19

Literacy as a Sociolinguistic Process for Clinical Purposes

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As an applied linguistic specialty, clinical sociolinguistics holds great promise for practicing speech-language pathologists and other pedagogical personnel. With the information obtained from this discipline, practitioners can utilize the methodologies and the data from the long-standing field of sociolinguistics to improve their clinical practices. Specifically, they can address potentially complicated issues with a fresh appreciation for contextual variables and a wealth of accumulated data that can inform them and increase the effectiveness and efficacy of their service delivery.

This chapter may serve as an exemplar of the power and benefits of clinical sociolinguistics. By reporting on some of the sociolinguistic data collected in the area of literacy, this chapter provides the practicing clinician with a richer conception of literacy than most clinicians possess and then demonstrates how this sociolinguistically enriched perspective on literacy can be employed within the clinical context.

A typical literacy perspective

In a recent study, the authors conducted extensive focus group research to determine what conceptions of literacy were being employed by practicing clinicians. These focus groups documented that many practicing speech-language pathologists had a fairly simplistic conception of literacy. That is, literacy was viewed as a straightforward process of decoding and encoding visual text and although it was considered a psychological skill, most clinicians deemed literacy fairly isolated from significant social considerations.

Further, they tended to view literacy as a secondary language system that employed systematically and explicitly taught component skills (e.g., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency) to create readers and writers. This conception of literacy – though simplistic – was expected. A simplistic approach to literacy instruction has been advocated both within the profession and across a number of other educational disciplines and publications (e.g., Chall, 1967; Moats, 1990; Lyon, 1999). Indeed, this perspective has given rise to a number of political mandates (e.g., National Reading Panel, 2000; Bush, 2001) and has sparked what has been termed the "reading wars" (Lemann, 1997; Goodman, 1998) since there is a debate over whether this isolated conception of literacy is valid and efficacious.

From the perspective of clinical sociolinguistics, however, a different story of literacy can be told. A story involving a more complex and socially relevant phenomenon incorporating the dynamic and the functional qualities of literacy that are so important to its effective use in the real world. To describe this more dynamic perspective, several areas of research involving literacy as a social construct will be discussed and the lessons learned from these data will then be applied to understanding how such sociolinguistic research can inform the literacy practices of clinicians and teachers.

A sociolinguistic consensus of literacy

Over the past two decades, there has been an emerging consensus of literacy as a sociolinguistic phenomenon that takes into account the language and cultural knowledge of the individual and how this knowledge is implemented within society. Scribner and Cole (1981), for example, described literacy as a set of socially organized practices that employed a primary visual symbol system in its own right and that created an adaptable set of technologies for production and dissemination of meaningful content. Inherent in this description is the *socially contextualized* nature of literacy and how societal influence operates to create literacy acquisition (e.g., Bruner, 1984) and to shape literacy practices (e.g., Street, 1993). This focus on literacy as a social phenomenon is crucial to understanding the complexity and the dynamic nature of this meaning-making skill. If we focus on some of the ways that social influence occurs within literacy contexts, we can recognize the paucity of the previously mentioned construct of literacy and we can employ actual data and their implications to guide our pedagogy. Several points about literacy – derived from this focus on social influence

– are detailed below and may serve as examples of the vast data sources available to the practitioner when employing clinical sociolinguistics.

Data source one: the acquisition of literacy is a socially constructed process

As the first demonstration, understanding how literacy is acquired naturally would greatly assist the teacher or clinician since this knowledge could be modified and employed for teaching purposes. With regard to literacy acquisition, nearly thirty years of research has demonstrated that the development of literacy prior to schooling is a socially constructed process (e.g., Holdaway, 1979; Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1982; Heath, 1983; Cochran-Smith, 1984; Wells, 1986).

Literacy acquisition runs parallel to oral language development in that it involves a similar social interaction; the same kinds of mediating events and access to the same kinds of meaningful components described by Bruner (1983) in the acquisition of oral language are employed. This means that the child acquiring literacy is recurrently exposed to authentic literacy skills successfully modeled by proficient readers/writers via reading and writing aloud and through shared reading and writing activities. For his/her part, the child, when ready, has an opportunity to attempt the authentic literacy skills him/herself with the mediation and corrective feedback of the more capable reader/writer. So, for example, during the period of emerging literacy a child and his/her caregiver may pick up a book together and engage in the social act of reading. When this occurs, there is an underlying (and meaningful) social interaction that is employed so that the caregiver collaborates with the child to construct meaning from print. In engaging in this social framework, the caregiver can assist the child's internalization of what the author was trying to say by reading, discussing, questioning, inviting the child to participate, and by responding to the child's questions and other contributions. Clearly, it is through such socialized literacy activities that the child eventually acquires authentic reading and writing skills (Clay, 1979; Holdaway, 1979; Teale and Sulzby, 1986; Cambourne, 1988). That is, the social acts of reading and writing provide many of the conditions necessary for literacy acquisition and learning discussed by Cambourne (1988): the child may be exposed to excellent models of reading and writing, the child is exposed to the specific behaviors that are employed in reading and/or writing, the child can observe and internalize the functionality and meaningfulness of this social act, the child will have the chance to practice

and perform, and the child will be able to observe and recognize the joys of literacy – all through social modeling by individuals important to the child.

