

The Role of Literacy in Second
and Third Language Acquisition

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This literature review focuses on literacy and its effect on second and third language acquisition. Third language acquisition (TLA) is often subsumed under the topic of second language acquisition (SLA). However, in the last two decades linguists have started to treat TLA as an area of focus in and of itself. The study of literacy as a distinct component of second and third language acquisition is a more recent undertaking as well.

Definitions

The whole field of language acquisition is young enough that researchers have not reached a convention that everyone adheres to in terms of labeling the languages being studied. First, mother, or native language (or languages if learned simultaneously from birth) are referred to as L1, the subsequent language (or languages if learned concurrently) as L2, and the following or target language(s) as L3 (regardless of how many languages may actually follow the second language learned). The term “heritage language” distinguishes itself from the first, mother, or native language as it is applied to the individual whose speaker community and educational institution is a majority language but who is in constant contact with a minority language (usually spoken in the home). Heritage speakers have varied levels of proficiency in the minority language.

Another interesting factor gleaned from the studies found in this review is that researchers evaluate different kinds of multilinguals. Cenoz’ (2000) research identified four types of multilingualism in terms of order of acquisition: (1) the three language systems are acquired consecutively; or (2), the third language system is acquired after the simultaneous acquisition of the first two; or (3), the first language system is already acquired before the simultaneous acquisition of two other languages; or (4), there is simultaneous contact with three language systems (2000, 40-41). It may also be difficult to categorize certain multilinguals because it is difficult to determine when someone has stopped learning a language and because many multilinguals are still learning their second language while learning their third.

Metalinguistic Awareness

Many linguists attribute multi-competence and multilingualism to metalinguistic awareness (Cook, 1995; Herdina & Jessner, 2002; McLaughlin & Nayak, 1989). Metalinguistic awareness is a subfield of metacognition and is concerned with activities of reflection on language and its use and a person's ability to intentionally monitor and plan her own method of linguistic processing in comprehension and production of any aspect of language. It is what one actually knows, or thinks she knows, about a language (Gass & Selinker, 2001). According to Cook (1995), multi-competence encompasses the different linguistic knowledge and different mind set that multilinguals have compared to monolinguals.

Several studies have reached the conclusion that proficiency in two or more languages can lead to higher levels of metalinguistic awareness, which aids the process of language acquisition (Ringbom, 1987; Cenoz & Valencia, 1994; Lasagabaster, 1998). According to McLaughlin and Nayak (1989), this is precisely what makes the difference between an expert and a novice learner. Bilingualism adds to a child's awareness of the languages she is learning to speak, and that is what makes her an "expert", or experienced learner, compared to a "novice" or monolingual learner. Following this path, it is logical to believe that learning a third language requires less effort for experts than novices because they have access to more strategies and techniques.

Bilingual and multilingual individuals also present a different type of linguistic competence as compared to that of monolinguals (Grosjean, 1989; Cook, 1995; Jessner, 1999). Much of the current research suggests that learning a third language is not the same as learning a second language (Jessner, 1999; Cooke, 1995). Herdina and Jessner (2002) propose that the acquisition of more than two language systems leads to the development of new skills such as learning how to learn; it also facilitates subsequent additional language acquisition as learners use metalinguistic awareness to explore the cognitive and linguistic mechanisms underlying language.

Additive and Subtractive Bilingualism and the Shift from Negative to Positive Research

Hakuta (1986) noted that, for the most part, the research on bilingualism in the first half of the twentieth century was driven by the concern that bilingualism had a negative impact on intelligence. Earlier research was mostly conducted on immigrant populations in the United States. Lambert (1981) recognized that it is not bilingualism that has a negative effect on intelligence but the kind of bilingualism. He made the distinction between additive and subtractive bilingualism as such: when members of the majority group learn an L2 in order to become bilingual, bilingualism results in additive linguistic consequences. When minority group members learn an L2 which might replace their L1, bilingualism results in subtractive linguistic consequences (1981, as cited in Sanz, 2000:25). Subtractive bilingualism has been associated with decreased levels of literacy in the heritage language, lower levels of second language proficiency, scholastic underachievement and psychosocial disorders. In 1992, Valencia and Cenoz noted that the level of competence, use, and valorization of two languages by the speech community will predict the additive or subtractive type of bilingualism. More recently the research has shifted to an interest in the positive effects of bi- and multilingualism and more SLA and TLA studies are being conducted in established multilingual environments.

