Quality control in the new workplace: Implications of ethnography for language and literacy learners

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on contexts of language and literacy in use, particularly on the complex social meanings of language and literacy in the workplace. Taking a social practice perspective, it draws on literacy theory and research developing from the New Literacy Studies. It analyses ethnographic findings across four Canadian workplaces to show the complexity of social meanings of language and literacy in use, calling into question the approaches of many language and literacy programs that present meanings as largely embedded in language structures.

A brief set of vignettes from worksites is introduced relating to language and literacy events around quality control, an important area of concern in 21st century business and industry. This is followed by a discussion of how the interaction of language with the contexts of quality control events is implicated in meanings around social relationships, power, access to knowledge and resources, and issues of language proficiency. The article identifies how learners can be advantaged by engaging in the dynamics of language and literacy use with insight and initiative and outlines implications for language and literacy workplace educators.

Introduction

It’s basically just documentation of every process, every, basically every little thing that you do within the plant starting from the time the product comes in the door to testing it in the lab, to processing it in twisting. Right down to the end to the shipping out the door, and which also includes checklists, non-conformances. It goes on and on and on, standard operating procedures (an employee from the Texco Quality Department).

Standard operating procedures, global competition, accountability, continuous improvement and quality control are more than just corporate buzz words in the 21st century world of work. Regulation, standardisation and documentation have become an integral part of people’s working lives, from the factory floor to the professions. Moreover, digital technologies have facilitated their proliferation via easily gathered, disseminated and stored information. Employers consider such information essential for keeping track of the ability of their companies to compete in the global business arena. While many may grumble about how much form filling is required at work, workplace documentation poses potential challenges and threats to those who are marginalised due to language, ethnic or educational background. To a great extent, the work that people do, and even their value as workers, is now measured indirectly by that documentation, rather than solely by direct observation.

This article takes one aspect of workplace documentation and regulation – quality control – and looks at how language and literacy in use play out for employees across four Canadian worksites. The employees who participated in our study of workplace literacy could have been students in many of our classes, those often identified as needing English language and/or literacy upskilling. However, with an ethnographic approach, we came to a different interpretation. We came to understand how the meanings-in-use of quality control are interwoven with the contexts of everyday working lives and that these meanings are more complex and dynamic than the meanings more conventionally attributed solely to words and texts. At the same time, meanings-in-use affected the ways in which employees dealt with quality control requirements and documentation and the assessments of work and workers.
Language education over the past decade has taken a social turn in approach and theorising, away from an individualised cognitive view of language learning, and has recognised communicative participation in social contexts as vital to the construction of meaning. Along with the continuing prevalent emphasis on language as a cognitive activity, a growing body of qualitative research has taken into account contexts of learning and their effects on language acquisition. This article takes a social practice perspective, drawing on literacy theory and research from the New Literacy Studies of the past 20 years. It analyses ethnographic findings across four Canadian workplaces to show how social meanings of language and literacy-in-use are much more complex than the approach of many language and literacy programs that present meanings as embedded in language structures.

**The social turn in applied linguistics**

Interest in the social dimension of language acquisition grew considerably in the late 1990s. For example, Rampton (1997) and Firth and Wagner (1997) called for attention to be paid to the social in applied linguistics research, serving as an impetus for applied linguistics and second language acquisition to focus on the social. The subsequent decade has been marked by theorising on the importance of learners’ experiences of second language, the place of social context in language acquisition, and access to and engagement in target language interactions. Although Rampton (1997) and other sociolinguists (eg Block 2003; Sealey and Carter 2004) have called for broadening the field of study, the dominant approach in second language acquisition has been based on neo-Vygotskian theories, usually referred to as sociocultural theory (SCT) (eg Lantolf 2000; Atkinson 2002; Ortega 2005; Lantolf and Thorne 2006; Swain and Deters 2007; Tarone 2007). By recognising the importance of social interaction in learning, SCT represents a dramatic shift from the individualised cognitive approach to language learning. However, it remains a cognitive theory, with its focus on language and cognitive development, with social interaction as a means to that end, as summarised by Swain and Deters (2007: 822):

Whereas traditional psycholinguistics views language as a conveyor of an already formed thought, SCT views language as a tool of the mind, a tool that contributes to cognitive development and is constitutive of thought. Through *languaging*, defined as the use of speaking and writing to mediate cognitively complex activities, an individual develops cognitively, and as we shall see, affectively. The act of producing spoken or written language is thinking in progress and is key to learners’ understanding of complex concepts. These understandings are reached through interacting with others, ourselves, and social and cultural artifacts.

