

An Observation of the Process of Transfer of Literacy Skills between L1 and L2

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the factors that impact second language learners in gaining literacy in their second language. Specifically, this paper looks at the transfer of literacy skills between students' first and second languages and the implications this has on current and future educational practices. Furthermore, this paper discusses the lack of conclusive research found in the field to determine the process by which one learns how to read in a second language. Thus, the purpose of this research is to investigate this issue further in an attempt to better seek out the accepted findings of second language literacy acquisition in the field and to identify gaps in the research that currently exist.

Introduction

Gaining effective literacy skills is indisputably one of the most important factors for overall academic success. Literature courses aside, students are dependent on their literacy skills to navigate, comprehend, and internalize content specific texts and materials across all of the disciplines he she will encounter throughout their academic careers. While schools begin fostering early reading and phonetic skills from the preschool years, many students continue to struggle to learn how to read throughout their primary and secondary education. Although many factors arguably contribute to the acquisition of literacy skills, most studies point to socioeconomic status as the overwhelming contributor.

While much literature has been published on the needs of struggling readers, less research has focused on the impact of learning how to read when a student's first oral language (L1) is different from the target language (L2) in which literacy skills are sought. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to look to emerging research in the field focused on addressing the challenges students encounter when learning how to read in a language other than their mother tongue. Specifically, this paper explores the following questions:

1. Do language and literacy processes from L1 transfer to L2?
2. What factors influence successful reading comprehension in L2?
3. What is the ideal academic environment for successful L2 literacy obtainment?

The goal of this paper is to contribute to the body of knowledge on this topic to help current practitioners and schools better assist their students in the pursuit of learning how to read.

Today's Student Profile

In 2013 in the United States, our student demographic profile is as diverse as it has ever been. While socioeconomic factors have a long history of contributing to the diversity of our nation's students, recent experience tells us that our country's increasing pluralism brings with it a variety of disparities that indisputably impact academic success rates in this country. According to Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan, Coleen Carlson, and Sharolyn Pollard-Durodola (2007), "From 1991 to 2002, the total ELL population grew 95% so that between 1990 and 2004, ELL enrollment doubled, with approximately three fourths coming from homes where Spanish is the primary language" (Cárdenas-Hagan, et al., 2007, p. 249). Thus, overwhelming, most students in US school ELL programs are native speakers of Spanish.

Immigration and isolation are perhaps two of the most important factors that contribute to a disparity of languages amongst our schools and the students they serve. While many schools receive students with English deficits due to the fact that they are recent immigrants, others receive students who although are US-born, have grown up in isolated communities where they received little exposure to English. Jo Ann Farver, Christopher Lonigan, and Stephanie Eppe (2009) find, “unfortunately, ELL children tend to have poor literacy outcomes, lower academic achievement, and higher grade repetition and school drop-out rates than their non-ELL peers” (p. 703). Furthermore, Cárdenas-Hagan et al (2007) finds, “ELLs tend to receive special education services with more frequency than do monolingual children, and many of these referrals are for academic problems, such as difficulties with reading” (Cárdenas-Hagan, et al., 2007, pp. 249-250). This combination of factors clearly puts ELL students at a disadvantage in our current academic institutions.

Thus, whether schools receive these children at pre-school, 12th grade or at any point in between, teachers and administrators are charged with the issue of having to bridge the gap between that student’s native language and English so that students are able to function effectively in all of their content-related courses. If academic success is dependent on literacy in the target language, schools must take action in fostering the skills needed for this growing student demographic to whom institutions across the United States are serving today and will arguably continue to serve for years to come.

Do language and literacy processes from L1 transfer to L2?

Studies suggest that students have three skills that they need for general literacy development, “oral proficiency, metalinguistic awareness, and general cognitive development” (Bialystok, et al., 2005, p. 44). Similarly, Farver, Lonigan, and Eppe (2009) argue that phonological awareness, print knowledge, and oral language are amongst the three most important skills needed for literacy acquisition (Farver, et. al., 2009, p. 704). Furthermore, Bialystok et al (2005) finds, “oral vocabulary has been shown to influence children’s acquisition of literacy.” If Bialystok’s findings were true, this would indeed complicate the process for gaining literacy for students whose first spoken language is different than the first language in which they learn to read.

Within the field, there are two hypotheses regarding the relationship between L1 and L2 that are commonly accepted. These two hypotheses are the linguistic interdependence hypothesis and the linguistic threshold hypothesis. According to Junko Yamashita (2004), “first the linguistic interdependence hypothesis claims that L1 reading ability transfers to L2 reading. Second, the linguistic threshold hypothesis claims that L1 reading ability transfers to L2 reading when learners’ L2 proficiency is higher than the linguistic threshold” (Yamashita, 2004). If one hypothesis is more widely accepted than the other, Yamashita (2004) finds, “studies have generally supported the linguistic threshold hypothesis.” Notwithstanding, Cárdenas-Hagan et al (2007) offers yet another theoretic framework to this discussion known as cross-linguistic transfer. According to the authors, “cross-linguistic transfer occurs when students learning another language have access to and use linguistic resources from their L1” (Cárdenas-Hagan et al, 2007, p. 250). Elizabeth Bernhardt (2003) echoes the theory of cross-linguistic transfer by stating, “readers progress faster and become higher achievers in literacy if they know how to read in their first language” (Bernhardt, 2003, p. 114). Moreover, Bernhardt (2003) finds, “a strong first-language base enables a second-language reader to understand the parameters of literacy as well as the strategies, thereby unburdening the process substantially” (Bernhardt, 2003, p. 114).

