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Towards Future Literacy Practices

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This paper gives an overview and some preliminary results from a multidisciplinary research project “Towards Future Literacy Pedagogies” (ToLP). The four-year (2006-2009) project is funded by the Finnish Academy. The aim of the project is to explore and interpret literacy practices both in school and out-of-school contexts. The overall objective is to evaluate to what extent the school is able to meet the challenges of the knowledge society. The project focuses on 9th grade students (15-year olds) and their L1 and foreign language teachers. The reason for choosing this particular grade is that it is the last year of compulsory education and thus the last year of school common to all young people in Finland.

Background to the project

Traditionally literacy has been seen as a basic prerequisite to full participation in society. In order to function in a knowledge society, one has to understand what kind of literacy practices society values and how to show competencies to gain affirmation and recognition (Hall 2002). This poses challenges to schools and especially to teachers in understanding the different values, interests and literacy practices of students who do not only represent heterogeneous subcultures and communities of practice but also diverse national, ethnic and linguistic groups (Wenger 1998; Barton & Hamilton 2000). It is a challenge also because the whole territory of multiliteracies is somewhat unknown and undefined, and the teachers might not be fully literate themselves (Snyder 2002). Schools as institutions have the power to categorise social identities. These categories are inscribed in cultural models of schooling and constructed through teachers’ interactions with students, but also through, e.g. curriculum and materials design (Hawkins 2005). Instead of seeing school and out-of-school literacies as separate, or opposites even, teachers and students should be supported in searching for overlaps and complementary functions in these two domains.

From the pedagogic point of view, the pressure to re-design the learning settings and approaches is growing rapidly. Learners should be engaged in activities that employ critical thinking, problem solving through various media, in different teams and for different purposes. From the language teaching perspective meaning making and interpretation through the use of a wide variety of linguistics and cultural means is of utmost importance. Hull and Schultz (2002) have argued that the most fruitful accounts for educational purposes have come from ethnographies of out-of-school literacies, since they will inform our understanding of future literacy practices and multimodal pedagogy. These practices are not mere skills in using the different media but a completely new culture of peer-to-peer learning, joint knowledge construction and shared expertise (Prensky 2006, Gee 2004).

The multiliteracy view on pedagogy imposes challenges also to assessment practices. Assessment is a socially and culturally constructed activity which transfers and reinforces educational, social, political and economic values (Norris 1995). It also forms, maintains and reforms to what extent ownership of knowledge is shared. Despite its power to influence teaching and learning (Shohamy 2001), assessment often remains a distinct entity which may even rely on a rather narrow view of learning. Thus, one of the aims of this project is to explore the compatibility of current assessment practices with the demands of knowledge society.

The approach to pedagogy adopted in this research incorporates socio-constructivist (Resnick et al. 1991, Scardamalia & Bereiter 1994, Breiter & Scardamalia 1996,) and sociocultural (Lantolf 2000, van Lier 1996) learning theories that emphasise the interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge. In this line of thinking, learning takes place in interaction both in formal and informal contexts and occurs across a continuum of contexts that are “fit” for learning. The idea of multimodal pedagogy is in perceiving learning as a non-linear transparent process where the individual and group learning needs are addressed in a more efficient way, and learning tools, working modes and use of different media are built around the learning process and not the learning content (Taalas 2005). A central aim of multimodal pedagogy is to promote learners’ self-directedness through individual goal setting and self-assessment.

