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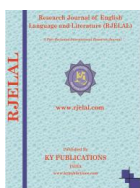
Theories of the New Literacy Studies (NLS)

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Abstract

There has been different kinds of literacy studies. This article strives to give a detailed understanding of "The New Literacy Studies" and different terms and concepts relating to literacy as a social practice and event across changing time and place. Discussions have been made on the relation between language and literacy, home literacy vs school literacy, globalization of literacy, transnational literacy and the need of literacy in public sphere. It is difficult to study literacy within strict borders and contexts. Literacy is just not based on reading and writing but is beyond it. Communication, collaboration and interaction between people through social practices is essential in understanding the way into literacy. This is where the literacy gets divided into Primary and Secondary Discourse. The New Literacy Studies or NLS have formed the ideological model of literacy which removes the great divide between literacy and orality and conceptualizes literacy as a significant social practice that makes definite principal hypotheses and power relations integral in concepts of literacy as social procedure. New Literacy Studies (NLS) brings in both the discourses together to completely define literacy. In keeping up with the contemporary times, it has become important to consider multimodality in literacy as well as the relationship between literacy and digitalization. This article also explores how the New Literacy Studies (NLS) examine far more pragmatic investigation of the diverse ways of implanting global literacies in the local.

Keywords: literacy, new literacy studies, global, technology, language, public.

INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW LITERACY STUDIES

The transition from literacy studies to "New Literacy Studies" shows a shifting of focus from just skills acquisition to consider literacy as a social practice across context. The New Literacy Studies involves the identification of multiple, multimodal, multilingual literacies changeable according to the varying space and time and challenged when relating to power. Nothing is taken for granted by New Literacy Studies while associating itself with social practices and literacy. It then becomes challenging and problematic as what should be considered as literacy at any context/time/space and which literacies is seen as dominating and overshadowing the other marginalized and resistant literacies. Keeping in mind the contemporary times, Literacy researchers have, thus, reformed the old literacy studies, providing new denotations and coining new terms.

Literacy is an act of obtaining knowledge through different sources, contexts, practices and experiences, and applying them in a day to day life to accomplish tasks.

Verbal communications, reading and writing are considered to be the basic approaches of

acquiring literacy, although more emphasis has been given on writing due to the fact that it helps to trace it back to the origins and histories of literacy- "one distinction between linguistics of writing and linguistics of speech is that in the case of the former we can delve far enough back in to the past to come close to the beginnings of the phenomenon" (Sampson 46). Besides being a systematization of speech, writing is also based on the development of sign and symbols. From the very beginning humans have communicated by signs which are subcategories of symbols. Symbols have special meanings which help in expressing and communicating ideas. Various information has been acquired of symbols used in Middle Paleolithic Period, Upper Paleolithic Period, Mesolithic and Neolithic period. The use of symbols, the development in their meanings, the social and cultural contexts which aid in evolving new processes of symbolization expose characteristics congruent with the present developments of written communication. The earliest Sumerian inscriptions and clay tokens are often considered to be the first examples of writing which has later developed in pencils, pens, and today computers.

Unlike earlier theorists, present day theorists and their papers "represent the relationship between literacy and orality as a "continuum rather than…as a "divide"" (Street, The New Literacy Studies 431). The earlier "Autonomous" Model of Literacy considered writing to be an autonomous mode of communication. The model depends on Western practices of literacy rooted in and represents a culturally specific model. School-based concepts of literacy are held as a benchmark definition of literate proficiency across backgrounds by this model. Street argues in *The New Literacy Studies* that the ideology and social control of the teacher's class suppresses the students in this model. Positioning students as subjugated learners prevents the critical analysis of their social and political context. The Ideological Model of Literacy conceptualizes literacy as a crucial social practice that makes specific principal hypotheses and power relations integral in concepts of literacy as social procedure. Thus, literacy acquires substance as well as locates writing and reading in the linguistic and social practices that give them connotation. The ideological model of literacy accentuates the portrayal of people's lives grounded on ethnography and the methods in which macro political and social methods are represented in the daily lives of people. Street also claims that concepts of the "great divide" between orality and literacy triggers deflection in concentration from real intentions of literacy in the direct lives of local peoples.

