

The Conflation of Adult ESL and Literacy: The Views of Experienced Teachers

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At first glance, “literacy” would seem to be a term that everyone understands. But at the same time, literacy as a concept has proved to be both complex and dynamic, continuing to be interpreted and defined in a multiplicity of ways.

(UNESCO, 2003, p. 147)

Abstract

This article explores the links between English as a second language (ESL) instruction and literacy instruction through an examination of viewpoints from eight teachers in two Canadian provinces. Four of these teachers worked in government-funded adult ESL and literacy education programs for a large urban school district in the province of Ontario, and the other four teachers worked in similar programs in the province of British Columbia.

Introduction

We believe that the conflation of ESL and literacy education is in large part due to how the two fields have been linked to citizenship, nation building, and political reform. In England and the United States, for example, literacy education were major projects of the Luddite movement of the early 1800's, the women's temperance and suffragette movements in the 1850's and in the formation labour lyceums, mechanics' institutes and such organizations such as Myles Horton's Highlander Centre.

The history of literacy education in Canada has been marked by intense struggles over curricula, particularly in terms of the citizenship programming goals for second language immigrants who were enrolled in literacy programs (Walter, 2003). The most significant of these struggles occurred within Frontier College, the most prominent literacy organization in the country. Its dedicated and dynamic founder, Alfred Fitzpatrick, was a social conservative who promoted a vision of Canada that was based on a language-based hierarchy. Many intense debates within the organization occurred as to programming goals, but in the end, instruction was explicitly framed in the context of acculturating immigrants into Anglo-centric cultural norms. As Walter has put it, this aspect of Frontier College's mission "was the quintessential embodiment of the grand project of Anglo-Canadian nation building" (p. 1).

The history of distinct ESL provision within Canada has been shorter than that for literacy. Systematic provision did not begin until the 1970's with the advent of official federal policies of bilingualism and multiculturalism associated with significant increases in second language immigration to the country (Esses & Gardiner, 1996). ESL provision has been very closely associated with government funding, programming and policy goals associated with citizenship education (Fleming, 2013). Space does not permit us to provide detail on these points. It is suffice to say here that it is clear that citizenship education constitutes a very large part of ESL and literacy education in both the Canadian and larger contexts.

Our discussion begins with an outline of the connections and divergences between ESL and literacy instruction in terms of theory and practice. There exists theoretical confusion as to the connections and divergences between the two fields have resulted, as Murray (2011) argues, in research that frequently "conflates ESL and literacy." Second language ability is often discussed as if it were synonymous with L2 literacy. At the practical level Shohet (2001) and Miller (2003) argue that this conflation has meant that the heterogeneity of learners' needs in these contexts are not addressed at either the administrative or classroom levels, and that this situation has detrimental effects on learning. We continue this article with an outline the methodology for our study then present findings that focus on what each of the eight respondents told us in turn about how they navigated the tensions that exist between the two fields. In the discussion that follows, we argue on the basis of these findings that there is a pressing need for both theorists and practitioners to clarify how these two fields both converge and diverge. We believe that much of this confusion is due to how citizenship has been historically connected to adult education. In the Canadian context, we point out that citizenship has

particular significance for the two fields. We conclude this article with an outline of the key implications connected to our research.

Problematizing ESL and Literacy

Adult literacy education has traditionally been closely associated with second language training in immigrant receiving states such as Canada in large part due to the fact that literacy and ESL learners are quite often one and the same groups of people (Resnick & Resnick, 2001; Tight, 2002). Relatively low levels of education and literacy skills characterized expanding immigrant populations, starting particularly at the outset of the 20th century. Definitions of both ESL and literacy have also expanded in recent years within each of the disciplines, respectively. Literacy can be interpreted as a relatively straightforward decoding of written text that represents an engagement with the meanings constructed by an author or a process of interrogation in reference to the assumptions, values and orientation contained within a text (Janks, 2010). As Street (1984) pointed out, a full understanding of literacy has moved beyond treating the phenomenon as being a simple set of skills centered on the coding and decoding of text. Street (1984) argues, rather, that literacy must now be treated as a form of social practice in which multiple forms of text are negotiated and critically examined through explorations of the relationships between language practice, power relations and identity.

