and Campbell’s *Talk on Trial* is a study of real job interviews which shows how, due to largely hidden demands made upon them by the structure of interviews and expectations of interviewers, non expert speakers of English face a ‘linguistic penalty’ in the British job interview. Two DVDs have been produced based on the findings of *Talk on Trial*, the first for interviewers, the second for foreign-born students and their teachers.


**Listening**

This book contains a range of activities for helping students learn to listen.


**Testing**

Lazaraton’s book takes a discourse analysis approach to interaction recorded during Cambridge ESOL testing exams. McNamara and Roever look at the social aspects of language testing, placing the testing of migrants for language and citizenship in its historical and political context.


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6

**ESOL, LITERACY, AND LITERACIES**

I've come back to study. What changed my mind? My writing was worse, and my spelling was worse as well. So I thought to myself, yeah, if you keep like this you are going to get worse, so you might as well study now.

Somali man, London

**Introduction**

If Chapter 5 concerned the vital importance of oral communication for ESOL students, so this chapter and the next (on electronic literacy) relate to written communication, to literacy, one of the most complex issues in ESOL. At the heart of this complexity is the difficulty in defining what literacy actually is or means. Is literacy principally a cognitive, a linguistic, or a social activity? Is it best understood as a set of reading and writing skills which can be taught, learnt, measured, and assessed? Or is it better thought of dynamically, as something that is done or performed in social contexts? How does its teaching relate to students’ lives outside classrooms and beyond ESOL? How are educational policies shaped by ideas about literacy? And how does politics impinge on literacy teaching? These are some of the questions visited in this chapter. And, looking ahead to Chapter 7, how does the coming of electronic communication alter the ESOL literacy landscape?

This chapter has a central concern with contrasting theoretical approaches to literacy, and how they have an effect on practice. A fundamental distinction is between the notions of ‘literacy as commodity’ and ‘literacy practices’. On the one hand, literacy has a narrow or conventional definition, as a finite set of skills that can be the focus of instruction. This interpretation of literacy is all about the decoding and encoding of linguistic texts, and allows a view of literacy as a store of knowledge that students can learn and be taught. Literacy rooted in this basic skills tradition will be familiar to many ESOL students and teachers today. On the other hand, literacy viewed as social practice, or rather, plural social practices, sees it as being done by people in various contexts. This broader notion of literacy is to do with how texts are both produced and used to fulfil social purposes. The distinction between these two views of literacy is crucial; subscription to one view or another positions ESOL students in very different ways.

This chapter opens with literacy for new readers and writers, considered by many teachers to be the most challenging area of ESOL pedagogy. This
leads to theories of literacy which to an extent are in conflict, the literacy as commodity and the literacy practices views. We then draw the link between a functional view of literacy and 'employability', a notion that is current in much political and educational discourse, at least in English-dominant countries. This is a pertinent matter for ESOL, as language and migration are so often tied up with the question of employment. An investigation of functional literacy and employability brings us to the discussion of a more questioning approach to literacy, 'critical literacy', itself allied to the literacy practices tradition.

ESOL students with basic literacy needs

Say if I get a letter from the immigration people today, I can't read that letter properly. I can't understand the meanings correctly and if I misread the words there'll be a lot of problems.

Kamal, Sri Lankan man, London

I would read my own letters. I would write my own letters. I would work. I think I would do many things.

Gulnaz, Turkish woman, London

In a survey of around 500 ESOL students, 12 per cent reported not being able to read or write in either their primary language or English (Baynham and Roberts, et al. 2007). The reasons for this vary. Some migrants come from countries and societies where there is no written form of their language or where a written form has existed for only a relatively short period of time. Others have faced social, economic, and cultural barriers to schooling. For example, Gulnaz, the Turkish woman quoted above, was prevented from going to school as a girl because of poverty compounded by gender. We return to her story later. The upheaval caused by military conflict and war is a further reason why people have found it impossible to become literate, even in societies where the literacy rate was previously relatively high; Kamal, also quoted above, is a Tamil refugee whose education has been seriously disrupted because of the civil war in Sri Lanka.

Low literacy can have serious repercussions and provoke strong feelings and anxieties for ESOL students. Migrants to societies such as the UK who had not previously regarded their literacy (or lack of it) as a problem are suddenly faced with a pressure to learn to read and write in English, their second or third language, sometimes at the very time when they are confronting the stresses of migration. Other people, who immigrated many years ago, may have worked in jobs which required little from them by way of literacy; now unemployed, however, they are facing new demands from potential employers in the increasing textualization of even the most unskilled manual work. That is, even menial jobs now entail employees having to negotiate with written texts. There are potentially serious problems for people unable to read English when they are faced with the bureaucratic demands made of migrants in English-dominant countries. This is particularly true for asylum seekers and refugees such as Kamal. Many people in his position have access to community networks and resources to help them process important bureaucracy such as letters from the immigration authorities; they also have recourse to official interpreters and translators provided by government offices and local councils. However, one of the reasons people attend ESOL classes in the first place is to break their sense of dependency on either official translators or friends and relatives. This dependency can occasionally provoke insulting treatment from street-level bureaucrats and functionaries, as Yasin’s story suggests:

I have no confidence in anything, no control. I went to the bank to open an account. I took my sister with me to interpret. The cashier said, ‘You don’t know English?’ ‘No, I don’t.’ ‘You can’t open the account. ’I froze in my place. I said, ‘What, don’t I have any value or anything?’ He says to me ‘You don’t know English. Go and get an interpreter.’ My sister said she was interpreting. ‘You must pay money for an interpreter.’ So I said, ‘Let’s go.’ The man shook me up. In my country my brother opened an account for me. Nobody said anything. You get a strange feeling when you come to a strange country. You’ve left everything, and then people talk to you like this.

