# Checkmate or stalemate?
## Teacher and learner positioning in the adult ESL literacy classroom

by Sue Ollerhead

## Abstract

*This paper reports on a research case study conducted within Australia's Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program (LLNP). Employing elements of identity theory, positioning theory and culturally relevant pedagogy, it investigated how Jann, a teacher of beginner-level adult ESL literacy learners, positioned her learners vis-à-vis her teaching practices, and how her learners positioned themselves in response. The paper draws on the concepts of investment and imagined communities (Norton, 1997, 2001) to explain how learners reacted to Jann's positioning of them. The research findings revealed that Jann conceptualised her role both as a mother figure and as a social link between her learners and the broader Australian community. In turn, these perceptions had a distinct effect on the ways in which she positioned her learners in the classroom. Analysing the data from in-depth interviews and classroom observations, the paper discusses the extent to which Jann's learners appeared to be invested in the language practices of the classroom, and the degree to which her teaching was able to tap into their imagined communities. The research findings suggest that both of these factors played an important role in determining the learners' levels of engagement and participation in classroom learning activities.*

## Introduction

The growing number of adult English language learners who have low levels of literacy in their first or home language presenting in Australian classrooms over the past two decades has emphasised the need for more empirical studies to be carried out in this area. The term ESL literacy learners is used to denote adults with little or no formal education who are learning to speak English at the same time as they are learning to read and write. Such learners frequently experience difficulty in transferring skills from the first to the second language (van der Craats, Kurvers & Young-Scholten, 2005). Teachers of these learners need to become not only more highly skilled at developing English language and literacy proficiency, but they also need to develop a deeper insight into the social and cultural needs and backgrounds of their students (Gunn, 2003). The aim of the present study, therefore, was to add to the body of empirical, classroom-based research in this area.

The following research questions guided the study:

1   How does the teacher conceptualise her role as a teacher of adult ESL literacy learners?
2   How do learners conceptualise their roles as social members of the broader Australian community and as language and literacy learners in an adult English language classroom?
3   How does the teacher position her learners through her pedagogical practices?
4   How do learners position themselves in response to the teacher's pedagogical approaches?

**Research on adult English language literacy learners**

Despite there being a growing body of literature on different aspects of adult literacy for English language learners, the emphasis has primarily been on the linguistic rather than the social and cultural needs of low-literate adults (McKay & Wong, 1996). Additionally, there has been limited research into the influence of classroom teachers' approaches on the participatory practices of language learners (Yoon, 2005). The following abbreviated literature review summarises current research regarding teachers' attitudes towards ESL literacy learners, the ways in which teachers position their learners, and how their learners respond.

The differences in teachers' conceptualisations of their roles are explored in an ethnographic case study which examined four teachers' roles in enacting Proposition 227, the Californian intiative to end bilingual education. In explicating what he terms the 'policy-to-practice connection' (Stritikus, 2003: 30), the researcher uses sociocultural theory to explain that the way teachers enact policy in the classroom is deeply influenced by their social and historical backgrounds and political and personal ideologies.

Another study of teachers' experiences of the inclusion of English language learners in US secondary school classrooms found that teachers brought their own attitudes, convictions and discourses to bear when attributing identity positions to learners (Reeves, 2009). These preconceptions included teachers' understanding of second language acquisition theory, attitudes towards low-literacy learners shaped by their historical and cultural backgrounds, and the influence of institutional discourses regarding low-literate learners. The study concluded that such factors often positioned English language learners in a negative way.

