Multiple Perspectives on the Role of English Literacy Skills in the Curriculum of Young English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) Learners in a Taiwanese Urban Context

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This qualitative study explores the perceived influence of literacy skills on speaking skills for young English learners in Taiwan. Reading and writing skills are often neglected for the sake of improving learners’ oral production. Previous research has shown a significant connection between oral production and literacy skills. The written modality is an asset in the EFL environment where there is a lack of native oral input, and integrating written language with oral for young ESL learners could lead to gains in oral proficiency. Interviews with teachers, school managers, parents, and a curriculum writer may indicate the inequality of time allocation towards literacy skills, and classroom observations may confirm this. Findings may reveal that teachers are not aware of parents’ needs for their children’s literacy skills. Teachers hope to spend more time on literacy in the classroom but are hindered by a full curriculum. Directions for future research are discussed.

Literacy skills are traditionally considered secondary to the development of oral language in many contexts (Harklau, 2002; Williams, 2008). Young learners of English commonly acquire the spoken language first, then they learn to read, and lastly, they write. From this view, one might infer that children’s reading development could be influenced by his or her oral ability, and how well a child writes may depend on both his or her speaking and reading abilities. This has resulted in a discussion among language acquisition researchers and among language teachers over whether written English (reading and writing) should be used to develop oral English skills for beginning ESL students. In other words, is an adequate level of oral language skill a necessity for literacy instruction in English? Researchers in child and adult language development (e.g., Kim, 2008; Olson, 2002; Williams, 2008; Wong, 2001) have indicated an interrelated and complex relationship between literacy and oral skills. Several researchers believe that there is no unidirectional influence of one modality over the other but rather a bidirectional relationship between written and oral modalities.

The aim of this qualitative study is to explore the perceived influence of reading and writing on the spoken skills of young English learners in Taiwan. In my experience as a language teacher in Taiwan, reading and writing skills are often neglected for the sake of improving young learners’ oral production in Taiwanese private schools.
despite the fact that previous research has shown a significant connection between oral production and literacy skills. In fact, integrating written language with oral production for young ESL learners might lead to greater gains in oral proficiency (Blake, 2009; El-Koumy, 1998; Kim, 2008; Weber & Longhi-Chrilin, 2001).

To understand what takes place in this context, I will examine the perspectives of some stakeholders at a school in Taipei, namely, teachers, school managers, parents of Taiwanese learners (of L2 English), and curriculum writers. The topics to be addressed in this study include the participants' views on teaching literacy skills, methods of teaching literacy, time allocation to reading and writing, time allocation to oral practice, and views on the links between literacy skills and oral production.

EFL students at the kindergarten and elementary levels are underresearched populations throughout the world, and research with regard to the development of second-language literacy among children scarcely involves such populations. Although this study does not focus on the development of speech and writing of learners within the EFL context, it does nevertheless investigate the focus of instruction, whether on oral or written English, and the possible reasons for preferring to focus on one modality rather than the other. It also investigates whether stakeholders are aware of the potential bidirectional relationships between the oral modality and written modality.

**Literature Review**

Second language teaching and learning has historically been about the acquisition of spoken language; in other words, the focus has been on teaching speaking because written production seemed less likely than spoken language to be a reflection of English proficiency. Research, especially bilingual research, has concerned itself primarily with the study of spoken language (Leki, 2000; Valdés, 1992). Only a few empirical studies have investigated the effects of modality (Polio, 2012; Weissberg, 2006; Wong, 2001) and very little research has been done on the early L2 writing of young learners (Matsuda & De Pew, 2002).

The development of written and oral skills are often viewed as separate processes (Strube, 2011). Most researchers on child reading development hold the assumption that the development of reading depends on prior phonological awareness, and as such, literacy acquisition depends on a child's speech processing skills (Tarone & Bigelow, 2005). However, other researchers in child language development lean toward the opposite position in that the development of literacy increases phonological awareness. Olson (2002) stated that writing introduces our speech to us; that is, writing shows our speech as having a particular structure. “To segment words, the child has first to learn that an utterance can be segmented into words, and that knowledge too may be acquired in the process of becoming literate” (Olson, 2002, p. 156).

