

Does literacy occur during foreign language acquisition or before?

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This paper considers a definition of FL literacy that both derives from a definition of L1 literacy (and is inferable from other related literature) and from L2 rating scale descriptors.

In view of the demands made by various content modules on students and the students' developing proficiency in the target language, the novice versus expert dimension of the learner is weighed against the study context. In relation to such dimensions students' self assessment results are worth considering.

The notion of 'literacy' is consensually agreed to refer to a capacity to read and write in a given language which can be one's first language(L1) or an additional language (L+) .Despite the consensus about print as both input and output in literacy practices, there is also increasing interest in computer and other types of literacies (Grabe&Kaplan, 1992).

For conciseness sake, we shall here focus attention on literacy as the capacity to handle print through both reading and writing in school /academic settings.

Reading in L1 and L+

As regards reading, research in the 1970s through the 1980s highlights a number of perceptual and cognitive processes which are basic to comprehension.

Wilson & Anderson (1986) insist on the crucial role of eye fixation movement in the selection and integration of new information; the idea is that it does not suffice for an individual to be able to see the graphic items of the code but to be able to identify their various combination into chunks.

Furthermore, since chunks vary in length, their size determines the eye span; the longer the chunk, the wider the span.

But eye span alone does not ensure the decoding of grapheme and grapheme combination (at various syntactic levels) neither does it ensure integration unless the nature of the chunk as well as the reader's familiarity with the code and its various combinations enable him/her to do so . Given that grapheme combination at different levels(word, phrase or sentence) varies in complexity, Wilson and Anderson postulate that beyond decoding, neither the width nor the frequency of eye spans are alien to syntactic complexity. This might account for low speed reading and quick speed reading.

Closely related to the physical processes mentioned above, reliance on sound(images)or on semantic relations are two factors that might distinguish poor readers from more experienced ones. Again the idea is that poor readers rely on phonetic decoding while better readers make use of the various sense relations which exist between words and lexemes to construct meaning.

The two suggestions about the role of perception and speed reading and decoding sound fairly consensual as Eysenck and Keane (1990) point out in their studies. They also point to a similar role and agree that it stands as a distinctive feature between novice and better readers. They agree too, that comprehension proper and the various types of knowledge that interplay with language knowledge will determine the degree of expertise in reading

To put it shortly, the various types of knowledge interplay simultaneously at various levels in the following manner: A knowledge of syntax and semantics comes into play to arrive at what Kintsch & Van Dijk (1978) refer to as "text grammar"; that is readers make sense of a text content by quickly identifying the structure of a text together with the set of discourse devices that writers make use of in constructing (writing & composing) the meaning they want to convey.

In addition to an ability to arrive at "text grammar", proficient readers are believed to make use of discourse conventions . How various genres are achieved and how various texts(descriptive, narrative, discursive..)are organized is valuable information that good readers make use of . This is often integrated in the notion of schema knowledge and various texts are believed to fall into "frames" "moulds" or "schemas".

However familiar or knowledgeable of topics, types of discourse and aspects of culture that a text may reveal, good readers achieve adequate comprehension and the required types of inferences only when they possess an additional

but no less important type of knowledge which seems so crucial to determine the right type of inferences.

Such knowledge ,at times described as pre-existing structures and at others as "slots", "prior" or "organized" knowledge is believed to be at the basis of readers' proficient use of texts. Indeed those readers who are equipped with such knowledge might achieve comprehension when or if they make use of both their language knowledge and their knowledge of texts schemas, as well as their capacity to verify whether their assumptions about text structure and text content work.

This is believed to occur at a dual level , a top-down level and a bottom-up level wherein meaning relations are accessed and elaborated to give way to other relevant instances of knowledge or other schemata.

However, for new schemas to unfold, pre-existing schemas must activate in multiple ways to render a text meaningful to a reader. Six specific functions are served by schemas and were identified by Wilson and Anderson(1986). They are summarised below:

1. The slots within the schema are filled with information that fits: when information is suitable, it reduces mental effort.
2. Selective reading is thus triggered and guides decision-making regarding information "worth dealing with"
3. Schemas allow readers to find extra informative value in a text, determine implicit facts and "go beyond the literally stated information."
4. At probably an advanced level, a knowledge of how a text may be structured as well as getting at that type of structure facilitates the access to information during reading . This is described as "text schemas "by the authors and is believed to ease memory search
5. Schemas or a knowledge of features about how information varies in value will help a reader "prime" a text and subsequently retain most essential ideas in order to summarize text content.
6. Ultimately a knowledge of text content and discourse-level forms enable a reader to make the right inference(s). In the authors' words, schemas' functions are the following :
 1. providing ideational scaffolding
 2. directing allocation of attention
 3. enabling inferential elaboration

4. allowing orderly searches of memory
5. facilitating editing and summarizing
6. permitting inferential construction.

