

# Fact sheet – Teaching spoken and written language

These fact sheets have been developed by the AMEP Research Centre to provide AMEP teachers with information on areas of professional concern. They provide a summary as well as identifying some annotated references that can be used to broaden knowledge and extend understanding. These references can be obtained through the AMEP Resource Centre at [rescentr@nceltr.mq.edu.au](mailto:rescentr@nceltr.mq.edu.au)

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## Context

In the AMEP, teachers are used to teaching learners to survive in the context of a highly literate society. In recent times, the client groups who have enrolled in the AMEP often do not share the understandings of 'literacy' or 'oracy' that we have developed from our experience as language teachers in a highly literate and technologically oriented society.

When the patterns of behaviour we observe in our classrooms differ from our previous experiences and our expectations, how are we to understand what is happening so that we can respond in ways that assist our clients in their learning and adjustment to life in Australia?

How do AMEP teachers:

- make sense of what they are hearing and reading from their students?
- respond to what they hear and read?
- adapt to this in their teaching of both spoken and written English?

## The nature of spoken and written language

There are strong connections between spoken and written language, but stepping back and thinking about the nature of oracy and literacy, as if they were separate, can help us to better understand what we may observe and experience in the classroom, and can provide some useful insights into how to develop appropriate ways of teaching.

In thinking about 'literacy', Street (1993) has differentiated between the particular skills that an individual writer has (eg the ability to form letters well, or to recognise words) and the ways that people or societies use and value these skills. He has called these 'autonomous' and 'ideological' dimensions of literacy.

The same way of thinking can be applied to spoken

language. As teachers who begin with teaching spoken language, we have an immediate concern with the building of relationships with our students, but teaching this is a less conscious part of our curriculum and practices. For this reason, it is worth having a look at these aspects of 'oracy' in more detail. Starting with literacy, as something that we are more familiar with, is one way into this issue.

### 'Autonomous' and 'ideological' dimensions of literacy

Autonomous dimensions of literacy are the skills of letter and word recognition, word attack skills, knowledge of 'phonics' or sound-symbol relationships, and the ability to form letters and produce a written text. Working with this dimension gave rise to the notion of 'functional literacy', a minimal or threshold level that an individual would need to perform 'everyday' literacy tasks in their society.

More recently, literacy researchers and theorists and teachers have become more aware of the cultural dimensions of literacy in different societies, and the fact that literacy involves certain sets of attitudes towards, and practices with, written texts, as well as the skill base that supports these. The ground-breaking work in this respect was Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) study of the different ways that people in three communities in the south-eastern United States treated and regarded children's literacy and, as part of this, their bedtime stories. The ways stories were read and discussed, as well as the attitudes about the significance of these stories, differed strikingly between middle-class white families, working-class white families and African-American families living in nearby communities. Furthermore, the school tended to reinforce the middle-class view and practices, seeing these practices as 'natural' and worthy of encouragement, while seeing the other groups' practices as either less valuable or problematic.

This type of understanding is what Street terms the 'ideological' dimensions of literacy, as it is the values

in relation to literacy that are shared by groups of people. These values may come to be seen as so normal or natural as to be invisible, or in times of change may come to be contested and negotiated between subgroups within a society.

### 'Autonomous' and 'ideological' dimensions of oracy

The 'autonomous' dimensions of oracy include the ability to recognise and produce comprehensible forms of phonemes, sequences of sounds and other aspects of spoken language such as stress, rhythm and intonation, as well as the grammatical and discourse features of longer spoken texts. These are skills that language learners need to develop and work on in order to be able to begin to use the spoken form of a new language.

Learners also need to understand how spoken language is used in order to communicate effectively. This obviously involves an understanding of paralinguistic aspects of spoken language such as body language, volume and the kinaesthetics of speaking face to face. But it also involves an understanding of what is valued in speaking in the new language and culture, the culturally valued ways of speaking and the meaning of different ways of speaking in the new language and culture.

Speaking is frequently a mode of language that is highly interpersonal. It is usually conducted between individuals or in small groups, although it can also be used in more impersonal ways and with mass audiences (although here it is worth noting that often the skills in using mass media effectively involve the ability to create a high sense of interpersonal interaction between a speaker and many listeners). So spoken language carries strong meanings about the social relationships between interlocutors, as well as communicating the information contained in the words and utterances carried by spoken language.

