

English

**A Changing Medium for
Education**

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

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A Changing Medium

for Education

Edited by
Constant Leung and Brian V. Street

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Contents

Contributors	vii
Preface	xi
1 Introduction: English in the Curriculum – Norms and Practices <i>Constant Leung and Brian Street</i>	1
2 What Counts as English? <i>Martin Prinsloo</i>	22
3 The Rise and Rise of English: The Politics of Bilingual Education in Australia’s Remote Indigenous Schools <i>Ilana Snyder and Denise Beale</i>	41
4 (Re)Writing English: Putting English in Translation <i>Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu</i>	59
5 Multilingual and Multimodal Resources in Genre-based Pedagogical Approaches to L2 English Content Classrooms <i>Angel Lin</i>	79
6 Multimodal Literacies and Assessment: Uncharted Challenges in the English Classroom <i>Heather Lotherington and Natalia Sinitskaya Ronda</i>	104
7 Beyond Labels and Categories in English Language Teaching: Critical Reflections on Popular Conceptualizations <i>Martin Dewey</i>	129

Concluding Remarks <i>Constant Leung and Brian Street</i>	150
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Index	152
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Preface

Constant Leung and Brian Street

The widespread use of English as a preferred medium for schooling in a variety of educational contexts in different parts of the world has given rise to questions about what counts as ‘Standard English’ and ‘literacy’. In relation to both of these questions, the dominant focus in educational contexts has been to assume that English, both spoken and written, is a stable and uniform phenomenon and that teaching has simply to ignore, or to marginalize, everyday or ‘popular’ uses. However, recent debates in the fields of English (as a school and university subject), English as a Lingua Franca, English as an Additional/Second Language, multimodal communication World Englishes, and in the fields of New Literacy Studies and Academic Literacies, for instance, have shown that English, whether spoken or written, is not a single monolithic language in terms of genre, lexicogrammatical properties and pragmatic conventions of use. Rather, participants in the specific contexts of both community activities and also of classroom curricula can shape both form and function of English in decisive ways, particularly in the light of the increasing use of interactive digital communication devices. This complex view of English is clearly an important issue for language education policy and practice in different world locations.

It is also sometimes assumed that English is a set of neutral linguistic resources and that the adoption of English as a medium for schooling is based on good common sense – an obvious thing to do, so to speak. The choice of English as a preferred medium is, however, a deliberate act involving value judgments and ideological and political principles, whether one is talking about the education of ethnolinguistic minority students in English-speaking countries, or the adoption of English as the official school medium in places such as Singapore or South Africa, where English is one of the many local/official languages. Recent studies in bi/multilingual interaction in school and elsewhere suggest that the role and utility of English in education has to be understood with reference to the presence, the conferred status and the use of other languages in school and in wider society.

This edited volume is designed to provide a scholarly and research-based discussion on how English in education can be (re)conceptualized and understood in light of the dynamic and changing nature of English. It will cover, inter alia, the following aspects of English (in alphabetical order):

- *Classroom English models* (Leung & Street, Chapter 1; Lin, Chapter 5; Lotherington & Ronda, Chapter 6).
- *Communicative competence in and through English* (Leung & Street, Chapter 1).
- *Cultures in and through English* (Prinsloo, Chapter 2; Snyder & Beale, Chapter 3).
- *Ethnicity and English* (Snyder & Beale, Chapter 3; Prinsloo, Chapter 2).
- *Labels and categories in English Language Teaching (ELT): Critical examination of EAL* (English as an Additional Language), *EFL* (English as a Foreign Language), *ELF* (English as a Lingua Franca), *ESL* (English as a Second Language), *ELL* (English Language Learning) (Dewey, Chapter 7; Horner & Lu, Chapter 4).
- *Language/s in English* (Horner & Lu, Chapter 4; Prinsloo, Chapter 2).
- *Literacy in English curricula* (Leung & Street, Chapter 1; Lotherington & Ronda, Chapter 6).
- *Principles of English language policies in education* (Snyder & Beale, Chapter 3; Prinsloo, Chapter 2).
- *Student identity in and through English* (Horner & Lu, Chapter 4; Snyder & Beale, Chapter 3).
- *Teacher professional knowledge of English in context* (Lin, Chapter 5; Lotherington & Ronda, Chapter 6).
- *Technology, literacies and English* (Lotherington & Ronda, Chapter 6).

