

Research and Practice in Applied Linguistics
Series Editors: Christopher N. Candlin, David R. Hall and Jonathan Crichton

Exploring Literacies

Theory, Research and Practice



Helen de Silva Joyce
Susan Feez



Research and Practice in Applied Linguistics

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Exploring Literacies

Theory, Research and Practice

Helen de Silva Joyce

University of New England, Australia

and

Susan Feez

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*For Georgia and Ella
and the joy of your developing language and literacy skills*

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Bringing up the question of learning to read and write reminds us of the comment by the primary-school teacher who remarked, 'It's lucky we're not responsible for teaching them to talk. If we were they'd never learn that either'. Nevertheless, a surprising number of people do become literate, mostly through being taught.

(Halliday 2009/1978: 178)

The literacy educator or researcher preparing to undertake research into their own practice, or into literacy education more broadly, will find a vast terrain of research literature to traverse. So it was with some apprehension that we embarked on the task of adding this title on the topic of literacy to the *Research and Practice in Applied Linguistics* series. Our brief from the series editors was to present 'a concise historical and conceptual overview' of the literacy field and to identify the 'many lines of enquiry and findings, but also gaps and disagreements' in the field. We were to provide readers with 'an overall framework for further examination of how research and practice inform each other, and how practitioners can develop their own problem-based research'. Importantly, for us, we were also 'to ensure many, often, competing voices are heard' (Candlin & Hall 2011: xii.). The extent to which we have met our brief will be for you the reader to judge. Capturing every important and illuminating research and practice-based orientation to literacy and literacy education is clearly beyond the scope of one volume. Writing about literacy, to adapt Firth's famous words, is after all just turning literacy back on itself using constructs that are 'neither immanent nor transcendent' (Firth 1951, cited in Butt, 2001: 1815).

All literacy artefacts are located in a particular time and place (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanič 2000) and, likewise, this book is unavoidably a product of the time and place in which it has been written. We have necessarily drawn on our own experience as literacy educators and researchers. While our outlook is international, the reader will become aware that this snapshot of the field has been taken from our location in Australia, and from an orientation to language and literacy development and education that owes much to the 'applied' linguistics

of Professor Michael Halliday and his colleagues. From this perspective language is central to all aspects of social development across the human life span.

In the development of the child as a social being, language has the central role. Language is the main channel through which the patterns of living are transmitted to him, through which he learns to act as a member of a 'society' – in and through the various social groups, the family, the neighbourhood, and so on – and to adopt its 'culture', its modes of thought and action, its beliefs and its values.

(Halliday 1978: 9)

One valuable legacy of Halliday's language-based theory of learning in Australia has been that literacy researchers and practitioners from diverse contexts and educational sectors share ways of thinking and talking about language and literacy development. By traversing the boundaries between developmental stages, from the origins of language in infancy and early childhood, across primary and secondary school and into adult life, researchers and practitioners have been able to collaborate on studies of language and literacy development between and across contexts and sectors that are often kept apart. Numeracy, numerate practices and numeracy teaching are also important features of the social and educational contexts in which language is used. The quality of research and practice within each context and sector is the richer for insights shared across these boundaries.

Another boundary that is becoming less distinct in educational contexts is the one that differentiates speakers of standard English from speakers of other languages and dialects. An educational linguistics makes it possible to describe in principled ways the differences between standard English and other dialects, and between English and other languages. These descriptions can be used to map well-targeted language and literacy learning pathways that start with learners' current levels of language and literacy before leading them towards their language learning goals. All language learners are striving to expand their use of language to achieve personal, community, study and/or vocational goals that are important to them. Whether students are identified as learners of English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL), or learners of English as additional language or dialect (EAL/D), or as English language learners (ELLs), they are all on the language-learning continuum, but at different points along the way.

As we have been exploring the field of literacy research and practice, we have compared the task to searching for tracks through a rocky terrain. While our geographical and theoretical location remains the reference point to which we return regularly, as the reader will find, the book contains many excursions into complementary, contradictory and competing regions of this complex and uneven landscape. While we do not seek to persuade readers to one particular understanding or approach, we do acknowledge that in our journey through the terrain of literacy research we have regularly looped back to a contextualised and rhetorical view of literacy as social practice informed by a language-based theory of learning.

During the writing of this book we have become particularly aware of just how bewildering and intractable the literacy research landscape must be for those who are new to it, and even more so for practitioners immersed in 'the tasks of ordinary devoted teaching' (Macken-Horarik 2012: 180). Yet, knowledge about literacy and literacy development, gained through research, can only benefit students, if literacy practitioners are able to transform this knowledge into pedagogy. The application of research to practice in turn refreshes literacy research agendas and keeps them grounded. Bridges are needed to connect research and practice and these are built by practitioner-based enquiry and collaboration between teachers and researchers.