Operational framework

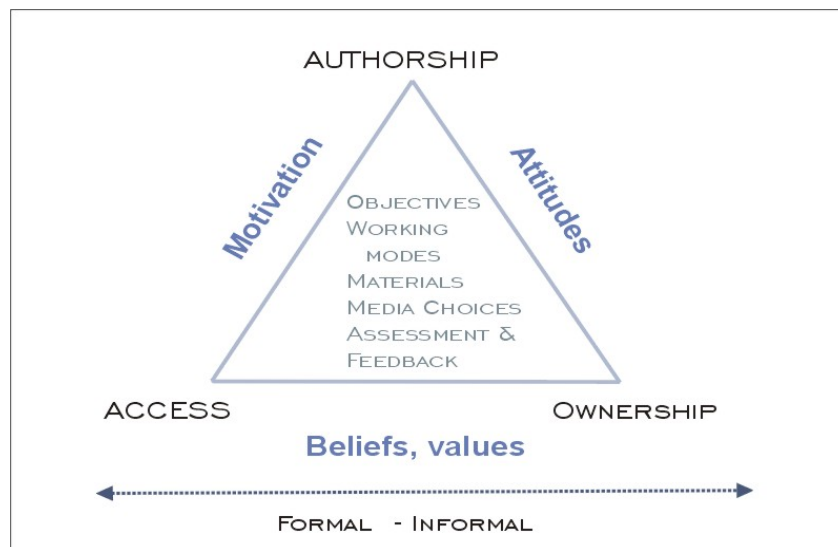


Figure 1. The framework of formal and informal learning.

The triangle presented in Figure 1 illustrates the operational framework employed in the research project in its different stages. The units located inside the triangle represent the core elements of a typical teaching and learning setting. The scale Access-Authorship-Ownership is used to imply and “measure” the empowering and/or restrictive effects of the teaching practices and available materials in a given context. These features or characteristics can be used as tools to understand the mechanisms of a certain material or a learning activity when it comes to constructing knowledge, the social spaces of learning and the roles of the participants.

Teaching goals (both on the policy and on the practice level) can be considered as guidelines for learning in terms of both content and practices. The material and media

choices and assessment practices are influential mechanisms that guide the learners towards a certain way of thinking and learning. Furthermore, the concepts of "learning material" and "media choices" do not refer narrowly to a book and a data projector/a PC but to the use of open-ended materials that are meaningful for the learner, that offer added value for learning and that employ the real potential of the various technologies and media (by not just replacing the existing materials, but by expanding and transforming the learning setting on many levels). It can be claimed that the current book-based and teacher controlled syllabus will not lend itself to the creation of a learning environment where the students have ownership of the learning situation so that they can be active and equal producers of the learning content and materials and be included in the assessment of the learning outcomes.

Research questions and stages

The main research questions are:

1. What are the literacy practices that students and teachers engage in both in school and out-of-school contexts?
2. What conceptions and values of literacy are embedded in curriculum, teaching materials and teaching and assessment practices in language classrooms?
3. What are the relationships between traditional print-based school literacy and the variety of multiliteracies in teachers and pupils everyday life?
4. What kinds of learning environments exist and are created in schools in order to expand the range of (multi)literacy practices?
5. How are different participants (e.g. immigrant pupils) constructing and manifesting their authorship, ownership and expertise in their literacy practices?

There are altogether four stages in the project and these stages include both qualitative and quantitative research methods and approaches. The first stage, which is the focus of this paper, aims at an overview of the current literacy practices in school and out-of-school contexts. In spring 2006 this first phase of the project was carried out with a large-scale survey which will be described in more detail in the following paragraphs.

The survey

The survey is based on a representative sample of 9th grade pupils in Finnish-speaking comprehensive schools and first and foreign language teachers who teach in the 9th grade. The sample represents the Finnish schools in terms of geography and population density. The response rates were 80 percent for the students and 40 percent for the teachers (the teacher questionnaires were mailed to the teachers whereas the student data was collected on site in school time). The survey data covers responses from over 1700 pupils from 102 Finnish-speaking lower secondary schools and 740 language and mother tongue teachers.

On the whole, the survey focuses on current literacy practices, media and text choices, teaching practices and prevailing attitudes towards literacy. The survey has been structured on the ideas of access, authorship and ownership. The structure of the surveys is to a large extent identical for teachers and students (see Table 1). Some questions have been left out or verbalised in a more concrete manner in the student questionnaire. The three parts of the questionnaires are: background information, learning and teaching in school and free time. The questions in sections B and C relate to materials, media and working modes: materials used in the classroom, media use in the classroom, media use in free time, time spent on using various media on an

average day, etc. Teachers were also asked about their media skills and whether they felt they would need to improve their skills in certain aspects or areas. Questions related to attitudes and beliefs were phrased as statements that the respondents reacted to on a 4-point likert scale. These included statements such as “the Internet is a valuable learning environment”, “It is important to discuss students’ free time media use in the classroom”, and “Playing games is useful for learning languages”. There were altogether 62 (for teachers) and 48 (for students) thematically organized attitude statements.

Table 1. The structure of the surveys.

