

Local literacies in a Cameroonian village

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Abstract

This paper explores the uses of literacy in a rural area in a developing country, and applies the ensuing insights to an examination of the provision of basic literacy teaching to adults in that context.

Adopting the perspective of literacy as a social practice, I describe the literacy practices which I have found in my research so far among the Mofu-Gudur people of northern Cameroon, using the framework of vernacular literacy practices identified by Barton and Hamilton (1998). Following Rogers *et al.* (1999) and Street (2005), I demonstrate how the application of the social practice view of literacy together with adult learning theory reveals important issues to be addressed by the designers of adult literacy programmes.

1. Introduction

In this paper I will explore the uses of literacy among the Mofu-Gudur people of Cameroon using categories developed by Barton & Hamilton (1998) in their study of literacy in Lancaster, and demonstrate how an awareness of local literacy practices can lead to suggestions for the improvements in the provision of basic literacy teaching to adults in that context. I will show how similar practices exist in Cameroon and Lancaster, although in an area where few people are able to read and write there is significant difference in the degree of prevalence of these practices. I will also show that literacy for reading the Bible is highly valued in this area, but that this is not apparently recognised in local adult literacy provision, even in the programme operating within the churches. I will propose some reasons for this.

My research is based on the premise that teaching people to read and write is not a matter of teaching only basic skills without an acknowledgement of how those skills will be applied, but rather requires paying careful attention to the uses and significance of literacy in the community. As Street (2005, *my italics*) points out,

If we want learners to develop and enhance the richness and complexity of literacy practices evident in society at large, then we need curriculum and assessment that are themselves rich and complex and *based on research into actual literacy practices*.

This view has not always been recognised, even though it has much to offer those looking for ways of improving the effectiveness of adult literacy provision.

The research reported here forms part of my ongoing research into the uses and conceptions of literacy in this part of Cameroon.

2. Theoretical Background

My research is informed both by literacy theory and by adult education theory. I will outline first the main aspects of literacy theory which are relevant to this discussion, followed by those of adult learning theory.

2.1 Literacy as a social practice

Within the last twenty years, literacy has come to be seen in terms of a social practice (Barton, 1994; Street, 1984, 1995, 1993). Whereas the traditional view of literacy regards literacy as a skill acquired by individuals through an educational process typically located in the classroom, the social practice view focuses on the ways in which people make use of literacy as individuals or as communities of people. It locates literacy in the community and in everyday life.

Fundamental to this view is the concept of literacy practices. According to Barton & Hamilton (1998: 6-7),

Literacy practices are the general cultural ways which people draw upon in their lives. In the simplest sense, literacy practices are what people do with literacy. [...] Literacy practices are more usefully understood as existing in the relationships between people, within groups and communities, rather than as a set of properties residing in individuals.

This view of literacy therefore places literacy in the realm of interpersonal communication, offering people an additional channel for meeting their needs as individuals and for functioning as members of their wider society. This does not necessarily reject the view of literacy as a product of education or as a skill which people need to learn; it rather complements it and serves to remind educators that the skill which is typically taught in schools or in some other educational setting does not exist independently but rather is applied in the world outside the classroom, and that the world outside in turn affects what is learned inside the classroom.

The social view of literacy is particularly helpful in showing that literacy practices vary from place to place and from person to person, and also that literacies do not all have the same status. Dominant literacy practices are those associated with the formal institutions of a community such as school, government or the Church where the manner in which literacy is used follows certain predefined norms. Being established as norms, these practices enable those who can make use of them to acquire status, and potentially power, within those institutions. In contrast, vernacular practices are those of individual people who make use of literacy in the ways they choose and for the purposes of their own choice. If dominant literacy practices are found in the institutions of the community, vernacular literacy practices are found in the home and in the everyday lives of the people who make up the community.

Although much research into literacy practices has been conducted in industrialised countries, a significant body of research has taken place in developing countries. Both Kalman (2001) and Maddox (2001), in Mexico and Bangladesh respectively, have pointed to the failure of adult literacy programmes to take adequate account of the specific literacy needs of the learners. Furthermore, the Department for International Development in the UK funded a project in Nepal to provide literacy support tailored to the needs of the specific local groups; this was based on extensive research into literacy practices in the community (Chitrakar, 2005). Much, however, remains to be done if adult literacy programmes are to take as much account of learners' needs as is necessary for teaching and learning to be fully effective.

