



English Foreign and Second Language Literacy Instruction for Chinese Speakers: Future Directions and Implications

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RETHINKING ENGLISH LITERACY ISSUES

English is widely taught as a foreign language (FL) or second language (L2) in kindergartens, primary schools, secondary schools, and universities throughout the globe. English literacy is high on the agenda in Chinese-Speaking contexts, where there is a lack of clarity about what knowledge should be taught and learned when English is a subject (Pine & Yu, 2012). EFL students have a low level of motivation and language attainment due to loss of engagement in learning (Xu, 2013). The inadequate effort provided to English learners to train them in literacy skills is not due to lack of concern on the part of educators, researchers,

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policy makers, classroom practitioners, or politicians. Instead, a combination of factors makes literacy development a conceptually difficult topic for English learners, particularly those in a context where English exposure is limited. Among these factors are: the dynamic and evolving policies related to EFL/L2 literacy, the fluidity of what it means to be literate depending on learning context and the tremendous diversity of learners, the controversial state of literacy research in general, and the insufficient and inconsistent research findings on EFL/L2 literacy processes and programs. This book may not be able to address all the inherent problems in EFL/L2 literacy instruction nor was it our aim for this book to do so. However, the contributors have attempted to address some of the emerging problems. These chapters have been written from the perspective of those that have firsthand contact with learners (i.e., classroom teachers) and by those that are actively involved in policy development or critique.

It is hoped that, this book, offering a balanced perspective on key issues facing literacy instruction for students at various levels of education, can act as a springboard to others interested in this area of research and practice. It has been our aim for the book to provide comprehensive, up-to-date, critical and authoritative ideas on the EFL/L2 literacy instructional practices for Chinese speakers. We hope this collection of studies and commentaries will become standard reading for teachers in training and serve as an inspiration to in-service teachers as they dip into the contents. By reading the chapters from each region, readers may begin to form a picture of the practices in each region, thereby gaining an awareness of key issues in English literacy development relevant to Chinese speakers. This collection provides a synthesis of research findings that encourages reflection on language policy so that we may begin to formulate probable responses to the demands of literacy instruction.

There are still challenges related to EFL/L2 literacy instruction to be taken on in the future. First, it should not be assumed that the concept of literacy has been watered down to only that of reading and writing—instead, it has been developed beyond this simple definition into a meaning-making enterprise. For example, students need different linguistic and knowledge (i.e., funds of knowledge) resources to comprehend and produce English texts. Second, one's first language (L1) influences reading-writing relationships, thus the connection between the two literacy skills and systems should also be highlighted (Carson, Carrell, Silberstein, Kroll, & Kuehn, 1990). L2 literacy research on

the transferability of skills across languages has remained inconclusive. Future research needs to reconceptualize EFL/L2 literacy in terms of learners' L1 background.

In summary, EFL/L2 literacy as an academic subject is a relatively recent arrival but has gained a prominent place in schools and universities. Learning to read and write is a laborious process, and it is the ability to read and write which makes a person *literate*, with varying degrees of fluency (Inglis & Aers, 2008). However, literacy cannot continue to only be defined as the ability to read and write. Thus, schools and universities are striving to reconceptualize L2 literacy for the twenty-first century and develop curriculum that corresponds to the need of promoting literacy as a basic subject. This speaks well for the need of this book. We are also looking forward to reading the future research that the contributors to this volume will produce and we encourage the authors to follow up this line of research. For example, there are chapters in the current volume that critique language and literacy policies especially in terms of how literacy has been or is being defined and how such policies are actualized in language classrooms by language teachers. Furthermore, Second-Language Acquisition (SLA) and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) have traditionally defined being literate in English as aiming for or adhering to native speaker norms; while some authors of the current edited volume also fall in line with this traditional notion of being literate in an L2, other authors tackle issues that have not been previously handled. These include whether native-like language acquisition is necessary to be literate in an L2. Lastly, what is arguably most appealing about the current volume is the practical approach taken to discuss major issues. Many of these issues are discussed from a bottom-up perspective, meaning many of the chapters deal with issues that are of immediate interest and importance to English language teachers. In other words, the issues of literacy instruction, language acquisition/instruction, English as a Medium of instruction (EMI) among others are being brought out of the ivory towers and into the hands of those that actually deal with them—teachers. We applaud such efforts.