Readers are invited to follow our journey across the literacy research landscape where we hope you will find tools for thinking about literacy as social practice, the pedagogy of literacy, and literacy in its role at the core of human learning. We hope that readers will be prompted to investigate a selection of the different aspects of literacy, whether these relate to how people practise literacy in social contexts or to the practical issues that confront the literacy educator.

The book is divided into three parts to trace one of many possible tracks through this vast terrain. Part I – *Literacies Education: The Landscapes of Literacy Studies* – briefly introduces in Chapter 1 four orientations to the teaching of literacy, together with the views of literacy and learning that underpin these orientations. In Chapter 2, the role of literacy in human societies over time is explored, alongside ways in which the development of written language has been implicated in the development and teaching of specialised fields of knowledge. Part II – *Lifespan Literacies* – examines the teaching and learning of literacies across the human lifespan. This begins in Chapter 3 where literacy learning in the home is examined as the foundation for children's transition to the early years of school. The focus of Chapter 4 is the variety of methods

through which literacy is taught in primary and secondary school. The final chapter in this part, Chapter 5, spans the social contexts of adult life, bringing into focus the ways people use literacy in community, further education and work contexts and the various forms of literacy education in adult contexts.

The final part of the book – *Literacy Research: A Continuing Project* – reviews a range of research methods, with examples of projects that have utilised these methods to research literacy in social contexts and in education (Chapter 6). The book concludes with Chapter 7, in which the voices of literacy researchers give us first-hand descriptions of their literacy research experiences. We are very grateful indeed to this group of researchers whose considered responses to the questions we posed are so encouraging and welcoming for newcomers to the community of literacy researchers and the practitioners with whom they collaborate.

We need to end this preface by thanking those who directly assisted us as we wrote the book. This includes Professor Christopher Candlin who extended the original invitation to contribute to the RAPAL Series and Dr Jonathan Crichton whose incisive feedback on various drafts provided valuable guidance as we finalised the book. And of course we must acknowledge Elizabeth Forrest of Palgrave Macmillan for her assistance and her patience, especially in the final weeks before the manuscript was submitted.

We again thank those researchers who enabled us to end the book with their insights and descriptions of their own journeys across the literacy terrain – James Gee, Maria Estela Brisk, Mary Schleppegrell, Annemarie Palincsar, Geoff Williams, Ruth French, Len Unsworth, Jenny Hammond, Anna-Vera Meidell Sigsgaard, Barbara Comber, Peter Freebody, Helen Nixon, Victoria Carrington, Anne-Marie Morgan, Debra Myhill, James Martin, Frances Christie, Beverly Derewianka, Claire Acevedo, Caroline Coffin, Carlos Gouveia, Ann-Christin Löfstedt, Rachel Whittaker, Brian Byrne, Anne Burns, Dave Tout, Stephen Black, Jo Balatti, Brian Paltridge, Sue Starfield, Louise Ravelli, Susan Hood, Jennifer Blunden, Helen Whitty and Nancy Jackson.

General Editors' Preface

Research and Practice in Applied Linguistics provides the essential cross-over between research in applied linguistics and its practical applications in the professions. Written by leading scholars and practitioners, the series provides rapid and authoritative access to current scholarship and research on key topics in language education and professional communication more broadly. Books in the series are designed for students and researchers in Applied Linguistics, TESOL, Language Education, Communication Studies and related fields and for professionals concerned with language and communication.

Every book in this innovative series is designed to be user-friendly, with clear illustrations and accessible style. The quotations and definitions of key concepts that punctuate the main text are intended to ensure that many, often competing, voices are heard. Each book presents a concise historical and conceptual overview of its chosen field, identifying many lines of enquiry and findings, but also gaps and disagreements. Throughout the books, readers are encouraged to take up issues of enquiry and research that relate to their own contexts of practice, guided by reflective and exploratory questions and examples that invite practical connections to their work.

The focus throughout is on exploring the relationship between research and practice. How far can research provide answers to the questions and issues that arise in practice? How should we warrant the relevance of research to practice? Can research questions that arise and are examined in very specific circumstances be informed by, and inform, the global body of research and practice? What different kinds of information can be obtained from different research methodologies? How should we make a selection between the options available, and how far are different methods compatible with each other? How can the results of research be turned into practical action?

