Literacy Across Languages and Cultures

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LITERACY ACROSS LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

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PART 1

Introduction

CHAPTER 1

Literacy Across Languages and Cultures

Bernardo M. Ferdman and Rose-Marie Weber

Popular conceptions tend to portray literacy as a basic vehicle for social and economic advancement as well as a means of enhancing individual lives and fostering equal opportunity. Scholars and academics, while debating the accuracy or limitations of this image and even the very definition of literacy, at the very least seem to agree that more literacy among more people is desirable. Extending access to literacy for both children and adults has become a widespread goal in the United States and throughout the world. Business leaders maintain that the workforce is insufficiently proficient in the skills that will be increasingly necessary in the future. Educators struggle to meet the needs of a changing population that has a variety of values, backgrounds, and preparations. The focus has been broadening from one on illiteracy, then, to the larger problem of how to provide diverse people with the specific and expanded literacy skills they require for full participation in a variety of social contexts, including work, school, and home. Beyond these functional needs, the linkage of literacy with personal empowerment, social status, and individual growth also drives a variety of literacy efforts.

Members of linguistic and cultural minorities in the United States, as in other multiethnic societies, often face special challenges in having these needs addressed. This is especially so given the predominant and largely unexamined tendency in the United

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States to equate literacy with English literacy. The premise of this book is that focusing on such people—people whose languages and cultures are not the dominant ones in the society—is crucial if we are to learn enough about becoming and being literate to permit truly accomplishing the goal of extending literacy as broadly in society as possible. Literacy has too often been portrayed primarily in functional terms and from a monolingual framework. For members of linguistic and cultural minorities, this has meant acquiring literacy in the context of theories and practices that are incompatible with their realities and experiences or that force them into unfamiliar or undesirable molds.

Together with a growing number of literacy scholars and practitioners, we believe that changing this situation means not only concerning ourselves with diversity, but also rethinking many of our assumptions about literacy itself. Consideration of the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse people can shed new light on how to think about the many ways children and adults become (and do not become) literate and what this means for them. Thus, extending knowledge and theory about literacy is one of our goals. We are also concerned with doing so in a way that can help those who are most concerned with applications. With this volume, we would like to do our part to shift attention from limited conceptions of literacy development to perspectives that permit heterogeneity in approach and function.

LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Consistent with the goal of spreading and "fine-tuning" literacy, educators and researchers have focused on developing a better understanding of literacy, literacy acquisition, and related processes. Later in this chapter, we give an overview of several major streams of research and theory on issues of literacy. While these have produced a voluminous literature, most of it concentrates on first-language and mother-tongue literacy, and in the United States mainly on English literacy. We find that insufficient attention has been given in this scholarly literature to the particular issues facing people who are immigrants, members of ethnolinguistic minorities, or cross-nationals. For many such individuals the language and culture of the educational system and the surrounding society differ from those of the home. Many such persons develop literacy

in English while already having literacy skills in their native language. Scholars are only recently beginning to consider the implications for learners of becoming literate in the context of an educational system based on a second language or an unfamiliar culture.

At the same time, growing awareness of the changing demographics of the United States and calls for broader social equity are placing pressure on educational institutions to become more responsive to the needs of diverse ethnic groups. According to the Census Bureau, the Hispanic population in 1990 numbered 22.4 million, an increase of 53 percent from the 1980 count of 14.6 million. Thus, from 1980 to 1990 U.S. Hispanics grew from 6 to 9 percent of the total population. Similarly, the Asian and Pacific Islander group in 1990 numbered 7.3 million or 2.9 percent of the total population, having increased 107.8 percent since 1980. The African-American population numbered 30 million in 1990, 12.1 percent of the total, an increase of 13.2 percent since 1980. Finally, the American Indian group numbered 2 million or 0.8 percent of the total, having increased 37.9 percent since 1980. In contrast, the growth rate for the White group during the 1980s was only 6 percent. Thus, in 1990 members of non-European groups, including African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans, accounted for 25 percent of the U.S. population.

This diversity in the racial and ethnic make-up of the United States is reflected in the data on language. According to the 1990 Census, almost 32 million people in the United States (13.8 percent) over the age of 5 reported that they speak a language other than English at home (Waggoner, 1992a). Of these, approximately 14 million indicated that they have some difficulty with English or cannot speak it at all. An estimated additional 16 million persons who now speak English at home are originally from language-minority backgrounds, in that one or both of their parents spoke a non-English language at home. The majority (54 percent) of home speakers of non-English languages reported speaking Spanish, but substantial numbers speak French, German, Chinese, Italian, Polish, Korean, and Vietnamese (Waggoner, 1992b). Approximately 6.3 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 speak non-English languages at home, and 76 percent of them were reported to live in homes that are linguistically homogeneous (Waggoner, 1992b). In large urban areas, language diversity is even greater.

