How literacy emerges: foreign language implications

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Reading and writing well in a foreign language can be special challenges for many students (Alderson, 1984). Yet literacy (reading and writing) is often essential to students' growth for many reasons, including academic advancement, professional success, and personal development. Other benefits also accrue from inclusion of literacy activities in foreign language instruction. Literacy activities can enhance not only students' reading and writing development, but listening and speaking development as well (Elley and Mangubhai, 1983; Hafiz and Tudor, 1989). Additionally, well-known cognitive outcomes of fluency in two or more languages, such as enhanced divergent thinking and creativity (Bain, 1974; Duncan and De Avial, 1979; Hakuta, Ferdman, and Diaz, 1987; Nystrand, 1989), appear to be more pronounced when reading and writing are required in conjunction with listening and speaking instruction (Cummins, 1984; Hakuta, Ferdman, and Diaz, 1987).

Recent research on the foundations of literacy, or the conditions under which reading and writing develop, suggests that students learning a foreign language might benefit from particular sorts of reading and writing involvement. In this article, I explain a new view of how literacy emerges in native languages and discuss implications for foreign language classrooms. (The terms, 'emerge,' 'acquire,' and 'learn,' are used interchangeably in this article, which is consistent with literacy educators' use, but inconsistent with some foreign language educators' distinctions between acquisition as naturally-occurring development and learning as development more clearly associated with instruction (q.v. Krashen, 1982).

Emergent literacy: a new view

For many years educators thought that learning about reading started during first grade for most children. Even into the 1950s some psychologists suggested that children could not learn to read until they had a mental age of about six-and-one-half years. By and large, educators tended to think that writing capabilities emerged to some very limited extent during the elementary grades.

The launching of Sputnik in 1957 and the introduction of the space age in the 1950s and 1960s marked a dramatic shift away, from maturational theories and toward nurturing reading (but still not of writing). The notion, 'reading readiness,' was born. It referred to a period of time, usually during kindergarten, when 'prerequisite' reading skills might develop.

In the 1970s and 1980s, views of early literacy development changed again. Marie Clay (Clay, 1972, 1975) coined the term, 'emergent literacy,' and a new vision of reading and writing acquisition grew, gaining both popular and empirical support. The new view was spurred by two significant contemporary occurrences. First, psychologists and educators were moving from behaviourist to cognitivist understandings of learning and development. Second, there was renewed interest in the very early life years as a critical stage in human development.

Research pointed to the preschool years as formative and foundational for all development and to children as active participants (rather than passive recipients) in language learning, hypothesis generation, and problem solving (Teale and Sulzby, 1986). Consequently, researchers focused closer attention on aspects of literacy acquisition during the preschool years.

The ensuing conclusions from emergent literacy research cast doubt on many former beliefs about reading and writing acquisition in native English. They also lead to instructional suggestions and guidelines for helping literacy development of second-language learners which may in many cases differ from previous practices and recommendations. Some of the most important major conclusions of research on emergent literacy are the following.

Literacy develops long before children begin school

The former notion that listening and speaking proficiencies are prerequisites to learning to read and write is now viewed as a misconception. Rather, literacy begins in infancy, along with listening and speaking. In advance of learning to recognise words, use phonics, and so on, children first learn why people read and write, and they learn characteristics of what reading and writing are (Kontos, 1986). That is, reading and writing acquisition originate with learning about the *functions* of literacy and about selected *characteristics* of how reading and writing happen. Examples of functions that young children learn about are that literacy occurs in real-life settings to get things done for entertainment or pleasure. Learning about reasons for reading and writing is as much a part of learning to read as are being able to pronounce written words and knowing about letter/sound relationships (Teale, 1986).

An example of learning about a characteristic of reading and writing is *print awareness*, or knowing that printed words and letters are unique symbols which are different from pictures, objects, or numbers. Print awareness is acquired gradually through the early years of life (Clay, 1979; Ferreiror and Teberosky, 1982; Huba & Kontos, 1985).

An especially important point about early literacy development is that in the beginning children focus on 'big things,' such as creation of meaning through texts that are drawn, scribbled, and written. 'Small things,' such as spelling and punctuation develop gradually with more extensive literacy experiences.

Children learn about reading and writing through activity in their social world

Children develop literacy knowledge in much the same way that they develop listening and speaking knowledge, that is, through social interactions with others around them, especially their caregivers (Hall, 1987; Heath, 1982). One way that very young children learn about reading and writing is through artifacts in their environment that have print on them. Printladen homes and communities are filled with a variety of literacy artifacts. Some are artifacts on a child's level, such as alphabet blocks, storybooks, and T-shirts with words on them (Smith, 1983). Some have a functional purpose in the immediate environment, such as newspapers, McDonald's signs, and STOP signs (Smith, 1983). Some artifacts are context-free, meaning the words stand alone and are unrelated to their immediate environment (e.g., some words on T-shirts); some are context-dependent, meaning the words are related to what's around them (e.g., McDonald's sign, cereal box labels).

