

English Literacy Learning as a Socially Situated Practice

Su-Jen Lai

Chang Gung University, Taiwan

This paper explores some aspects of the relations between English literacy learning and the social situations in which it occurs. My aim is to illustrate the theoretical concepts of the New Literacy Studies (NLS) and Vygotskian approaches to language, and apply them to the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The focus is on one EFL undergraduate student who studied English in the School of Continuing Education at a university in Taiwan. In terms of methodology, I use interview transcripts, questionnaires, and field notes on observing student learning as the database. In consequence, the results reveal that for this student, *learning* as well as *teaching* is inevitably situated in the institutional contexts in Taiwan. The results also reveal that *learning contexts* and *social networks* appear to have a strong influence on the student's EFL literacy learning. This in turn illuminates the importance of juxtaposing the theoretical concepts of the NLS and Vygotskian approaches to language and considering English literacy learning as a socially situated practice. Furthermore, the results suggest the importance of using multiple methods and the link between research and pedagogy. Finally, based upon the research findings, this paper makes some recommendations for EFL literacy pedagogy.

In recent years, studies on second language learning and teaching have moved on from just dealing with cognitive processes and have now brought together cognitive processes with social interaction (e.g., Candlin & Mercer,

2001; Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Skehan, 1998). In this paper¹, I combine a *social* with a *psychological* approach, exploring some aspects of the relations between English literacy learning and the social situations in which it occurs. My aim is to illustrate the theoretical concepts of the New Literacy Studies (NLS), which is concerned with the cultural and social characteristics of literacy, and Vygotskian approaches to language, and apply them in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

I draw on the work of Barton and Hamilton (1998, 2000) who make connections between literacies in specific contexts and broader social practices located in time and space. I also juxtapose this with the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) who develop Vygotsky's work and identify learning as legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) in communities of practice (see also Wenger, 1998). The notions of Literacy as Social Practice and Learning as Situated Practice, which are the key concepts central to the NLS and social basis of language development, are subsequently discussed. In my view, these concepts can be useful when they are applied to data with respect to English literacy learning socially constructed in particular contexts. The example of one Taiwanese EFL undergraduate student who participated in my case study is used to demonstrate the importance of connecting the theoretical concepts of the NLS with Vygotskian approaches to language and considering English literacy learning as a socially situated practice.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The New Literacy Studies (NLS): Literacy as Social Practice

Developments in the New Literacy Studies (NLS) have moved away from models which focus on the *cognitive psychological* aspects of reading and

¹ This paper is a revised version of my paper, entitled *Literacy Practices as Socially Situated in EFL Learning Contexts: A Case Study*, presented in the 2nd Asia TEFL International Conference and is developed on from my recent paper, entitled *Learning English Literacy as an Aspect of Social Practice* (see Lai 2004).

writing, and are concerned instead with the *social practices*, which surround the use of their particular writing systems (Barton, 1994; Street, 1984, 1993, 1998). The NLS in this sense does not focus only on literacy itself, but on how literacy is culturally embedded and socially constructed in a particular situation. Allied to this is the concept of an 'ecological' view of literacy. Barton (1994) utilizes the metaphor of 'the ecology of literacy' to convey the idea that particular acts of reading and writing have their own 'ecological niche'. This ecological metaphor is deemed useful in drawing together the *psychological* and the *social* concepts. In Barton's view, "the idea of ecology has often been used to situate psychological activity, placing it in a more complete and dynamic social context where different aspects interact" (p. 29), and "an ecological approach aims to understand how literacy is embedded in other human activity" (p. 32). To illustrate this view of literacy, it is important to consider the concept of Literacy as Social Practice.

More generally, people read and write different things in different ways according to their roles associated with particular social contexts. The view of literacy in terms of 'practices' may vary according to context and purpose and these practices are local to the activities and communities with which people are involved. The notion of 'practices' in this sense involves values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships, and specifically, includes people's awareness of literacy, constructions of literacy and discourses of literacy, how people talk about and make sense of literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 7). As such, literacy practices involve not only "the objective facts of what people do with literacy" but also "what they make of what they do, how they construct its value, the ideologies that surround it" (Baynham, 1995, p. 53). The concept of literacy practices "focuses on the particularity of cultural practices with which uses of reading and/or writing are associated in given contexts" (Street, 1999, p. 38).