Different ways of speaking are also interpreted as conveying attitudes and emotional states as well as messages about social relationships. In this way strong, stern messages can be conveyed with care and concern, supportive messages can be conveyed coldly, and so on. Ways of speaking are also interpreted as reflecting status, power and abilities. There can also be a strong aesthetic dimension to spoken language – what sounds 'pleasing'. While writing can also be highly interpersonal and have aesthetic value, in modern technological societies at least, it is often the ability to write in an impersonal, detached style that is a valued literacy practice. Such different emphases in what can be considered different 'ideological' qualities of spoken and written language can be reflected in cultures or individuals that are considered to be highly 'oral' or highly 'literate' in their orientation.

## 'High oracy' and highly 'oral' cultures compared to highly 'literate' cultures

Cultures that are thought of as highly oral are characterised by ways of living that bring the same people together on a regular basis and frequently involve a creative reliving of shared events. In other words, as with a lot of folk music, the purpose of the communication is the sharing of living/being and the performance of interpretations of known material. There is a common stock of meanings that is drawn on, and people establish their shared sense of belonging by revisiting the same repertoire and participating in the same speech events. The newness and the freshness are in the performance, and the material that is performed is regarded as communal.

These cultures are frequently also located within a more cyclical and rhythmic life style, with life being shaped by events such as seasons and crops, so that the sense of time is linked to a sense of events repeating and of rituals being regularly and repeatedly associated with those events. This different sense of time means that what occurred once can/will occur again, so that what was in the past will also be in the future. Living in the present is simultaneously reliving the past. There is a much less clear sense of 'then' being different from 'now' and much less need to identify a particular 'time' – the event itself is more important than the time it took place.

A key feature of literate society is that much less of life is shared. In literate behaviour, authorship must be established because the author can't be seen. 'Who produced this?' is an important question. Similarly, in literate behaviour, 'when did this occur?' and 'in what order?' are even more important questions to consistently establish and explicitly mark, because the interlocutor wasn't there and can't make assumptions about routines. They can't interrupt the speaker to establish or impose their own interpretation. Thus, time takes on a different meaning – and 'truth' (ie interpretation) that can be independently checked against experience also becomes much more important. In 'oral' cultures, truth is established through the shared experiences of the community. In 'literate' cultures, 'truth' is what can be supported with independent evidence.

Despite these apparently categorical differences, there are still many things that are shared in both speaking and writing. Within each of the above notions of 'oral' or 'literate', we can get things such as gendered 'style'. In most societies, men are frequently encouraged to be more discursive in their behaviour than are women (at least in mixed company). Some oral cultures value deference to authority. Other oral cultures value challenge and verbal duelling. Those with more

education/authority are frequently inclined to make use of their language in ways quite different from those with less education/authority. These values represent highly variable practices that members of those communities are frequently not consciously aware of – even though they ‘do’ them most of the time.

## Teaching and learning spoken and written language in the AMEP classroom

In learning a second language, this way of thinking about spoken and written language means that learners have four major learning tasks:

- 1 The learning of the ‘autonomous’ elements of speaking in the new language – including the recognition and production of phonemes, patterns of stress, rhythm and intonation, and the pronunciation of words in the new language.
- 2 The learning of the ‘ideological’ dimensions of oracy in the second language, including pragmatic aspects of the language system – such as the rules for turn-taking; interrupting; the way attitudes, relationships and emotions can be conveyed; as well as the significance of certain types of texts such as greetings, jokes, instructions (and the way they are given) – and an understanding of the culturally valued (or despised) ways of using spoken language.
- 3 The learning of the ‘autonomous’ dimensions of reading and writing in the new language – the sounds represented by letters, the way that particular words are written, punctuation, marking of paragraphs, and so on.
- 4 The learning of the ‘ideological’ dimensions of literacy in the new language – the conventions associated with certain types of written texts; the attitudes towards different types of texts and the practices associated with them (eg a shopping list compared to a tax invoice); and the ways that other messages and meanings, such as claiming authority, conveying care or alarm, can be relayed in texts. Not to mention the canonical texts of the language that can be found in the literature that ‘everybody knows’ or that the English-speaking community defines as ‘good’ or ‘important’.

Not all practices will be appropriate for all contexts. Learners will need to be enabled to make choices and to move across styles, and also be helped to make their own styles.

What and how learners need to learn in each of these dimensions will be affected by:

- the extent to which a learner is considered adept in certain types of oracy in their first language and culture;

- the extent to which a learner is considered adept in literacy in their first language and culture;
- the extent of convergence with or divergence from the nature of oracy and literacy between the first language and culture and English, and the extent to which the learner is aware of this;
- in the context of literacy, the extent to which a learner already has some sense of what it means to be literate, as well as having control over autonomous literacy skills that can be transferred and applied to the ideological dimensions of literacy in English.

