Literacy in the life of a ‘struggling reader’

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Abstract
Adolescence literacy in Spain is being studied from a pedagogic point of view. In this paper we provide, from a socio-cultural perspective, the results of a case study of a Catalan ‘struggling reader’ who does not like to read at the end of compulsory education. [1]

Introduction
Nowadays, the lack of interest in reading among Spanish adolescents is still a major debate in education as well as a topic of concern in society. According to the results of PISA 2000 (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2000) the reading competence of 15-year-old Spanish students was slightly below the European average (19th place of 32 countries). Since these results, the Spanish Ministry has invested in statistical national studies in order to explore the reality of reading in the Spanish society at the beginning of XXI century. According to the last report that focused on the reading habits of 15-year-old adolescents in Spain (Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 2003), 38% of adolescents at the end of compulsory education are occasional readers and more than 26% almost never read, or never at all.

Traditionally reading competence in Spain has been studied from the education field, above all by educational theorists, psychologists, linguists and literature theorist. From a cognitive and linguistic point of view research has strongly concentrated on developing effective teaching of reading strategies (Sole, 1992) for improving students’ comprehension and engagement with text. Two trends have developed and currently these are the most successful in education. One of these major trends deals with cultural literature formation and has sophisticatedly analyzed the narratives in children and youth literature corpus in order to find those texts that fit student’s interests (Lluch, 2003; Colomer, 2005). The other one has focused on how to make students become ‘critical readers’ as a way of preparing them to be ‘critical citizens’. (Bordons & Diaz-Plaja, 2004; Cassany, 2006).

This current state of the matter is that much of the research that has been done in the past decade has been in response to the question: what teachers can do for motivating new generations to read more and better? Although this approach is highly important, we would like to note that literacy research in Spain stressed pedagogical methods without paying much attention to comprehend the heart of the question: why do a large number of adolescents argue that they do not like to read and systematically struggle with (academic) reading? The ‘struggling readers’ in the Spanish education system have not been yet studied as a goal in itself but as a part of broader field of research focused on reading improvement skills and literacy habits. This theoretical hollow fits with literacy research tendencies described by Franzak (2006), who highlights that
'struggling readers' have recently become a new topic in European education research (See similar studies in American education research: Moore et al., 2000; Reeves, 2004; Moje, 2007). We think that qualitative and ethnographic research about adolescent reading is needed for complementing the pedagogical approach. In the last decades, the field of research called 'New Literacy Studies' (now on NLS) has developed new methods for studying the roles that texts play in people’s everyday life and the meanings of literacy for individuals and communities. Following this socio-cultural approach we believe that studying values, experiences and feelings about reading practices in-and-out of school of those who are called by the education system as 'struggling readers' will bring new data for reconsidering literacy theory, pedagogical reading tools and literacy educational policies.

The next section will briefly summarize the research interests of the NLS and also argue what this socio-cultural theory brings to the study of 'struggling readers'. Afterwards, we will follow with a description of the design and methodology of this research. Finally, we will expose the literacy practices of a 'struggling reader' and the strategies he employs for building a social image of himself as a smart boy who does not read.

Exploring literacy in the life of a 'struggling reader' at the glance of the NLS

The NLS (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 1996) represents a new view of understanding the nature of reading and writing as a social practice rather than a universal and asocial cognitive skill. This conception develops in a socio-cultural perspective Vygotsky’s ideas about situated cognition. By assuming that reading and writing are specific and situated human activities, the NLS’ researchers seek to document the diversity of uses, functions and meanings literacy has in people’s everyday-life across cultures, social domains and institutions (home, education setting, workplace, and religious context). Exploring the gap between dominant and vernacular literacy practices they attempt to explain how literacy conceptions are ideological phenomena socially-constructed and embedded in social power relations.

One of the theoretical contributions of the NLS is that there are different literacy practices depending on the context where texts are used. On the one hand, dominant literacy practices are those reading and writing activities legitimated by an institution as an appropriate way of using written language. On the other, vernacular literacy practices are forms of reading and writing that are private rather than public, written in a non-standard language, learned informally and self-generated rather than imposed. These analytical concepts are addressed ethnographically in order to explore how people’s literacy identities are constructed in interaction with the dominant conceptions.