Thus, language and cultural heterogeneity in the United States

are at the center of controversies regarding the role of differences in education and how these should be addressed by schools. Educators and researchers, though, cannot reach a consensus on whether there are more benefits to be gained by focusing on differences or by focusing on similarities. In large part, this is because such debates tap into value conflicts over the nature of U.S. society and the place of its component groups (Ferdman, 1990). While many argue that the role of the schools is to educate children into and by means of a common culture, others maintain that the best way to learn is by building on each child's own culture, language, and background. Still others insist that the educational system should help to attain a pluralistic society in which each group is permitted to maintain its own culture. Paralleling these debates are struggles by those groups seen as different from the historically dominant White majority to gain an equitable measure of power in education and in society at large. Because linguistic and cultural diversity in the United States typically has been associated with minority status, part of the struggle has involved attempts to eliminate the devaluation that often accompanies the perception of difference.

In recent years, language has been the focus of especially vigorous debate in the United States, as seen in controversy over English-only laws and conflicts in the area of bilingual education. Some groups, such as U.S. English and English First, actively work against the use and promotion of languages other than English in governmental and commercial spheres. Other groups, such as English Plus, oppose these efforts and support attempts to enhance bilingualism among both English speakers and linguistic minorities (Baron, 1991; Crawford, 1992a, 1992b; Horberger, 1990; Madrid, 1990; Padilla et al., 1991; Piatt, 1990). Historically, the language situation in the country has not been shaped by official language policies. Rather, the overwhelming turn to English as the national language has been accomplished by the linguistic choices of the citizenry and indirectly by the educational policy that led to the official requirement that one condition of citizenship be literacy in English (Heath, 1985). Today, political activity by U.S. English and similar linguistic interest groups has led almost a third of the states to enact constitutional amendments or resolutions legally making English the official state language (Hornberger, 1990; 1992). These measures are often motivated by such feelings as resentment of perceived privileges accorded minorities or un-

abashed prejudice against specific groups (see e.g., Padilla et al., 1991). They also may be driven, as Nunberg (1989) has argued, by a set of untenable beliefs about linguistic diversity. These include, for example, the view that retaining a native language and corresponding values is necessarily incompatible with learning English and assimilating to the majority culture, that if their first language is available people will not learn a second language, and that linguistic diversity is more threatening to national unity than other types of diversity, such as religious differences.

Bilingual education has been another major ground for vigorous language debates. Bilingual education has become especially controversial in those few cases where programs incorporate maintenance of the native language with the teaching of English. The values represented by maintenance programs challenge the idea of assimilation and Anglo-conformity and evoke for their opponents fears of uncontrollable divisions and loss of power. Transitional bilingual education programs, which are designed to phase in English slowly while educating children in their native language, have also been attacked, perhaps in part because they are often perceived as maintenance programs in disguise or are mistakenly thought to be ineffective. Although research results show the benefits of bilingual education programs over English immersion and English-as-a-second-language approaches for eventual learning of English and for the general academic progress of language-minority students (Hakuta & Gould, 1987; Imhoff, 1990; Medina & Escamilla, 1992; Mulhauser, 1990; Padilla et al., 1991; Ramirez, Yuen & Ramey, 1991; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1987b; Padilla, Fairchild & Valadez, 1990), controversy in this area continues. In part this may be because what is being debated is not so much the nature of the evidence but the proper role of non-English languages in an educational system largely geared towards assimilation. Huddy and Sears (1990), for example, report that opposition toward bilingual education increases among those with "antiminority sentiments, anti-Hispanic feelings, and nationalistic feelings . . . and . . . [is] even further exacerbated by a description of bilingual education as cultural and linguistic maintenance" (133).

Researchers have participated in the language debate, in part, through extensive work in the area of second-language learning and teaching (e.g., Bernhardt, 1991; Gardner, 1985; Kaplan,

1988; Ramírez, this volume). Although this work has explored variables at all levels, ranging from the individual cognitive to the macrosocietal (Hakuta, Ferdman & Diaz, 1987), it has concentrated on language and communication in general, rarely considering reading and writing in their own right (Carrell, 1988; Valdés, 1992; Weber, 1991) and tending, instead, to take them for granted. Because researchers focusing on the social, cultural, and social psychological aspects of bilingualism have tended to confound issues of literacy with other aspects of second-language acquisition and usage, it is only recently that researchers and educators focusing on literacy have begun to recognize the importance of these variables to their work.