REFLECTIONS ON THE ISSUES

The chapters in this book tackle eight main issues. First, literacy instruction should be focused on lexical knowledge and focused feedback. Development of reading and writing literacy is an active process,

which requires learners to continually acquire lexical knowledge (see Ma & Lee, Chapter 3) and formulaic language (see Ding & Reynolds, Chapter 7). Acquiring adequate lexical knowledge, including depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge, is essential to learners' capacity to function well in a reading literacy context (Teng, 2018a). Vocabulary and reading comprehension are multidimensional, incremental, context dependent, and develop in a connected relationship (Paris, 2005). Given that vocabulary knowledge is multifaceted (Teng, 2016, 2018b), students' comprehension of reading texts can become elusive (Shih & Reynolds, 2018). In addition, in response to rule-based and lexically-based errors, teachers' feedback as error correction can facilitate both grammatical and lexical acquisition (see Kao for Chapter 15). However, as argued by Bui and Yu (Chapter 8), teacher written comments may lose their effectiveness when such feedback is implemented too long before the next written draft is produced by learners. Teachers should give students encouragement during the whole writing process, especially when revising previously written drafts as students may easily lose motivation or become bored (Reynolds, 2016). Hence, if we believe that literacy development should involve the basic elements of reading and writing, then development of lexical knowledge and feedback practices is extremely important to build a solid foundation in reading and writing skills.

Second, development of content knowledge is essential to reading comprehension. EFL/L2 learners' intractable problems of poor reading comprehension are partly related to the lack of content knowledge (Shawna, 2014). Steady acquisition of content knowledge is the key to sufficient reading literacy and well worth the instructional adjustments and innovations in curriculum development (Shih & Reynolds, 2018). Reading literacy is dependent on the provisions of content knowledge for learners to make coherent sense of what is being read. Without content knowledge, EFL/L2 learners may get caught on partial details of a text. The learners can be distracted, and comprehension of the text can be disrupted. The understanding of content knowledge acts as a road map for learners, allowing them to not stray from the text. Once printed materials have been decoded into words, reading literacy requires learners' active construction through inferences made based on content knowledge explicitly or implicitly present in the text. However, in teaching content knowledge for improving EFL students' reading literacy, teachers tend to use bottom-up strategies. The use of bottom-up

processing, according to Wong (Chapter 12), should be cautiously applied, as students often overuse such strategies by mainly focusing on decoding every single word in a text. This is limiting in that their L2 reading and understanding of L2 texts remains much at the literal level.

Third, literacy involves multimodal, technological, and symbolic representations. Given the multiple dimensions of literacy, developing project-based learning activities are an important way of providing extensive practice outside the classroom. For example, as described in Lee (Chapter 17), the project of Book Builder, using technology, allowed learners to create and publish e-books. This project improved learners' ability to read and write, as well as their ability to adapt their reading and writing skills to become better prepared for future language learning requirements. Other activities, e.g., stories, songs, and games, can also increase students' interests and engagement in language learning. Becoming literate does not need to be mundane. As argued by Ng (Chapter 4), using stories, songs, and games can motivate students, particularly those at the pre-primary level, while they learn to listen and read in English because these activities activate multiple sensory channels in their brains. Other researchers and classroom practitioners also discussed activities for enhancing EFL students' literacy skills. For example, Lin, Shih, and Lee (Chapter 5) suggested teachers should tailor-make content and language integrated learning (CLIL) materials for improving primary school students' reading comprehension and writing ability. Chan (Chapter 6) also reported on how the Award Scheme on Instructional Design promoted by the Macau government has been instrumental in moving primary education toward a more student-centered pedagogy.