2.2 Adult learning theory

Current theories of adult education argue that adults generally learn best when they see a clear reason for their learning and when learning programmes are based on research to identify their specific needs, such research being ideally undertaken with the learners themselves. A 'one size fits all' approach is not appropriate (Knowles *et al.*,

1998; Vella, 2002). As applied to literacy work, adult learning theory suggests that, instead of presenting the learners with a repertoire of decontextualised skills which they need to learn in order to be literate, it is educationally more effective for programmes to respond directly to the purposes which have brought the learners to the literacy class, and to provide curriculum which addresses these purposes in an explicit manner. Facing, and overcoming, real tasks in the course of learning ensures that what is being learned is immediately reinforced through being put into action; learners are therefore more likely to retain what they have learned and also acquire a greater degree of independence. As Rogers *et al.* (1999: 54) indicate,

...literacy learning programmes which apply adult learning principles will help the participants to learn through their own literacy experience, to learn by doing in reality. Just as it is impossible to learn to swim without swimming in real water, or to learn chicken rearing or rice growing without actually rearing chickens or growing rice, so it is impossible to learn reading or writing or calculating without engaging in real reading, writing or calculating in real situations – wherever possible with the assistance of a facilitator.

Such an approach also provides a response to the commonly observed phenomenon of many adult literacy learners failing to continue in their classes for long enough to acquire an adequate mastery of literacy skills. Learners who see recognition of their felt needs and the immediate application of their learning to those needs are more likely to continue in their learning (Lauglo, 2001; Oxenham *et al.*, 2002).

Adult learning theory thus joins with a social practice view of literacy to emphasise the principle that adult basic education programmes need to pay particular attention to identifying and responding to the practical literacy needs of the learners.

3. Methodology

Having worked in the northern part of Cameroon for nearly three years in the late 1990s as a literacy consultant with SIL, I was somewhat familiar with the area in which I am now conducting my research. SIL is a faith-based NGO specialising in the development of unwritten languages, through the provision of alphabets and literature and the training of the speakers of such languages in translation and literacy activities. In many SIL projects, an explicit goal is the translation of the Bible for the benefit of the local churches. Nevertheless, my research interests concern the effectiveness of literacy programmes of all kinds, both those with a religious goal and those with other purposes.

In order to explore as fully as possible the conceptions of literacy of the people and literacy programmes in this area, I have adopted an ethnographic approach involving participant observation, informal involvement in local activities and semi-structured interviews.

Up to the time of writing, I have spent approximately five months in Cameroon, almost all of this in Mowo, a Mofu-Gudur village. I have involved myself in

local life, shopping in the local markets, attending services at four different churches in the area and observing various activities and meetings relating to the growing of cotton, a major activity of the Mofu-Gudur people. I have also attended four different literacy classes for adults, and have interviewed a total of 59 people, including 15 people who are attending literacy classes, 9 people who teach literacy to adults in the area, and 24 other people from the village. I have also interviewed 11 people who are involved in literacy work regionally or are in positions of responsibility in the community, including the local chief and two church leaders. These interviews have been conducted in French with a Mofu-Gudur interpreter who is my research assistant. Using an interpreter is inevitable in view of my lack of knowledge of the language. Although it would be preferable if I were able to converse directly with my respondents, having an interpreter on hand at least provides me with a readily available colleague who is familiar with the culture and with whom I can discuss issues as they arise.

4. The Mofu-Gudur people

Mofu-Gudur is one of approximately 270 indigenous languages in Cameroon and is spoken by about 60,000 people in a small area in the north of the country (Gordon, 2005). The term Mofu-Gudur can be applied to the area in which the Mofu-Gudur language is spoken as well as to the speakers of the language. Most Mofu-Gudur people are subsistence farmers. Farming is difficult in this arid area and many people are short of food for a certain period of each year. People commonly grow cotton as a cash crop for Sodecoton, the national cotton company.