Similarly, the field of TESOL has changed somewhat with the advent of the *communicative approach* in the 1980's, which, as Allen and Widdowson stated in their seminal text, defines language as consisting of "the rules of use as well as rules of grammar" (1979, p. 141). The widespread adoption of the *communicative approach* has meant that ESL teachers were encouraged to teach the language in ways that took into account specific social contexts. This new approach is part of the greater impact of sociological concerns within the field, a trend Block (2003) has called the "social turn" In essence, the impact of sociological factors in these two closely connected disciplines have been the subject of increased attention in recent years.

The theoretical conflation of the two fields outlined by Murray (2011) has more than academic implications. As our respondents report below, there is a significant overlap in terms of how programming and course planning is conducted between adult literacy education and the teaching of ESL, particularly in the milieu in which these teachers worked. All of our respondents noted that teachers in adult education will often work across both fields within the same institutional setting without significant changes in their conditions of employment. As these participants reported, it is very common for teachers in this context to work for periods in one field and subsequently in the other. Thus, teachers were very much aware of both the differences and the similarities between the two fields.

This conflation between literacy and ESL also occurs at the levels of policy and teacher education. Policy statements, such as those of the Canadian Council of the Federation (2004), for example, use the terms interchangeably without distinction. Most popular ESL teacher training texts (e.g., Brown, 2000; Law & Eckes, 2000; Wallace, 1991) make little or no distinction between the teaching of literacy and the teaching of a second

language. Chapters within these texts also commonly represent the ability to write as relatively straightforward extensions of oral skills.

Additionally, Gunderson, Odo and D'Silva (2014) have argued that the debates about meaning of literacy have significant implications for teaching practice. The lack of clear definitions of where one field begins and the other ends results in situations where, as Shohet (2001) and Miller (2003) have pointed out, ESL learners are often placed in programs designed for literacy students and vice versa. This situation occurs despite the fact that "methods appropriate for immigrant students who are highly literate in their mother tongue are not suited to students with limited or no mother tongue literacy" (Shohet, 2001, p. 3).

There has also been significant work done on the conceptual and theoretical linkages between adult ESL and literacy instruction and education (Tight, 2002). This work is linked to developments in Canada at the level of curricula and instruction (e.g. Johansson, et al., 2002). Both adult ESL and literacy are forms of *andragogy* (Knowles, 1984), in which learners demand an immediate and concrete applicability of instruction that is clearly linked to their previous schooling. Given their maturity, adult learners also have greater power to insist upon having their needs met through instruction and generally have a clearer idea as to what these needs are. As Knowles pointed out, adults need to understand what the immediate purpose is for their learning, use experience as the basis for their participation, prefer to be involved in classroom decision-making, and tend to frame classroom activities in terms of problem-solving.

As Knowles, Holton and Swanson (2005) further noted, there has been a chronic lack of research in adult education that articulates how experienced teachers and program managers view the connection between theory and practice. This is part and parcel of how isolated the various strata remain within adult education (Taylor, Quigley, Kajganich & Kraglund-Gauthier, 2011). As one of our respondents below remarked, experienced instructors have had to find ways that help them negotiate the overlaps between the two fields without much assistance from theorists, researchers or curriculum writers.

Methodology

The research question guiding the study was "how do experienced ESL and literacy teachers understand the purposes of ESL and literacy education?" In consultation with the supervising managers for the largest public school continuing education departments in each of these two provinces, we approached a number of colleagues who were known to our lead author on the basis of his 20-year experience in the field as a practitioner. Eight of these experienced teachers accepted our invitation. These eight participants for the study worked in Ontario and British Columbia, the two Canadian provinces that receive the first and second most newcomers to the country each year.

