Preface: Reading and Literacy in Developing Countries

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This issue of the Journal of Research in Reading should be thought of as interdisciplinary in a number of ways. It presents papers dealing with reading and literacy which originate in a number of research perspectives: psychology, linguistics, literacy studies, and education. Indeed, some of the papers provide a view from more than one perspective. In this preface we provide an overview of the way in which the two of us see the papers presented here in the context of development studies and informed by our views as applied linguists.

Given that most countries in the world face problems to do with "development" (King, 1998), categorizing countries as developed and developing may be of doubtful validity. However, while the UN has "no established convention for the designation of […] "developing" countries" (UN, 2005: 43), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) does publish a categorisation of countries as "less developed" and "least developed" countries based on a combination of human and economic indices (hdr.undp.org/hdr2006/). Development may be conceptualised in terms of increased national economic growth, or in terms of the meeting of human needs (Thomas and Potter, 1992), the latter seeing development as a process that not only frees individuals from economic poverty, but also enhances democratic participation, health and education, the status of women, and environmental sustainability, and reduces the vulnerability of the powerless. "Development to meet human needs" is not, of course, incompatible with "development as economic growth" (some holding that the former is inevitably contingent upon the latter), but the human needs perspective pays

particular attention to the manner in which growth is achieved, in which the results are distributed, and in which people are affected.

There has, of course, long been a belief that investment in literacy would have a positive effect in developing countries. Anderson (1966), for example, estimated that an adult literacy rate of about 40% was needed for economic development, although he adds that that level would not be sufficient if societies lacked other support systems. Indeed, the failure of the Experimental World Literacy programme, organised by UNESCO in 11 countries from 1967 to 1972, to generate development in those countries, provided evidence that literacy alone cannot be a causal factor in development.

However, although literacy may not be a sufficient condition for economic development, there is ample evidence that it is a necessary condition or an "instrumental" one, in the words of Olson and Torrance (2001: xi). Thus Azariadis and Drazen (1990), who looked at the development history of 32 countries from 1940 to 1980, concluded that not one of the countries where the threshold level of labour force educational quality, including literacy, was not met, managed to achieve rapid growth. Moock and Addou (1994) suggest that this threshold represents a level of education where literacy and numeracy skills attained are sufficient to be retained and rewarded in later life. If we accept such propositions, it is indeed ironic - although quite comprehensible - that in developing countries, where it might have had most to contribute, fundamental research into reading is relatively scarce.

However, while there is a dearth of research into reading as an individual capacity in developing countries, recent years have seen increasing research into social practices of literacy in developing countries - represented within the work of Blommaert (2005), Martin-Jones and Jones (2000), McKay and Hornberger (1996), Rassool (1999), and Street (2001; 1995; 1984), among others. Proponents of the social approach to reading talk of a complex of literacy *practices* and focus on literate *behaviour* which is "dependent on the social context" (McKay 1996: 421). Underlying such practices or behaviour, however, there must be individual processing, acknowledged in the observation of McKay (1996:421) that "literacy is a complex interplay between both individual skills and social knowledge." In other words, to create meaning at the functional, informational and personal levels through reading, an individual must be capable of (at the very least) understanding the language of the text, and the conventions of the associated orthography. This is the basis of reading for comprehension, with students who can generate meaning from the text independently, which is essential to formal education, which is in turn instrumental in development. To make such a claim does not mean that reading should be regarded solely from a psycholinguistic meaning-making perspective, but that there is a place for both the psycholinguistic and the social in attempts to illuminate the roles of reading in today's world: in the words of Triebel (2001: 42) "literacy and the process of becoming literate is more than alphabetisation on the level of the individual. Literacy cannot be separated from politics, social structure, culture or economy".

