

## **A sense of place: Variation, linguistic hegemony and the teaching of literacy in English**

URSZULA CLARK

**English, School of Languages and Social Sciences, Aston University, Birmingham, UK**

*ABSTRACT: The ways in which literacy in English is taught in school generally subscribe to and perpetuate the notion of a homogenous, unvaried set of writing conventions associated with the language they represent, especially in relation to spelling and punctuation as well as grammar. Such teaching also perpetuates the myth that there is one “correct” way of language use which is “fixed” and invariant, and that any deviation is at best “incorrect” or “illiterate” and at worst, a threat to social stability. It is also very clear that the linguistic norms associated with standard English are predicated upon and replicate white, cultural hegemony. Yet, at the same time, there are plenty of literary and creative works written by authors from all kinds of different cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, including canonical ones, where spelling and punctuation are varied and championed as a sign of creativity. In the world beyond school, pupils are also surrounded by variational use of written language, especially in public displays such as shop signs, writing on mugs and t-shirts, posters, graffiti and so on, which link language to place. Equally, the voices we hear in entertainment and public broadcasting, far from being homogenous, celebrate diversity in Englishes. The homes and backgrounds of pupils in our schools, including their linguistic backgrounds, may also be very different either in terms of a different variation of English or languages spoken other than English. Since the emphasis is usually upon “correct” and “fixed” ways of teaching writing in English, it has often been difficult for teachers and pupils to reconcile the kind of English taught in school as the “correct” way and thus, by definition, all others as “incorrect.” However, narrow definitions of linguistic “correctness” are becoming increasingly difficult to uphold given that the public spaces with which we are surrounded are peppered by examples of variational use in writing.*

*Recent sociolinguistic research into variation points to an increasing fluidity of linguistic use, especially when it comes to public displays of writing, particularly in media such as newspapers, websites, shop signs, TV channel logos and so on. Linguistic variability can thus be seen as a resource in creating unique voices and marking allegiance to, for example, a particular place and culture. Such research is indicative of the fact that variational use of English, far from being “incorrect” or “illiterate”, is increasingly being drawn upon creatively to mark a place identity. It also points to a shift in our conceptual thinking about language(s) and varieties from being perceived as static, “fixed”, totalised and immobile to being thought of as dynamic, fragmented and mobile, with the focus upon mobile resources rather than immobile languages. At the same time, the teaching of literacy centres upon the teaching of linguistic norms of spelling and grammar as “fixed.” There is a tension then, between creative expression of linguistic use often linked to place and those linked to standard English. This article explores those*

*tensions and discusses the implications and possibilities for the teaching of English and literacy.*

*KEYWORDS: Linguistic hegemony, variation in English, language, literacy.*

## INTRODUCTION

Literacy is central to the curriculum for English, from the initial teaching of reading and writing at primary stages of schooling through to the ability to read and write the range of academic genres or styles through which the subject knowledge of all subjects is realised at secondary level and beyond. Learning to be literate, as Clay (1991) amongst others has observed, is never a neutral activity, since the texts used to teach literacy will show a particular cultural representation of social reality and cultural norms associated with the organisation of different text types or genres. Those working in the area of literacy studies also view literacy as part of, rather than independent of, social practice. Activities, meanings and values ascribed to reading and writing can shift according to context, purpose and social relations (see, for example, Hamilton, 2012, and Gee, 1990). As Hamilton points out “Like other theories of everyday life...literacy studies views lived experience as tactical, pragmatic and fluid, patterned by social relations and tacit rules and values” (2012, p. 11). Theorists such as Gee (1990) and Street (1995) have also pointed out that literacy practices are tied up with social and work activities and are used in maintaining and developing social networks, communities of practice and social identities as expressed through both spoken and written language.

In education, acquiring literacy has always been more than simply the acquisition of skill, and key to reproducing cultural and national identity (Clark, 2001; Crowley 1996). Specific reading and writing practices are imbued with cultural values, both implicit and explicit, so that acquiring skill in new practices is not only a question of linguistic proficiency but also of taking on different values and in some cases, different identities.

The tacit rules and values that underpin the pedagogy of teaching reading and writing are predicated to a large extent upon writing being perceived as an unvaried set of conventions and norms that are “fixed” by grammars and dictionaries. Any deviation or alteration of such conventions is perceived as deficient, “wrong” and illiterate. Such a perception is rapidly becoming at odds with the linguistic landscapes that surround us and the increasingly multilingual nature of many communities. Linguistic landscapes allow for far more fluid conceptions of writing, and signify a variety of physical realities re-located from their original geographic origin. For example, in many major cities and towns in England (for example, London, Birmingham, Leicester) as with those in other parts of the world (for example, New York, Sydney, Johannesburg), a walk down any neighbourhood street in any of these cities cannot help but draw one into linguistic landscapes comprised of shop signs, posters, religious building inscriptions and so on, that not only break or bend written conventions of English but are also multilingual. In the case of Birmingham in the UK, shops selling Polish food nestle alongside those selling Asian food and goods, Indian restaurants and Chinese takeaways. Muslim mosques lie cheek by jowl with

Buddhist temples and Christian churches, schools, health centres and local supermarket chains such as Tesco.

In an era of increasing globalisation (Blommaert, 2010), varieties of English world wide have aligned with places to mark a specific national identity linked to place. Thus older, more established varieties of English such as Australian English, Canadian English and General American as well as those associated with the United Kingdom are fast being joined by newly emerging varieties such as Indian English and Singlish, for example (Clark, 2013). Linguistic landscapes surround us physically and materially in the places where we live (Blommaert, 2010; Coupland, 2007, Scollon & Scollon, 2003) located within urban landscapes that surround us. As Coupland says: “Linguistic landscapes are visualisations of (mainly urban) modernity, and they can bring very different qualities of the contemporary urban experience into focus” (2010, p. 78).

