

Literacy: Development and Enhancement across Orthographies and Cultures

2009, Springer.

Editors:

Dorit Aram (Ph.D.) Tel Aviv University, Israel

Ofra Korat (Ph.D.) Bar Ilan University, Israel

Preface

It has become increasingly clear that a country's prosperity and cultural progress largely depend on its level of literacy. Consequently, literacy enhancement has become a public issue that interests readers across the world. Integrating innovative insights from different perspectives, this book promotes cross-fertilization of ideas and practices and explores how we might provide children with stable literacy foundations.

For many years, the study of literacy development and enhancement was generally based on English language learners. This picture has changed dramatically in the last two decades, and today we benefit from the intensive work of researchers from different countries and languages. Worldwide research increasingly highlights the role of early literacy in young children's development and the increasing value of literacy in general development. Moreover, massive immigration around the world has increased the significance of studying bilingual literacy, acquisition of a second language, and foreign language learning. Researchers from different countries and cultures have studied the relationships between their languages' orthographies and the acquisition of literacy. In the 16 chapters included in this book, we bring together studies and thoughts of researchers from eight countries across the world, focusing on

literacy acquisition and advancement in Cantonese, Catalan, Chinese, Dutch, English, French, Hebrew, Kannada, Mandarin, Portuguese, and Spanish. The studies presented in this book employ a variety of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Some of these are naturalistic, while others are experimental. All of them aim to present a reliable picture of the state of the art in the arena of literacy development and enhancement. .

The chapters in this book are grouped into four parts: (A) Literacy Development, (B) Promotion of Literacy at Home and in School, (C) Bilingualism and the Acquisition of Second Spoken and Written Language, and (D) Beyond Literacy.

Part A consists of four chapters focusing on *Literacy Development*. It includes analyses of acquisition of phonological awareness, print awareness, letter knowledge, spelling, and writing. The studies in this section refer to the significance of these skills in different orthographies. In Chapter 1, Anna Both-de Vries and Adriana Bus explore the role of name writing in children's acquisition of alphabetic knowledge. The chapter presents a series of studies on early spelling in Dutch. The researchers assert that the first letter in their own name is the first letter that children write phonetically. They conclude that name writing functions as the stepping-stone to the alphabetic strategy. Chapter 2 by Sarah Robins and Rebecca Trieman also refers to the significance of children's own names in informal early literacy experiences among English-speaking children. They investigate the informal learning of surface features of writing (what letters and words look like) and deeper features of written language (the fact that print symbolizes spoken language). They conclude that informal learning about the surface and deep features of writing begins at an early age, and it can help prepare children for the formal reading and writing instruction at school. Chapter 3 by Cláudia Cardoso-Martins and Marcela Fulanete Corrêa centers on the development of

spelling skills among Brazilian Portuguese-speaking children. It explores the similarities in which English-, Hebrew-, and Portuguese-speaking children take advantage of their letter name knowledge to connect print to speech. The researchers conclude that Portuguese-speaking children rely on their letter names knowledge to spell words, and in this they resemble Hebrew- and English-speaking children.

Chapter 4 by Mary Ann Evans and Jean Saint-Aubin focuses on the development of print awareness. Using eye tracking methods, the researchers examine where children are looking during shared reading. The results indicate that during shared book reading children engage in minimal exploration of the print, and that their parents rarely draw their attention to it. The researchers suggest that print awareness may be developed by activities in which adults teach children to print letters and words and to learn letters and sounds as they take part in shared book reading. Although Hebrew letter names have been claimed to be less useful in supporting children's literacy acquisition, in Chapter 5, Iris Levin presents two studies that assessed the impact of the nature of Hebrew letter names on children's letter naming, letter writing and first letter isolation. Hebrew letter names (e.g., gimel for /g/) are longer than English letter names (di for /d/), and, unlike English, they incorporate sounds that are not relevant to the focal letter sound. Despite this, Levin found that they are highly effective cues in helping children to report, spell, and sound out letters within a word. The author concludes that letter names in Hebrew are more effective than in English. The fact that Hebrew letter names are relatively long does not limit their usefulness in promoting children's early literacy acquisition. Levin suggests that these results can be explained by the cacophonous nature of Hebrew letter names and the greater length of full name cues in Hebrew.

Part B, *Promotion of Literacy at Home and in School*, examines the sociocultural context of literacy acquisition. This section includes studies of storybook reading, parental beliefs about literacy practices, the influence of schooling practices, and the efficiency of literacy interventions. In Chapter 6, Susan Sonnenschein, Linda Baker, and Robert Serpel describe a five-year longitudinal investigation of children's literacy development in a sociocultural context. They provide the readers with an overview of cultural and environmental factors that are central to children's literacy development at home. This chapter studies parental beliefs, focusing on low- and middle-income families. The authors conclude that parental beliefs and children's home experiences make a significant difference in children's literacy development. Although low- and middle-income children had different home literacy experiences, the intimate culture of the home was a more powerful predictor of literacy development than demographic factors such as family income and ethnicity. In Chapter 7, Catherine McBride-Chang, Yvonne Chow, and Xiuli Tong focus within the home environment context on parent-child reading and writing activities. While Chapter 6 studies variations of home contexts in different socioeconomic status groups within one language, Chapter 7 provides data regarding home literacy practice in different orthographies and cultures. The authors define two major facets affecting children's literacy development. One is implicit and includes variables such as parents' educational levels or beliefs regarding literacy. The other is explicit and comprises parents' scaffolding of children's writing and shared book reading. The authors conclude that there are distinctive features in parent-child reading and writing activities that have a clear impact on children's language and literacy across cultures. Within the arena of literacy activities in Chapter 8, Monique Sénéchal centers on storybook reading. She asks what reading books to young