As with all other forms of meaning-making, literacy acquisition is social, natural and continual. It takes place within a recurrent and meaningful context through social interactions with people the child identifies with and, within any such literacy encounter, the individuals and their personal relationships are at the heart of the process (Smith, 1998, 2003).

Data source two: the concept of literacy is a socially constructed process

Since pedagogical practice is often determined by one's desired end point, it is important to understand the concept of literacy and the stability of this term and its counterparts. That is, if literacy is the objective, exactly what does the term mean and is it a "fixed" or a "moving" target? The sociolinguistic research indicates that while there is frequent discussion regarding literacy, illiteracy, and disorders of literacy (e.g., dyslexia, learning disabilities) in our society, the terms are not set categories. Rather, since literacy is a social construct, the definitions change over time and across various social contexts. Newman and Beverstock (1990), for example, investigated various definitions of literacy over historical periods and found that the conception of literacy changed from very basic skills (i.e., the ability to sign one's name), through the ability to read and write, to attainment of fourth grade reading level. With the current focus on high stakes testing, it is possible that future literacy attainment may not focus on actual reading and writing at all but, rather, on performance scores from de-contextualized standardized tests (Kohn, 2000; Allington, 2002). As a social construct, therefore, the labels or concepts are often just mirrors of the prevailing ideologies that are in vogue at any given time (Baynham, 1995).

This constructed character is also evident in the term *dyslexia*. Monaghan (1980) found that a number of definitions for dyslexia have been employed and that they are always reflective of the current social conditions and "received knowledge" of the time. Boder's (1973) definition, for example, employed a heavy reliance on standardized tests and strategies for reading isolated words and for word decoding rather than authentic reading and writing. This tendency for the social construction of disability and handicapping labels has also been documented in the area of learning disabilities (Coles, 1987). Consequently, we should not simply reify labels such as

literacy and dyslexia. Rather, as suggested by Street (1993), the conception of literacy should not be dichotomous (have/have not) but it should be viewed along a continuum that attempts to account for the complexity of this symbolic and social process.

Data source three: literacy is guided by functionality within the social context

One of the most important contributions of sociolinguistics to literacy pedagogy has been the work supporting the contention that literacy is not an isolated skill devoid of context or functionality (e.g., Heath, 1983; Bloome, 1989; Baynham, 1995; Gee, 1996; Hagood, 2002); literacy must have a contextualized purpose for effective acquisition, advancement, or implementation (e.g., Halliday, 1978; Bruner, 1990; Wells, 1990, 1994; Olson, 1994; Hinchey, 1998). When literacy operates within a situated context and when there are practical objectives or goals to pursue, then the literacy activities are more robust, more effective, and motivating for all involved (e.g., Edelsky, 1994; Oldfather and Dahl, 1994; Morgan, 1997; Roberts and Street, 1997; Gee, 2000).

This recognition that literacy is a socially constituted act requiring functional interaction with one's context has manifested itself in many ways. Based upon this functionality, various pedagogical philosophies and orientations have been developed. For example, *critical literacy* has been progressively suggested as a viable and effective component of literacy instruction over the past two decades (e.g., Freire and Macedo, 1987; Shor and Freire, 1987; Graman, 1988; Luke, 1988; Shor, 1992; Edelsky, 1994; Morgan, 1997; Egan-Robertson, 1998). Based upon the ideological work of Freire (1970, 1973), critical literacy is intended to get students to engage in literacy activities by making them more knowledgeable about how texts are used to reflect and advance certain struggles for knowledge, power, representation, and material resources (Cazden et al., 1996). So, for example, students may get more interested in reading and writing when they are doing so with an eye toward understanding how local merchants and the community government make decisions about playground development, or they learn more about how their own cultural backgrounds are reflected in basal readers, or they study the impact of the media on apartheid in South Africa and how it relates to racism in America (Sweeney, 1997).

Other manifestations of this functional interaction between literacy and context involve using literacy to help establish a student's self-concept as a person through reading and writing (e.g., Beach and Anson, 1992;

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Egan-Robertson, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1995) and to investigate how literacy helps individuals shape their own identities (e.g., Halliday, 1978; Kamberelis and Scott, 1993; Hagood, 2002). In each of these examples, literacy is employed as a contextually based tool that is created out of a commitment to understand social conditions, to affect change, and to form a more socially just and equitable society through literacy users' scrutiny of relations between and among language and language users. Additionally, these socially-based efforts typically result in achieving better literacy skills (Graman, 1988; Edelsky, 1994; Morgan, 1997).