Some research challenges the idea that ESL learners need to become proficient in spoken English to learn the basics of written English. Several studies have taken for granted that children have basic implicit knowledge of their first language and thus a foundation for acquiring the form and use of another language in print as well as in speech (Weber & Longhi-Chrilin, 2001). In Taiwan, the situation is different in that knowledge of the learners’ first language
(Mandarin Chinese) does not necessarily provide children with a foundation for L2 literacy because of the different writing systems used by Mandarin and English. The use of different orthographic systems has also received little attention in L2 literacy research, particularly with children. Buckwalter and Lo (2002) studied a five-year-old Taiwanese learner of English, and the case study gave insights into the debate as to whether the introduction of literacy in languages with two different writing systems helps or hinders literacy development in both languages. They found that their participant acknowledged Chinese and English as separate writing systems with different characteristics—and he was aware of the differences. These researchers also concluded that literacy development in one language had a positive effect on literacy development in the other. Interacting with text and constructing meaning from it led to foundational concepts in literacy. Reading and writing both English and Chinese help to develop the basic concepts of literacy. “This knowledge serves as a support base for literacy in any language, regardless of the surface level differences that may occur due to the nature of the writing system” (Buckwalter & Lo, 2002, p. 287).

The effect of home literacy practices on children’s language abilities and later academic success has been well documented (for understanding associations between early reading and later language skills, see Karass & Braungart-Riker, 2005). Other research has provided evidence that joint writing activities (writing activities completed through parent/child cooperation) were more effective for literacy development than joint reading for children aged three to five (Levy, Gong, Hessels, Evans, & Jared, 2006). These joint writing activities improved children’s performance on phonological awareness and word writing. On the other hand, the usefulness of L2 reading for receptive skills was suggested by Elley and Mangubhai (1983). They found that reading skills transferred not only to productive skills (i.e., speaking and writing), but also to other areas of academics.

Kim (2008) argued that oral language and literacy skills can develop simultaneously. She provided two different types of instruction (i.e., integrated and oral-language-based instruction) to two young ESL learners. The results showed that the participant who was exposed to the integrated instruction made gains on most English oral and written assessment measures. Not only do these findings suggest that it is possible to develop literacy skills without a predetermined level of oral skills, but also that literacy skills can be used to develop oral language skills for young ESL learners. The findings showed that reading and writing can play a positive role in the development of oral language and that students’ reading and writing were important and might provide learners with chances to record their ideas as well as to further their language development.

Another relevant study was conducted by Weber and Longhi-Chrilin (2001). These researchers studied two Spanish first graders and suggested that children can readily apply themselves to reading and writing in English in spite of limited spoken ability. Both children achieved much toward acquiring early English literacy, such as reading words orally, without a strong oral foundation. These children, however, found themselves in a setting that allowed them access to spoken English most of
the day, which is much different in an EFL environment such as Taiwan, which will be discussed later.

A number of other studies have also shown that writing can improve oral ability (Blake, 2009; El-Koumy, 1998; Kim, 2008). El-Koumy (1998) used dialogue journal writing as a tool in the EFL classroom in Egypt to help improve oral fluency. The posttest results indicated that the experimental group that used dialogue journals scored significantly higher than the control group on oral fluency tests.

Blake (2009) addressed the issue of improving oral fluency in a second language with the use of internet chats. His study was conducted in an effort to contribute to research with regards to the oral-written connection. The significantly higher gain scores in oral assessment of the internet chat group in a university-level ESL class support the notion that oral fluency improvement is possible within a text-based environment. In an exit survey, parents, teachers and learners indicated their skepticism about the use of writing and reading to improve oral fluency, and therefore more studies are needed to promote the idea of reading and writing as important factors in oral fluency.

Related to Blake’s findings, Hardison (2011) found that the percentage of time L2 English (L1 Korean) graduate students spent using English (vs. their L1) for various types of electronic communication significantly predicted their fluency scores in an oral interaction task.