The abovementioned studies, while useful in offering insights into teachers' beliefs and positioning of ESl literacy learners, fail to address the learners' perspectives on and responses to their teachers' positioning practices. However, there have been some notable attempts by researchers to include the

perspectives of English language learners. For example, a study of several recently arrived Asian English language learners in an Australian high school showed how these learners were positioned by their Anglo-Australian teachers and fellow learners. The researcher found that the English language learners generally remained silent in class due to feelings of self-consciousness about their different accents. They were largely ignored by their Australian classmates, suggesting that they were not accepted as legitimate members of the classroom community (Miller, 2000). In a similar vein, Yoon's study of middle school English language learners in the United States found that teachers viewed their roles in markedly different ways. While one teacher positioned herself in an inclusive way, as 'a teacher for all students, whether mainstream or ELL', another teacher regarded herself as chiefly a subject teacher for whom the additional responsibility of teaching ESL to English language learners posed a frustrating imposition (Yoon, 2005). The teachers' different approaches were related to the learners' different levels of participation and their positioning of themselves as powerful or powerless students. This study adds valuable insight into the participation of English language learners and the complex patterns of interaction in the classroom that influence learning and teaching.

To date, there remains little sociocultural research available about Australian adult ESL literacy learners, especially related to workplace-related literacy programs such as the LLNP. This study seeks to address this research gap.

**Theoretical framework**

**Positioning theory**

A relatively new direction in language teaching research, positioning theory provides a theoretical perspective for work on learners' participatory behaviours and identity formation in the classroom. Positioning theory adds a new and valuable dimension to the field of identity research in language education, marking a move towards 'dynamic theories and methods and away from static and essentialist approaches' (Yamakawa et al., 2005: 20).

Within the context of this study, two modes of positioning are relevant. One is intentional self-positioning, 'reflexive positioning', where individuals deliberately position themselves according to their world views (Davies & Harré, 1990: 48). Individuals' self-positioning guides the way in which they act and think about their roles, responsibilities and activities in a given context. In the same way, teachers' self-described beliefs help to explain how they position themselves in the classroom. For example, while some teachers may see themselves as linguistic facilitators based on their beliefs about their learners' needs, others may view their role in more social terms, such as offering learners exposure to the wider social community. Whatever position teachers adopt, that positioning guides them in their interactions with learners in the classroom.

The other mode of positioning is interactive positioning. It is based on the premise that social phenomena always occur in relation to other people, and that what an individual says positions another (Davies & Harré, 1990: 48). Interactive positioning therefore tells us how and why the same person may position herself differently in different contexts. Furthermore, such a perspective implies that positioning people in particular ways limits or extends what those people can say and do (Adams & Harré, 2001). It has been further asserted that positioning individuals as deficient may deny them the right to correct their cognitive performance and that, conversely, positioning them as intelligent may allow them the possibility to improve performance (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003).

These characteristics of interactive positioning, along with teachers' self-positioning, can help us to understand how teachers position ESL literacy learners in their classrooms. Teachers can intentionally or unintentionally position students in more positive or more negative ways through their pedagogical approaches. This in turn affects students' self-positioning. It thus seems evident that teachers' positioning of their learners as intelligent, and being responsive to their learners' specific needs, are crucial factors for learners to be able to view themselves positively and participate meaningfully in classroom activities.

**Learner investment and imagined communities**

Researchers point to the suitability of identity research as a lens through which to investigate language learning in the classroom, highlighting the theoretical constructs of investment and imagined communities (see, e.g., Norton & Toohey, 2011). Investment is a construct conceptualised by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. It can be used to describe how learners' desire to learn English is often ambivalent, and heavily influenced by their social and historical context. If learners 'invest' in the target language, they do so with the understanding that they will gain a wider range of symbolic and material resources, such as an elevated status or a better-paying job. Investment is a construct deriving from the assumption that language learners have multifaceted identities that change across time and space and which become manifested in different forms of social interaction. Investment therefore links a learner's desire and commitment to learning a language to their changing identity (Norton, 2010). For example, even if highly motivated, a learner may nevertheless have little investment in the language practices of a classroom that she or he perceives as elitist or sexist.

For many learners, the target language community presents what has been referred to as 'a community of the imagination', offering a wider range of identity positions to choose from in the future (Norton, 2010; Norton & Toohey, 2011: 415). It therefore extends to learners the possibility to enhance their social networks and achieve more social power in the community. Such potential takes on added

salience for very low-literate adult learners in Australia, many of whom are newly arrived migrants with refugee backgrounds and are thus actively involved in negotiating new social, cultural and economic identities.