Yasmin, Yemeni woman, Leeds

Apart from the serious immediate and day-to-day reasons for needing literacy in English, many students are motivated to become literate to fulfil their longer term aspirations for employment and further study. Although many migrants face barriers which are arguably greater than those created by their low levels of English language and literacy, such as poverty, racism, and other discrimination, they often see literacy as their main passport to greater personal and economic fulfillment. Some people, often women, regard their efforts to acquire literacy in English as attempts to redress many years of inequality and frustration. Gulnaz’s story is an illustration of this.

CASE STUDY 1 Gulnaz’s Story

My father sent all of my brothers to school but he did not send me. I studied in primary school until the fifth year. They did not send me after that because we were living in a village. Actually there was not even a school building in my village. There was a very old building where they used to teach children. There was not even any tables or chairs. We used to sit on the floor. Some people went to secondary school in towns because they had some relatives living there. People who did not have any relatives in towns, like me, had to work in the fields. The other reason was that I was a girl. They believed that girls should not need to study.
After a while I got married. After I got married I had family problems. My husband did not want me to go to college. If my father had sent me to school before I got married, everything would have been different. I worked for a while in a factory. I was cleaning the clothes after they sewed. There was work in the factory at that time. My husband did not support me to go to college in the first years of our marriage. He was a very jealous husband. He did not send me to college because there were male students. Now he is not like he used to be. He wants me to go to school now. He knows we are not young anymore. After three children I think he knows no one would want me.

I really want to learn to speak English. I really really want to learn. I will go to school and learn English, then I will work, and I will get out of the house. Like all other normal women I want to work in a normal job such as a hairdresser, in a job with other English people. Without working I feel useless, not worth anything. I am doing nothing but house work. If you stay at home all day you will go mad and start having depression. That is why I have to go to college or work, to not go mad. It is the best thing, going to college or work. When I see some women in a hurry to go to work I envy them really. I want to be like them.

I want my daughters to study. I do not want them to become one of my kind. I do not let them do any housework. I really want them to study. If they carry on studying this is a country full of opportunities. The government gives people the chance to study. It is up to them. At least I want them to have a decent job. What am I doing? Going home to cook, washing dishes, nothing else but cleaning the house.

(Abridged interview translated from Turkish)

As Kathleen Rockhill (1987) points out in her work on Latina women seeking literacy classes in the USA, literacy education is experienced by women such as Gulnaz as both a threat, that is, to her husband and her role in the home, and as a desire to change her own future and the future of her daughters. She sees learning English and acquiring literacy as an escape, and going to class as entering a world that holds the promise of change.

Teaching basic literacy to ESOL students

As the ESOL population expands there are growing numbers of students like Gulnaz and Kamal seeking to learn English and acquire English literacy. Meeting the needs of ESOL students with low literacy creates several challenges for teachers and providers. These include defining who is and who is not an ESOL literacy student, and deciding how provision should be organized. In their guide to teaching basic literacy to ESOL students, Marina Spiegel and Helen Sunderland define a basic literacy student as: ‘Someone who is still learning to read a short simple text and struggles to write a simple sentence independently ... Some students may have little or no print literacy in their own languages, while others may be able to read and write extremely well one or more languages’ (2006: 15). Beyond this definition, Spiegel and Sunderland point to a number of factors which complicate matters for teachers of basic literacy to bilingual students. Some students come to ESOL classes with an ability to read and write another language which uses Roman script. Others might be familiar with an ideographic writing system, a syllabary, or a non-Roman alphabet. Others still may have little or no knowledge of any writing system at all. Thus all students of basic literacy arrive in their classes with different starting points, and classifying students according to their English literacy needs becomes problematic for teachers.

ACTIVITY 1 Basic literacy and ESOL

Consider the institution where you currently teach, or one you are familiar with. How does the institution provide for ESOL students with literacy needs? What are the literacy backgrounds of students in ESOL literacy classes? How does the institution find out about the literacy of ESOL students? What do you know about the literacy backgrounds of your students?

One helpful distinction made by adult literacy acquisition researchers is between those students with some foundational literacy in a primary or expert language and those with none. Those with some expert language literacy are viewed as having skills to transfer on to literacy in their new language, a point made by Tarone and Bigelow (2005) among others. In ESOL classrooms, teachers appreciate that progress is slower among those with no skills to transfer. As Jill Sinclair Bell (1995: 687) says, most ESL literacy teachers would agree that students who are literate in their native language make better progress than those without native language literacy. ESOL teachers will also recognize the fundamental point about language transfer: people are able to transfer knowledge that they have about literacy, regardless of script; for example, as Spiegel and Sunderland (2006: 15) call it, an understanding: 'that there is a link between sound and symbol or that different genres have their own conventions'.

ESOL students with no literacy in a primary or expert language are better served in a class which is able to address basic literacy needs, while those who are literate in another language, especially one using the Roman script, can be catered for in mainstream ESOL beginner classes. However, in many institutions students not literate in any language are placed in beginner ESOL classes alongside those who are literate in their expert language. This may be because there are not enough literacy students to warrant special provision or because of a lack of awareness on behalf of the institution. The onus for dealing with this mix is usually placed with teachers who are required to respond to the diverse needs of their students through differentiation and
individualized approaches to teaching and learning. People with very low literacy, though, often fare badly in mixed classes and the dropout rate among them is high. If most of the students in a class are literate they and their teachers can draw on resources for learning such as written texts, bilingual dictionaries, and so on. Lacking the skills possessed by most of the rest of the class can be very alienating for a low-literacy learner such as Yasmin, who we met earlier in this chapter:

Sometimes she says, ‘Look in the dictionary. Open the dictionary.’ But it is difficult for me because I don’t know written Arabic. The others, if they don’t understand they check in their dictionary. I am embarrassed. It’s very difficult for me that they read and understand and I don’t.