Language, then, is involved in the production of a sense of place rather than an “expression” of it. On the one hand, place can signify a specific physical and material reality expressed linguistically through variational features associated with a particular place location and national and/or regional identity, be it the USA, Canada or India. On the other hand, indexes of place such as shop signs, those found on religious buildings and so on can signify a connection to a physical space in an entirely different location. Consequently, the notion of community or place as being bound physically by material space is no longer tenable in today's world. Within say, Australia, Europe (including the UK) and USA, streets within a community – especially in large towns and cities – relate more to countries of origin than to their host community, to the wider neighbourhood and the nation within which they live. Literacy activities may thus also cross linguistic boundaries, such as when a child brings her English language homework to a home where Punjabi or Polish is the primary means of communication, and text messages between members of a family can be written in a mixture of two languages just as conversations may be conducted in an amalgam of two or more languages. Pupils may also be literate in more than one language, through, for example, attending complementary schools (Creese, Bhatt, Bhojani & Martin, 2006). Yet, the literacy practices of many mainstream schools tend to ignore this fact, so that pupils in effect leave behind any language or literacy practice other than those associated with English at the school gate. There is a potential tension, then, between linguistic varieties evident in the linguistic landscapes that surround us beyond the school gate or learning spaces, and those that are taught within them. This tension centres upon the self-evident creativity and plurality of linguistic use within landscapes, as compared with that of learning spaces within which standard varieties of English are taught and replicated. This article argues that to embrace the former solely is to risk denying pupils the social and economic advantages education can bring, but to deny the latter or “correct” variation out of existence is not the way out either.

However, societal cohesion in predominantly English speaking countries has been predicated upon wide acceptance of a single, common, standardised language. Linguistic diversity thus appears to threaten the privileging of a single, unchanging variety of English linked to concepts of national identity. Linguistic diversity thus appears to pose a major threat to democracy and provokes language-centred moral discourses and anxieties of the part of liberal elites in Europe (including the UK) and

North America about increasing linguistic diversity in their own backyards. Being able to speak no language tolerably has also been a recurring feature in expert and popular discourses centring on sources of moral panic, exemplified by the fact that asylum-seekers who appear not to be fluent speakers of putative national languages are routinely returned to hands of tormentors (Blommaert, 2010).

Within nations, where English is the recognised national language and first language of many speakers, speakers of regional varieties of English different from standard English, especially in England, are equally subject to discourses of deficit and continue to be positioned either as intellectually challenged and/or educationally disadvantaged. Given the demographic, economic and social changes that characterise the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the attitudes and assumptions that underpin belief in linguistic homogeneity are fast becoming untenable. Nevertheless, they continue to hold fast in public discourses, particularly those relating to issues of language, literacy and education. Paradoxically, increased educational opportunity and rising levels of literacy have created the conditions whereby people are able, if they so choose, to draw upon linguistic variability as a marker of identity, including a place identity. In so doing, the notion of a single, invariable and “fixed” variety of English as a unifying agent of social stability and cultural cohesion appears to be increasingly challenged. This article then, explores the implications of these challenges for the teaching of language and literacy in English.

It argues that acknowledging linguistic diversity whilst at the same time teaching standard varieties of English is not as contradictory a practice as it appears to be. Rather, it argues that pedagogic practices underlying the teaching of English need to change, from an “either/or” position – either a standard variety of English or a locally ecologised or less prestigious variety – to one that embraces and acknowledges both (Clark 2010, 2012).

## **LINGUISTIC HEGEMONY, LITERACY, IDENTITY AND SOCIAL PRACTICE**

The concept of hegemony is attributed to Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Communist imprisoned in 1926 by the then Italian fascist state and who died in prison ten years later, in 1936. Whilst in prison, Gramsci speculated as to the reasons why Western European working class movements had not only failed to rise against fascism as Marxist philosophy had predicted, but had instead appeared to have yielded to it. His speculations led him to distinguish between two different modes of social control. Firstly, coercive control, manifested through direct force or its threat and, secondly, consensual control, where individuals assimilate voluntarily the worldview of the dominant group. Thus, Gramsci concluded that people are not ruled by force or fear alone, but also by ideas.

The Gramscian concept of hegemony, then, centres upon moral and intellectual leadership through consent and persuasion, comprised of three concomitant processes: without force, through legitimation and by consensual rule (Suarez, 2002, p. 512). *Leadership without force* is where the dominant group exercises leadership over subordinate ones through the development of a consciousness, rather than by a show of overt strength. *Leadership through legitimation* is where the control of the

leading group is taken for granted by the subordinate group as right, just and unquestioned. *Leadership through consent* is when the subordinate group believes that their subordinate position is at their own choice, benefits them equally, and that the needs and concerns of both dominant and subordinate groups are mutual. Taken together, this total system of hegemony means that a leading group secures its position via the willingness and consent of a social minority group or groups. This consent is achieved predominantly through systematic, consistent persuasion through, for example, the media and through institutions such as education and the law. This persuasion insinuates ideas and beliefs of what is normal or “common sense” into daily life, so that they permeate and guide human interactions. Hegemony, then, refers to leadership through securing active consent, rather than securing domination through exercising coercive power. Williams writes that:

Hegemony goes beyond “culture”, as previously defined in its insistence on relating the “whole” social process to specific distributions of power and influence. To say that “men” define and shape their whole lives is true only in abstraction. In any actual society there are specific inequalities in means and therefore in capacity to realise this process. In a class society these are primarily inequalities between classes. Gramsci therefore introduced the necessary recognition of dominance and subordination in what has still, however, to be recognised as a whole process. (1977, p. 108)

Hegemony is also something that is constantly being readjusted and re-negotiated, as crises in any governing group precipitate disintegration and/or change, thus creating the opportunity for a subordinate class to transcend its limitations and build up a broad movement capable of challenging the existing order and achieving a new kind of hegemony. However, if the opportunity is not taken, the balance of forces will inevitably shift back to the dominant class, which re-establishes its hegemony on the basis of a new pattern of alliances. The key to “revolutionary” social change in modern societies then, is not the Marxist predication of a spontaneous awakening of critical class consciousness, but upon the formation of a new alliances of interests, an alternative hegemony or “historical bloc”, which has already developed a cohesive world view of its own and is thus capable of challenging or subverting dominant hegemony through political activity, including force.