**Culturally relevant pedagogy**

The phrase 'culturally relevant pedagogy' was coined to describe teaching practice that addresses learners 'intellectually, socially, emotionally and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes' (Ladson-Billings, 1994: 108). Such an approach implies that the teacher needs to create a bridge between the learner's home and school life, while still meeting curriculum and policy requirements (Coffey, 2008). In doing so, teachers also need to draw on learners' unique backgrounds, situated knowledge and life experience to inform their lessons and teaching practices and classroom management.

In this paper, classroom discourses are examined to demonstrate how a teacher positioned ESL literacy learners according to her own beliefs, manifested in her teaching practices. The ways in which the teacher attended to her learners' social and cultural needs are described to explain the ways in which she was positioning her learners. In addition, the learners' responses and participation practices are examined to demonstrate how they either accepted or resisted these positionings.

**Method**

The data discussed in this paper were collected as part of a broader research project involving four adult ESL literacy classrooms. Data were collected over three months at two large vocational institutes. Both institutes are located in an ethnically and socially diverse area, with 31% of residents having been born overseas and 23% coming from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE).

A collective case study method was used to examine the pedagogical approaches of four teachers of beginner level ESL literacy learners (Stake, 1995). To yield a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of the four cases, multiple sources of information were used, including observations, interviews, audio-visual materials, documents and reports. The core data consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the four classroom teachers as well as extensive classroom observation. Each classroom was observed in two-hourly sessions on six different occasions over a period of three months.

Four teacher participants, of whom only one is reported in this paper, volunteered to participate in the study. They consented to regular visits, classroom observations and two interviews. The teachers all expressed their desire to highlight what they felt to be the unique challenges they faced in teaching very low-literate learners. Learner participants were selected on a voluntary basis according to their core language groups and the availability of first language interpreters. The majority of learner participants were multilingual, had limited experience of formal schooling (most fewer than four years) and were not yet literate in their first language or in English.

The students involved in the study included Dinka, Vietnamese, Arabic, Urdu, Mandarin, Congolese and Krio speakers. They were interviewed in their first language with the assistance of a bilingual interpreter. Consecutive interpretation was used, where the interpreter listens to the speaker for a few minutes (or more) and then recounts what was said. My role as a participant observer (Merriam, 1995) assisting small groups of learners with activities at the teacher's request, afforded me a closer insight into how learners engaged with the classroom practices.

**Data analysis**

Data analysis of interview transcripts and memos, field notes, audio-recorded transcripts of classroom observations and documents such as learner worksheets and curriculum outlines was conducted using coding strategies (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This formed the basis of a taxonomy of categories (Spradley, 1980) reproduced in Figure 1.

The first of these categories deals with teachers' historical and teaching backgrounds. This serves as a counterpoint to learners' social and historical backgrounds to illustrate the often divergent life experiences and world views of teachers and their learners. The second category draws on positioning theory to examine how teachers position themselves according to their self-articulated world views and beliefs about their roles. Thereafter, it draws on identity theory to analyse whether teachers' stated beliefs about their roles and their perceptions of learners' needs appeal to narrow notions of identity (e.g., restricted to the capacity of linguistic facilitator) or broader notions (e.g., taking responsibility for learners' cultural and social needs). These findings were then juxtaposed with learners' stated beliefs about the nature of their social and learning identities, including their self-articulated imagined communities. This juxtaposition allowed the researcher to look for patterns of congruency between teachers' perception of learners' needs and learners' self-articulated needs. The third category examines how teachers position their learners through their pedagogical practices. Teachers' pedagogies were analysed through the dual lenses of identity theory and culturally relevant pedagogy. Identity theory acted as a framework to assess whether teachers' classroom content and methods offered learners constrained or extended identity positions, and whether teachers were able to tap into

