SOME NOTES ON LITERACY, WRITING AND HEGEMONIC POSITIONING

Fikri Sulaiman Ismail

Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh & Senior Researcher at SCAD Independent, Indonesia
e-mail : ibnusulis@gmail.com

Abstrak

This article discusses the ideological meaning of literacy and how it should be considered before we attempt to develop various writing programs. Writing as one of main forms of human communication is prone to being ill-defined. This may lead to certain injustices in our education world, especially when literacy is not defined or seen as an ideological concept. The most familiar example of this in a learning context is that we tend to view literacy as reading and writing ignoring other values and potentials that a learner brings to a classroom such as her socio-cultural background. In the face of such challenges, this article therefore presents a conceptual framework which could serve as a reminder for educators before they attempt to develop their various education programs. The author hopes that the article would help educators determine where they should stand along this imaginary continuum of ideological literacy.

Keywords: *Litercy, communication, conceptual, written language*

A. Introduction

Among various semiotic systems in the universe, spoken and written languages seem to play a very dominant role in our social world. The consequence that each has on the environment in which it is used varies. Cultures originating among oral communities may differ significantly from cultures practiced within the boundaries of a written language. Since advances in cultures with written language appear to be more noticeable and sophisticated, many would easily assume that cultures with a written language are in many ways superior to cultures

with only oral language. Consequently, many superior qualities are attributed to individuals who live in cultures with written language, such as critical thinking, superior cognitive development, civilization, etc. Oral communities, on the other hand, are said to generate within them qualities that do not allow such sophistication in thinking and development to occur. Much later, and perhaps due to this seemingly simplistic dichotomy, the superiority of writing is given a new meaning that not only trashes in its way qualities of oral cultures but also affirms certain forms of writing originating from specific cultures. In light of new directions in literacy studies, especially the ideological model of literacy, this paper discusses how certain forms of writing have assumed the dominant position in literacy development, and at the same time, have forced other non-dominant forms that also have potential literacy values to always abide by the dominant forms in order to be called literacy.

B. Literacy and Written Language

Civilization of various forms has tended to develop systems by which its values can be documented and passed through generations. Either through reliance on memory and storytelling or through writing, the degree to which the values of a certain culture are preserved very much determines which of the two labels it will acquire: literate or illiterate. It is often easily assumed that we now live in the 'literate' world because this world is fueled by technologies that are made possible by one powerful grant technology namely writing. This assumption, more often than not, also demands that we think of others who do not depend on a writing system as illiterates. In this regard, Ong (1986) asserts that writing, as a technology, is often used to wrongly assume normativity as though it is what separates literates from illiterates. In fact, according to Ong,

writing prevents us from seeing full truth: "we find it hard to recognize this obvious truth, so deeply has the fixity of the written word taken possession of our consciousness" (p. 20). Although writing is an intrusion, Ong admits that it is a valuable one, carrying out tasks that are problematic to the oral world and "accelerating the evolution of consciousness as nothing else before does" (p.23).

What is it that makes writing perceived as superior to oral? First, writing is believed to promote conscious thinking or analysis. Based on Ong's (1986) observation, the fundamental difference between oral and writing cultures lies in the fact that while an oral culture relies heavily on memory to hold information and preserve stories, and often with the main purpose of only retaining and not analyzing, a writing culture raises consciousness and encourages analysis "by distancing thought, alienating it from its original habitat in sounded words, writing raises consciousness" (p. 23). Second, because language is significant for acquiring cultural essentials, writing too as the symbolic and representational systems of that culture becomes essential (Olson, 1995).

Olson maintains that writing does not only serve to transcribe speech as many would perceive, it also promotes cognitive development and a model for speech, adding "a new type of structure to the world and in coming to use that structure, that is, in reading and writing, learners learn something that we have by and large overlooked" (107). Also central to theorists such as Ong and Olson is that "there are functions of language that are significantly affected by the mastery of a writing system, particularly its logical functions" (Street, 1984, p. 20).

With these qualities said about writing, it is indeed very easy that one would fall into describing the non-writing world as illiterate. Scribner and Cole (1981) cautiously express their concerns that it is in fact problematic to prove that writing has cognitive effects if evidence is

derived from a historical account of cultural and social changes. They warn that we ought to draw a clear distinction between historical and contemporaneous affects of writing. What was perhaps true about writing during its early development might no longer be true in contemporaneous society. Street (1984) similarly argues that "the anthropological evidence suggests that there is scientific and non-scientific thought in all societies and within all individuals" (p. 26), suggesting that there may have been a negative overgeneralization against oral cultures and negative overestimation in favor of writing cultures.