Fourth, writing assessment is an important topic in EFL/L2 literacy development. Assessing literacy has been an important topic for discussion and research, for which EFL/L2 teachers should cope with the changing and challenging demands to support learning. Assessment cannot be only for the evaluation of learning outcomes but also for the creation of learning opportunities. The development of assessment literacy requires teachers: (1) to have an understanding of what they are assessing, (2) accept that how they assess literacy should be based on the purpose or purposes for becoming literate in an L2, and (3) be comfortable with making learner assessment decisions (Inbar-Lourie, 2008). Assessment of literacy can be achieved through a sound understanding of the nature of assessment, providing assessment training and workshops, engaging in educational practices and innovation, and

making assessment resources available to language teachers (Coombe, Troudi, & Al-Hamly, 2012). However, we should also acknowledge the challenges of assessing literacy. The development of literacy assessment does not only concern teachers, but also policy makers, test developers, and school administrators. As proposed by Lam (Chapter 9), teachers are usually only on the receiving end of assessment reforms (e.g., assessment *for* learning and assessment *as* learning). Teachers are seldom encouraged to take initiatives to adopt a bottom-up approach to assessment innovations. There still remains a clear hierarchy among policy makers and in-service teachers. The way to bridging this gap seems rather elusive. Related to this, Ma (Chapter 16) suggested a need for continuous assessment, both summative and formative, which is related to the students' learning of academic English writing and learner self-regulation.

Fifth, there is a need to attend to the different aspects of reading programs or writing centers. Developing a reading program, as acknowledged by Moorhouse and Wong (Chapter 2), is challenging. For example, one difficulty is meeting students' specific needs and developing their abilities to adapt to the curriculum. Another challenge arises when students are given high-stakes assessments. When students receive the same instruction, they have to prepare for end-of-term tests. To address these types of challenges, teachers need more autonomy to determine what students should learn in class, and assessments should be more adaptable to reflect what was being taught in each classroom. However, teachers are often not empowered with adequate autonomy, and this becomes a difficulty when developing learner-centered reading programs. In a similar vein, developing a writing center can benefit university students but it can also be a challenging endeavor. For example, as acknowledged by Zhang (Chapter 14), the inherently unequal power dynamics between student writers and peer tutors as well as that between Chinese peer tutors and native English-speaking teachers might hinder students' learning to write in the L2. The main problem with developing a writing center is how the writing center directors can promote explicitly and repeatedly a respectful, egalitarian, and relaxing tone at their institutions to ensure that the writing center can reflect a safe and welcoming space for writing literacy learning rather than one where students feel isolated. The effectiveness of a writing center lies in a collaborative orientation characterized by scaffolding, negotiation, and discussion between student writers and tutors.

Sixth, we acknowledge the importance of becoming aware of the cultural knowledge and norms associated with literate language use. The importance of intercultural awareness, as suggested by Fang and Jiang (Chapter 13), reflects the value of researching cultural literacy, referring to learners' ability to understand and participate fluently in a given culture (Hirsch, 1983). Indeed, learning to read and write cannot be separated from the culturally assumed knowledge that affect students' learning practices. Culture is an integrated element of English literacy and the relationship between literacy and culture is complex and subtle. Literacy and culture are not static but dynamic and fluid. Thus, language teacher educators should value the relationship between literacy and culture. Rather than reinforcing cultural stereotypes for the instruction of culture, language teachers need to broaden their understanding of the complexity between literacy and culture. This suggests a need to develop literacy skills for international communication from a global English as a lingua franca perspective. However, as Yu (Chapter 11) suggested, the quality of strengthening students' literacy skills for international communication may be reduced when literacy training is not balanced in terms of reading and writing or focusing too much on exams in the examination-oriented culture in Chinese-speaking regions.