Several researchers have shown that the written modality could be helpful to draw learners’ attention to form, and that could have a facilitative effect on overall proficiency. Van Patten (1990) indicated that adult L2 learners of Spanish have difficulty simultaneously attending to the meaning and form of aural input, especially when the grammatical form is not essential for understanding the content. Van Patten only addressed the aural mode in his Spanish L2 data, but Wong (2001) compared the written and aural modes and focused on French learners’ acquisition of English. Wong (2001) found that learners can pay attention to form and meaning at the same time in writing, unlike speaking. Even though the participants in the Wong study vary greatly from the participants in the current study (i.e., college level students vs. young learners), Wong's findings have relevance in that they clearly indicated that “attentional constraints do not affect the aural and written modes in the same way” (Wong, 2001, p. 360). Processing written input may be less taxing on the language learner’s attentional resources because written input is segmented and can be reread.

The mutual interdependence of writing and oral skills is perhaps obvious, but in the past, speaking was seen as the precursor, and writing was viewed as the outcome of proficiency. Rubin and Kang (2008) suggested several ways in which written language acts as a foundation for oral proficiency. Acquiring the print code affects the metalinguistic representation of speech; that is, when “children can visualize language because they have cracked the print code, they consequently become more aware of the stream of speech as composed of segmentable units” (p. 215). While speaking can often stimulate writing, the opposite is also true. Learners may talk about their writing processes, or they may talk about their texts as objects. Writing can also script oral performance, or it can guide interaction. Writing requires a slower rate of production, and therefore, it
allows the opportunity for more reflection and revision (Rubin & Kang, 2008).

The acquisition of the ability to decode an alphabetic script has been shown to change the way in which an individual processes oral language (Tarone & Bigelow, 2005). In a study with illiterate adults, the results indicated that the acquisition of the grapheme-phoneme correspondence in learning to read an alphabetic script provided important cognitive tools, for instance, the awareness of linguistic units encoded in written language, for the processing of oral language. Tarone and Bigelow (2005) stated that an adequate SLA model should also be able to account for the learning experiences of illiterate and low-literate multilinguals, and the directionality between phonological awareness and literacy development cannot be fully understood by working exclusively with children. Thus, incorporating research with an illiterate adult population has the potential to give a much broader picture of SLA.

Other research has indicated that language may emerge first in the written modality before speaking (Harklau, 2002; Weissberg, 2006). The written modality took preference over the spoken modality as the preferred mode for the development of L2 syntax for a group of ESL learners at an American university (Weisberg, 2006). Certain grammatical forms appeared in particular modalities for all five participants in a variety of oral and written language production tasks, such as oral interviews and written essays. Irregular verb forms, personal pronouns, prepositions, and plurals most often appeared first in speech. Regular past morphemes, negatives, modal auxiliaries, passives and perfect verb tenses appeared in writing before they appeared in speech. These findings also have pedagogical implications for the EFL and ESL classroom, and research with more participants could shed light on these findings. With these ESL learners, written English syntax appears not to have developed on the basis of an existing oral proficiency. These findings have several implications for L2 writing and speaking instruction in that they suggest a preference for writing over speech as the main modality for morphosyntactic development. Weisberg (2006) showed the importance of writing in the L2 acquisition process of adults, but some generalizations, to a limited extent, can be made with young learners in Taiwan because the situation is similar to what Weisberg described. Weisberg put it very aptly: “It seems clear that the L2 composition classroom is not just a place to learn about writing; for some students it may be the best place to learn the new language” (2006, p. 52).

The relationship between the development of written and oral proficiency is a dynamic and complex one. Williams (2008) discussed the influence of writing on the development of oral proficiency. Research has shown that writers are more likely to develop their writing when they have a chance to talk about it. Learners can also use the written modality to test out new forms and access acquired forms they do not yet totally control. The use of a new form in writing “increases the likelihood that it will be produced later in a more spontaneous setting, such as conversation” (Williams, 2008, p. 13). There is less pressure in writing than speaking, which allows learners a safe and more private place to try out new language about which they do not feel confident. The aforementioned
discussion makes apparent the possible benefits from the written modality for learners of English.