Linguistic hegemony refers to the ways in which linguistic minorities, or speakers of a variety of English other than the standard one, believe in and participate in the subjugation of non-standard varieties of English or minority language to the dominant, to the point where just the dominant language remains. As Gramsci states: “Great importance is assumed by the overall question of language, i.e. the collective attainment of a single cultural ‘climate’” (1971, p. 56). Linguistic hegemony thus exerts and legitimates power by presenting the dominant language or variety of a language such as English as an instrument or tool to be used by those who acquire it in whatever way they choose. As Suarez points out

This is an exertion of hegemonic control because the “selling” of English appears to be politically and socially neutralised, when in fact it is clearly not the case. Thus, learning of English is presented as a technical instrument (like a tractor), not a world order. (2002, p. 514)

Upholding or perpetuating the linguistic hegemony of English then, is predicated upon the legitimisation of English – and legitimised varieties of English – as the unquestioned dominant language or variety of usefulness. Phillipson states:

The top language benefits through the image-making of the ads of transnational corporations and the connotations of English with success and hedonism. These symbols are reinforced by an ideology that glorifies the dominant language and serves to stigmatise others, this hierarchy being rationalised and internalised as normal and natural, rather than as expression of hegemonic values and interests. The results of successful linguistic hegemony are, in the case of processes of standardisation, the privileging of one variety of English over all others and in terms of language shift, from the minority language to the majority language and ultimately, language loss. (1992, p. 40)

### **Hegemony and discourses of speech and writing**

Increasingly, the nature of the world in which we live is becoming ever more multifaceted in terms of the language demands it makes of any one of us in the various speech communities of which we may be a part. The Internet has brought with it a facility for people to live lives virtually and remotely, with the emergence of new forms of communication such as email, chat rooms and social networking sites providing a new context within which people can experiment with language use. Such speed of communication also allows groups of people to organise themselves in ways which are unprecedented and can threaten social mobility, as the riots that took place in England in the summer of 2011 demonstrated. Mobile phones and smart phones in particular have made email communication as easy to undertake as face-to-face conversation, and challenge the notion that face-to-face interaction is a defining element of a speech community or a Community of Practice (Clark, 2013).

One consequence of this is that notions of a unitary form of a single language such as English, or one mythical form of a standard English to which everyone should aspire, are becoming increasingly eroded in favour of a pluralistic approach. Olson writes that one of the consequences of the emergence of literacy practices beyond Ancient Greek and Latin that began during the Renaissance period of history was the impact writing had when texts “came into the hands of the ordinary readers, the wrong people!” (1994, p. xvi). Similarly, in the age of the Internet, governments of countries such as China seek to limit their populations’ access to the Internet based on a fear that Western ideas and Western culture accessed through it pose a threat to their own different social order and social and national identity, based upon a different set of beliefs. Olson observes that the linguists’ claim that:

“writing is not language; it is just a record of language” is no longer tenable, neither is the classification of people as primitive or modern, oral or literate, concrete or abstract, or as biased to the eye or to the ear. (1994, p. xv)

Olson takes as fundamental the fact that in modern societies, text provides a model for speech.

In the Western world and other parts of the globe, it is the literacy practices of the societies in which we live that provide a model for a standard version of a national variety of English. Thus, although in its primary form language occurs as speech and

provides a model for a written equivalent, the written equivalent in turn, becomes a model for speech. Writing thus changes us from speakers to language-users. He goes on to point out that in the course of learning to take part in a literate society, the concepts children appear to acquire “naturally” are actually ones which have been worked out in particular historical and cultural contexts over two thousand years. Upward and Davidson (2011) also point out that writing, just like other systems in the modern world such as systems of government, manufacturing and industry arose in certain circumstances for certain purposes, so too did forms of written language. In addition, the language of any society that depends upon the literacy of its members has its own conventions for converting speech to writing. Once these conventions have been applied and written texts created, such texts become independent of speech.

A combination of advances in sound recording coupled with the explosion of new, virtual textual forms that take speech as their primary form have also both served to make material what was previously ephemeral. What was previously private and unrecorded in terms of conversation, especially between adolescents, has become public, with the medium of expression altered from the spoken to the written, such as text messaging, emailing, posting to a social networking site, chat room and so on. Recording how we speak, and writing as we speak, brings speech into the material world in ways that blur distinctions between speech and writing. Thus, as increasing numbers of people and sections of society become literate, and uses of literacy extend into the private as well as public spheres of our lives, then, paradoxically, literacy becomes the means through which the invariability of written, standard English norms is challenged. Such challenges have implications for the teaching of language and literacy in English, since questions arise inevitably about whether or not variational use of written English should be legitimised as part and parcel of teaching literacy. Within subject English at secondary level, of course, creativity and variational use of English, as expressed through literary and creative writing has an important and central place in the curriculum. Nevertheless, in English as with the majority of all other school subjects, writing about the subject, including literature and media, normally requires pupils to be proficient in written academic registers through which subject knowledge is expressed, which for the most part require competent and accurate use of standard written English. The ways in which explicit teaching of standard varieties of English happens, however, are often based upon “correcting” pupils or students perceived “inaccurate” or “misuse” of English. Such pedagogic practice reinforces linguistic hegemonic practices predicated upon the notion of standard varieties of Englishes being superior to non-standard ones.

