Reviewed work:

The Social Construction of Literacy (2nd ed.). (2006). Jenny Cook-Gumperz (Ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 332. ISBN 0521525675. $34.99

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The first edition of this volume, published in 1986, provided a timely synthesis of historical and theoretical perspectives on literacy in combination with then contemporary empirical work in school classrooms. The new edition has reviewed and updated both theoretical and empirical perspectives and expanded the bibliography by approximately 100 post-1986 entries. The book retains its original format, consisting of three chapters covering the emergence of literacy in Western societies and its ongoing relationship with schooling, and the evolution of applied linguistic practice in schools since the 1960s. The subsequent seven chapters are concerned with empirical studies of actual classroom practice. Some of the revisions are by way of prologues and postscripts, others by way of more fully rewritten chapters. The perspective of the collection is clearly an American one and most of the studies are set in the United States, although there is one study set in the UK and one in the Philippines. The seven "empirical" chapters can usefully be read in order as there is a logical progression from home to school, lower years to higher years, and from classroom teaching to institutional testing (although this last chapter is concerned with tertiary-level students). The papers hang together quite nicely as a collection: many are co-referential or are aligned through similar perspectives (e.g., the transition from spoken to written discourses). Many of the studies feature mixed classes of black and white children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. While the focus of the volume is predominantly on first language literacy, at least half of the chapters would be of direct relevance

to reading in a foreign language. Indeed, there is no reason why interactional sociolinguistics, the key theoretical support underpinning the studies in this volume, could not equally enhance the researching of foreign language reading acquisition.

A word of disclosure may be warranted at this point: The reviewer's background is not in children's literacy but rather in discourse analysis and testing and assessment of adults learning English as a second language. Most importantly though, it is as the father of two school-aged children (kindergarten and Year 2) that I have sought to evaluate the claims, evidence, and arguments in this book as they resonate directly with what has been observable in the development of my own children's literacy.

The first two chapters are by the editor, Jenny Cook-Gumperz, and provide the historical background to viewing literacy as a social construction. In contrast to the view that literacy simply comprises technical/cognitive skills of coding and decoding, Cook-Gumperz argues that "[a]s socially constructed, literacy is best regarded as part of an ideology of language, a sociocultural phenomenon where literacy and orality coexist within a broader communicative framework not as opposites, but as different ways of achieving the same communicative ends" (p. 3). Moreover, literacy is "a complex of communicative language practices and historically influenced attitudes to these practices that unite or divide a community" (p. 9). Chapter 1 outlines how the various contributors to this volume make clear the ways in which literacy is developed through the process of schooling and the opportunities and practices of teacher and student interactions in schools.

Chapter 2 provides a fascinating account of the history of literacy noting, for example, that literacy for much of the population actually *preceded* industrial development, and indeed, preceded organised schooling. As for the role of schooling in developing literacy,

> initially, it was not schooling which developed literacy, but rather the reverse. Literacy led to the growth of a commonplace culture that was part of a movement for social change, thus, the linking of literacy to schooling at its outset was not an [*sic*] historical cause but rather an [*sic*] historical consequence of the growth of popular literacy that had preceded the development of mass schooling. (p. 31)

Nineteenth-century views of literacy centered on an ideology of literacy as "personal self-improvement tied to personal, social and … economic advancement" (p. 36). Twentieth-century views stress the ideology that "literacy may bring, not economic well-being directly, but *equality of opportunity* [emphasis in original] as a basic value from which other advantages can come" (p. 39). This, notes Cook-Gumperz, has led to the role of schools to

> transform this commonplace literacy of contemporary society into a formal discipline of literate reasoning that takes the form of a set of technical skills. It is these technical skills that we take to be the subject of literacy tests and literacy rates …. Linguistic differences within the community become seen as sociolinguistic deficits and as the cause and product of the inability to use literate reasoning. (p. 49)

In chapter 3, John Gumperz and Jenny Cook-Gumperz provide the linguistic theoretical backing for the notion of literacy as social construction. With their focus on interactional sociolinguistics in the study of schooling, they review ideas and findings in this field as a decade-by-decade progression from the 1960s through to the 1990s. The 1960s are characterised as the shift from a linguistic deficit model, where "the cultural environment in which low-performing children grew up did not provide adequate exposure to adult talk, resulting in lack of verbal stimulation that in turn impeded cognitive development" (p. 51), to one embracing cultural and linguistic diversity (and the recognition of the importance of language *use* in educational settings). The 1970s saw the development of the notion of teaching as a linguistic process aimed at bridging the "mismatch" between the language of the classroom and the language of the home. Much research focused on empirical studies of classroom communicative exchanges. Indeed, during the 1970s the notions of ethnography of communication and communicative competence showed that language variation was patterned and context-bound, and the classroom became an important site of ethnographic language research.