It is estimated by Kenneth Hollingsworth, the SIL linguist resident in the area, that only about 15% of adults are able to read and write (personal communication). This overall figure hides considerable variation between younger and older people and between men and women. Many adults have little or no formal education as the first primary schools were established in the area only in the last twenty years. Although most children now attend primary school, not all complete the normal six years of primary education and only a small minority go on to secondary school. Questions also have to be asked about the quality of education available in local schools, since not all teachers are trained and there may be 80 pupils or more in a class. Lessons are taught in French but as children do not encounter this language much outside of school, they generally have an imperfect mastery of it. There are no secondary schools at the present time in the area.

There are few employment opportunities locally, particularly for those with limited education. For this reason, many young men go to the major cities of Cameroon and other neighbouring countries in order to find work. This is generally of an unskilled nature such as guards or street vendors.

Mofu-Gudur is not the only language in common use. Although it is the language of choice for most local people, which they use at home and in daily life, many people speak at least one other language. Those who live near the edge of the

area closest to the neighbouring languages speak these languages to some extent, and many speak Fulfulde, which functions as the language of wider communication in much of the northern part of Cameroon. Those Mofu-Gudur people who travel, or who are in positions of responsibility, are likely to speak this language. It is also commonly used within the Mofu-Gudur area in the cotton industry and also many of the churches. Apart from Fulfulde, French is used by those who have most education, although there is considerable variation in their level of competence. As with Fulfulde, men are more likely than women to be able to speak and use French.

A similar multilingualism exists in the use of written language in the area, but whereas Mofu-Gudur is the language which is used most orally, it is least used in written form. Conversely, French, which is mastered by few, is the language which is most often seen publicly and in the homes of the local people in its written form, usually in the context of official documents.

The relative paucity of written materials in Mofu-Gudur is due to the fact that a writing system for it was not developed until the late 1970s when linguistic research and language development was begun in the area by SIL. In the last thirty years, a body of literature in Mofu-Gudur has been published locally. Most of this, apart from pedagogical materials, is of a religious nature, and includes extracts from the Bible, but there are some booklets of folk stories and others relating to health issues including the treatment of diarrhoea and malaria. The publication of the New Testament in Mofu-Gudur is expected within the next two years.

Fulfulde is found in its written form, as in its oral form, primarily in two distinct contexts, namely Sodecoton, which produces all its documents bilingually in Fulfulde and French, and the Protestant churches where the most commonly used translation of the Bible is in Fulfulde. The Catholic churches, however, use Bible extracts in Mofu-Gudur.

If literacy teaching aims to equip people for the literacy tasks which occur in their environment, then all these socio-economic, educational and linguistic features of the Mofu-Gudur area have implications for the provision of literacy teaching. These will be discussed below.

5. Uses of literacy in Mofu-Gudur

Barton & Hamilton (1998), in their research in Lancaster in the UK, observed that the purposes for which the people in their study made use of literacy could be divided into six broad categories as follows: a) organising life, b) personal communication, c) private leisure, d) documenting life, e) sense making and f) social participation. These are not in any order of priority or frequency of occurrence. There is some overlap between them and each involves a range of different literacy practices, but together they provide a helpful starting point for exploring how literacy is used in the Mofu-Gudur area. In due course my research may uncover an alternative analysis more appropriate for this context.

Each of these categories will now be considered in turn in the context of Mofu-Gudur. In spite of the significant socio-economic differences between Mofu-Gudur and Lancaster, and the much less frequent use of literacy in Mofu-Gudur, it will be seen that similar types of practices exist in both places. An analysis of the uses of literacy in this area will then lead on to a discussion of their implications for the local literacy programmes.

5.1 Literacy for organising life

One of the principal functions of literacy at the vernacular level is that it enables people to organise their time and resources. In Lancaster, people were found to use literacy to keep an appointment diary or an address book, to take notes of things of importance to them and to compile lists such as of items which they need to buy when shopping. Their homes were likely to show the evidence of literacy with notice boards and calendars on display.

Busy people find literacy useful for this purpose. There are busy people in Mofu-Gudur such as the leaders of the local churches who commonly keep such a diary, and my research assistant keeps a record in his pocket of the hours he has worked. Further research will undoubtedly uncover more instances of this practice. However, so far it does not appear that those who are able to read and write use literacy for this purpose as much as people in industrialised societies.