Another way children learn about literacy in their social world is through participating in literacy interactions and events. Through social interactions in a literate environment, students can acquire a broad base of knowledge about reading and writing (Goodman, 1986; Nystrand, 1989). Just as listening and speaking develop through participation in oral conversations with more expert conversants, literacy develops through participation in literate exchanges with other novices and proficient readers and writers. Such apprenticeship experiences are vital to the course of early literacy development in native languages.

Examples of such interaction are: directing children's attention to a can label, storybook sharing, and reading junk mail together (Heath, 1982; Strickland and Taylor, 1989). Children also learn

about literacy by observing role models, for example, older children and adults, reading and writing (Baghban 1984; Greaney, 1986; Morrow, 1983, 1989). Examples of literacy role-modeling are: Finding television shows in the *TV Guide*, making grocery lists, writing in an appointment book, and leaving notes for family members.

Children develop literacy knowledge as active participants

Children learn about literacy as active participants, not passive recipients. Through literacy interactions and observations, children formulate hypotheses about written language that are modified or affirmed through subsequent print interactions (Hall, 1987). For example, during shared storybook reading, children begin to hypothesise about aspects of print such as how to hold a book, directionality when reading, and selected conventions of stories like 'Once upon a time' (Kontos, 1986; Teale, 1984).

Reading and writing develop concomitantly

The former notion that reading precedes writing is a misconception (Teale, 1987). Learning about writing can also begin in infancy, far younger than previously thought. Initially, children understand that they can draw objects. Next they discover that they can draw pictures that 'tell stories' or that they can talk about. Soon they 'draw' letters and words, scribbling letter-like squiggles. These scribblings begin to resemble written forms in the native language. For example, young Arabic children's pre-alphabetic 'writing' can have a distinctly Arabian appearance, whereas young American children's pre-alphabetic 'writing' may look like English forms (Harste, Woodwar, and Burke, 1984). Eventually, children start to use 'invented spellings' which have been shown to evolve through reliable stages, finally ending with standard orthography (Read, 1971).

Children tend to learn about functions and conventions of print, not of reading and writing separately. They do learn about differences between reading and writing, but there is 'substantial evidence of a dynamic relation between the two, indicating that each influences the other in the course of development' (Teale, 1987, p. 46).

Implications for foreign-language classrooms

Research indicates that reading processes in a second language probably are not significantly different from those in a first language (Alderson, 1984; Cziko, 1978; Wode, 1980). The same is also likely to be true for writing, though less evidence is available (Ammon, 1985; Edelsky, 1986; Hudelson, 1987). Consequently, findings from emergent literacy research on children learning to read and write in native languages have implications for how teachers might structure classrooms to enhance development of second-language literacy abilities.

The guidelines and activities which follow emanate directly from what is currently known about emergent literacy in native languages (primarily English). Many of the suggestions focus on the sociocultural nature of literacy and revolve around reasons for reading and writing. As the following guidelines are read, two additional factors should be remembered. One is that, for students from early elementary grades through adulthood, initial reading and writing in a second language may be slow and arduous because of lack of fluency and automaticity with key processes such as word recognition and vocabulary meaning; the other is that students may have limited background knowledge for specific content, language structures, and text structures in the new language (q.v. Carrell and Eisterhold, 1988).

The following guidelines do not constitute a complete curriculum. Instead, they offer a framework for literacy learning in most foreign language classroom settings with young children through adults, and generally speaking, whether the students are already literate in another language or not.

Immerse students in literacy situations at the earliest possible time

Some sort of reading and writing activity should be initiated as soon as possible. It is not necessary to withhold reading and writing until students have considerable fluency in listening and speaking. Nor is it necessary to withhold writing until considerable reading proficiency is established.

The most important principle in relation to early introduction of reading and writing is to devise and make available tasks that are always adapted to the learner's level in the new language. Entry-level students with a limited vocabulary of only a few words can begin to develop literacy in the new language if the texts they read and write are very short and highly simplified. As students' knowledge grows, texts can gradually become longer and more complex.

Provide an abundance of literacy artifacts

Have in the students' environment lots of reading materials on appropriate levels, that is 'beginner' materials for entry-level learners and more advanced materials for others. Such materials should be visible and accessible. In addition to typical library texts, everyday texts in the second language should be accessible, texts such as telephone books, menus, cookbooks, magazines, grocery lists, and notes. Likewise, teachers may want to have special writing centers with paper and writing implements such as pens, pencils, tape, and scissors.