Thus Vygotskian sociocultural theorists have been most concerned about the ‘dynamics of social scaffolding [through social interaction in a social context] that support the production of L2 [second language] lexical items or morphosyntactic items’ (Tarone 2007: 840). Language-in-use and social meanings remain largely unexplored in the more dominant areas of applied linguistics theory. For these reasons we look next to the social domain in literacy studies, where context leads not primarily to cognitive development but is constitutive of meaning.

**The social turn in literacy studies**

_When we take a socio-cultural approach to literacy, we exit the mind … and enter the world, including the world of work_ (Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996: 4).

Over the decade of the 1990s a body of research emerged that examined the *local meanings* of literacy/literacies in terms of social relations and power dynamics. Often referred to as the New Literacy Studies, it is described as a *socially situated* and even an *ecological* view of literacy, as Gee (1998: paragraph 1) explains:

_The New Literacy Studies (NLS) was one movement among many that took part in a larger ‘social turn’ away from a focus on individuals and their ‘private’ minds and towards interaction and social practice. The NLS … [is] based on the view that reading and writing only make sense when studied in the context of social and cultural (and we can add historical, political and economic) practices of which they are but a part._
Hamilton (2000: 1) further notes that from this perspective ‘literacy competence and need cannot be understood in terms of absolute levels of skill, but are relational concepts’.

Much of the research focus in the 1990s was on literacy in the workplace. Gowen (1992), one of the earliest researchers in this area, wrote an ethnographic case study of a workplace literacy program for African-American hospital workers. Her research revealed that what managers interpreted as poor literacy skills were at times acts of resistance. Similarly, Hull (1999) describes a mistake made on the factory floor; the social and political values, biases and practices of the workplace were reasons for the mistake, not problems with workers or a lack of literacy. Darrah (1997) reports similar findings, through research that illustrates the fallacy of viewing literacy skills as a toolbox that can be carried from one workplace to another. Instead, he makes a compelling argument that people accomplish work as a community of practice that is embedded in, not separate from, the workplace context. His research shows that management blamed the failure of the team concept on poor worker skills but that lack of supervisor support and management inconsistency on the terms and rules of teams contributed to the failure.

Writing in the Canadian English-language context, Goldstein (1994, 1997) looks at the situation of Portuguese-speaking women immigrants in factory work. Her study challenges the easy notion that English as a second language (ESL) classes are inevitably an advantage for the workers. The Portuguese employees she looked at had created strong communities of practice built on functioning in their mother tongue. In this productive environment, ESL classes on work activities and responsibilities, along with pressure to use English in the workplace, undermined worker solidarity and social relations. Research in Australia (Mawer 1999), in the United States (Katz 2001) and our own work in Canada (Belfiore et al 2004) added to the literature establishing a more socially oriented approach to workplace literacy and language.

Quality control, along with continuous improvement and related safety initiatives, has sometimes been categorised in management circles as *speaking with data* (see Belfiore et al 2004 for a fuller discussion). The term is used to refer to the process of accumulating extensive data throughout a workplace to monitor work practices. It involves very explicit record-keeping in the context of a continuing cycle of planning, action and review, with a strict focus on achieving workplace efficiencies. There are therefore strong demands on the language and literacy of frontline workers, who have to provide the requisite data. Compliance with all these steps is enforced through onsite inspections and a focus on individual employee accountability.

The fieldwork for the research reported in this article was done over a period of approximately six months in each site. We used conventional ethnographic methods including both participant and non-participant observation, formal and informal interviewing and a combination of note-taking and tape-recording. We sought out a variety of experiences and perspectives in each workplace, aiming to understand both the organisation of work and the landscape of local meanings from an insider’s point of view.

The four vignettes below, three of which are more fully described in Belfiore et al (2004), illustrate how tasks, which are often seen as straightforward compliance with quality documents and procedures and with straightforward application of skills, can become much less straightforward in actual practice. The vignettes introduce themes of local and global knowledge, social relationships, power and issues of language proficiency and how these themes interweave with workplace documents and procedures. The names of the workplaces and employees have been changed.

**Vignette 1: Homemade records at Metalco**

This vignette tells of an internal audit to ensure that the quality procedures were being followed as written in the Quality Procedures Manual. Metalco designs and manufactures industrial parts and products from cast and machined metal for customers worldwide. There was great diversity in ethnicity, age and educational backgrounds among the workforce. Rapid growth, changing technology and ever-higher demands for reliability and accuracy have shaped the company’s social and literate systems. Everything is documented
and standardised at Metalco, which has been certified by the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) and other standards for some years. Signs on every entrance to the shopfloor give notice that You are now entering a Controlled Materials Location. All production materials are also labelled, contained and controlled.

