

A Paucity of L2 Learning Strategies among Preliterate Learners - A Case Study

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Abstract

Studies have demonstrated the importance of literacy in the first language for students' full development of proficiency in the language of instruction and subsequent academic success. (Collier, 1992; Hakuta, 1986; Snow, 1990). Furthermore, studies have consistently indicated that academic and linguistic skills transfer to the second language, even in the case of languages with dissimilar writing systems (Au, 1993; Cummins, 1991; Ovando & Collier, 1998). Learners who are preliterate can vary widely in their experience of literacy, and these different experiences may influence their approach to language and literacy learning. This paper examines the strategic disadvantage of preliterate learners with special focus on one such group, the 'Patkar' learners.

Firstly the main advantages of learners' L1 literacy are presented. Selected studies on the effect of L1 literacy on L2 learning provide insights into aspects of transfer. Finally the situation of learners from one such preliterate community, the Patkar community is discussed.

Key words: Literacy, learning strategies, preliterate learners, transfer

Introduction

Literacy skills both reading and writing are critical skills for students all over the world. Educators Grabe and Stoller (2002) assert, "As we enter a new century, productive and educated citizens will require even stronger literacy abilities (including reading and writing) in increasingly larger numbers of societal settings" (p. 1). However, most research on writing development has focused on learners who are literate in their first language. Very few studies have examined the L2 writing of preliterate learners. These learners come from diverse backgrounds and have widely differing experiences with literacy in their first languages. A number of factors influence the ways that learners' English literacy develops and the progress that different learners will make in learning to read and write in English. They include level of literacy in the first language and in English, oral language proficiency in English, educational

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background, personal goals for learning English, and the structure and writing system of the first language. These factors must be taken into account in all areas of teaching. This paper describes how one of these factors-literacy in the first language-can affect the development of the writing skill in English and the problems faced by preliterate learners with special focus on Patkar learners whose L1 does not have a script.

Literacy in the First Language

Huntley (1992) describes four types of literacy in the first language (L1) that affect English literacy development and should be considered in ESL literacy instruction: preliterate, nonliterate, semiliterate, and non-Roman alphabet literate. Birch (2002) adds to these types nonalphabet literate.

Preliterate learners come from cultures where literacy is uncommon in everyday life because the language is not written, has only recently been written, or is being developed. Preliterate English language learners often have had little or no exposure to written text and may not be aware of the purposes of literacy in everyday life. They generally progress slowly in literacy and other language instruction and require re-teaching of skills and concepts (Robson, 1982; Strucker, 2002).

A Preliterate Society is a society where few people can read or write and there is little or no tradition of literacy and literature use. The group may be geographically scattered or isolated, and small in number. The group lacks a written language or has just recently had its language put into written form. There is little or no formal education available to most children. There are very few literates in any language (less than 5 percent of the population).The group may be geographically scattered or isolated, and small in number. The group lacks a written language or has just recently had its language put into written form.

Literacy and Bilingual

Literacy is consistently associated with educational success and achievement. There is no shortage of research evidence that a sound foundation in the first language - spoken and written - creates the best conditions for the acquisition of a second language. Studies have demonstrated the importance of literacy in the first language for students' full development of proficiency in the language of instruction, subsequent academic success, and high levels of self-confidence

(Collier, 1992; Hakuta, 1986; Snow, 1990). Furthermore, studies have consistently indicated that academic and linguistic skills transfer to the second language, even in the case of languages with dissimilar writing systems (Au, 1993; Cummins, 1991; Ovando & Collier, 1998). Even when the vocabulary, grammar, and orthography differ, a whole range of skills in decoding and reading strategies transfer from the first language to the second. Two studies suggest that either previous or simultaneous acquisition of L1 literacy can have a positive impact on English literacy development among these populations. Robson (1982), in a study of Hmong learners of English at a refugee camp in Thailand, found that adults with minimal literacy in Hmong acquired English reading skills more rapidly than those who had no Hmong literacy. Similarly, a study of adult Haitians learning English in New York City (Burtoff, 1985) found that those who received native language literacy instruction while learning English developed stronger literacy skills in the L2 than did the English-only group.

When children are not literate in their native language they struggle with reading and writing in English. Many preliterate learners approach English literacy learning with trepidation. They need to be given opportunities to increase their self-confidence in educational situations and to develop positive images of themselves as readers and writers.

Learners who are literate in some writing system have the advantage of experience with deciphering and assigning meaning to print and using print to enhance their learning. Learners, who are non-alphabet literate, read a language that is written logographically, such as Chinese and Japanese. These learners may try to read in English by memorizing whole words. Learners who depend on whole word recognition to the exclusion of phonological decoding will not become proficient readers in alphabetic languages.