In the 1980s the focus shifted to consider classroom communication as a discourse process. Microethnic studies of classrooms, their discourses and participation patterns became the new research focus. "The analytic point of departure became speech activities as they occur within the context of specific 'speech events' that could be seen as constituting micro-social systems, no longer language usage as such" (p. 64). This research in turn led to the development of interactional sociolinguistics "concerned with interpretation … and with speakers' and listeners' meaning assessments in interaction" (p.68), and for which John Gumperz is considered the founding father. The 1990s continued the focus on discourse and context, as well as ideology. Critical discourse analysis, an approach valued for its ability to explain the complex relationship between language and power, became a useful tool for classroom language analysis. And, interactional sociolinguistics continued to offer insights into the complex interactions between and among teachers and students in the educational setting. Let us now turn to consider some of the key studies in which interactional sociolinguistics provided the theoretical platform.

Chapter 4, by Gordon Wells, is a UK study of the language experience of children at home and at school at the age of 5 years, focusing on spoken discourse. The chapter stresses the importance of the role of interaction in education (i.e., the "hidden curriculum"). The study reports many clear-cut differences in interactions of children with adults at home and in school settings. For example, "whereas at home twice as many adult utterances are extending [children's utterances] rather than developing [adult utterances], the ratio is reversed in the classroom, with teachers developing matter introduced by themselves twice as often as they extend matter contributed by the children" (p. 91). Wells asserts that "what is most important for students' intellectual development … is not so much the informality that characterizes interaction in the home as the opportunity to express their ideas and opinions and to have them taken seriously and responded to in ways that help them extend and deepen their understanding" (p. 107). An interesting aside, as a sign of the times, is that the original chapter was heavily reliant on quantitative analyses, whereas the revision for the second edition also acknowledges the usefulness of collaborative action research (see, for example, Burns, 1999) in investigating classroom interaction. In particular, Wells refers to subsequent studies that have demonstrated how classroom teachers are able to substantially alter the types of classroom discourse occurring through providing more dialogic forms of classroom interaction.

In chapter 5, Sarah Michaels shifts the focus to oral presentations of narratives as a step towards literacy for first graders and shows how scaffolding of oral presentations can lay the groundwork for written prose. The chapter highlights the contrasting intonation styles of white and black children and notes how there are parallel contrasting discourse styles as well. (Interestingly, the reported intonation patterns of the white children presenting during sharing time [i.e., "show and tell"] are ones that the reviewer hears at home on a regular basis as his daughters rehearse their own oral presentations for school.) Michaels notes that while white children tend to follow a "topic-centred" discourse, black children tend to follow a "topic-associated" narrative relying on "full lexical items" rather than prosodic cues. However, she argues that it is not these differences that make it difficult for black children to acquire "prose-like" discourse strategies. Rather, it is the black children's "use of a discourse style that is at variance with the teacher's own style and expectations [that] decreases the *quality* [emphasis in original text] of interaction in key classroom activities that might otherwise provide these children with the practice needed to develop a more expanded, prose-like discourse style" (pp. 136–7).

Chapter 6 deals with the issue of differential instruction in reading groups. James Collins reports on part of a study of first-grade students learning to read. Their class is divided by *ability* into high-ranked and low-ranked groups. The students have the same teacher and study the same reader. Collins argues that the differences in reading performance are not due to reading traits or skills but rather are the result of the interactions occurring and recurring during the school year. For example, Collins notes that for the low group, "correction consists predominantly of low-level linguistic instruction about the grapheme-phoneme correspondences and lexical-level composition of texts" (pp. 136–7). Whereas, with the high group, "correction refers to a broad range of text elements and processes" (p. 137). With regard to instruction, both low and high groups are taught orthography and lexical items, but for the high group alone "information about clauses, sentences, expressive intonation, and the attribution of speakerhood are also brought into play. The differing instructions provide very different contexts for the business of learning to read" (p. 137). Furthermore, while the high group actively learns "conversational inference," the low group's lessons are so fragmented "by hesitations, corrections for mispronunciation, dialect, and failure to recognize words, as well as distractions from within and without the group, that synthetic comprehension is difficult to achieve" (p. 137). One of the key conclusions of this study is that the reading lessons for low-group students, unlike the reading lessons of high-group students, do not provide as many opportunities for the learners to apply their knowledge of spoken language to the task of reading.

