

MA Education TEFL dissertation prize winner 2011

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Agency and literacy practices as mediation means: A case study of an English language learner

Abstract

This dissertation explores the role that literacy practices play in mediating second language learning, with particular focus on the relationship between the development of literacy practices and the development of learner agency. This research takes a sociocultural perspective on language learning and conceptualises both literacy and agency as socially and culturally situated practices (Barton and Hamilton 1998, Van Lier 2008). The study adopts an ethnographic, case study approach to provide a detailed account of the literacy practices developed by one English language learner at a UK language school. It draws on data from classroom observations, documentary evidence and semi-structured interviews with both staff and students to investigate both the observable and unobservable aspects of literacy and agency as social practices. Findings illustrate how learner literacy practices can represent acts of agency which develop in the tension between historical, social and cultural factors and the physical and ideological resources of local contexts. However, the study also highlights how dominant classroom literacy practices and pedagogy intended to facilitate learning may also act to constrain the development of learner agency that is crucial for second language development.