During an inspection, the internal audit team discovered that one of the machinists, Yves, had been using a homemade checklist to record the measurements of a gear housing he was machining. He was running a new product on a new machine and double-checking, but the form was the problem. It would have been acceptable if it were stamped Reference Only or handwritten, rather than typed on his home computer. This kind of finding, from an ISO viewpoint, could be treated as a major breach of documentation practice if found by external auditors. After some conferring, the audit team decided to write the document up as an isolated incident of an uncontrolled form in use in production. With this resolution, there was no requirement for official corrective action. Someone would speak to the machinist about the Reference Only stamp but he would not need to be retrained.

On the surface, the issue may appear simply a matter of compliance to a standardised form. However, the standardised ISO form was a generic standard that was set for all to work against, and creating another form would imply a different set of standards. The auditors pointed out the machinist’s experience and the perfection in his work. In other words, they trusted him and did not want to give him and, by extension, shopworkers, unnecessary trouble over a systems breach that did not put any product at risk. The machinist knew that his form was reported as an Uncontrolled Document in Use in Production, but he did not see that as getting him into trouble. Afterwards, he preserved his checklist, along with his other personal notes, in a binder, with Reference Only stamped neatly in red in the top right margin of the page.

From another angle, Yves was fine-tuning his documentation to his individual work tasks. As an experienced machinist, he was highly knowledgeable about the specific work he did, which was reflected in his literate activities. The ways that workers read and used written texts echoed this rewriting of the form. As Tracy Defoe, the researcher for the Metalco site, noted, the texts of individual production cells were ‘meaningful only to those who understand the job, the products and the circumstances’ (Belfiore et al 2004: 170). Yet, while individual employees intimately knew their work and the texts that went with their work, it was the Quality Assurance Department that understood how all the separate meanings of documents and work fitted together.

The Metalco story illustrates two important points, both of which have ramifications for assessments of workers’ language and literacy proficiency and for the competence others ascribe to them.

1 In another workplace, or with other managers, the machinist might have been considered for retraining, or even for discipline. His managers, however, understood the local demands of his job, respected his work history and knew that the standardised documents were created representations of reality, rather than reality itself. In many workplaces, standardised documents such as these are reified and they ‘orchestrate and synchronise people’s activities by stabilising meanings’ (Barton and Hamilton 2005: 32), standardising how events and people’s actions are interpreted. However, in this case, the managers’ knowledge of the machinist and his work overrode the dictated meanings of the form.

2 Meanings of print reflect both the local knowledge and meanings of tasks and work relationships. Their relevance to broader contexts, indeed even their meanings in other contexts, are not always apparent or comprehensible to those outside the local community of practice.

Vignette 2: Texco’s non-conformance reports

Texco is a small textile factory that makes specialised fabrics for a niche market around the world. The factory employs 60 people, including those born in Canada and immigrants from Greece, India and Portugal. The company has been transitioning from an oral culture to one that is increasingly paperwork-centred and data-driven as a result of its ISO certification about five years earlier. The non-conformance report (NCR) is part
of the ISO Standards and is used, for example, to document wrong yarn sent by a supplier or fabric that is out of spec. One of management’s concerns is that these reports were not always adequately completed, which they attributed to shyness on the part of employees about putting their opinions on paper or lack of confidence in English. They planned to offer a communications course that would include a module on how to complete NCRs properly.

One of Cameron’s co-workers told Sue Folinsbee, the researcher at the Texco site, that it was not really a non-conformance, ‘since nowhere in the procedures does it say that yarn has to be tested within 24 hours. This is just Ted’s way of trying to get something done.’ Rather than communicating to someone in the laboratory that he needed the boxes moved out of the holding area so he could use the space, Ted wrote up an NCR. Ted’s story was just one example of what Sue saw as the writing-up game. Whether an employee completed an NCR involved much more than just the mechanics of reading and writing. Completing NCRs also included questions of comfort levels with risk of blame and time pressures. All this was exacerbated by contradictory messages about paperwork, which sometimes came from supervisors or managers. For example, workers were told how important the paperwork was but were given other subtle and not-so-subtle messages that indicated meeting production quotas was the first priority. Completing an NCR at Texco required a complex and astute understanding of power and social relationships in the workplace. While there were overlaps in how managers and workers understood the purpose and the problems with NCRs, there were some quite important distinctions. The most obvious was the management view that inadequacies in the NCR completions could be addressed by a communications course, that the issue was one of skill. However, social relationships and power played a large part in this story, as they did in much of the NCR writing that Sue observed.