All eight teachers had worked in programs that featured courses termed as being focused on ESL and literacy instruction for new immigrants to Canada. At various times, each had taught courses that had been designated as having one or the other focus. Thus, based on their experiences, these participants were able to make informed

comparisons between the two fields because they had had concrete and extensive teaching experiences in courses that had been so designated.

This qualitative research used semi-structured interviews as the principal method of data collection. Informed consent prior to these interviews was obtained from participants after the Ethical Review Board at the University of Ottawa approved the research plan. The participants were first asked to describe the highlights of their careers and then encouraged to provide definitions of ESL and literacy. The interviews then focused on what the participants believed to be the overall purposes of these forms of education. Finally, the participants were asked about how their understandings changed over time and encouraged to provide concrete examples from their teaching. While the majority of interviews were conducted face to face, several were conducted by telephone. Data collection took approximately six months.

The interviews were audio taped, transcribed and thematically coded through the use of NVivo Qualitative Research software. Coding was conducted in terms of identifying emerging themes and patterns that were related to demographic information, training, teaching experiences, career paths, and opinions as to the purposes of ESL and literacy instruction. Themes were then identified through comparisons of the patterns that emerged between various nodes. We did not discern any significant patterns in terms of the gender, age, socio-economic status, first language or ethnicity of this small sample of respondents.

We would like to note that in the interest of maintaining anonymity and because gender was not a significant response variable, we use feminine nomenclature regardless of the gender of our respondents. We have arranged the findings in our discussion below in the form of summaries of what our eight respondents reported, augmented with appropriate excerpts from the data. All of our participants have been given pseudonyms.

Findings

Given the hermeneutic nature of this research, we feel it is best to first report what our participants told us one by one in a descriptive manner. We progress to an analytic discussion of our findings in our subsequent section.

Anne

Our first interview was with a long-time literacy practitioner who at the time of this study served in an executive capacity for one of the largest provincial literacy organizations in the country. Anne had been involved in ESL and literacy for over 15 years as a teacher, program director, and curriculum writer. Our first participant noted that a recently published research report (i.e., Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2007) identified serious gaps in the knowledge base related to the combined field of ESL /literacy around definitions and terminology of literacy. These gaps were related to the way instructors were trained and in the way that resources were allocated to program providers. According to our respondent, these gaps had been discussed in recent conferences sponsored by various local advisory and advocacy organizations, including the National Literacy Coalition and the Ontario Region Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) Advisory Committee, major policy development

organizations in both the ESL and literacy fields. As Anne stressed, the confusion associated with the overlap between ESL and literacy was nothing new, and remembered discussing these issues at the beginning of her career.

This respondent also noted that the confusion related to the overlap between the two fields has had serious practical implications. Anne noted, for example, that potential teacher candidates often avoid joining what appear to be ill-defined fields. As we discussed above, respondent explained this rather well when she said that, “people are afraid to get into ESL/ literacy because... people don’t seem to know what they are doing and no one has been able to define them.” This quote underlines the practical and concrete affects that this confusion and overlap has on practitioners.

In the interview, Anne also noted that the poor sense of the boundaries between the two fields hampers the ability to coordinate programming. She explained how clearer definitions could streamline how citizenship, for example, is treated in both fields, stressing “we have to make a lot more connections between different kinds of programs and citizenship.” This quote underlines the practical and concrete affects that this confusion and overlap has on administrators.

Betty

Our second participant taught elementary school for six years before entering adult ESL and literacy instruction. Betty then taught employability skills at the community college level before taking on a supervisory role for literacy programs in her school district. All in all, she had had several decades of experience in literacy programs. At the time of our interview Betty had had nearly five years’ experience in a program designed to assist foreign trained professionals in gaining the credentials needed to access the Canadian labor market.