One reason for this is that the resources which are needed for using literacy in this way are not always readily available. Frequently interviewees have told me that they do not even have a pen or paper in their house, and that they would need to buy them if they needed them. In an area where incomes are very low, it is not surprising that only the essentials of life are normally on hand at home.

5.2 Literacy for Personal Communication

People live in community, whether in families or in society as a whole, and give expression to their relationship with those around them in various ways. Being able to read and write to communicate with others provides a way of doing this in addition to oral communication. In Lancaster, this literacy practice was manifest, for instance, in the letters which people sent to relatives, friends, and others, and in the greetings cards which they posted on particular occasions. It was evident too in the notes which people wrote on ordinary pieces of paper and left for members of their family at home, or the announcements which they placed in the newspaper on the occasion of significant family events.

In Mofu-Gudur, people feel the same need to keep in touch with one another. Those who have remained in the home area often wish to communicate with members of their family who have moved away to find work. Many of those whom I have interviewed have expressed the view that this is one of the most important uses of literacy for them. Although there is no local postal service, so that letters have to be sent by hand with people travelling in the right direction, this does not discourage

people from wanting to remain in touch with the members of their family. There is often the very practical need to ask relatives working in the city to send money home.

In view of the personal nature of much communication by letter between family members, it is not surprising that Mofu-Gudur people often mention, as one of the primary advantages of being able to read and write, that literate people no longer need to make use of another person to write letters on their behalf or to read those which they receive. As one of the village leaders has told me,

If I want to write to someone, I have to get someone to write the letter for me. Then I send the letter and the person who receives it has to get someone else to read it to him. So that makes four people involved in sending and receiving the letter. (Djaouro Koutkobei, interviewed 28/02/06; ref P50 line 558).

Keeping secrets is a high priority, especially when many letters concern financial matters, so the fewer people who know the contents of a letter, the better.

5.3 Literacy for Private Leisure

Being able to read and write enables one to use literacy for the purpose of relaxation or entertainment, be it reading a book or even writing a poem as many people in the Lancaster study apparently enjoyed doing. Books are not the only object of literacy for leisure: magazines, newspapers and catalogues can fulfil the same function.

The use of literacy for leisure purposes is much more limited in Mofu-Gudur, even among those who are able to read and write. This is partly the effect of the difficulty of obtaining books, magazines and newspapers in the area, since there are no bookshops or libraries. The Sodecoton publication, *Le Paysan*, is distributed through the local groups of cotton growers and may well be the only periodical to reach Mofu-Gudur homes. Mofu-Gudur people commonly do not possess any books. If they do, these are most likely to be a Bible or Bible extract, or a school text book used by their children. Some Christians have reported that they read the Bible at home, so this may be the primary example of leisure reading, even if it overlaps into the area of literacy for instruction and self-improvement, a function akin to that of literacy for making sense, as discussed below.

5.4 Literacy for Documenting Life

Being able to read and write is also useful for the purpose of keeping records of one's activities in the past and in the present. In Lancaster, Barton and Hamilton found that people not only kept their birth and marriage certificates but also their school records and cuttings from the local newspaper as well as other items such as scrap books which served to record significant moments in their lives. Such literacy artefacts may be kept because of the obligation to have official documents such as a birth certificate, or because the owners have chosen to keep them because of some personal significance.

In Mofu-Gudur, people keep such records of their lives but they are considerably more limited. Many people do not have a birth or marriage certificate. However, they are very likely to have an identity card since these are often required to be shown to the police. They are also likely to have a receipt for the taxes they have paid and a card indicating that they are on the local register of electors. Mofu-Gudur people possess these documents irrespective of their level of literacy. Even those who are unable to read are aware of their significance. This inability may not lead to any disadvantage in most cases, but this is not true of the receipts which people receive for their cotton when it is weighed and taken away by Sodecoton. Only two years ago in one local village, many of the cotton growers were defrauded out of some of the money they were due because they had been unable to read the scales or the figures on their receipts and to verify that the weight of their cotton recorded was the same as what had been weighed. Unbeknown to them, a certain amount of their cotton was credited to a fictitious person by the people in charge of weighing, who subsequently attempted to claim the amount due for themselves.

In most cases, Mofu-Gudur people have these documents because they are required to have them and they serve an immediate purpose. This is not true of all personal documents. For instance, some interviewees have shown me out of date membership cards for the political party or the local church. Sentimental reasons may come into play. One of my respondents has shown me the identity card of his father who died some years ago; he has kept it as it bears the only photograph of his father which he possesses.