children does and doesn't do in children's language and literacy development. The chapter presents an overview of six studies. These studies show that the number of times, as well as the manner in which the adult reads to children, affect children's acquisition of comprehension and spoken vocabulary. The studies also provide evidence that children's vocabulary is a strong predictor of reading comprehension. To enhance language and literacy of preschoolers, Chapter 9 calls upon us to build a bridge between home and school. Linda Phillips presents a critical view about the ways in which researchers and educators sometimes perceive low socioeconomic status (SES) parents' attitudes regarding literacy education. In her chapter she describes a line of studies demonstrating the disconnection between teachers and parents. These studies show that parents from low SES do care deeply about their children's literacy development, and that educators occasionally overlook these parents' beliefs. She declares that it is critical to forge informed collaboration between homes and schools for the advancement of children from low SES background. The author presents a five-year longitudinal study of a project in the community. This project demonstrates effective ways of bridging between parents and teachers to the benefit of children. The last two chapters in this part relate to schoolchildren. Linnea Ehri and Julie Rosenthal in Chapter 10 provide an overview of studies of vocabulary acquisition, which plays a central role in reading ability and academic achievements. Vocabulary is traditionally studied in the context of oral language. Ehri and Rosenthal describe studies that have assessed the contribution that spelling makes to vocabulary learning in English. They conclude that the field of vocabulary learning and instruction has neglected an important skill that facilitates vocabulary growth – spelling. Concluding this part in Chapter 11, Frederick Morrison, Carol MacDonald Connor, and Annemarie Hindman present an innovative approach

toward effective reading instruction. This approach acknowledges the early individual differences among children in cognitive, language, literacy, and social skills and prescribes effective instruction that takes into account each child's characteristics. In accordance with their theories, the researchers developed an intervention program that assessed the children's literacy. Based on the child's scores, a computer program specified the amounts and types of instruction (i.e., teacher/child management and code/meaning focus) that a child should receive in order to reach his/her optimal level. The researchers report that children in the intervention group showed greater growth in reading skills than did children in the control group. In addition, the closer the instruction received by the child matched the duration and type of activity that the software recommended, the more children's reading skill grew over the year.

The four chapters of Part C, *Bilingualism and the Acquisition of Second Spoken and Written Language*, illuminate how different languages and orthographic systems affect children's literacy acquisition. Literacy acquisition in different languages puts distinct cognitive and metalinguistic demands on readers. These differences may be related to the specific typology of the orthography and to specific language features. On the other hand, common cognitive processes might underlie the reading process across languages. Chapter 12 by Malatesha Joshi presents an integration of two studies, exploring both commonalities and differences of literacy acquisition in different languages. In the first study, reading comprehension of monolinguals is shown, in English and Spanish alike, to be strongly explained by decoding and listening comprehension. But decoding contributed more to reading comprehension in English, the language with more opaque orthography. In the second study, an analysis was carried out on reading and spelling of three bilingual children: one with dyslexia, another with hyperlexia, and the third a normal reader. These children spoke English

and Kannada. Similar differences in decoding and comprehension emerged between the dyslexic and the hyperlexic children across the two languages, again showing commonalities between languages. Similarities and differences in second language acquisition were also studied by Liliana Tolchinsky. In Chapter 13 she describes a study that examined the effects of first language (L1) on the acquisition of the second language (L2). She compared morphological transformations in Catalan by children recruited from Moroccan and Chinese origins living in Spain. These two groups are particularly revealing because of the richer morphology in L1 of children originating from Morocco rather than China. Whereas the two groups exhibited similar levels of successful performance, they differed in the kind of mistakes they produced, reflecting the features of their L1. In the same vein, referring to similarities and differences of literacy acquisitions in different languages, Esther Geva and Dana Shafman in chapter 14 examine the development in morphology, oral comprehension, and vocabulary in Hebrew of English-speaking children. These first and second grade children studied Hebrew as a foreign language (HFL) for about two and a half hours a day, five days a week. The researchers found that grade 2 children had somewhat better vocabulary, morphological, and syntactic skills than their counterparts in grade 1. The researchers claim that vocabulary is significant for the emergence of basic morphological knowledge in HFL children. A follow-up study is presented in Chapter 15 by Orly Lipka and Linda Siegel. The authors show how a balanced literacy program, consisting of early literacy skills and language support, can close gaps in literacy knowledge between children of L1 and English as a Second Language (ESL) background. The children, who received a balanced literacy program in kindergarten, were followed from kindergarten to fifth grade. Whereas in kindergarten, L1 speakers outperformed their ESL counterparts on a wide range of

measures (phonological processing, syntactic awareness, memory for sentence and spelling), by grade 5, the same groups of children exhibited a similar level of literacy almost across the board.

Part D, *Beyond Literacy*, presents Chapter 16 by David Olson, who approaches the important issue of teaching. This chapter provides an overarching critical review of theories of teaching pedagogical theories. The author presents his own perspective on pedagogy, based on intentionality, responsibility, accountability, and the earning of entitlement. In Olson's words: "What one knows, understands, and infers is subordinated to one's ability to take on and successfully meet one's obligations." He calls for developing a new science of pedagogy. While this chapter has a broader perspective than usually met in literature on literacy, the examples utilized refer to teaching of literacy.

We would like to thank the authors of the chapters in this book for their dedication and scholarship and for their enthusiasm in contributing to a book dedicated to Professor Iris Levin. The research literature on the development and enhancement of literacy across orthographies and cultures is expanding. We hope that the ideas set forth in this book will stimulate researchers around the world to broaden this line of studies and include more languages and orthographies in different countries.

Dorit Aram

Ofra Korat