In conclusion to the above discussion, reading appears to be much dependent on perceptual and cognitive processes but for effectiveness, it also needs the contribution of a set of functional or working schemata, without which reading or any other cognitive process cannot turn into performance. Therefore if, as an L1 literacy component, reading develops to a sophisticated level, it is bound to equip L1 readers with life skills that might transfer to L+ reading. Notwithstanding L+ knowledge, we are led to expect English degree students to reveal some kind of transfer.

Let us now look at the other component of literacy, writing .

Writing in L1 and L+

In writing, too, language is a pre- requisite together with other types of knowledge which determine the composing process.

Indeed, easy handling of the code seems crucial to the generation and expression of ideas . In order to both construct and express meaning, writers, it is agreed, proceed along three major steps :

The first step which is much dependent on a capacity to set goals consists for the writer to produce ideas and organize them (planning)

The second major step involves the writer into generating sentences, a process which obviously depends on the ease with which language knowledge is handled. This is followed by a third step, an evaluation procedure whereby writers check for words, phrases or overall organization and coherence.

However, scholars agree that the above mentioned sequencing in the writing process may not be so rigid in that variation exists. An alternative sequencing might include a planning process which is preceded by sentence generation (Bereiter & Scardamalia 1987, Eysenck & Keane 1990).

Further to the thinking and writing ability, what seems to determine a successful outcome to the composing process is knowledge of the topic as well as the capacity to easily retrieve required (linguistic) knowledge from memory.

In a similar way, additional knowledge is here too, part of the overall process. Perhaps to a different extent, strategic control is crucial as it determines both quality and quantity in the composition process.

Knowledge of how to set goals, how to organize them and how to achieve coherence seems the type of knowledge that differentiates experienced writers' compositions from novices' ones.

In connection with the above mentioned distinction between low skilled writers and their more proficient peers, Eysenck and Keane(1990) report a study results which led them to conclude to differences between low and high skilled writers.

Among these differences, they mention the following :

a) Production of shorter word group units by low skilled writers (7.2) as compared to longer units (11.7) by more skilled writers.

b) Little revision and revision at word/phrase level by low skilled writers against longer review and review for meaning and coherence by more skilled ones.

They witness to the difference as follows: It is a much more complex and time-consuming task to modify the hierarchical structure of a text than to change individual words. The non-expert can do the latter but not the former.

Raimes (1985) acknowledges little difference between L1 and L2 writing. Except for the medium (language), the major processes along which students' essays or compositions unfold seem very much alike. Even flaws in the composing process that "unskilled" writers revealed are believed to be similar in L1 and L+.

Despite this similarity, we have to take into account the difference in language use. In so far as it relates to knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, morphology, discourse and writing conventions in general, such difference may by no means be minimized as it will, in addition to strategic and other knowledge, certainly determine low versus high expertise in composition skills.

Here too the notion of schemas comforts us with the idea that both a cognitive and a metacognitive component make up competence and determine high or conversely low level of performance.

Defined for both reading and writing (and language use, in general) as abstract structures, schemas or schematas (or even frames) necessary to handle reading and writing, appear as necessary requisites for adequate performance.

One may have content knowledge (information about both language and topic) but one needs also a set of abilities to achieve a task – an aspect so essential in academic settings! Such abilities include goal setting, goal finding (when they are too broad or otherwise undefined), creativity etc...

The second type of knowledge, often identified as procedural, not only complements language knowledge but also determines how it may be used by readers and writers.

It appears thus that like reading, writing involves types of knowledge other than language knowledge but language knowledge is so much determinant for literacy goals to be fulfilled.

