

# The Literate Bias of Classrooms: Helping the ESL Learner\*

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It has been argued recently that the language of the classroom is more decontextualized ("bookish" language) than the language of normal, everyday conversation. Those children who have had an early exposure to bookish language are better equipped, it seems, to handle the language of the school. For the ESL learners the problems are two-fold: they have to learn a new language and they have to learn the language of school. In

order to bridge the gap between the home language and the language of the school, an experiment in which reading materials were introduced into a print-deficient environment will be discussed. The results of this experiment indicate that the provision of books and regular reading in the school curriculum not only improves proficiency in the second language but also has a positive effect on academic achievement in other subjects.

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For a number of years now there has been a focus on the classroom and what happens within its four walls. Researchers have looked at the quantity of teacher talk and pupil participation (Flanders 1970), at types of questions asked by teachers (Barnes 1969), at the structure of interaction in the classroom (Sinclair & Coulthard 1975; Dore, Gearhart & Newman 1978; Mehan 1979; MacLure & French 1981, Stubbs 1983). It has been argued that the language used in the classroom is frequently different from the language used in normal conversational interaction (Barnes 1969; Olson 1977; Cook-Gumperz & Gumperz 1981; Heath 1982; Chafe 1985; Watson & Olson in press). Children acquire their first language in an oral environment through interaction with interlocutors in a "shared, extra-linguistic context" (Watson and Olson, in press; also Wells 1985), but in acquiring literacy—and for most children this process occurs in a school environment—they have to learn a new set of interpretative strategies. They have to:

make some basic adjustments to the way they *socially* attribute meaning to the events and processes of the every day world in order to be able to loosen their dependence upon contextually specific information and to adopt a decontextualized perspective. Among other things they must learn to rely on incrementally acquired knowledge rather than on what is said within any one

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context. (Cook-Gumperz & Gumperz 1981, p. 99, emphasis original)

This change has to occur at the early stages of elementary school so that children can both learn to read and subsequently use and develop this newly acquired skill in order to learn. ESL learners likewise have to make this transition; they have to acquire reading and writing skills, and they generally have to do it in a second language, as, for example, is the case for many children in the English-speaking part of Canada. Particular types of literacy skills have to be acquired for students to be effective in the school context as these are the skills that determine success or failure in the educational systems as they are presently constituted.

Unfortunately, it is the experience of most teachers that not all children easily manage this transition or accept the school language as a variety of language use to be assimilated into their repertoire of language functions. In a longitudinal study of three communities in the south-eastern United States (Heath 1982), it was found that in the "mainstream", "middle class" community "story reading" was a major literacy event in which the nature of the participation between children and parents paralleled in some respects the nature of the participation and interaction between pupils and teachers. Moreover, these parents took opportunities to engage in book-talk, to encourage children to tell stories which were not true and to fictionalize everyday objects. Children from such homes learned to accept "book and book-related activities as entertainment". As Heath puts it,

a pervasive pattern of all these features is the authority which books and book-related activities have in the lives of both the preschoolers and members of their primary network. Any initiation of a literary event by a preschooler makes an interruption, an untruth, a diverting of attention from the matter at hand . . . acceptable. Adults jump at openings their children give them for pursuing talk about books and reading. (p.53)

By the time these children reach school they have had ample practice in answering the display-of-information type of questions asked in classrooms in a way that is usually expected by teachers in the school context. These children have little difficulty in making the transition from a home language environment to a school one since there is a basic continuity between the two.

By contrast, the second community that Heath studied provided books for children, but it did not "extend either the context or the habits of literacy events beyond bookreading" (p.61). There was no "scaffolding" of questions about a story in the "initiate-respond-evaluate" style of interaction. Neither were children encouraged to fictionalize themselves

or objects around them. While these children performed well in the initial stages of the elementary schools since they had been orientated to print, they had some difficulty in operating in decontextualized, hypothetical situations because their home interactions had not placed a value upon these types of interactions.

In the third community, the child-rearing practices were different. Language development took a different path from that described in Brown (1973) or Bloom (1970). Books were not very prominent in the children's lives, nor were "what-explanations of their environment" (p. 66). There was a great emphasis on contextualizing verbal and nonverbal language. The transition for these children was the hardest since there was a marked discontinuity between the type and purposes for which they used language and the type and purposes for which language was used in classrooms.

