Monolingual literacy in multilingual contexts

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Abstract

This presentation reports work-in-progress on the first stage of a larger project¹ that seeks to problematise monolingual constructions of literacy by examining how teachers, themselves, understand ‘teaching literacy’ when students come to the teaching/learning relationship with a first language other than English. Focusing on teachers who work with bilingual and multilingual students in their early stages of acquiring English as a second language (ESL), the study thus acknowledges the increasingly diverse social, linguistic, and cultural profile of students who comprise contemporary Australian classrooms, and the varying degrees of communicative competence these students bring to the mainstream in their use of English as a second language. The focus of the present discussion is the themes to emerge from the initial analysis of the teacher interview data, and the teachers’ understandings of literacy within their particular contexts for practice.

Introduction

The current context for educational policy and practice in Australia is one in which the predominant understanding of literacy is essentially monolingual in orientation; that is, an understanding of literacy around a common language with an emphasis on universal, normative “standards” and “benchmarks”, than a recognition of greater diversity and difference (Cross, 2009b). To take the proposed National Curriculum as an example (National Curriculum Board, 2008), literacy is subsumed into one of three elements under English, with the mastery of “diversity” (p. 14) in literacy thus curtained to all but a “first language”-only perspective on language and literacy development. While reasons for this are complex, contemporary developments within literacy have been most closely associated with the trend in globalised, knowledge-based economies towards neoliberal and neoconservative models of education that emphasise accountability, cohesion, and control through curriculum and the processes of schooling more generally (Apple, 2004; Luke, 2003). Literacy has been an especially powerful mechanism for moving these changes forward; in part, because the changing nature of the knowledge economy demands new ways of working with ideas, concepts, and technologies for information and communication exchange. However, and no less significantly, the introduction of social, cultural, and linguistic “difference” into what were once, in relatively terms at least, unified and stable nation states has resulted in the presence of new forms of linguistic, cultural, and social capital with the potential to challenge and disrupt existing social and cultural, and linguistically ordered, status quos.

¹ Literacy and teaching English outside of the mainstream (Cross, 2008), funded by The University of Melbourne ECR Competitive Grant Scheme
This presentation seeks to problematise this predominant notion of literacy by asking what means to “teach literacy” when the actual context for practice is not, in fact, monolingual; that is, what do teachers understand as “teaching literacy” when students already come to the teaching and learning relationship with a language other than English? Specifically, the focus concerns teachers working with bilingual (and in some cases multilingual) students in their early stages of acquiring English as a second language (ESL), rather than those with already well developed skills across both languages (i.e., “balanced” bilinguals; Baker, 2006). In so doing, the paper acknowledges the increasingly diverse social, linguistic, and cultural profile of students who make up contemporary Australian classrooms, and the varying degrees of communicative competence that these students bring to the mainstream in their use of English as a second language (Matthews, 2008; Miller, 2009; Miller, Mitchell, & Brown, 2005; Santoro & Allard, 2005).

The discussion draws on data from a larger study on the sociocultural construction of teachers’ professional knowledge in multilingual pedagogical contexts. Although the broader project includes observational case studies of teacher practice and surveys of English second language teachers in Melbourne metropolitan schools, the focus of the present analysis is the themes to emerge from the teacher interviews and their understanding of literacy within such contexts. As such, the scope of this paper does not extend to a discussion of first language (L1) literacy, and makes no attempt to claim beyond the available data that the themes are therefore necessarily specific or unique to second language (L2) learners. However, by attending to how these teachers have come to recognise and understand literacy and their learners’ literacy needs as second language students – and how they do so within a sociocultural domain for practice that is essentially antithetical to linguistic and cultural difference – the discussion does nonetheless begin to identify some significant implications that second language learners present for literacy and literacy education in contemporary Australian classrooms.