It should come as no surprise that four of the six papers in this volume feature African countries, given the history of African colonisation, and the fact that the introduction of colonial languages "froze the opportunity for development of almost all African

languages" (Spencer, 1985: 391), a point echoed by Mazrui (1996). Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (1994), point to the same effect with respect to the development of African languages to meet school subject needs; what little publishing there is in these languages tends to be educational publishing at primary level. This situation leads to a debilitating vicious circle: many African countries have print-poor African language environments, since there is very publication in these languages: one reason for this is that few people are fluent readers in the languages because they have had no, or very little, reading instruction in them (see also the papers in this volume by Pretorius and Mampuru, and by Hunt). This also means the bulk of research on reading and on literacy, has come from "the North", indeed, it has in particular in recent decades come from English-speaking countries, and has focused on English.

This leads us to another important factor: English and its role in a globalised world. One of the most obvious consequences of the extensive geographic and temporal range of colonisation (from the invasion of Wales in the 13th century to the take-over of Tanganyika in the 20th), is that English has achieved exoglossic status in some 75 countries (Crystal, 2003: 60), a status now bolstered by globalisation which depends on, and fosters, massive deployment of English as an international language in commerce, leisure and diplomacy. The language currently dominates the educational domain in developing countries, and the reading problems that such dominance generates are reflected in some of the papers in this special issue.

As an ex-colonial language, English flourishes in Africa and India, where the ambitions of politicians to promote modernisation through industrial development, tourism and international commerce are widely perceived as dependent on English.

Furthermore, the overriding concern of politicians in multilingual ex-colonial countries was with unification - at least at the level of civil administration – and this led them to favour English, with the primary school seen as a crucial instrument that would achieve this. Thus in 1976 the Zambian MOE claimed that:

> [F]or the sake of communication between Zambians whose mother tongues differ and *in order to promote the unity of the nation*, it is necessary for all Zambian children to learn the national language as early as possible, and to use it confidently" (MOE [Zambia], 1976: para 47 – italics added).

The national language referred to in this quote is in fact English, ideologized and promoted as crucial for national unification (c.f. Blommaert, 1999: 31). However, while opting for English may succeed in preventing conflict in the educational arena between competing language groups, it has created division between, on the one hand, those who have good access to it, typically members of the reasonably well-off urban groups, and, on the other hand, those who do not, typically the members of poor urban and especially rural groups. Heugh (1999: 306) claims:

> [T]he role of superimposed international languages has been hugely overestimated in their capacity to serve the interests of the majority on the continent [...] these languages serve only the interests of the élites.

Most families and students in developing countries are enthusiastic supporters of English-dominated education practices, seeing English as a bridge to the hoped-for salaried post, although in reality the use of the in education language is a barrier to fluent literacy for the vast majority. A wealth of research supports the view that literacy teaching in a language already known to the learners, typically their mother tongue, is more likely to succeed than teaching in a language children meet for the first time as they enter the classroom. Elley (1994), reporting on a survey of 32

countries, found that students whose home language differed from the school language performed less well on reading tests than those who were tested in their home language. The situation in Sub-Saharan Africa, where exoglossic languages (English, French and Portuguese) dominate primary education, gives particular cause for concern (Bamgbose, 1991: 81; Rubagumya, 1990: 2). Large-scale research carried out in southern African countries on behalf of UNESCO by the Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) found ample evidence in the countries of the region that the vast majority of primary school pupils were not able to read adequately in English, the sole or dominant language of instruction (Kulpoo 1998; Machingaidze, Pfukani & Shumba. 1998; Milner, Chimombo, Banda & Mchikoma. 2001; Nassor & Mohammed 1998. Nkamba & Kanyika 1998; Voigts, F. 1998).

