

# Teacher and learner agency in the low-level adult ESL literacy classroom

- Motivation for study
- Research design and participants
- Key themes
- Analysing the classroom: from theory to practice

# Motivation for study

## Professional, personal, social

- Teaching/publishing experience - South African ABET system
- Interest in literacy as social practice (Prinsloo & Breier, 1996, Street, 1993, 1996, 2001)

# Selected research sites

- **Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program (LLNP)**
- Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP)

# Research sites

- **Teaching context**
  - Large, vocational institute west of Sydney
  - 2 classrooms on main campus, 2 on satellite
- **Location**
  - Ethnically and socially diverse commercial hub
  - Large migrant population, 31% born overseas, 23% from NESB

# Research participants

- **Head teachers (n=2)**
  - Responsible for overall program management, curriculum planning, teacher recruitment
- **Teachers (n=4)**
  - Responsible for delivering literacy tuition to low-literate learners (“marginally post-beginner”)
- **Learners (class observation, n=53; focus groups, n=23)**
  - Multilingual, low L1 literacy, low English literacy, median formal schooling years n=4
  - Core nationalities: Sudanese, Afghani, Iraqi (also Pakistani; Ethiopian; Chinese; Vietnamese)



# Research design

## **A collective, multi-site case study**

- Integration of macro- and micro-levels of contextual data (Watson-Gegeo, 1992)

## **Investigation on two levels**

### **Macro-level**

- Head teachers: institutional culture; policy; program structure

### **Micro-level**

- Teachers: constraints and enablements
- Learners: constraints and enablements
- Classroom practices: how are these manifested?



# Research Tools

Step	Instrument/tool	Participants	Time
1	Documents in public domain (policy documents, curriculum, assessment tools)	n/a	ongoing
2	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews	Head teachers	1,5 hr interviews (x 2)
3	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews	Class teachers	2 x 1 hr interviews (x 4)
4	Learner focus group interviews (conducted in learners' L1s)	low-literate adult ESL learners	1 hour interview (x 8)
5	Classroom observations (field notes)	Class teachers; learners	4 x 2 hr observation sessions (x 4)

# Emergent themes (1)

## Agency:

*“The capability of the individual to make a difference to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events.” (Giddens, 1994)*

*“The ability of individuals to exercise choice and discretion in their everyday practices.” (Pickering, 1995)*

*“Learners and teachers are not agentive on their own; rather the social settings in which they participate both **impose constraints** on, and **enable** their agency.” (Toohey, 2007)*

# Preliminary findings

**Macro-context: Institutional culture, policy, program structure**

**Source: Head teacher interviews**

## **Policy constraints**

- Increased administration and reporting loads
- Highly prescribed timeframes
- Doubling of assessment burden

*“I think some of the teachers feel that we’re so assessment and reporting-driven, that quality teaching is disappearing because all their energy and time is taken up with paperwork instead of being creative ...” (Rose, head teacher)*

# Preliminary findings

**Macro-context: Institutional culture, policy, program structure**

**Source: Head teacher interviews**

## **“New” learner population**

- Those who have oracy but very little/ no literacy in their L1s, little experience of formal schooling (<http://www.ameprc.mq.edu.au>)

*“We were caught, the Sudanese crept up on us. Maybe four years ago, none of us had taught that kind of learner. Then suddenly, the Sudanese were upon us, and the Afghan women were upon us, and so we were kind of, we were existing teachers and even if you had expertise at teaching lower levels at other providers, ... they were educated ... they had literacy, so it’s completely different.” (Rose, head teacher)*



# Preliminary findings

**Macro-context: Institutional culture**

**Source: Head teacher interviews**

***Perceived lack of agency in challenging the system***

- **Perceived anomalies in funding/enrolment system**

*“I think it’s because we’ve got too many bosses making too many rules. I said in a meeting with the Institute Director, “That’s stupid!” She said “yeah I know”, so I said, “Say something!” Everybody just goes “pfssssh!” Each person I go to in the line above is as helpless as I am. And they agree, they sympathise, but those are the rules! So I said, well, change the rules! That’s why I’m here and not there ...” (Madeline, head teacher)*

# Preliminary findings

**Micro-context: teacher constraints and enablements**

**Source: teacher interviews**

**Teachers influenced not only by policy conditions, but also by personal backgrounds, beliefs and attitudes (Stritikus, 2003)**

- *“I’ve been trying to do, give them something, maybe I try to work out some impossible things. I try very hard to do things in different ways. But it can be very tiring, depressing really.” (Helen, teacher)*
- *“I actually love the challenge of getting right down to the basics of a language and working out how to present it in its simplest form for people at beginner level.” (Pauline, teacher)*
- *“I’m 50% teacher, 20% friend, I’m 30% counsellor/support.” Because they (the learners) see me as a mum, as a sister as a grandmother, [laughs] and I see my teaching as only about half of what I do.” (Sara, teacher)*

# Emergent themes (2)

## Language and power:

- “One sees the way in which certain **practices**, varieties, contextual features, and **instructional strategies** have been tools for gaining/sustaining power.” (Hornberger & Skilton Sylvester, 2000: 99)
- Through **critical reflection** about language and power in and out of the classroom, actors (teachers, researchers, community members and policy makers) can begin to see themselves as agents who have the power to transform practices, not merely as recipients of already decided upon norms.
- **Voice and identity:** Those who are learning a new language need to believe that they have the right to speak, that what they say will be heard and responded to with interest, respect and action. Teachers need to identify and foster the conditions under which learners’ identities become salient.” (Norton, 2005, 2009)



# Theoretical concepts

traditionally *less powerful* < ----->traditionally *more powerful*

## Contexts of biliteracy

micro < ----->macro

oral< ----->literate

bi(multi)lingual< ----->monolingual

## Content of biliteracy

minority < ----->majority

vernacular< ----->literary

contextualised < ----->decontextualised

**Figure 2 Power relations in Hornberger's continua of biliteracy**

(Hornberger, N. & Skilton-Sylvester, E. 2000:99)

# Preliminary findings






Classroom lessons reflected two distinct types:






Example: **Case 1**

Monolingual context
Decontextualised content
Low levels of learner participation
Emphasis of written over oral
Reflected majority context (urban, western, formal)



# Case 2: Market excursion

Vegetables			
Vegetable	Did you see it? (✓)	How much? ..... A kilo	How much? ..... A box or bag
 broccoli			
 capsicum			
 carrots			
 cucumber			
 garlic			

Fruit			
Fruit	Did you see it? (✓)	How much? ..... A kilo	How much? ..... A box or bag
 apple			
 banana			
 grapes			
 pear			
 lemon			

# Case 2: Market Excursion



# Case 2: Market excursion



# Case 2: Market excursion



# Preliminary findings

Classroom lessons reflected two distinct types:

Example: Case 2

Multilingual context
Contextualised content
High levels of learner participation
Emphasis of oral over written (discussion around real-life tasks)
High level of interculturality; dialogic interaction



# Implications

- “*We need to ... **contest the traditional power weighting** of the continua by paying attention to and **granting agency and voice** to actors and **practices** at what have traditionally been the less powerful ends of the continua” (Hornberger & Skilton-Sylvester, 2000, p.118)*
- Maximising teaching/learning opportunities within policy, funding constraints.
- Sharing narratives about classroom practices that allow learners voice and agency.



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Thank you

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