The study

The data was generated through a series of stimulated-recall procedures (Gass & Mackey, 2000) with teachers in three different settings: a mainstream secondary school (Anna), an “adjunct” English language centre attached to a mainstream secondary school (Belinda), and a stand-alone specialist secondary school for English as a second language (Claire). However, common across the participants was their regular contact with English second language students in their day-to-day teaching. Each teacher was observed working with two classes in the middle years to provide stimulus for a post-observation interview that occurred immediately after each class, focusing on what had taken place from their perspective as teacher. Although Gass and Mackey (2000) consider the limitations of stimulated recall and other think-aloud style protocols in generating “true” and accurate accounts of the cognitive processes behind practice, they do nonetheless provide invaluable insights into the reasoning underlying behaviour in terms of how teachers, themselves, interpret, rationalise, and make sense of the sociocultural setting within which they practice (Cross & Gearon, 2007). This is significant as the next stage of analysis.

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1 Pseudonyms have been used to refer to all participants to maintain confidentiality.
incorporates a sociocultural/activity theoretical lens to further consider the observational classroom data to examine not only what the teachers understood by “literacy” (i.e., the focus of this presentation), but how and why those particular understandings have come into being on the basis of the teacher-subjects’ engagement with their particular settings for practice (i.e., contexts for mediated sociocultural activity) (Cross, 2009a, in press).

The remainder of the present discussion, however, focuses on those themes to emerge from the initial interview data, in terms of what these teachers described and understood as “teaching literacy” based on their experiences with students who come to the teaching/learning relationship with already well developed first language skills in a language other than English. The stimulated recall data was analysed using conventional qualitative content coding techniques by first identifying recurring themes within each case, and then for convergences and divergences across cases (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2008; Yin, 2003). The three key themes that emerged from the analysis were:

1. Literacy for learning,
2. Language for literacy, and
3. Language as literacy

**Literacy for learning**

Literacy for learning concerns the emphasis the teachers placed on the importance of not merely teaching the “linguistic” elements of literacy (e.g., phonics, reading a piece of text fluently, etc), but the need to further include the type literacy skills necessary for students to work effectively in the Australian classroom environment. Given the nature of the relationship between language and culture, these teachers emphasised that students from other first language backgrounds often brought to the classroom a social and cultural perspective of what it means to engage, relate, and know the world in ways that differed from that expected of them in the mainstream Australian educational context. In particular, many students have refugee or refugee-like backgrounds, with little, if any, experience of the types of daily routines and regular school activities that Australian teachers and students can typically relate. Teachers emphasised that this gap in experience can “present enormous issues” (C1, 220-222) in the students’ adjustment to new, more formal modes of learning. Anne, for example, recalls one student who had “been out with the goats in rural Sudan” (A1, 304), and found the challenge of adjusting to the expectations of the Australian classroom arduous:

> Because he’d never sat in a classroom before he’d be hanging upside down on the desk, he had no distinction between inside voice and outside voice, had no idea how to behave in a classroom and he couldn’t sit still …. This is here after he’d been to the language school ….. He was there for a year. I don’t know how he behaved there, I’ve got no idea but he still hadn’t absorbed much and it was just a struggle getting him to sit still just long enough to learn anything. Now he’s in class, he’s participating, he’s progressing, he’s been here for three years. Fantastic. (Interview A1, 305-315)
While encounters such as these might appear extreme to teachers and students in the mainstream who share similar assumptions and expectations about how classrooms operate – even if it means exploiting that knowledge to break or challenge those rules to bring about disruptive behaviour – Anne’s experiences of students with almost no background knowledge of “acceptable” social and cultural modes of engagement within the Australian learning context were echoed by Belinda and Claire. Indeed, all three teachers emphasised what they saw as the need to very consciously, and deliberately, introduce students to the social and cultural practices expected of them within Australian classrooms – including even the most basic of skills, such as the ability to concentrate upon one particular task for a sustained period of time (B1 & B2). As Claire points out:

It’s really, really important for us to show and demonstrate to students how to get into that methodology, and for students to be able to do it. If it doesn’t happen it’s really very sad. Interrupted students or refugee like students … can have great difficulty in engaging the methodology, or more fundamentally, the classroom, full stop. (C1, 243-247)

However, the teachers also made it a point to emphasise that these issues were not only relevant to students with non-formal or disrupted experiences of schooling. As Claire explains, students educated from other cultural backgrounds similarly go through a process of “making a shift” (C1, 223) in their expectations of teachers, classrooms, and schools from their first culture during their adjustment to Australian classrooms. In her experience, a failure to do so is “counter productive” (225) towards eventually acquiring the full set of skills needed to effectively engage in mainstream Australian settings, and instead leaves students as risk of being “detached from a lot of the really rich learning possibilities that happen” (233-234).

Recalling one recent experience with a well educated student from China who relied heavily upon memorisation and reproduction as his primary mode for learning, she explains:

Xiu, who understood [the content] perfectly well, the first thing he did … was to attempt to reproduce a memorized text …. so what Xiu was trying to do, which was no big surprise, was to give me “the perfect text” back and the perfect text was obviously the one that we’d been working on. So I went over that and then he tried again. He sort of understood that, in a sort of superficial way, that I didn’t want him to use this text and he gave me, “I have to use my own words?”, and my heart sinks a bit when that happens because it’s, often it’s a parity thing. There needs to be a lot of understanding about what that really means and it’s very hard to convey, and often when a student says it, they’re not really- they still don’t know what you mean. (C1, 382-393)

In a similar vein, Belinda described the advantages of having her Chinese-background ESL students learn Chinese in the Australian curriculum, arguing that it provided an opportunity to expose them to an Australian “way of learning” subject matter they were already very familiar with (i.e., Chinese language and literacy).

A second issue related to “literacy for learning” extended to what teachers saw as the need to develop their students’ understanding of the strategies by which teaching and learning is mediated and managed within Australian classrooms. For example,
all three teachers again expressed the need to have students understand, in very explicit terms, the routines that unfold over the course of a typical lesson. A reading task during Belinda’s second class, for instance, began by asking if students remembered “what reading comprehension was”, and she again introduced a discussion-based activity by similarly asking: “We’re now going to have a discussion. What is a discussion?”. Claire explained that this type of direct and explicit approach to the types of teaching practices commonly found in classrooms is important because,

when they leave here they go to places where that notion is well established and it won’t be revisited …. They have to learn, even though school students often need to learn quite a different environment for learning and different set of responsibilities and for teachers and for students so we have to try and address those. Our ideal which we don’t always live up to at all is to try and make more and more explicit for the buried stuff, the implied, the assumed, and you know we’re a long way from doing that properly, but we’re trying, really trying to expose the agenda. (C2, 405-415)

Similarly, Anne argued that the language used to mediate most teaching and learning practices is, “in mainstream classrooms, … all assumed” (A2, 50):

Part of the year twelve exam is to actually do note taking as part of their assessed work at the end of the year, and it’s actually nowhere taught in the course… and so we feel that we need to just build that up all the way through. (A1, 615-618)

A final point on “literacy for learning” was the stress teachers placed on having students become familiar with the diverse range of modalities by which knowledge is represented in classrooms. Often, this involved the use of ICT within lessons, including graphics and images (e.g., Google Maps), television, interactive whiteboards, PowerPoint presentations, and internet resources. As Anne explains, “access to the interactive white board and the data projector is fantastic because I use that a lot in my teaching. I like having it set up in a horse shoe shape because it promotes interaction” (A1, 658-664).