It is through this lens that literacy learning is seen as a socially-constructed phenomenon. Learning it is more than getting knowledge or learning to do something; it is also a socio-cultural process in which learners construct them-selves in interaction with others (teachers, friends, parents) and within particular institutions (home, school) that legitimize some ways of learning by hushing up others. In this sense, learning to read involves appropriating the social uses and values which surround the reading practices in each community and institution. Within this socio-cultural approach to learning, and following Alvermann (2006), struggling adolescent readers are a cultural construction. Labels as 'critical reader' or 'struggling reader' are classifications
generated by the educational system from its particular criteria of how readers should or
not should to be, and all the linguistic knowledge and cognitive skills they are expected
to have in each academic level. We are interested in understanding how these school-
categories generate literacy identities that can have consequences for the futures of
these adolescents that are defined in these parameters. For this reason, we think that is
necessary to look inside the life of those who are called ‘struggling readers’, ‘poor-
readers’ or ‘non-readers’ to deepen our understanding of why they think they struggle
with texts or why they think they do not like to read.

**Design and methodology of this research**

The data discussed in this article are based on a larger study examining the reading
practices and the reading ideologies of five 16-to-18 year old urban teenagers in
Catalonia (Barcelona, Spain) that are labeled as ‘struggling readers’ at school. This
study is based on the premise that conceptions about literacy and reading identity are
socially constructed in adolescence around the practice of reading in-and-out of school
and the discourses about reading in the social environment. We seek to explain what
experiences, attitudes and beliefs lead adolescents to construct an attitude not interested
in reading in spite of having being educated in a literate environment where reading is a
dominant fact. For developing these aims, we follow the theoretical framework of the
NLS (Barton & Hamilton, 1998) and the literature about ‘struggling readers’ (Reeves,
2004; Alvermann, 2006; Moje, 2007).

The work is ethnography-orientated, so that qualitative tools such as semi-structured
interviews and photographs are used for data collection and analysis. With each
informant we developed a cycle of five in-depth interviews held in different domains of
literacy (home, school, community) involving the participation of relevant figures for
each one (families, teachers and friends). In this paper we provide data about the first
case study of this research. Data collection was carried out over a 6 month period
resulting in a 5 interview-corpus. A total of 6 hours and 45 minutes of interviews were
collected, transcribed and fully-analyzed in three levels: firstly, we analyzed the
thematic development; secondly, we applied the Discourse Analysis for analyzing the
informant’s representation about literacy; thirdly, we wrote his biographical reading
history.

**Vernacular literacy practices in-and-out of school**

At the time of data collection Arnau was a 16 year-old who was studying the
humanistic itinerary at the last year of Spanish Secondary Education. He had failed in
8th grade and struggled with academic literacy and numeracy practices at school.
Nevertheless, he had a rich literacy life outside school where he had constructed
different reading identities associated to his social identity. As we will see, these
outside-school engagements with texts constituted important roles in his life because
they were communicative spaces where he constructed meaningful dimensions of his
identity.

Firstly, one of Arnau’s out-of-school engagements with text was linked to the digital
space, where he spent around two hours each night reading and writing (mail, chat,
blogs), sharing experiences and pictures with friends, organizing social events for
weekends and doing homework with his classmates. Keeping his social network
through the digital space was a way of feeding his popularity, as he thought about
himself that he was a well-known boy at school. Secondly, another part of his social identity was related to his involvement in football culture. As he wanted to become a football journalist, he was used to visiting his grandmother's old people's home where he could daily pick up a free sports newspaper. After reading it, he usually shared it with his brother and then updated his mother, as she loved football but could not read due to an illness. Thirdly, when in love with a girl, Amau sometimes would write poems. He had also kept a private written diary for more than one year with his last girlfriend, as they could not communicate their feelings face to face. He usually insisted on the fact that he felt himself to be a romantic boy.

All these vernacular literacy practices were disconnected to the school practices though Amau was supposed to engage for succeeding at school. As many other students in Secondary Education, Amau thought that school readings were compulsory activities which have nothing to do with his interests and goals in life. This feeling was part of his major viewpoint in which education was considered an imposed stage in his life. That is why, in order to deal with reading practices at school, he employed some strategies for attempting to pass the demanded exams and assignments. One of these strategies was collaborating in a school network for getting the exams' questions. As there were two classrooms, one of the friends who did first the exam assumed the responsibility of copying the questions in a school table. In the following hour, another friend copied the questions in a paper, which after circulated among classmates and was photocopied in the break hour. This is an example of a sophisticated vernacular practice through which dominant literacy practice at school was being challenged.