The role of writing and reading in lower-level curricula needs to be reconsidered. For example, Maxim (2002) concluded from his study of beginning L2 German learners at a university that they benefitted from a curriculum where extensive reading was incorporated. He also proposed that beginning students could develop more than just reading skills, but also greater grammatical and communicative competence. Even though Maxim’s study involved adult beginning learners, it might be applicable to young learners in Taiwan.

The education system in Singapore has similarities with that of Taiwan in the sense that children are attending English schools, but they do not come from English-speaking homes. In addition, teachers in Singapore face many external constraints such as rigid syllabi and limited curriculum time (Ng & Sullivan, 2001). Moving away from a curriculum that relied heavily on writing, the Singaporean government implemented a Reading Skills Project (REAP) that focused on the acquisition of reading skills. Several years later, tests revealed that REAP schools outperformed non-REAP schools with regards to speaking skills, amongst others. Ng and Sullivan (2001) found that the students who read more also spoke English more confidently and responded more in classroom discussions.

**English Within the Taiwanese Context**

It is relevant to consider how the Taiwanese perceive the English language. English has been considered a prestigious language for study in Taiwan since the end of the Ching dynasty (1644–1911), when the Chinese society started to be more welcoming of Western civilization. The prestigious position of English continued after World War II because of the ties between the United States and Taiwan (Wang, 2000). English, especially American English, has remained popular in Taiwan, and the Taiwanese government has promoted English education to a great extent in recent years. Wang (2000) indicated that English serves an instrumental function in Taiwanese society, in that Taiwanese people depend on English for knowledge from professional publications and English language media. Despite the popularity of English, Chinese remains the medium of instruction in both elementary and high schools, and both students and teachers indicated “that the language most often used in English class in high school is Chinese” (Wang, 2000, p. 129). Lai (2009) also confirmed that English, although a major foreign language taught in school, is not used much by people in society. In the city of Taipei, the only suburb where learners of English might be exposed to English in everyday life is Tienmu, a popular area for expatriates and their families. However, in most other areas of Taiwan, only Taiwanese, Mandarin Chinese, and Hakka are spoken, and learners of English do not have many opportunities to hear English outside of the classroom.

Children start learning English very young, as early as kindergarten. There is also a lasting trend for parents to send their children to private language schools or bushibans to better compete with peers and do well on entrance tests to be admitted to good elementary and high schools in Taiwan. Previously, English language education began at the secondary level, but since 2001, English instruction has been introduced at the
elementary level. This trend is occurring not only in Taiwan, but in other East Asian countries such as Japan and Korea. In the past, critics noted that language instruction focused too much on grammar and translation, with the result that students often acquired insufficient communication skills (Butler, 2004, 2007). To rectify this, the Taiwanese government began introducing English language education at the elementary level, with a particular emphasis on developing oral skills. The government provided several general guidelines for teaching English. To develop students’ communicative abilities in English, the government suggested to teachers a number of activities such as games, songs, chants, and role plays (Butler, 2005). English is taught as an academic subject for around 72 lessons per year (40 minutes per lesson). The objectives articulated by the central government are “a) To develop students’ basic English communicative abilities; b) To develop students’ interests in and ways of learning English; c) To increase students’ awareness of native and foreign cultures and customs” (Butler, 2004, p. 248).

The Taiwanese government also suggested that all English classes be conducted in English with a relaxed and interactive instructional method. Speaking and listening are the primary focus, and according to the government policy, “reading and writing should not be neglected” (Butler, 2004, p. 249). At the elementary school level, not many native-speaking teachers (NSTs) teach English, and English language instruction is usually done by individuals who have obtained English-related degrees or individuals who possess sufficient English proficiency based on the computer-based TOEFL test. These teachers, however, often have insufficient proficiency to teach English effectively (Butler, 2004).

The Chinese culture of learning in Taiwan warrants some discussion. Taiwan is a highly exam-oriented society, and success on writing tests is usually a precondition for academic study (Chien, 2011). According to Yu (2008), emphasis is placed on memorization and analytical ability, rather than functional use of language for communication (see also Lai, 2009). The role of the teacher is the “source of knowledge,” and Yu (2008) reported that Chinese teachers of English often have concerns about adopting Western approaches such as communicative language teaching. These sentiments were also supposed by Butler (2005) and Wang (2000). Wang found that grammar-based practices still reign in English classes in Taiwanese high schools. One of the reasons could be the way Taiwanese students learn Chinese. Chinese language learning is seen as the memorization of words and grammar. In Chinese, children learn to write first before reading, and it is presumed that Chinese learners should learn written words by writing them so that they can read them later (Hsu, 2004).

