Emerging multilingual practices of young people: learning language or literacy or both?

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The development of literacy is often understood as the ability to function in the languages that are used in one’s immediate environment, that is, when examining literacy practices a connection is made to one’s first or second language, to use the traditional categorizations. In today’s increasingly multilingual societies with mixed and meshed uses of various linguistic and multimodal resources, this view is limited and inadequate. Young people especially are savvy users of their limited language skills to create new kinds of multilingual literacy practices. Therefore, we should also examine what kind of literacy practices people have in languages that they are not fluent in. Approaching this kind of multilingual language use from the perspective of literacy practices – rather than language skills – enables one to look at beyond language to the social practices, to look beyond languages as separate entities and focus on language as resource. At the same time, this approach gives us a lens to examine the relationship between literacy practices and language learning.

In this paper, I will use two cases as examples of young people’s emerging multilingual literacy practices. In both, the use of participatory methods was central. The first one focuses on Finnish teenagers’ use of English in their various language and literacy practices. The second one explores primary school aged children’s creative literacy practices in the context of endangered indigenous Sámi languages. With the participatory take on literacy practices in both cases, the researchers were able to bypass the fixed views of language, competence, proficiency and skills, and instead provide space for awareness raising and emancipation in creating emerging literacy practices in which the young people make use of all the linguistic and multimodal resources available to them.

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