This and other examples of “whole language” approaches to language are often recognized as an important part of all literacy classrooms (e.g., Goodman, 2005). Indeed, such strategies may even appear prosaic and mundane when viewed from the perspective of how classrooms operate with good practice, rather than offering anything that might been seen as exceptional for second language learners. However, in contrast to simply using these technologies as opportunities to expose students to the range of different modes by which language and meaning is made and communicated, an additional focus that these teachers emphasised was on having students also understand the ways that teachers and students use these modes as part of teaching and learning. That is, and similar to the point above on making the social and cultural practices underlying teaching and learning explicit to students, the need to very deliberately raise students’ awareness of the different modalities available to them within the classroom as strategies to support their own learning. As Claire, for example, describes,
I’m much more conscious of doing is much better board work, and I’ve found that the stuff I’m doing on the board I’m referring to a lot more when I’m walking around and talking to students. And sometimes I find what I’m doing is using the board better to make explanations … I’m engaging the board a lot better, and sometimes when I find I’m trying to jog a students memory about something, by just pointing to the area of the board where it had been, the students go “oh yeah” – connect! It’s quite interesting, the visual orient- I’m using visual stuff a lot more now … and I’m getting the students to do the drawing more and more and more. (C1, 857-866)

**Language for literacy**

While all three teachers emphasised the need to see language as distinct from the broader, more general concept literacy – a point made elsewhere within the literature on the problematic conflation of language with literacy within Australian educational policy (see, for example, the special issue of *Prospect* (Hammond & Burns, 1999)) – they were also adamant that this was not a suggestion that language could therefore be developed independently or separately from a related focus on literacy. That is, they spoke of literacy in ways that suggested an expansive view of language and literacy, in which both parts were inseparable but discrete elements interdependent upon the other. As Belinda puts it, “when students come to this country, it’s not just only reading and writing – it’s speaking and listening, it’s functioning in the society …. What literacy is … in ESL contexts for these learners, it’s so complex” (B2, 1077-1084). While this is not to suggest, either, that mainstream literacy is somehow “less” complex, the teachers, with speakers of English as a second language, understand working with texts as necessarily being broader and more multidimensional than skills sometimes associated with “literacy” when understood as merely “language-in-print”, such as phonics and the encoding and decoding of text (Department of Employment, Science & Training, 2005). As Claire asserts,

> We’ve always had the mantra that it’s equal attention to speaking and listening, and reading and writing. But in our heart of hearts we’ve always thought that you really need to get on top of the speaking and listening a bit ahead of the reading and writing. That the reading and writing will follow….

> The end point may be about being able to write, read … but it’s not just about that. We’ve always thought that you need to be able to speak – literacy is about speaking as well. (C1, 573-596)

Again, this use of oral language to support the development of literacy reflects much of what has already been noted within the literature, a great deal of which focuses on the needs of second language learners in the mainstream. Gibbons (2002), for example, highlights the significance of oracy to support print literacy, through classroom strategies such as group discussions to build a knowledge of the field, face-to-face conferencing to support the writing process, and oral scaffolding to facilitate the joint and independent construction of texts. Yet, while such techniques are useful in explicating the assumed knowledge embedded within texts to assist students to understand the purposes, structures, and features inherent within different text types, as well as to support students through the writing process from planning through to publication, they begin with the assumption that students come
to those tasks already equipped with at least the basic language resources necessary to engage in such activities, with literacy “development” thus being the exploitation, or at least refinement, of existing language skills that the students bring to those texts and classroom learning.

By way of contrast, the teachers in this study had a somewhat different focus; namely, the development, first and foremost, on an “enabling” language that students use for working with texts. In other words, a focus less on the text itself (i.e., understanding or producing meaning through texts for subsequent, secondary tasks), than an understanding of how language – across all of its different dimensions (i.e., speaking, reading, writing, and listening) – can be used as an holistic, complex system to enable students to initially engage and begin working with texts. As one teacher put it,

In this context, and it wouldn’t be true in the mainstream I don’t think … we’re trying to get them not to fuss about it in the sense of we want them to understand what’s happening in the language … We are trying to focus them away from the content area. We’re not asking the students to be very good students of biology … We’re asking the kids to accept this piece of text and accept that they do know what it’s about because we’ve been working on knowing that, and then to focus on whatever the language feature is that we’re trying to get them to look at.