Yasmin, Yemeni woman, Leeds

Some students spend years without getting the intensive, specific literacy teaching they require, and remain in low-level classes as ‘false beginners’, failing to make any progress to higher levels. Kamal, who we also met earlier, upon being asked to compare his previous mixed classes with his current literacy class, said the following:

The teacher would try and put something into our head, to make us learn as much as she could teach us. But why didn’t we understand even though she tried hard? Why can’t we understand at least a bit? From the beginning she was trying her best to, so why did we still not understand? That was worrying me a lot. But in Linda’s class, you feel like you can study in her class for a lifetime. It’s like that for me. She makes me understand a lot.

Kamal, Sri Lankan man, London

Expert language literacy or English literacy?

Some researchers in bilingualism and biliteracy believe that adults acquiring literacy for the first time will learn more effectively if taught literacy in their primary or expert language. As there is little research done on the effectiveness of this approach for adults, this belief is based on a considerable body of research carried out on children in the early grades of school. Jim Cummins, an authority on bilingual education, states the following (1990: 7):

It makes sense to introduce literacy in the learners’ stronger language. This lessens the complexity of the task since only the literate code is being acquired (rather than a second language and the literate code) and also permits learners to become more actively involved in their own learning since they are fluent in the language of instruction.

Cummins and others believe that literacy skills are easier to acquire in a stronger language and once acquired, will transfer to a weaker language. Rather than hinder or slow down the acquisition of English, evidence from bilingual programmes in North America suggests that promotion of literacy

in the primary language ‘provides a conceptual foundation that sustains stronger growth in English literacy skills’ (Cummins 1990: 8). Bilingual instruction would also make it easier for teachers to find out what their students’ real-life concerns and interests are. Some writers on ESOL literacy believe that teaching beginner ESOL literacy students in English (rather than in their expert language) is very unlikely to be effective, as this quote from Elsa Auerbach suggests (1993: 18):

... the result of monolingual ESL instruction for students with minimal L1 literacy and schooling is often that, whether or not they drop out, they suffer severe consequences in terms of self-esteem; their sense of powerlessness is reinforced either because they are de facto excluded from the classroom or because their life experiences and language resources are excluded.

Bilingual literacy education for adults is controversial in the USA, where the ‘English Only’ movement lobbies fiercely against it. In the UK, despite some attempts to implement it in projects such as the Sheffield Yemeni literacy project (Gurnah 2000), it remains very much a minority approach. Teachers, however, are often aware of the massive task facing students who have low levels of oral English attempting to learn English literacy at the same time, and in areas of the country where there are large numbers of people from the same linguistic background it would seem sensible to at least consider bilingual instruction as an option. This would of course depend on the political will to fund such programmes, which is perhaps unlikely in a socio-political climate in which English is viewed as the primary linguistic tool of integration and community cohesion.

ACTIVITY 2 The challenge of basic literacy

Try to learn to read and write the days of the week in Korean and, if you are familiar with Korean, in a script with which you are unfamiliar. Return to the activity a week later, then a month later.
While this section has focused on pedagogy, it has also implicitly raised questions of the nature of literacy. Literacy here has been considered variously as something that has a rate or level, something that people can have more or less of, a mental or cognitive learning process, and a powerful factor in self-fulfilment. Moreover, lack of literacy has been seen as a barrier to employment and access to services. The sections that follow look at some of these very different ideas of literacy and the theories which underpin them, illustrated with examples from ESOL and literacy classrooms.

**Literacy theories in conflict: basic skills and literacy practices**

The efforts of ESOL literacy educators such as Spiegel and Sunderland (2006) to train teachers to teach basic literacy to ESOL students has led to a greater awareness amongst practitioners and institutions as to what their needs might be, and it is increasingly the case that ESOL literacy students are placed in classes designed to cater specifically for them. The pedagogical challenge for teachers thus becomes that of deciding which approaches, strategies, and materials best suit the teaching of basic literacy to ESOL adults. The major debates in ESOL literacy reflect those in other fields of language and literacy education and are influenced in turn by larger questions about the definition of literacy itself. A key theoretical distinction is between literacy as a basic skill and literacy as socially situated practices.

**Literacy as a basic skill**

**ACTIVITY 3 Definitions of literacy**

Here are some sentences drawn from the British National Corpus, a 100-million-word database of samples of written and spoken English. Each sentence contains the words ‘literacy’ or ‘illiteracy’. How is literacy understood in each case?

- a. It has been suggested that literacy levels in these weaving villages were higher than they were to be in the industrial towns of south Lancashire a generation later.
- b. Belarus had the lowest literacy rate among all the peoples of European Russia.
- c. Some lands were redistributed to landless peasants, literacy was raised.
- d. She gave most of it to a charity promoting adult literacy, living instead on the £15,000 presidential salary.
- e. The worsening condition is evident in the poor life expectancy and literacy statistics in Pakistan.
- f. By the usual measures of third-world misery: infant mortality, unsafe water, calorie intake, illiteracy ...