Betty corroborated many of the things our first respondent noted, especially in terms of the importance of making a differentiation between the needs of ESL and literacy learners. She told us that when she came to her school district, “we were fortunate because there was a distinction between literacy and ESL.” This fortuitous circumstance meant that literacy students could be streamed into classes that more effectively met their needs. Betty also stressed that literacy instruction must not only be limited to reading and writing skills, but must also engage learners in an “awareness raising” of what is going on in society. Our respondent stressed that this would mean, for example, that teachers must find specific ways to discuss voting rights in the classroom through the context of the concrete issues affecting one’s learners and their community.

Carrie

Although our third respondent had been trained as an ESL teacher, most of her 20 years’work experience in programs was as a supervisor of literacy programs for the continuing education program in her school district. As part of her duties, she conducted a multitude of training workshops for instructors.

Carrie stressed the distinctiveness of ESLand literacy programs, which catered specifically to those “second language immigrants who are not literate in the first

language.” She felt that the then current trend of melding ESL and literacy programs into regular literacy programs was a major mistake because this practice conflated the different learner needs represented by these two programs. As she described it:

there is ESL and literacy; ESL literacy is in the middle. There are commonalities in terms of learner needs, methodologies, content, and teacher considerations... but there are differences too, that are specific, depending on methodology approaches, content, resources that are unique to each of the three programs.

Carrie went on to elaborate that in her estimation second language literacy learners do not simply lack the ability to write. She also noted that these learners commonly had limited vocabulary and an incomplete command of syntax in the target language, and they lacked an understanding of the culture of the surrounding social environment. Our respondent also argued that literacy learners whose first language was English, on the other hand, usually possessed a command of common vocabulary and had few problems understanding anything that an interlocutor said to them.

Diane

Our fourth participant had over ten years teaching experience in both ESL and literacy. In addition, at the time of our interview, she had had five years’ experience as an editor of a national magazine that focused on literacy. Diane started her career as a volunteer tutor in her district’s ESL program and only gradually moved into literacy education through a pilot program designed to strengthen the writing skills of second language learners. Her employment became permanent when that program was expanded into a full-scale literacy program.

Diane told us that many beginning ESL classes typically developed a primary focus on literacy skills because of the needs of particular learners, noting that many immigrants from poorer backgrounds or war zones often had had limited formal education. She then provided us with an example of a class from the start of her teaching career that was designed to develop the oral English skills of Gambian immigrants. Diane found that she had to focus first on general literacy skills because her students lacked them, which meant prioritizing academic skills, such as attending to classroom tasks, setting goals, cognitive restructuring, and self-evaluation. Our respondent felt that she could turn to second language instruction only after her students had “learned how to learn” in a classroom setting.

Diane noted that no training was available in literacy instruction at the beginning of her career, and that many ESL teachers struggled when placed in a situation in which their learners lacked basic literacy skills. Luckily, concrete mentoring from more experienced peers and some training she gained through a local municipal service organization helped her “smoosh [ESL and literacy] together.” However, before her school district recognized the need to differentiate between the two forms of education and provide specific training in literacy instruction, she explains that “some ESL teachers just got placed into literacy classes and some of them were struggling.”

Diane argued that specific training in literacy instruction makes a great deal of difference to both teachers and learners. She noted that when she conducted workshops

for ESL teachers, her participants often underestimated the effects of previous education on their own students. These teachers often assumed that their students could easily transfer competent reading and writing skills from their first language to their second. She stressed that for learners with limited educational backgrounds, nothing could be further from the case. Many learners in her class lacked formal training in writing and reading in their first language and could not thus transfer any of these skills to their second.

Heidi

Our fifth respondent had taught for over ten years in both the ESL and literary components of her district's continuing education program before becoming its administrator. Heidi possessed a master's in Curriculum Studies and was working on her doctorate at the time of our interview.

Heidi emphasized that in her district, administrative and funding considerations strongly affected how ESL and literacy were defined. Since funding for the ESL component of her program came from the federal government, there were few accountability pressures associated with grades or advancement. The ESL component was required to satisfy federal officials in terms of the number of learners the program served, but the program did not have to provide them with an account of their curriculum or assessment procedures. This meant that the ESL teachers had to develop their curricula and tests.