At that point the meaning of the text is almost irrelevant, they’re free, really free, to focus on what’s happening in the text in terms of language. (C2, 238-269)

A related point was the emphasis the teachers placed on texts as both the means and medium by which to first identify, and then introduce, the language skills most relevant to their students’ emergent literacy skills. For example, in the same way that Belinda made an analogy of language and literacy as “different parts of the body [that need to be] in harmony” (B2, 383-392), Anne similarly argued that a language for texts should be developed with an understanding of those texts, so it remains “in a context, [and] it’s not separate” (A2, 32). In one class where her students were working on a novella, for instance, Anne explains: “I wanted them to read the whole chapter … and the thing I wanted them to focus on was the language that [the characters were] using to talk about their dream” (A2, 385-397), and later:

When you’ve got a piece of text you’ve got a bit of direct speech, and then you’ve got a little part of a sentence you know saying who’s saying it, and perhaps how they’re saying it, and then you’ve got another bit of text and then you’ve got another line underneath.

Now there’s nothing necessarily to say that this text is read by the same person before and after or underneath, so in the last lesson they were really struggling with that. So we talked about how when a person is speaking it’s usually a slab of speech and that if it’s all in the same slab it’s all the same person. And often another person isn’t indicated so there’s another line, it’s not indicated but you can tell by the fact that it’s on a different line starting another paragraph, if you like indented. (A1, 448-457)
Another key aspect of developing a “language for literacy” was what teachers described the need to develop their students’ “voice” for working with texts: an understanding of their role as a communicator through language-in-print to then better connect with text, and other readers, at higher and more abstract levels of understanding and engagement. Anne argues that although literacy was ultimately about “being able to communicate effectively” (A2, 170-174), one of the greatest challenges in doing so was having learners engage and respond to a text at a level beyond “superficial” or “general statements” (A1, 581-594). While this is, of course, related in part to the students’ limited L2 linguistic repertoire, Claire makes a significant point in her argument that “without a voice medium to derive information from it, or pleasure or entertainment, [engagement] is really, really difficult, and I think quite rare” (C1, 300-304). In one interview following a class on writing, she expanded on this need to have students develop their own sense of voice, and an understanding of their position in relation to a text:

[Students] need to be able to position themselves as an expositer – one who exposit or does expository writing – and that is difficult... because they have not been positioned that way, they haven’t been the ones who have had to make the explanation and make the science text. What they have been is the receiver of someone else’s text and the memoriser of someone else’s text and the internaliser of someone else’s “excellent text”.... This is quite a new idea that you are the creator of this authoritative bit of text and it has the potential to be a valuable bit of text. (C2, 838-851)

Also intimated in the extract above is what teachers saw as the need to develop a “trust” of the printed word – especially amongst students from first language backgrounds that were primarily oral, without strong literacy backgrounds in even their native language. Whereas mainstream Australian students are socialised into a community that understands literacy (especially “print” literacy) as a powerful means by which “valued” cultural, academic, economic, legal, and popular knowledge is recorded, stored, and transmitted, students from first languages that are predominantly oral do not necessarily share those same understandings about the authority and value of literacy as a cultural practice. Claire notes, for instance, that even well developed “basic” skills for reading and writing may still fail to translate into the ability to work with even the simplest texts, such as a set of classroom instructions, if students fail to understand and appreciate the relationship between print and language more broadly:

A [student with no literacy background] who’s perfectly capable of decoding and encoding and telling you what it means at one level can be very distrustful of acting on it. It’s not speaking to them in a way that my voice saying exactly the same word speaks to them and I think that’s a really deep shift in thinking that takes a long time. They’ve got to believe it. It’s like it’s not believable. Silly way to say it but it’s as deep as that.... Print doesn’t speak to you. (C2, 863-882)

By focusing on the development of “language for literacy” – where literacy skills are not merely “print-based” skills for the encoding and decoding of texts, but are instead developed in tandem with a broader set of skills to enable students to see how they
can engage with the printed word through their language – teachers have a means to bridge what students from non-literacy language backgrounds may otherwise fail to recognise about the relationship between oral modes of communication with the printed word. It provides a way to build an understanding of the value and authority of writing as an important social and cultural practice.