As the authors in this collection indicate, there are several competing/conflicting views of language and of literacy, which creates tension in how different aspects are conceptualized. It is perhaps more obvious from a social practice perspective, for instance, that what counts as ‘English’ will vary with context, than it would be from a more formal standard or autonomous language viewpoint, which focuses on the features of language itself, particularly syntax, lexis and phonology, and generalizes what is ‘proper’ language use from descriptions of these features. From that view English can be described in terms of a set of stable features. In the field of literacy studies, for instance, the models of literacy as a single unified standard, ‘autonomous’ of social context, have been distinguished from models of literacies, in the plural, as social practices, where what counts as literacy in a given context is already heavily laden with ideological meaning. The

tension between these models and their enactment in policy and practice is especially apparent as institutions attempt to prescribe what counts as 'standard' uses of reading and writing, whilst social practices perspectives recognize that such value judgments vary with context and with ideological positions. The concept of 'practice' is central to many of the discussions in this volume as it is regarded as 'situated'. This is not to support complete relativism but rather to acknowledge the complexity and variety of language and literacy in actual practice, and to recognize that judgments need to be based on a context-sensitive perspective – as Hymes (e.g. 1972, 1977, 1994) might argue, what is 'appropriate' for particular purposes – rather than trying to lay down a universal general 'standard'. From this perspective, then, the variations that the authors describe as now to be observed in uses and meanings of 'English' require researchers, as well as practitioners and policy-makers, to both describe the varieties they encounter and to make explicit the criteria for judgments as to which will count for particular purposes. In a sense this is a de-centering exercise. In the Academic Literacies field, for instance, this social practice perspective has led to closer attention being paid to the varieties of genres and styles that are called upon in different disciplines and at different stages of academic work, rather than imposing a single uniform criterion for performance across the board. The Academic Literacies perspective, however, also has to meet and negotiate with the 'Standard English' perspective of what counts as writing, especially in the fields of English for Academic Purposes, English as an Addition/Foreign/Second Language, English Language Learning (or ELL, particularly in the United States), where traditionally the aim has been to inculcate learners into a single entity called English. Similarly, research in the field of English as a Lingua Franca has strongly suggested that lingua franca use often involves linguistic reformulations and pragmatic innovations that depart from the putative standard variety of English. At the same time, of course, the standard variety itself has many manifestations in the form of Standard American English or General American, Standard British English and Standard Australian English and so on, so in fact both those who have tended towards the 'standard' model and those who advocate the more varied social practice model recognize variation. The authors in the present volume, then, take full account of the tensions between these perspectives and provide detailed and rich accounts of the complexity and variety to be identified in English as it is enacted in spoken and written forms across different contexts, both internationally and within institutions in given situations. As we now talk about multiple literacies, so many of the authors in the present volume recognize the need to take account of multiple Englishes and their enactments in spoken and written media.

The volume begins with an account by the editors, Constant Leung and Brian Street, entitled 'English in the Curriculum – Norms and Practices' that both summarizes the main theoretical approaches in the field and offers classroom examples that illustrate the changes they have noted. Drawing in particular on the work of Hymes (e.g. 1972, 1977, 1994) and Halliday (e.g. 1973, 1975, 2004) they note how the idea of language in communication was taken up by practitioners in the field of English language studies to develop what has become known as 'communicative competence'. In reviewing and updating this concept, in the light of English as a changing medium of education, they provide a vignette drawn from research in an ethnolinguistically diverse London school that gives the reader a glimpse of the potential yield of looking at English as part of social and language practice and that helps set the scene for the discussions by subsequent authors in the volume. English is seen as a set of linguistic resources that can be used for communication, often in combination with actions and other symbolic means. Partly driven by curriculum subject content and woven into classroom activities, it can take a variety of forms (e.g. spoken, written, print, digital), and can serve as the main conveyor of meaning or as a framing facility to draw attention to graphic and other forms of meaning representation. Above all, in addition to being a means for individual meaning-making, English is seen as a carrier of cultural capital and social values, access to which is not equally distributed amongst the different groups of participants in education. Taken as a whole the chapters in the volume, similarly drawing upon specific concrete case studies in a variety of international contexts and developing a theoretically informed and 'practice' minded discussion of English as it is changing, can help us build a rich and more complex picture than the more norm-driven language and literacy approaches that have dominated both research and pedagogy in English.

We summarize briefly here the other chapters in the volume and indicate how the authors draw upon the issues discussed above in their accounts, from many different countries, of the changing nature of English as both spoken and written language.

