

The Influence of Literature on Chinese-English Biliteracy Development in Classroom Settings

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Abstract: English is an important subject matter in China. For Chinese children, it is a necessary process to gain English literacy in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Through the process, how their biliteracy develops remains unclear. To investigate the issue, this study mainly focused on the influence of literature applied in EFL classrooms on Chinese student's L2 English development. Results show that literature is beneficial for students' biliteracy development in terms of improving reading ability. Literature contain vivid context suitable for L2 language practices, thus may unconsciously improve students' linguistic competency and fluency through the reading process. Identity formation is also important in bilingual reading developments. Through classroom literature practice, students could form proper ideologies of bilingualism and become confident in perceiving themselves as bilingual readers. Results also indicate that literature facilitates students' biliteracy development through promoting their cultural understanding. Since literacy is the product of sociocultural backgrounds, biliteracy development could not be separate from altering cultural concepts and enriching cultural understandings. Literature reading not only acquaint students to diverse cultural backgrounds but also encourages constant negotiation of meaning, from where students' cultural awareness become mature. This study will shed inspiration for literature practices in EFL classrooms and policymaking of EFL literature curriculum.

Keywords: biliteracy development; literature; bilingual reader

1. Introduction

In mainland China, English is learned as a second language and applied widely in academic contexts. Generally, children come into contact with English from third grade, and through their schooling, English has always been an important subject matter. As Chinese children generally acquire their mother tongue before studying English, they are Chinese-English sequential bilinguals [1]. When they come to the English classroom with Chinese as their home language, their bilingualism develops as gradually add English to their linguistic repertoire [2]. In this case, it would be necessary to investigate how their biliteracy develops.

As Bernhardt and Kamil [3] claimed, L2 reading is much more than the impoverished version of L1 reading. L1 literacy has a positive influence on L2 reading in terms of cross-linguistic knowledge and strategies, as well as reading ability [4-7]. Rós and Castellón [8] pointed out that English learners already possess a valuable resource from their primary language during the development of English

language literacy. For Chinese learner of English specifically, their acquired reading and writing skills in Chinese provide certain linguistic resources, cultural strength, and academic foundation to aid their second language learning process, supporting the acquisition of English (L2) literacy. Genesee et al. [9] also indicated that the reading comprehension performance of bilingual students in both languages was related closely. Likewise, Yamashita [10] found that Japanese-English readers who have a higher level of L1 Japanese reading proficiency were enabled to achieve a better proficiency in their L2 English proficiency. Even with Mandarin Chinese which might be the most distant language from English regarding reading, the reading comprehension of Hong Kong children in Chinese and English demonstrate a strong correlation and their higher-level reading comprehension strategies seem to be transferable despite the differences in language typology [11]. These findings are in consonant with a well-known theoretical model conceptualizing the continuing and interactive development of biliteracy, which is Hornberger's continua of biliteracy [12, 13].

Applying the literature study method, the purpose of the study is to uncover how biliteracy development happens in Chinese-English bilinguals reading literature in school settings. The emphasis of this study focuses on the effects of literature on Chinese student's L2 literacy development as they pertain to learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in the classroom setting.

2. Relationship between L1 literacy and L2 English literacy

In the 21st century, the concept of literacy has been changing and overlapping to include various aspect relating nowadays technology [14]. In this study, however, literacy only focus on its general meaning, namely, the ability to read and write in a language [14, 15]. Previous research has demonstrated that L1 literacy fosters the outcome of L2, especially English literacy development [16-19]. The stronger L1 literacy skills are, the stronger the literacy skills will become in English as the L2 [16-19]. Biologically, L1 shaped the necessary brain networks for L2 reading, which provides foundations for transferring reading abilities to a second language [10, 20]. Through reading L1 text, bilingual readers also develop cognitive ability and reading strategies that could positively affect L2 reading comprehension [21]. In this sense, reading skills in one language are possible to transfer to another with adaptation to different contexts and situations [22].

3. Benefit of literature in EFL classroom

Nowadays, there is an overall consensus in L2 pedagogical research on the utility of literature in the context of second language learning and teaching [23]. Reading ability is culturally learned through socializing in a particular cultural context [24, 25]. As stated by Lazar [26], reading literature in English encourages students to be broadly aware of the social, political and historical background of the specific play or novel. This cultural enrichment is agreed upon by many previous researchers [27-30].