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION	B. TEACHING AND LEARNING IN SCHOOL	C. FREE TIME
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • education (teachers only) • teaching experience (teachers only) • language competence • use of technology • L1 & L2 grade (students) • self-assessment of L1 and L2-4 competence (students) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use of materials • working modes • learning goals • cooperation and integration • feedback and assessment practices • attitudes and beliefs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use (and pupose of use) of different media • technology skills and development needs • reading and writing texts • attitudes and beliefs

Some preliminary results and thoughts

The amount of data gathered in the survey is immense. For the purposes of this paper it is only realistic to touch upon certain aspects of the results and offer some glimpses into the preliminary findings. The data analysis is not complete yet so there are mostly descriptive statistics available.

In school

One of the central elements of a classroom is the materials used for teaching and learning. In the survey this was explored with a chart type of a question, where the teachers and students could mark both the types of materials they use and also the intensity of the use. For 97,5% of the foreign language teachers the study book is the primary material and the exercise book comes on a strong second place (93,6%). For 92,5% of the L1 (mother tongue) teachers the study book is the primary material and fiction comes second (89,5%). The other types of materials fall clearly behind the leading duo and the various digital resources are very sparingly used in teaching.

The student responses are quite well aligned with the teachers’ responses. There is a slight disagreement when it comes to the digital learning resources: the teachers claim more frequent use to what the students report. All in all, the student – teacher responses cannot be weighed against one another, but they can be used as indicative of certain discrepancies or differences in opinion.

Apart from the types of “texts” the students read, it is also interesting to see what they write or produce. According to the teacher responses, the main emphasis is on “school essays” in L1 teaching and “discussions” in foreign language teaching. By these discussions the teachers most likely refer to the different communicative tasks in the study and exercise books. Most often these tasks are based on pre-written

dialogues. The student data on this point is not directly comparable, but it seems that the responses are similar to the teachers' responses. Students are also asked about the types of activities they feel they learn most from. In L1 teaching the response was "essays" and "other texts" and "oral presentations" in the foreign language classroom.

If we think of the formal assessment in both the L1 and L2 classrooms, it is not surprising that the students state that writing essays is most beneficial for their own learning. In L1 teaching assessment is very much focused on written texts, mostly on student essays. In L2 teaching it is a positive surprise that the students appreciate oral presentations the most, even if the oral skills are currently not tested in any of the school leaving examinations. When looking at Table 2, however, one can notice that also the foreign language teachers consider the oral skills to be important evidence of language competence. The L1 teachers in turn seem to value good writing skills along with a good familiarity of the Finnish literary heritage. According to the students, none of the individual skills are as important as being a "good" student and behaving well.

Table 2. Five most important things teachers assess combined with the students' responses. (Tarnanen & Huhta, 2007)

5 most important things that the teachers assess		Students' view of what teachers assess	
L1	FL	L1	FL
writing skills (writing different kinds of texts) 70%	communicating in everyday situations 56%	diligence, active participation, positive attitude 68%	
reading comprehension 54%	tests 43%	tests 37%	tests 41%
knowledge of Finnish literature 43%	active participation in lessons 43%	writing 35%	grammar 28%
writing skills (esp. compositions) 41%	listening comprehension 36%	grammar 22%	oral skills 20%
correct usage 40%	grammar & structures 36%	general achievement 14%	general achievement 16%

Outside the school

The students and teachers both use the various media in their free time. The Internet use is frequent in both groups, but the resources the teachers spend most time on are online banking, various information sites (e.g. train/bus timetables, teacher associations, the national health services) and online newspapers whereas the students use the Internet for socialising, for belonging and for learning even. This result is significant as it seems to imply two almost polar opposites of use, and it indicates that the use of social media is a frequent part of the student's online existence. The gap between the students and the teachers grows even more if we look at the use of online real-time communication tools (see Figure 2). The teachers and the students are asked to estimate their use of tools like Messenger, IRC, Skype on a typical weekday. Less

than 15% of the students state no use at all whereas 20% of them spend three hours or more communicating online. For the teachers the figures are different: over 90% of the teachers do not use the tools at all. It can be assumed that the use is slightly more intense for both groups during the weekends.