Literacy Studies

The majority of the research overwhelmingly concludes that L1 literacy aids in L2 and L3 acquisition. In *The Power of Reading*, Krashen (1993) maintains that reading in and of itself is almost powerful enough to result in language acquisition. He promotes the theory that reading is the foundation of language education and the most powerful tool for increasing vocabulary and the abilities to read, write, spell, and comprehend. Much of the research on L2 reading suggests that readers' awareness of their reading processes and strategies enhances proficiency. In writing about the benefits of L1 literacy, Hudleson (1987) noted "it develops in children an understanding of what reading and writing are for" and "native language literacy provided the

children with resources to use as they moved into second language reading and writing.” (1987, as cited in Swain et al., 1990:67).

Swain, Lapkin, Rowen and Hart (1990) applied Hudelson’s theory to third language acquisition to see if, by extension, L2 literacy would aid in L3 literacy. They studied children whose L1 was not French or English in a French and English bilingual immersion program in Toronto, Canada. Based on a variety of tests and measurements Swain et al. showed that “literacy knowledge in the heritage language, regardless of whether learners are currently making use of those literacy skills, has a strong positive impact on the learning of a third language.” (1990:73). They also found that “...heritage language use without literacy has little effect.” (1990:65). Based on their research, they concluded that the “positive effect on third language learning is a generalized one and is not limited to literacy-based activities...” (1990:65) and that “even when two languages use different writing systems, readers are able to apply the visual, linguistic and cognitive strategies they use in first language reading to reading in the second language.” (1990:67).

The study took in to account general L1 proficiency versus L1 literacy and found that L1 literacy has a positive impact on L3 learning beyond that of overall general L1 proficiency. It also accounted for socioeconomic factors in the homes of the students and found that the L1 literacy is not attributable to socioeconomic privilege. The L1 literate and non-literate students had similar socioeconomic backgrounds. One of the most important results found in these studies is that literacy in the heritage language contributes to a generalized higher level of proficiency in the third language beyond literacy. This research suggests that bilingual programs that promote first language literacy have an overall positive effect on the learning of other languages and when the third language is required for academic success and participation in the target language society, support for literacy in the L1 is critical to the success of the students.

The majority of the current published work focusing on the role of literacy in TLA comes from Catalonia and the Basque country. Sagasta Errasti (1993) studied bilinguals in Spanish and

Basque who were studying English as a third language in Spain. She found that the bilingual students who used Basque at home as well as at school (maintenance bilinguals) had a higher level of proficiency in English than the students who only used Basque in the classroom (immersion bilinguals). This supports the claim that students learning a third language that are literate in previous languages have advantages over those who aren't. Likewise, Cenoz and Valencia (1994) conducted research which concluded that literacy in L1 aids in L3 acquisition. They compared Basque students who spoke Basque and Spanish and were learning English as a third language, with their peers who only spoke Spanish and were learning English as a second language in the Basque country. Furthermore, Sanz' (2000) study looked at the effects of additive bilingualism on proficiency in English as a foreign language. According to the research, Catalan bilingualism like Basque bilingualism led to superior English proficiency independent of other variables. These biliterate students show that immersion programs in the minority language produce more efficient L3 learners. Swain et al. (1990) showed that literacy in the heritage language is the key element when determining the positive impact that being bilingual has on subsequent language acquisition. They found that bilinguals who were not literate in their first language did not have the same advantages in third language acquisition as those who were literate. They cite Troike (1981, cited by Swain et al. 1990:66) who believed that children who are educated (i.e. literate) in their heritage language learn a second language better and are more academically successful than those who are not. Furthermore, the researchers determined that the level of proficiency in third language acquisition was affected more by the ability to read and write in the heritage language than by the oral level of proficiency to the extent that those heritage speakers who could not read or write in the heritage language had no advantage over the monolinguals.