The same procedure is not applicable when Taiwanese students learn English because they learn to read first, and “most Taiwanese students will have only two years English composition writing experience at their 11th and 12th grades” (Hsu, 2004, p. 2). Longhi-Chrilin and Weber (2001) also noted that writing is not a regular practice in the ESL classroom.

According to Yang (1999), students in Taiwan have strong beliefs about becoming skilled in listening and speaking skills. Students believe that the purpose of studying English is to have
Wang (2000) noted that pronunciation (specifically American English pronunciation) is an important factor in the Taiwanese context. Wang also reported that most English learners in Taiwan considered excellence in pronunciation to be the most important factor in improving English communication. Because the Taiwanese government emphasizes oral communication in their elementary school English curricula, Butler (2004) discovered that Taiwanese teachers felt that they needed a more balanced proficiency level across all skill domains, not only speaking. Butler (2005) also found that many Korean and Taiwanese teachers questioned the government’s current policy and commented that students “need to have instruction in written English to facilitate their learning” (p. 437).

When EFL kindergarten students make the transition from private language schools to elementary school in Taiwan, they are faced with a variety of difficulties. The two education systems of kindergarten and elementary schools are quite different. In kindergarten, the students are used to an environment with small English classes, native-speaking English teachers who use different teaching methodologies, and curricula that focus on spoken skills. When they go to elementary school, they become part of classes with more than 40 students each. They also have Taiwanese teachers who do not follow the same teaching methodologies as the native-speaking teachers. At the elementary school level, there is also a focus on written English, rather than spoken English. Both learners and parents often complained to me that kindergarten did not prepare them sufficiently for the writing activities done at elementary school. Similar frustrations of children entering first grade without much experience in literacy were found by Weber and Longhi-Chrilin (2001) and Harklau (2000). Students considered “good students” or “model students” often experience difficulties in elementary school, and they often rebel against the system and long for their kindergarten days.

I lived and worked as an English teacher in Taiwan for nine years, and during this time, I noticed that the learners went to elementary school with inadequate literacy skills, which had a detrimental effect on their experiences there. Parents often complained to me that their children did not want to study English anymore once they entered elementary school. I became interested in the topic because I wanted to make sure that these young learners were prepared for elementary school. In my experience, the written modality was neglected in the kindergarten classrooms at private language schools, and when these children went on to elementary school, they could not cope with the writing that was expected of them at that level. As a teacher, I was explicitly told by school managers that parents just expected their children to be able to speak English. In several conversations with parents, I received contradictory requests. Parents were very worried about their children going to elementary school without sufficient writing and reading abilities. To prepare these learners for elementary school, teachers might have to focus more on the written modality. In implementing this study, one should keep in mind the positive effect that writing can have on oral skills as well as the reasons for teachers and managers neglecting reading and writing at a young age;
therefore, I suggest interviewing teachers, parents, and managers. To triangulate the data, classroom observation data can be used.

**Research Questions**

This research is qualitative in nature. Issues to be addressed by this study include the participants’ views on teaching literacy skills; their opinions regarding suitable materials; methods of teaching literacy; time allocation to reading and writing; time allocation to oral practice; and views on the links between literacy skills and oral production. This led to the following research questions:

1. What are the participants’ views on teaching literacy skills?
2. What are the teachers’ methods of teaching literacy?
3. What percentage of time is allocated to reading, writing, and oral practice in class?
4. What are the participants’ views on the links between literacy skills and oral production?

**Method**

**Research Site**

The research site is a well known private school in Taipei, Taiwan. The school is very prestigious and attracts top students from all over the island. This language institute is the largest in Taiwan, with several branches in Taiwan and in countries such as Korea, Canada, and Singapore. The company employs native English speakers to teach English to Taiwanese learners aged three to sixteen. Classes are often co-taught by a NST and a Chinese teacher. The main office supplies all branches with the curricula (including books, audio CDs, props, and artwork) written and published by company employees.