A good example here is a collection of research articles in the book edited by Hamilton, Barton and Ivanic (1994), *Worlds of Literacy*, where the researchers used 'ecology' as a powerful metaphor for literacy. In his preface of the book, Barton demonstrates that the notions of 'literacy practices' and

'literacy events' focus on the real activities involved in reading and writing. Whilst 'literacy events' are the particular activities where reading and writing have a role, 'literacy practices' are the cultural ways of using reading and writing which people draw upon in a literacy event (Hamilton, Barton, & Ivanic, 1994, p. viii; see also Barton, 1994; Baynham, 1995; Heath, 1999).

To apply these two concepts of 'events' and 'practices' in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), I provide examples from business English and from medical English. Business students learn a variety of specific terminology and expressions in English, which are widely used in the business world because they will have to read and write business documents such as letters of order/payment, memos, minutes, reports and others, when they work in the commercial industries. Students do not just have to learn the vocabulary and grammar, but they also have to learn how to use these documents in appropriate ways in specific business interaction. Activities, like buying, selling, making payments and writing minutes, can all be seen as common business literacy practices. To participate in specific business events, students draw upon their literacy practices, that is, their knowledge and understanding of appropriate ways of using the various documents. To give another example from medicine, nursing students learn a wide range of medical terms in English so that they can carry out activities such as reading a wide range of prescriptions, which involve the names of medicine and the instructions of medical use, when they work in hospitals or clinics. Each instance of these activities of making up a prescription or following the instructions on a medicine bottle is a literacy event, and there is a set of common practices associated with each event.

Another key concept often utilized in the NLS is the term 'domains'. In principle, *domains* of reading and writing can be used as a way of sorting the social space in which literacy practices are embedded (Barton, 1991). As Baynham (1995, p. 40) points out, "Domains of literacy map the main settings and contexts where people use literacy (home, workplace, school, shops, bureaucracies, the street)." Fundamentally, the reading and writing that people undertake in day-to-day life (e.g., reading novels, writing letters

to friends, etc.) are seen to be different from that done in schools (e.g., reading research articles, writing compositions or essays, etc.). More specifically, EFL students are required to read English texts and write English reports, which are closely related to the academic subjects they study (e.g., business English, medical English, English literature, etc.) in schools, and each of these can be seen as a specific domain. In addition, the students may read English texts (e.g., magazines, newspapers, grammar books, novels, etc.) and write English notes, diaries and/or e-mail messages at home. What these students read and write in the home settings may, to a varying extent, differ from what they read and write in these other settings. To understand how language as well as literacy is embedded in a particular human activity, it is crucially important to figure out the notion of 'domains of literacy'.

Yet another important concept central to the NLS is that of 'networks'. The results derived from the work of Barton and Padmore (1991, p. 69) reveal that "social networks of support exist for people. These networks are part of everyday life whether or not people have problems. Sometimes there was support for people who identified problems." Of these networks, Barton (1994, p. 149) highlights that "[t]he family is an ecological niche in which literacy survives, is sustained, and flourishes." In addition to this, networks also exist in educational settings as well as in social communities (Barton, 2001, pp. 32-33). Specifically, 'networks' are involved not only in how students are taught in the classroom, but also in how the students make use of the practices in the academic milieu or social context to help and support their learning. A salient example here is the work of Heath (1983), which is concerned with literacy events in the home and in the community. In ESL/EFL learning contexts, social networks, which include the support from family members, teachers and friends/classmates, seem to have not been researched very much, but they are likely to be important factors affecting students' English language learning.

Vygotskian Approaches to Language: Learning as Situated Practice

In connection with the social basis of language development, Vygotsky (1962) emphasized a close and complex relationship between external social processes and internal psychological processes. In Vygotsky's theory (1978), cognitive abilities and capabilities are formed and built up in part by social phenomena, and created through interaction with the social environment. For Vygotsky, learning is 'highly contextualized' and thereby development is very much a product of the child's participation in the social world.

An important concept central to Vygotsky's theory is that of 'scaffolding'. Here the term 'scaffolding' refers to the way adults support children's activities and provide a framework within which the children act. The term denotes an adult's structuring of an interaction by building on what s/he knows the child can already do. In essence, this concept can also apply to the situations of foreign-language learners, especially beginners who need more support from their teachers and their peer groups. For example, Donato (1994) put forward the theory of Vygotsky, investigating how non-native speakers construct language learning experiences in the classroom setting and how second language development is brought about in the social context. As a result, Donato found that "scaffolding occurs routinely as students work together on language learning tasks" (p. 52), and that "in the process of peer scaffolding, learners can expand their own L2 knowledge and extend the linguistic development of their peers" (p. 52).