**Language as literacy**

The final key theme to emerge from the data concerned how teachers saw literacy in relation to language for abstract functions and high-order thinking. In Claire’s words, her focus is essentially “academic English” (C1, 81): the language associated with “the cognitive functions that [students are] going to be asked to use in school” (C1, 86-87). This attention to the relationship between the language for high-order thinking and literacy is therefore closely interrelated with the previous two themes, concerning the language necessary for engaging in the social and cultural (although in this case, academic and intellectual) practices of Australian classroom contexts to support successful engagement and learning. As Claire goes on to explain: “at the heart of school based English is the ability to categorise, order, compare, infer and all that other stuff that underpins all the tasks that they have to do in all the curriculum areas…. It’s still absolutely transferable” (C2, 94-98).

Although teachers indicated that all second language learners, as a group in general, presented various challenges for developing literacy skills for higher order thinking, the type of challenges differed according to whether students had backgrounds of literacy in their first language. From the teachers’ perspective, those with well developed first language literacy skills appeared more ready to acquire new language which could then be “mapped onto” their existing conceptual schemas for organising, processing, and producing abstract knowledge. For students from non-literacy backgrounds, however, this often seemed more difficult. In particular, their predominantly oral language backgrounds meant opportunities to engage with abstract knowledge beyond their direct experience (often grounded in the context of growing up in a developing nation) has been limited:

Kids from Australia who come from kindergarten straight through have actually picked up on the way because they’ve had such a range of learning experiences from excursions to family holidays to just everyday experiences that we all understand. These kids who’ve come from refugee camps or whatever sometimes have never seen the sea, they’ve never been to a museum, they know nothing outside of surviving a) in the jungle or, in a refugee camp in the jungle or in Kakuma [a refugee camp in Kenya] where they’re struggling to survive …. They don’t know basic concepts. They haven’t got pictures in their mind. When there’s a word we often associate it with a picture or with a concept or with something that triggers an understanding of what that word means. But these kids often don’t have that, because they haven’t experienced it. (A1, 173-196)

However, rather than simply developing a “bank” of conceptual knowledge that students might encounter in the mainstream, the teachers saw their teaching focus for literacy in more generic terms; namely, the development of language by and through which those conceptual ideas and abstract forms of knowledge are
represented and conveyed. In response to a question on what skills she saw as most important, for example, Anne argued that it was not simply the ability to “explain a word with another word, but you’ve got to explain a concept” (A1, 96-97). That is, “teaching literacy” was tied to those skills that allowed students to engage in higher order thinking, and the language used to articulate, record, and convey those cognitive processes:

C: Encoding and decoding without… grappling with cognitive processes or articulation with these sorts of cognitive processes stops once the decoding and encoding is done; well, where does it go, I can read really well but I can’t…. It’s the manipulation of language.

R: In abstract ways?

