

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

Shuwen Mao^{1,a,*}

¹*National Research Centre of Foreign Language and Education, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Haidian District, Beijing, 100089, China*

a. maosw2918@163.com

**corresponding author*

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 Castillón [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.

References

- [1] Reyes, I. (2012). *Biliteracy among children and youths*. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 47(3), 307-327.
- [2] Garc á, O., Kleifgen, J., & Falchi, L. (2008). *From English language learners to emergent bilinguals*, *Equity Matters*, Research review #1. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University. Retrieved March 2023 from http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/6532_Ofelia_ELL_Final.pdf
- [3] Bernhardt, E. B., & Kamil, M. L. (1995). Interpreting relationships between L1 and L2 reading: Consolidating the linguistic threshold and the linguistic interdependence hypotheses. *Applied linguistics*, 16(1), 15-34.
- [4] Hardin, V. B. (2001). Transfer and variation in cognitive reading strategies of Latino fourth-grade students in a late-exit bilingual program. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 25(4), 539-561.
- [5] Jiménez, R. T., Garc á, G. E., & Pearson, P. D. (1995). Three children, two languages, and strategic reading: Case studies in bilingual/monolingual reading. *American educational research journal*, 32(1), 67-97.
- [6] Jiménez, R. T., Garc á, G. E., & Pearson, P. D. (1996). The reading strategies of bilingual Latina/o students who are successful English readers: Opportunities and obstacles. *Reading research quarterly*, 31(1), 90-112.
- [7] Schoonen, R., Hulstijn, J., & Bossers, B. (1998). Language-dependent and language-independent knowledge in native and foreign language reading comprehension. An empirical study among Dutch students in grades 6, 8 and 10. *Language Learning*, 48(1), 71-106.
- [8] R ós, C., & Castill ón, C. (2018). *Bilingual Literacy Development: Trends and Critical Issues*. *International Research and Review*, 7(2), 85-96.
- [9] Genesee, F., Geva, E., Dressler, C., & Kamil, M. L. (2006). Synthesis: Cross-linguistic relationships. In D. August, & T. Shanahan (Eds.), *Developing literacy in second-language learning: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, pp. 153-174.
- [10] Yamashita, J. (2002). Mutual compensation between L1 reading ability and L2 language proficiency in L2 reading comprehension. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 25(1), 81-95.
- [11] Li, T., McBride-Chang, C., Wong, A., & Shu, H. (2012). Longitudinal predictors of spelling and reading comprehension in Chinese as an L1 and English as an L2 in Hong Kong Chinese children. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 104(2), 286.
- [12] Hornberger, N. H. (2002). Multilingual language policies and the continua of biliteracy: An ecological approach. *Language policy*, 1, 27-51.
- [13] Hornberger, N. H. (2004). The continua of biliteracy and the bilingual educator: Educational linguistics in practice. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 7(2-3), 155-171.
- [14] Pilgrim, J. & Martinez, E. E. (2013). *Defining literacy in the 21st century: A guide to terminology and skills*. Texas Journal of Literacy Education. Volume 1. Issue 1.
- [15] Opoku-Amankwa, K., Brew-Hammond, A. (2011). Literacy is the ability to read and write English: defining and developing literacy in basic schools in Ghana. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 14(1), 89-106.
- [16] August, D., Shanahan, T., & Escamilla, K. (2009). *English language learners: Developing literacy in second-language learners — Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth*. *Journal of literacy research*, 41(4), 432-452.
- [17] Droop, M., & Verhoeven, L. (2003). Language proficiency and reading ability in first-and second-language learners. *Reading research quarterly*, 38(1), 78-103.
- [18] Escamilla, K., Olsen, L., & Slavick, J. (2022). *Toward comprehensive effective literacy policy and instruction for English learner/emergent bilingual students*. Retrieved March 2023 from https://multilingualliteracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/21018-NCEL-Effective-Literacy-White-Paper-FINAL_v2.0.pdf
- [19] Koda, K. (2005). *Insights into Second Language Reading: A cross-linguistic approach*. Cambridge University Press.

