Mum and Dad prefer me to speak Bengali at home: code switching and parallel speech in a primary school setting

Linda Pagett

Abstract

Although it contains a statutory inclusion statement, England’s National Curriculum “hardly acknowledges the learning practices of different minority groups” (Gregory and Williams, 2003, p. 103). Through observation and interview, this study examines the repertoire of languages that six children for whom English is an additional language (EAL) choose to use at home and in their primary school settings in the West of England. The study bears out and extends previous research, which indicates that children from various ethnic backgrounds are involved in a struggle where they construct and reconstruct their identities according to the social situations they find themselves in. In addition to code switching between languages, the study reports on children using ‘bilingual parallel speech’, an unresearched practice. It shows that there may be a tension between schools’ efforts to build upon the children’s use of the home language and the children’s reluctance to use it in a school setting, where the dominant institutional language is English, and where they would prefer to appear ‘like everyone else’. Social capital would appear to be an important factor affecting children’s use of language and this may make them reluctant to maintain and develop their home language. Schools may need to consider strategies that value bilingual children’s commonality with the school culture.

Key words: bilingual parallel speech, code switching, intrasentential, intersentential, reference group orientation, cultural capital

Introduction

Inclusion

Notions of inclusion emphasise that accommodation is the responsibility of the school: the school must change its environment and policy to fit the children’s needs (DfEE, 1999). For children from diverse backgrounds, these needs can be identified only if there is some understanding of their language and literacy practices beyond school.

“Teaching has to be able to take account of the variation in literacy practices amongst students and give value to their different backgrounds and different literacies they employ in their home contexts.” (Street, 2003, p. 85)

Teachers are advised to:

“build on pupils’ experiences of language at home and in the wider community so that their developing use of English and other languages support each other” (DfEE, 1999, p. 37).

Research indicates the importance of using the home language to support learning of English as an additional language (Drury, 2004; Gregory and Williams, 2003); yet, this can only happen if children are happy to use their home language within a school setting. Children from diverse ethnic backgrounds may find themselves caught between two cultures where their identity in each is strongly related to language use. This might make them reluctant to use the home language in school, unless efforts are made to provide a truly multicultural classroom. This reluctance to use the home language may be echoed in the home environment, despite pressures to maintain it (Tannenbaum and Howie, 2002).

In their studies of code switching among primary schools in South Africa, Ncoko et al. (2000) found that children deliberately chose to switch between languages in order to hide their home language. In the UK, Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke found that “children when they start school do not want to appear different from their English speaking friends and may go through a stage where they are reluctant to speak the home language” (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2000, p. 29).

Code switching

Code switching usually takes two forms: intrasentential, switching languages within the same sentence and intersentential, switching languages in whole sentence chunks. Jenkins (2003) reminds us that much of the world is bi- or multilingual and in many parts of the world English is often spoken within a framework of code switching.
In her research into young bilingual learners in London, Drury (2004) conducted a close study of Samia, who was just beginning to learn English as another language. Dury found that Samia was reluctant to speak at nursery school, but in home play with younger siblings she was more confident, initiating games where as ‘teacher’ for her younger brother, she practised the English she had learnt at school. In order to fulfil the two purposes of keeping him in the play and practising her own English, she used a mixture of English and Pahari. Free from the constraints of the nursery school, Samia was able to use language purposefully in a strong social context, which required code switching in order to make meaning with her brother, and to practise her emergent English, in role as the teacher.

Drury concluded from her work with Samia that the “early desire to learn English and to adapt to the new socioculture is very strong” (Drury, 2004, p. 50). However, Samia was caught in the ‘double bind’ of needing to interact socially in order to acquire English, but without sufficient mastery of English to enable her to carry out this interaction with the new socioculture.