Developing on from Vygotsky's work, Lave and Wenger (1991) in their *Situated Learning* book explore the situated character of human understanding and communication whereby individual learners are seen to internalize knowledge. They develop the theoretical concepts of learning in communities of practice and examine adult learning in a variety of cultural contexts. Drawing on examples of adult learning, they identify that learning is about 'legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) in communities of practice' (see Lave & Wenger, 1991, Chapter 4). In their view, successful learning takes place when people are able to understand the practices that they need to

master to become *core* members, rather than *peripheral* members, of the community. Besides this, issues relevant to the relationship between identities, knowing and social membership, as well as discourse in communities of practice are also very important and need to be taken into consideration (see also Wenger, 1998).

To juxtapose the notion of Learning as Situated Practice with that of Literacy as Social Practice, it is worth pointing out research papers in *Situated Literacies* book edited by Barton *et al.* (2000). In the book, the researchers are based primarily on the NLS, making connections between literacies in specific contexts and broader social practices located in particular times and spaces. Barton and Hamilton (2000), for example, provide an overview of a social theory of literacy in terms of *practices* and *events*. In their view, “literacy practices are as *fluid, dynamic* and changing as the lives and societies of which they are a part” (p. 13; italics added). This has significantly been interwoven with the way Lave and Wenger (1991) situate learning in certain forms of ‘social co-participation’ (see also Wenger, 1998). As Barton and Hamilton (2000, p. 14) put it, “any theory of literacy implies a theory of learning.”

In my view, the aforementioned concepts of the NLS and Vygotskian approaches to language can be useful when they are applied to data with respect to EFL literacy learning socially constructed in particular contexts, and as a result, I apply these two concepts in the field of ESP. Having synthesized the two concepts, I hope that this paper will provide an underlying background to understand EFL student learning and literacy practices in higher educational settings not only in Taiwan but also in other Asian countries, helping teachers of English to provide an efficient EFL literacy pedagogy which directly supports students in their learning and which ultimately improves the quality of student learning in both inside and outside academic institutions.

In the next section, I focus on a case study of one Taiwanese EFL undergraduate who studied English in the School of Continuing Education (Evening Division) at a university in Taiwan, whereby the interview

transcripts, questionnaires, and field notes on observing student learning are used as the database.

A CASE STUDY

Methodology

The primary objective of doing this research was to provide an in-depth picture of one Taiwanese EFL undergraduate student, examining the student's English literacy learning as an aspect of socially situated practice. I therefore consider it as a *qualitative case study*, focusing mainly on specific issues of the individual case (McDonough & McDonough, 1997; Silverman, 2000; Stake, 1998). This is because "case study is not a methodological choice, but a choice of object to be studied" (Stake, 1998, p. 86). In the main, Cohen and Manion (1994) distinguish this methodological approach from quantitative research, pointing out that "the case study researcher typically observes the characteristics of an *individual* unit" (p. 106; italic added). The individual here may be a child, a language learner, a class, a school or a community, which or whom situated in a particular social context. Allied to this is the issue of how to generalize such a small number of the single case. According to Schofield (1993):

... for qualitative researchers generalizability is best thought of as a matter of the 'fit' between the situation studied and others to which one might be interested in applying the concepts and conclusions of that study. This conceptualization makes thick descriptions crucial, since without them one does not have the information necessary for an informed judgement about the issue of fit. (p. 221)

In this regard, Cohen and Manion (1994) emphasize that "there is... no clear-cut answer, for the correct sample size depends upon the *purpose* of the study and the nature of the population under scrutiny" (p. 89; italic added).

In terms of methodology, I use interview transcripts, questionnaires, and field notes on observing student learning as the database. With the use of alternatively multiple methods—triangulating data collected from different sources—I was constantly evaluating the *reliability* and the *validity* of the analysis (see Cohen & Manion, 1994; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). That is to say that the use of triangulation from different sources of data was continually checking the *reliability* of my analysis. Besides this, I also checked the interview transcripts that I translated from Chinese to English with Verna—whether my interpretations fitted with the reality of the informant’s perspectives (see Birbili, 2001). This in turn helped evaluate the *validity* of my research data and thus the outcomes of the case study.