The books in this series identify key researchable areas in the field and provide workable examples of research projects, backed up by details of appropriate research tools and resources. Case studies and exemplars of research and practice are drawn on throughout the books. References to key institutions, individual research lists, journals and professional organizations provide starting points for gathering information and

embarking on research. The books also include annotated lists of key works in the field for further study.

The overall objective of the series is to illustrate the message that in Applied Linguistics there can be no good professional practice that isn't based on good research, and there can be no good research that isn't informed by practice.

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Macquarie University, Australia*

and

*Jonathan Crichton
University of South Australia*

Part I

Literacies Education: The Landscapes of Literacy Studies

Introduction

In this opening part of the book the field of literacy studies is surveyed from several standpoints. First, it is explored from an historical perspective to consider changing views about what it means to be literate over time, in different contexts and for different groups of people. The field as a whole is then examined to take into account influences from other discipline areas, and key sociocultural concepts that have emerged from research, for example, *literacy domains, practices and events*, and common misunderstandings are identified and re-interpreted. Key terms such as *illiteracy, literacy, literacies, multiliteracies* and *numeracy* are introduced and explained, as well as overlaps between these concepts and ways they are integrated within the field. Readers are encouraged to reassess their current ideas and concepts in relation to various aspects of literacy and literacy teaching, and to extend their interpretations of current debates and research evidence.

In Chapter 1 a range of views not only about literacy, but also numeracy, are explored using an historical lens, as well as in terms of the influence of research across disciplines and social and economic agendas, which, in turn, have influenced educational approaches to teaching literacy and numeracy. Changing views about how literacy and numeracy should be taught are also examined. This is important because contrasting pedagogical approaches developed for different times and contexts continue to have their advocates, which leads to recurring 'literacy wars' (Snyder 2008). Regularly, often on the basis of contested evidence, politicians, the media and public administrators claim there is a literacy crisis, and promote superficial solutions to an inadequately articulated problem. As the exploration in Chapter 1 confirms, Graff's (2001: 3)

statement still resonates: '[a]s a student of literacy for over two decades, I cannot recall a time when literacy was not in a crisis'.

That literacy wars and crises can be so easily and regularly reignited in the public mind, no matter how disingenuously, is a reflection of how dependent post-industrial societies have become on literacy and numeracy to mediate all aspects of life, and how easily the community can be alarmed if access to this resource appears to be under threat. While literacy has been aligned with knowledge and power for millennia, access to literacy and the chance of a reasonable quality of life are becoming increasingly enmeshed for all levels of society. Fifty years ago, even in industrialised societies, people with low levels of literacy or with no literacy at all, could carve out dignified lives, but this possibility is receding at an accelerating rate for people in all parts of the world. An open question remains about what kinds of literacy, or configurations of different types of literacies, will be most highly valued as the 21st century unfolds. A re-examination of literacy and numeracy pedagogy, across the last century and into the early years of the 21st century, can provide a way of addressing the inevitable question of whether it is possible to deal with the 'enduring problems in literacy education, themselves a legacy of its history and of a time-honoured tendency to create false dichotomies or dualisms where none really exist' (Christie 2010a: 9). While the funding and resources available for addressing these enduring problems appear to be shrinking, there is no doubt of the expanding role played by literacy and numeracy in 'learning, in promoting personal development, in fostering self-expression and self-esteem' as well as 'conferring skills that build employability' (Christie & Simpson 2010: 4).

Chapter 2 offers a selective review of some of the many debates that have been generated by the study of literacy and literacy development over time and in different societies. Reviewing historical and cross-cultural perspectives and recurring themes is central to challenging fixed ideas about literacy and about becoming literate, as it enables us to see that studies of literacy are themselves products of specific times and places. As societies, cultures and technologies change, literacy and numeracy and what it means to be literate and numerate need to be re-evaluated. This chapter also examines systems of organised knowledge across academic disciplines, and how these are built through particular genres and language features, as revealed by literacy research. Understanding differences across academic discourses is crucial if literacy educators are to successfully apprentice students into the discourses of the academic disciplines that are key to achievement in educational contexts and subsequently in the world of work and social engagement.

1

Literacy: A Field of Evolving Terms, Definitions and Educational Approaches

Everyone has an opinion about literacy. When differing opinions about literacy are represented as conflicts in the media, through print and online newspaper articles and editorials, talk-back radio and online spaces, the spectre of a literacy crisis is raised, 'usually ... in relation to socio-economic change of some kind' (Snyder 2008: 7). While commentary is sought from politicians, employer groups, teachers, teacher unions, experts and parents, rarely, if ever, are students consulted. Everyone who believes there is a literacy crisis can give an example of the crisis in action: young people glued to their various electronic devices using text language instead of *correct* language; the young woman at the local store who can't add up the prices on a few groceries, young employees who can't follow written instructions and schools that fail to teach grammar or that teach a grammar parents don't recognise.