- [20] Kim, S. Y., Liu, L., & Cao, F. (2017). How does first language (L1) influence second language (L2) reading in the brain? Evidence from Korean-English and Chinese-English bilinguals. *Brain and language*, 171, 1-13.
- [21] Ponniah, R. J. (2018). First-language reading promotes second-language reading and acquisition: Towards a biolinguistic approach. *The idea and practice of reading*, 113-124.
- [22] Ducuara, J. J., & Roza, H. A. (2018). Biliteracy: A systematic literature review about strategies to teach and learn two languages. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 8(10), 1307-1318.
- [23] Yunusova, S. (2022). *Literature in second-language education: a cognitive-affective approach to the use of literary narrative in an intermediate Russian language classroom* (Doctoral dissertation, Macquarie University).
- [24] Grabe, W. & Stoller, F. L. (2020). *Teaching and Researching Reading*. Routledge
- [25] Mikulecky, B. S. (2008). *Teaching reading in a second language*. Retrieved March 2023 from Teaching Reading in a Second Language - PDF Free Download (docplayer.net).
- [26] Lazar, G. (1993). *Literature and language teaching: A guide for teachers and trainers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [27] Collie, J. and S. Slater. 1987. *Literature in the Language Classroom. A Resource Book of Ideas and Activities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [28] Schewe, M. 1998. Culture through literature through drama. In M. Byram and M. Fleming (eds), *Language Learning in Intercultural Perspective: Approaches through Drama and Ethnography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 202-222.
- [29] Sell, R. D. (ed.). 2002. *Children's Literature as Communication*. John Benjamins: Amsterdam/Philadelphia.
- [30] Silberstein, S. 1994. *Techniques and Resources in Teaching Reading: Teaching Techniques in English as a Foreign Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [31] Delbridge, A., & Helman, Lori A. (2016). Evidence-Based Strategies for Fostering Biliteracy in Any Classroom. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 44(4), 307–316.
- [32] Martínez-Roldán, C. M. (2003). Building Worlds and Identities: A Case Study of the Role of Narratives in Bilingual Literature Discussions. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 37(4), 491–526.
- [33] Medina, C. (2010). "Reading Across Communities" in *Biliteracy Practices: Examining Translocal Discourses and Cultural Flows in Literature Discussions*. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 45(1), 40–60.
- [34] Spack, R. (1985). Literature, Reading, Writing, and ESL: Bridging the Gaps. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19(4), 703–725.
- [35] Goodman, Y. M. (2015). Miscue Analysis: A Transformative Tool for Researchers, Teachers, and Readers. *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*, 64(1), 92-111.
- [36] Kim, K., & Goodman, Y. M. (2011). Teaching strategies that revalue ELL readers: Retrospective Miscue Analysis. In R. J. Meyer & K. F. Whitmore (Eds.), *Reclaiming reading: Teachers, students, and researchers regaining spaces for thinking and action* (pp. 99-110). New York, NY: Routledge.
- [37] Palmer, D. K., & Martínez, R. A. (2016). Developing biliteracy: What do teachers really need to know about language? *Language Arts*, 93(5), 379.
- [38] Erkaya, O. R. (2005). Short Stories in the ESL/EFL Context. *Asian EFL Journal*, 8(November), 1–13.
- [39] Mullen, J. S. (1984). *Outsiders: American short stories for students of ESL*. Teacher's Manual. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- [40] Altun, M. (2023). Literature and Identity: Examine the Role of Literature in Shaping Individual and Cultural Identities. *International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies*, 10(3), 381-385.
- [41] Glenn, W. J. & Ginsberg, R. (2016). Resisting Readers' Identity (Re)Construction across English and Young Adult Literature Course Contexts. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 51(1), 84-105.
- [42] Jiménez, R. T. (2000). Literacy and the identity development of Latino/a students. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(4), 971–1000.
- [43] Kim, M. (2004). Literature discussions in adult L2 learning. *Language and Education*, 2(18), 145–166.
- [44] McCarthey, S. J. & Moje, E. B. (2002). Identity matters. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 37(2), 228–238.
- [45] Thein, A. H., Beach, R. & Johnston, A. (2017), "Rethinking Identity and Adolescence in the Teaching of Literature: Implications for Pre-Service Teacher Education", *Innovations in English Language Arts Teacher Education* (Advances in Research on Teaching, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Leeds, Vol. 27, pp. 65-87.
- [46] Soto, L. D. (2010). Young bilingual children's perceptions of bilingualism and biliteracy: Altruistic possibilities. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 26(3), 599–610.
- [47] Martínez-Roldán, C. M., & Malavé G. (2004). Language Ideologies Mediating Literacy and Identity in Bilingual Contexts. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 4(2), 155-180.
- [48] Morren López, M. (2011). Children's language ideologies in a first-grade dual-language class. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 12(2), 176–201.
- [49] Bauer, E. B., & Colomer, S. E. (2016). Biliteracy. In: Peters, M. (eds) *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*. Springer, Singapore.

- [50] Carrell, P. L., & Eisterhold, J. C. (1983). Schema theory and ESL reading pedagogy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 17 (4), 553–573.
- [51] Street, B. V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*, Cambridge University Press, Vol. 9.
- [52] Cook-Gumperz, J. (1986). Caught in a web of words: Some considerations on language socialization and language acquisition. *Children's worlds and children's language*, 37-68.
- [53] Carter, R.A. & Long, M.N. (1991). *Teaching literature*. London: Longman.
- [54] Ernst-Slavit, G., & Mulhern, M. (2003). Bilingual books: Promoting literacy and biliteracy in the second-language and mainstream classroom. *Reading online*, 7(2), 1-15.
- [55] Jeffers, D. (2009). Bilingual books for ESL students... and beyond. *Children and Libraries*, 7(3), 38-39.
- [56] Akyel, A. & Yalcin, E. (1990). Literature in the EFL class: a study of goal-achievement incongruence. *ELT journal*, 44(3), 174-180.
- [57] McKay, S. (1982). Literature in the ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 16(4), 529-536.
- [58] Parkinson, B., & Reid Thomas, H. (2019). *Teaching literature in a second language*. Edinburgh University Press.
- [59] Shanahan, D. (1997). Articulating the relationship between language, literature, and culture: Toward a new agenda for foreign language teaching and research. *The Modern Language Journal*, 81(2), 164-174.
- [60] Beach, R. (1995). Constructing cultural models through response to literature. *The English Journal*, 84, 87–94.
- [61] Beach, R. (1997). Students' resistance to engagement with multicultural literature. In T. Rogers & A. O. Soter (Eds.), *Reading across cultures: Teaching literature in a diverse society* (pp. 69–94). New York: Teachers College Press.
- [62] Shin, C. & Riazantseva, A. (2015) Reader identity: a case study of Korean graduate students' meaning construction of an L2 literary text, *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 15:4, 600-615.
- [63] Barzani, S. H. (2020). The perceptions of EFL teachers and students on the use of short stories to enhance reading comprehension. *Asian EFL Journal*, 27(3.1), 325-341.
- [64] Harste, J., & Vasquez, V. (2018). What do we mean by literacy now? Critical curricular implications. In P. Albers (Ed.), *Global conversations in literacy research* (pp.14–28). New York, NY: Routledge.
- [65] McCullough, R. G. (2013). The relationship between reader response and prior knowledge on African American students' reading comprehension performance using multicultural literature. *Reading Psychology*, 34, 397–435.