Identity

For most people, belonging to groups seems an important part of human behaviour. Our identity seems to be a continuous process, never completed and strongly influenced by the effects of important factors such as gender, class and nationality. Identity can be integral to the way in which we learn: research has shown that positive self-esteem depends upon whether or not children feel that others accept them (Siraj-Blatchford, 1994). However, there is only an emerging literature about racial identity, culture and social interaction. In her study of third-generation Asian children, Mills (2001) describes some of the negative reactions to a bilingual situation: “They can utilise avoidance strategies by refusing to use a particular language, fighting shy of contexts in which it is used; limiting responses to one word answers; changing conversation topics to another language” (Mills, 2001, p. 388). This may be because “choosing to learn a language signalled a particular identity and could affiliate one to a group. At different points in their lives, all the respondents had been faced with language choices and therefore choices of identity” (Mills, 2001, p. 400).

A study of students in a high school in the US undertaken by Eckert (2000) found that group identity is very important to students within a school setting. Members of such groups tend to wear the same clothes and cosmetics, and begin to speak in the same way. The groups she studied were monolingual English speakers but chose to copy each others’ pitch, pronunciation and grammar so that a ‘group language’ emerged, which helped to identify students as members. Eckert’s work emphasises the fluidity of identity and how it is strongly influenced by social contexts, in this case the school.

The project

I decided to carry out a small case study of primary school children for whom English was an additional language, to investigate their uses of (and attitudes to) the different languages at their disposal. This project was designed to:

- investigate the repertoire of languages that pupils with EAL choose to use;
- identify preferred languages in relation to social situations; and
- consider the influences on preferred languages in diverse social situations.

Two schools were chosen in which to conduct research. To capture situations in which bilingual children were an unusual part of school life as well as those where they were more fully represented, the two schools were in rather different locations. Both schools were in a rural county where, compared with other parts of Britain, there are few children from different ethnic backgrounds. However, one was a small town school with a roll of 600 children, but only a handful from ethnic backgrounds other than English. The second was an inner city school, smaller than the first, but with a much higher proportion of children from different ethnic backgrounds and a rich cosmopolitan mix. The children and their parents came from a diverse range of cultures, as shown in Table 1. Apart from one child in Year 3 (age 7–8), they were all in Years 5 and 6 (ages 9–11).

Table 1: Pupils involved in research project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pupil</th>
<th>Parents’ nationality</th>
<th>Year group</th>
<th>Parents interviewed</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Languages spoken other than English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bangladeshi</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Town</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Arabic/Bengali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Algerian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>French/Arabic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Nigerian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ibo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mongolian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mongolian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Malaysian</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Malay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Bulgarian</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bulgarian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

© UKLA 2006
All the children were fluent in at least two languages. They were all assessed as ‘competent’ in English by the school, which equates approximately to Levels 3 and 4 in England’s National Curriculum. So they were proficient enough to choose whether to speak in English or their home language in different social situations. The children had all acquired English sequentially rather than simultaneously: that is, they learned English not in tandem with another language, but after the first language was partially established.

Influenced by a pilot interview, which indicated that bilingual children in monolingual classrooms may be reluctant to use their home languages in school, even when talking to family members, the children, parents and teachers were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Questions were loosely framed to investigate what languages were used at home, what languages were used in school and whether there was use of code mixing. Because in initial face-to-face interviews the children appeared nervous and reluctant to talk, they were encouraged to use drawings to indicate where they preferred to use their home language and where they preferred to use English. In a group setting, with this opportunity to draw, they became confident, fluent and keen to talk about their language use.

The interviewer was previously unknown to the children and all interviews were, necessarily, conducted in English. The parents who agreed to be interviewed were all fluent English speakers. The parents who declined to be interviewed were not. This may have affected the findings considerably, as may the fact that the parents interviewed were all professional people, two of whom were planning to return to their home country after completing studies in England.

Findings

The children’s perspectives

All six children were very reluctant to use their home language at school. Pupil 1 stated:

Pupil 1: When I get to school I can’t say one word in Arabic or Bengali
Interviewer: Why not?
Pupil 1: I don’t know I try really hard to say it but I can’t say it. I don’t know why.
Interviewer: Are you too embarrassed to say it?
Pupil 1: Yes that’s it!
Interviewer: Why?
Pupil 1: I don’t know

He then referred to an incident where his cousin had unexpectedly come to school to take him home. The teacher had already described this scenario to me – the cousin and pupil had found a quiet place and whispered together. Pupil 1 described his feelings.

