

New Literacies, New Identities
Changing Landscapes within Language Studies

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It is no longer possible to think about literacy in isolation from a vast array of social, technological and economic factors. Two distinct yet related factors deserve to be highlighted. These are, on the one hand the broad move from the now centuries-long dominance of writing to the new dominance of the image, and on the other hand, the move from the dominance of the medium of the book to the medium of the screen. These two together are producing a revolution in the uses and effects of literacy and of associated means for representing and communicating at every level and in every domain. Together they raise two questions: What is the likely future of literacy, and what are the likely larger-level social and cultural effects of that change? (Kress 2003: 1)

The issues raised by Gunther Kress above are extremely pertinent to this issue of 3L, the Journal of Language Teaching, Linguistics and Literature which focuses on the theme of new literacies and the creation of new identities of literacy practices. All articles engage with novel ideas of teaching and learning reading and writing and the subsequent creation of new identities of literacy within the fields of Language, Linguistics and Literature in the Asia Pacific Region. Each demonstrates a deep cognisance of the “larger-level social and cultural effects” that shape new spaces of literacy practises in varying contexts, as new insights are offered through discussions of pedagogical advancements, the employment of the performing arts, the incorporation of multicultural literary texts, the emergence and uses of new varieties of English, the new portals of communication generated in digital space as well as larger social domains such as the world of legal practice. These subsequently illustrate that the notion of literacy cannot simply be confined to the traditional ability of reading and writing, but rather that these take place

in a spectrum that reflects the sociocultural environment within which literacies are formed and performed and reflect thus the constant renewal of the concept of literacies and the attendant new identities that are created.

According to Leu et. al. “A New Literacies Perspective recognizes that a singular label, literacy, fails to capture the complexity of the changes that can only be captured by a plural label. Increasingly, scholars are beginning to recognize that changes taking place result in multiple new literacies required in different social contexts” (2004). The articles selected for this issue each demonstrate the complexity of literacy practices in the Asia Pacific and enunciate especially the diverse acquirements of literacy skills in different sociocultural contexts. Most significantly, when seen within the broader terrain of language studies, they reveal a rapidly changing landscape. Through their varied discussions, the extent of the shifting topographies of research in language studies can be discerned, for not only do they present various pathways to the changing concept of literacy, but more significantly these are reflected from fairly fresh angles that reveal the budding creations of new identities of literacy, disentangled from its traditional roots that were mainly “restricted to formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language” (New London Group, 1996). In short, as the authors advance their arguments on new literacies, new identities, they reveal simultaneously a progression into the realm of multiple literacies.

The domain of literacy studies is becoming increasingly eclectic. As in the words of Peter V. Paul & Ye Wang,

For many scholars, multiple literacies represents a paradigm shift when compared to notions of traditional literacy. Multiple literacies implies that there are different literacy genres and a variety of literacy situations, which may be accompanied by a range of literacy practices. Furthermore, information can be presented in multimodal formats with the use of technology—for example, sound plus print, sign language plus print, or graphics plus sound plus print. (2006: 305)

The various scholars whose voices resound in this volume on new identities of literacy practises offer a range of literacy situations and genres. Three articles offer pathways into Pedagogical and Curriculum Advancements and the establishment of new identities of literacy practices as they present and discuss emergent educational models and materials for the facilitation of new spaces for the learning, teaching and practicing of literacy skills within language studies. T. Ruanni F. Tupas discusses “a range of institutional and ideological contexts” which shape a student’s learning of English language in his article *Learning about learning: Literacy demands in ‘Singapore’s global university*. He argues that there is a whole range of “institutionalized literacy demands in English as an academic language” that pose problems for English language learning within the university yet proceeds also to offer pathways towards accommodation and change. He attempts this through an engaging discussion and delineation of the concept of “investment” and language learning, a concept developed, as he explains, by Bonny Norton Peirce. Such an approach, he argues, can ultimately lead academic institutions to “(re)negotiate terms and policies from ‘within’ in order to locate spaces of intervention and resistance to democratize the learning process.