For ESL learners also there can be discontinuities between home and school in at least two ways that are pertinent to this discussion. One is the discontinuity between the home and school language, the latter being English. The other discontinuity may be the differences in purposes for which language is habitually used at home and school. Like the second community in the Heath study described above, there may be some reading activities carried out at home, but stories may be regarded as simply accounts, not as events acting as springboards to delve into hypothetical possibilities or into abstractions of prototypes or prototypical behaviour. Or like the third community, there might be no orientation in the homes towards storybooks. The result is that both these discontinuities are likely to have an impact on the progress ESL children make in the school. The nature of that impact is not easy to characterize; there are many factors that may contribute to the level of achievement of an ESL student, factors like the level of proficiency in L1, quality of interaction with teachers in the classroom, cultural mismatch in classroom interactional styles and numerous societal variables (see Cummins 1984 for a fuller discussion of these issues).

Described in the rest of this paper is a study, carried out in Fiji, which shows one way that ESL learners can be helped to improve their proficiency in the second language and in their overall performance in other subjects. It may be one way to help bridge the discontinuities between language use in the home and school discussed above.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

English is a second language for the majority of the population in Fiji. The first language is either Fijian or Hindi (or one of a number of other languages with a small number of speakers). Most of the children

begin to learn to read and write in their mother tongue, which is also used as the medium of instruction for the first three years of school. English is taught as a subject from Grade 1, and at Grade 4 becomes the medium of instruction. The vernacular language becomes a subject on the timetable. Understandably, the transition to English is frequently difficult, particularly in rural areas where English is rarely used outside the classroom. Increasingly after Grade 4, English becomes the dominant language in the educational system. (For further details about the educational system, see Mangubhai 1984.)

In 1977, in a national survey of reading in English, it was found that approximately one quarter of Grade 6 children were unable to read simple English prose with enough understanding to cope with daily classroom tasks (Elley & Mangubhai 1979). One promising avenue for further research was identified in this study. It was found that those children with high achievement levels invariably came from schools with large libraries (in the survey defined as more than 400 books), and/or homes with many books.

In order to find out what impact books would have on children's achievement in English, a Book Flood Project was set up. Classrooms were provided with high-interest, well-illustrated story and non-fiction books in order to give maximum pleasure to young readers (Holdaway 1979) in the same way that children from homes where story-reading is a regular feature derive pleasure from such an activity.

## **Subjects**

Fifteen schools were pretested initially. They were predominantly rural schools chosen because the pupils would be exposed to English in the school environment only and were not likely to be in contact with much English (spoken or written) once outside the school compound. To be considered for the experiment, the schools also had to have few children's story books in the school, so that reading for pleasure was not likely to be a school practice. In these respects, they were typical of most primary schools in the rural areas.

Twelve schools were identified for the Book Flood Project. Eight of the schools received books and did daily reading for twenty-five to thirty minutes. This was in lieu of some other activity carried out during the English lesson. The remaining four schools received no books but were to carry on their normal English lessons. The time set apart for English lessons was constant across schools in keeping with the directives from the Ministry of Education. Thus there was no difference in the amount of time devoted to English by the experimental or control groups. The groups were matched so that they were similar in English reading ability and ethnic distribution. The eight schools selected for the book flood were divided into two similar groups of four, so that an

additional comparison could be made between two methods of using the books with the pupils: shared book reading and uninterrupted sustained silent reading. In each school a class of Grade 4 and Grade 5 students were chosen since (1) it was expected that pupils in Grade 4 would be reading in English; and (2) it was thought that books in English at that level (grades 4 and 5) might be easier to obtain. The choice of English was made to allow speakers of any language to be tested, and because there are so few books in the vernacular languages suitable for that level. Table 1 gives the design of the project as it was originally conceived.