Involve students in literacy situations as apprentices

Here are some examples of ways that foreign language teachers can involve students in literacy situations as apprentices. One is through teacher-student dialogue journals (Dolly, 1990; Heath, 1982). Dialogue journals are written conversations that continue over an extended period. One person writes an entry in a spiral notebook and gives it to the partner at least once a week. The partner addresses questions and comments and then introduces new material. The student makes the first entry; the teacher's role is to converse, never to direct or correct.

Another way students can apprentice to literacy is through group reading and writing conferences. In conferences, students think and act as real (published) authors and critics think and act. Teacher-led group conferences on the students' own writing or on published writing of others have many benefits, such as helping students to learn how to revise their materials and how to critique what they read. Group conferences also induce the notion that writing and reading are social communicative acts, that is, writers write for readers and readers reach to authors through texts. In essence, conferences not only engender aesthetic appreciation of texts, they engage students in learning about some of the social functions of texts. Simultaneously, students' vocabulary, knowledge of syntactical structures, and knowledge of genre structures in the new language will develop through reader-writer interactions in the conferences. Following is a brief example of how to hold a teacher-led group writing conference (reference deleted for review):

(a) Students write.
(b) Later, a small group of four to eight students meets with the teacher and students take turns reading their own compositions aloud.
(c) After each student reads, the teacher asks three focal questions: 'What was the piece about?' 'What did you like about the piece?' and 'Do you have any comments, questions, or suggestions for the author?'
(d) Later, students are given an opportunity to revise their compositions.

A parallel type of conference focusing on reading the published texts of others might be (name deleted for review):

(a) A small group of four to eight students meets with the teacher and reads a text.
(b) After reading, the teacher asks the same three questions as in (c) above.

Create learning activities that capitalise on the interrelatedness of listening speaking and literacy

Listening, speaking, and literacy can be intertwined so that each is perceived to be a variant form of thinking and so that each can develop the other. Language Experience Activities (LEAs) (Stauffer, 1980) are good examples of ways to combine listening, speaking, and literacy. LEAs require learners to talk about their knowledge and/or experience on a topic, then either

write about it or dictate some material about it to someone else who writes it, and finally to read the material. For instance, in a beginning-level foreign-language class, the students might listen to some popular music from the target culture and then discuss it in the foreign language. The teacher could ask, for example, how the music was similar to, or different from, music the students most often listen to on radio stations of their choice. Guiding questions such as the following could lead the students: 'What did you think about the beat of the music:' 'Were there sounds from instruments that seemed unusual:' and 'How were the sounds and feel of the music similar to what you hear on your favourite radio station'. As students give ideas, the teacher could write their words or paraphrases on the chart, organising the chart around selected dimensions, such as 'tempo', 'melody', and 'types of instruments'. Students could also copy the writing as they build the text. Finally, students read the texts they have just written.

Focus on the 'big things' first (q.v. Nurss and Hough, 1992)

Students of a foreign language are likewise more likely to develop successfully as readers and writers if they initially focus on holistic features of language, that is, ones which revolve around communicative functions and intentions (q.v. Chaudron, 1988; Ellis, 1985; Kleifgen, 1985; Krashen, 1982; Ventriglia, 1982). Teachers who help foreign-language learners get the 'big things' first while reading and writing will highlight: getting and giving main ideas or gist; making important inferences; seeing and making structure (outlines) for texts; and developing self-regulating (or metacognitive) strategies such as rereading to search for needed information (q.v. Krashen, 1982). 'Small things' such as the following are not ignored, but are initially de-emphasized: getting and making details; using standard grammar, punctuation, and spelling; pronouncing correctly while reading; and using lower-level word recognition techniques such as phonics.

Encourage exploration and experimentation

Help students to be active participants in learning about literacy, seeking out new information, making hypotheses, and taking risks to try to figure out reading and writing. One way foreign-language teachers can facilitate such exploration in reading is frequently to regard errors in reading and writing as evidence of students' progress rather than as always undesirable. For example, if a student makes a mistake while reading orally, but the mistake doesn't have a highly detrimental effect on the meaning, the teacher might ignore the mistake. This allows readers to focus on meaning and to feel freer to take the risk of making a guess.

In writing, one way of encouraging experimentation and risk taking is to sometimes help students to work through several drafts of one composition. Considerable literacy knowledge can be gained in this way. Among other understandings, through drafting and revising, students learn to focus on and play with ideas and meaning in initial drafts, rather than worrying about grammar and surface features such as handwriting and spelling right away, and they discover that they can learn what they have to say through the act of writing.

Summary

The benefits of reading and writing well in a foreign language have been well documented. Recent research on how literacy emerges in native languages suggests that reading and writing develop concomitantly through social interactions in literate environments, long before schooling starts. Implications of emergent literacy research for foreign-language instruction include ideas about when reading and writing activities should be introduced, what sorts of literacy materials might be made available, what kinds of reading and writing tasks are likely to be most helpful, and what teachers should help novice foreign-language readers and writers focus on.

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