Radha Nambiar’s article, *Enhancing Academic Literacy among Tertiary Learners: A Malaysian Experience* offers similar pathways towards facilitating new spaces for language learning through an appealing discussion of the challenges tertiary students face in “reading, interpreting and critically evaluating an academic text”. She accomplishes this by presenting a set of interesting findings from a case study conducted with the objective of identifying strategies used by students in academic reading exercises in order to determine their ability “to cope with academic literacy”. The discussion is subsequently threaded through with a number of interesting modes and manners of guiding tertiary students to “help empower tertiary learners and enhance their thinking and learning process”.

In a similar vein, Roswati Abdul Rashid, Radhiah Ismail & Noor Haslina Mohamad Akhir examine the strategies used by introductory level Japanese language learners to learn and master this foreign language. Their discussion is based on data gathered from a study conducted to ascertain the effectiveness of foreign language learning in tertiary students and subsequently to determine strategies that students used to

of enhanced outside the classroom. They demonstrate that significant amongst their findings was the fact that the mastering of literacy skills in the Japanese language was seen to be most effectively acquired and achieved through a significant amount of autonomous learning. While not dismissing the significance of the part that the traditional teacher mediated learning environment played, the greater part of the acquisition of literacy skills in a foreign language was engendered by various learning styles initiated by the students. The authors conclude that the acquisition of literacy skills in a foreign language can best be achieved through a collaborative learning environment that involves the participation of both instructor and student. They end with suggestions on how foreign language teachers can diversify techniques, materials and activities to enhance the potential of learners acquiring greater literacy skills in any foreign language studied. In this way, all three authors negotiate new spaces for literacy practises that are student-centred, concerned with the ways in which learners develop their literacy skills in the language studied and recording the various strategies that are employed in the process. As in the words of The New London Group (1996) “literacy educators and students must see themselves as active participants in social change, as learners and students who can be active designers - makers - of social futures.”

Further elaborations on the issue of language and new designs and designers can be effectively obtained within the area of emerging language varieties and the resultant new identities of literacy practices. Speaking on the issue of localised varieties of English that exist today, Ronald Carter expresses the opinion that

Part of the problem is that we always see local lingo as being lower than the norm, but it is actually different, serving various purposes and expressing varied cultures. And they have to be valued accordingly. Very often local varieties are a kind of lingua franca within communities and work best for the environment. People would use it as it enables them to communicate across different language and cultural barriers within a country or region. (cited in Nurjehan, 2007)

What this essentially means is that the creation of new identities of the English language in various cultures across the globe can effectively claim and create various new spaces

practicing of literacy skills. This is most often accomplished through acts of abrogating, appropriating and reconstituting traditional standards of the English language that ultimately open up more domains that facilitate socio-cultural intercommunication, a significant factor in the acquisition of literacy skills. Inroads into this issue are considerably paved out in Ganakumaran Subramaniam's article *The Changing Tenor of English in Multicultural Postcolonial Malaysia* as he examines "the challenges and concerns that confront the use and users of English in postcolonial contexts" and demonstrates that the inevitable changes to the language "are products of real needs and realities in new language speaking contexts". Merging renowned scholarly arguments on the subject of New Englishes with that of postcolonial thoughts on resistance and appropriation, the article presents a compelling exposition of not only the challenges that faced the "role and status of English in Malaysia" yet also, and more significantly, the ways in which a new (Malaysian) identity of the English language developed which was subsequently aligned with "the vision to make Malaysia a significant player in world economy by the year 2020, the vision to make Malaysia the centre for regional education, and the plan to create a multi-media super-corridor", literacy skills that were crucial for the nation in order for it to become a successful contender in the global arena. However, the author firmly concludes that while renegotiation of priorities in terms of the status of the English language have been necessary, its "tenor ... is never likely to be realigned to standard native speaker varieties".

The issue of varieties and its effect on literacy practises can be extended to the realm of literature and the arts, both significant fields within language studies and this can be gleaned from two articles in this volume. In *Identity, Nationhood and Body Politics: Pathways into the Yemeni World of They Die Strangers*, Yahya Al-Wadhaf and Norita Omar demonstrate the ways in which multicultural literature can provide avenues into the acquisition of multicultural literacy, an attribute that is highly significant in the contemporary borderless world. As the authors aptly put it:

a wide range of readers all over the world can gain access to narratives such as this, which otherwise would remain buried in their linguistic and cultural boundaries. Moreover, it helps to promote literary research in the field of comparative literatures and multicultural literary discourses by providing students

with immediate and easy access to literary artifacts being produced in different parts of the world.