C: Yes…. A kid who’s not well educated, or not educated, has a great deal of difficulty in articulating in any language those sorts of abstract things…. Exceptions have tended to come from very intact, culturally intact backgrounds, but if you add a layer of disruption and war and dislocation and camp life and refugee, let alone trauma and all the rest of it, then those capacities to articulate those sorts of cognitive things are really damaged. (C2, 158-180)

The focus, then, became what the teachers saw as language for supporting the link between thinking and speech. Moreover, given these students came to those cognitive tasks with a different first language as their basis for thinking, while also still acquiring sometimes even the most fundamental skills of English, teachers emphasised a very deliberate effort to remain constantly mindful of the complex relationship between these two processes – thinking and speech – and the additional implications this raises when then attempting to work with abstract knowledge in, and through, a second (or possibly third, etc) language. This seemed especially difficult for the pre-literate students without well developed higher-order thinking skills in even their first language, as they were simultaneously attempting to develop language together with higher-order skills for understanding, thinking, and responding in, and through, that language. As Anne comments reflecting on her master’s research on the influence of wait-time on students’ language and cognition:

I was looking at ESL teachers, and I realised that they were asking a question and if the answer wasn’t delivered straight away then they were answering their own question. So what the students were doing was waiting for them to answer their own question because that way they didn’t have to think and so I applied that then to my own classroom. And I thought okay I’m going to wait until I get an answer because it occurred to me that if I’m asking a question then they’re probably having to translate that question into their own language, formulate an answer in their own language and then translate it back into English so they actually need some time to think about that so I tend to try to allow that to happen. (A2, 270-285)

A related point was what the teachers saw as the need to develop English that would allow students to “verbalise their knowledge” (A1, 77). As Belinda contends, literacy is the “the freedom to speak and think and express themselves orally or in a written
form” (B2, 807-808, emphasis added). In contrast to the previous two themes, then, this final theme is significant because it illustrates the teachers’ understanding of literacy is not only concerned with language for “communicative” purposes (e.g., the idea of literacy for social and cultural practices), but, in these contexts, one that also specifically attends to enabling students to be able to engage with academically and intellectually demanding higher-order thinking and cognitive processes. As Claire sums up, the aim is “to master a language of cognition to express what they’re doing in their heads” (C2, 146-149).

Concluding remarks

The notion of literacy presented within current policy frameworks for curriculum, teaching, and assessment in Australian schools is premised on the assumption that students essentially share a common command of the language (in this case, Standard Australian English) as the basis for further engaging with “literacy”. Having assumed all students share English as a common language, it similarly assumes that students therefore share at least a common set of social and cultural experiences, practices, and knowledge about what it means to be a speaker and user of that language. Indeed, the subsumption of literacy as an element of English within the proposed National Curriculum (National Curriculum Board, 2008) reaffirms that the literacy of most value within schools, as well as society in general, is one reduced to English, and, of most concern for ESL students within that curriculum context, one that has therefore been modelled upon, and developed for, the monolingual speaker.

As part of a larger study that seeks to problematise the assumptions around literacy as a monolingual construct, this presentation examined what teachers, themselves, understood by “teaching literacy” when working with students a language other than English and, in particular, those who are still learning to develop English within the Australian educational and social context rather than those who come to teaching and learning as balanced bilingual speakers in their first and second languages. Speaking at length about what they saw as teaching literacy within these multilingual contexts, the teachers in the study raised a number of significant issues tied to the themes of: “literacy for learning”, or literacy as an understanding of the social and cultural practices that other language background students need to be able to engage in the learning environments of Australian classrooms; “language for literacy”, being not only an understanding of the language of texts, but the enabling language for talking about the texts themselves; and “language as literacy”, or the development of language to support, articulate, and convey abstract and higher-order thinking.

While the focus of this presentation has not extended to how such notions compare or contrast with the views of teachers working with first language students, these initial findings nonetheless highlight issues that these teachers see as significant in understanding literacy when couched in their understanding of these learners and their literacy learning needs as background speakers of a language other than English: a domain of professional knowledge and expertise that has become more and more marginalised as monolingual-centric discourses become increasingly pervasive within mainstream education systems (Harper & de Jong, 2009). Significantly, the findings suggest a compelling argument for revisiting those dominant monolingual assumptions if we intend to develop a framework for literacy
most suited to the teaching and learning needs of students within the contemporary Australian school system.

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References


