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Learning to Read Across Languages: Cross-Linguistic Relationships in First- and Second-Language Literacy Development

Keiko Koda and Annette M. Zehler (Eds.) (2008)

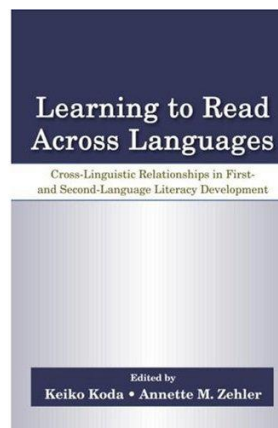
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Keiko Koda and Annette M. Zehler have put together an informative introduction to the issues involved in the learning of reading and writing in both first and second languages. *Learning to Read Across Languages* is an extension of a federally-funded project to research literacy practices in various languages with non-roman-based writing systems. The results are quite informative in that they reveal not only educational practices in different cultures, but also the importance of literacy practices. Divided into two parts, the articles cover both introductory principles in understanding the relation of written and oral language, as well as an in depth coverage of five languages commonly found in immigrant populations in North America.

Part One concerns itself primarily with introductory material to help the reader understand what the learner must master in order to achieve any sense of literacy. Topics include writing systems, metalinguistic awareness, and L1 literacy as a springboard to L2 literacy. This section is most informative for advanced students, but it may also help practitioners in the field as a handy guide to reading primary research. Part Two provides an in-depth analysis of the literacy processes in Arabic, Chinese (only simplified characters are used), Hebrew, Khmer, and Korean. Each article is presented in the same fashion which aids the reader in finding pertinent information.

Chapter Two provides a good background in understanding variations in writing systems of the world. Charles Perfetti and Susan Dunlop begin with the theory that each writing system provides representation of some phonological level whether phoneme or syllable. From this basis, they progress to discuss cross-linguistic relationships involved in learning other writing systems which may or may not use similar strategies to express phonological units. General distinctions between systems are introduced through figures and descriptions, both of which are a help to those readers who are not yet aware of the variety of writing systems around the world. When distinct languages use similar systems, there is a question of transparency or ability to map one-to-one correspondences between phonemes or syllables and orthographic characters. Such

issues are then further discussed as barriers for adults who are learning an additional language as well as a new writing system, such as Chinese speakers learning English.

Chapter Three discusses various factors and concepts in describing metalinguistic awareness, albeit not with the intent of defining the term per se, but rather to inform the reader of the many-faceted sides of the issue. By examining different aspects of metalinguistic awareness, Li-jen Kuo and Richard C. Anderson provide a deeper glimpse into just what is necessary to describe what a speaker of an additional language knows to perform well in either language. They advocate an understanding of just what is tested when studies in cross-linguistic awareness are conducted. They provide a good explanation of each area of awareness including phonology, semantics, morphology, syntax, grapho-phonology, and grapho-morphology. This information can help the researcher wanting to compare literacy studies for depth and understanding of the issues of L2 literacy.

In Chapter Four, Koda blends the issues discussed in the previous chapters to provide a framework to explain how L1 literacy can affect L2 literacy. By combining the theory of a universal mapping principle as mentioned in Chapter Two and the metalinguistic awareness as outlined in Chapter Three, she describes the *transfer facilitation model*, wherein the learner applies techniques used in the L1 to negotiate the printed text. In this model, transfer is not static but rather dynamic in that it continues through the learner's L1 and L2 literacy acquisition processes. Through an increase in exposure to L2 text, a learner continues to gain knowledge about the structure and conventions in the L2. Only then can reading become more fluent in the L2.

The five remaining chapters focus on five diverse languages and their writing systems. Before continuing to these chapters, the editors insert a section which includes a brief glossary of technical terms important to understanding the remaining chapters. While inclusion of such a section shows great audience awareness on the part of the editors, placing it at the end of the book would have been more practical.

Each language chapter is presented in a similar form. An introduction to each language, its speakers, and orthographic forms are given. Depending upon the language, more or less space is given to describe orthographic forms. Remarkably, the chapters about Hebrew and Khmer do not contain any samples of the written script, only transcriptions. Metalinguistic awareness needs are also discussed, including what children are taught and in what manner they learn to read. Finally, each chapter concludes with an outline of the challenges speakers of each language face in learning to read in English.

Each chapter is carefully written by authors who are either L1 speakers of each language or are well known for their knowledge of the language in question. Even if the reader has some knowledge of the language, the discussions concerning home literacy practices are most revealing. For reading teachers and adult literacy tutors who work with students from these language backgrounds, these chapters are precise in presenting possible difficulties, in the sense of contrastive analysis, as well as providing social information about the role of the written word in each culture. In this sense, the information presented can help shape pedagogical practices.

As a L2 literacy doctoral student, I found the book to be very informative in regard to the later chapters dealing with specific languages. The authors of these chapters have provided detailed reference lists to allow the reader to gain greater insight. This is especially true with the chapter about Korean in which the author provides a very lengthy list of references to help the reader know where to find more information. The chapter about Khmer, spoken in Cambodia, is less detailed, but the authors spend more time discussing the socio-cultural significance of the

language for immigrant populations, an issue of greater concern to instructors outside Cambodia. For readers with knowledge of various writing systems, the material in Chapter Two is more review than new insight.

In general, this book fills a gap in the literature in that it presents timely information concerning the processes involved in learning to read along with specific discussions about five diverse languages. As the book focuses more on understanding the cognitive processes of reading, it is better suited for graduate courses in literacy, especially second language literacy. By virtue of the book's format, it is very suitable as a reference guide to understanding reading processes in general as well as in an L2 context. I would wholeheartedly recommend this book to ESL teachers and graduate TESOL students for its introductory materials and lengthy reference lists.

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