**Vignette 3: Just sign here at Triple Z**

This story unfolded over several months at Triple Z. Triple Z started as a family business more than 50 years earlier, with a largely Italian immigrant workforce, and became the subsidiary of an international food-processing company with a highly multicultural workforce. The company manufactures pickled condiments for North American retail and fast-food outlets. Many of its customers require Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) certification, a standardised system to ensure food-processing safety through detailed documentation.

When Mary Ellen Belfiore, the researcher at the Triple Z site, first arrived at the site, the managers were concerned that a number of operators were not signing the documentation on their shifts. It was not clear why, but language and literacy difficulties were a possible explanation. Yet the strong response of several women employees about signing the research consent forms suggested otherwise. After some hesitation, one spoke out, saying, ‘I go to jail if I sign it’. After much explanation and persuasion by Mary Ellen, one woman agreed and the others followed. The possible ramifications of signing and not signing forms at work became clearer at a later meeting called by the Production Manager about mis-documentation, where individual documents with errors were shown to all and ownership of documentation for recall purposes was driven home. The meeting followed training and retraining sessions and marked an increase of pressure on employees for compliance. The employees saw the consequences of individual blame associated with documentation. Unfortunately, HACCP training was often full of jargon that older ESL speakers could not understand, explanations were unclear and their questions were often unaddressed.

Although perhaps an exaggeration, the wariness of employees to sign documentation showed an understanding of the potential ramifications of placing their signatures on paper. Together with
uncertainty about the meaning of complex English documents, their resistance suggested cautious self-protection. They knew from Triple Z meetings that signing HACCP documents implicated them directly if there were mistakes or other problems, and they could be blamed in front of their co-workers. Their hesitation may have also indicated an awareness that signatures can lock the signer into a binding contract, with possible catastrophic consequences for those who have not read documents thoroughly. Further, when people are asked to sign documents written in their second language, they are at a greater disadvantage. People need to be aware of the implications of signing their names, and it is perhaps a great deal more important than simply knowing the correct way to sign a form following the word Signature. In some government-developed literacy curriculums, learning to write a signature is the only learning requirement. The social meanings of signing a name can be as powerful as the meaning of the linguistic form itself. With limited knowledge of the consequences, lack of confidence in language proficiency, and experience of blame, the concerns of the Triple Z employees about documentation were most likely well-founded. In other words, concerns like these, rather than issues of work or language competence, may have contributed to workplace documentation problems.

Vignette 4: Retraining at the Urban Hotel
The Urban is a large upmarket hotel in the heart of the city, and was recently bought by an international hotel chain. The language and literacy demands contrast with those of the other worksites discussed above in that quality is measured as meeting the needs of guests and maintaining hotel room and service standards. However, like the other sites, the demands are set out in numerous documents that create a competitive image of a high-quality hotel chain. Living up to the hotel brand image involves standardised procedures for tracking and documenting data and standardised interactions with guests. Guest and room data, vital to the functioning of the hotel, are kept up to date by complex systems of databanks, reporting and inspecting. In addition to regular monitoring of work, the hotel is committed to ongoing training of its large multicultural workforce.

The Housekeeping Department was a vibrant, hardworking group of employees who were predominantly Portuguese, Afro-Caribbean and Chinese immigrants. This vignette is about the retraining of a Chinese-Canadian room attendant, May, who spoke English with some hesitation and with an accent that was often difficult to follow. May had scored below the minimum on recent room inspections. She was therefore required to have a retraining session on room cleaning procedures from Martha, a housekeeping coordinator and trainer who had also once been a room attendant. Martha approached and greeted May in one of the rooms she was cleaning. She reminded her that she had come to help her with her room cleaning because of her recent difficulties. Martha first walked through the room with May, talking about the steps she needed to follow and potential problems that could easily go unnoticed. Throughout the retraining session Martha struck Judy, the Urban Hotel researcher, as softly spoken, gentle and respectful, adjusting the speed of her speech and frequently rephrasing when May appeared not to understand. May smiled and nodded often but spoke little.