One of the earliest studies on literacy and TLA, conducted by Wagner, Spratt, and Ezzaki (1989), reached the conclusion that L1 illiteracy does not negatively affect L2 or L3 literacy. In this case the L1 was Berber, the L2 Arabic and the L3 French; the study took place in Morocco.

Their findings led them to recommend against teaching children to read in their L1 as it would be an unnecessary burden on the economy of the country and on the population who for the most part spoke a language without a written system (1989, as cited in Sanz, 2000:24). This was the only study in this review that observed speakers of a language without a writing system and speakers who were, therefore, not established literate monolinguals. It was also the only study to recommend against literacy in the L1. However, it seems this recommendation was motivated by the difficulty and expense of undertaking the task. The majority of the current studies disprove the notion that literacy in the L1 negatively impacts third language acquisition.

One of the problems with comparing these studies is that they were not conducted in the same manner: Wagner et al.'s 1989 study was longitudinal and most of the others were cross-sectional. The studies also looked at different linguistic abilities, different groups and ages of people, and different languages. It is also difficult to distinguish between the effects of literacy, in and of itself, and the effects of metalinguistic awareness on language acquisition. However, Swain et al.'s study did isolate biliterates from bilinguals and found that the link to more efficient L3 acquisition is biliteracy not bilingualism. It is clear from these studies that literacy and metalinguistic awareness, both in the first and subsequent languages, help the learner produce language. The results show biliterates obtain higher levels of proficiency in a third language and that literacy in the native language has a positive effect and is essential for successful subsequent language acquisition. The pedagogical implication that should be drawn from this analysis is that literacy should be reinforced in the L1 and then in each subsequent language.

Suggestions for Promoting Literacy

- Understand the importance of literacy
- Foster linguistic skills in L1
- Reading promotes reading (Krashen, 1993)
- Storytelling has a direct positive impact on literacy (Krashen, 1993).
- Familiarity, repetition and frequency are the best factors in maintaining literacy skills; good readers read a lot, whatever their language(s) (Ellis, 1994).
- Most schools that teach multiliteracy skills encourage a strong foundation in the mother tongue before the child learns literacy skills in a second or third language (Belgium, Switzerland, Sweden).
- Understanding the function of literacy in one's first language is a critical step to successful acquisition of subsequent languages. Teach literacy skills in the native language first (Tokuhama-Espinosa 2001).
- Be a model: learn or learn something about your heritage language, discuss with students.

Schwarzer, Haywood, & Lorenzen (2003) have several suggestions:

- Assess literacy in the first language by listening to students read (even if you don't understand the language you can tell if the student is reading fluently). Even if students are inventing meaning from text this creative invention is a positive sign of literacy development.
- Change focus from maintaining native language (NL) literacy outside of school to fostering w/in curricula
- Change perception of duality in language learning (school is for English, home is for Eng. + NL)
- Find peers and mentors in other languages for yourself and your students
- Use students as resources of their languages
- Use NL as a resource in the classroom to enhance curriculum
- Create a multiliterate print environment: use calendars, posters, books, etc. in a variety of languages
- Use environmental print in multiple languages: Newspapers, bottles, product labels
- Use NL authentic materials with authentic audiences for authentic purposes
- Promote policy and attitude changes toward heritage literacy maintenance
- Direct instruction and interactive instruction have shown to be much more effective than process-based instruction: emphasize specific reading strategies.

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