

# Multilingual reading theory

JILL FITZGERALD

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA

A pressing issue in multilingual literacy research is the need for work that is grounded in, or contributes to, the construction of elaborated theoretical outlooks. On the whole, a great deal of bilingual and English-language learner literacy research has been published without explicit reference, or with only incidental reference, to theory about how multilingual literacy processes might function and develop, how they might be similar to and different from monolingual literacy processes, and how learning and using multiple languages might affect one's literacy (cf. August & Hakuta, 1997; Fitzgerald, 1995; Fitzgerald & Cummins, 1999; García, 2000). There are notable exceptions, such as Bernhardt's (1991, 2000) seminal work toward developing a theory of second-language reading and Carrell, Devine, and Eskey's (1988) description of second-language reading as an interactive process.

The word *theory* is complicated to define. Researchers and philosophers who hold different epistemological stances may attribute different meanings to it (cf. Creswell, 2002; Hill, 1977–1978). However, most educators and researchers in the social sciences consider theory to be an inherent part of their work and press for it to be explicit (cf. Hill, 1977–1978). For my purposes in this brief commentary, I use the following definition: the formal or informal identification of sets of variables, constructs, or principles and of hypothetical explanations of relationships between and among those variables, constructs, or principles. (This definition draws from work by Creswell, 2002; DeGroot, 1969; Kerlinger, 1965; Mitchell & Myles, 1998; Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991.)

## How theory might move multilingual literacy research forward

There are many ways in which more elaborate and explicit theory might move multilingual literacy research forward. I offer here two brief and minimally delineated illustrations. I am impelled to preface

my comments by stating that it is very difficult to comment upon theory briefly—in part because clarity usually requires detail and specificity, including specificity of terms. As I have written and rewritten this piece, I have found it nearly impossible to wend my way toward details and specificity about *particular* theories in this short piece. I occasionally refer to “language” or “reading” as if they were singular processes, when instead I mean to acknowledge the plurality of processes and subprocesses that such labels should represent. My illustrations of theories are also crude and bare. In short, I point to sketchy possibilities of theories that might or might not merit further elaboration. At the same time, theory is so connected to research and practice that some discussion of its importance for multilingual literacy is not only warranted but, I think, necessary.

Let me return now to two examples of how elevating our awareness of theory and of how theory specification might move multilingual literacy research forward. First, when multiple theories, especially competing or even incompatible theories, of the same phenomena are explicitly stated, possibilities increase for enhancing our understandings of multilingual literacy. When researchers or practitioners disagree about particular issues, often their different underlying theories of the topic being discussed are at the heart of their disagreements. However, because the theories are “hidden,” sometimes discussants do not realize that others adhere to different basic theories. Discussion around the “hidden” theories might yield fruitful understandings or at least clarify issues underlying disagreements.

For example, some of the most pressing contemporary questions in multilingual reading today, at least in the United States, revolve around the learners' *oral* proficiencies in the native and in the new language in relation to *reading* in the native and in the new language. *Vis-à-vis* classroom practice, one central question often asked about these relations is, “Should we wait to teach reading in the new language until students have developed some optimal level of oral proficiency in the new language?”

Let me briefly and minimally suggest two possible competing theoretical outlooks of how oral language processes and reading processes might be related, let's say across two cultures using alphabetic written systems. In both outlooks, language understandings learned in one language are used in the other language. However, in one theoretical stance that I'll call the General Factor Theory (cf. Cronbach, 1970), one generic set of language subprocesses undergirds a student's learning of different facets of a "new" language—for example, phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. A cornerstone of this outlook is that language subprocesses are not attached to a particular "mode" (reading, writing, listening, speaking) as they are learned. Rather, once a subprocess is learned, that understanding is available for use in any mode.

In a competing theoretical outlook that I will call the Oral Precedence Theory, a cornerstone tenet is that oral language understandings in the new language form the bases for reading and writing processes and development in the new language. Hypothetically, new language understandings would be first acquired and learned in the specific modalities of listening and speaking, and these understandings then would provide a foundation for learning about reading and writing. Oral understandings in the new language would become available for use and transfer to reading and writing in the new language.

These competing theoretical outlooks have implications for whether and how reading in the new language could begin in concert with listening and speaking in the new language. According to the General Factor Theory, a student could learn about a facet or process involved in the new language—for example, about a syntactical structure in the new language—first through listening and speaking, and then his or her understanding could be used and manifested in reading and writing. It is *equally possible* according to this theory that a student could learn about a syntactical structure in the new language through reading and writing *first* and that understanding could then be manifested later in listening and speaking. Conversely, according to the Oral Precedence Theory, students should first develop some optimal level of oral proficiency in the new language before learning to read and write it.