These instances of the words ‘literacy’ and ‘illiteracy’ reflect the dominant or prevailing view of literacy, at least in the West, as a commodity that has a rate, an abstract notion of free-floating matter that one can have more or less of. Sentences (a) and (b) talk of a literacy ‘rate’ and ‘level’. In addition, sentences (c) and (d) imply that literacy is generally a good thing. Moreover, literacy has an antonym, illiteracy, invariably viewed as a bad thing. Lack of literacy (sentences (e) and (f)) is in fact widely seen as a scourge. This interpretation of literacy encourages it to be seen as a body of knowledge that people can and should learn; the learning of which will be generally beneficial to their lives. The British anthropologist and linguist Brian Street has called this view of literacy the ‘autonomous’ model (Street 1984); autonomous, that is, in as much as it can be thought of generally, without close reference to individual lives and concerns.

Subscription to an autonomous model of literacy encourages teachers and students to consider literacy as primarily a linguistic activity, the learning of which happens in individual people’s minds. Literacy pedagogy can then be thought of as comprising basic reading and writing skills taught and learnt largely in isolation from the contexts of their use. This is the ‘common sense’ notion of literacy that many students and teachers of adult literacy draw on when talking about their literacy learning and teaching. For example, here is a monolingual English-speaking adult literacy student talking about her lessons:

> I find it really helpful going right back to the beginning. Right back to basics. It’s a bit boring sometimes thinking, ‘Oh, oh it’s only a comma’, but I think that’s what I needed, to go right back.

The idea of going ‘back to basics’ is a very strong metaphor in everyday talk about adult literacy. Moreover, the student’s mention of punctuation as a token of her literacy learning echoes a familiar theme in popular books promoting a highly prescriptive view of ‘correctness’, such as Lynne Truss’ *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* (2003) and John Humphrys’ *Lost for Words* (2004). An overriding concern with the technical skills of syntactical accuracy, punctuation and spelling is also common with adult ESOL and bilingual literacy students. In the example below, bilingual students in an adult literacy class in London are discussing with a researcher what, in their opinion, is appropriate lesson content. Among these students the crucial aspect of English literacy is again...
narrowly defined as spelling: 'It's good for us to know about spelling. Yeah, we write something we can't write a spelling mistake'. To equate literacy with a focus on spelling also corresponds with what happens in their literacy lessons:

**I=interviewer, S=students**

*What do you actually do in this class? How are you improving? What are you doing?*

S We're doing spelling.

S Dictation.

S We have separate spelling books.

S Everyday we do a spelling test. There is a different spelling book.

S And dictation.

S Dictation only and words beginning with the word. So I think this is good for us.

These students too have an idea of literacy which is rooted in the notion of literacy as a basic skill, associated with correctness in spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

ESOL literacy classes sometimes focus very narrowly on a limited set of 'skills' such as decontextualized word recognition, spelling, handwriting, or phonic awareness. Such attention on the level of the word, or even on individual sounds and symbols, situates ESOL literacy teaching at the extreme end of a basic skills notion of literacy. Debates about pedagogy which rage in other areas of literacy education are therefore also pertinent in ESOL literacy. The teaching of phonics in particular provokes strong feelings. There is some evidence to show that adults acquiring literacy for the first time in a new language benefit from intensive coaching in mastering sound/symbol relationships (Craats, et al. 2006), but to take such evidence as a basis for ESOL literacy pedagogy is a risky strategy. This is principally because it distracts the focus of literacy from the creation of meaning. Making this kind of tuition relevant to students' lives is probably impossible and can seem very alienating to adult students with pressing concerns outside the class. As one ESOL student on a phonics-based programme put it, in an interview translated from Kurdish (Campbell, et al. 2007):

*I am more interested in sentences that I can use when I need to, making an appointment, phoning college saying I can't come. We learn things like cat, frog, which I don't need.*

**Literacy practices**

A basic skills view of literacy concentrates on an ability to read and write in ways that are measurable and easy to assess, and are relatable to a prescriptive standard. However, literacy can also be understood as plural, dynamic, socially and culturally situated and contextualized practices, comprising individual literacy events. This literacy practices view represents a challenge to classifications of literate or illiterate that assume a generalizable, autonomous literacy. It also allows us to think about literacy as embedded in everyday social practice, considering ESOL classrooms as one among many sites of language use.

A turn towards the social, cultural, and ethnographic has been influential in literacy theory in recent years, developing a body of work termed the New Literacy Studies. Socially- and culturally-oriented literacy is neither sterile nor context-free. Although it incorporates the technical skills involved in reading and writing, it encompasses more than this, and reading and writing are never decontextualized in a literacy practices approach. Early theorists in the tradition were anthropologists, who showed that the purposes of reading and writing arise from social and cultural needs and expectations. What is more, the uses which people make of literacy were seen to vary hugely across and between cultures and communities. So it is not appropriate to assume one single literacy, or to impose a view of literacy which arises from one specific cultural source. To take an example, a student of Qur'anic Arabic at a madrasah in Algeria will have a very different understanding of the uses and purposes of literacy to a new migrant from Latin America in the US who is in the process of applying for a job.

**ACTIVITY 4 Reflecting on literacy practices**

Here is a list of literacy practices. What kind of reading or writing is involved? Why would some people have difficulties with these? Can you add to this list? If you are teaching at present ask your students to do this activity too, referring to English and to their expert languages. What do you find out?

- reading academic papers
- following instructions for putting together flat pack furniture
- reading the 'help' menu on a computer programme
- reading the financial section of a newspaper
- following signs to find your way around a large store
- writing a letter to a bereaved friend
- reading a spreadsheet
- reading a page on the social networking website Facebook.

