

6. Using Home Texts to Promote L1 and L2 Literacy Learning in the Classroom

Charmian Kenner¹

Children's motivation to learn about reading and writing stems from an understanding of the power of literacy in the world around them. Texts used in the context of everyday literacy practices - newspapers, videos, recipes, family letters – are of considerable interest to children and can serve as a springboard for literacy learning in L1 and L2. In this paper I shall discuss the 'Home Pages' action research project, which took place in a multilingual primary school in South London, where families were encouraged to bring literacy materials in different languages into school, and parents were invited to act as writers in the classroom. This approach promoted literacy learning in first and second languages. I shall discuss how a multilingual literacy environment can be created in the classroom, how it benefits children for whom English is an additional language (EAL) as well as those who speak English as their first language, and how such an approach might be relevant to the Irish context.

The New Literacy Studies: Literacy as a social practice

Shirley Brice Heath (1983) was one of the first researchers to draw attention to the specificities of literacy events in different cultures by describing 'ways with words' in the everyday life of two rural communities only a few miles apart in the southeastern USA. Her accounts of a parent emphasising exactness of interpretation when looking at a storybook with a fractious toddler in 'Roadville', or of a group reading and commenting together on the local newspaper out on the porch in 'Trackton', exemplify different kinds of talk around text. Heath identified patterns in the way

¹ Addresss for correspondence: Department of Educational Studies, Goldsmiths College, University of London. Email: c.kenner@gold.ac.uk

literacy events were conducted in each community, and linked these patterns with the underlying organisation of social life (such as adult-child relationships, and the moral values which were considered to be important). Such patterns of social activity around reading and writing have been termed 'literacy practices' by Street (1984, 1995).

In bilingual or multilingual communities, literacy events take place in more than one language and script, with participants switching between them. Such contexts give rise to a complexity of literacy practices. For example, as part of his discussion on the multilingual reading and writing abilities of Panjabi families in Southall, West London, Saxena (1994) describes the typical day of a four year old. This boy observes his parents and grandparents reading newspapers and novels, and writing letters and shopping lists in Panjabi, Hindi and English. As a result, he can distinguish between three different types of script, although his school literacy experience is restricted to English only. Research by Martin-Jones and Bhatt (1998) with older children and young people aged 9 - 20 in the Gujarati-speaking community in Leicester shows them adding their news to fortnightly family letters written to relatives abroad, joining in with prayer gatherings at home, reading novels and performing songs in Gujarati.

Making connections between home and school literacies

Mainstream teachers are not always aware of the variety of literacy events and practices taking place in bilingual children's homes, so there tends to be little opportunity for children to extend these literacies in their primary or secondary classrooms. However, if they were encouraged to do so, this could bring rich rewards in terms of literacy learning.

It was with the awareness that young bilingual children are likely to have such varied experiences that I began the 'Home Pages' research project (Kenner, 2000). I worked collaboratively with Helen, the teacher in a South London nursery class, for a whole school year, during which we aimed to develop a multilingual literacy environment in the classroom. Our purpose was to find out about the literacy knowledge that children were acquiring at home, and to encourage writing at school in other languages as well as in

English. This approach stimulated a great deal of writing during the year, both from bilingual children and from their monolingual classmates.

First, Helen and I needed to get to know the bilingual children and parents in the nursery in a new kind of way. We were interested in children's 'literacy worlds' at home and in local communities, so we began a dialogue with parents when they came into the classroom in the morning and afternoon, asking about any materials in different languages which children liked to use at home. In this way we found out that, for example, these young children enjoyed participating in letter-writing to relatives abroad. They would sit beside their mother or father as s/he wrote about the family news, asking about the contents of the letter and doing their own writing at the same time. Children also enjoyed watching a variety of videos, ranging from Thai karaoke videos in which the script rippled across the screen, to Bollywood films with titles in Hindi. One child loved his Spanish storybook of the Disney film 'The Lion King', a present from his uncle in Ecuador, and knew the accompanying audiotape off by heart. Another used two calendars with her family at home: a Hindu calendar with an illustration of a religious scene for each month and a Gujarati calendar with Gujarati numerals.

We encouraged families to bring these home literacy materials into the nursery, and invited parents to use them as a basis for writing their own texts in the classroom, such as a calendar, an airletter or a poster about a video. Children would sit next to their parents during these activities, often accompanied by their classmates who showed considerable interest in different scripts. The multilingual work was integrated into the nursery curriculum and served as a springboard for children to deepen their literacy knowledge. Two case studies are presented here to illustrate the literacy activities promoted in this project.