3.1. Improving reading ability

In the development of biliteracy, reading in plays an essential part [23]. Without educational interventions through guided literature reading, students may constantly experience restrictions in response expressions regardless of their proficiency level in L2 reading [31-34].

As a complex cognitive process, reading comprehension requires the simultaneous application of rapid word recognition and processing of semantic and syntactic cues to construct meaning. In this sense, the improvement of reading ability in a second language is largely related to the enrichment of vocabulary and syntactical knowledge, which could not develop abstractly [35-37]. Compared with other types of language learning materials, literature provides authentic, and more importantly vivid, contexts for the use of L2 language. Through engaging themselves in the given context for a specific

purpose (usually for pleasure and curiosity), bilingual students do L2 language practices unconsciously and gradually become more competent and fluent in reading second language materials [37-39].

From a sociocultural point of view, classroom literature practices affect a crucial process in bilingual reading development, namely, identity formation [40-45]. Those who have already developed strong identities as bilinguals tend to read bilingually spontaneously in their daily lives even when they no longer receive classroom instructions [1, 46]. To be or become successful bilingual readers, students should construct proper ideologies of their relationship with bilingualism. However, from very early on in their life, students' sensitivity towards language ideologies develops and later affects their literacy behaviors and language preferences in the L2 classroom [47-48]. Even first-graders could sense their parents' feelings towards English (L2) and Spanish (L1) use in various contexts and, as a result, behave according to these ideologies during literacy instructions [47]. Besides students' stance on the ideology of bilingualism, their self-perceptions as bilingual readers matter as well [36, 49]. According to Schema Theory, reading comprehension, instead of retrieving information from the text directly, requires interaction between the text and readers' existing knowledge [50]. Unlike monolinguals, bilingual students possess linguistic and social-cultural resources in two languages. Literature, which is narrative in nature, enables these bilingual students to draw on their "funds of knowledge" to participate in classroom literacy events [32]. Students become confident in bringing their personal experience to bear on understanding L2 reading material when their repertoires of linguistic and cultural knowledge gradually been elaborated as intellectual resources [34].

3.2. Promoting cultural communication

Literacy is a cultural artifact laden with a set of attitudes and beliefs arising from a certain culture [51, 52]. Instead of being neutral, it is acquired through socializing in a specific cultural context; therefore, biliteracy development requires students to alter their cognitive structures and value orientations [25]. Literature acquaints students with cultures different from their own in time and space and may deepen their cultural perceptions through constantly perceiving heritages such cultures endows [53]. The familiarization of the variety and depth of human cultural experiences through literature reading encourages students' empathy and greater understanding of the complexity of human existence [40].

When promoting biliteracy development, research has recognized the positive effects of multicultural literature utilization [54, 55]. In a foreign language context, incorporating literature will enhance cultural awareness [26, 56-59]. Previous research found that students don't always realize their cultural identities influence their L2 reading experience, leading to different thoughts, emotions and responses towards the characters, their actions and feelings [60-62]. Literature could transmit the cultures of people in an effective manner [63]. Various literature, frequently exploring cultural backgrounds, could help students be aware of the practices, traditions and values embedded [40]. Gradually, students may become clearer about their cultural meanings and be able to negotiate these meanings with new cultural challenges presented in L2 texts through engagement and interaction [62]. It is unlikely for anyone to really become literate without finding self in literature [64], so culturally relevant texts are essential mirrors for students to see themselves [65].

4. Conclusion

This study investigated how literature incorporation in EFL classrooms aids biliteracy, especially L2 literacy, developments for Chinese-English bilinguals. The result indicated that L1 literacy facilitates L2 English literacy development biologically and cognitively. Reading literature in EFL classrooms is beneficial for students in terms of improving reading abilities as well as promoting cultural

communication. The improvement of reading is manifested in two aspects: (1) the context of literature provides opportunities for unconscious L2 language practices, gradually leading to better linguistic competency and fluency, and (2) more importantly, classroom literature practice affects learners' identity formation as L2 readers, which is a crucial process of bilingual reading developments. As literacy is culturally oriented and socially acquired, the developments of biliteracy require alterations of cultural concepts and enrichments of cultural understandings. Literature, rich with various cultural backgrounds, could enhance students' cultural awareness through constant negotiation of meaning. The findings of this study provide theoretical evidence for EFL teachers conducting literature practice. As for policymakers, this study shed insight into effective biliteracy curricula, helping them make choices and impact EFL education in China.

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