The Case of Verna²

Verna, a 26-year-old student, has been brought up in a four-member family, comprising of father, mother, herself and one younger sister.³ Verna started to learn English when she was in the first year of junior high school. After graduating from the three-year junior high, she entered a vocational high school where she worked during the day and studied in the evening. It was a business school where she spent four years studying ‘particular technical subjects’ which were concerned with commercial skills such as Accounting, Economics, Business English, and the like. She noted that the academic knowledge she gained from the business school had assisted her in dealing with the job demands when she worked in a social community in Taiwan.

Nevertheless, having worked in business for a period of time, Verna found

² This is a pseudonym (see also Appendix 1: A Brief Profile of Verna).

³ Given that “in practice, the bulk of ESP activity has always been directed towards adults or older students, who are either already working and need to acquire the linguistic tools to carry out their work more effectively, or who are still in full-time education, but who have fairly clear career goals which give some indication of their future language needs” (Breeze, 2005, p. 16; see also Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 5; Hutchinson & Waters, 2001, p. 18), I refer the case of Verna to ESP.

that a BA degree was of essential importance, particularly for those who expected to get a steady, permanent job. In her view, the subjects she studied at the vocational high school were very *practical* and *useful*, and yet, they were not enough to fulfill the requirements of the competitive society in Taiwan. Because of this, she decided to prepare for the entrance examination, and later successfully passed the exam to study English at the Evening Division of a Taiwan's university. At this point, it is worth mentioning what Verna said in the interview concerning her orientations to studying at the university.

Verna's Orientations to Studying at University

Jane: *At that time you decided to study at university – what was your orientation to studying?*

Verna: *My orientation was relatively strange. There were two different departments at university – Chinese and English – that I expected to study in. ... Because I knew that my personal interest is 'writing', I have wanted to go towards the channel of my interest – writing. If I could not pass the entrance exam to study either Chinese or English at university, I would rather continue working.*

It would seem that there were two different subjects that Verna really expected to study at university: Chinese and English. In her view, having a good understanding of Chinese literature and culture would give her great insight into her first language of Mandarin Chinese. Nevertheless, with the growth of international contacts, she had learned that English had become the world's most popular language which would help her at work. As a result of this, she decided to study English at the university. One of the main problems, which had been associated with the complexity of her orientations to doing the BA degree in the School of Continuing Education (Evening Division), and which Verna had been confronted with when studying at the university, was lack of her parents' support. As she put it:

The Generation Gap between Verna's and her Parents' Viewpoints

Jane: *Do your parents support you to study at university?*

Verna: *No! They really object to my studying at university! At the moment when I knew that I had passed the entrance exam, I was so pleased and happily went home to tell my parents such good news. The first person I talked to about the news was my father. But the first sentence he said to me soon after I told him was that, 'You have to continue working!' At that moment, I was in tears and felt really very sad! Perhaps, the thing that my parents lay stress on is different from the thing that I do. I think they have their problems; they have their viewpoints.*

From what Verna said here, it would seem that her parents tended to be more concerned about her job than her studies. This was likely one of the main reasons she decided to study in the evening and work during the day, in order to support part of her tuition fees and living expenses. And due to the lack of her parents' support, it was the 'teachers' who would have strongly affected Verna. In the interview, she pointed out that:

The Two Teachers who have a Strong Influence on Verna (1)

I feel that in the whole of my life, it is the place [an ELSI language school in Taiwan] where I met several teachers who have a strong influence on me. And this has led to my decision to study in the English Department. In fact, it is the two English teachers who have an extremely strong influence on me. They are native speakers of English teachers. They seriously told me that I am a person who has the ability to 'write'.

In the follow-up interview, after Verna had read the English version of the first-time interview transcripts that I translated from Chinese (see Appendix 1), she once again emphasized that the two teachers had a strong influence on her and inspired her to further her interests to study English at the university. As she said that:

The Two Teachers who have a Strong Influence on Verna (2)

The two teachers ... I think the 'strongly influenced' here refers to my 'writing skill'. They encouraged me to keep writing. The two teachers have strongly influenced me. Because of them, I have become interested in 'writing'.

When Verna recalled her previous learning experience, she said that the English she studied in the cram school was relatively difficult and complicated. She would never know how to make use of what she learned from the cram school, with respect to *vocabulary* and *grammar*, if she did not actually write a composition in English. And yet, she admitted that the *lexical items* and *grammatical structures* she studied in the cram school did assist her in developing her writing in English. In the interview, she stated that:

**Bring Theoretical Concepts to Actual Situations:
Input and Output Verna's Knowledge**

At that time, it was the cram school where I studied 'grammar' and took 'exams'. Besides these, I learned everyday American English in a language institution. The speed of teaching at the language institution was comparatively slower than that of the 'cram-based' style of teaching at the cram school – extremely fast. At the cram school, students had to memorize all the grammar, which had already been taught. I feel that I learned an extreme lot of things during that period of time. I tried to find out the way to digest what I had learned and then applied it to an 'actual' situation, that is, at the language institution. The actual situation here is, in particular, referred to as 'writing'. At that time, in addition to the Conversation class, I also attended two Writing classes.