Ethnographies of literacy practices in bilingual and multilingual communities show that even people with low levels of literacy participate in literacy events and practices in their daily lives. In his study of literacies amongst Panjabis in Southall, west London (1994) Mukul Saxena found that the grandmother of a family could not read in her expert language but nevertheless participated in literacy events at home, in the community, and at her place of worship.
Functional literacy and employability

An extension of the established or traditional 'skills-based' approach to literacy is functional literacy. If a literacy practices view represents an opening-up of literacy, then functional literacy risks closing down literacy education, promoting a restricted, unquestioning literacy, and positioning ESOL students as subservient to the needs of business and industry. The idea of functional literacy is powerfully evident in the discourse of educational policy, as this quote from an Adult Basic Skills policy document from England (DfEE 1999) shows:

Some seven million adults in England—one in five adults—if given the alphabetical index to the Yellow Pages, cannot locate the page reference for plumbers. That is an example of functional illiteracy. It means that one in five adults has less literacy than is expected of an 11-year-old child.

How the figure of seven million adults unable to find the page reference for plumbers in the phone book was actually calculated is not clear. It is also not suggested that people might use the alphabetical organization of the phone book, rather than its index, to find a plumber, or even to rely on word of mouth or a personal recommendation. The term 'functional literacy' is largely meaningless, therefore, until we stop to consider, as the literacy theorist David Olson does (1994: 11): 'functional for what or functional for whom'.

In educational policy, the 'function' of literacy, as with learning in general, is often economic. Literacy is widely assumed to have an economic impact, as part of a 'knowledge economy', where knowledge itself can be sold or exchanged. Students of literacy are cogs in the economic machine, and the overriding purpose of literacy education is to make students more economically productive. Applied linguist Randal Holme puts it this way (2004: 12):

Education and training ... become a means to add value to the students who are its 'products' just as manufacturing increases the worth of raw materials by turning them into usable goods. ... Functional literacy consists of some of the basic skills that the individual needs to fulfil their economic and social potential. The concept of functional literacy should therefore be associated with that of education and training as adding value through training in basic skills.

The case for a causal relationship between literacy and economic growth is not conclusive. If anything, argues Holme (2004: 22) 'the probability is that an increase in literacy rates is as much a product of economic development as a cause'. He cites the example of Sweden, whose economic development during its industrial revolution preceded a growth in literacy rates. Yet the motivation in policy of linking literacy and the economy continues to be to encourage economic activity through the development of individuals' capacity.

In functional literacy classes the emphasis is on the basic skills of reading, writing, grammar, spelling, and punctuation. In addition, functional literacy encompasses a limited set of core genres, for example, the formal letter, the CV, the job application form. These might relate more or less to what a teacher perceives as their students' literacy needs. This is not to say that teaching the skills of literacy is unimportant or that these core genres need not be taught. But the association of functional literacy with 'basic skills' and the core genres mentioned here risks a separation of how literacy is learnt and the reality of people's everyday literacy needs and experiences.

Literacy and employability

In educational policy literacy is often associated with employability, the ability and capability people have to gain employment. This requires an interpretation of literacy primarily as a basic skill (the conventional or 'common sense' definition), and relies on the questionable assumption that the economic value of the workforce can be increased through training in basic skills. ESOL students are often viewed in terms of how they can become more economically productive, and conversely are castigated for being a drain on the economy when they do not progress to a certain level. This corresponds with a broader discourse in education policy, which ties education to employability.

Quotations from politicians and educational policy makers provide evidence of this way of thinking. Here are two, from a UK Government education minister, and the authors of a government-commissioned review of skills.

I want a [Further Education] system ... which helps employers of all shapes and sizes achieve their business goals.
Denham 2007

Nowhere is the UK's skills deficit more apparent than in basic skills. Today, more than five million adults lack functional literacy, the level needed to get by in life and at work.
HM Treasury 2006: 61

The dominant perspective in policy is thus that:

a students in Further Education (which includes the majority of ESOL students in the UK) are there to service employers and their business needs;

b functional literacy is a skill that can be measured or quantified;

c if you do not have functional literacy, you, like five million others, cannot 'get by in life and at work'.

There are a number of pedagogic and ideological reasons why the development of literacy skills with a focus on 'employability' adequately addresses neither literacy pedagogy nor the needs of those seeking employment.

Functionality should not be, but frequently is, considered in isolation from individual circumstances, which is to say, people's particular reasons for learning. The complicating factor here is that these circumstances are just that—individual—and moreover, they change over time. This makes any attempt at pinning down the nature of the skills that constitute functional literacy very difficult to do. And even if the scope and nature of such skills are tightly defined in syllabuses, they may well not adequately cover students' broader literacy needs. David Olson's questions posed earlier still beg: Functional for what? Functional for whom?

It may be the case that the answer to Olson's questions are 'for employment' and 'for employers', and it is the case that for a good number of students the demands of work create their most urgent needs with regard to English language and literacy. For many workers, language training is an essential part of their socialization into a specific workplace or world of work. Doctors and nurses, for example, who are learning to do their job in an English-dominant country, need to follow very specific language training courses whose content relates closely to their needs in employment. On a general ESOL course they are not likely to encounter the language and literacy practices they need to perform specific activities in their jobs. For such students, it is appropriate to do a targeted English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course which may be provided at a college or in the workplace itself. Students who are already workers need a complex set of language and literacy competencies. These include the specific institutional and occupational discourses of their jobs. In addition, as the work of the UK Government-funded Industrial Language Training Unit (1974–1989) showed, workers need the inter relational competence to form relationships with their colleagues and negotiate their rights. These issues are discussed in a book by Celia Roberts and her colleagues, Language and Discrimination (1992).