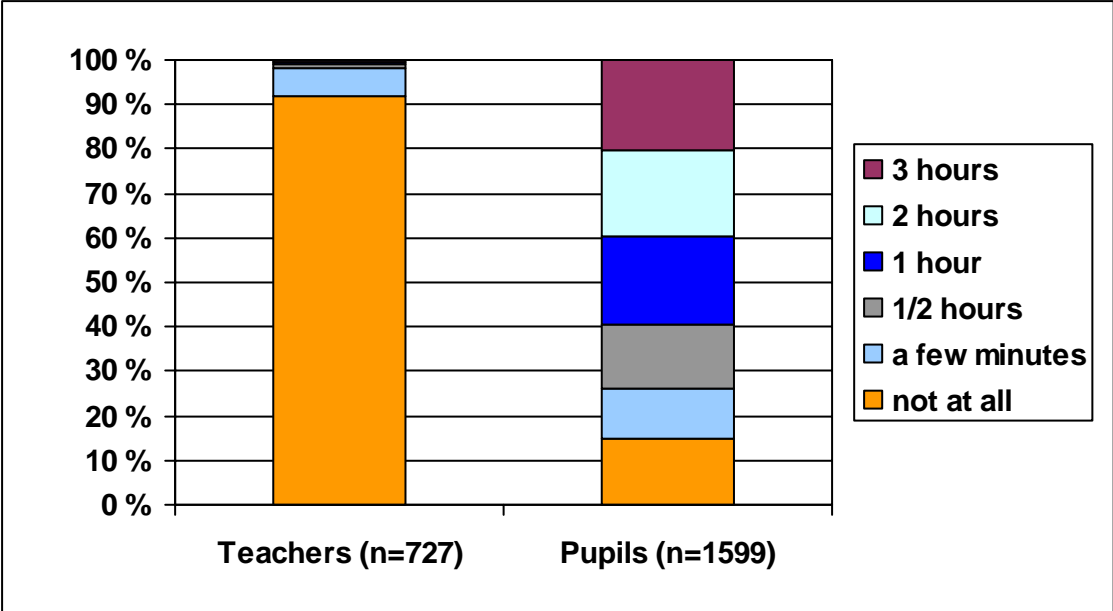


Figure 2. The use of online synchronous communication tools on a typical weekday.

Figure 3 presents the data for playing games on a typical weekday. There are differences not only between students and teachers, but also between girls and boys. A very small number of teachers play any sort of games, at least during the week, 60% of the girls do not play any games either. More than 85% of the boys play games for at least a few minutes every day and almost half of them play games for at least two hours.

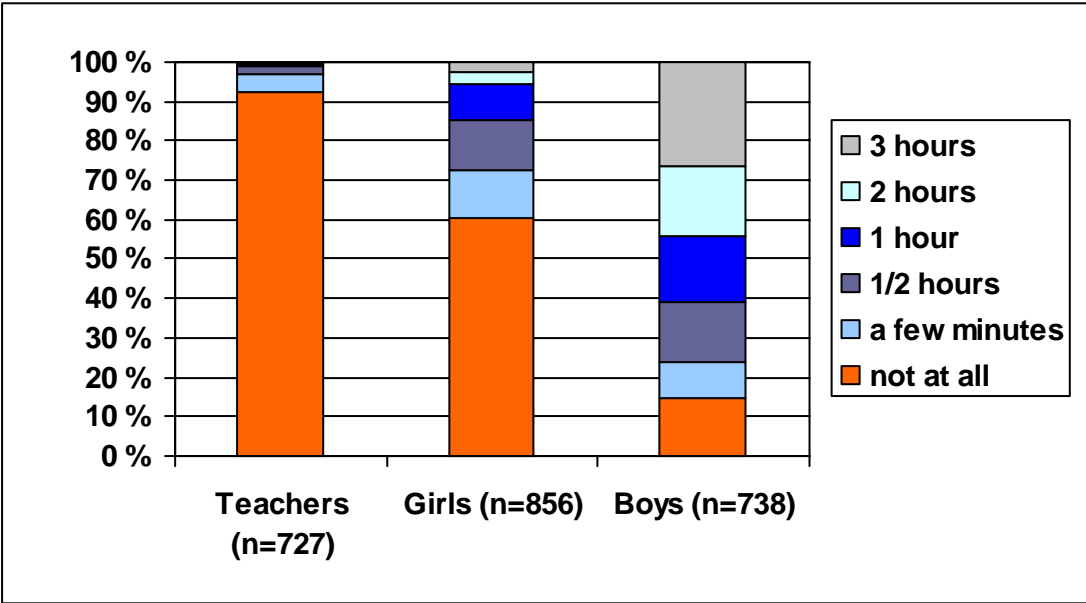


Figure 3. Playing games on a typical weekday.