From this it would seem that teachers at the cram school tended to approach a 'cram-based' style of teaching, whereby students learned to memorize a range of difficult vocabulary and grammar, as well as test-taking (i.e., input knowledge). Teachers at the language institution, on the other hand, tended to adopt a 'communication-based' style of teaching, whereby students learned everyday conversation and writing, and enabled to apply their existing knowledge to the real-life situation (i.e., output knowledge). With an integration of these two teaching approaches, Verna acknowledged that she had made fast progress in her English. The results here in turn demonstrate that *teaching* as well as *learning* was inevitably situated in the institutional contexts in Taiwan, and that the two educational settings of practice, which include teaching approaches, curriculum policies and assessment requirements, shaped

the approaches Verna utilized to her EFL learning.

Later, when Verna was in the second year of her undergraduate study at the university, she seemed to find some effective ways to help her cope with difficulties when learning English. In the questionnaire, she wrote that “*Always encourage myself to contact English. To speak, to listen, to write and to read are all important to learning English.*” Besides this, she also jotted down the English things she usually did in both social and academic contexts, as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Verna’s English Literacy Practices

Student	Reading		Writing	
	in social contexts	in academic context	in social contexts	in academic context
Verna	<i>English novels</i> <i>magazines</i>	<i>textbooks</i> <i>journals</i> <i>literature magazine</i> <i>critical article</i>	<i>diary</i>	<i>compositions</i> <i>essays</i>

In the interview, Verna said that in her everyday life, she spent most of the time reading. She read different types of book at different times and on different occasions, depending on her mood and on her intention. For example, she read a magazine written in Chinese when she had a meal and read a Chinese-version novel before she went to bed. That way, she said, it could help her release some stress and pressure. In addition to reading, Verna had a keen interest in writing. As she pointed out, “*I have constantly kept writing as it is my usual habit... In the evening, I usually spend time on my writing – both in Chinese and in English.*” Importantly, Verna realized that, a certain amount of reading, either in Chinese or in English, had helped her not only to understand what the teachers said in class but also to develop her ability to write in English. As time elapsed, she had gradually become accustomed to using English in part of her day-to-day life. Keeping an English diary, for example, became one of her literacy practices, stimulating her to think in English. When reading, she observed how other authors used

English to convey their ideas, being aware of the sentence structures they used. In so doing, it could help her think about how to write in English more precisely. Before writing, she read something relevant to the 'topic' she wanted to write about, as this could help her cope with, at least, some difficulties she might encounter when she actually started writing. The learning circumstance of Verna here reveals a close link between non-academic literacies and academic literacies, whereby everyday learning was inextricably intertwined with academic learning. In turn, this indicates that *literacies* as well as *languages* (Chinese and English) were closely associated with her domains of life, which might at some points overlap.

Here, I would also like to submit an extract from my field notes on how Verna and her classmates learned in the English Composition course, as shown below:

Field Notes on Observing Taiwanese EFL Undergraduate Students' Learning

While students in Group 3 and Group 4 give their presentations, other students sit in their seats. Some of them continue having their dinner and some read their own books (they seem likely to prepare for the mid-term exam of other academic subjects). It seems that few students pay close attention to the oral presentations. The students in Group 3 and Group 4 use transparencies as a tool in their presentations. The transparencies are all written in English. The two groups of students seem to 'read' the transparencies word by word. Because of the very small characters printed on the transparencies, the teacher suggests that students who are short-sighted move to sit in the first few rows of the class. Students in the class did not move their seats as a circle while Groups 3 and 4 give their presentations. After finishing the presentations, the teacher asks students:

Teacher: *Any questions about this presentation?*

Students: ... (no response)...

Teacher: *Are you awake? Do you have any questions you want to add?*

Students: ... (no response)...

Teacher: *Again, do you have any comments you want to make?*

Students: ... (no response)...