Is it possible that at least part of the controversy around when to begin reading instruction in the new language arises when some researchers and practitioners tacitly adhere to the General Factor Theory while others tacitly adhere to the Oral Precedence Theory? Would detailed explication of theories such as these assist differing "camps" of researchers and

practitioners in better understanding their own "locations" in the possible array of theories? Could such explication also lead researchers to consider creative designs for studies that might render clearer support for selected contentions over others? Could such explication provide a basis for designing a *series* of related studies that collectively over time could render keener insights about the issues surrounding relationships between multilingual oracy and literacy?

A second example of how increased awareness of theory and greater theory specification could move multilingual literacy forward has to do with the possibility of creating interlocking webs of theories. To provide another rough illustration, imagine a sort of "grand" ever-broadening theory of multilingual literacy in which multilingual literacy was viewed as involving multiple, interacting webs of factors including, for example, individual cognitions and affects for and about language—oral and literate—in both native and new language, the past and present school and classroom environment of the individual, and the past and present family and community environments. Consider the possibility that many of the webs of factors are equal in importance and moreover that various factors within webs interact and that various webs of factors also interact.

Koda's (1996) work on second-language word recognition provided an illustration of a researcher working across subsets of webs, not in a grand theory in which a wide variety of factors are accounted for but nonetheless across webs of theories. Specifically, she connected theoretical webs addressing native-language word reading and new-language word reading. Through examining word recognition research on second-language learners (mostly adults) who have already learned to read in their native language, Koda suggested a "superordinate" (my term) connectionist theory of second-language word recognition in reading, focusing on the necessity of accounting for understandings of native-language orthography. She pointed to the ways in which first- and second-language orthographies are evoked during second-language word recognition and how they interactively mold second-language word recognition. In addition to exemplifying the work of making connections across two or more theoretical arenas, Koda's research-based "superordinate" theory building across native- and second-language reading provides an example for other researchers of how the "step up" to theory can potentially create ideas for future exploration.

Currently, it is perhaps more common for researchers to work within particular webs. For instance, whereas some researchers have focused their

research more on the cognitions involved in multilingual reading (e.g., Fitzgerald & Noblit, 1999, 2000; Geva, 1999; Geva, Wade-Woolley, & Shany, 1993; Geva, Yaghoub-Zadeh, & Schuster, 2000; Hakuta, Ferdman, & Diaz, 1987; Weber & Longhi, 2001), others have focused more on the sociocultural features of multilingual literacy (e.g., Manyak, 2001; Moll, 2000; Moll & Dworin, 1996; Willet, 1995). The first set of researchers centered their work in theories of the individual psychology of reading and of learning to read in English, while the other set of researchers centered their work on social and cultural theories. The former tends to design research focused on cognitions in reading, take samples and measures of those cognitions, and describe students' development of cognitive understandings about reading. The latter tends to design research focused on the socialization and micropolitics of the classroom, school, or community and to collect data in markedly different ways and concludes by describing students' literacy development as it evolves in relation to the classroom, school, or community environments.

While both sets of researchers can make important contributions to the field, there is little or no discussion in the literature of how results of such different studies might relate to one another or whether they might be theoretically connected in some way. Could a web of interlocking theories—grand theory—help us to locate different sets of researchers in a way in which we could better understand and value results of their respective studies? Might results of the two sets of studies in my preceding example be compatible? When viewed from a grand theory outlook, do the results from one set inform results from the other? Would a grand theory help if researchers were to position their research questions and findings in relation to the grand web? By clarifying the place of our findings in the grand theory, would we be more thoughtful and cautious about the parameters of our work and the generalizations we make from our findings? Would a grand theory of interlocking webs help us to plan better programmatic research so that findings could build upon previous findings and inform iterations of the grand theory?

## Implications of considering greater emphasis on multilingual literacy theory development

There are at least four immediate implications that derive from a call for increased awareness of,

and emphasis on, multilingual literacy theory. The first is that multilingual researchers should be reflective about the theories from which they work and where their theories are positioned in the field. Their theoretical underpinnings should also be explicitly stated in reports of their research. Such reflection and explicitness boosts the potential significance of multilingual research because when a theoretical frame is visible, there is greater promise of interpreting findings across studies in more meaningful ways.

A second implication arises from the idea of achieving a grand theory of interconnected webs of theories. While multilingual literacy is, and has been, examined from many different perspectives in many different fields—such as linguistics, speech and language development, sociology, early childhood education, and psychology—discussions among researchers and theoreticians across fields has been infrequent. Similarly, multilingual literacy research is done around the world, but international collaborations are rare. Increased interdisciplinary and transnational work would likely greatly inform the field and contribute to more detailed webs of theories about multilingual literacy.

