

Synthesis of Research on the Development of Reading and Writing in a Second Language

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The literature on ELs' reading and writing development reflects different theoretical perspectives related to ELs' acquisition, development, and use of language. The articles included in this synthesis represent different theoretical perspectives and their related conceptualizations of language. This review begins with an overview of the four major, long-standing leading perspectives in second language acquisition. The relevant leading perspectives are then used as a frame to categorize and understanding the vast body of literature in the field of study. The synthesis concludes with a description of the relationships between the relevant theoretical perspectives.

Snow (1992) and Dixon et al. (2012) synthesize the literature on Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Within these syntheses, the authors address common questions about SLA and how the process unfolds. The authors identify the four leading perspectives that influence the way the process of SLA is described and understood. These perspectives include: (1) Foreign Language Instruction; (2) Developmental; (3) Psycholinguistic; and (4) Sociocultural. This literature also offers an account of the histories and main ideas that characterize these perspectives. Foreign Language Instruction supports the idea that SLA is voluntary and results from formal classroom instruction. It emphasizes the use of correct grammar and vocabulary and is known for its development of second language proficiency assessments. The Developmental perspective gained prominence in the 1970s and is premised on the belief that the acquisition of a second language mirrors that of the first. According to this perspective, proficiency is evident in the speaker's ability to effectively communicate to perform tasks. The developmental perspective is known to identify cognitive and developmental issues related to SLA. The Psycholinguistic perspective views SLA as a unique kind of information processing where proficiency is

understood to be the effective processing of auditory stimuli, and the connection of words to their appropriate semantic representations. This perspective challenges the notion of a “native speaker” because everyone is always learning language. Lastly, the sociocultural perspective considers the social and cultural contexts of bilingualism including the relationship of second language learning to one’s social and cultural identity. From this perspective, proficiency is effective and socially appropriate communication. The literature synthesizing these perspectives relates to reading and writing development because it maps the perspectives that collectively describe the process in which reading and writing occurs. The literature explains that the research based on Foreign Language Instruction and Psycholinguistic perspectives focus on adult learners and lab-based observations respectively. Consequently, the Developmental and Sociocultural perspectives most relevant to the LOREL project. These two perspectives provide a frame to discuss the relevant literature in each of these two categories.

The Developmental Perspective

The literature that reflects the developmental perspective includes research on reading comprehension and writing and the linguistic complexity that relates to both reading and writing (Lanauze & Snow, 1989; Lesaux et al., 2008). One study (Proctor et al., 2005) developed a model to measure English reading comprehension for a sample of students who speak Spanish as a first language. The model developed accounted for students’ alphabetic knowledge, oral language fluency, listening comprehension and vocabulary knowledge in English. Snow (2008) describes these complexities as “cross-cutting themes” that pervade the development and acquisition of language. Overall, the literature shows a strong relationship between students’ oral language proficiency and reading comprehension. This suggests that, for these students

learning English as a second language, understanding written texts requires more than literal decoding and includes a range of literacy-based practices.

Additionally, the research on reading development in SLA explains how skills like oral language fluency are related to the skills necessary for reading comprehension (Leasaux et al., 2008; Proctor et al., 2005; Snow, 2008). This indicates that students' effectiveness in accurately reading the text included in an open response (OR) test item may be influenced by or contingent upon other language skills not typically taken into consideration when measuring and identifying reading tasks.

Within the Developmental perspective, the literature on writing examines the English writing abilities and techniques of young elementary school students learning English as a second language. Similar to the literature on reading development, it acknowledges oral language proficiency as the primary determinant of performance in a literacy task in a child's second language. Additionally, this literature reveals that literacy skills can be transferred between multiple languages with different orthographies and writing systems. This seems to indicate that writing skills in any language activate or are closely related to cognitive developmental processes (Snow, 2008). The research also indicates that, in some cases, writing performance can outstrip oral proficiency. The research examined students' writing, measuring factors like semantic information and language complexity (number of words, number of noun phrases, etc.). In doing so, it identifies these factors as important indicators of proficiency in writing. Spelling and grammar were also considered important contributors to successful writing. Collectively, these factors aim to capture the set of skills students need to master for writing proficiency.

The research on writing skills relates to writing development in SLA because it explains that writing performance can be impacted by other determinants like oral tasks. Interestingly, the

research findings that highlight the importance of grammar, spelling, and sentence structure describe a set of writing skills that are not necessarily required to correctly answer MCAS OR items. That said, students are often aware of basic writing conventions and the expectations that accompany them. This may complicate the task of writing if test takers believe their responses will be scored based on these expectations.

The Sociocultural perspective

This body of literature includes theories on biliteracy, research on the role of identity in relation to SLA, and the language ideologies that impact SLA (Dworin, 2003; Geisler, Escamilla, Hopewell, & Ruiz, 2007; Hopewell & Escamilla, 2014; Moll, Saez, & Dworin, 2001). Theories on biliteracy included in the research describe children's literacy abilities in more than one language (Dworin, 2003; Moll, Saez, & Dworin, 2001). The research on biliteracy theory and practice broadens the scope of existing research perspectives to understand how children's literacy skills in and across languages assist in the acquisition and development of a new language. Many of the biliteracy studies discuss theoretical insights on biliteracy development. Biliteracy is a term used to describe children's literate competencies in two languages, to whatever degree, developed either simultaneously or successively (Dworin, 2003; Moll, Saez, & Dworin, 2001). In the field of literacy research, biliteracy has not traditionally been a topic of study, although biliteracy is a common worldwide phenomenon and is relevant to the study of how literacy is constituted in different contexts.