Since there have been no responses from students in the class, the teacher then starts commenting on the performance of the two groups of students orally, beginning with the 'content / organizational structure'. The teacher says: "*Good! Except for 'grammatical errors'...*" In addition to this, the teacher also places emphasis on the so-called 'topic' in the sense that it needs to be appropriate – e.g. Comparison of Canada and Taiwan, and others. The teacher gives not only some

relevant examples but also detailed explanation. Ultimately, the teacher says that, “...errors really depend on the individual... If there are any questions, please ask me in the conference...”

From the extract it would seem that there was a lack of interaction between the teacher and the students in the English Composition class. This has in turn revealed that, by tradition, students in Taiwan tend to learn English in a rather passive, silent way in the EFL classroom. In this regard, it is worth pointing out what Verna said in the interview: “*Actually, in the class, I would have liked to voice my views because I think this could help to create a more interactive classroom atmosphere. But I decided not to do so because I recognized that social practice was conventionally situated in the learning environment.*” And she then continued saying that:

Practice as Conventionally Situated in the Learning Context

Like yesterday in the Introduction to Western Literature class, when the teacher asked questions and no one replied to the questions. I, too, didn't want to answer the questions or even to ask questions in the class. Indeed, I feel that if I asked questions in the class, the teacher would then reply to the questions, and all of us could hear – could learn! But if I one-to-one asked the teacher questions, it was only I who could learn. So I thought that it's a good idea to ask questions in the class and we could raise questions together. But my classmates seemed not to think in that way. Though it is only very few of my classmates, I still got hurt! What my classmates thought was very different from what I actually thought... In fact, I would have liked to set up a 'reading group' but it's impossible to do so! I used to have a try with a group of several classmates, including my good friend. The goal here was to use English to communicate with each other. However, my classmates said, "Why did you use English?" I would have liked to build up an English-like context of learning because normally we will not speak in 'English'. If we don't do so, we will have to spend extra money studying at a language institution. But my classmates said, "What did you say? Why didn't you say it in Chinese?" As a result, I have to find my own way to cope with such a problem. I have also subsequently heard that some classmates complained that they could not make progress in their English. They then spend extra money on studying at a language institution. But they would feel ashamed when they were asked about the academic subjects they major in at the university. Moreover, when other people knew they major in English, those people might then look down on them.

What Verna said here has in turn spelled out the *values, attitudes* and *social relationships* in the learning milieu in Taiwan. This circumstance has explicated that EFL learning is inevitably situated, and that English literacy learning may take place in real-life situations, under real performance requirements on actual individuals, and may therefore be vulnerable to social influences that may arise at any time.

When questioned whether she had achieved her initial goal of coming to study English at the university, Verna said that: “*Yes, I would say yes. But I feel that it has been on the way out due to the ‘learning context’ and the ‘classmates’.*” And then, she continued saying that: “*It is because of the ‘environment’. The context – learning context – has been a disappointment to me!*” In the end, she emphasized that she would not be able to change the learning environment or even change others’ usual practices which were culturally embedded in the particular social context, and that she had to change her values and attitudes if she wanted her behavior to be accepted by others. The case of Verna has in turn demonstrated that “[l]iteracy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 8).

Issues from the Case Study

From a *methodological* point of view, I would say that if I did not use multiple methods, which include observation, interviews and questionnaire, in Verna’s case study, I would not be able to have a more complete understanding of her EFL literacy practices. As this has been significantly supported by the questionnaire (see Appendix 2) and the following interview transcript:

The Interview Transcript: What Verna Said

I really don't have self-confidence. In fact, I know this is very pessimistic, I know my personality. I feel that the extent to which I have self-confidence is lower. If today you asked me the extent of my self-confidence, 'very confident' or 'not at all confident', the point where I am is probably lower than that of 'not at all confident'. But actually I know I personally don't have self-confidence, probably right off the scale. ... I always hope that I appear to be an optimistic person in front of my classmates. But actually in my mind, I have that strong feeling of a lack in self-confidence.

From the data here it is seen that what Verna said in the interview was not consistent with what she wrote in the questionnaire where she circled the scale of 5, appearing to be 'very confident'. In such a case, I would rather say that *in-depth interviewing* is one of the most important research tools, enabling me to uncover Verna's values and attitudes towards English literacy learning.