Non-Roman alphabet literate learners read in a language that uses a non-Roman alphabet, such as Hindi or Tamil, but that is still phonetically based. These learners have the advantage of being accustomed to reading with an alphabet, but they may struggle to find words in the dictionary and may need time to process written materials presented in class because the orthography of their L1 is different from that of English. Urdu students learning to read in English are likely to have problems with directionality issues. (Their alphabet reads right to left; the Roman alphabet, left to right) Strategies that these learners may have developed to read Urdu may not work as well in English reading and spelling. Students who are literate in a Roman alphabetic language (e.g., Spanish or French) like those literate in a non-Roman script or in a logographic script ,have already developed literacy skills and formed reading behaviors in their

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L1. They know that written language can represent speech. Their educational background and literacy skills may be an important part of their self-image. They can study English texts, take notes in class to learn new vocabulary or structures, and read outside of class. Previously learned reading strategies, learners' experiences and access to literacy, and the nature of their L1 written language contribute to the speed and ease with which learners will acquire L2 literacy.

Does L1 Literacy Transfer To L2 Literacy?

Empirical research in the 1970s and 1980s has led to more persuasive evidence for the importance of transfer in all subsystems. A rather large number of studies comparing phonology, morphology, grammar and discourse of learners with different native languages indicate acquisition differences attributable to cross-linguistic influence (e.g., Schachter and Rutherford, 1979; Ringbom, 1987). And with the growth of transfer research, researchers have conducted interesting studies in this field exploring new approaches to it. Master (1987) and Mesthrie and Dunne (1990) have compared how learners with two or three native languages behave regarding to language structure that can be found in one native language but not in other, whereas Murphy (2003) and Wei (2003) have given interesting ideas of how transfer interacts with linguistic as well as cultural, social and personal factors in second language learning and use. The samples of evidence for transfer have been rising, and the empirical support for the importance of cross-linguistic influences on all linguistic subsystems is nowadays extremely firm.

However, the question of transferability of literacy skills is in large measure related to how literacy is defined. Definitions which limit literacy to encoding/decoding skills and functional abilities generally involve rather low-level skills and are generally agreed to transfer. These include prereading skills of directionality, sequencing, ability to distinguish shapes and sounds, and knowledge that written symbols correspond to sounds and can be decoded in order and direction (Lessow-Hurley, 1990). Evidence for the transfer of these kinds of literacy skills is abundant. Gudschinsky (1977) discusses programs in Peru, in Mexico, and in the highlands of Vietnam, where L1 literacy promoted L2 literacy. Robson (1981, cited in Penfield, 1986) found that Hmong refugee adults who were already literate in their L1 were more successful in acquiring English in the classroom. Goodman & Goodman (1978; in Mace-Matluck, 1982) found that elementary grade Spanish, Arabic, Samoan, and Navajo students learned to read English more easily if they were literate in their first language than if they were preliterate bilinguals. Most studies investigate cross-language relationships on the basis of one of two

theoretical orientations: The contrastive analysis hypothesis (Lado, 1964) and the interdependence hypothesis (Cummins, 1978, 1979).

Contrastive analysis involves analyzing a learner's first and second language to identify similarities and differences. According to the CA Hypothesis, second-language errors will be made when the structures in the second language differ from those in the first language; and facilitation will be apparent when the languages are similar. In the second theoretical orientation, the interdependence hypothesis, Cummins (1981, 2000) has postulated that acquisition of first and second languages is interdependent, that is the development of first language can influence and facilitate development of the second. Cummins distinguishes between language for academic and higher order cognitive purposes (CALP) and language for day to day interpersonal communication (BICS). These constructs are distinguished by the extent of contextual support and cognitive demands. Cummins (2000) hypothesizes that "academic proficiency transfers across languages such that students who have developed literacy in their first language will tend to make stronger progress in acquiring literacy in the second language" because these academic language skills are developmentally linked to common underlying proficiencies across the languages.

Transfer of Strategies in Writing

In the school setting, writing plays two distinct but complementary roles. First, it is a skill that draws on the use of strategies (such as planning, evaluating, and revising text) to accomplish a variety of goals. Second, writing is a means of extending and deepening students' knowledge; it acts as a tool for learning subject matter. Effective writing instruction acknowledges that the smooth deployment of the higher-level writing strategies needed to plan, generate, and revise text depends on easy use of lower-level skills such as handwriting, keyboarding, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and access to appropriate vocabulary. It will be harder for students to utilize strategies to write a coherent summary or persuasive essay if they are not fluent in the lower-level skills. At the same time, students who have difficulty with either lower-level writing skills or higher-level writing strategies will find it difficult to learn to write.