The New Literacy Studies involves social literacies, referring to a "body of work that…has approached the study of literacy not as an issue of measurement or of skills but as social practices that vary from one context to another" (Street 21), academic Literacies referring to the "area of student writing and faculty feedback in the university…also to consider what this tells us more broadly about discourse, identity and power in academy" (Street 25). With the rapid development of technology, it has now become necessary to consider multimodality or new modes of communication like computers, mobile phones and so on into the definitions of literacy. Technology and digitalization as an important path towards literacy, a path to gaining knowledge- "Global developments in technology are actually having the effect of extending and diversifying…literacy and language practices." (Cruickshank 470).

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

While communicating and interacting with another person(s), one must go beyond just using language. When using language, in speech or in writing, it must be done in the right way and attitude according to the particular social and cultural context which is called Discourse. Early in life when one begins to interact with one's immediate family and near ones to socialize, it is Primary Discourse. Gradually one moves on to other social institutions like school, church, markets etc. which is the Secondary Discourse. The function of language in Discourse and literacy is transfer into and from different Discourses "and otherwise influence each other to form the linguistic texture of whole societies and to interrelate various groups in society" (Gee 533) . Another Discourse one gets is through "acquisition". This is the personal

communication with intimate family and groups in native language, which is determined socially and culturally, sometimes called the "oral mode".

Gee (Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics) defines "literacy as the mastery or fluent control over a secondary Discourse". He also explains that this literacy is powerful enough to be used as a "meta-language". This "meta-language" can be used to critique other literacies to establish us as people and as a part of the society. He explains his definition with two theorems. The first theorem establishes that a person who is differently or partially literate cannot be a part of the discourse if he is not fluent in it. According to Paul Gee (Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics), "You are either in it or you're not" gives the representation that one can only be an identity if one satisfies the description of the Discourse. A person who "fossilizes" the acquisition of Discourses without gaining fluency then he/she is said to be a "pretender to social role". The second theorem says that a primary discourse can never be powerful enough in liberating other literacies. It is because the literacy misses out on the part of secondary discourse i.e. meta-language which comprises of just not using language and words but also attitudes and values. Primary discourses cannot bring the use of meta-language and meta-thought without the secondary.

Initial Discourses are achieved through speech, acting etc. before anybody learns to read and write. Some discourses are acquired in educational institutions. But a foreign language cannot be taught in the classroom, one truly understands and picks up the discourse when one communicates with others in the language in a social context. When complete attainment of the discourse is not possible, it results in mushfake. "Mushfake" is a term from the prison culture which describes the failure of achieving something despite the lack of resources, essentially to make do with what you have. The example given by Gee is the prisoners wore their underwear as hats to prevent lice. Gee (Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics) explains that it is a situation in which someone can join a discourse without belonging to it by acquiring enough knowledge and skill to feign it.

Acquisition is the process of mastering through interacting subconsciously and experiencing secondary discourses in natural surroundings. A more structured approach in gaining a level of mastery in the secondary discourse is learning. It is often done under the guidance of a teacher or class. A level of control over a language can be described as literacy. While growing up with native language speakers one gains a level of control over one's vernacular language through acquisition. The most effective combination of acquisition and learning is visible when literacy is seen as an expertise over a language. This is especially important to a foreign language teacher as it is effective, when learning a second language, in expressing the significance of including cultural lessons with the more conventional, or organized lessons.

GLOBAL LITERACIES

In contemporary times, New Literacy Studies (NLS) have examined far more pragmatic investigation that explores the diverse ways of implanting global literacies in the local and how "dominant, universalizing literacies can be seen on closer inspection, as profoundly local" (Baynham 289). Transnationalism means "the condition of cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space" (Ong). Transnational literacies build up questions of transnationalism on one side and discussions of regional literacy practices on the other by combining the two areas, local cultural practices and globalization. Theorists investigate the different political, cultural, social, ideological, and material effects of literacy by laying focus on the practices, real experiences and cultural reasons of people whose daily lives are significantly molded by extensive transnational and global processes. Through this, exact explanations of the relationship between educational access, immigration, and globalization can be provided by them—specifically relating to "the vicissitudes of identity formation" witnessed by refugees and immigrants struggling to manage "the complexities of belonging both 'here' and 'there' simultaneously" (Suárez-Orozco).

