Crossroads project and LILIEMA approach. Professor Lüpke introduced the project arguing that distinct, standard forms of African languages are European constructs and therefore inherently colonial, in effect conceptualise by 'Western' linguists for linguists. The roman orthographies developed are formally used by few. Regardless, grassroots literacies which do exist tend to follow an imported 'lead language model' and therefore the orthographies and grapheme–sound correspondence are not endemic to the language being served. Examples of translation, use of the roman and Arabic (ajami) alphabets, and social media translanguaging were shared. These question comprehension and usage inside and outside of speech groups.

In the Casamance area of Senegal, near the Guinea–Bissau border, many languages are spoken extensively, and many others to a lesser extent. These belong to different African language families. French is also used. Individuals select which language they may use in interaction with different groups and for different purposes.

In such cases, how can literacies, which are traditionally dependent on the sounds and morphemes of the language spoken, be developed? Professor Lüpke argues that appropriate literacy development incorporates existing grassroots practices, including acknowledgement of heterogeneity and translanguaging. The LILIEMA project uses the official alphabet of Senegal, based on Wolof, for mono- or multilingual teaching and learning. This, it is argued, overcomes the need to choose one language. Any of the local languages can be written using the standard alphabet, developing their own orthographies. Standardised spelling systems are therefore not strictly required, and writers may adapt their repertoire across their life course. Educational provision is split into two levels, firstly embedding sound-grapheme correspondence at word level; secondly, utilising simple written texts for practical local purposes.

In terms of wider socio-political context, this approach is argued to support not only the multilingualism that is prevalent across people and contexts, but is responsive to the high numbers of children who are fostered out across language groups, the tradition of women marrying into communities they do not share a language with, and the high level of post-conflict mobility. It recognises the prevalence of patrimonial territorial identity based on founding clans, and the potential for ideological erasure of inhabitants, in a cultural system which works on the understanding that 'strangers' may become 'landlords' in their own right. As it is argued that the formal curriculum has 'no connection to local culture and everyday life, LILIEMA valorises local and regional knowledge', and the integration of strangers. LILIEMA provides an alternative to the deficit model of teaching children the language of instruction, empowers mother tongue learning, and provides a space for all languages to co-exist. This particularly enables recognition of locally confined and minority languages. The presentation culminates questioning categorical versus relational indexicality.

In critiquing this study, participants acknowledged the extraordinary context of southern Senegal and the ambition of supporting incipient literacy practices and orthographies. It is a different approach to historical Francophone attempts to translate and create dictionary aides in their endeavours. How well simplified Wolof orthography matches to sounds across language groups, and how distinct these languages are, is queried. Beyond providing an initial platform which aims to serve immediate personal and local community needs, participants questioned the extent to which the model serves non-homogenous audiences across space and time should local participants require this service. Will there be a call on notices, publishing services, or legal agreements, for example? These

facilities may exist (or develop) in an alternative form in the local community. What appears to be prioritised is local meaning-making and supporting local uses and practices, which avoids the criticisms of phonics' disconnect with comprehension.

A video of clips from Professor Lüpke's talk is available on YouTube here https://youtu.be/ggWteYgV33o

Professor Leketi Makalela, University of Witwatersrand
'Models of multilingual literacy learning in South Africa' presents the impact of mono-lingual literacy epistemologies and traditional instruction on richly multilingual learners, focussing in this instance on children. This perspective induces a multiple monolingualisms theoretical framework, contrary to more fluid concepts such as translanguaging, and considers the impact on literacy education.

Professor Makalela argues that multilingual children are inherently and disproportionately disadvantaged, rather than finding their rich cultural identities a valued resource bank. Traditional literacy instruction forces 'barking at text', with less focus on comprehension let alone expression. This pedagogy is demonstrated to appalling effect in quoted studies of educational results, for example in the Mathew effect, where children are often not in a position to build upon abstract work at secondary level. A focus limited to sound-grapheme correspondence does not develop morphological awareness, i.e. blocks of meaning rather than approximate instances of sound. This has implications where language and literacy are used to access knowledge about the world and the self. Schooled 'individualism' may impoverish and cause inauthenticity, perhaps more so where 'failure' is perceived; in contrast, the Ubuntu approach presented would emphasise 'I am because you are' and wider self-affirmation.

In arguing for integrated multilingual literacy models, Professor Makalela outlined cultural differences between language and literacies practices. For example, in some African contexts, circumlocution is valued over getting straight to the point; the hearer deriving meaning may be emphasised over speaker responsibility for making meaning; or the use of tone to communicate meaning. These factors may emphasise relationships over 'meaning-making', which Western formal written traditions may find themselves in conflict with given their succinct, direct, explicit style. Inherent conflicts may lead to deficiency models, whereas the proposed Ubuntu approach emphasises inter-dependency, disruption and confluence. An Ubuntu multi-languaging approach, such as that of the Balang Foundation, supports multiple languages in learning, as does HUMEL (Hub for Multilingual Education and Literacies). The pedagogy supports languages and texts 'leaking into each other' and being transformed. It is argued this unleashes learner creativity, and by association, motivation. Home school partnerships are a key feature; as is the 'teacher as learner'. The presentation concludes on ways of

'knowing' and 'being' moving from fixity to fluidity.