Reasoned debate seems impossible when the loudest voices are aligned with the political stance of powerful media outlets and vested interests who want to redefine 'professional educators and students as consumers' (Luke 2004, 2011). Those who wish to voice alternative views, even when based on considered and extensive research, are often accused of undermining educational traditions designed to build literacy and numeracy skills that will enable students to obtain employment and contribute to the national economy.

Quotes

Although no one has died in these wars ... there have been casualties. The persistent denigration of literacy teachers by the conservative critics in the media has damaged the morale of those charged with

the responsibility of educating the next generation of citizens. Hard-working and underpaid, without the social regard they deserve, literacy teachers have been bewildered, but also angered ... Moreover the collateral damage for the students in the classrooms of these battle-weary teachers and their confused parents cannot be underestimated (Snyder 2008: 9)

Clearly, debates around literacy education have concerned much more than matters of classroom method or remediation strategies. These debates have dealt with the nature and consequences of an individual's or a collective's becoming literate, and, moreover, with the consequences of becoming literate in particular ways. That is, we can insert into debates a concept of literacy that entails a set of individual and social resources that enable certain kinds of practices, events and organisational arrangements, rather than a single trait that is either possessed or not, or that is possessed in some quantity. (Freebody 2007: 15)

What it means to be literate, how literacy is defined and how best to teach literacy is difficult to determine because the answers to these questions have altered through history, are shifting in the present and will continue to change into the future. The term *literacy* is used as a label for a valuable 'set of behaviours' (Wignell n.d: 5) that enable people to learn and to participate in a range of social contexts, but as a concept it is complex to grasp and, as with all complex concepts, is reinvented in response to the context in which it is used, changing global and social structures, advancing technologies and individual aspirations. However, if the term *literacy* remains so value-laden for so many and at the same time is subjected to limited and limiting characterisations, then educators and community members are less likely to reconcile disparate views about literacy and its consequences. It is hoped that this book will assist readers to participate in considered and productive debates about literacy that account for its complexity and the multiple ways it can be developed.

Defining literacy

The terms *literacy* and *illiteracy* have shifted in meaning over the years. Traditionally literacy was, and still is in most dictionaries, defined as 'the ability to read and write', and *illiteracy* was defined as 'the lack of ability to read and write'.¹ However, now the term *literacy* has a number

of definitions and has come to be associated with ‘effective participation of any kind in social processes’ (Halliday 2007/1996: 98), so that we refer to financial literacy, health literacy, media literacy and even emotional literacy (Steiner and Perry 1997). But as Halliday goes on to say ‘[t]he problem is that if we call all these things literacy, then we shall have to find another term for what we called literacy before’.

In this book we begin by adopting the following definition of literacy, proposed by UNESCO (2004), as the:

ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.

This definition of literacy is then expanded to account for the shift over recent decades from paper-based to digital technologies as captured in the concept of *multiliteracies*, which means understanding ‘how different modalities separately and interactively construct different dimensions of meaning’ in texts (Unsworth 2001: 10). We also consider what it means to be numerate in the contemporary world, that is, having ‘the ability to effectively use the mathematics required to meet the general demands of life at home and at work, and for participation in community and civic life’ (NSW Department of Education and Communities 2013: 1).

Socially oriented research has revealed that different social contexts make different literacy and numeracy demands on people. Consequently people who are literate in some contexts may not be literate in others, and even people who are otherwise highly literate may have problems with some literacy tasks (see for example, research by Fawns outlined in Chapter 6). This has complicated what is meant by *illiteracy*, with many policy statements now concerned with levels of functional literacy and illiteracy in society. So while illiteracy is the total inability to participate in the literacy practices of the society, being functionally illiterate means being unable to use literacy skills to manage everyday social and work tasks.

In describing functional literacy, some assessment and educational programmes have focused on the literacy tasks people encounter in daily life, identifying three types of literacy (as defined by the National Assessment of Adult Literacy 2003 below):²

1. Prose literacy – the ability to search, comprehend and use continuous texts such as news stories, brochures and instructional materials.

2. Document literacy – the ability to search, comprehend and use non-continuous texts in various formats such as application forms, payroll forms, train timetables, maps, tables and labels.
3. Quantitative literacy – the ability to perform quantitative tasks such as computational tasks or recognising and using mathematical information embedded in printed texts.