At the end of the room tour May showed Martha that part of the doorframe above the closet was coming loose. Martha asked if she had telephoned the Speedy Action Centre to report the need for repairs, an important quality procedure for room attendants. On learning that May had not reported the damage, Martha told her to make the call. May just smiled and said, ‘Don’t know’. Martha prompted her with the exact words and phrases to use and wrote them on her notepad while saying them. She asked May the numbers to press for the Action Centre and, when May was unresponsive, told her the numbers, wrote them down, asked her to repeat them and handed her the telephone. May smiled, shook her head and gave the telephone back to Martha, who quietly told May it was her job and she had to do it. She went through the number and the phrases again. Finally May completed the call in hesitant but comprehensible English. After we left, I asked Martha about the levels of English of the room attendants. Martha told me that they had some difficulties talking but that ‘most understand OK’.

There are several possible reasons for May’s resistance: annoyance at having to undergo retraining, lack of confidence and fear of failure,
lack of English proficiency possibly coupled with the added demands of the telephone, or embarrassment at the presence of the researcher. However, another source of resistance may have been at play here. Low English proficiency cannot be overcome instantly and by displaying limited ability in language, May would not necessarily be responsible for failure to telephone for the repair request. The hotel was aware of May’s English proficiency when she was hired and it offered limited language training at irregular intervals. In practice, the policy was to adjust the job demands to meet what they saw as employees’ education and language and literacy levels. For example, photographs of appropriately cleaned rooms with labels and captions covered the walls where room attendants collected assignments for the day. If, on the other hand, May’s failure to call was not language related, but was due to negligence, she could be vulnerable to discipline, for she was already being retrained for unacceptable quality scores. In other words, ignorance and language difficulties would be less problematic for May’s job evaluation than simply lack of performance. While May’s reasons for resisting Martha cannot be known unequivocally, English language most likely played some part, quite possibly as a means of deflecting blame away from perceived inadequate performance.

**Implications for learners and educators**

These four vignettes show how the meanings of workplace documents and procedures are never straightforward. While corporations strive to ensure quality control by standardising language and literacy practices, additional meanings take shape as people engage with the workplace. In Vignette 1 auditors resisted allowing ISO forms to become rigid reifications that could be seen as more real than the reality of the work. They were able to do so partly because of their own knowledge of the work, their relationship with Yves and their view of his work competence. Vignette 1 also shows how workers deal with meanings of texts in ways that are focused on the local contexts of their work. Vignettes 2 and 3 showed a contrast between how managers view employee competence at filling out quality forms and the meanings-in-use of those forms for employees. At Texco, employees used paperwork to exercise power over others in the workplace. At Triple Z employees resisted completing and signing forms that, in part, made them vulnerable to blame. In Vignette 4 an employee being retrained may have chosen to be positioned as a limited English speaker to avoid being positioned as an unsatisfactory room cleaner, neither of which would advantage her in the long term.

Many researchers (see for example Goldstein 1997; Mawer 1999; Defoe, Folsinsbee and Belfiore in Belfiore et al 2004; Farrell 2006) have consistently advocated that language and literacy educators become more aware of their own social practices and how social practices and social contexts are implicated in workplace language and literacy beyond providing a supportive learning environment. Proficiency at reading and filling out forms alone is not adequate preparation for dealing with the dynamic implications of documentation practices in the workplace. Learners need to be well informed about the multiple meanings of language and literacy in workplace use, as Hull (1995: 19) explains:

“To be literate in a workplace means being a master of a complex set of rules and strategies which govern who uses texts, and how, and for what purposes. [To be literate is to know] … when to speak, when to be quiet, when to write, when to reveal what was written, and when and whether and how to respond to texts already written.

It is important not to interpret Hull as enlarging a list of rules for employees to learn and follow, but as proposing strategies to enable employees to understand and participate in workplace practices with a sense of agency. The complex relationships in workplaces are dynamic and variable and there is no single set of fixed rules for how workplace practices are enacted, for meanings continuously shape and are shaped by interweaving factors such as power dynamics, social relationships and access to knowledge and resources. Although we have seen that workers have intimate knowledge of their work and their local work contexts, they may have little understanding of the broader context, as noted in the Metalco vignette. In workplace cultures of close monitoring, individual quality assessment and blame, employees may accept and internalise individual blame. They may respond with resistance, evasion or lack of engagement, all of which may serve to disadvantage them.
There are implications for educators who are front-line workers in guiding others to prepare for and advance in workplace language and literacy. They can play a large part in helping their learners gain insight into how meanings in spoken and written texts are not just in the language form, but also in the interactions and contexts of work. They can help learners take initiative to acquire broader working knowledge and help them learn to read the world of work.

References


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