Case study: Mohammed writing the Arabic alphabet

Four-year-old Mohammed was being taught by his mother to recognise the letters of the Arabic alphabet with the aid of an audiotape of a children's alphabet song, in preparation for joining Qur'anic classes at the age of five. Mohammed's older siblings already had their own copy of the Qur'an, and Mohammed would receive his when he had learned sufficient Arabic – a

strong motive for literacy acquisition. We invited Mohammed to bring the tape into the nursery so that the whole nursery group could hear it, and asked his mother to make a poster showing the alphabet letters (with a transliteration in English) so that we could sing along with the tape.

The Arabic tape and poster were used as part of the nursery’s investigation of how graphic symbols relate to meaning – an essential building block for early literacy. As well as the English alphabet, we could now explore a new set of different-looking symbols which related to a different set of sounds. The teacher talked about this with the whole class, and, whether bilingual or monolingual, the children were intrigued. Extra impetus was given to their understanding of the concept of sound-symbol relationships.

Children were offered the opportunity to make an alphabet poster, with the Arabic and English versions as resources, and a number decided to do so. Mohammed was amongst them, and he worked with considerable concentration to produce his own version of his mother’s poster in which each letter was accurately written. His mother was astonished to see Mohammed’s work because she had so far only taught him to read, and she commented: ‘*He’s never written any Arabic before!*’

Figure 1. Mohammed's Arabic Alphabet Poster

ا	ب	ت	ث	ج	ح
خ	د	ذ	ر	ز	س
ش	ص	ف	ط	ظ	ع
غ	ق	ك	ل	م	
ن	و	ي	ه	و	

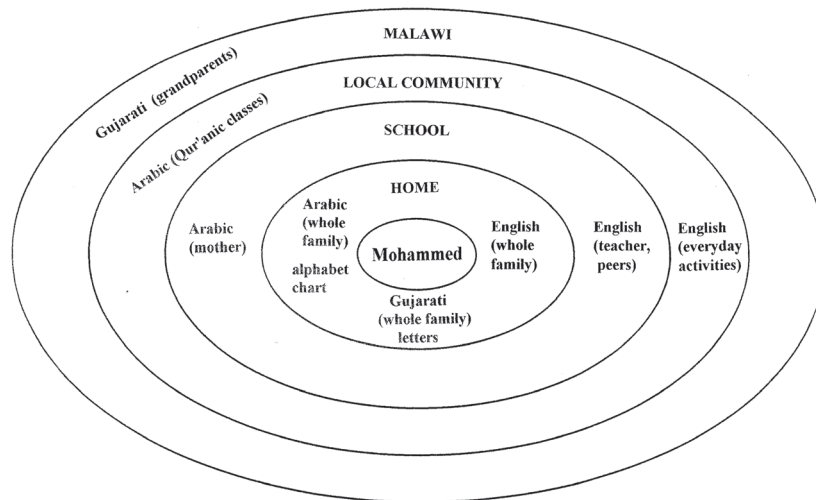
The detail of the letters was a considerable accomplishment for a four-year-old, and showed Mohammed's desire to become a writer in Arabic because of its importance in his personal and social world. The interest demonstrated by his nursery teacher in Arabic, together with his mother's example as a writer, had also proved powerful sources of motivation. Following this event, Mohammed's mother reported that he was singing the Arabic alphabet song more frequently at home, thus demonstrating the boost given to home literacy work by linking it with the classroom.

Mohammed's literacy world

A diagram can be built up to represent a particular child's literacy world, in order to gain more understanding of the multi-layered language and literacy environments in which they live. Such a diagram can be used for children or young people of any age, whether monolingual or bilingual. Each layer represents an area of experience, a 'domain', such as home or school. In the example given here, I have arranged these layers to show how each domain was located with respect to Mohammed - so 'home' is the most central for a young child, with Malawi, the country where his grandparents lived, being the furthest away. I have also tried to indicate the significance of each domain in terms of the amount of time Mohammed spent there - thus 'school' is placed between 'home' and 'local community'. I have noted some of the people he communicated with in each language, and some important places where literacy events might happen. I have also mentioned particular texts which were part of his life in languages other than English.

Mohammed's family originated from the Gujarati-speaking community in Malawi, East Africa. Mohammed was the youngest in the family, with an older brother aged 12 and a sister aged 10. At home, the family spoke both Gujarati and English, as well as using Arabic as a religious language. Mohammed's sister, Shaista, would write the English alphabet out for him and he would copy from this, so he could now write the letters A-G and his name, along with the numbers 1-15. As discussed above, Mohammed's mother was also teaching him to read Arabic letters, using an alphabet chart and song tape, so that he would be ready to go to Qur'anic classes.