Cruickshank, Bartlett have explored the effects of globalization with a particular attention on

the significance of multilingual language practices. They explore how some practices of literacy create or break down the restrictions (literally as well as figuratively) between moments in time and succession of communicative events; how the transnational movement (Sydney and Lebanon/ USA and Dominican Republic) provides specific cultural and linguistic means for the immigrant children, the inventive usage of multimodality in literacy practices (technology- computers, mobile phones etc.) by immigrant youth in creating and maintaining their identity in local contexts.

In *Bilingual literacies, social identification, and educational trajectories, Lesley* Bartlett (Bartlett) examines how social interactions across classroom contexts shaped Maria's, a Dominican immigrant student's, educational trajectory and bilingual literacies. She changed her identity from a failing student to a successful one, on which depended her chance of learning English language and literacy. Bartlett shows how she situated herself in ways that increased her opportunities and made her a "good student". Bartlett investigates the complex relationship between academic learning and social identity. According to Warriner (Warriner), Bartlett calls into attention the "relationship between bilingual literacies and bilingual identities for transnational youth as well as our representations of school-based notions of "success"".

In *Literacy in Multilingual Contexts: Change in Teenagers' Reading and Writing* (Cruickshank) Ken Cruickshank explores how, in multilingual contexts, family literacy practices are considered traditional and inferior to the school literacy practices. With the advent of technological improvements and cultural change literacy practices in multilingual contexts are experiencing rapid and dynamic developments. The research is based on four teenagers along with their Arabic speaking families who moved to Sydney from Lebanon in 1970s. While their teachers marked them as underachievers and stated the lack of literacy at homes based on the autonomous understandings of literacy, the investigation brought out contradictory results. The teenagers have used technology for very specific purposes in dealing with work in their daily lives. They use communication

technologies like chat rooms, emails which link them to people across space and time but immediately. Their houses could not meet the specific literacy expectations of the school but there was the habit of reading magazines, books outside school syllabus, reading and writing letters and helping their parents as mediators. One of the teenager's mother was taking English classes in a local college.

Warriner (Transnational Literacies: Examining Global Flows through the Lens of Social Practice) analyses the literacy practices prominent in an adult ESL program and provides implications to "re-conceptualize theories of language learning and language teaching in communities across the developed world, particularly when economic conditions are driven by rapid technological advancements, the continued movement of goods and people across borders, and growing distinctions between the rich and poor".

HOME LITERACY

Ken Cruickshank's article *Literacy in Multilingual Contexts: Change in Teenagers' Reading and Writing* (Cruickshank) explores and discusses the disparities between literacy in home and literacy in school in multilingual context. Ali Tannous, a student of Kotara High School, is one of the four children on whom the research has been conducted. Ali's family lives in the south-western suburbs of Sydney. His parents migrated from Lebanon after the 1970s civil war. The main focus was to "examine the community literacy practices in Arabic and English and to explore school literacy practices and teenagers, experiences of literacy in the local schools." (462).

He was marked as an under achiever by his teachers and a "non-reader". On the contrary, the research showed multiple literacy practices at home including reading. The reading that Ali did might not be according to school curriculum, but he was seen reading magazines and young adult fiction. Perhaps Ali liked reading those texts he took interest in or he could relate to. The texts taught in school were all pre-chosen by teachers to meet the school's strict codes of learning, which hints of autonomous model of literacy. Independent reading of self-chosen texts such as books by R. L. Stine and Virginia Andrews. In

1997 Ali had a computer which he utilized in working on his school projects and played video games and use chat rooms. With the writings in the chat room or reading game instructions, there was a development in the writing, reading and perceptual skills in Ali. The introduction of mobile phones, Arabic and English TV programs and FM radio helped Ali improve his formal Arabic and his vocabulary. This is, perhaps, what Street called "multimodality". With improved fluency in formal Arabic and also English vocabulary, Ali became the mediator for his parents, helping out in shopping or in writing letters.