### **CHALLENGING LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL HEGEMONY IN THE TEACHING OF LANGUAGE AND LITERACY IN ENGLISH**

Snell (2013) reminds us that those who feel current linguistic hegemony is under threat continue to base their arguments for its retention upon notions of deficit rather than difference. The most recent example of this in the UK is a pamphlet (self-grandly named a Report) published in 2010 by the influential, UK, right-wing think tank, *The Centre for Policy Studies*. The pamphlet’s author, Gross, focuses upon perceived deficits in the speech of working-class children in London (presumably to include those for whom, in the UK, English is an Additional Language (EAL) in

addition to those for whom it is a first language). In the pamphlet, Gross asserts that in other European countries, argot and slang are not allowed in the classroom. Children know what is “correct” usage in their main language, whereas in the UK, primary teachers do not feel it is their role to interfere with self-expression in any shape or form. Then, in secondary school, pupils suddenly discover “street language” and that this is not acceptable in their written work. Falling literacy standards in London schools are thus attributed to this (non) teaching by primary teachers.

Since the 1960s, sociolinguistic research has shown time and time again that linguistic difference does not automatically equate with intellectual deficit, yet such evidence does not appear as yet to have permeated and affected dominant discourses of linguistic hegemony. Lip service is paid to recognition of non-standard varieties of English as part of the curriculum for English in England, for example, but only in so far as acknowledging that many pupils have linguistic repertoires comprising more than one way of speaking English. Manifestations of linguistic variety other than that taught in schools are at best ignored, or at worst, continue to be the source of ritual humiliation in the classroom (Snell, 2013). However, Carter (2004) illustrates clearly the inherent creativity manifested in everyday spoken language and how speakers adapt creatively to the conditions of use demanded by the situations in which we find ourselves. Thus, as adults, and paradoxically through becoming literate, many of us become increasingly aware of the range of linguistic resources upon which we can draw, including ways that mark identity, including identity linked to place (Clark, 2013).

Sociolinguistic research has also devoted itself to identifying regular patterns of sound, vocabulary and grammar of English varieties, partly as a way of legitimising them (for example, Clark & Asprey, 2013). In the past, it may well have been the case that speakers of a non-standard variety of English were part of social networks bound by speakers of the same variety, in both rural and urban areas and where employment was also bound by the same social networks and in occupations that placed minimal demands upon literacy. Thus, Dakin (2013) in his study of the effects of the 1870 Education Act in England upon the regional dialect of the communities in the Black Country region of the English West Midlands, found that the effect was negligible. This was because many children left school as soon as possible and went to work in local industries such as chain making and glass making where literacy and speaking standard English were not assets that were valued by the communities.

Thus, increased urbanisation and the increasingly literate nature of modern societies means that there has been a commensurate blurring between variational uses of English and that of standard English. Consequently, whilst sociolinguists may identify a grammar and vocabulary that characterises a particular variety of English, it is unlikely that every educated speaker of a regional English dialect will draw totally upon its identified features all of the time. In today’s world, it is no longer the case that speakers either: a) consistently speak a -variety of English with all its identified features of sound, vocabulary and grammatical variation or b) consistently speak standard English with all its identified features of sound, vocabulary and grammatical variation. It is far more likely, depending upon individuals’ backgrounds, that s/he will either draw upon both to varying degrees (most likely if from a working class background, including EAL) or speak standard English



consistently (most likely if from a middle-class background with English as a first language or as bilingual with English and another language from birth).

For example, Snell (2013), in her work in secondary schools in Teeside in England, found that pupils who were speakers of local dialect forms interacted with a range of semiotic resources (including those of standard English) as part and parcel of their linguistic repertoires. She makes the point that it is not the presence or absence of non-standard forms in children's speech that raises educational issues, as commentators such as Gross have suggested. Rather, it is the ways in which teachers react to the use of non-standard forms in children's speech, that can lead to academic disaffection and disenchantment. Snell describes how a pupil, Freddy, in response to a question about a word to sum up emotion in the animation film *The Piano* says:

“because he's he ain't got a smile on his face”

The teacher repeats: “ain't got a smile on his face” while another pupil, Asha, laughs, which prompts Freddy to self-correct himself: “he (.) has (.) not got a smile on his face.” (2013, p. 121)

Freddy recognises the need to reformulate, and Snell asks why this was necessary. After all, Freddy's answer is intelligible and communicatively effective in that the utterance is understood by all. In answer to her question, she points to a difference between being understood and being listened to, and the issue of “voice.” Voice is defined by Blommaert as “...the way in which people manage to make themselves understood or fail to do so” (2005, pp. 4-5). In so doing, people have to “...draw upon and deploy discursive means which they have at their disposal, and they have to use them in contexts that are specified as to conditions of use” (2005, pp. 4-5). Thus, since literacy is taught largely through oracy, the conditions of use and the underlying dominant hegemonic practices within a school classroom context dictate that pupils should speak standard English at all times when talking to the teacher. Freddy is thus “constrained” by norms, which dictate that only utterances in standard English can function as legitimate contributions to classroom discourse. Non-standard usage such as *ain't* may have value in peer-group interaction, but they do not have value in teacher-focused discussion in the classroom. In order to be accepted in this context, Freddy has to substitute a feature that occurs frequently in local speech with its standard English equivalent.