their understanding of learners' imagined communities. Culturally relevant pedagogy allowed the researcher to assess whether the teacher used her knowledge about learners' unique and multicultural backgrounds, knowledge and life experiences to inform her lessons, or whether her lessons tended towards Australian monoculturalism. The corresponding learner category examined how learners positioned themselves interactively, in response to their teachers' positioning. This was analysed in terms of their participatory actions, such as whether they were predominantly silent or actively engaged, their expressed investment in the language practices of the classroom, and the extent to which teachers' pedagogical approaches corresponded with the learners' imagined communities.
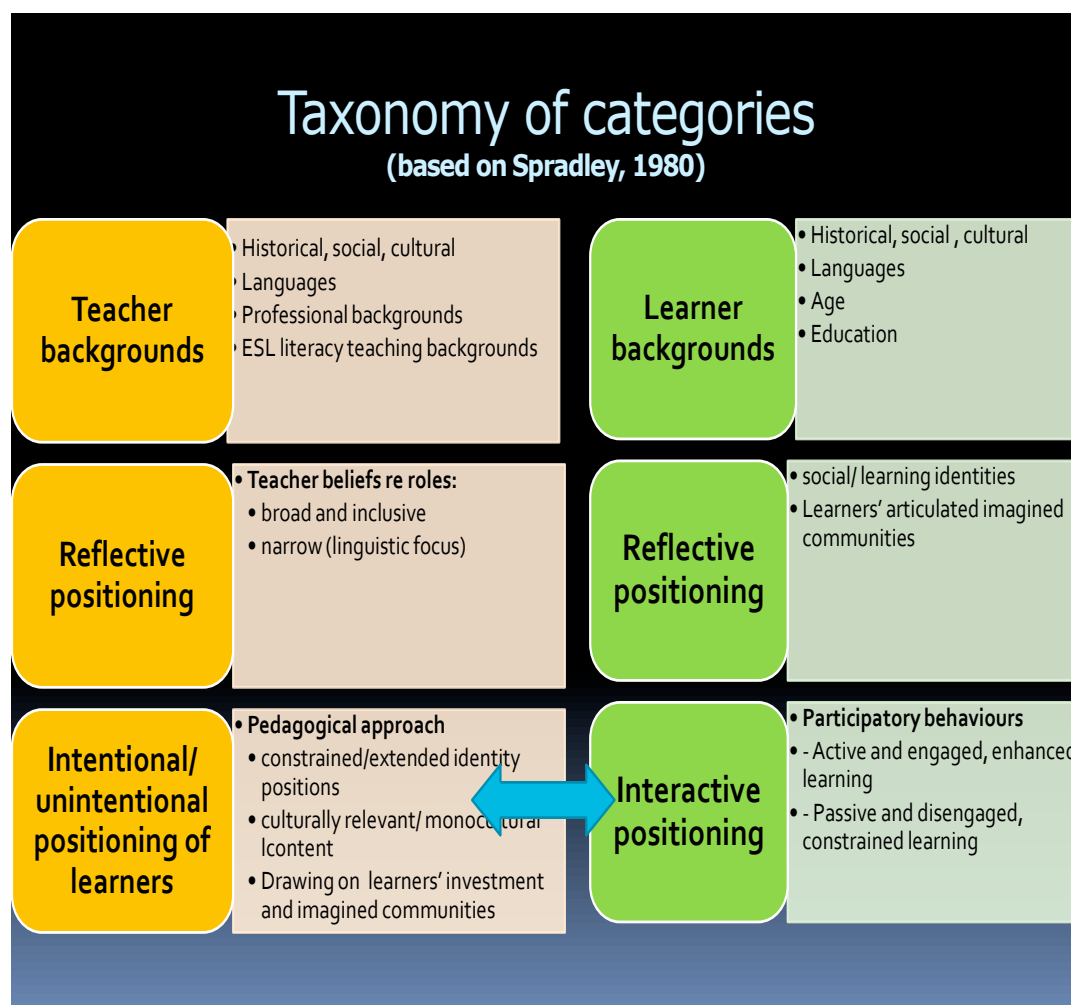


**Figure 1 – Taxonomy of categories for analysing classroom observation data**

The taxonomy outlined above will now be applied to a sample data set involving the class teacher, Jann, and an Afghani learner named Ahmed (pseudonyms used).