Cruickshank observes that Ali's "pattern of literacy use was linked to their social practices in everyday life, to entertainment, communication, study and religious observance. The statement that the teenagers did not rely much on reading and writing was based on a judgement of school-based literacy which did not take into account the different structuring of activities in the home domain and the differences in what counted as reading and writing." (Cruickshank 465). It is quite clear that there exists a disparity between school literacy practices and home literacy practices. The methods used in home and school literacy practices are differently structured, understood and analyzed. Ali's teachers and educators were not aware of the kind of literacy he was getting in his home. His "sponsors" of literacy in school support and teach in autonomous model of literacy and they do not acknowledge the readings or writings Ali experiences at home.

A comparison can be drawn with a separate research on Maria by Lesley Bartlett in *Bilingual Literacies, Social Identification and Educational Trajectories*. Here Maria is seen marked as a SIFE student, a student with interrupted formal education. All her teachers were of the opinion that she would not be able to graduate. Maria worked hard in her weak subjects like English and Maths, switched classes to teachers who encouraged her from teachers who criticized her. She diligently completed all her class assignments and homeworks, sometimes without even understanding. Some schoolworks needed a student to be diligent rather than comprehensive. In this kind of setting Maria successfully took on the image of a "good student" and passed. The way Ali was

acquiring literacy, through daily communication, interaction, real tasks, using technology along with reading and writing outside school might be more productive and fruitful than Maria being a good student in school. Her effort to identify herself as a good student might hinder her actual learning of new materials. Rymes and Pash (2001) found that "academic achievement can actually be compromised by social competence." (Pash). It is believed that there is a difference between education and literacy. It is undeniable that school-based education is important in moving forward and build one's career, but it is equally important to pay as much attention to home-based literacy.

Lam's paper, *Literacy and capital in immigrant youths' online networks across countries,* talks of how the usage of technology and digitalization can help in gaining cultural and social capital (Lam). Lam provides studies based on two adolescent Chinese immigrants who moved to America. Suying, Lam's first studies adolescent, used technology to renew her "cultural connections" (Lam 16) with country. She started learning more about formal use of language, Shanghainese, understanding the change in the economy and making a connection with her origin. Later when interviewed while studying in college, Suying is seen promoting university exchange student programmes to tighten bridging social capital. Lam also reflects on the study on Kayiee and her use of computer, internet and networking to learn and gain knowledge in digital art, to "enhance learning in a specialized knowledge domain." (Lam 16). Lam also talks extensively on the advantages of video-gaming, giving access to the people across space and time and communicating with them to gain economic, cultural and social capital. Warschauer in, *Digital literacy studies: progress and prospects,* upholds his study on two groups of teenagers, poor, middles-class African- American and Latino teenagers and wealthy white American teenagers (Warschauer). The study shows, the white American from wealthy and more advantageous educational background could exploit the computer and network technology to its fullest. He could culture on his high interest in politics by studying and listening to presidential speeches and sharing it among his peers via internet.

The study on an underprivileged African American teenager shows her inability to use technology, though available to her, as she is not conversant with computers or even spellings of the words she wishes to search in internet. Warschauer advocates for a new ideological digital literacy and "the confluence of economic, social, and technological changes means that educational systems in the United States and many other countries are ripe for reform, and a key element of that reform is figuring out how to better evaluate literacy practices and outcomes in technology-rich classrooms. Literacy Studies scholars have a valuable role to play here too, first by situating more of their digital literacies research inside of schools, and second by contributing their expertise to developing more authentic forms of assessment." (Warschauer 137). In educational contexts, schools and educational institutions should understand the importance and need of technology and digitalization in learning literacy. Instead of restricting it, institutions should incorporate more technology, like laptops and computers, in classrooms. And, not only incorporations, but also teaching students to use the technology is also important. Not all students have strong educational backgrounds or affluent family. Many students require the knowledge to understand and make proper use of the technology provided to them. Teachers and schools, instead of undermining home literacy, should understand how crucial it is in forming and developing school literacy. A healthy, open-minded, teacher-parent meeting and discussion can help the teachers and school in understanding how literacy moves through text messages, computer usage and social networking at home can improve their cultural knowledge and second language. On knowing the students' interest, teachers can incorporate more modern young adult literature in curriculums to increase their reading habit which will result in an improvement in academics.