In the context of the cotton growing industry, keeping records has a particular value. The local growers are organised into groups of between 10 and 30 people such that the group as a whole takes responsibility for each of its members. If one member fails to grow sufficient cotton to repay the company for the seeds and fertiliser which he has received on credit at the start of the season, the whole group has to make up the payment. Many of the leaders of these groups as well as the majority of the growers are unable to read and write, and it is reported that there are frequent disputes between them concerning how much money each should receive when Sodecoton makes its payments. Without written records which are understandable to those most affected by them, there is ample opportunity for misunderstanding, whether accidental or manipulative.

In my research I have met several respondents who have expressed frustration at their inability to read and write and, by implication, their inability to make use of literacy for purposes which are important to them. As one man commented,

Someone who can read and write beats me because he can write down what someone says so as not to forget it. With me, my head has to do all the work.
(Moussa Baydam, interviewed 21/03/06; ref P72 line 0855)

The village leader mentioned earlier also commented that being literate would make his job much easier as he would no longer have to rely on his memory about decisions which had been taken, or tasks which he needed to carry out. "You have to realise that you can't remember everything. You have to write things down so as not to forget

them. If I was literate, when I had issues to deal with, I could write them down and then put them on one side and just go back to them when I needed to.” (Djaouro Koutkobei, interviewed 28/02/06; ref P50 line 552).

5.5 Literacy for sense making

In Lancaster, Barton and Hamilton found that people used literacy in order to find out what they did not previously know. This may be reading instruction booklets for household appliances or sustained enquiry into a specific area of specialist knowledge, as when people suffering from medical conditions try to find out more than their doctor has told them. The reading of religious materials is another aspect of this type of vernacular literacy. In Lancaster, many resources exist for those who wish to find out about something which interests them. Apart from the local library, there are several bookshops and, of course, in recent years the internet has opened up new opportunities for accessing information.

Such a wide range of opportunities does not exist in Mofu-Gudur, but the same desire to find out is evident. It finds expression most often among the many Mofu-Gudur people who are Christians and who wish to read the Bible. Scriptural texts are the only texts found in the Mofu-Gudur area in all three languages most commonly spoken – Mofu-Gudur, Fulfulde and French. Those people who possess any kind of reading matter are most likely to have a Bible or Bible portions in their homes, and to read them on a more or less regular basis. The ability to read the Bible is highly valued and, alongside letter writing, it is the purpose for literacy most often identified by my respondents, both literate and non-literate. Seven out of the nine of my interviewees who were involved in church based literacy classes stated that they desired to read the Bible.

5.6 Literacy for social participation

Barton and Hamilton also noticed that many people in their study were members of local groups or at least took an interest in their activities. Literacy promoted their participation in a world wider than their immediate family and circumstances.

In Mofu-Gudur, there are fewer opportunities for social participation through literacy, not least because of the near absence of newspapers or newsletters. Being able to read enables Mofu-Gudur people, at least in principle, to read the public notices which are displayed in prominent places; these may relate to vaccination campaigns or, as recently, to the arrangements for the national census. However, being literate does not necessarily facilitate understanding when such notices are normally written in French. Thus, for many local people, social participation in this case is only through literacy mediators who are able to understand what is written and translate its meaning to them.

Literacy does, however, promote participation in some limited circumstances. Church members often meet in groups for Bible study and those who are able to read are able to take part in a different way to those who are not, as they are able to read passages aloud for the benefit of the other members of their group.

To summarise this survey of vernacular literacy practices in Mofu-Gudur, it has been shown that, in spite of the obvious social and economic differences between a city in the UK and a rural area in Cameroon, the vernacular literacy practices in the two places appear to differ only in terms of extent of occurrence and not in terms of the range of purposes. As in Lancaster, people in Mofu-Gudur use literacy to organise and document their lives, to communicate with one another, and to find out about subjects that interest them. They also use literacy for leisure purposes and to facilitate their interaction with their wider society. The inference could be drawn that these vernacular uses of literacy have a universal dimension. However, as my research develops, I expect to explore in greater depth the similarities and differences between the literacy practices in the two places, and to develop a set of categories which is more distinctive of the Cameroonian context.

