

Reading 2: The value of L1 literacy in achieving L2 literacy

“In fact, it is clear that the ability to transfer to English what is learned in the first language applies to content-area subjects like science, math, but also applies to skills in reading and writing – even when the orthographic system is quite different from the roman alphabet . . . ”

– Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)

<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/biling/resource/NLA/CH1.pdf>

The importance of valuing and utilizing the background knowledge and native language literacy skills that our students bring to school cannot be underestimated. Over the past 30 years, there has been a consistent body of research that points to the importance of native language literacy in the development of literacy in the second language. In 1998, the National Research Council in its study entitled ***Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*** (Snow, Burn, and Griffin, eds.), recommends that:

“LEP children should be taught to read in the first language while acquiring proficiency in spoken English and then subsequently taught to extend their skills in English.”

Similarly, the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English in *Standards for the English Language Arts* (1996) addressed the importance of instruction in the native language as a means to develop proficiency in English and develop content area knowledge, as described in Standard 10: “students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.”

In examining the relationship between first and second language literacy, researchers in the field of second language literacy agree that there is a strong and positive correlation between literacy skills in the native language and literacy skills in the second. Students with the highest levels of native language literacy are those who eventually become the strongest readers in their second language. Bernhardt and Kamil (2001) explain that:

“research indicates that about 20% of the process of reading in the second language is predictable on the basis of the level of first-language literacy

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(Bernhardt and Kamil, 1995; Brisbois, 1995; Hulstijn, 1991). In other words, the more knowledge of reading and an understanding of literacy a student has in the first language, the better off he will be in the second. Even when children are literate in a language that has little or no structural or orthographic overlap with English, the mere fact that they are already literate really helps them.”

Furthermore, research findings suggest that the reading and writing processes function similarly for native and second language learners (Grabe, 1991). There seem to be universal aspects of literacy (Goodman, 1973) that underlie the reading process (which is essentially similar for all languages) and facilitate the transfer of skills and knowledge from one language to another. In support of the transferability of native language literacy skills into English, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD, 1987) indicates:

“In fact, it is clear that the ability to transfer to English what is learned in the first language applies to content-area subjects like science, math, but also applies to skills in reading and writing – even when the orthographic system is quite different from the roman alphabet . . . ”

The transfer of literacy skills from one language to another is made possible through the universal aspects of literacy. Research supports the theory that second language learners transfer native literacy skills into the second language reading and writing in an interactive, reciprocal process (Escamilla, 1993; Rodriguez, 1988; Cohen, 1987; Garcia and Padilla, 1985; Barnitz, 1985).

In conclusion, students use their native language literacy skills and strategies to become literate in the second language, and what is learned in the second language enhances native language literacy. Therefore, the development of native language arts plays a pivotal role in the acquisition of English language Arts.