Practically, while independent multilingual literacy researchers in general should consider their theoretical underpinnings, make them explicit, and be aware of potentially competing theories, the conduct of research based upon, or contributing to, such interlocking theories might involve differing compositions of interdisciplinary teams. Some might be large teams of researchers, perhaps teams seeking large-scale grants. Some might be smaller groups working on smaller subsets of issues. Ideally, interdisciplinary international teams would also be able to obtain funding, though, to my knowledge, such funding is not available at present.

A third implication of increased specification of theory and of building interconnecting webs of theories is that policy issues might be better informed. Many of the major current controversies and policy issues in the field of multilingual reading today are nested in two or more possible webs within a grand theory of interlocking webs. For instance, consider the policy question "Should we withhold reading instruction in a new language until some optimal level of oral proficiency is developed?" That question at least in part focuses on the potential theoretical linkages of a web of oral language theory, a web of reading theory, and a web of sociopolitical concerns. "Should we generally ensure that all students learn to read in their native language before reading in the new language?" That question at least in part centers on the potential theoretical linkages

of a web about native-language understandings and about new-language understandings, about the theoretical connections between native and new languages (e.g., regarding orthographies), and about cultural and political values. "How does familial culture affect new-language learners' multilingual reading development?" That question focuses on the potential linkages of theoretical webs of family and community dynamics and reading. Certainly there are other questions lodged within theoretically related webs about schools, school culture, society, politics, and economics as well. Specifying interconnected webs of theories might provide a sort of organizational scheme or a systematic basis for examining such important policy questions.

A fourth implication flows from the idea of a grand theory of interconnected webs of theories. That is, researchers might better understand and appreciate that their own multilingual literacy research and practice are situated within a subset of theories rather than seeking overarching generalities from a research base that is confined to particular webs or domains. As my own learning about multilingual literacy has continued to grow over recent years, I have come to appreciate more and more that a grand theory of interlocking theoretical webs suggests possibilities for multiple theories of multilingual reading. At least this is a contention that deserves more attention. For instance, it is possible that multilingual reading processes shaped by learning to read English in an all-English first-grade classroom setting are quite different from reading processes shaped by learning to read English in an all-English, fifth-grade classroom setting. Perhaps the English reading processes of many first-grade second-language learners appear to be quite similar to their peers who are native-English speakers, whereas fifth-grade, English-language learners' reading processes are not very similar to their peers who are native speakers of English. Or what about reading processes of native-language German high school students in Germany learning to read French or of native-Spanish speakers learning to read in Spanish in bilingual education programs in the United States? Might reading processes of such different individuals in such different circumstances be more different than alike?

## Closing

Increased attention to multilingual literacy theory might enrich our understandings of multilingual learners' literacy in many ways, most especially by leading us to create new visions of research and in-

struction and perhaps by helping researchers and practitioners to work and learn together across fields in unprecedented ways.

## REFERENCES

- AUGUST, D., & HAKUTA, K. (Eds.). (1997). *Improving schooling for language-minority children: A research agenda*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- BERNHARDT, E.B. (1991). *Reading development in a second language: Theoretical, empirical, and classroom perspectives*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- BERNHARDT, E.B. (2000). Second-language reading as a case study of reading scholarship in the 20th century. In M.L. Kamil, P.B. Mosenthal, P.D. Pearson, & R. Barr (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. 3, pp. 791-811). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- CARRELL, P.L., DEVINE, J., & ESKEY, D.E. (Eds.). (1988). *Interactive approaches in second language reading*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- CRESWELL, J.W. (2002). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.
- CRONBACH, L.J. (1970). *Essentials of psychological testing* (3rd ed.). New York: Harper & Row.
- DEGROOT, M.H. (1969). *Optimal statistical decisions*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- FITZGERALD, J. (1995). English-as-a-second-language learners' cognitive reading processes: A review of research in the United States. *Review of Educational Research*, 65, 145-190.
- FITZGERALD, J., & CUMMINS, J. (1999). Bridging disciplines to critique a national research agenda for language-minority children's schooling. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 34, 378-390.
- FITZGERALD, J., & NOBLIT, G.W. (1999). About hopes, aspirations, and uncertainty: First-grade English-language learners' emergent reading. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 31, 133-182.
- FITZGERALD, J., & NOBLIT, G.W. (2000). Balance in the making: Learning to read in an ethnically diverse first-grade classroom. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92, 1-20.
- GARCÍA, G.E. (2000). Bilingual children's reading. In M.L. Kamil, P.B. Mosenthal, P.D. Pearson, & R. Barr (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Volume 3, pp. 813-834). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- GEVA, E. (1999). Learning to read in a second language: Implications for assessment and instruction. In T. Nunes (Ed.), *Integrating literacy, research and practice* (pp. 343-368). Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Kluwer.
- GEVA, E., WADE-WOOLLEY, L., & SHANY, M. (1993). The concurrent development of spelling and decoding in two different orthographies. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 25, 383-406.
- GEVA, E., YAGHOUB-ZADEH, Z., & SCHUSTER, B. (2000). Understanding individual differences in word recognition skills of ESL children. *Annals of Dyslexia*, 50, 123-154.
- HAKUTA, K., FERDMAN, B.M., & DIAZ, R.M. (1987). Bilingualism and cognitive development: Three perspectives. In S. Rosenberg (Ed.), *Advances in applied psycholinguistics: Reading, writing, and language learning* (Vol. 2, pp. 284-319). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- HILL, W. (1977-1978). Concerning reading theory: A reaction to Carver's "Toward a theory of reading comprehension and reading." *Reading Research Quarterly*, 13, 64-91.
- KERLINGER, F.N. (1965). *Foundations of behavioral research*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- KODA, K. (1996). L2 word recognition research: A critical review. *The Modern Language Journal*, 80, 450-460.
- MANYAK, P.C. (2001). Participation, hybridity, and carnival: A situated analysis of a dynamic literacy practice in a primary-grade English immersion class. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 33, 423-465.
- MITCHELL, R., & MYLES, F. (1998). *Second language learning theories*. London, New York, Sydney, Australia, & Auckland, New Zealand: Arnold.
- MOLL, L. (2000). Inspired by Vygotsky: Ethnographic experiments in education. In C. Lee & P. Smagorinsky (Eds.), *Vygotskian perspectives on literacy research: Constructing meaning through collaborative inquiry* (pp. 256-268). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- MOLL, L., & DWORIN, J. (1996). Bilingual development in class-