6. Literacy provision for adults in Mofu-Gudur

Before considering some of the implications for literacy programmes of the vernacular literacy practices which I have described, I will outline the range of organised programmes which currently exist for Mofu-Gudur adults who want to learn to read and write.

All of the available classes are provided by non-profit organisations and normally take place only during the period between January and April when people are not occupied with work in their fields. Churches throughout the area offer literacy classes in the Mofu-Gudur language and several hundred people attend these at any one time. Classes, varying in size from a handful to more than twenty learners, are taught voluntarily by church members who have received training at short courses organised by CALMO (Comité d'Alphabétisation en Langue Mofu-Gudur), a local voluntary organisation. The teachers are put forward by their local churches and many have received little formal education. The programme is structured around a pre-primer for complete beginners, two basic primers and a post-primer for the highest level.

For those people who want to learn French and also to read and write at the same time, literacy classes in French are available, at least in the village of Mowo where I have been living, through CROPSEC (Conseil Régional des Organisations Paysannes de la Partie Septentrionale du Cameroun). A small group of women meet three times a week under a grass shelter and are taught by a local lady trained by this NGO which pays her a small sum for her work. French literacy classes are also available at Mowo Baptist church, organised by a French lady. These are taught at beginners and advanced levels. About 15 women attend the two classes.

Literacy classes in Fulfulde have also been available in the past. The teachers were trained by Sodecoton but the cost of the training and the materials had to be met by the local cotton growers' organisation. These classes are not currently running for lack of funds.

These four programmes approach the literacy teaching task in different ways. All of them teach basic literacy skills but, in addition, the CROPSEC programme seeks to help the learners to increase their knowledge of useful information, with some of the reading texts concerning health and other matters. This is also true of the French literacy classes in the Baptist Church. Likewise, the materials in the Fulfulde programme contain a good deal of functional content very directly related to what is required for growing cotton; this includes the forms which the growers encounter in their interaction with the cotton company. The programme also includes a strong element of numeracy teaching, again related to the mathematical skills, including measuring and weighing, which are required for cotton growing.

On the other hand, the CALMO literacy programme does not include any functional content except at the highest level. The reading texts relate only to the adventures and activities of a fictional local family except in the post-primer. However, this is not commonly taught, so the focus of the programme remains on the discrete skills of reading and writing rather than on the use of these skills to access new topics of practical application to the lives of the learners.

7. Implications for literacy provision

The exploration of vernacular literacy practices in Mofu-Gudur has described a context in which the use of literacy is considerably limited by the inability of most adults to read and write and by the lack of books and other reading material. Against this backdrop, however, the study has shown that the Mofu-Gudur people place a high value on literacy, especially for the two purposes of communicating in writing with other people, particularly family members living away from the area, and of reading the Bible. The study has also revealed the highly multilingual nature of the area in which several languages are in use orally and in writing, although not all to the same degree.

Can the available programmes do more to take local literacy practices into account and thereby become more effective in enabling learners to meet their own literacy needs? This is important since, by doing so, these programmes may become more attractive to the large proportion of the potential beneficiaries who at present fail to take advantage of them. I will focus here primarily on the largest programme, which takes place in the churches.

This programme is very successful in that more adults take part in the classes than in any other programme. It is striking, however, that it appears to give little recognition to the expressed desires of the learners, particularly to be able to read for the purpose of reading the Bible. This is surprising, given that there is a high degree of consensus among the learners as to this purpose of literacy and that the programme is organised within the churches, so that it would be well placed to respond to this desire. Typical of the traditional adult literacy programmes described by Rogers and Uddin (2005), the primary aim of the programme at present is to teach basic literacy skills, a task which it accomplishes by providing an extensive and thorough grounding in the

phonemes of the language, with each lesson focusing on one sound and the letter which represents it. This approach is highly structured; each letter is introduced in turn and words created by combining each new letter with those previously taught. However, it is only by completing the whole course that the learners encounter all the 32 letters of the Mofu-Gudur alphabet in their various combinations. This process takes some three years.