LITERACY AND PUBLIC SPHERE

"Going Public in a Disabling Discourse" by Linda Flower and "Argument as Dialogue Across Difference" by Jennifer Clifton talks of ways of managing and controlling issues in public sphere, the issues that are seen by some "as a point of stasis- the central issue a dispute- may not circulate in ways that do justice to the experiences of those most closely connected to the life- world disturbance being named. In order to do justice to those experiences, we- and the young people we teach- need tools for engaging conflicts in ways that are capable of calling people with divergent interest to the table." (Clifton 2). *Going Public in a Disabling Discourse* by Linda Flower explores the politics of revealing a learning disability in the public sphere. The article shows her research with Think Tank and a group of school students with learning disability which reflects that "coming out" with their disability has a dreadful consequence of marginalizing them and changing their social identity as "dumb" (Flower). The article talks of "how the institutional obsession with testing and the structure of learning activities in school (versus everyday life) are designed to make disability visible—to allow a disability to "acquire" a child." (Flower 143). Instead of finding out what they can't do, teachers should find out what they can do, highlighting more on their power of ability to do things over their restrictions. Flower exclaims that "self-advocacy" can change one's situations and identity. But before self-advocacy it is important to understand "yourself— your strengths and weaknesses...a functional understanding of how *you* learn—what causes you trouble, how you work around it, what you need from others, and where your alternative talents lie. Taking ownership of what a disability means (for example, asking for appropriate accommodations when you need them) starts with a reflective, constructive writerly process of meaning making." (147). Flower suggests a deliberative discourse which will provide students safe and respectable spaces for coming out and establishing positive and new social identities. For this counter publics need to be formed, publics who "speak in vernacular voices, operating from positions of interest and passions, creating a vernacular rhetoric...they are created...by the mere act of attention and process of people engaging in the circulation of discourse." (Flower 146). Thus, student communities form and establish rhetorical agency, they possess the reflective power to interpret themselves to a public and to draw that public into a deliberative dialogue.

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Rhetorical agency for students with learning disabilities might include expressive moves where students narrate their personal stories or opinions and, in turn, show power and authority over their experience and identity. Rhetorical agency may also include interpretive moves where students analyses both the problem and the usual solutions offered to them in order to fully understand what they need which leads to dialogic, knowledge-building through engagement with others- "In acts of complexity and sophistication, we see these speakers interpret the image of another speaker, rival or compare their own points, plan a response or actively adapt to others." (Flower 152).

CONCLUSION

> "[…] the virtue of tolerance. It is through the exercise of tolerance that I (Paulo) discover the rich possibility of doing things and learning different things with different people. Being tolerant is not a question of being naive. On the contrary it is a duty to be tolerant, an ethical duty, a historical duty, a political duty, but it does not demand from me that I lose my personality." - *Paulo Reglus Neves Freire*

The common people or publics are aware of certain social, economic or political issues and problems but refuse to respond or participate in healthy argument. The lack of tolerance to accept different views or different argument cause a failure to find solutions to the problem. The lack of tolerance makes "listening across difference" difficult. People who are reasonable, who possess tolerance to accept different ideas, or aims to construct inclusive public life with others, have "openness toward others and their willingness to listen and learn from people who may want to interrogate their ideas…" For doing argument as dialogue across difference it is important for the public to listen and understand issues before conveying or forcefully imposing one sided opinion on everyone. Listening does not simply means listening to others' experiences for intent but with intent as well which makes public listening a site for learning and developing new ideas and solutions.

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