From a *pedagogical* point of view, after having administered the questionnaire with Verna, I observed that 'self-evaluation' would be an effective way of fostering her to think carefully about the progress of her English language learning. In my view, the use of self-evaluation would supply EFL students with the responsibility on their own learning. Besides this, after having conducted in-depth interviews with Verna, I found that if EFL students had clearer intentions and/or orientations to study at university, they would be able to think more critically about their learning, and hence learn how to learn. More specifically, if the students had clearer ideas in expectations of undertaking, for example, the English Composition course, they would become more critically aware of their EFL writing, even the use of language, when they composed their assignments.

Importantly, the results derived from the case study of Verna indicate that doing research could to some extent facilitate student learning. As she said in the follow-up interview, "*I want to say thanks to you [Jane]. I did learn and gain from participating in your case study. The questions you asked helped me to critically think and reflect on the processes of my learning.*" The example of Verna in turn suggests that an integration of *research* and

pedagogy would to a certain extent assist teachers in modifying tasks or classroom activities to suit learners' needs, and at the same time, help students learn better (see also Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Nunan, 1999). The relevance of this issue will be further discussed in the next sub-section.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have illustrated the notions of Literacy as Social Practice and Learning as Situated Practice, which are the key concepts central to the NLS and social basis of language development, and applied them in the field of ESP. I have also discussed the learning circumstances of Verna, one EFL undergraduate student who studied English in the School of Continuing Education at a university in Taiwan. The results reveal that *learning contexts*, which include curriculum practice, assessment practice and pedagogy practice, affected the individual student's orientations to studying, the approaches she adopted to her EFL literacy learning, and the outcomes of her learning. The results also reveal that *social networks*, which include the support from family members, teachers and friends/classmates, strongly influenced the student's values and attitudes towards EFL literacy learning. In turn, this has illuminated the reason I juxtapose the theoretical concepts of the NLS and Vygotskian approaches to language and consider English literacy learning as a socially situated practice.

Taken as a whole, based on the outcomes of Verna's case study, it is suggested that teachers of English consider constructing a reflective curriculum for literacy and encouraging EFL students to take an ethnographic stance towards their learning (see Bartlett, 1990; Hamilton, 1999; Roberts *et al.*, 2001). This is because "developing an ethnographic stance amongst teachers and learners of literacy can promote a *critical* and *reflective* (as opposed to a prescriptive) literacy curriculum, which makes effective use of the full range of available methods and content" (Hamilton, 1999, p. 429; italics added). Such a reflective curriculum will facilitate students to become critically

aware of not only their learning per se but also the context of their learning (see also Hounsell, 1997).

Finally, I would like to end up this paper by suggesting that it may be time for EFL literacy teachers to closely consider the use of an ecological approach to pedagogy, adopting a *learning-centered, reflective* approach to course design (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
An Ecological Approach to EFL Literacy Teaching

<i>Types of Needs Analysis</i>	<i>Phases of Teaching</i>	<i>Types of Investigation</i>	<i>A learning-centered, reflective Approach to Course Design</i>
Initial-phase Needs Analysis: Target Situation Analysis (TSA)	<i>before</i> teaching	- pre-course information questionnaires	- syllabus construction - selection of materials and classroom methods
Ongoing-phase Needs Analysis: Learning Situation Analysis (LSA) and Present Situation Analysis (PSA)	<i>while</i> teaching	- classroom observation - informal interviewing - documents - in-course information questionnaires	- a mini research project - pair/group discussions - individual conference meetings - paper-and-pencil tests
	<i>after</i> teaching	- documents - evaluation questionnaires	- portfolios - test and other assessment results
	<i>follow up</i>	- documents	- course evaluation

From Table 2 it is seen that there are two types of needs analysis suggested: initial-phase needs analysis and ongoing-phase needs analysis (see also Lai, 2004, for a discussion of an ecological approach to needs analysis). The former, *initial-phase needs analysis*, is parallel to the target situation analysis (TSA) and the latter, *ongoing-phase needs analysis*, contains both the language situation analysis (LSA) and the present situation analysis (PSA), identified by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998). Initial-phase needs analysis is done in the phase of ‘*before teaching*’; ongoing-phase needs analysis is done in the phases of ‘*while teaching*’, ‘*after teaching*’ and ‘*follow up*’. In the early phase of ‘*before teaching*’, administering pre-course

information questionnaires, which are concerned with students' goals, social roles, interaction patterns and language proficiency, may assist EFL literacy teachers in selecting materials and classroom methods suited to the learners. In the phase of '*while teaching*', a mini project of researching English language and literacy practices in support of the teacher, pair/group discussions, individual conference meetings and paper-and-pencil tests can be considered as part of classroom activities. At this stage, administering in-course information questionnaires, which cover issues relevant to the expectations and progresses of individuals' language learning, may help students to identify their needs, their wants, and their own language and literacy practices. In the phase of '*after teaching*', the use of portfolios is suggested; at the same time, administering evaluation questionnaires may help the teachers as well as the students to reflect on their own teaching and learning. And this may in turn help the teachers develop future course design in the later phase of '*follow up*' (see also Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, for a discussion of EAP curriculum).