Chapter 7 nicely articulates with chapter 6 in its focus on reading groups in a first-year class. Donna Eder reports on a non-linguistic aspect of literacy, namely the effect of organizational constraints on reading group mobility. She finds that although reading groups are meant to be based solely on aptitude this does not happen in practice, and she refers to the "illusion of harmony" that obscures this fact. Time and management constraints are the key factors influencing the number and size of groups formed, independent of the range of aptitude of learners. The effect of these constraints is that "even though a student's aptitude may increase during the year there is no guarantee that there will be an available position in a higher group" (p. 173), and in fact the child is usually "locked" into the group of his/her initial placement. This, as Eder notes, particularly disadvantages students from low socio-economic backgrounds, who

find themselves stuck within the constraints of their reading group level. Although this chapter is reported as it appeared in the original edition of the book, Eder does add a short postscript in which she identifies subsequent research supporting the view that mixed-level rather than "streamed" classes provide a better learning environment for many students.

Chapter 8 marks a departure from a focus on Year 1 students and the development of literacy in a first language. Douglas Campbell reports on the development of mathematical literacy in a bilingual classroom in the Philippines. His study highlights the role of questions and answers in developing discourse where students learn content through searching, probing, and guessing answers. Campbell's notion of students "going for the answers" aligns with Vygotsky's theory of a zone of proximal development, as it involves students in interaction that actively engages them in constructing a plausible solution to a challenging problem. Campbell stresses the importance of students being able to talk about subject content, such as mathematics, and not just to "compute" answers. "Learning and using mathematics is essentially a matter of acquiring patterns of discourse" (p. 186).

In chapter 9, Herbert Simons and Sandra Murphy highlight the differences between spoken and written language and, consequently, the need for different discourse strategies for each mode of language. From their study of reading acquisition of 2nd-year students, the authors stress the importance of phonological awareness and the role it plays in segmentation and decoding. Curiously, Halliday's (1989) work showing that spoken language tends to be grammatically complex whereas written language tends to be lexically dense is not mentioned. Presumably this is because the reading texts for early readers tend to be quite "spoken" in their language orientation. Instead, the authors focus on spoken discourse as being situation-dependent whereas written discourse is text-dependent. Simons and Murphy stress the importance for students to develop metalinguistic awareness and the ability to manipulate language, as this plays a critical role in reading acquisition.

Chapter 10, by James Collins and Sarah Michaels, also reports on how discourse strategies interact with the acquisition of literacy. Their study involved both 1st-year and 4th-year students. The authors, citing the work of various scholars, note that "perhaps one of the key distinctions that exists is not between formal and informal characteristics [of spoken or written discourse]; it is between what can be assumed to be the audience's private background knowledge of the communicative intent and what is estimated to be the audience's ability to make particular inferences which depend on knowledge of both language and the audience's real-world situation" (p. 247). The study reported in this chapter focuses on the issue of thematic cohesion as central to coherence in discourse.

The final chapter, by Mary Catherine O'Connor, is the only paper in this collection that looks at adult learners and is the only one that deals with the issue of testing. The chapter reports a study of undergraduate and postgraduate students at an elite American university and explicates how standardized test items that deal with analogy (e.g., doctor:patient::lawyer:client) can be interpreted by test-takers at the level of lexeme (i.e., what the test-makers intended) or alternatively at the level of socially situated discourse. O'Connor provides compelling evidence (through excerpted protocols) of how the test-takers do in fact think analogically in following *either* interpretation; yet their performances are only recognised as correct if they follow the

restricted discursive practices of this type of standardised test question. "Neither [psychometrics nor cognitive science] has a clearly articulated understanding of the kinds of socioculturally rooted linguistic practices that make up the discourse genre of standardized tests and how these differ from the everyday practices of test takers themselves" (p. 269).

The 11 chapters in this volume provide a fascinating view of different perspectives on literacy with each chapter providing key insights into how literacy skills are developed (or not) in school settings. The notion that literacy is a social construction (i.e., interactively constructed through verbal exchanges over time and in different settings) is emphatically supported by the evidence provided in the various studies. Indeed, one of the great strengths of the collection is the quality of the empirical studies that are reported. Classroom discourse is analysed in a variety of ways and to a remarkable degree these still stand the test of time. A notable deficiency of the collection is the absence of any empirical study involving multimodality (e.g., the use of images) or computer and internet use which are both important aspects of 21st-century literacy in Western countries, if not yet throughout the wider world. This is rather disappointing as these issues could have been foreseen in the revised edition and their inclusion would have rounded off an otherwise fine body of work.

One of the enduring impressions left by reading this book (and, for a father of children learning to read and write, the most worrying) is how the school system itself seems biased in favour of those students who "conform" to their teacher's preferred discourse type or are already performing well as readers and writers. This provides a strong argument in favour of parents not relying on formal schooling to teach their children to read and write. Rather, as in times past, parents must be prepared to take the lead in helping their children to acquire the literacy skills needed to be able to engage with and participate fully in today's "information age" societies.

References

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