In many ESOL contexts, employment-focused courses provide only the most generic, decontextualized focus on the skills of employability such as writing letters of application and CVs, and preparing for interviews. This is reflected in the growing number of ESOL courses and qualifications which concentrate on ESOL for work. These courses can be contentious amongst teachers, who are resistant to teaching them because of their narrow generic focus and because of the associated shift of responsibility for funding adult ESOL courses away from colleges and towards employers. One ESOL manager interviewed about her college's new ESOL for work programmes, observed the following problem for many ESOL teachers in the new turn towards the generic workplace:

We came into the public sector and we could all be earning more money if we were doing other things, but we had a belief in education, in colleges, in students or the polities of asylum or whatever it was, but this new agenda has nothing to do with that, it is all about being business focused, and we're not business focused people. That's why we're here.

Elsewhere in this book we criticize some ESOL courses for their attention to instrumental needs and 'survival English'. This criticism applies equally to ESOL for work qualifications and courses. English language students, whether jobseekers or not, should be exposed to as wide a range as possible of language, perhaps including the language of literature and storytelling, poetry and song, as well as the language skills needed in the workplace. Furthermore, not all ESOL students are actively looking for work, and some already have jobs which they are more than capable of performing. They therefore do not regard their ESOL course as essential to their increased efficiency as workers. Instead, many people are studying ESOL because they see an ability to communicate in English as a necessary and important aspect of living in an English-dominant country, for all the reasons outlined in Chapter 5. These people can feel excluded (and in some cases are in fact excluded) from ESOL classes with a predominant focus on developing generic work-related language skills.

It is certainly the case that literacy is becoming more and more important for work, even if the job does not, on the face of it, require high levels of literacy skills in English. Literacy now acts as a gatekeeper in employment contexts as never before. However, the association between functional literacy and work is a complex one, and one that can be explored through the example of an individual case, that of Abbas.

CASE STUDY 2 Abbas

Abbas is originally from Afghanistan and is a speaker of Dari. He was interviewed when he was on an ESOL course at a training centre in London whilst in the middle of a difficult period of unemployment. In Afghanistan his education was severely disrupted because of the civil war and the activities of the Taliban regime. He has acquired a high level of fluent spoken English but has serious problems with English literacy, particularly writing.

The story of how he came to England is complicated and very traumatic. He fled Afghanistan as an unaccompanied minor at the age of 15 or 16, becoming a displaced refugee in Tajikistan and then Pakistan. In Pakistan he was unable to make a living because there were so many refugees trying to do the same, so he paid a large sum of money to get out of Pakistan, arriving in England some time later after an arduous journey. He was sent by the authorities to several different English towns in succession and waited two years for a decision to be made about his claim for asylum. All the while his family had no idea where he was and he had no money with them until, T D [name], who was based in Dewsbury.
Abbas has had many jobs since he was given permission to work. He was determined to work at any cost in order to survive. He has a long work record, having had jobs in warehouses, factories, and shops. He began as a cleaner in a warehouse ("I was happy to do it") and while there informally learnt the trade of some of the other workers, such as driving a forklift truck. He has found work through several employment agencies, some of which are less scrupulous than others. The inefficiency of agencies has meant that he has lost jobs on occasions and has had to spend time with no work and no money. He has had a spate of bad luck recently and has been unable to get work either through the Job Centre or through agencies, so has been going around employers on foot and trying to get work through his contacts and word of mouth. His current job is delivering pizzas.

One of the problems facing Abbas now is that recently he has found that his low-level literacy is a barrier to employment. In an attempt to get a steady job he applied for training as a bus driver, a job which in England has serious recruitment problems which companies are addressing by recruiting in new EU countries such as Poland:

_The last job I applied was for bus driver. I've still got the letter from them. They called me to the Job Centre in Finchley, one person from the bus company was there and he was checking how we write and speak. So when I went he gave me a piece of paper and said, 'OK, you have to write something', and I said, 'Oh my God, this is the worst thing for me'. I asked them why, to drive a bus? They say that this is a new rule, sometimes if you have an accident or some passengers have a fight inside the bus if the police are involved you need to describe to the police what happened and you need to write a report to the company as well. So this is the new rule, you must be able to understand English but you must be able to write as well. They said I had to improve my writing. They said, 'Once you can write, call us again.'_

More seriously, though, Abbas is also finding that jobs he could easily get previously are becoming less and less open to him because of the literacy demands of even menial jobs.

_Most of the companies now they are saying you must have reading and writing English so you need to know about safety and so on. Most of the warehouses they are saying you must have basic writing because they are saying sometimes we will give you the basic paperwork we don't have time so you have to write the reports. For example, where I used to work, when you are handling the goods for the customers, if the box is damaged they don't accept it they ask why it is damaged so they say they want compensation. So now they say you should write a report, what are the damages, what happened and what the customer is saying, what compensation he wants, so this is the kind of thing they want in all the warehouses. Writing is the most important thing now, it's everywhere. The first question when you apply for a job is this._

This case study throws up a lot of questions, about literacy, about employability, and about funding of adult education and skills. Abbas is a hard worker, prepared to do almost anything to get by. He has a young family to support and is very frightened by the thought of unemployment. Getting a job is proving increasingly difficult for him because it is very competitive (he says 'every job is a war') and because he is being asked more and more frequently for a level of literacy he does not have. Aware of this, he is doing his best to learn what he can at the training centre and to study at home. As he says though, acquiring literacy is a slow process:

_My writing is getting better now. I think I can see the difference. It is not getting lots better but I feel better anyway. I know it is quite hard and it takes time._

Abbas faces several problems, some of which may prove intractable and which may mean that he never gets the ESOL literacy education he needs. Firstly, he has to find a class which can provide the intensive, sustained instruction he needs to improve his literacy, which would involve consistent support and detailed feedback. This is not available to him at the training centre he attends because the tuition there is funded only for six months and because his teacher, although well qualified, has no experience of teaching people with low literacy, nor has she had training in how to support them. Aware of this, Abbas has made several attempts to get a place at the local college where literacy expertise is available, but each time has been put onto a long waiting list.