Writers also need strategic knowledge (SK) to meet the cognitive demands that qualitative writing makes on language users. In fact SK differentiates between two types of writing to which scholars (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987) refer as **knowledge-telling (k-t)** and **knowledge-transforming (K-T)** in account of the fact that writing competence can expand beyond what they call "ordinary ability to put one's thought and knowledge in the process..." Such expansion is perceived within a continuum with k-t positioned at one end and K-T at the other (more sophisticated) end. Such view of writing makes obvious the fact that sophisticated and skilful writing is the type of writing most required in academic settings!

The distinction between the two ends of the continuum is interesting for at least two reasons: The first one has to do with the fact that scholars who position k-t at one end and K-T at the other do not exclude possible developments towards a more sophisticated form of writing.

The second interesting aspect of the distinction between k-t and K-T lies precisely in the inferable set of intermediary steps before writing at K-T level may be attained during literacy acquisition.

When the potentially perfectible nature of writing performance renders the latter not only difficult to achieve by students (in a FL context in particular) but also difficult to assess by teachers, one may wonder whether in a FL study context, perfectibility should be located along a continuum between k-t and K-T literacy, or should extend beyond K-T?

The other question one may ask is: When is the more sophisticated type of writing attainable? Writers need to know about the criteria of good writing and also need to know how well these criteria should be met (, ie to "know that" and "to know how")

Existing rating scales for SL composition offer a set of profiles which vary from "poor" to "good" with an extension to "excellent". Among the few available, we were interested in the profile proposed by Genesee and Upshur (1996) which we examined and summarized into salient aspects of the

profiles (see notes). The interest in this "composition profile" lies in the fact that although the range of profiles extends to "excellent" writing with each type of profile associated with a set of descriptors, almost none of them seems to point to metacognitive knowledge explicitly.

Two queries sound relevant at this point:

1. How are assessors to judge and score without "flouting" the descriptors?
2. How are student writers to clearly understand **how** they should write when the bulk of the descriptors hint at the **what** (language knowledge) and little at its use?

Concern with writing profiles and their developmental nature has led us to find out the extent to which writers are aware of how they write. To this purpose a **Self-Assessment Scale** (Likert's type) was used. Its specific aim was to elicit third year students opinions about their capacity to handle language when they read or when they write essays.

As revealed by the way they ranked the various statements referring to their reading and writing capacities (see notes), degree students do not sound unanimously confident with written English.

Aware that intervening factors such as inadequate grasp of the statements (1 to 11 for reading and 1 to 18 for writing) might have biased their responses, we find the emerging pattern quite suggestive of a low confidence in handling written English.

Although the results cannot even be generalised to other tuition groups in the same department (of the University of Algiers), given the small-scale nature of this investigation, they seem to reveal that a low proportion of students sound confident enough in handling the various subskills that characterise written English, whereas a much larger proportion seem well aware of their inability to do so and have expressed it in their responses..

Of the six points on Likert's scale, the first two ('Strongly agree' and 'Agree') gather a good proportion of respondents. However, points 3 to 6 seem to gather a much greater proportion of respondents. Given the more clear-cut nature of the responses in 1 and 2 compared with 3 and 4 ('Somewhat agree' and 'Disagree'), we are tempted to conclude that the responses obtained there seem to suggest a lower degree of confidence more than any other attitude to the kind of "could do" statements.

The overall picture thus obtained does not contradict greatly the one inferrable from formal test results about reading and writing capacities

Of 68 students sitting for term papers one and two (in January and in May), only five students scored 10+ (out of 20) on test 1 against 12 who scored above 10+ on test 2. A much larger proportion of students from the same group had to take both the June re-sit test and the September re-sit test

The Self-Assessment procedure reveals that the few students who obtained above average scores (six in all) have self-assessed their capacities in a fairly realistic way.

To mention but one example, we shall refer to a test 2 essay the writer of which managed to develop into a readable whole. However the subdivision into paragraphs did not seem so clear-cut and transition sections were often missing. Furthermore, the student's self assessment of her capacity to handle writing suggests a certain confidence as she ranked most "could statements" either 1, 2 or 3 (Strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree). However, she ranked 5 (disagree) the two statements about a) rearranging paragraphs and using suitable transitions and b) making clear transitions between paragraphs, and she ranked 6 (strongly disagree) the statement relating to a capacity to complete an essay under timed conditions. This student's rankings reveal that she was quite aware of her limitations. Indeed her essays tend to be weak in paragraphing, transition use and expansion.