Ironically, even in the writing world we live in today with almost no oral-only culture left, this dichotomy has quite successfully gained its new meanings. In the academia for example, students who fail to adhere to specific ways of writing will be easily branded as "illiterate", a quite strong term for students who in fact know how to write in their own specific discourses. Overestimating certain forms of writing that are practiced in certain discourses or cultures as qualities that define literacy and downplaying other forms from less popular discourses or cultures may have serious consequences. If literacy is viewed as equal to specific forms of writing or vice versa, then the places in which these forms are mostly practiced (e.g., school, colleges, universities) will also tend to play a role in defining literacy. On this note, Scribner and Cole (1981) argue that because of the kind of data that many literacy researchers use to prove their argument, often comparing school and non-school writing products without taking into account other variables such background knowledge, "most of our notion of what writing is about, the skills it entails and generates, are almost wholly tied up with school-based writing" (p. 127). Not only have these new meanings of literacy situate people from oral cultures in the periphery by describing them as illiterate,

people practicing non-popular forms of writing such as those in minority communities too have come to be called illiterate.

This poor definition of literacy may make us too blind to see what literacy really means. The consequences of that are two-fold. First, when faced with one literacy problem such as writing problem, for example, we tend to look only into a pool of remedial programs that are perhaps only unique to certain discourses, such as school-based literacy practices or programs founded on specific purposes. Second, this limited view of literacy often ignores more global concerns of literacy problems that are shared by both dominant and non-dominant discourses.

In short, although it is tempting to suggest that writing in general supports cognitive development, critical thinking, analysis, and sophisticated thinking, more than oral language does, and that certain writing forms tend to be more appealing than others, we should not forget that literacy is not defined only by writing per se. Literacy involves so many other properties, such as language, thought, context, politics, and social values that are not unique only to writing. Examining the nature and the interplay of these illusive properties may be required before any solutions to a particular literacy problem can be suggested.

C. An Overt View of Literacy as a Universally Shared Property

Acknowledging the fact that literacy is a complex and rich concept, Street (1984) distinguishes between what he terms 'autonomous' and 'ideological' models of literacy. The autonomous model refers to a text-based and culture-specific literacy practice that often fails to account for the dynamics of literacy practices. The ideological model, on the other hand, recognizes the interdependence of values and qualities from both oral and writing cultures, and perceives them as mutually inclusive and reciprocal. It argues that meaning is always dependent on its social institution, has ideological and political significance, and is always

contextual and multiple. This model treats writing as a situated activity that can only exist within a community of practice involving more than paper and ink. It involves a web of interconnected elements that cannot exist in isolation.

The realization that literacy is not only reading and writing, and that this simplistic view of literacy is not sufficient to account for the dynamic nature of language use in social context has led to a quest for new directions in literacy studies. This realization requires that we divorce our understanding of literacy as referring only to reading and writing or ways of teaching them, and put in its place more global strategies and criteria that allow us to critique existing literacy practices and offer more plausible ways of defining literacy and mapping its boundaries. Street's (1984) differentiation between autonomous and ideological models of literacy and Gee's (1987) notion of multiple Discourses, among others, have led this quest for decades. What they all have in common is that their view of literacy offers an ideological stance by which any simplistic notions of literacy or any taken-for-granted aspects of literacy development can be scrutinized and examined.

Street (1984), for example, contends that "what the particular practices and concepts of reading and writing are for a given society depends upon the context; that they are already embedded in an ideology and cannot be isolated and treated as 'neutral' or merely 'technical'" (p.1). Street equates the term literacy with social practices to promote socially sensitive literacy practices that take literacy studies beyond merely reading and writing. As much as context is important to literacy, Gee (2008) asserts that understanding language too is imperative when defining literacy. For many, language as a tool for communication appears to be the default definition of language function. This tacit definition of language often carries with it a force that inspires individuals with norms, such as where they should stand or how they should be positioned or

perceived in relation to others. Viewed this way, language can indirectly communicate to them what they ought and ought not to do, according to the 'given' position or perception. Language then reveals to these individuals the choices that seem exhaustive and hides from them those that are still possible to attain. A more overt definition of language, on the other hand, allows us to see it as much more than a mere tool of communication, thus enabling us to deconstruct what-come-with-the-package social phenomena or 'built-in' social devices. Overt thinking, according to Gee, allows individuals to see the whole forest and not just trees. Both ways of seeing language cannot by themselves magically take command in individuals, only those who consciously choose to have such qualities are the ones who are able to cautiously and wisely navigate through social options and positions.

D. Toward an Ideological Model of Writing

If literacy is contextual, social and political and varies from culture to culture, it is then a luxury that cannot be confined only to people who reside in a culture with a written language. Likewise, individuals from non-dominant groups within that writing culture who have difficulties learning to write or read, should not be forced to only resort to the solutions that are based on the properties unique only to dominant groups. Any attempt to overcome such literacy "problem" requires that other literacy properties, issues and concerns, that are shared by all forces within that culture such as its social and political aspects be taken into consideration. Therefore, the proponents of New Literacy Studies such as Street and Gee vigorously express their discontent against the mystifying concepts of literacy: the ones that cause certain practices to advantage only those born and raised in a certain discourse, such as that in which reading and writing are prevalent and more practiced, and at the same time, disadvantage those who are, outside of or newly introduced to, this

discourse. This view requires that any attempt to promote literacy should also consider fully its relationship with language and its use in cultural, social, and political contexts. Doing so will help ensure that available literacy practices are products of a just and flexible system that allows fair comparison between cultural groups or discourses.