These young learners have long school days that vary from 8 to 10 hours. They are smart and highly motivated learners. By the age of six, they have studied Mandarin, English, Japanese, and French. The teaching philosophy of the company focuses on whole-child development and what the company calls “educare.” Whole-child development implies that children will achieve the best results cognitively, emotionally, physically, and socially when they develop a balance of these intelligences. The curriculum has, therefore, been written with the methodology of simultaneously integrating several ways of learning. Educare is an approach to schooling that recognizes the indivisible relationship between educating and caring for a child; that is, if a child feels safe and cared for, then learning will come effortlessly.

These schools have three levels of classes: little (children aged 3–4), middle (children aged 5), and big (children aged 6–7). The classes that are relevant to this study are big classes, and all teachers interviewed should be big class teachers.

**Participants**

The participants for the study will be 10 native English-speaking teachers, five school managers, three parents of Taiwanese learners, and one curriculum writer. The employees at the time of data collection will either be working at one of the schools in Taiwan or at the language institute’s headquarters in Taipei, Taiwan. The parents at the time of data collection will have one or two children enrolled at the language institute.

To qualify for participation, teachers should have worked in one of the language schools for more than six months. School managers should have worked as managers for at least one year. Parents will have to speak some English
and be willing to be interviewed; and the curriculum writer will have to have at least two years of curriculum writing experience. The participants will be identified on the basis of availability and willingness to participate in the interviews.

**Materials**

Some classes will be observed and field notes will be made with the use of an observation template. Four sets of interview questions were designed to elicit responses from the four groups of participants. These are mostly open-ended questions combined with some specific questions relating to the participants’ views on literacy and teaching literacy skills (i.e., reading and writing). The interviews will provide me with valuable insights and a deeper understanding of the participants in their context.

Two different sets of curriculum materials will be reviewed. The first set of materials will consist of reading books, writing books, and teacher manuals that are used to prepare learners for elementary school. Additional curriculum materials that will be considered are the books used in the first semester of elementary school. These materials are not associated with the Taiwanese elementary school system but are part of the bushiban system; that is, they are English class materials not issued by elementary schools but by the educational institute. These materials consist of a textbook, a workbook, and two homework books.

**Procedure**

Interviews will take place in a variety of locations, such as the school itself, the head office, coffee shops, and the homes of the Taiwanese parents. All of these locations are in Taipei city in the Da-An, Sinyi, and Songshan districts. The exact choice of location for the interviews is left to the participants, and the interviewer/researcher will accommodate those requests.

The classroom observations will be done at two different schools. No recording of classes is allowed. In all five observations, I will observe the class through the visitor's window. These classrooms typically have three solid walls and one wall that includes a large window directed to the inside of the school. This is often referred to as the parent window or visitor's window. Through the visitor's window, all classroom activities can be seen and heard. The focus of the classroom observations is threefold. I will take note of the modality (i.e., written or oral) that the young learners practice, the time spent on that modality, and the types of activities.

Two possible risks are considered. First, language difficulties could be a problem when interviewing the Chinese school managers and parents. I will allow participants to answer in Chinese if they are not sure about the English vocabulary. I have limited Chinese skills and am willing to use the services of an interpreter. I will also attempt to interview parents with a high intermediate English ability to lessen ambiguity during the interviews. Second, the teachers could experience discomfort in criticizing the curriculum or in being observed. Because I am a former teacher and fully aware of possible conflicts, I will assure the teachers that their views will be kept confidential.

One of the caveats of this kind of research is that the presence of the observer might cause the participants to act differently. To prevent my observation from influencing the linguistic behavior of those being observed, I will attempt to enhance
credibility by collecting data over a period of eight weeks to ensure that the participants have become used to me and are behaving naturally.

**Analysis**

As is typical in qualitative research, the data will be analyzed through an inductive approach in which themes and patterns emerge from the data. All interviews will be transcribed, and these transcriptions will be entered into NVivo 8. The data will be read, and a list of general themes will be compiled.

**References**