## Implications for classroom practice

The difficulties of mastering ‘autonomous’ dimensions of spoken and written language are often the most obvious to learners and teachers in the language classroom. However, the ‘ideological’ dimensions of oracy and literacy may create more profound difficulties for teachers and learners in classrooms. This applies to the business of working together in the same classrooms and buildings as much as to the challenge of developing a high level of competence in a new language. This is because of the often ‘hidden’ nature of such phenomena, or the idea that certain things are ‘natural’ and so are taken for granted, resulting in instant (instinctive) automatic reactions and responses, rather than considered reflection.

In making sense of what they observe and encounter in their classrooms, and in other contact with learners, teachers in the AMEP need to constantly consider that what they see may not be best understood in terms of how it is ‘imperfect’ or ‘deficient’ in relation to the norms and practices they regard as normal. Rather, we may be better able to help our students by first understanding that they are using spoken and written English in ways that make sense to them in light of their prior learning and experiences, which is reflected in the choices they make about behaving based on their sense of who and what they are. In helping students to communicate effectively in spoken and written English, we need to help them understand how the ways they speak and write may be understood or misunderstood by other speakers of English, and also make them aware of the factors that help them to effectively communicate a sense of who and what they are, or what it is they want to convey to others.

As well as attending to the skills that AMEP learners need to develop in relation to the ‘autonomous’ dimensions of oracy and literacy in English, activities such as the following can help learners understand and explore ‘ideological’ dimensions of oracy and literacy in English:

- adding emotional and attitudinal dimensions to role-plays (for example, helpfulness, surliness, frustration or even hostility in a service encounter);
- using videos of segments of movies, soap operas, or even advertisements to explore the ways in which emotions and attitudes are conveyed or evoked in listeners and readers;
- exploring different examples of the same types of spoken and written text to see how different feelings, attitudes and positioning are achieved or attempted;
- making sensitive and respectful cross-cultural comparisons of the significance of different ways of acting and reacting, to enable students to see how the culture of Australian English compares to their home culture(s);
- encouraging explicit discussion of the attitudes towards and value accorded to particular types of spoken and written texts in different societies – including in diverse communities in Australia.

## Annotated bibliography

Barraja-Rohan, A 2000. 'Teaching conversation and sociocultural norms with conversation analysis'. In A Liddicoat and C Crozet (eds). *Teaching languages, teaching cultures*. Melbourne: Language Australia

This chapter presents an approach to the exploration of conversations in the ESL classrooms, based on the use of videos of naturalistic conversations. Teachers help students to discuss the intentions of the interlocutors and the effect that they had on each other. Cross-cultural comparisons are made.

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Baynham, M 1995. *Literacy practices*. Burnt Mill, England: Longman

This volume explores the practices associated with literacy and attitudes towards literacy in a variety of cultural settings, including immigrant communities in the United Kingdom, with some examples in the discussion being drawn from Australian cases.

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Brice Heath, S 1983. *Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Brice Heath's classic study of the different practices associated with written texts in three different communities – white middle class, white working class, and African American – in the south-eastern United States.

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Elliott, M 1991. 'Case studies of students learning to write in English as a second language'. PhD thesis, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia

This thesis looks at the ways in which learning to write in a second language differ between learners and discusses how these differences reflect varied understandings of what it

means to write as a result of how much literacy had been developed in the first language.

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Gumperz, J 1982. *Discourse strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

This volume looks at the ways in which conversations can be organised and some of the things that can go wrong in the interpretation of the intention of the speaker when speaker and listener do not share the same assumptions about how talk is to be used.

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Okpewho, I 1992. *African oral literature: Background, character, and continuity*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press

This volume contains fascinating details about the features of many oral language traditions in Africa and describes ways in which oral language performs many of the same functions as written stories in, for example, English-speaking cultures. It contains a very useful listing of the strategies of such oral literature.

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Street, B 1993. *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

This is an interesting collection of discussions of the nature of literacy in different cultural contexts. Street's introduction, 'The new literacy studies' elaborates the notion of 'autonomous' and 'ideological' dimensions of literacy applied in this fact sheet. A chapter by I M Lewis, 'Literacy and cultural identity in the Horn of Africa: The Somali case' explores the nature of literacy in Somalia.

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Vansina, J 1985. *Oral tradition as history*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press

This more technical volume raises key points about the complex and context-embedded nature of spoken language and how it forms an essential part of the communities in which it is used.

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