P1: They came to take me I was like Oh no I can’t come . . .
ten or twelve were listening (class mates) and I was Oh! No do you have to come?

Figure 1 shows Pupil 1’s preference for using English at school.

Figure 1: Pupil 1 – codes at home and school

Pupil 4, whose drawing appears in Figure 2 below, said:

Pupil 4: I feel it embarrassing [to speak to Mum in Mongolian at school] it’s just a feeling in my stomach really weird feeling I pretend not to hear it [when Mum speaks to her in Mongolian in front of her friends]

Figure 2: Pupil 4 – language at home
Interviewer: Would you prefer her to say goodbye in English?

Pupil 4: Yes

As Figure 3 shows, Pupil 4 was very analytical about her preferences to speak either English or Mongolian. She:

- recognised English as the dominant culture: “It’s a multi-language, if you go to another country people speak English, it’s comfortable to speak the language”;
- recognised the social capital of language in relation to the domains of school and Mongolia: “it (English) helps me make lots of friends (at school), when I visit my country I can speak (Mongolian) to my friends”; and
- recognised language use as being related to group identity.

Pupil 6 was also inhibited about speaking his home language to family members at school, but for a rather different reason. He was aware that other children might be disturbed if he spoke in his mother tongue to family at school:

Pupil 6: People will be saying “they’re talking behind my back”

At home, all the children spoke in their home language, at times, but the Year 5 children (aged 9–10) who were very fluent in English tended to listen to their families speak in the mother tongue but reply in English. This is not code switching, either intrasentential or intersentential. Instead, I would call it bilingual parallel speech.

Most children reported speaking to their siblings at home in English. This was so, even when their parents
could not understand. Pupil 1 described his father’s reaction when he spoke to his younger brother at home:

**Pupil 4:** my dad’s always saying “Why you speak in English all the time speak Bengali” they are so mad at us well not mad only joking they cannot understand they say ‘STOP TALKING ENGLISH’

Only Pupil 2 was reported to mix languages together (through intrasentential switching) when he was talking to a much younger sibling at home. His mother described this as using a bit of “Malay for the words he don’t know”. Her description was very similar to the scenario described by Drury (2004) of Samia playing schools with her brother.

The children’s accounts of their language use are summarised in Table 2 below.

### The parents’ perspectives

The parents interviewed were happy for the children to use English at home. One actually preferred it,

**Parent:** I prefer them to use English at home but the younger ones must learn Malay I want them to learn English. It is very important in Malaya

Another said:

**Parent:** I don’t mind [if they use English] Mongolian at home] I talk in Mongolian they answer in English, why not? we’re going home anyway and they’ll speak Mongolian there I notice my daughter has trouble remembering Mongolian so I remind her

This parent was obviously concerned that her daughter would return to ‘another life’ in Mongolia but had accepted that there was capital in speaking English. She herself had chosen to study in England rather than Mongolia.

However, the parents who were not interviewed, who, according to the school, were not proficient in English, may have preferred children not to use English at home. Pupil 1 stated: ‘Mum and Dad prefer me to speak Bengali at home, my mum doesn’t speak English really’.

The attitudes of the parents interviewed all appeared to reflect Kenner’s finding:

> “Whilst parents wished their children to grow up and speak in their language, they recognised that English was the dominant representational system and that children’s lives were inevitably bilingual and biliterate” (Kenner, 2003, p. 11).

To summarise, at home, to talk to their siblings, the children preferred to speak English, apart from one child who chose to speak to his younger brother using intrasentential code mixing. If the parents were English speakers, they preferred to speak to them in English. This was the case even where the parents were using the home language, and so gave rise to bilingual parallel talk.