Chapter 2, 'What Counts as English?', by Mastin Prinsloo draws on data from South Africa to demonstrate the diversity of English that is hidden in the term 'English' in policy construction, arguing along with ourselves and other authors in this volume that the concept of language is by no means neutral. The chapter examines the divergences between what educational policy calls for in South African schools with regard to language and learning and what actually takes place in schools. Drawing on an examination of language policy statements in South Africa and on school-based ethnographic data, Prinsloo develops an analysis that starts to account for

the difference between language policy imperatives and schooling practices. And, again like other authors, he takes South African education policy as an example of how constructs to do with language in education policy rely on familiar but problematic ideas about language, development and nation building. He draws in particular on interactional sociolinguistic and ethnographic research, approaches that study language as situated social practice. From this perspective he argues the term 'English', or any other named language, is misleading shorthand for a diverse range of language varieties, genres, registers and practices. He takes us through a variety of policy statements in post-apartheid South Africa, analyzing them in terms of a social practice perspective and showing what is lacking. He then provides a number of ethnographic-style studies of classroom literacy and language practices that demonstrate the limitations of the policy claims. There is, in reality, an acute contrast between the 'English' being taught and used in post-foundation phase classrooms, where the majority of black, ethnic minority students are to be found, and that being taught in suburban schools, where the teachers see the school as an extension and elaboration of the students' home communities' ways of knowing and being, a perspective that is reflected in the language of the classroom. Whilst there are also black and ethnic minority pupils here, the approach is an assimilationist one that edges them towards dominant 'English'. Prinsloo's argument, then, in his discussion of the data from these different classrooms is that 'English' is something different in different school settings, depending on the situated resources and intentions of social actors (see Chapter 3 for a discussion of an Australian context). Effective policy-making, then, should be based on a closer understanding of how language is practiced, rather than relying on projections of romanticized and essentialized notions of language-culture and indigeneity onto particular 'languages'.

Chapter 3, 'The Rise and Rise of English: The Politics of Bilingual Education in Australia's Remote Indigenous Schools', by Ilana Snyder and Denise Beale also specifically provides a demonstration of how a language policy to make English the instructional medium, itself a complex educational issue connected to the inter-communal politics between indigenous communities and settlers, affects other languages and speakers of other languages. Drawing upon work in the Northern Territory of Australia, they take us through the policy pronouncements and the political responses analyzing the value-laden understandings of language and literacy education that informed the initial policy. They look at the relationships between English and indigenous languages from a historical perspective and then track the current policy moves including a recent climb down and consider its implications. Like Prinsloo and other authors in this volume, they argue

that the debates illustrate the deeply political and value-laden nature of language and language policy, in which questions of power, ideology and politics are central. They also address the literacy and assessment dimension of these perspectives, agreeing with the overall view in this volume that literacy tests and the apparatus of testing are never neutral. As in the South Africa case (see Chapter 2), whilst some children have the cultural and social capital that helps them to understand the particular language associated with testing and to decode the questions in language tests, for others, such as students in remote communities for whom English is often their second, third or fourth language, there are no such advantages. They track the history of these debates in Australia as a background to their analysis of the present situation, taking us through the various recent policy shifts regarding both language and literacy. In this, they draw upon authors in the theoretical literature such as Cummins (1999), Lo Bianco (2008a, 2008b) and May (1998, 2008) and conclude with a general, 'academic' argument that the policy shifts they identify took place without adequate understanding of such theoretical perspectives. In their conclusion they argue that the decisions they describe displayed a lack of understanding of the ways both language and literacy are acquired, which brings them back to the starting point of the chapter: the value-laden nature of language and literacy education.

Chapter 4, '(Re)Writing English: Putting English in Translation', by Bruce Horner and Min Lu challenges many of the assumptions in US composition classrooms that are so taken for granted that people are not aware of the need to be thinking in alternative ways. The authors present some of the criticisms and debates which show that some of the work in the fields of English as a Lingua Franca and World Englishes, which recognize the diversity within English today, reinforces the static view of the language (see Chapters 6 and 7 for a discussion on this issue in relation to school language and literacy and English language). The US, it seems, is a further case study for the gap between what research can tell us and what policy and educational institutions attempt to impose on language and literacy users. Their focus is on post-secondary writing instruction for 'L1' and 'L2' speakers of English in light of changes to our understanding of English as a medium. They take this approach because they claim that the powerful policy debates about ELF and World Englishes have in fact mostly been applied to the 'outer circle' and they want to argue here that many of the issues are also relevant to those in the 'inner circle' of the Anglo-American sphere. In fact, English as a uniform and static code, the mastery and preservation of which are linked indelibly to social identity and to individual, national and global economic well-being, is an ideology that dominates language instruction in the