Even more serious is what might happen to Abbas in the future. Responsibility for who pays for training for adults rests not only with publicly-funded colleges but also with employers, who are encouraged to identify which skills they, as businesses, require their workforce to acquire, and train them accordingly. Companies tend to invest in narrow skills training which is tailored to their needs as employers; they are less likely to put long-term investment into the language, literacy, and general adult education needed by workers such as Abbas. In fact Abbas, despite his intelligence and keen work ethic, is finding it difficult to get into any workplace at all; if he does find a job it is likely to be in a firm which is either too small to be able to invest in training or too concerned with profit to care. Stories of extreme exploitation of foreign workers hit the news every day and give little cause for optimism. The union leader Frances O'Grady pointed out in a speech in 2006:

_The migrant worker horror stories are sadly all too familiar, but that doesn't make them any less shocking. Like the two Filipino women being paid £75 for an 80-hour week at a Norfolk care home. The Portuguese man and his pregnant wife working on a farm in Lancashire, sharing a house with 17 others, and left with just £6 a week to live on after deductions. This is not some Dickensian nightmare—this is happening here and now, in Britain, in 2006._
A critical take on literacy

Given cases such as that of Abbas, it could well be argued that ESOL practitioners can no longer see themselves as neutral instructors in the English language (if they ever could), and need to adopt a critical stance as never before. Critical literacy has been very influential in some parts of the world, though rarely explicitly so in ESOL in the UK. It is both a reaction against strictly functional literacy and a complement to the literacy practices view. If literacy is conceptualized as social practice, it is also critical in the sense of the tradition of critical pedagogy, a movement most closely associated with the Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire. Freire believed that literacy is emancipatory and transformative; the first step to critical reflection and action upon the forces that affect students’ lives. His work strongly rejects the ‘banking’ notion of education, whereby knowledge is conferred by those who have it (teachers) upon those who do not (students). Freire writes (1970: 58):

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance on others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of enquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence.

The banking notion of learning, where knowledge is transmitted from teacher to students, is connected to inequality, dominance of one group over another, and oppression. A critical take on literacy recognizes that literacy practices are far more than cognitive processes, and relate to other social constructions such as class, gender, ethnicity, and political status. In the words of the critical literacy educators Morgan and Ramanathan (2005: 151), literacy practices are:

at root social arrangements, embedded in and constitutive of issues relating to unequal distributions of power within communities and institutions ... In this respect, literacy can be seen as doing the work of discourse and power/knowledge.

Critical educators are aware that it is not only individual competences but also larger societal forces which shape the life possibilities of ESOL students. There is a danger, however, that literacy education in itself is held as the key to redressing political and socio-economic inequities. This caution is indicated by Michael James, a literacy educator in San Francisco working with young people on social issues such as health, employment, and drug use:

Many literacy educators and programs today would hope their programs were indeed transformative. The new interest [in literacy for transformation] has also generated an inclination to mystify literacy, to ascribe to it catalytic properties far beyond its actual utility. It has captured the imaginations of many activists and educators for whom it represents a panacea for social and political inequities.

1990: 15

Most ESOL literacy programmes cannot be said to be emancipatory or transformative in Freire’s sense, a notable exception in the UK being the Reflect for ESOL programme instigated by the charity Action Aid. One notion which is a direct descendant of Freire’s ideas is that to be effective, lesson content and materials have to be directly relevant to students’ lives. Some educators working in the Freirean tradition have developed the concept of the participatory curriculum in which students bring along their own real-life concerns and texts to class, thus creating the curriculum according to their evolving needs (see Baynham 1988, Wallace 1989, Auerbach 1992). This is compatible with the approach proposed in Chapter 3, in which teachers are encouraged to look to their own classrooms when developing methodology. Elsa Auerbach and Nina Wallerstein (2003) take this further, advocating that literacy work be always at the service of students’ larger political concerns, that it should be not educational work with ‘relevant content’ but rather, embedded in political processes in communities and workplaces which have an educational character.

Adopting a critical orientation towards ESOL literacy does not mean teachers have to disengage with the importance of the technical skills of literacy or with the core genres of formal letters, CVs, and the like. Students both want to and need to know how to write in certain genres and how to spell and punctuate their writing accurately. But it is also vital that they know why these functional and technical skills are important, and this is where a critical stance is important. If students do not write according to a prescriptive standard, they will be judged unfavourably and disadvantaged, particularly if they are looking for work or aspiring to education beyond ESOL. As the linguist Deborah Cameron points out in her book Verbal Hygiene (1995), judgements are constantly made about people based on the extent to which their writing conforms to a standard or norm. In fact public concern with accuracy can reach the level of obsession. This can be difficult for teachers to stomach, aware as they are of the arbitrariness of standard or prestige varieties of a language, of the confusing intricacies of punctuation, and of the quirks of English spelling. However, a critical approach to ESOL literacy education can put the skills and core genres of functional literacy in their place, by
encouraging an awareness of pervasive prescriptiveness, and of why written accuracy is held to be so crucial.