The parents interviewed were happy for their children to do this but keen that they should also remember their home language. At school, all but one of the children preferred to speak English, even when they were speaking to family members: they experienced acute anxiety when family members spoke in the home language. The one child who did not experience such anxiety claimed to have spoken to a friend at school in Ibo, her home language. But no one had seen or heard her do this, so it may have been deliberately hidden.

### The teachers’ perspectives

Teachers rationalised their pupils’ choice of languages in school as being influenced by wanting to belong to

---

**Table 2: Pupils’ accounts of code use**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pupil</th>
<th>At school</th>
<th>At school</th>
<th>At home</th>
<th>At home</th>
<th>At home</th>
<th>At home and school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mother tongue spoken</td>
<td>English spoken</td>
<td>English and mother tongue</td>
<td>Mother tongue only</td>
<td>Bilingual parallel</td>
<td>Talking to siblings in English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the dominant culture. Teacher 1 said of the incident where Pupil 1 was unexpectedly collected from school: “He sees himself very much as part of the year group, part of his peers and he’ll fit in with the behaviour, the language attitudes, everything that fits in with Year 6”.

Teacher 2 stated (of a Korean pupil in her class not interviewed):

Teacher 2: The EAL service like us to [use the home language in school]. they don’t want to do things in their own language [in school]. they’re happy to have a calendar on the wall he spots Korean things in class but he doesn’t want a fuss about it

When asked if she thought there was a tension between wanting to use their home language as a basis for learning the new language and their reluctance to do so, she replied

Teacher 2: The EAL service like us to [use the home language in school] but we kind of know that you can’t really as long as you value them infer that ‘you can read really well in your language’ that’s enough they don’t particularly want to do their own language

This finding echoes Kenner’s observation:

“Although some schools displayed posters in different languages and offered premises for community language teaching and all celebrated festivals from different cultural backgrounds, almost all teaching and learning was conducted in English” (Kenner, 2003, p. 11).

What I found in the project schools mirrored Kenner’s research. The environment was monolingual and monocultural. Even though schools may be making explicit attempts to support the DfEE principles of inclusion by ‘responding to pupils’ diverse learning needs’ and ‘overcoming potential barriers to learning and assessment’ (DfEE, 1999), they are still subtractive environments, where the home language is submerged.

All the teachers agreed that the children wanted to be seen as being ‘like everyone else’, and this was echoed by a parent who said that when the family spoke together in shops it would be in English because: ‘we don’t want to be different outside (the home)’.

Discussion

In trying to analyse the findings, it is necessary to ask why the children were so highly motivated to use English. The parents were all immigrants or migrants and so this could have caused the children to want to distance themselves from their families, while in the ‘other’ domain of school. Previous research would support this finding.

“In immigrant families there is an aspect, which has to do with the children’s perceptions of their parents being foreigners.” (Tannenbaum and Howie, 2002, p. 409)

This could explain the unease the children felt with the use of mother tongue with their families in school and the way in which some of them used bilingual parallel speech at home.

If we are to adopt a view of identity as a fluid ongoing process (Norton, 2000), it is possible to see the children researched as involved in a situation, where they construct and reconstruct their identities according to the social situations in which they find themselves. Kenner (2003) describes the children she was working with who were growing up in London and learning more than one language and literacy at a time as existing in ‘multiple worlds’, which they experience simultaneously.

It may be impossible to separate language from the ideologies – systems of values, beliefs and social practices embodied in its use. In speaking English, children are affirming their acceptance of the dominant culture as they are when for example speaking Arabic in the mosque. English would appear to be the dominant discourse in a situation where the children are caught in a balance of power between two or more languages. Gregory and Kenner argue that

“in the majority of language contexts the balance of power is heavily in favour of the dominant language and literacy. Few opportunities are offered for children to study their home literacy . . . such opportunities are almost always in voluntary run, under-funded out of school classes – as a result children tend to focus more strongly on the dominant literacy” (2003, p. 185).