Seventh, there is a need to cultivate students' thinking skills. Students practice thinking as a function of reading and writing. Thinking skills to EFL learners is an ability to explain and manipulate complex systems involved in English learning. Learning to think requires frequent, repeated, and deliberate practice. To become clear, flexible, and coherent thinkers, learners need to work with both the process and the product in learning to read and write. The only way to teach the process and product of thinking is to recognize the profound relationship between thinking skills and literacy. However, as suggested by Cheng and Yeh (Chapter 10), teaching students thinking skills is challenging because teachers are always worried about time constraints for successful thinking skills instruction. In addition, teachers often feel puzzled about the priority of learning in an EFL class, that is, whether thinking skills or literacy skills should be the priority. In responding to this constrained situation, teachers may need to use a wide variety of content reading strategies to help students build up their reading literacy and encourage students to think about the process and product of writing literacy (Shih & Reynolds, 2015). Lee (Chapter 17) also suggested appropriate assignment design

helps students apply language in different circumstances by encouraging them to develop their critical thinking skills.

Eighth, we need appropriate policies for developing English literacy skills. Literacy development is influenced by policies and these policies are set based on policy-makers' interests. In practice, there is a gap between policy and literacy development outcomes. In He and Teng (Chapter 18) and Wang (Chapter 19), the educational policies in mainland China and Hong Kong are inseparable from politics. Policy is influenced by a complex array of historical, cultural-political, social-economic, and practical factors. In addition, we have to be aware of the influence of external assessment. For example, as Vong and Wu (Chapter 21) suggested, the introduction of international assessment such as PISA and PIRLS can influence the conception of language education and literacy in an education system. Related to this, school administrators need to provide support, particularly by allocating time in the school schedule, for language teachers and content teachers to develop interdisciplinary classes (see Chern & Curran, Chapter 20). Otherwise, simply changing policy will not necessarily constitute change in the realities of what takes place inside classrooms.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As concluding remarks, we note that although much research has been conducted during the past decades on literacy development, some significant areas, e.g., the development of reading and writing skills, still need more exploration. Specifically, there is limited research on EFL/L2 literacy for pre- and primary school levels. Research on sociocultural factors, including instructional issues and policy, also needs more attention. We believe that, to achieve the goal of developing literacy for EFL and L2 learners, classroom teachers and school-based educators need to assume responsibility for the teaching of students' literacy skills. They also need to continuously evaluate their teaching practices and theories to validate and improve the teaching of literacy skills. We strongly believe that this can be accomplished by encouraging more practitioner-based research. For example, more case studies and action research studies need to be conducted by classroom teachers to give a clearer picture of what is actually going on in EFL/L2 classrooms.

We link educational practice with research findings throughout the book, making this volume a practical guidebook for classroom practitioners and school-based educators. This book includes classroom examples to illustrate main ideas and provide practical references for teachers of English literacy. Teaching English literacy to EFL/L2 learners is challenging. All classroom teachers, teacher trainers, school administrators, and the language learners share a crucial responsibility in learning how to help students become more literate in English reading and writing. English literacy requires the use of various linguistic skills to investigate further, probe, and hypothesize about various situations, and doing so requires new approaches in pedagogy. In addition, technology is a major force in changing literacy. For example, digital content and people's engagement with digital literacy have already become a major research issue in many parts of the world and Chinese speakers should be prepared for the changes that digital literacy will have on the teaching of English. Through incorporating digital technology into the classroom, EFL/L2 teachers can support students in building their skills in phonics, phonemic awareness, and language fluency while also expanding vocabulary and comprehension skills needed for future academic learning (Reynolds, 2016). Teachers will need to begin to ask questions about how technology can offer more than just delivery of content but how it may also enhance or hinder L2 learners' literacy development. There is no doubt about the centrality of literacy to education in a literacy-dependent global society. While the empirical evidence in this book is encouraging, we feel confident in speaking for the chapter authors by saying that developing English literacy for Chinese speakers is still likely to remain an enduring battle. We will remain vigilant.

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