**Conclusion**

Literacy for ESOL encompasses the teaching and learning of reading and writing skills, but for written communication to be effective it must go beyond skills development, taking into account the relationships between readers and writers, and the contexts (inside and outside classrooms) within which literacy is done. We conclude this chapter with an attempt at drawing together the various strands it has covered with a definition of the sociocognitive view of literacy which might be usefully adopted in ESOL literacy pedagogy. This definition, proposed by American applied linguist Rick Kern, marries together cognitive, sociocultural, and critical strands of literacy. Kern presents the definition as one which characterizes literacy in foreign or second language education (2000: 16):

> Literacy is the use of socially-, historically-, and culturally-situated practices of creating and interpreting meaning through texts. It entails at least a tacit awareness of the relationships between textual conventions and their contexts of use and, ideally, the ability to reflect critically on those relationships. Because it is purpose-sensitive, literacy is dynamic—not static—and variable across and within discourse communities and cultures. It draws on a wide range of cognitive abilities, on knowledge of written and spoken language, on knowledge of genres, and on cultural knowledge.

Drawing as it does on different kinds of knowledge and abilities, we can extend the sociocognitive view of ESOL literacy education and say that it is concerned with knowledge of the what, the how and the why of literacy.

**Knowing what:** The cognitive dimension of literacy is concerned with encoding and decoding written text, as well as gaining an understanding of what the relationships are between words and between longer stretches of discourse. Developing the cognitive processing abilities involved in reading and writing in a new language is fundamental in beginner ESOL literacy for people with little or no foundational literacy in their expert language. Those with literacy in other languages often find they have cognitive skills they can transfer over to their new language.

**Knowing how:** This dimension encompasses an understanding of how literacy practices are carried on in their social and cultural contexts. This is particularly challenging for ESOL literacy students, who might not have the same social and cultural background knowledge as those they communicate with. ESOL students know the importance of learning how to write for particular audiences, and when certain conventions should be followed. Teaching ESOL literacy therefore involves helping students gain an awareness of how literacy is done in various contexts and situations.

**Knowing why:** The critical dimension of literacy is a vital concern in ESOL. Critical literacy involves developing an appreciation through critical reflection of why the relationships between writing and contexts of the use of writing are as they are. Not only is it important to know how to write in certain ways, to follow certain conventions, but it is also vital to know why we write in such ways. Literacy is about more than autonomous skills. ESOL literacy pedagogy involves equipping students with an awareness of how literacy practices do the job of mediating power relations in societies.

It falls upon the shoulders of teachers to address this complexity in ESOL literacy lessons, and for this they need at the very least a grounding in what literacy comprises beyond skills, and what might be appropriate approaches to its teaching in ESOL classrooms. In the chapter that follows the theme of literacy continues, with a focus on electronic literacy and the literacy practices that ESOL students engage with when using new technology.

**Further reading**

**Literacy practices**

Barton’s *Literacy* is an updated edition of his introduction to the interpretation of literacy as socially situated and plural practices. Papen’s *Adult Literacy as Social Practice* also takes a socially situated view of literacy and describes its relevance to adult literacy teaching. Street’s book is an early work developing the notion of an ideological literacy which subsumes, and goes beyond, an autonomous skills-based view of literacy.


**Critical literacy and participatory curricula**

Auerbach and Wallerstein’s book promotes the notion of a participatory curriculum, one in which students and their broad political as well as educational concerns are central. Freire’s book is the original text on emancipatory literacy. Reflect and ESOL describes a participatory approach to adult learning and literacy developed by Action Aid and adapted for ESOL.
Teaching and assessing ESOL literacy

Kern's book outlines an approach to language teaching that uses literacy as its organising principle. Spiegel and Sunderland's handbook is a practical and useful guide to teaching basic literacy to ESOL students. Wrigley's film shows an alternative way to assess the basic literacy of ESOL students. Pahl and Rowell's book, though geared towards primary, secondary, and family literacy teaching, is a valuable handbook relating the New Literacy Studies to classroom practice.


ESOL AND ELECTRONIC LITERACY PRACTICES

I did not know anything about computers. So everything I do I enjoy. I didn’t know the computer could be fun. I didn’t know that I can watch news, I can communicate from abroad, I can research things on the computer. I can see a lot of images.

Somali woman, Leeds

Introduction

New technologies of literacy—networked computers, the internet, and the World Wide Web (www), various tools of computer-mediated communication—are associated with change and revolution. This chapter builds on the previous one, looking at how literacy is changing for ESOL students in and out of their classrooms with the coming of electronic communication. How is the literacy landscape changing with the advent of electronic literacy? And how do students experience the new technologies of literacy? That is, what are their electronic literacy practices?

This chapter is concerned with four themes of electronic literacy, as they relate to ESOL. The first is reading online and on the screen, a different matter from more traditional types of reading. Electronic literacy has brought some of the multiple modes of communication to the fore: online readers know that text can be integrated with graphics, video, and audio, and that reading can follow non-linear paths through links. Correspondingly, new technologies allow for new ways of learning, through the use of multimedia and multimodal texts. This enables teachers to cater for the visual and aural dimensions of students' learning.

The second theme is computer-mediated communication (CMC). While the range of CMC now encompasses video and audio communication, electronic writing—principally email and text chat using messenger programs—still plays a vital role in students' lives outside their learning environment as they attempt to maintain ties with distant friends and family.

It is difficult to consider information and computing technologies (ICTs) in isolation from processes of globalization, and the third theme is ESOL students' engagement with globally-spread virtual communities. Some ESOL students might sometimes be considered victims, or at least passive subjects, of globalization, migrating great distances to escape war, famine, and poverty. As refugees or asylum seekers in the West, their socio-political