Snell argues that it is socially naïve to assume that correcting children's speech serves to enhance their linguistic repertoire. Speakers like Freddy and Asha buy into a system of linguistic evaluation that works against them. If low value is accorded to working class (or, by extension, non-native) speech in the classroom, some pupils may become less confident in oral expression and thus contribute less to whole-class discussion. Since classroom dialogue is crucial to learning, Snell argues: “Pupils should, therefore, be encouraged to respond, question, challenge and elaborate their thinking using whatever language they find most comfortable. There is no reason why this ‘thinking aloud’ should be done in standard English” (2013, p. 124). Although Snell acknowledges that some linguistic resources are more valued than others, she does not offer any strategies as to how “conditions of use” in educational contexts could be altered to allow for a more pluralistic approach to pupils' “thinking aloud”. This in turn, leads to pupils' reluctance to engage with the conditions of use –

the requirement to use standard English accurately for replicating subject knowledge in writing.

Two major challenges, then, for schools located in socially disadvantaged areas are: firstly, how to engage pupils with the discourses demanded by the school curriculum when such discourses may be very different from the ones they are used to at home and in the community; secondly, how to prepare them for the adult world beyond that of the school gates and their immediate locality, including access to further or higher education in ways that do not denigrate or disparage their home and linguistic backgrounds. The rest of this section outlines three very different ways in which local communities have responded to this challenge.

### **Wesbank High, South Africa**

One of the ways in which some schools have responded to the challenge of the mismatch between the language of the home and local community within which the school is situated has been through ecologising local literacy practices and thereby legitimising them in the school curriculum. Thus, conditions of use are altered so that the language of the school and its literacy practices match more closely those of the local community. Blommaert (2010) describes the literacy practices of a particular school, Wesbank High, a township secondary school in the Cape Town area of South Africa. Wesbank High is situated within the Westbank settlement, and was one of the first, post-apartheid housing projects to be initiated at the end of the 1990s, when the criteria for eligibility for relocation was based on minimum income families. This made for a very mixed neighbourhood in racial terms, isolated from neighbouring areas and plagued by a variety of social and economic difficulties. The school practices dual-medium teaching in English and Afrikaans, and those for whom English is a mother tongue formed a very small minority of the school's population.

Analysis of students' writing showed that it was characterised by differences from written standard English in orthography, syntax, lexis and pragmatic elements. All students at the school suffered from basic literacy problems when compared with normative English literacy. For example: the erratic use of capitals (using them when not needed, missing them out when they were); difficulties in singular and plural marking; difficulties with verb inflection, especially plural marking and tense marking; a wide range of spelling problems, mostly as a result of acoustic writing (writing according to pronunciation) and a tendency to aestheticise writing, even when struggling with basic skills so that writing became drawing. Some examples are:

- Because they thought that was a Gun Sound and the boy wasn't back @ home.
- If I loved him, He would marry me;
- BECAUSE you can Communicate with Everyone in it;
- You can go to the far lands that they speak other language lets say maybe they speak French they may understand English;
- ENGLISH, because it's the oFFicial Language in South Africa. (Blommaert, 2010, p. 84)

Such features, Blommaert contends, are not unexpected and are very widespread in South Africa and elsewhere. They are features of "grassroots literacy" and may be

encountered in many places of the world, where people live in sub-elite literacy economies and have restricted linguistic repertoires. Blommaert writes that:

Grassroots literacy, I insist, need not be seen as “bad literacy” or “restricted literacy”....Such terms suggest a particular (inferior) position on one uniform continuum of “quality” in literacy, whereas it is far more useful to see grassroots literacy as a particular, locally constructed and constrained literacy “culture” with a degree of autonomy vis-à-vis related literacy cultures, including that of elite, normative literacy. (2010, p. 85)

In grassroots literacy, norms and codes associated with literacy are deployed differently, in a different system of visualisation and meaning. There is order in the chaos; what some would call, according to normative literacy, recurrent “errors”, Blommaert see as “types”. Rather than seeing such an activity in terms of an absence of order and continuity, it can be as the presence of a different kind of order operating within a restricted repertoire.

Grass roots literacy can be seen as a response to local issues of function and need, and ecologically embedded in the community within which they operate. The view that such forms of writing belong to a particular local literacy culture complicates what might otherwise seem very clear. That is, rather than dismissing a learner’s writing as being full of orthographic errors, there is another, more productive heterographic way of viewing the writing. Such errors do not exist only in relation to one, institutional norm of writing, but in relation to a multitude of such norms. A superficial comparison with similar forms of writing produced, say, by native speakers of English in the UK or USA is not helpful, as such a comparison suggests one uniform literacy complex that functions as a yardstick for assessing degrees of quality in literacy in everyone, regardless of their cultural and social backgrounds. For example, if someone in a literacy saturated environment writes “luv”, it is likely they already know that there is an orthographically normative version “love” and also able to write it. Writing “luv” becomes an act of wit, skill and creative graphic display, existing alongside normative writing and gets its indexical values of creativity and wittiness from a contrast with the norm. This example shows or illustrates an interplay between two different kinds of literacy, both of which are within reach of the user and part of their literacy repertoire. By contrast, the student at Wesbank High who writes “dearist” instead of “dearest” in a letter to the head teacher, has no access to the orthographically normative version. “Dearist” is her best possible graphic realisation because the normative version is not available within her literacy repertoire (Clark, 2013).

Grassroots literacy features at Wesbank High occur regardless of the students’ backgrounds and academic abilities, and display a level of shared literacy culture in an otherwise extremely mixed community. They are also, to some degree, found in teachers’ writing as well. Blommaert argues that this is a sociologically “realistic” form of literacy, in the sense that it mirrors the marginalised status of the community within which it occurs, where access to elite (hyper-normative, homogenised) literacy is severely restricted. Doing well at school thus means doing well in terms of local criteria for acceptable performance. It is about doing well at Wesbank, not in a universal abstract of learning. If local varieties of literacy are valued, this allows teachers to praise and encourage students, and to differentiate their achievement as measured against these localised norms.