It becomes increasingly apparent that we live in a world that is continually embroiled in various intercultural miscommunications. This article presents us with one form of antidote to this as it reveals the ways in which bridges may be built through literature, to facilitate the crucial spaces needed for the acquisition of multicultural literacy. Through a discussion that delves into the intricacies of the identity politics of the Yemeni community, both within Yemen as well as its diaspora, the authors provide us with “new horizons for reading multicultural literary texts such as the Arabic novel” which has been thus far marginalized within the field of literary studies. In this way, the article presents ways in which literature is instrumental in the journey towards creating spaces to facilitate the practice of multicultural literacy.

Theatre is yet another field within the arts that can be employed to create new spaces for the creation and practice of literacy skills and this is deftly shown in the article *Turning up the Volume: A Study of the Wan Smolbag Theatre Company* by Robin Taylor and Ian Gaskell. They provide an intriguing exposition of the ways in which theatre and more specifically the genre of theatre for development, can be engaged “as a means of communicating developmental issues to communities”. In so doing they show how this genre can facilitate the acquisition of significant literacy skills for, “TfD as a whole is concerned with the broader conception of building competence in 'critical literacy”, as “it creates a temporary discourse-community based on shared experience in a participatory and dialogic learning process”. The authors present findings from a research conducted on a theatre company in Vanuatu, Fiji, renowned for its theatre for development projects that focus on a variety of sociocultural issues such as “domestic violence, forest protection, AIDS awareness, incest, tourism, reef protection, good governance, dengue fever” amongst others. Through an absorbing discussion, Taylor and Gaskell, demonstrate that “the value of theatre in promoting social development is not just that it builds competence in communication; it also encourages individuals and communities to learn how to learn.” As such, it significantly enables the production of new identities of literacy practices.

The courtroom is yet another social space that generates the practise of literacies and this facet is the focal point of discussion in Noraini Ibrahim's article, *Building a credible and believable narrative: The role of direct examination in expert witness testimony*. As she argues, meaningful participation in this domain requires an awareness of "of literacy practices, which in turn, involve the acquisition and learning of the relevant and existing complex roles, identities, codes, registers and social artifacts". This aspect is discussed in terms of the role of the witness in legal cases, who more often than not, are individuals who are not "trained participants", unlike their legal counsel. She proceeds with an in depth examination of "several strategies successfully employed by the counsels with the corroboration of the expert witnesses during the questioning process" and also discusses "the role(s) of the judge, counsels and expert witnesses in the adversarial system practiced in Malaysia". As such, the article presents an interestingly novel feature of the study of language and literacy in the sociocultural domain.

A volume on new identities of literacy practises would be incomplete if it did not include a discussion on Digital Space and the influence of the World Wide Web in generating new spaces for the learning, teaching and practicing of literacy skills. This is effectively accomplished in Ruzy Suliza Hashim's article *Blogs of Their Own: A Story of Two Malaysian Women Bloggers* which simultaneously merges another significant aspect of literacy, that of gender. Through an enriching discussion, we are not only shown the ways in which digital space can be utilised as "a powerful medium of communication but also how women are beginning to use this space as a means to "express one's opinion, generate topics, present information, and facilitate new perspectives", all factors that are crucial in the developing of literacy skills. As the author points out the weblog allows women considerable space within which to negotiate "the line between the private and public dimensions of their lives". Her analysis of the articulation of the thoughts and expressions of two Malaysian women bloggers "highlight the sense of energy, optimism and empowerment which participation in cyberspace culture has produced" and significantly "act as a medium to persuade others to incorporate women's values and viewpoints into public structures in order to enhance the quality of politics, professional activity, and cultural life in general." The article consequently reveals that digital space

can successfully engender new identities within which women can practise and achieve new literacy skills.

Ultimately the articles selected for this volume present new passageways into the realm of literacy within language studies. They reveal that various new identities of literacy are constantly being formed and that these are instrumental in the provision of new spaces for the learning, teaching and practicing of literacy skills in the contemporary world. They consequently reveal that the path towards the acquisition of literacy need not necessarily be confined to traditionally limiting zones. The terrain is vast and there are many pathways that can lead towards the attainment of literacy skills.

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