Biliteracy theory explains the variation in the reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills biliterate learners exhibit. This complicates the traditional assessments of bilingual learners because it challenges the idea that children's abilities in one language can or should be measured separately from their abilities in another. Though this represents a facet of the Sociocultural

perspective, it also aligns with the concepts of cross-cutting themes and the discussion of interrelated linguistics skills included in the Developmental perspective literature (Proctor & Silverman, 2011).

The Sociocultural literature on ELs' reading and writing development is distinct because it includes a discussion of the role of linguistic identities and experiences in SLA by examining the relationship between language and identity (Proctor & Silverman, 2011). From the perspective of this research, language develops as a product of a child's experiences and therefore reflects the child's identity. Shared experiences among groups can facilitate the way a language is shared. Words, phrases, and patterns of speech are often developed to describe concepts unique to a particular culture and experience. This literature describes the many cultured assets bilingual students draw on to develop their abilities across languages (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Jimenez, 2000; Moll, 2005).

There is a body of research within the Sociocultural literature that explains how different language ideologies can influence SLA. It describes how the language ideologies that characterize students' learning environments can promote bilingualism or can instead promote replacing the use of one language with the use of another (Snow & Kang, 2006; Soltero-Gonzalez, 2009; Soltero-González & Butvilofsky, 2015). Ideologies can promote bilingualism when they value both languages but they can threaten home language maintenance when a second language is held in higher regard. The process of developing literacy-based practices in a new language can vary based on the attitudes and beliefs peers and teachers communicate about a particular language. Students may be hesitant to speak in and draw from a language that is considered inferior and may be more inclined to acquire a second language if it is viewed favorably peers and teachers.

Overall, the literature grounded in the sociocultural perspective examines the writing behaviors of early elementary bilingual students who are learning to read, write, and speak in more than one language. Many studies in this section are concerned with instructional features that assess the effectiveness of bilingual programs or bilingual students' development of proficiency in English as a second language. The literature explains that many beliefs about literacy development in bilingual contexts are influenced by research conducted in monolingual settings and calls into question the assumption that literacy is always dependent upon bilingual children's progress in oral language ability (Dworin, 2011; Dworin & Moll, 2006; Goldenberg, Rueda, & August, 2008). It also addresses general assumptions made and disseminated through common and traditional research practices and describes how these practices fail to account for students' unique experiences (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez, & Chiu, 1999; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999).

A subset of this literature focuses on the intersections of language and the social context of schooling. It describes the classroom teacher's critical role and responsibility to acknowledge and incorporate students' experiences and languages into instructional practices (Moll, 2005; Moll et al., 2005; Moll et al., 2015). Students are said to bring their individual experiences to the classroom and use their command of one or more languages to construct knowledge. The literature also describes the unique and complex impact of students' home life on their academic experiences. It describes the nuances of life as they relate to language where language isn't simply considered a system of mechanical processes. Language is informed by and informs rich, lived experiences. The Sociocultural literature relates to ELs' reading and writing development because it supports the theory that, in some pathways for SLA, learning to

speaking, reading and writing in one's native language can provide a powerful scaffold for learning to read and write in a second language.

Looking across Perspectives: Interrelated Skills

The discussions of ELs' reading and writing development in the Developmental and Sociocultural literature are interrelated. Both bodies of research describe the importance of multiple linguistic skills in the development of ELs' reading and writing abilities. More specifically, a significant amount of the research across the theoretical perspectives emphasizes the importance of vocabulary knowledge including vocabulary comprehension, and cognate knowledge.

These studies collectively describe students' abilities to draw on one or more languages to identify words, their meanings, and their use. Carlo et al. (2004) describe vocabulary knowledge as a student's ability to attach an appropriate meaning or definition to a word. Most of the studies examining vocabulary knowledge, however, understand vocabulary knowledge to be more complex than this description implies. All studies describe the importance of vocabulary in understanding and using more than one language.

According to the research, vocabulary knowledge is not simply about how many words a student can attach meaning to (vocabulary breadth), but the many ways students can use nuanced definitions of a term across different contexts (vocabulary depth) (Proctor et al., 2011). Many assessments measure vocabulary knowledge based on the number of words students can define, but some scholars caution that this rote practice doesn't account for the range of uses a word can have in the texts students typically encounter.

The research on cognate knowledge (Dressler et al., 2011) describes students' abilities to identify similar word parts between words and across languages. Students can use these

identifications to make meaning of unfamiliar words. It is believed that students who know and understand more than one language can use their word knowledge in one language to inform their word knowledge in the other language when they come across such language cognates.

This literature relates to reading and writing development because students' ability to read and write is influenced by their ability to understand and use different words in specific ways. Many OR items use the same words to instruct students and provide information but the words are often used in different ways. According to the research cited above, students are better equipped to comprehend a given text when they are familiar with a word's multiple uses.

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