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In critiquing this study, participants questioned the matching of formal language and literacy models to current or creative uses. A few of the issues raised, such as a preoccupation with sound–grapheme correspondence, are a feature of a range of early literacy initiatives which subsequently move on to, for example, morphology. Automation in these early 'decontextualised skills' areas is used as a basis for 'cognitive efficiency' releasing the capacity for higher order cognitive engagement in subsequent educational stages. Multisyllabic words, for example, may convey more information per sentence than monosyllabic words, which has implications for notional 'reading speeds'. Comprehension studies are often expected to run in parallel. 'Success' in these areas are pedagogical as much as curriculum resourcing matters, where comparative perceptions of 'failure' may trigger deficit model analysis. It may be asked, beyond providing an extremely valuable and clearly motivational initial platform which aims to serve immediate personal and local community needs, to what extent the educational model is complete in serving to underpin consequent higher order work and study. Does the study serve as an effective bridge or are changes required to secondary schooling? How do learner identities continue to interplay and develop with their learning experiences in later educational stages?

A video of clips from Professor Makalela's talk is available on YouTube here
https://youtu.be/TY8NFVH04KE

Language versus literacy
One of the themes which surfaced in discussions was the distinct nature of languages versus literacy practices as much as the relationships between them. There may be a difference between languages which are used to facilitate literacies learning, and the language(s) utilised in the literacies practices. Equally, infinitely flexible translanguaging and –literacy usage may not carry the oral or literate 'canon' of knowledge which is the objective of many 'Western' educational systems, or may not transfer the same types of knowledge in the same way. The round table on materials put considerable emphasis on the availability of appropriate images to support pedagogy, i.e. to stimulate language and literacy practices, reflection and discussion. Appropriate images were argued to be images that learners would instantaneously recognise as people in environments engaging in activities, with markers of meaning which were culturally relevant. Where artists had been commissioned to create these materials, they were argued to be more successful in stimulating language and

literacy responses than generic published materials.

There was further debate regarding the extent of multi-lingualism found in all contexts, the comparative familiarity of participants with the other languages in a classroom, or interest in learning (or funding) other languages, for example in an ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) context. Beyond multi-lingualism, the contribution of learners' prior knowledge, experiences and social relationships, and their role in meaning-making, was emphasised.

Fixity versus fluidity
Languages standardise to enable communication across peoples, space and time with shared, often abstract, frames of reference which may be described as cultural, governance or academic. This may be distinct from and serve different purposes to day-to-day personal, social and business activity, which is likely to be closely related to diverse immediate personal and community identities. Potential differences between these language and literacy characteristics and purposes in different spheres with different audiences were not discussed; nor were the political implications of centralised 'standardisation' versus diverse expression. However, it was suggested that linear, sequential and prescriptive models might encourage people to make only linear connections and is perhaps to stifle reflective thought processes. The arguments may therefore have as much applicability to traditional monolingual Western learning as to international multilingual contexts.

In a separate stream of enquiry, the fixedness or grounding of language in territory or geography as much as in peoples and histories was put forward. This extended to the differences between dominant and minor languages, for example, in writing as an expression of identity rather than as an instrument for communication. From a pedagogical perspective, the role of stretching flexibility and adaptability within a secure structure of sounds, sentences and possible contexts may be overlooked in critiquing 'pure phonics' approaches, perhaps because the links back to reality are not subsequently made; or the flexibility and adaptability are not emphasised. The role of 'imagination' in reaching outside of immediate environment and experience was highlighted. Discussion extended to how orthographies are adapted to different dialects, for example in marking tone; and how language and literacy are used to translate between, for example, different schema.

In looking at barriers to learning, it was suggested that the forms of fluidity discussed in the seminar allowed there to be 'no right answers' in a non-hierarchical structure. This approach encourages participation and collaborative learning environments which serve individual purposes. Creative approaches allow one to make one's own sense of the world and of the self, may emphasise encoding rather than decoding, but may at some point seek common frames of reference with other parties which is a different form of barrier. However, in this

seminar, the importance of seeking local reading and writing practices was emphasised over global models.

Teachers and Training

A third theme which emerged was the level of demand on teachers' connections to their learners, political environments, and their own professional formation. Professional formation was considered to span language, literacy and pedagogical specialisms for cultures, age groups and purposes. There was the inherent requirement to also be able to generate adaptive spoken, written and pictorial learning resources, and to support their learners to create the same.

What participants found

Twenty-eight people participated in the seminar. In response to the presentations and activities, attendees highlighted their raised awareness of challenges to (indigenous) languages, consequent inaccessibility of literacy, and models of language learning which avoid single language boundaries. Concepts of multilingualism versus multiple monolingualism were generated which implicated heightened awareness of learner generated materials and learner uses of literacy, as well as the role of culturally relevant images in stimulating language and literacies in learning contexts. Ubuntu was compared to Freirian empowerment approaches. The importance of 'letting go' was reiterated, perhaps as part of the 'transformational' process. Finally, who is the expert?

A video of clips from the discussions is available on YouTube here
https://youtu.be/L_uySJqr9n8

BALID would like to thank Professor Lüpke and SOAS for kindly hosting *Models of Literacy Learning*, Professor Makalela for travelling from South Africa to enrich the epistemological offering and, of course, the attendees without whom we would not have had an event or such stimulating dialogue and reflections.

"Thank you. Really thought provoking and well run."