Overall, research points to positive transfer of literacy skills from a student’s L1 to his or her L2. Bialystok et al (2005) states, “the extent to which children transfer their skill in one language to the other language depends on the similarity of the systems, phonological structure in one case and writing system in the other” (p. 47). To this end, Cárdenas et al (2007) finds, “students who begin school with low-level L1 skills who are instructed only in L2 may lose all knowledge of L1 and may also have difficulty acquiring L2” (p. 250). Conversely, Cárdenas et al (2007) states, “students who begin school with higher L1 skills are hypothesized to acquire L2 more easily and also retain their L1 skills” (p. 250). Thus, all studies tend to support the theory that language and literacy skills can transfer between a student’s L1 and L2; however, it is important to observe the factors that may contribute to, or at times limit, the overall successfulness of literacy in L2.

What factors influence successful reading comprehension in L2?

Researchers in the field suggest varying influential factors that may impact successful reading comprehension in L2. To begin, it is important to recognize that not all languages are created equal. “Different languages realize their meanings with different surface structures.

Readers must acquire processing strategies specific to the language at hand” (Bernhardt, n.d., p. 9). In short, studies point to the similarity of a student’s L2 to his or her L1 as perhaps one of the most dominating factors in determining a successful outcome in L2 reading comprehension.

According to Bernhardt (n.d.), “the studies in the field estimate the contribution of first-language reading to second-language reading to be between 14% and 21% and the contribution of language knowledge to second-language reading performance to be around 30%” (Bernhardt, n.d., p. 7). To this end, Farver et al (2009) points out, “studies also have shown that children with weak L1 skills will not acquire L2 skills as quickly as those with more developed L1 skills” (Farver, et. al., 2009, p. 705). Thus, it can be argued that the more advanced a student’s prior vocabulary and literacy skills are in their first language will ultimately facilitate the process of that student being successful in gaining these skills in the student’s L2.

Furthermore, Bernhardt (n.d.) points to sociocultural reader and text variables as influential factors for gaining L2 literacy skills (Bernhardt, n.d., p. 5). Yamashita (2004) and Setsuko Mori (2002) suggest that motivation and self-efficacy may also be key components to success in L2. In a study by Yamashita (2004) it was found that, “if students have a positive attitude towards L1 reading, they are more or less likely to keep it in L2 even if they are, at a certain point of their development, not very successful learners.” According to Yamashita (2004), “In general, what students think or believe is more likely to transfer from L1 to L2 than what they feel” (Yamashita, 2004). While compatibility between L1 and L2, advancement of L1 literacy skills, sociocultural variables, and motivation and self-efficacy may all influence successful reading comprehension in L2, these factors alone are not enough if not for a supportive academic environment with highly trained faculty and staff on the needs of our country’s growing ELL student population.

What is the ideal academic environment for successful L2 literacy obtainment?

As with all content areas, successful L2 literacy obtainment can be highly facilitated by learning environments that cater to the process of transfer of literacy skills between a student’s L1 and L2. Today’s teacher education curriculum may not be doing enough to educate prospective teachers on how to properly assess, modify, overcome and generally navigate the varying needs each ELL student brings into the classroom. According to Bernhardt (2003), “the most pressing issue for reading instruction is the preparation of teachers to ensure that they have the knowledge or skill to diagnose and assess children’s progress” (Bernhardt, 2003, p. 115). This call for help is overwhelmingly shared across the field by researchers, current, and prospective practitioners who share the desire to educate all children. Perhaps this can be even more poignantly noted by the following question posed by Bernhardt (2003):

How does a teacher identify phonemic confusions and then cope with them if she or he has little if any sense of the phonemic system with which children enter school? How can a teacher recognize the cause of fluency disjunctures without understanding that the child already reads in his or her native language, which is perfectly phonetic, and cannot get past what appear to him or her to be random spellings in English?” (Bernhardt, 2003, p. 115).

To respond to this question posed by Bernhardt, researchers in the field, and current and future practitioners, modern practices suggest that teachers need to be given materials to help them identify deficits in the ELL students’ literacy skills based on the students’ native language(s). Short of asking in-service teachers to become linguists, another suggestion within modern practice is to have more multilingual professionals with linguistic knowledge able and available to assist our teachers in assessing and creating appropriate curriculum for ELL students today.