On the other hand, the literacy component of the district's continuing education program received funding from the provincial Ministry of Education and was more accountable for its curriculum and assessment procedures. This accountability was reflected in the formal name for this component: Fundamental Language Arts. The teachers in this part of the program had to closely follow guidelines that were modeled on K-12 documents. However, teachers in the literacy component were not as concerned with attendance numbers as those in ESL.

Heidi noted that there were important differences between the two programs in terms of content. In the ESL program, the focus is mainly on language development and in the literacy program other areas are addressed, such as settlement and cultural integration. In contrast to the literacy program, the ESL program had clearly defined outcomes. To her, the hallmark of a literacy program was that there was more focus on writing skills. ESL programs, in her opinion, tended to also include more of a focus on oral skills.

Janet

Our sixth participant started her career 34 years prior to the interview as a high school teacher in the Middle East, where she taught grades 11 and 12 English. At the time of the interview, Janet had lived and taught adult ESL in Canada for 11 years. One element that our respondent stressed was the extreme variability of the learners that her colleagues encountered in their classes. There were "a lot of challenges [because] the needs [of these students] were quite different." This meant that teachers in this context have "to have different preparations for different students." For some students, "holding a pen or

pencil was pretty challenging.” Others “could read perfectly well but needed conversation skills.”

As corroborated by the other respondents in this study, the ESL students in their classes commonly came from a multitude of social class and educational backgrounds and from varying linguistic and ethnic communities. However, as our respondents pointed out, many literacy students were Canadian born and had advanced oral fluency in English. Like the immigrant students within these programs, they had limited mastery of reading and writing. As Janet noted, what was common to both the Canadian-born and immigrant students in the literacy programs under study here was their lack of exposure to formal education, which might be a result of their lower socio-economic status either in Canada or elsewhere.

Karen

Our seventh participant had been teaching full time in an ESL program for approximately four years at the time of the interview. Before then, Karen had taught extensively on a part-time basis in a literacy program for the same school district and been a teachers’ aide in a local elementary school for about eight years.

According to Karen, literacy was not limited to decoding skills; instead, it was also about learning to learn. As she expressed it, “if you are not literate in your own language, I feel that you don’t have the tools for learning, as it were, because you have never been through the learning process in either language.” She went on to say that teacher must help the learner “understand that there is even such a thing as an alphabet.” The experience of learning the alphabet is “like trying to invent a third language.”

Nancy

Our eighth participant had been teaching both literacy and ESL for 21 years at the time of our interview. Nancy declared that in an ESL class she would expect to see a majority of new immigrants, whereas students in a literacy class would be more advanced in the language. This is why she focused her literacy class more on their writing skills with a focus on job-related skills (e.g., writing a resume). As she stated:

in a literacy class, in my opinion, I would be gearing my students; I would be making my lessons more towards formal practicable skills that they can use – life skills. Whereas, ESL it’s more towards – I would give it more ‘Canadiana’. It would be geared more towards their local community, the provincial and of course Canada.

Nancy admitted that the biggest challenge for her is to attend to the needs of ESL learners with limited literacy skills in their first language. She had to teach basic writing skills that often included the mechanical aspects of using pens and pencils.

Discussion

As noted above, the research question guiding this study was “how do veteran ESL and literacy teachers understand the purposes of ESL and literacy education?” The themes that emerged from our treatment of the data were classified in terms of how our respondents identified the purposes of ESL and literacy education.

The limitations of our study are readily apparent. Our recruitment was based on the personal contact that our lead author had with supervising managers of the two school districts in question and the professional network that he had developed through a 20 year work experience in the field. We also relied on semi-structured interviews that took what these participants had to say at face value. We did not have an opportunity to conduct classroom observations to determine if there were any disparities between their professed beliefs and classroom practice.