Examples of how an overt view of literacy plays its role in our surroundings are abundant. The term "remedy", for example, whether it is used in college or school environment, at a glance and by "default", suggests genuine sympathy and understanding, a term that acknowledges the needs of individuals and addresses these needs accordingly. However, when language is seen as a deeply rooted social construct, the term remedy reveals that it also embeds other hidden values that may be in contrast to the interest of those being sentenced to remedial programs (Rose, 1985). Beside sympathy and help, Rose argues that "remedial" writing programs can also mean isolating writers from their authentic learning environment and thus, not giving them opportunity to develop their writerliness in a natural manner. Only when seen this way can the term remedy be revealed as a system of exclusion that perhaps does more harm than good. The ability to think critically overtly and to critique social injustices is not exclusive only to people from a culture with a written language or a dominant discourse in that culture, oral and non-dominant writing discourses too have been anthropologically proven to be capable of processing scientific thoughts and thus, are literate in their own ways (Street (1984).

Another case can be drawn from a writing center context. Grimm (2003) elaborates on how writing center assessment needs to be approached. For example, although she still regards the idea of using quantitative assessment as important, she believes that if more evidence of writing center effectiveness is to be found, we should also pay attention to much more important issues out there that need to be considered, that are

not necessarily captured by this type of assessment. In affirming this soft approach, she established a solid connection between writing center assessment and Street's (1984) model of ideological literacy. According to Grimm, unlike the autonomous model which focuses on individual writers, the ideological model of literacy views writing as part of social practices and recognizes that writers belong to different literacy groups. This entails that what writers write should be assessed not based on one static form of assessment, rather against various forms, genres, and discourses. To her, based on this ideological model of literacy, "a discovery approach to research rather than prove-it approach" appears to be more appealing and convincing (Grimm, 2003, p. 46).

In composition studies, many scholars (e.g., Berlin, 1988; McComiskey, 2000) adopt a sociopolitical approach in defining what writing is and how it should be learned. Disturbed by the oversimplifying concepts of language and writing presented by many cognitivists that often assume universality of learning patterns, Berlin accuses them of treating language as "a system of rational signs that is compatible with the mind and the external world, enabling the "translating" or "transforming of non-verbal intellectual operations into the verbal" (p. 724). He adds that if this is how we see writing, we may run the risk of seeing it as "analogous to the instrumental method of the modern corporation" that assumes "beneficent correspondence between the structures of the mind, the structure of the world, the structure of the minds of the audience, and the structure of language" (p. 724). To Berlin, writing is always ideological and the writing processes cannot be fully captured by a certain scientific structure or model without considering their higher order concerns (e.g., social contexts, ideologies, etc.).

Similar approach is used by Mccomiskey (2000) in critiquing cognitive models of writing. He believes that the richness of language should not be limited by static rules, and that rules no matter how

sophisticated they seem, cannot be generalized and used to represent writing as a whole. He specifically suggests that writing pedagogies should depart from tasks that isolate students in their cognitive-based world and limit their exposure to different genres, critical thinking, and discourses, to tasks that make them involved in what he terms "postmodern communal democracies", which resemble a far more complex and intricate network of experience, knowledge, and wisdom. He argues that whatever we adopt into our instruction should not be mere passive deconstruction but rather active construction of political choices and ideological work.

All of the cases elaborated above have one thing in common: that ideology is an inseparable part of writing and thus literacy. Whether we talk about remedial writing programs, writing center assessment, or writing pedagogies, ideologies always play a pivotal role in making certain styles, forms, discourses, learning strategies and pedagogies as if they are universally accepted, disregarding all non-dominant forces that in fact identify with writing no less than the dominant ones do.

E. Conclusion

Since literacy practices are socially constructed involving so many different traits and qualities, a certain form of literacy evolving from the practice of certain cultures cannot be used to define literacy itself. Literacy is not simply the sum of its parts; it requires the realization and careful assessment of its dimensions and all components that are contained within it. Reducing literacy to either oral or written is not sufficient to account for the intricate nature of its existence. An overt or ideological way of thinking, in that regard, can greatly help change the way we assign meanings to literacy and help restore our true understanding of literacy as a system that promotes unity rather than a divide.

As discrepancies in literacy studies can be gleaned and identified through the lens of the ideological model, writing problems too can perhaps be dealt with the same way. We have discussed how inappropriate and unfair it is to address a writing-related problem using discourses that are foreign to a writer as much as it is unfair to base our definition of writing simply on the fact that a certain form is used more or more useful than others. Drawing on the ideological model of literacy, the ideological model of writing discussed in this paper helps prevent such hegemonic positioning within the field of education in general, and the field of composition in particular. Finally, it is hoped that this ideological model of writing would help non-dominant forces in the periphery regain their confidence to be once again "literate" and "civilized". It is by defining writing and literacy this way that we can make all this possible.

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