In reviewing the work of Anne Haas Dyson, Comber (2003) argues that “her work strongly suggests that when it comes to an analysis of language and power, young children have greatest investments in situations and texts that arise in their immediate social classroom worlds” (2003, p. 359). My informal observations of the two Year 5 pupils confirmed that they were highly motivated to be seen to be part of the school community. I record in my research diary:

“Children seemed relaxed. In a group we chatted and the conversation went at the pupils’ pace (rather than a formal interview). They were very keen to tell me about friendships and I noticed very different behaviour from the two very fluent pupils who were Mongolian and Algerian. They called out to friends and were very keen to tell me how many of those passing by were their buddies. One of them grabbed hold of a friend to show me how her hair was worn in a similar way. The less fluent Nigerian pupil had an accent, which easily identified her as non-English and she was much quieter and didn’t claim
friendship with anyone. I wondered if part of the faultless fluent English the Mongolian and Algerian girls displayed was a result of their intense desire to be friends with others and each other. They merged in seamlessly with the other pupils.”

The home language is not just a collection of words disembodied in culture but is saturated with ideological meaning. If this is at variance with the habitus (Carrington and Luke, 1997) that children associate with particular groups, then children may be reluctant to use it. Habitus is seen as the connection between the biological being and the social world. The connection is culture based, influenced by the class and engendered ways of ‘seeing’, ‘being’, ‘occupying space’ and ‘participating in history’ (Carrington and Luke, 1997, p.101).

Norton (2000) argues that confidence and anxiety about language use are not individual attributes but socially constructed in encounters between the second language learners and the majority community. The children’s identity and self-esteem within school would perhaps be very dependent upon their relationships with pupils from the majority culture. Pupil 3 gave as her reason to speak English that she felt ‘comfortable’ and it helped her to make friends.

Code switching, either intrasentential or intrasentential, is often related to individual and group identity (Norton, 2000) and this would have been a powerful way in which pupils could have demonstrated their ethnic identity in school by talking to family members in the home language. Apart from Pupil 3, who claimed to speak in Ibo to a friend, they all chose not to do this even when there were opportunities such as talking to family members in school. Even at home, most appeared not to choose to speak in their home language. This may be because they were primarily concerned with narrowing social distance between themselves and their fellow pupils. Pupil 4 was very concerned that others might think, if he used his mother tongue, “I’m talking about them behind their back”. Pupil 1 was dismayed when his monolingual Bengali-speaking cousin arrived at school, “Oh no do you have to come?” Pupil 3 had a “weird feeling when I pretend not to hear” (her mother at school). This may be striking evidence of the emotionally discomfiting effect of a monolingual environment on a bilingual child. Ncoko et al. (2000) show that code switching was used in the South African pupils he studied to hide as well as to demonstrate the home language. The children studied here were trying to hide their home language, despite real contexts for using it. We need to understand this further if we are to provide a multilingual environment in which children feel confident in their identities.

The reluctance that the children demonstrated to use their home language in school could be explained in terms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Their embodied capital – linguistic practice – is not reflected in the school’s (institutional) capital, if that is defined as ‘academic qualifications and awards’ (Carrington and Luke, 1997, p. 102). Standard Assessment Tasks, the results of which may have significant political capital for the school, are administered in English and do not reflect the variety of linguistic capital multilingual learners may have. English is valued and rewarded institutionally and socially in school contexts and the children seem to have aligned themselves with this. Their use of English allows them to build social capital, defined by Carrington and Luke as “access to cultural and subcultural institutions, social relations and practices” (1997, p. 102), which, as immigrants without the majority language and culture, may be crucial to their chances of success (Figure 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbolic Capital</th>
<th>Institutional capital recognised and legitimated authority and entitlement for the exchange and conversion of cultural, economic and social capital.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Capital</td>
<td>Knowledge, skills, dispositions, linguistic practices and representational resources of the bodily habitus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectified Capital</td>
<td>Cultural goods, texts, material objects and media physically transmissible to others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Capital</td>
<td>Academic qualifications, awards, professional certificates and credentials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Capital</td>
<td>Material goods and resources directly convertible into money.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Capital</td>
<td>Access to cultural and subcultural institutions, social relations and practices.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5: Types of capital (Carrington and Luke, 1997)