Such localised norms, it can be argued, produce a productive and stimulating learning environment and a solution to otherwise unsurmountable obstacles to academic achievement. However, doing well at Wesbank is not the same as doing well in the world beyond the school gates. For, as Blommaert himself recognises, when Wesbank graduates move on to institutions of higher learning beyond Wesbank, the errors in their essays: “will not be perceived as tokens of local cultural creativity and peripheral normativity, but as indexes of poor academic literacy levels” (2010, p. 96). Thus, features which were instruments of inclusion and creativity in one sphere, become objects of exclusion in another. At Wesbank High, English is a complex concept comprised of at least two dimensions: there is “English”, as an ideologically conceived homogeneous and idealised notion as the language of success. Then there is the other, an “English” which is a locally organised pragmatics of using “English” in ways which are very different from idealised notions. As Blommaert (2010, p. 100) sums up, English is both a language from the outside, a “foreign” language, but has also, at the same time, become a language inside the Wesbank School, as their own or “our” language as well. However, making English “their own” in such a localised context whereby pupils can succeed and educationally achieve within it, becomes a barrier to participating in literacy activities and academic success beyond that localised context. As a result, pupils may find it difficult to move beyond Wesbank literacy and realise ideals of upward social mobility. It may well be that the norms and codes of a grassroots literacy, such as that exemplified by Wesbank, have a different system of visualisation and meaning that does necessarily and of itself equate with “bad” or “restricted” literacy. Nevertheless, the system only allows for educational achievement to go so far. The next section considers ways in which curriculum content, as well as literacy practices, may be affected by the local communities within which schools are situated.

### **Da Bomb Squad Comprehensive Literacy Program, Southwest Philly (Philadelphia)**

The *Da Bomb Squad Comprehensive Literacy Program* is a program introduced in 1997 into an American middle school, Turner Middle School, designed to address the disconnect between content of schooling and the reality of the pupils’ (neighbour)hood which is predominantly African American. The aim of the program was to use the cultural-linguistic practices and experiences of the school’s students as the impetus for creative and effective educational practice. Samy Alim (2007) recounts how he had been told by more than one teacher that students at the school could not write and moreover, it was difficult to motivate them to write. Often, Samy Alim states, such disengagement points to a disconnection between community and culture. He writes that:

Of course, what is cast as “the language of the real world” is the language of the dominating group – let’s call it what it is – the variety of English that’s consistent with the speech patterns and norms of use of educated, middle-class, White men. As scholars, sometimes we (myself included) allow ourselves to believe that the eradicationist view is a thing of the past and that the additive bidialectal view (adding “standard English” to the language variety that students possess) is the accepted norm. Judging from my own experience in schools, I must say that while the names have changed, the game has remained the same. As educators and scholars, we continue to view the language of Black students only in relation to that

other variety (the one we call “standard”), rather than treating BL on its own terms. Thus we are reinforcing the same ideology that has stifled and suffocated the language and learning of our students since desegregation. (Samy Alim, 2007, p. 21)

The *Da Bomb Squad* program thus centred upon connecting community and culture through Hip Hop, since American Hip Hop Culture is one that has Black English roots. The program centred upon the production of a student magazine called *Da Bomb!* (the title chosen by the students), produced by the sixth-graders at Turner Middle School. Among the aims of the program were ones not only to encourage originality and creativity among students but also to obtain formal skills in standard English writing, speaking and communicating. In this way, the culture and language of the students was drawn upon to learn various school and life skills. Writing and editing a school magazine is an activity that many schools undertake, either as an extra curricular activity or as part of a curriculum activity in say English or possibly history.

The difference with the program outlined here, is that an argument is made for hip hop culture being studied as an integral part of the school curriculum. Although educationists may say that the linguistic and cultural resources students bring to school should be valued, that value only seems to go as far as providing a stepping point on the way towards the acquisition of standard English. Samy Alim writes: “we gotta go beyond that....Why must their language and culture always be sued to ‘take them somewhere else? *Right here* looks good to me” (2007, p. 28). Samy Alim argues for the study of Hip Hop to be part of a school curriculum in its own right, rather than as a way of bridging students’ learning of how to write standard English and read prescribed, canonical works of literature. Rather than using Hip Hop Culture as a means to cultivate an appreciation for white canonical poets such as Chaucer and Shakespeare, or Black poets such as Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez, the curriculum, he argues, should include studying some of contemporary America’s most innovative and inventive poets such as Pharoahe Monch, Talib Kweli, Common, and Kanye West alongside the more established, canonical ones. In this way, pupils would see that their language and culture as an area of knowledge that is worthy of study in schools.

Like Blommaert, Samy Alim argues that in order to raise pupils’ or students’ expectations, opportunities need to be provided for pupils or students to be the producers of cultural knowledge rooted in their cultural-realistic realities. Many curricula for English and other subjects across the world have adapted their content to take account of literature written in the English that relates to place. Space can and is made in the curriculum for newly emerging cultural forms such as Hip Hop. However, limiting pupils’ or students’ opportunities in ways suggested by Samy Alim risk the same outcomes as those for pupils at Wesbank. That is, denying pupils the opportunity to acquire cultural knowledge required by the adult world beyond school risks replicating the very social inequalities educationists like Samy Alim are seeking to avoid. Once such pupils are themselves engaged in cultural practices beyond school, then they have a better chance of changing them. This is not to say that pupils’ cultural-realistic realities should be ignored, but rather, set in the context of or alongside those of the wider sociocultural context.

### High View Academy, Birmingham, England

High View Academy is a secondary school in Birmingham of whose pupils 80% are Pakistani, and English is an additional language, even where pupils have been born in the UK. Its catchment area is drawn from streets all within 100 yards of the school. Thus, although the community is located in central Birmingham, its sense of place is constructed as much by home communities as by the host city of Birmingham. This is signified by the way people dress, the food that they eat, the shops and cafes that serve the community and the linguistic exchanges between parents and administrative staff at the school, all of whom are drawn from the local community and thus speak the community language.