Conversely, beneficial effects flow from use of the mother tongue, or a known language, in reading: research from Nigeria, Mali, Kenya and Tanzania, summarised by the Association for the Development of African Education (1996), supports this view, while in Burundi Eisemon *et al*. (1989) found that in tests of comprehension with year 6 students in Burundi, scores were significantly higher for Kirundi versions rather than French versions. Williams (1996) found that year 5 pupils in Malawi primary schools have largely achieved reading proficiency in their local language, Chichewa (the language of instruction for years 1 to 4). One reason for the positive findings for reading in a first (or familiar) language, is almost certainly that the initial stages of beginning reading are much easier, since psycholinguistic guessing strategies based on knowledge of that language can be brought into play, and students

use language knowledge to help them read, rather than use reading to help them learn the language, as is so often the case in reading English as L2.

Papers in this issue

The papers in this special issue consider a range of questions, from micro issues such phonological awareness in different scripts, to the way in which social practices in reading may be relevant to enhancing formal education. There is, however, a sense that the English language is ever present in the background – no paper fails to make mention of the language. Neither can one forget that developing countries are by definition economically poor countries, and that the research reported here has been conducted in a context where infrastructure may be weak, and where many people have serious material needs.

The paper by Nag Arulmani reports a 2 year longitudinal study carried out in India which investigated the reading of five to ten year olds in Kannada, an alphasyllabary. It found that phoneme awareness is slower to emerge in Kannada than English and that orthographic knowledge takes longer to master in the Kannada orthography. Mishra & Stainthorpe, likewise reporting on work from India, investigated the relationships between phonological awareness and reading in Oriya and English. The results showed that phonological awareness in Oriya contributed significantly to reading Oriya but not for the children in the English medium schools. That papers dealing with such micro-issues nonetheless bring issues of English into their work is eloquent testimony of its pervasive effect in the educational enterprise.

The next paper brings more fully into focus the problem of reading in exoglossic languages in developing countries. Pretorius and Mampuru investigate the effect of L1 proficiency on L1 reading, and of L2 reading on L1 reading, in bilingual settings when readers have few opportunities for extensive reading in their L1. They concluded that L2 reading contributed more variance to L1 reading than L1 proficiency (yet again an indication of the dominance of English in school settings), thereby highlighting the need for more cross-linguistic reading research in different educational settings.

The paper by Williams reports on the evaluation of an extensive reading programme in English in primary schools in Malawi: the purpose was quite simply to improve English reading at that level. The finding was that the programme did not have the expected positive effect on reading in English, and Williams concludes that implementing educational innovations in Malawi requires from the outset greater sensitivity to the cultural-educational context, and more critical engagement from Malawians. In a rather more ambitious vein, the next paper by Hunt describes an attempt to establish reading for pleasure in an African language as a social practice, and sees school as mediating with the extra-scholastic community, to produce 'culturally relevant' materials. But mastery of English is still seen as the *sine qua non* of educational achievement, and danger is that community languages will continue to be neglected as educational resources.

Finally, the paper by Openjuru and Lyster look at social practice of reading in Uganda. They document Christianity as one of the major influences on local literacy practices in rural community life. Here again the status of English is revealed in that

most reading and writing (including public notices) is in English, with Kiswahili and Luo used primarily in oral mode. Openjuru and Lyster recommend that curriculum development for adult literacy programs could benefit from taking religious literacy practices into account in adult literacy curricula.

Education is concerned with enhancing possibilities for all individuals, and not only those in rich countries. The tradition of flying "western experts" into developing countries, where they impose projects deriving from developments in their own constituencies, has often led to disillusion on all sides, despite the fact that the project is wreathed in the rhetoric of "partnership", and its proponents invariably well-meaning. A further consequence is that there is, in developing countries, a relative dearth of educational and psycholinguistic research on reading in indigenous languages driven by nationals from those countries. If developing countries are to gain true ownership and understanding of reading research, it is clear that projects in the target contexts with meaningful participation from local specialists is a necessary foundation. This is not to advocate a narrow parochialism, but rather that research in developing countries should not neglect local needs in favour of outsider preoccupations. Likewise, those in the rich world should not be preoccupied with reading research *for* those in developing countries, but also be ready to listen to the stories of reading research *from* those in developing countries. The present volume is a contribution towards this.

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