Data source four: social adaptations to meet literacy requirements

The final demonstration of how sociolinguistic data can inform the clinician regarding literacy and its complexity involves the various ways that individuals with limited literacy skills create social adaptations to meet their literacy needs. Merrifield and her colleagues (1997) while studying rural and immigrant populations in various areas of the United States found that literacy was often so important that even when individuals were functionally illiterate, they employed social strategies to accomplish their literacy needs. Specifically, four main types of literacy strategies were used when needed. First, there were *other-oriented strategies* that involved using regular designated "readers," asking others for assistant with reading on an ad hoc basis, using other oral information sources, and gaining information through observations of others rather than reading instructions. This set of strategies has been well documented in minority-language populations. For example, Rockhill (1993) and Farr (1994) found that in many recent Hispanic immigrant families the women in the families tended to take on the responsibility of functional literacy for the family while they (or, more likely, their children) worked to gain functional English literacy. In these situations, these women often engaged others to assist them with literacy tasks, they quickly acquired specific sets of English literacy skills for a few frequently occurring literacy contexts, and they operated on a literacy economy wherein those more proficient in literacy helped those less proficient in exchange for other services or favors. Similarly, Metoyer-Duran (1993) found that in some ethnolinguistic communities there were information providers who served as literacy mediators to assist in required literacy activities. Interestingly, she found that literacy was often so important that these individuals – regardless of whether they were "official" literacy mediators or whether they operated on a voluntary basis – became "gatekeepers" between the mainstream society and the minority culture.

The other strategies identified by Merrifield and colleagues (1997) were *self-reliant strategies* including guessing, extensive use of memory, and selective use of text, *avoidance of potentially difficult literacy situations*, and *use of substitute technologies* like tape recorders, radios, and televisions to obtain the necessary information. When using these strategies, the illiterate individuals indicated their recognition for the power and necessity of literacy in certain contexts and they employed various social strategies to compensate for their lack of reading and writing proficiency. Their lack of proficiency, however, did not mean they could not participate in literacy activities; they just had to employ different socially-based adaptations.

Clinical applications from the sociolinguistics of literacy

While these four data sources reveal only a portion of the valuable information that can be derived from the sociolinguistics of literacy, they can be employed to modify literacy service delivery in clinical contexts. First, these data support the conception of literacy as a *complex social phenomenon*. The simplistic conception of literacy as a self-contained psychological ability cannot be justified. Consequently, it is important that the practicing clinician adopt a more robust conception of literacy, one that is more socially mediated, more contextualized, more authentic, and more functional. Further, more data from the sociolinguistics of literacy should be obtained to further expand this social construct of literacy.

Second, a more meaning-based and socially-oriented *re-conceptualization of dyslexia* should be employed. Given the fact that labels like dyslexia are socially constructed based upon the available "received knowledge" of the time, given the sociolinguistic data that supports the functional and meaning-based character of literacy, and given the fact that these labels are often transitory rather than permanent, practicing clinicians should employ Weaver's conceptualizations of "reading as constructing meaning" and "dyslexia as the ineffective use and/or coordination of strategies for constructing meaning" (1998: 320). This re-conceptualization will enable a more proactive pedagogy, enable a greater focus on meaning-based intervention, and not allow unsupported deficit models (such as the traditional definition of dyslexia) to reduce expectations for overcoming the literacy difficulties (Coles, 1987; Fink, 1995–6; McDermott and Gospodinoff, 1979; Weaver, 1998).

Third, the practicing clinician should employ a *more authentic and socially mediated approach to literacy intervention*. Based upon the data previously

discussed from emergent literacy research and from effective literacy practices, approaches should focus on authentic reading and writing for real purposes and the therapeutic effect should be accomplished through the active mediation of a more competent reader and writer (e.g., the clinician). There are several excellent pedagogical frameworks that might be effectively employed to meet this recommendation. For example, Routman's mediational framework (1988) of reading and writing aloud, shared reading and writing, guided reading and writing, and independent reading and writing will supply a general intervention format while many of the meaning-based techniques discussed by Clay (1991), Goodman (1996), and Routman (1988) will provide the functional and social models and feedback needed for the child to overcome any literacy deficits.

Conclusion

As hybrid disciplines such as clinical sociolinguistics are developed and expanded, the practicing clinician should carefully consider the advantages that such a field of study can provide. Often such interdisciplinary endeavors can supply different perspectives and an entirely new database upon which the serious clinician can build new and more effective approaches to service delivery. This short chapter has attempted to demonstrate the power and advantage of clinical sociolinguistics as it might be employed for the remediation of literacy difficulties. The potential of clinical sociolinguistics, however, far exceeds the demonstrations discussed in this chapter. The untapped data and applications await those clinicians willing to pursue these issues further. The advantages for both the clinicians and their clients will be significant.

Further reading

Coles, G. (2003) *Reading the Naked Truth: Literacy, Legislation, and Lies*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Edelsky, C. (ed.) (1999) *Making Justice Our Project: Teachers Working toward Critical Whole Language Practice*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994) *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Smith, F. (1997) *Reading without Nonsense*, 3rd edn. New York: Teachers College Press.