Figure 2. Mohammed's Literacy World



According to his mother, Mohammed was a keen participant in home literacy activities; he was *'always asking for pen and paper'*. When she wrote letters to relatives in Gujarati, Mohammed sat beside her, adding his own 'wavy-line' writing on the same page. He would ask her *'What have you written? Read it to me'*, and he commented that the script looked different. He would write letters to his older cousin, who lived nearby, and pin her replies up on his wall. He would also make texts about his favourite subject, his father's car, saying for example *'This is Daddy changing the wheel'*.

Within the local community, Mohammed would ask his mother questions about the signs he saw in English when out on the street, and try to read them out. He could also discriminate between different makes of vehicle, since cars were his special interest, and could recognise some names such as *Vauxhall*. At the same time, he also knew of the Qur'anic classes which his siblings attended. Further afield, Mohammed was aware that his

grandparents lived in another country. Again, this was emphasised by the letter-writing activity in Gujarati.

The languages mentioned are the predominant ones used with each person or in a particular place. Mohammed and the bilingual people around him would switch between their first languages and English as a matter of course in most settings. Also, many texts he encountered would contain more than one language; for example, newspapers produced for bilingual communities in the UK include articles in English and advertisements in both languages. These are complex issues and the diagram operates only as a rough guide to remind us of the variety of children's literacy experience and the many possible areas in which they can participate.

Usually, the 'school' layer would not involve languages other than English. However, through this research project we made it possible for Mohammed to interact with Arabic in the classroom as well, via his mother's participation. The aim was to bring the literacy materials familiar to children from the 'home' domain into the 'school' domain, and use them as a resource for writing in the classroom.

Building home-school literacy links

Other examples of using home texts to promote learning in the classroom included parents and children writing family letters together, making posters based on a favourite video, or creating their own newspapers in a multilingual newspaper workshop. Each of these activities tapped into children's cultural knowledge and led to an increase in writing, both in English and in their home languages (Kenner, 2000, 2001, 2003).

For example, four-year-old Billy, whose mother was Thai and his father English, rarely wrote in the nursery. However, we discovered that at home he enjoyed sitting next to his mother when she wrote letters to family in Thailand. We invited Billy's mother to write an airletter in Thai in the classroom; Billy sat beside her and they talked together in English and Thai while he wrote his own letter, which consisted of symbols and lines in several colours. Billy's mother also modelled writing in English, by putting his name on a separate piece of paper.

Later that morning, Billy returned to the nursery's writing area, and sat at the table where the airletter writing had taken place. He began to write a number of symbols which were quite complex and resembled his mother's Thai writing. Billy commented *'I write like my mum'* and *'Mu-ang Thai' ('Thailand')*. That afternoon, he returned to the writing table and began tracing the outline of some plastic alphabet letters, identifying 'B' for Billy and finding the other letters in his name with adult help. He drew around each plastic letter with care and the result was displayed alongside the Thai airletters on the nursery wall.

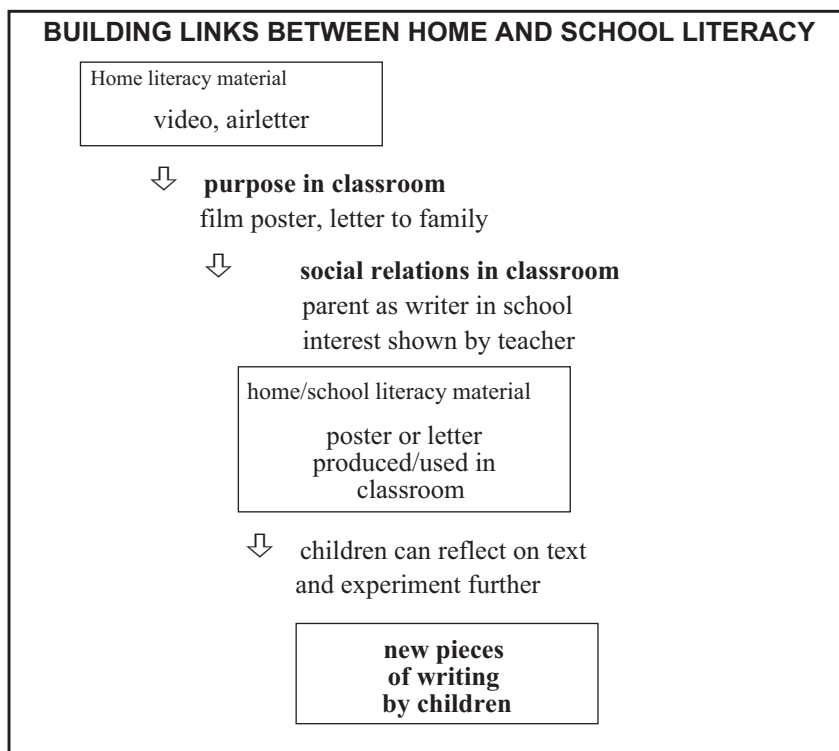
Shortly afterwards, his mother told us that Billy was writing a great deal more at home. She brought a plastic carrier bag into school containing 21 different texts: Billy had been writing on any available material ranging from notebooks to restaurant placemats. His writing included English alphabet letters from his name and the names of his parents and sister, and some symbols which looked like Thai.