Errors can provide 'important evidence for the strength and weakness of a particular native language influence' (Odlin 1989:23). They contain valuable information on strategies that learners use to acquire language and can play an important role in the study of foreign languages (Richards 1974, Dulay and Burt 1974).

Research in second language settings has frequently investigated strategy use of students engaged in language study. Most studies that have compared L1 and second language (L2) writing have found that there are similarities among the strategies used for the two processors. Both English as a second language and Foreign Language studies point to a transfer of writing strategies from L1 to L2 writing, particularly for planning and revision. Studies also show that the transfer from students L1 to their L2 writing affects the quality of their L2 writing. Although there have been several studies examining the use of writing strategies used by learners with scripts in their first language there have been few that have explored the writing strategies adopted by learners who belong to preliterate communities whose L1 has not been coded. At the same time it is clear that L2 processing is different from L1 processing.

It is hypothesized that preliterate learners could be at a strategic disadvantage when it comes to composing in L2. This could affect the writing of such learners. There could be several compensatory strategies for dealing with second language learning issues facilitating L1 composing process transfer in preliterate L1 learners. Gaining some insight into the awareness of writing strategies as related to their developing experience in writing and their English language proficiency levels may help us understand the process by which they succeed in writing for their academic exams etc.

Based on these assumptions the following research question was formulated.

To what extent does the lack of literacy (code) in L1 relate to the overall writing quality in L2?

Methodology

The present study involves learners from preliterate societies in the south of India. The participants in this study are English language learners (ELL's) from an English medium school in Hubli in the state of Karnataka, India. This school was chosen as at least 50% of the learners are from the 'Patkar' community which is a preliterate society. These learners receive 45 minutes of English language instruction five times a week. 9th class students were chosen because previous research has shown that students in intermediate grades are aware of the strategies they use to construct meaning during

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the composing process. (Langer 1986).

Research for this study was carried out during the participants' English class hour. Students were asked to write a descriptive essay on 'About Myself'. The essay was then scored on multiple dimensions including overall quality, linguistic and systematic complexity, textual variety, semantics, productivity and spelling. The instruments employed to capture the subjects' writing strategies were one to one interviews with each subject and the analyzing of essays written by them. The responses related to writing strategies pertaining to the writers' problem-solving and decision-making about focus, language use and composing processes. The essays were then rated by two raters, one the researcher and the other rater was a teacher who taught them. The interviews of the thirty students were conducted by the researcher. Students were asked about their language learning background, their school background, their current learning situation and their use of English outside class time.

Questions were asked in both English and in the students' L1, the Patkar language. There was no need for an interpreter as the researcher belonged to the Patkar community. The subjects' comments on their activities are probably more authentic and less structured than their answers on a formal Questionnaire would have been. Though essays were administered to the whole class due to time constraints only 30 students were interviewed.

The essays of students were analyzed using the criteria of meaning, form and convention. It was found in more than half the essays that meaning was not always clear on the first reading. Language was repetitive. Most of the learners writing was ridden by frequent errors associated with verb tenses, pluralization, and agreement. There was inconsistent use of articles and pronouns. Frequent spelling errors were made. The topic addressed was limited by the restricted known vocabulary. In most essays the output was very short. Most of the essays used simple present tense in short sentences. Some learners wrote mostly phrases (fragments).

Discussion

The research question in this study was concerned with the importance that a learner's native language has in written production in L2. As observed the learners in this study fall short of minimal performance that the students of class 9 must demonstrate. Thus their performance was significantly below grade level. Typically students' personal writing will be at a higher level than their content/academic writing. But as they don't ever use the language for personal writing

their academic writing remains dismally poor. The difficulties faced by these learners in their writing were evident in the numerous errors they produced in their compositions. Preliterate learners seem to require some intensive customized support. Typically students at lower levels require more instructional support than students at higher levels. But preliterate learners will require teachers not only to be sensitive to language needs but also to provide language for learning subject-specific content.

Conclusion

Literacy development in an L2 will always be a complex endeavor. While it is always in the learner's best interest to have a well grounded knowledge of L1 literacy, it must be kept in mind that the skills that learners bring from their L1 may not always relate directly to L2 literacy. In order for teachers to be able to teach students effectively, they must have knowledge of the background surrounding English language learners, the theories that provide the background for support of instruction, and strategies for development. If children are made to operate in the classroom in a poorly developed second language, the quality and quantity of what they learn from complex materials and produce in oral and written form may be relatively weak. Academic knowledge and literacy skills that second language learners have in their first language (L1) are strong determiners of L2 proficiency. However preliterate learners' oral traditions also can provide the scaffolding required for effective learning to occur. A better understanding of the interactions of other factors involved in writing, not only linguistic but also cultural, social and personal factors that interact with transfer will enable more effective teaching on the part of teachers.

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