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Orthographic learning and self-teaching in a bilingual and biliterate context



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine self-teaching in the context of English as a foreign language literacy acquisition. Three groups comprising 88 sixth-grade children participated. The first group consisted of Russian–Hebrew-speaking bilinguals who had acquired basic reading skills in Russian as their first language (L1) and literacy and who were literate in Hebrew as a second language. The second group consisted of Russian–Hebrew-speaking bilinguals who had not learned to read in their native Russian but had acquired Hebrew as their first literate language. The third group consisted of Hebrew-speaking monolingual children who were literate in Hebrew. This design facilitated examining the effect of biliteracy and bilingualism on basic English reading skills. We hypothesized that due to the *proximity* between the Russian and English orthographies as opposed to the Hebrew–English “distance,” the Russian–Hebrew-speaking biliterate group who acquired basic reading and spelling skills in L1 Russian would have superior self-teaching in English as opposed to the two other groups. The standard two-session self-teaching paradigm was employed with naming (speed and accuracy) and orthographic choice as posttest measures of orthographic learning. Results showed that after 4 years of English instruction, all three groups showed evidence of self-teaching on naming speed and orthographic recognition. The Russian–Hebrew-speaking biliterate group, moreover, showed a partial advantage over the comparison groups for initial decoding of target pseudowords and clear-cut superiority for measures of later orthographic learning, thereby showing self-teaching while supporting the script dependence hypothesis.

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Introduction

There is growing concern among social scientists that conclusions from studies based on highly educated populations from wealthy industrialized Western cultures (especially native speakers of English and other Indo-European languages) may have limited generalizability regarding human behavior in general (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). These reservations also extend to the field of language and literacy (Beveridge & Bak, 2012; Evans & Levinson, 2009; Share, 2008a). Share (2008a), for example, argued that the idiosyncracies of English orthography have confined reading science to an insular Anglocentric research agenda addressing theoretical and applied issues with only limited relevance for a universalistic science of reading (see also Frost, 2012).

Despite the fact that nearly all models of reading are exclusively Anglocentric, most languages are not like English (Evans & Levinson, 2009). Furthermore, more individuals in the world learn to read in additional language literacy than in their first language literacy (Gunderson, Odo, & D'Silva, 2011). Even in the English-speaking world, the majority of those learning to read English are no longer native English speakers (Crystal, 1997). Therefore, it behooves researchers to test their models and theories beyond the confines of monolinguals learning to read in their native tongue.

The aim of the current study was to examine a popular theory of reading acquisition, the *self-teaching hypothesis* (Share, 1995, 2008b), among children who are acquiring literacy in a non-native tongue. In view of the fact that many studies of literacy learning in a foreign or additional language often confound bilingualism and biliteracy, our study sought to disentangle these two factors. We also wished to avoid the potential confounds associated with studying native and non-native languages that belong to the same language subfamily or share a common orthography. Our study focused on English because this is the most commonly learned non-native language in the world (Crystal, 2008). Our sample comprised English language learners who are confronted with the task of learning to read and write in a structurally unrelated language and dissimilar orthography (as are the majority of English language learners worldwide). Our study took into account the influence of both biliteracy and bilingualism in three distinct languages (English, Russian, and Hebrew) and three distinct orthographies (Roman, Cyrillic, and Hebrew). To this end, three groups were recruited. All three groups were learning to read and write in English in the same instructional context but differed in their prior language and literacy background. The first group comprised Russian–Hebrew-speaking bilinguals who had acquired basic reading skills in alphabetic (Cyrillic) Russian as their first language (L1) and literacy and who were literate in Hebrew as a second language (L2) and were in the process of acquiring English as a foreign language (EFL) literacy where English was the third sequential language (L3). The second group comprised Russian–Hebrew-speaking bilinguals who had not learned to read in their native Russian but had acquired Hebrew as their first literate language and were also in the process of acquiring EFL literacy in English as their second sequential language. The third group comprised Hebrew-speaking monolingual children who had acquired literacy in their native Hebrew and were in the process of acquiring EFL literacy in English, which was their second sequential language. This design enabled us to distinguish the effect of biliteracy and bilingualism. If bilingualism per se is the critical factor in English language learning, then both Russian–Hebrew bilingual groups (monoliterates and biliterates alike) will be superior to the Hebrew monolinguals. If biliteracy per se is the crucial ingredient, then only the biliterates will enjoy an advantage in English literacy learning compared with the two monoliterate groups (Russian–Hebrew bilinguals and Hebrew monolinguals).

Returning to the overarching goals of this study, two issues were examined: (a) the self-teaching hypothesis in the context of learning to read in a non-native context and (b) the challenges of acquiring EFL literacy among non-native English language learners from different L1 orthographic backgrounds within the framework of the *script-dependent hypothesis*.

The self-teaching hypothesis

To become a skilled reader, recognition of individual words must be fluent and near effortless in order to free the reader's attention to meaning. It is widely agreed that the skilled reader is able to

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