Billy's teacher praised his writing and three days later his mother arrived with another bag, this time containing 27 pieces of writing. She explained that Billy was writing prolifically, even at breakfast time. As well as developing his knowledge of English alphabet letters, he had worked with his mother to copy a whole line of Thai letters. Billy showed these to us and again said *'Mu-ang Thai'*. His motivation for writing Thai at home had been increased by the prominence given to the language at nursery. Meanwhile, he had also become a more confident writer of English at school, continuing to use wooden and plastic alphabet letters to produce his name. The links between home and school thus supported Billy's literacy learning in both languages, in both environments.

This interactive pedagogy can also be pursued with children in the upper primary years and with young people in secondary school. They may have had the opportunity to further develop their biliteracy knowledge at community language school, or may have come directly from another country where they have been educated in a different language. As well as demonstrating their knowledge in activities which raise language awareness for the whole class, pupils can make use of their other literacies to write subject-based material. A project in a London secondary school

involved producing web pages in English and Bengali (Anderson, 2001), with a potential worldwide audience; this experience enabled the pupils to extend their range of writing in both languages. In this kind of work, texts brought from home can again be a point of reference; newspapers in different languages, for example, provide a resource for a vast number of culturally-related topics.

Figure 3. Building Home-school Literacy Links



How all children can benefit from a multilingual classroom environment

Whether they come from monolingual or bilingual family backgrounds, children and young people will need to build up experience in different

languages to take advantage of the study and job opportunities available to them in an increasingly globalised world. A European Commission report on education and training (1996) predicts that children need to be confident users of at least three languages (mother-tongue + two others) and recommends that children should learn other languages from pre-school onwards.

The Welsh Language Board (1999) sums up the advantages of bilingualism as follows:

- more creative and flexible thinking
- increased curricular achievement
- ease in learning a third language
- twice the enjoyment of reading and writing
- access to two cultures and worlds of experience
- enhanced economic and employment benefits

Biliteracy is therefore a resource for the future. Schools in the UK or Ireland need to do as much as possible to support children who already have knowledge of another language, and who are well-placed to acquire further languages by building on their bilingual experience (Baker, 2000). Schools also need to enable monolingual children to develop linguistic awareness and learn languages other than English. Creating a multilingual literacy environment in the classroom lays the foundations for providing these benefits. Such an environment can also be used to stimulate the learning of Irish, by encouraging the use of materials such as Irish TV and videos to spur writing in school. Once a classroom becomes a place where multilingualism is seen as an advantage, this boosts the status of all minority languages.

References

- Anderson, J. (2001) Web publishing in non-Roman scripts: effects on the writing process. *Language and Education* 15 (4), 229-249.
- Baker, C. (2000) *A Parents' and Teachers' Guide to Bilingualism*. Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters.

- European Commission (1996) *Accomplishing Europe through Education and Training*. Brussels: European Commission DGXXII.
- Heath, S.B. (1983) *Ways with Words*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- Kenner, C. (2000) *Home Pages: Literacy Links for Bilingual Children*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.
- Kenner, C. (2001) A place to start from: encouraging bilingual children's writing. In J. Evans (ed.) *The Writing Classroom*. London: David Fulton.
- Kenner, C. (2003) An interactive pedagogy for bilingual children. In E. Bearne, H. Dombey, and T. Grainger (eds.), *Classroom Interactions in Literacy*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Martin-Jones, M. and Bhatt, A. (1998) Multilingual literacies in the lives of young Gujaratis in Leicester. In A. Durgunoglu and L. Verhoeven (eds), *Literacy Development in a Multilingual Context: Cross-cultural Perspectives*, (pp. 37-50). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Saxena, M. (1994) Literacies among Panjabis in Southall. In M. Hamilton, D. Barton, and R. Ivanic (eds) *Worlds of Literacy*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Street, B. (1984) *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Street, B. (1995) *Social Literacies*. London: Longman.
- Welsh Language Board (1999) *Two Languages: Twice the Choice*. Cardiff: Welsh Language Board.