**Teacher and learner backgrounds**

Teacher Jann is a European-Australian female in her late 50s. A monolingual speaker of English, Jann has lived in the same suburb on the outskirts of a major Australian city for most of her life. She is a

self-described 'veteran' of ESL literacy teaching, having taught groups of these learners for over twenty years. When not teaching, she devotes considerable time and energy to charity fundraising and family responsibilities

Learner Ahmed is an Afghani male in his late 50s. He is a multilingual speaker of Dari, Pashto and Urdu. After living as a refugee in Pakistan for 20 years, Ahmed gained refugee status in Australia, where he has been living for four years. He had undergone four years of formal primary school education in Afghanistan and had spent nine months learning English in Australia. (Note: Even though Dari was Ahmed's first language, he was interviewed in Urdu, the language for which a bilingual interpreter was available. Ahmed reported that he was fluent in Urdu as he had spent over ten years living in Pakistan during the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989.)

A cursory perusal of Jann's and Ahmed's backgrounds reveals a convergence of two very different worlds. Jann had been well-educated and enjoyed a secure and stable life in Australia whereas Ahmed had received little formal education. Yet Ahmed had an arguably broader life experience than Jann in that he had lived in three different countries and spoke three languages fluently.

**Teacher and learner reflective positioning**

Teacher Jann perceived her role as a teacher as being broad and inclusive, incorporating significant social responsibility. She perceived extending friendship towards her learners and acting as a point of contact with the Australian community as being of crucial importance. She thus reflectively positioned herself in a supportive, empowering and inclusive role, as seen in the following interview extract:

> I'm 50% teacher, 20% friend [and] I'm 30% counsellor/support. … [T]hey [the learners] see me as a mum, as a sister, as a grandmother [laughs], and I see my teaching as only about half of what I do.

From this, it is clear that Jann viewed herself as occupying a broad and inclusive teaching identity through which she assumed social responsibility for her learners.

Ahmed, on the other hand, seemed to have assumed a far more marginal social role. He described himself as being too old to learn and reported numerous health-related problems. He said his deepest desire was to find work for himself and for his two adult sons to be able to find a job in Australia, as seen in the following translated interview extract:

> I find life here in Australia lonely … and boring. I have nobody to talk to besides my wife. My English is not good, I cannot learn. Sometimes my neighbour is friendly and helps me

> read bills and letters. I worry my sons are getting up to no good. They cannot find jobs …
> They are good with cars, but there is no work for them. They are bored and frustrated and
> make the wrong friends.

Ahmed's description of his life in Australia suggests that he saw himself occupying a fairly peripheral position both in society and as a language learner. He characterised himself as a poor learner whose lack of language skills and failure to find work have resulted in his inability to form a social network. His self-articulated imagined community reflected his desire to find employment for himself and his sons and for his family to become more integrated with the Australian community.

**Teacher's pedagogical approach and learners' participatory behaviours**

Jann planned her teaching program to match very closely with what she perceived her learners needed to know in order to function effectively and meaningfully in the broader social community. Over the three-month observation period, Jann designed her lessons around an excursion to a large fresh produce market in a nearby suburb. While on the excursion, learners were asked to complete a questionnaire where they had to locate various food items and find out how much each of them cost.

As a participant observer during the excursion lesson, I noted that the learners appeared highly engaged and motivated to complete the questionnaire task. They articulated their appreciation of the relevance of this lesson in comments such as:

> I often need to do this buying but never could (do this) in English before. I usually go to the
> store where I know they speak my language.

Jann used the market excursion as a generative context for follow-up lessons. Photographs were used as prompts for a language lesson on recounting events in the past tense, using models such as 'First we bought a ticket, then we took the train.' Learners practised their speaking skills when they were invited to discuss various recipes for preparing and cooking the produce they had bought at the market. This led to a dynamic intercultural exchange between learners when the conversation turned to the role food played in observing religious festivals and celebrating cultural events.