The way in which this school has sought to address this challenging situation is not by ecologising local linguistic practices or by altering the curriculum so that it reflects more closely pupils' cultural-linguistic realities, but through a whole-school language policy centred upon teachers explicitly teaching the linguistic structures through which knowledge is realised as an integral part of subject knowledge, known as either language based pedagogy (LBP) (Zhihui & Schleppegrell, 2008) or genre-based pedagogy (GBP) (see, for example, Rose & Martin, 2012; Rose, 2007). Recognising that teachers need to be supported in this aim, the school, like others in the West Midlands region, have provided support in two ways. Firstly, teachers attend a recognised LBP CPD programme (DECS) and, secondly, teachers co-plan schemes of work and lesson plans with an LBP trained language consultant and in some cases, co-teach of some lessons. In 2011/12, High View's language policy was piloted with a middle set of Year 8 (12-13 year old) pupils in English, history and science.

In history, the unit of work with the class was on the causes and consequences of the First World War. The unit began with a cartoon of the teacher, Mr Falkes, labelled *cause* banging his head with his hand, as he had forgotten to plan the lesson with the education consultant, Miss Landford. This was followed by a cartoon labelled *consequence* which showed a pupil asleep at his desk, with the caption: *The class won't learn much today*. This was followed by photographs of *causes* such as cigarettes and sweets leading to the *consequences* of a burned building and tooth decay. Then, the pupils were shown a slide which had a picture on the left of a military man being shot labelled *cause*, accompanied by a slide on the right labelled *consequence*, showing soldiers marching off to war. In between, was a set of verb groups or processes, that linked the two: *caused, led to, brought about, resulted in*.

The pupils then worked in pairs to match a set of causes with consequences, related to the First World War. They were then asked as a class what they thought was the main cause which led to the First World War. One pupil put up his hand and answered: "Because some geezer got shot Miss". In a school such as the one Snell (2013) has written about, the likely response to this expression would be to ridicule the informality of such an expression. Miss Landford, though, responded by saying: "Yes, that's right, but a historian wouldn't say it like that." She went on to explain that if the pupils wished to write and speak "like historians", they needed to learn the language historians used to express their thoughts and ideas. As the lessons progressed, learning about the causes and consequences of the First World War was

integrated with activities which taught the pupils the basic structure for writing about causes and consequences.

In March 2012, one of the pupils wrote:

What caused the First World War?

As the Archduke was killed part of that was bought up as how the 1st world war became in war. Guns and bombs were created to be used as defending theirselves and taking part and to defeat the opposite country. Countries were invaded in groups.

By June 2012, three months later, the same pupil wrote:

What caused the Second World War?

In 1918 Germany was defeated by the Allied powers and that is how the first world war came to an end. Germany felt humiliated by the Allied powers and were very angry. They were punished for the damage and loss of lives.

Although extract one contains the essential knowledge required by the question, its expression is clumsy, technically inaccurate, with pronouns in place of nouns thus making it difficult to understand to whom pronouns refer. It is also clear that the pupil is struggling to express the logical relation between his three sentences. By drawing this pupil's attention to clause structure and textual patterning as part of the process of writing, the pupil wrote the second extract, which has become much more logical, with a clear handling of expression and with the foregrounding of time, also making it sound more "historical" than the first extract.

Interviewing the pupils about their experiences of such a pedagogy, they said that they were puzzled at first as to why they were "doing English as part of history" but that, as time had gone on, they had understood the benefit of such an approach as they had seen their marks improve. They did not mind being asked to revise their utterances, since it made them more aware of how to write academically and helped them to structure their thoughts prior to committing them on paper. "We know a lot more long words now, Miss," one of them said.

Such a pedagogic approach, then, is not predicated upon deficit, but upon enablement, helping the pupils to realise how important language is to educational success in ways that are positive and encouraging, rather than negative and limited. There is no compromise when it comes to teaching such pupils sophisticated and complex sentence structures and "long words" or the notion that because these pupils are EAL, they are somehow incapable of learning them. The school is keen that its pupils can achieve academically to the best of their ability. By adopting an LPB approach, pupils are taught the linguistic resources through which expression of subject knowledge is expressed in ways that do not humiliate or denigrate pupils' home language(s) or by excluding their cultural-linguistic realities. Such realities pervade the school, not only through curriculum and pedagogic practices, but through the environment of the school and its extra-curricular activities as a whole. For example, many of the school's administrative staff are local, and it is part of everyday life at the school to hear these staff talk to one another and to parents in their home language (s).

## CONCLUSION

From the three examples given above and the brief snapshots of schools in three very different geographic and spatial locations, it is clear that addressing the issues raised by pupils' cultural-linguistic realities which are different from those of mainstream English culture, whether it be in South Africa, the United States or England, are complicated and not straightforward. It may seem to be educationally liberating to ecologise local literacy practices as exemplified by Wesbank, or to suggest incorporating the work of Hip Hop poets into the curriculum in place of canonical poets as exemplified by Turner Middle School. Such practices may well lead to an increase in pupils' confidence and their desire to write, but liberation only goes so far.

Literacy practices influenced by linguistic ecology can become restricting rather than enabling, and literacy practices such as the ones outlined above at Wesbank run the risk of creating an almost impossible leap for their students to make when faced with the world beyond Wesbank. This is because there is a mismatch between the micro-content, which arguably is acceptable as a local ecological form of English within the local context, and the macro-sociological level in the world beyond Wesbank, where it is not. The hegemonic practices that underpin literacy at Wesbank are too far misaligned with those that underpin what it means to be literate in the world beyond Wesbank. Equally, arguments for excluding the study of canonical poets are based upon the very notion that is criticised, made on the basis of including the work of previously excluded Hip Hop poets on the basis of the exclusion of all other poets. If one subscribes to the notion that education is a key factor in social mobility and a key means to economic prosperity, then ecologising literacy practices or designing curricula based upon exclusion of any reference to culture beyond the immediate one of pupils' cultural-linguistic realities seems to promote the very thing it seeks to affect: social inequality.

