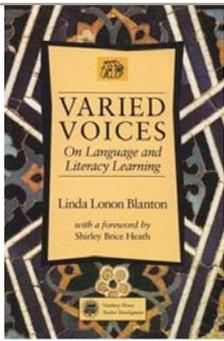


Varied Voices: On Language Learning and Literacy Learning

Author:	Linda Lonon Blanton (2007)		
Publisher:	New York: Routledge		
Pages	ISBN	Price	
Pp. vii + 184	0-8058-6210-2 (paper)	\$25.00 U.S.	

Blanton returns to the multiethnic, multilingual context of her former teaching environment, the American School of Casablanca, Morocco, to explore the acquisition of language and literacy among young children in their first years of school. The vast majority of the children enrolled use English as a second or third language, and many of the pre-schoolers are new to English. She approaches her study from an ethnographic perspective, documenting her observations of the teaching and learning taking place in her immediate environment as well as her discussions with the school teachers participating in the study. Such descriptions are further enriched by her observations of literacy events (often multilingual) unfolding beyond the confines of the school. Although the book assumes no prior knowledge of the literacy literature, the emphasis on description and the lack of theoretical analysis mean that readers approaching the book with some background in language teaching pedagogy may be better placed to benefit from the study.

Comprising seven chapters, with brief chapter outlines provided in the table of contents, the book's content is conveyed in an informal, conversational style, which at times risks becoming slightly repetitive. Visuals (photos of street scenes in Casablanca and, more importantly, numerous reproductions of children's work) enhance each chapter. These become particularly valuable in chapter six as they provide documentation of the children's literacy progress and are accompanied by a detailed analysis. The author breaks up the text of most chapters with bulleted information, direct speech (reminiscences), or interviews. Each chapter ends with key references for further reading, reflection questions, and tasks for related project work. The book closes with a short glossary of

Moroccan Arabic words used in the text, a list of general references, and an author/subject index.

The first two chapters function as a preface to the study. They recount the author's mental and logistical preparations for her return to Morocco and are the most personal sections in nature. In chapter one, amid Blanton's descriptions of Morocco's sights and sounds, she exploits the formalities of passport control, baggage claim and customs (and subsequent activities such as buying gas en route from the airport to the school), to identify and describe 'literacy events'. These serve as a model for the reader to reflect upon the place of literacy in his/her own environment. In chapter two the author conveys the reasoning behind her having chosen an ethnographic approach to her study. Although her account is unlikely to serve as a framework for students seeking orientation in research methodology, it provides general information on the types of activities undertaken by the author during her study.

In chapter three, the author describes the Casablanca American School (its administrative structure and student and teaching body), and situates the school within the broader Moroccan social context, introducing the reader to Casablanca's linguistic and cultural diversity. Perhaps of particular relevance to the reader interested in Morocco is the information on the multilingual nature of the country, although this is only provided at a very basic level. The author touches upon social contexts in which any of the languages commonly spoken in Morocco (formal Arabic, the Moroccan Arabic dialect, French, Spanish, and English) may be used, often interwoven in the same communicative event, and she provides numerous examples taken from Casablancon daily life.

Chapter four, "Reading Teachers' Stories: Key to Classroom Success", centres on two of the school's teachers. The author provides some information on the personal and professional background of each teacher together with a description of their individual teaching styles. This information is combined with snap-shot descriptions of language and literacy moments involving the children from each teacher's classroom. The principal message conveyed by the author is that the teachers are dynamic, resourceful, and patient, but the reader does not come away with an overall understanding of each teacher's learning objectives for brief communicative events or classroom activities since they are described in a very cursory manner. This chapter might have served as a place for each teacher to share with readers her understanding of the relationship between teaching and learning, and how her lesson planning and didactic methods attempt to put these beliefs into practice. A practitioner's reflections on her own beliefs on teaching and learning combined with objective descriptions of teaching activities by an observer can potentially serve as a valuable training tool for novice teachers. Towards the end of the chapter, the author incorporates reminiscences of classroom moments from one of the teachers. These provide a slightly fuller description of classroom activities and begin to identify the components which contributed to their apparent pedagogical success. The chapter closes with "Keys to Success", a series of bullet points outlining successful teaching behaviour observed by the author. The chapter's objectives are thus partially reached in these final two subsections.

Chapter five has greater practical value and should be of direct interest to novice

teachers, as it describes four teachers' activities promoting early literacy development and English language acquisition through integrated skill work. The author emphasises the need to exploit opportunities for language and literacy awareness-raising in classroom activities intended for children at a pre-school level or in their first years of schooling. She discerns that many activities undertaken by pre-school teachers could easily incorporate early literacy-building components. The chapter closes with an interview with one of the teachers on her approach to integrated skill work, during she shares her understanding of the pedagogical value of some of the activities.

Integrated skill work enables teachers to introduce literacy concepts to non-native English-speaking pre-schoolers still working on acquiring English. In chapter six, the author draws parallels between the school's young learners' language acquisition and literacy acquisition by presenting the work of four children (between four and seven examples for each child) collected over a six month period. Each piece is accompanied by her analysis of how the work provides evidence of the child's emerging literacy. Arguably the author's key proposition in this chapter is that literacy emerges by degrees and children who would ordinarily be classified as pre-literate often possess a very clear concept of literacy. This 'emerging literacy' finds expression in activities such as the following. Pre-school age children are cued to accompany their illustrations with a written commentary (often little more than a row of letters) or, following the pictures in a familiar book, 'read' a story. In each case, the results are meaningful to the child (though not necessarily entirely comprehensible to the teacher); thus the activity serves to reinforce the child's budding awareness that letters and punctuation encode meaning. This approach to documentation and analysis can be replicated on in-service teacher development programs.

In chapter seven, the author describes how older children (third graders) can take part in the literacy tutoring of younger "pre-literate" children (pre-schoolers) through a "buddy system, a cross-age tutoring program. She outlines the components of the program, such as the pairing of the children, lesson planning and activities undertaken by the children during their buddy sessions, and the older children's reflective journal-writing about the program. The buddy program evolved originally as a means to provide additional literacy input to young learners through authentic, meaningful literacy activities led by the third grade children. These "tutors" received considerable guidance and support during the initial stages of the program by their teacher, but were increasingly able to plan their "lessons" independently as the semester progressed. It didn't take long for the teachers to notice how the program also supported the older children's literacy skills, among other important spin-offs. Blanton suggests that the program could be extended to provide peer support for other academic areas such as math. The chapter closes with samples of the third-grade children's written work during the course of the project.

Blanton's book can serve as enriching supplementary reading to students, teacher trainees and practicing teachers of language and literacy who work with young learners of English as an additional language, both within an Anglophone context or within a multilingual, multiethnic environment such as the Casablanca American School.

Louisa Buckingham
Sabanci University, Turkey; Universidad de Granada, Spain
<bucklj@gmail.com>

© Copyright rests with authors. Please cite TESL-EJ appropriately.