Table 1  
Design of the Book Flood Project—1980\*

|                              | February | March          | April-October                      | November  |
|------------------------------|----------|----------------|------------------------------------|-----------|
| Shared Book Experience Group | Pretests | 3 day Workshop | 250 books supplied to Grades 4 & 5 | Posttests |
| Silent Reading               | Pretests | No Workshop    | 250 books supplied to Grades 4 & 5 | Posttests |
| Control Group                | Pretests | 1 day Workshop | Usual program<br>No extra books    | Posttests |

\*The school year begins in January and ends early in December.

### The Procedure for Using the Books

Books by themselves achieve little; they have to be read. In the study two different methods of reading were used so that a further contrast could be made between these methods. One was the shared book experience method developed by Holdaway (1979) and used extensively by European and Polynesian children in New Zealand primary schools. The teacher chooses a high-interest story with appropriate language and illustrations, and introduces it to the pupils in a "sharing experience" similar to that of a bedtime story. Discussion about the pictures, the likely content, the outcome, and a few new words is encouraged.

The teacher then reads all, or some of the story, to the class. To ensure that all of the group can see the text and illustrations, the book is frequently "blown-up" or rewritten in the form of a giant book, with suitably-sized illustrations. During the second or third readings, on subsequent days, children are encouraged to join in and read easier sections with the teacher, who continues to encourage discussion about the con-

tents of the book. Emphasis is placed on prediction and confirmation of events in the story, so that children are constantly striving for meaning. If children enjoy the experience, they will want to read it often, in the class group, in small groups, in pairs, or as individuals. Follow-up activities include role-playing, word study, art work, and writing activities. The origin of these activities is always determined by the story, not by any pre-ordained system of the proper sequence of structures and vocabulary to follow.

The other method of reading that was used in this study was the silent reading method. The eight teachers who used this method were given no special workshop. They were advised by the experimenters to display the books attractively, to read them aloud to the class occasionally and to let their pupils spend 20-30 minutes each day in sustained silent reading. The principles of this method were developed by McCracken (1971). Briefly, the rationale is that children best learn to read by reading, as often as possible. A definite period is set aside every day for reading during which time the teachers must set a good example by reading also. No book reports are required and no written exercises are set. The children read for enjoyment.

The eight teachers in the Control Group were advised to follow their normal curriculum in English, which was a structural audiolingual program. Children have two 15-minute oral English lessons each day in which new structures are systematically introduced, in appropriate classroom situations, with repeated drills, variations, substitution tables, etc. Reading is taught through carefully graded readers and activities are provided primarily for practice in order to consolidate the structures and vocabulary taught in the oral lessons.

## RESULTS

Eight months later, in November, all the classes in the project were tested again. Grade 4 was given tests of reading comprehension, English structures, word recognition and oral sentence repetition. Grade 5 had tests in reading and listening comprehension, English structures and composition writing. The results showed that the two Book Flood groups performed considerably better than the Control group in all four of the posttests. For Grade 4 (see Table 2), however, only the differences in reading comprehension and English structures were significant ( $t=4.16$ ,  $p<.001$  and  $t=4.00$ ,  $p<.001$  respectively)<sup>1</sup>. The other two tests, word recognition and oral sentence repetition, were administered orally to a smaller number of pupils and differences were not large enough to be significant (for further details see Elley & Mangubhai 1981a).

Table 2  
Mean Posttest Percentage Scores for Grade 4 Pupils

| Test                  | Shared Book |       | Silent Reading |       | Control |       |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------|----------------|-------|---------|-------|
|                       | N           | Mean% | N              | Mean% | N       | Mean% |
| Reading Comprehension | 71          | 56.63 | 84             | 58.26 | 65      | 49.06 |
| English Structures    | 71          | 42.63 | 84             | 42.09 | 65      | 34.43 |
| Word Recognition      | 33          | 72.90 | 42             | 68.34 | 29      | 63.10 |
| Oral Sentences        | 28          | 43.18 | 37             | 35.82 | 32      | 34.93 |

Similarly, Grade 5 results showed that the Book Flood groups, together and separately, did better than the Control group in all tests, though the differences were significant for two tests only, reading and listening comprehension ( $t=3.77$ ,  $p<.001$  and  $t=5.40$ ,  $p<.001$  respectively) but not for the English structures and writing tasks.