Thus, sociolinguistic research may show how variational use of English in both speech and writing, far from being "incorrect" or "illiterate", is creative, and thus points to a shift in our conceptual thinking about language(s) and varieties. The shift contributes to a challenging of linguistic hegemony, from where English or any variety of it is perceived as static, "fixed", totalised and immobile to its being thought of as dynamic, fragmented and mobile, with the focus upon mobile resources rather than immobile languages. It may appear to make sense, then, to allow for more creativity in the teaching of English literacy, in ways that practices centring upon the teaching of linguistic norms of spelling and grammar of standard English don't encourage.

However, the fact remains that much subject knowledge is assessed and judged through expression in writing that demands a certain level of competence in standard English. At High View, this fact is tackled head on, by explicitly teaching the structures of written standard English through which subject knowledge is realised. The way this is achieved is through a great deal of talk, by encouraging pupils to "think aloud" and reformulate their answers in standard English, not because their expression is "wrong", "illiterate" or spoken in non-standard English, but because the conditions of use underpinning academic success demand that the expression of subject knowledge be expressed through written standard English.



Becoming confident writers of standard English and the corresponding awareness of its importance both educationally and socially, as recent sociological research shows (Clark, 2013), does not mean that people have to become slaves to language. Rather, situational use of language can indeed transcend traditional social categories, and individuals draw upon linguistic resources in creative and innovative ways, but this is only possible once a certain degree of competence in standard English and linguistic awareness has been achieved. Becoming confident writers of standard English, then, is the responsibility of every teacher, regardless of their subject discipline or age phase that is taught beyond key stage 1. The explicit teaching about language that characterises so much of the teaching underpinning the acquisition of initial literacy should thus continue, as at Lake View, as part and parcel of teaching subject knowledge of all curriculum subjects up to public examination. To do anything else, such as adapting literary practices or curriculum content in restricting ways for whatever the reason, is to deny disadvantaged pupils the chance to succeed and to impact upon linguistic landscapes in conscious, creative and challenging ways should they so wish.

## REFERENCES

- Blommaert, J. (2005). *Discourse*. Cambridge, England; Cambridge University Press.
- Blommaert, J. (2010). *The sociolinguistics of globalisation*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Carter, R. (2004). *Language and creativity: The art of common talk*. London, England: Routledge.
- Clark, U. (2001). *War words: Language, history and the disciplining of English*. Oxford, England: Elsevier Science.
- Clark, U. (2013). *Language and identity in Englishes*. London, England: Routledge.
- Clark, U. (2010). Grammar in the Curriculum for English: what next? *Changing English: studies in culture and education*, 17(2), 189-200.
- Clark, U. (2011). 'What is English For?: Language Structure and the Curriculum for English. *Changing English: studies in culture and education*, 18(2), 175-186.
- Clark, U., & Asprey, E. (2013). *West Midlands English: Birmingham and The Black Country*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press.
- Clay, M. (1991). *What did I write*. Auckland, New Zealand: Heinemann.
- Creese, A., Bhatt, A., Bhojani, N., & Martin, P. (2006). Multicultural, heritage and learner identities in complementary schools. *Language and Education*, 20(1), 23-43.
- Crowley, T. (1996). *Language in history*. London, England: Routledge.
- Coupland, N. (2007). *Style: Language variation and identity*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Coupland, N. (2010). Welsh linguistic landscapes "from above" and "from below". In A. Jaworski & C. Thurlow (Eds.), *Semiotic landscapes: Language, image, space* (pp. 77-101). London, England: Continuum.
- Dakin, B. (2013). *The social history of the Black Country dialect 1870-1939* (Unpublished doctoral thesis). University of Wolverhampton, England.
- Gee, J. P. (1990). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. London, England: Falmer Press.

- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebook* (Q. Hoare & G. Nowell-Smith, Ed. & Trans.). London, England: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Hamilton, M. (2012). *Literacy and the politics of representation*. London, England: Routledge.
- Olson, D. (1994). *The world on paper: The conceptual and cognitive implications of reading and writing*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Rose, D., & Martin, J. R. (2012). *Learning to write, reading to learn*. Sheffield, England: Equinox Publishing Ltd.
- Rose, D. (2007). Reading genre: A new wave of analysis. *Linguistics and the Human Sciences*, (2)2. 185-204.
- Samy Alim H. (2007). "The whig party don't exist in my hood:" Knowledge, reality and education in the Hip Hop Nation. In H. Samy Alim and J. Baugh (Eds.), *Talking black talk: Language, education and social change* (pp. 120-146). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Scollon, R., & Scollon, S. B. K. (2003). *Discourses in place: Language in the material world*. London, England: Routledge.
- Snell, J. (2013). Dialect, interaction and class positioning at school: From deficit to difference to repertoire. *Language and Education*, 27(2), 110-128.
- Street, B. (1995). *Social literacies: Critical approaches to literacy in education, development and ethnography*. London, England: Longman.
- Suarez, D. (2002). The paradox of linguistic hegemony and the maintenance of Spanish as a heritage language in the United States. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 23(6), 512-530.
- Upward, C., & Davidson, G. (2011) *The history of English spelling*. London, England; Wiley Blackwell.
- Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and literature*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Zhihui, F., & Schleppegrell, M. (2008). *Reading in secondary content areas: A language-based pedagogy*. Michigan, USA: University of Michigan Press.

Manuscript received: August 8, 2013

Revision received: September 17, 2013

Accepted: October 1, 2013