In my view, such an approach can provide EFL literacy teachers with an understanding of students' needs – not only their initial needs or expectations but also the needs, which may be in tandem changed when particular courses actually started – and thereby may assist the teachers in designing appropriate curricula (see also Hutchinson & Waters, 2001). In the long term, it may help improve the quality of EFL student learning both inside and outside academic institutions in Asian countries. As Hounsell (1997, p. 257) puts it, "Reflective teaching and the quality of learning go hand in hand."

THE AUTHOR

Su-Jen Lai is Assistant Professor of English at Chang Gung University in Taiwan. She has an MA in English Language Teaching for Specific Purposes (ESP) from Warwick University and a Ph.D. in Linguistics from Lancaster University in Britain. Her research interests include EFL/ESL literacy

learning-teaching and TEFL/TESL theory and methodology.

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APPENDIX 1

A Brief Profile of Verna: Previous Educational and Work Experiences

Verna is 26 years old. She started to learn English as a compulsory subject when she was in the first year of junior high school. At that time, she was not interested in English but in Chinese Literature. Her personal interest is writing, especially writing in Chinese. After graduating from high school, she entered an evening division of vocational high school. It was a business school where she studied accounting, economics, and other commercial subjects. During her four-year study there, she worked during the day and studied in the evening. After graduating, she worked in a business company in Taipei where she was able to apply what she learned from the school to the real, actual situation. Nevertheless, she realized that the first university degree was crucially

important to her and to anyone who expected to work in the community in Taiwan. She therefore started to prepare for the Joint University Entrance Examination while she continued working during the day.

Because English was one of the main academic subjects required in the entrance examination program and because her English, at that time, was relatively poor, she then decided to study English both in a cram school and in a language institution. The cram school employed a 'cram-based' style of teaching whereby she was intensively taught a huge amount of new, difficult English vocabulary and grammar. At the language institution, the course was more concerned with everyday English conversation and writing, enabling her to apply the input knowledge she obtained from the cram school to real-life situations. There was no examination required at the institution, as opposed to the cram school where there were a number of exams the students have to take. She tended to prefer the style of teaching at the language institution because she could make use of the facilities such as borrowing books and tapes from the institution and self-studying in the home. Most importantly, at the language institution, she met two native English teachers, who have strongly influenced her and inspired her to further her interests to do a BA degree in English.

She seems to have rarely used English with her part-time job in the business company. Occasionally, she reads something written in English when she has to categorize business letters, internally sending them to different departments of the company. It was the two-year intensive study at the cram school and at the language institution where she really learned English. In the end, she successfully passed the Joint University Entrance Examination and entered Fu Jen Catholic University where she majors in English at the School of Continuing Education (Evening Division).

APPENDIX 2
The Questionnaire: What Verna Wrote

This questionnaire uses the following coding scheme:					
Not at all		Confident		Very confident	
1	2	3	4	5	
Please circle one number on the scale, 1-5, provided below for each category.					
The beginning of course					
1. <i>Reading</i>					
a) in an academic context		1	2	3	4 5
b) in social/everyday contexts		1	2	3	4 5
2. <i>Writing</i>					
a) in an academic context		1	2	3	4 5
b) in social/everyday contexts		1	2	3	4 5
3. <i>Listening</i>					
a) in an academic context		1	2	3	4 5
b) in social/everyday contexts		1	2	3	4 5
4. <i>Speaking</i>					
a) in an academic context		1	2	3	4 5
b) in social/everyday contexts		1	2	3	4 5
The end of course					
1. <i>Reading</i>					
a) in an academic context		1	2	3	4 5
b) in social/everyday contexts		1	2	3	4 5
2. <i>Writing</i>					
a) in an academic context		1	2	3	4 5
b) in social/everyday contexts		1	2	3	4 5
3. <i>Listening</i>					
a) in an academic context		1	2	3	4 5
b) in social/everyday contexts		1	2	3	4 5
4. <i>Speaking</i>					
a) in an academic context		1	2	3	4 5
b) in social/everyday contexts		1	2	3	4 5