Representations of the dominant literacy practices at school

Amau defined himself as a lazy boy, a lazy student and a lazy reader. One day, he told to us: "al ver, por ejemplo, cuatrocientas páginas, ya dices, voy a estar mucho rato aquí" [when I see for instance four hundred pages, I think, I will be a lot of time here] (E-3: 1288. Translation mine). According to him, the laziness, the lack of initiative and the facility of leaving and forgetting books were a way of explaining why he did not like to read, as he reports in the next quotation:

Amau: Creo que estoy demasiado vago a la hora de ponerme a un libro. Pues eso, si no me interesa mucho lo aparto y ya me olvido.

Amau: I think that I am too lazy when reading a book. So this, if I am not interested a lot, I just remove it and then I forgot it. (E-1: 53. Translation mine).

For him, watching a film or reading an abstract found in a website was equivalent to reading a book. He thought that reading meant to get the general information rather than processing the written language. So he spent a lot of time picking up the stories and the book plots through different resources such as listening to the teacher's or friends' explanations, looking for the shortest summary in the website or watching cinematographic versions of the books required at school. For instance, he told us on three occasions that he had read four times The Quixote of Miguel de Cervantes, which is a classic work with more than 1000 pages. Another day he recognized that, in fact, he did not read the book but he knew a lot about the story by watching the film, so he was able to talk about it as if he had read it. Furthermore, regarding study issues, Amau thought that studying in a right way was studying all night at his friend's house and going to the exams having done an intense effort the night before. It seems that these theories about reading and studying are a product of the literacy practices which he had

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to deal with at school. We would also like to stress that these ideas were also conditioned by the way he represented himself as a 'struggling reader' at school.

**Within the gap: strategies for constructing a social image of smartness**

We have seen that Arnau was engaged with a wide range of out-of-school literacies but he struggled with the ones at school. When he talked about himself it was interesting to look at how he managed both identities, as the next quotation illustrates:

*Arnau: Aunque lea poco, yo sé que soy muy listo. No es por ser creído pero yo sé que soy listo, solo que ayer tengo a la hora de no aplicarlo.*

*Arnau: Although I don’t read very much, I know that I am very smart. I don’t want to seem arrogant, but I know that I am smart; it’s just that I am silly when I have to put it in practice.* (E1:451. Translation mine)

From these words it can be inferred that according to Arnau, reading, culture and intelligence are related, which in fact is how good readers are commonly represented. The tension appears when he defines himself as a 'poor reader' so he cannot accept what this label involves in terms of culture and intelligence. Then, he tries to combine these two perspectives defining himself as a smart boy who does not read too much. In the interview with the teacher he explained that Arnau used to go to his office after class in order to ask for the newspaper. The point is: what does this behavior means for a 16-year-old boy who is seen by the teachers as a 'struggling reader'? In a later interview, Arnau explained to us that by asking for the newspaper he wanted to show one important side of his life to the teacher in order to manipulate perceptions of him. This behavior with the teacher, recognized as an authority at school, can be seen as an attempt to change his academic identity as a 'struggling reader'.

**Final remarks. What has Arnau taught us?**

As we have discussed, Arnau engaged with a wide range of out-of-school texts sanctioned by school, such as digital literacies, sporis newspapers or private diaries. These practices did not help him to prepare and pass the exams but constituted an important space for imagining his future. We are not arguing to introduce popular culture in the syllabus but we think it can be useful working with texts through which student’s own purposes can be recognized. We think that by being more flexible with the literacy activities at school we can provide students with school frameworks in which they are able to develop their social identities rather than focusing on the academic ones which they can feel unsuccessful and trapped in.

**Endnotes**

[1] This article takes part in the research project Pràcticas letrades contemporanea: análisis y aplicaciones (HUM2007-62118/FILO), carried out by the research group Líteracitat Crítica at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, directed by Daniel Cassany. Website: http://www.upf.edu/ dl/reerca/grups/greul/LC/index.html

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