It would not be difficult to introduce the learners to reading the Bible at a much earlier stage, either by altering the content of the reading lessons or by providing additional material alongside them. A structured curriculum including Biblical material of an appropriate level would not necessarily be more demanding of the teachers than the present curriculum focusing on everyday stories. The low level of education of most of the teachers in this programme need not be a barrier to the introduction of such an approach.

The reason for the current content of this programme may well lie in the desire of the programme organisers to ensure that the programme is open to all, both Christians and others. In reality, however, virtually all the present learners in this programme are Christians and more or less active members of their churches, so this reasoning does not appear to be valid. It would seem perverse to limit the content offered to those present for fear of discouraging others who have no desire to attend.

Another reason may be that the programme has failed to recognise the change in the literacy environment locally over the last twenty years. When literacy classes began, there were almost no reading materials in Mofu-Gudur apart from the pedagogical materials needed for the classes. Since then a number of texts have been published, many of them being extracts from the Bible, which has opened up the possibility of introducing different and relevant content into the literacy classes. This opportunity has not been taken, probably because of lack of resources and manpower. That many people still attend the classes is perhaps a reflection that the classes are successful in meeting a felt need at one level; however, further adaptation of the programme would result in these needs being met more effectively.

The classes in this programme, and in the other programmes I have examined, also do not assist the learners with the process of writing letters to their family members and others. Again this lack would appear to be due to the focus of the programme on the basic skills of reading and writing, of decoding and encoding, to the extent of not making application of these skills for particular uses. This focus arises from the philosophy of education on which the programme is based, namely that literacy consists of discrete skills which can be taught in isolation from their application in everyday life. Accordingly, this programme emphasises the formation of the letters of the alphabet and the construction of individual words using the letters which have been taught in preceding lessons. but the learners rarely construct whole sentences. The programme makes the questionable assumption that once learners are equipped with this knowledge they will feel able to use literacy in any context without further help. As is shown by my own observations, as well as by the example given by Rogers & Uddin (2005) of one man in Bangladesh who, after attending a literacy class for a year, felt that he had still not learned to read and write, this does not seem to be borne out in practice.

As my research continues, I will be able to discuss in more depth the extent to which the CROPSEC and the Baptist Church French literacy classes are responding to the ways in which literacy is used in the area. The multilingual nature of the Mofu-Gudur area also has implications for the adult literacy programmes. Adult learning theory would suggest that the literacy programmes should reflect the plurality of languages in daily use; but, on the other hand, principles of pedagogy (and andragogy) would suggest that to introduce literacy to adults through a language which they do not know, or through more than one language at a time, would undermine the learning process.

At the present time, the Mofu-Gudur literacy programmes do reflect the multilingual nature of the area if they are regarded as a whole, and, if literacy classes in Fulfulde were also available, they would do so even more clearly. However, the individual programmes are each limited to literacy in one language. To truly reflect the multilingualism of the area, the programmes would need to offer a progression from one language to another so that for instance, those learners who had learned to read and write in Mofu-Gudur could continue their studies by learning to speak and to read and write in French. This would demand a higher degree of training for teachers and also a greater supply of teachers capable of speaking French well, so it would not be easy to achieve. A straightforward step in this direction, however, would be for a relationship to exist between the literacy programmes such that adults could be encouraged to move easily from one to another. In a small community such as Mofu-Gudur it should not be difficult to promote this through the creation of opportunities for the literacy teachers in the various programmes to come together, albeit informally.

8. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to outline briefly how literacy is used informally by the Mofu-Gudur people of Cameroon, and to indicate how the study of their vernacular literacy practices raises important issues for the provision of literacy teaching to adults in the area. It has shown the value of the perspective of literacy as a social practice, and how the insights which arise from this approach can highlight ways in which adults can be helped to make greater and more effective use of literacy to meet their communicative needs. Although adult educators are already conscious of the importance of taking the needs of the learners into account when developing educational programmes, the theories of literacy as a social practice and adult learning offer the possibility of more detailed understanding of the learners and their context, and the opportunity to further improve adult literacy programmes.

There is certainly a place for more research. Apart from examining local uses of literacy, there is a need to uncover what potential beneficiaries of a literacy programme understand about literacy and what expectations they hold, both of literacy itself and the classes in which literacy is taught. My ongoing research will explore these areas and identify further implications for literacy programmes in the Mofu-Gudur area and elsewhere.

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