It was assumed that dividing the literacy tasks in adult contexts into these three categories would result in a more fine-tuned assessment of adult literacy skills. Results of these assessments are compared across countries. For example, the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, an international study, found that in New Zealand between 1996 and 2006 there were significant improvements in prose and document literacy over those years. In a national report, measures of document literacy, prose literacy and numeracy were compared with those of Australia, the United States and Canada (Education Counts).³ International assessment studies, surveys and comparisons feed into continuing literacy debates in various OECD countries. Comparisons with other countries, such as the one above, are often used as an incentive to improve literacy levels within a country with the implication that particular country should be at the top of the scale.

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The meaning of the term 'literacy' appears to live something of a dichotomous existence. While superficially it is a word widely understood and used by the public, 'literacy' lives a double life as the subject of intense academic debate that aims to attach a concrete definition to what is a complex, dynamic and often mercurial concept ... Scholars have used the term 'literate' to describe, not only the autonomous skills characterised as forming an integral part of literacy, such as writing and numeracy, but the application of such skills and how their acquisition affects learning processes.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) regards 'literacy', in an attempt to recognise the diversity of definitions attributed to the term, as being beyond simply 'the set of technical skills of reading, writing and calculating ... to a plural notion encompassing the manifold of meanings and dimensions of these undeniably vital competencies. Such a view, responding to recent economic, political and social transformations,

including globalisation, and the advancement of information and communication technologies, recognises that there are many practices of literacy embedded in different cultural processes, personal circumstances and collective structures’.

‘Literacy’, throughout history and across societies, has encapsulated a varying range of skills and erudition, but its antonym, ‘illiteracy’, has always been synonymous with disadvantage. It is this definition that, perhaps, elucidates the concept best.

(United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe (UNRIC) 2015)⁴

Failing to become literate

In various parts of the world literacy and education programmes form a significant part of the work of international organisations such as the United Nations and the World Bank. At the end of the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003–2012), according to UNESCO (2015), there are 775 million illiterate people in the world and about 61% of these are women. In addition, the 80 million children who are not in school ‘are likely to encounter great difficulties in the future, as deficient or non-existent basic education is the root cause of illiteracy’.⁵ It is probably not surprising, when viewing UNESCO statistics on literacy in the world that developing countries with low school participation rates have low average literacy rates and that countries with compulsory schooling have higher rates.

The current United Nations literacy strategy is the *Literacy Initiative for Empowerment* (LIFE) 2006–2015, which focuses on literacy as ‘an indispensable means for effective social and economic participation, contributing to human development and poverty reduction’ (UNESCO 2007: 11). The strategy focuses on 35 countries with the highest levels of illiteracy through ‘advocacy, capacity, policy, country-led programs and knowledge sharing’ (UNESCO 2007: 12). The aims of the LIFE strategy are to meet the learning needs of young people and adults, to improve adult literacy rates by 50% and to achieve gender equity in education.

Debates about literacy rates in Western countries may seem to be of a different order, when viewed from a global perspective, but nevertheless they have been part of continuing community discussion for over a century. In the Victorian era in the United Kingdom literacy was linked to social order and industriousness, as in the Sunday schools established

by people such as Hannah and Martha More. In these schools students were to

learn of week-days such coarse works as may fit them for servants. I allow of no writing for the poor. My object is not to teach dogmas and opinions, but to form the lower classes to habits of industry and virtue.

(More 1859: 6)

There were also discussions about what materials to use to teach literacy and how to counter the influence of popular publications and radical literature.

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... as an appetite for reading ... had been increasing among the inferior ranks in this country, it was judged expedient, at this critical period, to supply such wholesome aliment as might give a new direction to their taste, and abate their relish for those corrupt and inflammatory publications which the consequences of the French Revolution have been so fatally pouring in on us.

(More 1801 in Kelly 1970: 78)

The link between low levels of literacy and delinquency or crime is continually made. The Basic Skills Agency in the UK reported that 'one in two prisoners have problems with reading while two thirds have problems with numbers' (*The Independent* 17.2.2002). In Canada it is reported that 'almost 7 out of 10 prisoners in Canadian gaols before 1996 had low literacy skills' with low literacy affecting 'both procedure and outcome in the courtroom' (Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police 2008: 20). Similarly, Black, Wickert and Rouse (1990) found that prisoners in New South Wales had serious literacy problems requiring intervention through educational programs but that these same problems were a reflection of literacy patterns in the general population.

Many adults who have succeeded in becoming literate remember the way they were taught to read and write at school, childhood memories often embellished over the years with nostalgia and mythology. They assume that it was the half-remembered style of teaching at their school that led them to be successful readers and writers, and that this style of teaching should, therefore, be used to teach all children to read. Other influences that may have contributed to their success were so much