Beyond improving current teacher education curriculum and providing assistance to teachers in today’s classrooms, some research suggests reinventing the methodology and pedagogy surrounding general language acquisition. Instead of having ELL students mainstreamed into “regular” classrooms or isolating them by having them work alone, many researchers suggest a learning environment similar to a two-way partial immersion program. Within two-way learning, native L1 and native L2 speakers work together on a variety of learning tasks. Supporter of this ideal, Mileidis Gort (2008) finds, “ideal second language (L2) learning classrooms provide environments that encourage communication and authentic opportunities to use the target language and provide exposure to proficient speakers of the target language who tailor their language to make themselves understood” (Gort, 2008, pp. 192-193).

Furthermore, a study conducted by Gort (2008) found, “peer teaching/learning interactions provided opportunities for ongoing negotiation of meaning through hybrid literacy practices” (Gort, 2008, p. 195). By this, the author means, “The blending of Spanish and English, home and school registers, and formal and informal knowledge, that facilitated the development of bilingualism, biliteracy, and cross-cultural understanding for both groups of students” (Gort, 2008, p. 195). Farver et al (2009) echoes this by stating, “Some research has suggested that bilingual preschool programs can promote parallel development in both languages” (Farver, et. al., 2009, p. 705). Furthermore, the study by Gort (2008) found, “Peer scaffolding around bilingual literacy/writing development involved collaborative support with spelling, punctuation/capitalization, the use of literary devices/stylistic writing gestures, and the content of students’ writing” (Gort, 2008, p. 197). Thus, while the two-way partial immersion program curriculum may in fact be ideal for all learners (both ELL and monolingual English speaking students), this environment may not be realistic for all academic institutions. Thus, an alternative to two-way immersion programs may be literacy enrichment programs. Within literacy enrichment programs focusing on ELL students, specific curriculum creates a variety of teacher-directed small group activities that focus on students’ improvement of the top three skills suggested for literacy development. According to Farver, Lonigan, and Eppe (2009), these activities include:

1. A shared reading method known as dialogic reading in which children learn to become storytellers, and adult-child interaction develops into a “conversation” about picture books focusing on teaching new vocabulary, grammar, and narrative, as well as improving overall verbal fluency.
2. Phonological awareness training that is sequenced along the developmental continuum of phonological sensitivity.
3. Print knowledge activities involving the manipulation of objects and puzzles that teach letter-names and letter-sound knowledge and various matching and oddity games to help children identify capital and lower case letters (Farver, et. al, 2009, p. 706).

Thus, while research has yet to find a one-size-fits-all model for helping ELL students gain proficient L2 literacy skills, the suggestions herein may offer practical solutions for institutions and practitioners in the field today.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper has been to present the research that currently exists in the field concerning the transfer of literacy skills from L1 to L2. While this paper provides the reader with common theories, suggestions, and practices surrounding this topic, herein lays the problem. This paper is limited by the deficits of and discrepancies between current research specifically in the transfer of literacy skills between L1 and L2. As a result, much of the research used for this paper points to several gaps within the existing body of knowledge on this topic. The motive for these gaps tends to point to a lack of multilingual researchers who are sufficiently knowledgeable and socioculturally prepared in this field.

Bernhardt (2003) states, “a huge portion of the second language reading database has never acknowledged the variables introduced by multiple languages. We have a real problem---a dearth of scholars who do high-quality research in this area” (Bernhardt, 2003, p. 113). Farver et al (2009) echoes this point by stating, “there are few appropriate training programs or curricula that specifically target the development of emergent literacy skills for either English-speaking or ELL preschoolers, and children’s preliteracy skills are infrequently assessed in both their L1 and L2” (Farver, et. al., 2009, p. 705). Moreover, Bernhardt (n.d.) again offers, “those who investigate second-languages are notoriously monolingual” (p. 11). Furthermore, the author states, “researchers lament that since they don’t now the language of the subjects with whom they are working, they are forced to assess them in the researchers’ language. Researcher deficiencies shouldn’t be interfering with the ability to provide solid and trustworthy data” (Bernhardt, n.d., p. 12). Thus, it is clear that although literacy skill transfer between languages is heavily documented, more solid research is to be done if our country is to succeed in helping the needs of one of our country’s fastest growing student populations.

Conclusion

If current demographic and sociocultural trends hold, schools in the United States will continue to be presented with the task of educating students in a language that is different than their own. Since having an adequate set of L2 literacy skills is crucial for successful comprehension across content areas, studying the process by which students most effectively gain such skills is of utmost importance for the field of education today.

Moreover, the implications of this paper and the studies presented within can be used to help educate current and prospective practitioners and administrators. In short, more must be done in the crusade to educating our students both equally and equitably. Teachers need to be better prepared by their teacher education programs and professional development opportunities; administrators need to research alternative language immersion programs that have the capability of benefiting students of all languages; and multilingual professional researchers in the field must come forward and find new and better ways of assessing ELL students in a way that most accurately determines their needs. Perhaps through this idealistic combination of factors, educational practices for ELL students will continue to improve and positively impact the lives of the students it serves.

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