Through Jann's carefully designed generative lesson plan based on a local community activity, she was able to offer learners multiple identity positions, as consumers, learners, parents, nurturers. The lessons also offered the students' extended identity positions for the future, through tapping into their imagined communities. These included self-articulated aspirational identities which conferred additional status and independence, for example, as brokers of knowledge, skilful bargainers and independent commuters. By deliberately drawing on their unique situated knowledge in group discussions, Jann encouraged her learners to move beyond their current communities and into more

intercultural communities, through the sharing of recipes, methods of food preparation, unique customs and festivals and so on.

**Ahmed's participatory behaviours**

For a month after I interviewed Ahmed, my observation of him in a classroom setting seemed to reinforce his reflexive self-positioning. He appeared largely disengaged from the classroom setting. Physically, he appeared to set himself deliberately apart from the other learners through his choice of a formal style of dress, wearing an ornate *salwaar kameez*. Socially, he very rarely addressed other learners or asked questions in class.

However, a significant shift occurred when the class went on the excursion to the fresh food market. As a participant observer, I noticed that Ahmed actively handled the produce and appeared very motivated to compare prices of similar produce at different stalls. The excursion experience subsequently contributed to a marked change in Ahmed's participatory behaviours in the classroom. An extract from reflective field notes recorded during the classroom observations is presented below as evidence of Ahmed's developing identity formation over the course of the three-month data collection period:

> Jann had noticed that Ahmed spoke very little in class. Yet, during the market excursion, she noticed that Ahmed became animatedly engaged identifying, handling and pricing the various produce items. During a follow-up numeracy activity in class, which involved estimating the mass and volume of food items and then weighing them to check how close learners' estimations were to their actual mass, Ahmed's answers were the most accurate by far. Jann encouraged Ahmed to share some background information about what his occupation had been in Afghanistan. When he shared that he had been a fruit and vegetable trader at a big market, Jann suggested that as a reason for his quick and accurate numeracy skills, a fact acknowledged and commented on by other learners in the class. From then on, Ahmed began to participate actively in the lesson with a more confident attitude.

The taxonomy presented in Figure 1 forms the basis of a narrative analysis of the observation data: Jann's intentional positioning of Ahmed as an active, working member of society affirmed his right to participate in the classroom activity. She extended the possibilities for his positive identity as a participant, a position which he accepted and demonstrated through his active and confident participation in the class excursion and follow-up lessons.

The case of Jann and Ahmed adds weight to the assertion that pedagogical practices that appeal to learners' multiple and changing identities can be transformative (Norton, 2000). By using culturally

relevant lesson material that tapped into Ahmed's prior knowledge and appealing to his imagined community of being engaged in meaningful, valuable work, Ahmed's erstwhile peripheral social identity was gradually transformed into a more central, social identity through his growing engagement in the practices of the classroom community.

## Discussion

The findings of this study lend weight to the contention that teachers' backgrounds are influential in determining the way they conceptualise their roles in relation to their learners (Stritikus, 2003). Jann's inclusive self-positioning as a link to the broader social community appeared to affect her pedagogical choices of socially and culturally inclusive lesson content. When relating this to the learner data, it could be argued that Ahmed's self positioning changed from being less socially powerful to more socially powerful when he accepted Jann's positioning of him as a productive learner with valuable situated knowledge. In view of these findings, the study can be said to establish a link between the teacher's pedagogical approach and her learner's participatory behaviour in the classroom.

This study lends weight to the observation that adding the learner's voice to observations of teaching practice in the language classroom not only triangulates and strengthens research data, it provides a more comprehensive view of the subtle and often concealed power relations at play between learners and teachers in the classroom (Yoon, 2005). By adding the adult learner's voice to the debate regarding what constitutes best practice in adult ESL literacy learning and focusing on the complex and dynamic social interactions occurring in everyday classroom practice, as well as attributing a transformational value to culturally relevant teaching practice, this study aims to add another perspective to the dominant discourse regarding literacy provision in Australia.

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