Conclusion

It is important to understand multilingualism as a complex matter, far beyond the simplistic mantra of celebrating diversity. The schools in this study were very aware of the importance of valuing diversity. One of the parents interviewed was employed in the school. I also saw some exciting work being undertaken by children working with an advisory teacher, who had taken some humanities material they were studying and made a multimedia text, including all the children’s languages and involving a very clever use of ICT. This was a sophisticated text and could be considered quite an exemplary instance of valuing other cultures.

A holistic view, supported by the National Curriculum, suggests that language acquisition should encompass first and second languages (DfEE, 1999). However, I suggest that this might be difficult in the school domain as children are involved in a struggle described by Siraj-Blatchford (1996) as “in the very act...
of identifying ourselves as one thing we are simultaneously distancing ourselves from something else”.
That is, in speaking the home language at school, children may perceive themselves as simultaneously affirming their own culture but distancing themselves from access to social capital, social relations and practices (Carrington and Luke, 1997). Children’s participation in the class may depend not only on the teacher’s rules for participation but the child’s standing and relationship with peers (Gillen and Hall, 2003). Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke argue that

“Parents of bilingual children often report that their children’s English speaking friends exert pressure on them as they get older, which often results in the children refusing to speak their home language and sometimes forgetting their home language entirely” (2000, p. 31).

Their reference group orientation appeared to be overwhelmingly important to the children in this study. It could possibly have encouraged them to develop fluent English very quickly to merge in seamlessly with peers, but at the cost of sharing and celebrating their culture, which may be an important principle of a multicultural society. Teachers’ perspectives suggested that they were aware that children wanted to be ‘like everyone else’ in school. Teacher 2 used the words ‘as long as you value them’ and this may be the crux of the dilemma for teachers and parents – how to value children in relation to their own preferred identity and not a teacherly agenda.

Informed by the inclusion statement from the National Curriculum, which directs teachers to make sure that pupils with EAL have access to the curriculum and assessment through “using home or first language, where appropriate” (DfEE 1999, p. 37), schools have taken up a stance that may be problematic. They have to balance the advantages of recognising and celebrating diversity so that pupils with EAL can use their first language to learn English, with their possible need to identify with friendship groups in the dominant culture – to be the same as others. Celebrating diversity may have many advantages for all pupils and may support them in understanding how rich, varied and interesting language can be. However, it may be counterproductive to draw attention to a particular culture or language in the class in order to support a child from that culture.

I accept that pupils learning a second language need a quiet period or listening time to absorb the tunes, pitch, pronunciation and structure of the new language. During this time they may be under great pressure to redefine themselves in relation to the new social world. Their agenda for this change in identity may include some level of anonymity in terms of their home culture. This view challenges the perception of a ‘subtractive environment’, where the home culture is not recognised and is thus awarded a lower status, as inherently disadvantageous.

Views of literacy as an ‘autonomous’ set of skills, decontextualised from society and culture, have been criticised by Street (2003). Literacy is increasingly regarded as social practice, linked to culture, ideology, knowledge and power. Pupils entering a new culture may not be seen by their peers as acquiring literacy in that culture if they simply acquire the language, whether spoken or written. If understanding and knowing the culture is an important aspect of literacy, then immersion may be an opportunity for the learner to experience at first hand the narrative of everyday life and to redefine themselves within this. How teachers might manage this without a denial of difference in respect of pupils eager to ‘fit in’ is an area worthy of future research.

References


CONTACT THE AUTHOR:
Linda Pagett, Faculty of Education, University of Plymouth, Douglas Ave, Exmouth EX8 2AT UK
e-mail: l.pagett@plymouth.ac.uk

© UKLA 2006