Beyond language per se, culture and ethnicity are also gaining wider recognition as critical ingredients to any consideration of literacy (e.g., Applebee, 1991; Ferdman, 1990; Goldenberg, Reese & Gallimore, 1992; Langer, 1987; McCollum, 1991; Minami & Kennedy, 1991; Purves, 1988) and of schooling more generally (e.g., Bernal, Saenz & Knight, 1991; Fordham, 1988; Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Heath, 1985; Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Ogbu, 1990). One aspect of this has to do with the implications of how different ethnic groups and their members are treated in society and its schools. John Ogbu, for example, has described the connections between the status of an ethnic group in society and the outcomes of schooling for its members. Ogbu argues that castelike minorities (those ethnic groups who were incorporated into the society involuntarily) tend to display lower achievement in school than "voluntary" minorities (those arising primarily from immigration) because the castelike groups are more likely to view the schools' demands as representing the oppressive dominant group. Another important aspect of the role of culture and ethnicity has to do with the nature and implications of ethnic and cultural diversity (Ferdman, 1992; Ferdman & Cortes, 1992). Ferdman (1990), for example, has argued that individuals' representations of "the behaviors, beliefs, values, and norms—in short, of the culture—appropriate to members of the ethnic group(s) to which [they] belong" (182) will play an important role in literacy acquisition and activity. By seeing *becoming* and *being* literate as processes that are very much culturally framed, we can begin to consider their transactional and fluid nature. Yet in spite of this and other work, a great deal of theoretical and empirical terrain remains unexplored.

We believe that by juxtaposing and linking those approaches that focus on the study of literacy and those that accent second-language acquisition and/or cultural transitions, we can move toward a more complete understanding of literacy among diverse populations and in multicultural societies. Given the goal of developing further knowledge of how to improve the educational process that has relevance beyond members of majority cultures and linguistic groups, more cross-fertilization between these areas of study will be required. In the process of forging this link, both researchers and educators can gain new insights into basic and applied aspects of literacy. This collection takes a special look at cross-language and cross-cultural literacy to introduce and to encourage research and theory that simultaneously consider and integrate literacy, language, and culture.

The authors of the chapters in this volume focus on the social and cultural contexts in which literacy develops and is enacted, with an emphasis on the North American situation. More and more educators and researchers are discovering that cognitive approaches, while very valuable, are insufficient by themselves to answer important questions about literacy in heterogeneous societies. There has been a movement in research from an exclusive focus on individual mastery to a recognition that it is the social context that gives mastery its impetus and meaning (e.g., de Castell & Luke, 1983; de Castell, Luke & Egan, 1986; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Dyson, 1992; Edelsky, 1991; Hiebert, 1991; Jennings & Purves, 1991; Reder, 1987; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Snow et al., 1991; Street, 1984; Wallace, 1986; Willinsky, 1990). By considering the implications of family, school, culture, society, and nation for literacy processes, the chapters in this book help raise such questions as:

- In a multiethnic context, what does it mean to be literate?

- What are the processes involved in becoming and being literate in a second language?

- In what ways is literacy in a second language similar and in what ways is it different from mother-tongue literacy?

- What factors must be understood to better describe and facilitate literacy acquisition among members of ethnic and linguistic minorities?

- What are some current approaches that are being used to accomplish this?

We believe that these are vital questions for researchers and educators in a world that has a large number of immigrants, a variety of multiethnic and multilingual societies, and an increasing degree of multinational activity. In the next section, we discuss the various types of groups affected by issues of literacy across languages and cultures.

POPULATIONS OF INTEREST

The question of literacy across languages and cultures encompasses quite a broad set of populations and areas of study. Although the authors represented in this volume have each interpreted this theme in light of his or her own particular interests, here we attempt to provide a broader view of the groups and research questions relevant to cross-language and cross-cultural literacy. All the groups discussed include both children and adults, each with their own special needs in addition to those they share.

Immigrants

Many *immigrants* to the United States, whether or not they are literate in their native language, face the task of learning not only to speak but also to read and write in English. Indeed, one prerequisite for acquiring citizenship in the United States is demonstrating basic literacy in English. Certainly, the nature and the fluency of the literacy skills that immigrants bring with them should be an important factor in the process of acquiring English literacy. Although some newcomers to this country could be considered illiterate altogether, a good proportion have varying degrees of literacy skills in one or more languages other than English. From a purely monolingual perspective, it is difficult to know the implications of such skills for English literacy development.

We can expect that a number of other factors will also influence the experience of immigrants in acquiring or improving English literacy. These factors include the availability of resources in the native language(s), the status of the language(s) in the United States and in the person's immediate social environment, the relationship of prior literacy skills to those now required, and the