Table 3  
Mean Posttest Percentage Scores for Grade 5 Pupils

| Test                  | Shared Book |       | Silent Reading |       | Control |       |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------|----------------|-------|---------|-------|
|                       | N           | Mean% | N              | Mean% | N       | Mean% |
| STAF Reading Compr.   | 89          | 54.03 | 86             | 48.44 | 87      | 42.09 |
| STAF Listening Compr. | 89          | 46.86 | 85             | 42.51 | 87      | 34.71 |
| English Structures    | 89          | 33.10 | 85             | 33.30 | 87      | 30.10 |
| Composition           | 89          | 32.83 | 85             | 33.00 | 87      | 28.50 |

## THE EXTENSION OF THE PROJECT FOR A FURTHER YEAR

At Grade 5, a disturbing finding at the end of the first year of the project was that after five years of oral and somewhat less written English, pupils in all three groups were unable to write a simple story of about half a page. Yet these pupils were reaching a stage in their elementary schooling where there would be increasing demands placed upon them to produce longer and longer pieces of connected prose, in addition to reading increasingly more complex prose. It was also clear that after eight months of a reading program, the writing skills of the two experimental groups had not been affected in any perceptible way. The project was therefore continued with the same three groups of pupils for another year in order to ascertain whether the development of the productive skills of the experimental groups became evident in the second year.

The significant gains that the Book Flood groups made over the Control group continued into the second year (see Elley & Mangubhai 1981b, 1983 for further details). Grade 5 (previously Grade 4) students were given three tests: reading comprehension, listening comprehension, and structures; Grade 6 (previously Grade 5) were given four tests: reading comprehension, word knowledge, structures and written composition. At both grade levels, the Book Flood groups did significantly better than the Control group in all the tests.<sup>2</sup> But no significant differences were found between the Shared Book group and the Silent Reading group at either Grade 5 or Grade 6.

Table 4  
Mean Posttest Percentage Scores for Grade 5 Pupils—1981

| Test                    | Shared Book |       | Silent Reading |       | Control |       |
|-------------------------|-------------|-------|----------------|-------|---------|-------|
|                         | N           | Mean% | N              | Mean% | N       | Mean% |
| Reading Comprehension   | 65          | 39.00 | 68             | 40.53 | 62      | 22.95 |
| Listening Comprehension | 65          | 41.96 | 68             | 40.28 | 62      | 28.92 |
| English Structures      | 65          | 38.60 | 68             | 40.80 | 62      | 25.25 |

Table 5  
Mean Posttest Percentage Scores for Grade 6 Pupils—1981

| Test                  | Shared Book |       | Silent Reading |       | Control |       |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------|----------------|-------|---------|-------|
|                       | N           | Mean% | N              | Mean% | N       | Mean% |
| Reading Comprehension | 84          | 49.47 | 64             | 49.61 | 81      | 39.03 |
| Word Knowledge        | 84          | 46.23 | 64             | 46.83 | 81      | 36.89 |
| English Structures    | 84          | 43.90 | 64             | 42.13 | 81      | 30.37 |
| Composition           | 84          | 50.10 | 64             | 51.70 | 81      | 35.60 |

While at the end of the first year, no effects on writing ability were perceived, by the end of the second year it was evident that the effects of improved reading skill had a positive effect on the writing skill of the two experimental groups. The modal score for composition given in the Shared Book group, for example, was 9 out of 10. By contrast, the modal mark in the Control group was 2. Sample openings of stories which were given these marks indicate the difference in the quality of the writing of the two groups. These two examples are from the Shared Book group:

One morning when Luke's mother was washing, and the men were drinking yaqona, Luke was boiling the water.

One day, Tomasi's mother was washing clothes beside the river,



Tomasi's father was drinking yaqona under a shady tree, Tomasi was cooking the food beside their house, and his brother was carrying buckets of water.

The next three examples are from the Control group:

Is ther was the women in the tree. mothe sitg in the tree there was a looking at hes mother . . .

One day there boy Seru is make the tea to drinking his morth was the colth . . .

One day morning their were a house any village by the sea . . .