If we look at the teachers' training needs in the use of technology (see Figure 4), we can see that the teachers feel they need to master the various tool applications, such as presentation graphics, better than what they currently do. The various online tools and especially online games are of very slim interest for the teachers. Most of them openly say that they don't know anything about them and do not need to know either.

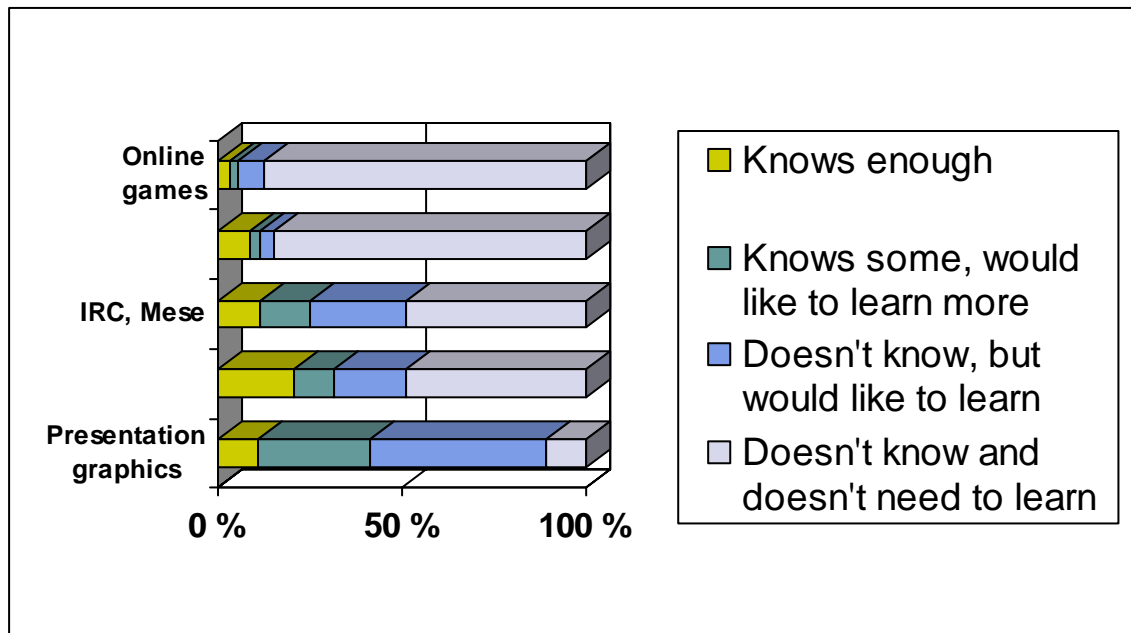


Figure 4. Teachers' technology knowledge and learning needs.

Concluding thoughts

The teachers and the students have slightly different views on what is going on in the classroom. This has probably been the case throughout the ages. But the fact that the school continues to be very much print-based is a finding that has relevance when contrasted with the students' free time activities. The multimodal world is present for the students in a multitude of ways, where as the teachers use of the online resources is "print-based" with improved search functions. It is not reasonable, or desirable even, to expect the teachers to hit the various online communities and resources in a similar manner to their students' but it is worrying if they do not even want to know what is going on. And as long as they don't know, they have no way of making a connection between the students real life skills and experiences and the classroom practices. As long as that connection is not made the learners are in a way misunderstood and the educational establishment misses the benefit of the skills and knowledge the students hold.

It seems that we would need to talk about a completely new paradigm for learning where the learning environment is not confined within the classroom and where the different layers of information present themselves in various ways for the different users in different situations and contexts. We also need to focus on defining the meaningful core content for learning as well as create designs and materials that are not product, but process oriented. It goes without saying that this new paradigm imposes huge challenges for assessment and evaluation, as the learning outcomes are not as easily defined and identified.

The project website: <http://www.jyu.fi/tolp>

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