These experienced ESL and literacy practitioners unanimously agree that there is a need to better delineate the fields of adult ESL and literacy mostly to better address the diversity of their students' needs. More precisely, participants declared that the lack of distinction between both fields made it more difficult for them to address the needs of adult ESL students with limited basic literacy skills. Our fourth participant, for example, was appreciative of the fact that she was also trained in literacy. She highlighted how important such training was for ESL teachers because it allowed her to better attend to the diversity of her students' needs. This distinction between the fields is not a simple dichotomy, however. As our third participant argued, there is a need to recognize the special needs exhibited by second language learners who have limited literacy skills in both their first and second language.

Our seventh participant, an ESL specialist, strongly believed that literacy could not be limited to reading and writing. For this participant literacy also referred to the ability to understand and learn. This refers to the comments of other participants related to the fact that in their ESL classrooms there was an increasing number of adult learners with limited classroom experience. As stated earlier, most current adult ESL teaching programs stress both language instruction and immigrant integration. A number of these participants in adult ESL instruction primarily focused on supporting learners acquiring the communicative and cultural competencies necessary to their integration (i.e., emphasis on oral and written production and comprehension and introduction to Canada's culture), whereas literacy instruction would be dedicated to the acquisition of competences necessary to their contribution to society (i.e., job-related writing classes).

Conclusion: Implications for Theory and Practice

Both language and literacy are inter-related and socially constructed practices that play central roles in learning and the transmission and mediation of culture (Vygotsky, 1978). One should not be therefore be surprised that ESL and literacy have been strongly linked in academic research (Reyes & Moll, 2008), language policy (Tollefson, 2013) and the design and delivery of educational programming (Murray, 2005). Indeed, as Murray points out, "traditionally, adult ESL instructors have considered themselves to be language teachers and that literacy was part of the language they were teaching." (p. 79) This points to how closely linked the two fields have been historically.

Whatever the cause for this conflation, on the basis of this study we argue that for both ESL and literacy practitioners, there is a need to clearly delineate the connections and divergences between the two fields so that we can attend to the diverse needs of learners. As discussed above, the conflation between them has often had detrimental effects on programming (Shohat, 2001). As illustrated by our participants' comments,

teachers often navigate along the boundaries of the two fields in their everyday pedagogical work.

At the classroom level, Murray and Christison (2011) advise novice instructors, “special strategies need to be employed” (p. 111) in the teaching of literacy. This is because of the great variability of written script worldwide, the recent advent of new forms of literacy, and the oft-noted link between literacy skills and the lack of formal education. As Gunderson, D’Silva and Odo (2014) assert the connections between language, culture and cognition is highly variable. One cannot assume that second language learners progress in terms of literacy skills from decoding to application and from automaticity to consolidation in the same age-dependent manner as native speakers. Second language learners are transferring literacy skills previously learnt in their first language and enter second language learning programs at various levels of ability. As might be expected, this is especially true for adult learners, whose life experiences make them well equipped to appreciate critical literacy.

When focused on literacy, teachers have to help learners critically negotiate text-embedded social practice as well as the mechanical skills of writing, the use of non-graphical forms of scaffolding (such as visual aids) and the explicit treatment of morphophonemic structures. When focused on English skills, teachers have to help ESL learners transfer the skills that they have already acquired in their first language to their second. These are two distinct although connected foci that deserve careful consideration by programmers and practitioners. Learners who have a firm grasp of the mechanical skills of writing in their first language, for example, do not need to spend time in class “relearning” these skills. Learners who have not yet acquired these mechanical skills do need this time. The heterogeneous needs of these two types point to the need for distinct programming and classroom treatment.

In short, there is a need for all teachers to understand the connections and divergences between literacy and ESL. As the teachers in our study have demonstrated, understanding these connections and divergences is not an easy task. We recognize this as experienced teachers and teacher educators ourselves. Teacher training programs should carefully delineate these similarities and differences.

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