One other finding related to this Project is of interest. It is based on the results of the Fiji Intermediate Examination taken by Fijian pupils, but not by pupils from any other ethnic groups living in Fiji, in the middle of the Grade 6 year. In all subjects taken in this examination—English, General Studies (Science and Social Studies combined), Mathematics and Fijian language—the Book Flood groups performed well above the typical performance of rural schools (45-50%). The advantages shown by the Book Flood pupils were greatest, as expected, in the case of English and General Studies [ $F(1,100) = 14.82$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $F(1,100) = 17.62$ ,  $p < .001$  respectively] but there was also an unexpected spread of effect to Mathematics [ $F(1,100) = 13.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ] and a similar but less marked tendency in the Fijian language examination [ $F(1,100) = 2.83$ ,  $p < .10$ ]

Table 6  
Mean Percentage Marks for Fiji Intermediate Examination  
Grade 6, 1981

| Subject         | Shared Book |       | Silent Reading |       | Control |       |
|-----------------|-------------|-------|----------------|-------|---------|-------|
|                 | N           | Mean% | N              | Mean% | N       | Mean% |
| English         | 37          | 63.99 | 37             | 53.74 | 29      | 45.55 |
| Mathematics     | 37          | 55.30 | 37             | 54.30 | 29      | 41.45 |
| General Studies | 37          | 57.51 | 37             | 57.97 | 29      | 46.03 |
| Fijian          | 37          | 58.11 | 37             | 58.51 | 29      | 53.69 |

## DISCUSSION

The Project had set out to investigate the effects of providing a rich variety of high interest, well-illustrated books in classrooms where the norm has generally been to have only instructional readers and very little other reading materials around the pupils. It showed that ESL learners can make substantial improvement in their second language pro-

iciency in the receptive language skills within eight months, and in the productive skill of writing within twenty months by reading daily in the classroom for 20-30 minutes. It had been hypothesized that the Shared Book group would perform better than the Silent Reading group but this was not borne out by the results. From the visits to the classrooms it was obvious to the researchers that some teachers were not following the procedures for Shared Book reading and were not providing a stress-free environment that had been advocated. Consequently, this may have lowered the overall achievement of the Shared Book group. It seems that the Shared Book approach cannot be adequately assessed without a far greater control over the teacher variable.

The other finding related to this Project, that the Fijian pupils performed above the norms of rural schools in Fiji in General Studies, Mathematics and Fijian, suggests that improved proficiency in the English language had an overall educational benefit (Stubbs 1980; Cummins 1984). That there was an effect on the performance in the Fijian language suggests that some of the skills acquired through reading in a second language might have transferred to the first language (Cummins 1979; Swain 1981; Swain & Lapkin 1982). It may also be possible that the pleasurable classroom activity of reading tended to produce a greater motivation for, and a more positive attitude towards school work generally. Further research is required to tease out the factors in a reading situation that contribute to improved academic performance.

Most children in rural schools in Fiji do not have the opportunity to read for pleasure. Nor are such literacy practices prevalent in the societies from which the children come. Where the

skills associated with the representation of meaning in written language are not used or valued by parents and other adults in the home environment, children . . . [are less likely to] persist with tasks that they may initially find difficult or lacking in meaning. However, even with lack of home support, it should be possible for a child to make progress commensurate with his intellectual potential, if **appropriate opportunities are provided at school.** (Wells 1981, pp. 264-265, emphases added).

One of the "appropriate opportunities" that can be provided, it is suggested, might be the provision in the timetable for regular reading.

## NOTES

1. F-test used on residual gain scores produced similar results:  $F(2,258)=9.30$ ,  $p<.001$  and  $F(2,257)=10.90$ ,  $p<.001$  respectively (see Elley and Mangubhai 1983 for the F-test results).
2. F-tests used on residual gain scores (reported in Elley and Mangubhai 1983) showed the following significance. **Grade 5:** Reading  $F(1,225)=58.14$ ,  $p<.001$ ; Listening Comprehension  $F(1,225)=28.73$ ,  $p<.001$ ; English Structures  $F(1,225)=27.49$ ,  $p<.001$ . **Grade 6:** Reading  $F(1,230)=24.66$ ,  $p<.001$ ; Word Knowledge

F(1,230) = 30.17,  $p < .001$ ; English Structures F(1,230) = 24.73,  $p < .001$ ; Written Composition F(1,230) = 25.00,  $p < .001$ .

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