rooms: Social dynamics and cultural possibilities. In D. Hicks (Ed.), *Discourse, learning, and schooling* (pp. 221–246). New York: Cambridge University Press.

PEDHAZUR, E.J., & SCHMELKIN, L.P. (1991). *Measurement, design, and analysis: An integrated approach*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

WEBER, R.M., & LONGHI, T. (2001). Beginning in English: The growth of linguistic and literate abilities in Spanish-speaking first graders. *Reading Research and Instruction*, 41, 19–50.

WILLET, J. (1995). Becoming first graders in an L2: An ethnographic study of L2 socialization. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29, 473–503.

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

I thank Rose-Marie Weber, Professor, State University of New York at Albany, USA, and the *Reading Research Quarterly* editorial team for comments on earlier drafts.

# Literacy and Latino students in the United States: Some considerations, questions, and new directions.

ROBERT T. JIMÉNEZ

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

The term *literacy* is interpreted and defined in different ways by scholars, legislators, and members of the general public. The more formalized statements of literacy are not, however, simply disinterested or detached musings but rather active rhetorical efforts to legitimate the status quo and preserve the privileges enjoyed by specific groups. In most cases, these interests can be traced back to those aspects of the authors' identities that draw from, reflect, and are shaped by their ethnicity or race, class, gender, and other salient factors. An important distinction for this discussion is the difference or, perhaps I should note, the sameness between these *political* perspectives on literacy as opposed to those elusive aspects of literacy that are, at least in the minds of some, relatively stable. Although important, formal statements seldom match the ways that literacy itself is enacted, these enactments are contingent upon who the participants are, where said literacy practices occur, which ideas and technologies are available, and what the prevailing interests and goals of the participants are. In other words, formal statements fail to anticipate, or even fully describe, the roles played by literacy in the lives of students, their families, and teachers. Still, the formal definitions are politically important because they serve to condone or delegitimize literacy practices that either challenge or uphold the status quo. By way of illustration, I refer the

reader to current notions of literacy that claim to be grounded in notions of verifiability, reliability, and replicability (National Reading Panel, 2000a, 2000b; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Only instantiations of literacy reducible to such terms are deemed "scientific" and thus worthy of official state recognition and support. It should be pointed out, however, that these efforts have been quite successful with respect to imposing conditions and terms for instruction, curriculum design and selection, assessment, and state-supported research as can be seen in recent legislation (see <http://edworkforce.house.gov/issues/107th/education/nclb/nclb.htm>). These political realities also suggest to the astute reader what some of the more problematic aspects of consensus can be in the political arena and why *disensus* may, at least in some cases, be preferable (Dhillon & Standish, 2000). In other words, I believe that far from advancing the academic achievement of marginalized groups, these mainstream definitions of literacy will serve only to legitimate and exacerbate current inequities.

Given the overall context described above, I would like to explore alternative conceptions of literacy that emphasize economic, historical, transnational, technological, and other expanded notions of literacy that I believe hold much more potential for improving access to literacy in a multilingual world.