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Tarone, Elaine; Bigelow, Martha & Hansen, Kit (2009). *Literacy and Second Language Oracy*. NY: Oxford University Press.

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In this volume, Tarone, Bigelow, and Hansen identify two gaps in current second language acquisition (SLA) research. First of all, they note that illiterate and low-literate second language (L2) learners are rarely the targets of SLA inquiry and thus have been left out of the SLA database. The authors consider this omission as a problem that abates the power of current SLA theories to the context outside schools and academia. Such an omission, as the authors suggest, is “an outcome of a more general theoretical problem in SLA research—namely, a general neglect of the social dimension in the process of SLA” (p.2). They argue that, in order to bridge this gap, it is necessary that the field of SLA includes less-literate L2 learners because their inclusion “will contribute to SLA theory-building” (p.3) and allow SLA researchers to broaden their view of the nature of SLA and of the human potential for language learning.

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Second, they indicate that relatively little, if any, SLA research has been dedicated to the investigation of the influence of first language (L1) or L2 literacy on the cognitive processing of oral L2.

The first two chapters then raise the awareness of the relationship between literacy and oral language processing. The authors review research on the relationship between the ability to decode alphabetic print script and the ability to perform oral phonological awareness tasks. A link is presented: alphabetic print literacy significantly improves individuals' ability to explicitly process and manipulate units of oral language. Thus, the authors reason that illiterate or low-literate L2 learners are likely to encounter difficulty during oral language processing since these learners do not have literacy-based tools (e.g. phonological awareness and visual formal lexical representations) for working memory to parse oral language. To test this claim, the authors focus their study on examining the effects of literacy level on the following areas: recast noticing, task effects, and interlanguage features.

Research methodology is laid out in Chapter 3, where the authors present the procedure of participant recruitment, assessment, and assignment. The authors clearly specify how they arrived at the decision of selecting the eight participants and how these participants were assigned to either *low* or *moderate* literacy group based on the scores obtained from the Native Language Literacy Screening Device (NLLSD) and Speaking Proficiency English Assessment Kit (SPEAK). Data were collected using tasks with English question formation as the target form for investigation and recast as the main corrective feedback provided on grammatical errors.

The data were first analyzed to examine the relationship between learners' degree of alphabetic print literacy and the accuracy with which they repeat oral recasts of their erroneous question forms (Chapter 4). Noticing of recast is operationalized as learners modifying production following recasts. The results support that alphabetic print literacy level is related to the learners' accuracy of recall of oral

recasts, with the moderate literacy group outperforming the low literacy group. A follow-up qualitative analysis, focusing on one low-literate learner, reveals that the learner has difficulty recalling recasts on his morphosyntactic errors while having no problem picking up recasts involving lexical items. This finding leads the authors to conclude that this learner's low alphabetic literacy skills may not afford him sufficient metalinguistic knowledge to use in parsing the recasts he received, forcing him to rely primarily on tools of semantic processing.

In Chapter 5, the authors investigate the role of context and literacy level in accuracy of recall in two tasks: recast (a contextualized task) and elicited-imitation (a decontextualized task). The authors demonstrate that regardless of literacy level, the highest rates of accurate recall occurred in the recast task. In contrast, more inaccurate recalls took place in the elicited-imitation task, with the low-literate group producing the highest inaccurate percentage. Using these findings, the authors suggest to L2 teachers working with low-literate learners the importance of shared context, co-constructed meaning, and repetition in assisting low-literate learners in oral language processing. Data generated via the two tasks also point out that low-literate learners attempt semantically plausible constructions rather than a phonological approximation of the trigger when they are unable to recall what is said in the elicited-imitation task. Again, it is supported that low-literate learners rely more on semantic processing of input. In addition, the data also suggest that low-literate learners cannot process certain aspects of L2 oral input as well as more literate learners.

The authors later found that it is the semantically redundant morphemes that the low-literate learners cannot process (Chapter 6). In fact, the authors reveal that learners with lower level of alphabetic literacy not only produce fewer semantically redundant morphemes but also less complex sentences. These findings further strengthen the possibility that semantic processing is the main mechanism low-literate L2 learners fall back on in oral language processing and that sentence complexity develops with linguistic literacy.

Overall, this book leads readers step by step to unpack how low-literate L2 learners process oral L2 input with carefully articulated chapters taking readers gradually from the rationales to the methods and to the findings. The empirical findings of this book provide L2 teachers with two pedagogical implications (Chapter 7). First, it is important for teachers working with low-literate L2 learners to use meaningful and contextualized activities in classroom practice. Second, it is important to teach these L2 learners how to decode and encode an alphabetic script; that is, to build the connection between oral language and written word.

In addition, this book is the first step in compiling evidence to suggest that literacy level can be used as a variable in SLA research to address the social, cognitive, linguistic, and pedagogical needs of less alphabetically literate L2 learners. The authors' arguments are clear and soundly grounded in SLA theories and are provided with supporting empirical evidence. However, it should be noted that the participants in this book still speak an alphabetic first language (Somali) and that the participants are not totally illiterate both in their L1 and L2. Thus, the L1 influence cannot be ruled out during the tasks. Thus, it would be interesting to see and worthwhile to investigate if the same findings would hold with learners that speak a non-alphabetic L1, such as Mandarin Chinese, a language that also does not utilize morphology. Nonetheless, by taking the first step to investigate the role of literacy level in oral L2 processing, this book makes a valuable contribution to SLA research and would be of interest to students and researchers in the fields of L2 teaching, learning, and literacy development.

### About the Reviewer

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