Worth mentioning, too, is the case of a low achiever whose writing lacks organisation, clarity and accuracy and who, after test 1 and previous to test 2, ranked most statements 3, 4 or 5. Specifically, the student ranked 5 most statements relating to idea organization and logical linking and he ranked 4 the statements relating to using English and sentence structure. When such ranking does not contradict the scores obtained ie. 04.5/20 and 06.5/20 (and 06.5/20 on the June re-sit test), this clearly reflects a fairly realistic picture of the students' writing profiles.

All in all, the ability to write (and to a great extent, this trend applies to reading too) suggested by an overall low performance amongst year three students, reveals different patterns of development. We suspect those patterns to vary greatly and that the variation may be qualitative in nature.

Not wanting to run into hasty conclusions or beyond the scope of the present paper, we shall nevertheless include a number of remarks:

1. Writing performance is perfectible by nature. But in a FL context , perfectibility is difficult to attain, challenging, not to say constraining for students
2. For degree readers who are expected to attain quality standards, the task is no less challenging. It is equally so on assessability grounds
3. In light of these results, one may wonder whether in a FL study context perfectibility should locate within **the k-t - K-T literacy continuum** or whether it should extend beyond that continuum ?
4. When a most sophisticated form of writing is quite attainable, “good” writing certainly needs to be specified and writers , novice mostly, need to know both about the criteria of good writing and how to fulfill the criteria. In other words, they need to know to “**know that**” (declarative knowledge) and to “**know how**” (procedural knowledge). Obviously full possession of the required knowledge and skill will result in their qualitative use for both reading and writing purposes.
5. But full possession of such knowledge and skill, if attainable within a reasonable period of instruction/training in L1(when not a gift!) can only be reasonably looked at as an ultimate, though not unattainable, goal in an additional language More importantly, when the L1 attainment might extend to “knowledge-transforming” (K-T), characterised by a creative use of composition, there is hope that it will positively influence L+ writing proficiency development.

Meanwhile, and not losing sight of the multitude of factors which might intervene in the development process, we may but rely on descriptors which are included in rating scales to infer how L+/ EFL readers and writers are expected to handle both language and skill. The “low” vs “high” or what is also known as the novice vs expert user dimension may thus be taken into consideration.

To conclude, in this paper we examined the nature of literacy skills and weighed their importance for academic achievement. We also considered the importance of their attainment in a FL academic context on the one hand and the novice versus expert dimension on the other . In the light of these two considerations, we pointed to the need to identify goals for attainment and assessment means that would both monitor and inform us about progress towards the goals. Finally when considering literacy students ‘own assessment against those obtained through formal tests, we stressed the close link between literacy development and a set of specifications about levels of attainment.

References

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Notes

1. Of the 42 respondents, 37 wrote their names on the SA sheet and could be identified. 5 of them obtained pass marks (10+/20) on test 1 and test 2.

Of the 30 who took the June re-sit test, 4 improved their score in this test (synthese) and obtained average marks which varied between 8/20 and 9.5/20.

2. High -Skilled Writer Profiles : (Genesee & Upshur 1996)

-Excellent writing: Clear and accurate statement of main ideas with clear change of opinion
Good organization and perfect coherence.

Very effective choice of words and use of idioms and word forms

Full control of complex structures and absence of grammatical errors

Mastery of spelling and punctuation.

-Good and excellent writing (A more flexible description):

Knowledgeability, thoroughness in thesis development, relevance to assigned topic.

Fluent expression, clear statement and support of ideas, good organization, logical sequencing, cohesion

Sophisticated range of vocabulary, effective choice of words and idioms, mastery of word form and appropriate register

Use of effective complex constructions, few errors of agreement, tense number, word order /function, article pronouns, prepositions.

Mastery of conventions, few errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, Paragraphing.

-Fair to poor writing :

Limited knowledge of subject,little substance,inadequate development of topic

Non fluent , ideas confused or disconnected, lacks logical sequencing and development

Limited vocabulary range ,frequent errors of word/idiom form,choice and usage

Meaning confused or obscured

Major problems in simple/complex constructions , frequent errors of negation, agreement, tense,number word order/function, articles ,pronouns, prepositions and or fragments ,no run-ons, deletions.

Meaning confused or obscured

Frequent errors of spelling, punctuation ,capitalization, paragraphing, poor handwriting