

**Impact of the Home Literacy Environment on the L1 Reading Frequencies of
Thai University Students: Implications for the Learning of an L2**

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ABSTRACT

In the Information Age, reading is a critical skill for accessing information and updating skills. However, reluctant readership in L1 may prevent many societies from fully participating in the global community. This reluctance to read may also slow the acquisition of an L2 such as English. This paper will present the findings of an MA dissertation which investigated pleasure reading rates in L1 at a Thai university, to understand better the issue of reluctant readership in L2. Results from a survey of six hundred students found that the home literacy environment may account for some of the differences in students' L1 reading frequencies. Though the size effects were small, parental reading to children, book ownership, and past reading rates of parents, were all found to have significant associations with students' present day reading frequencies and attitudes. Implications for SLA theories and reading strategies in the classroom will be discussed, as will the role of schools in promoting literacy.

Key words: reluctant readership, home literacy environment, cross-linguistic transfer

NEWSPAPER READING RATES

All literate societies have newspapers. They are cheap, accessible, and appeal to a wide audience. An analysis of newspaper readership rates may give some insights into Thai reading rates generally, the economic implications, and a comparative understanding of the phenomenon of reluctant readership.

According to Bronwyn Higgs (2000), a lecturer at Victoria University in Australia, there are 34 different daily newspapers sold in Thailand. This is almost identical to the 33 daily newspapers sold in Malaysia, a country with only a third of the population of Thailand. In figures released for 2004 by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2005), Malaysia was ranked 59th and Thailand 76th on the Human Development Index (HDI). Thus, Thailand has fewer newspapers per head of population than Malaysia and also a lower ranking on HDI. This relationship between newspaper readership and development seems to hold for comparisons with other countries as well. For example, in Thailand 194 newspapers are sold for every 1,000 people. This compares with 273 copies sold for every 1,000 people in Singapore. Singapore is ranked higher on HDI at 25th. India in contrast sells only 28 copies for each 1,000 people and is in 127th place (Higgs, 2000; UNDP, 2005). It would appear that the lower the newspaper reading rate, the lower the development score.

A comparison of UK and Thai newspaper reading rates confirms this trend. The top-selling tabloid in the UK is *The Sun* with a circulation of 3.5 million copies a day (Beckley, 2000). This compares with the *Thai Rath*, the leading Thai language newspaper, which has a daily circulation of approximately one million (Higgs, 2000),

which was similar to the UK's top-selling quality newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*, with sales of 862,958 for the first half of 2005 (Telegraph on-line, 2005). UK newspaper readership is probably in the order of two to three times that of Thailand. The UK had a ranking of 12th on HDI (UNDP, 2005).

This association between reading rates and economic prosperity is certainly the message of Shor and Friere (1987). They claim illiteracy spells marginalization and condemns millions to lives of poverty and oppression. If reading in adulthood is so important, it may explain why educators like David Bell (UK's Chief Inspector for Education), are such vociferous proponents of the virtues of developing a love of reading early in life (2005). Perhaps UK children are being prepared for adult readership, but what about Thai children? What reading opportunities do they have? How do these compare with those for UK children? Public book provision may provide some clues.

CHILDREN'S PUBLIC ACCESS TO BOOKS

Access to public libraries appears to affect how much children read. Heyns (1978) reported that children who live closer to public libraries read more. In another study, Snow et al (1991) found a significant positive correlation between the number of library visits by children and their gains over four years in reading comprehension. The results were that the more children visited libraries, the more their reading levels improved.

This positive relationship between reading frequency and reading ability fits with other findings. In his book *The Power of Reading* (1993), Stephen Krashen reviews the research on reading and makes the case that the more students read, the better readers they become. Day and Bamford, in their book *Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom* (1998), support Krashen when they say "It is simplistic but nevertheless true that the more students read, the better they become at it" (p4).

If the number of public libraries is a good indicator of readership rates, and therefore of reading ability, what is the extent of library provision in Thailand? According to Kulthorn Lerdsuriyakul (1999), the director of the Information Education Promotion Centre in Bangkok, in 1999 there were about 915 public libraries in Thailand. In contrast, in the UK, a country with a similar population size, in the same year there were a total of 4,891 (LISU, 2000). That is, there were over five times as many libraries in the UK than there were in Thailand. Given a population density in the UK twice that of Thailand (see Population density, 2006), a child in the UK is likely to have ten times the access to a local public library than a Thai child; with all the advantages for literacy such proximity would confer. In fact, performance on HDI between Thailand (76th) and the UK (12th) would tend to reinforce the view that these literacy advantages have real long-term consequences.

SCHOOL LIBRARIES

School libraries are another public source of books and they too have a positive effect on children's reading levels. Gaver (1963) reported that in schools with larger libraries children made better gains in reading than those children in schools with

smaller libraries, who in turn made better gains than children in schools who had only access to classroom books. In a study that showed reading scores also improve for L2 learners who are exposed to more books, Elley and Mangubhai (1979) discovered that the best predictor of English reading scores of Fijian children was the size of their school library: “Those schools with libraries of more than 400 books produced consistently higher mean scores than those with smaller libraries or none at all ... no school had high scores without a large library”. This paper has no statistics on school libraries, either in Thailand or the UK, but personal experience suggests that Thai school libraries are not as well-resourced as their UK counterparts.

Children not only have access to books in libraries they also have access to reading materials at home. What effect does the home literacy environment have on a child’s reading development?

THE HOME LITERACY ENVIRONMENT

A home environment that encourages reading has been shown to have significant benefits for the literacy development of children (Senechal and LeFevre, 2002; Senechal, 2006). Being read to regularly by parents, seeing parents read, and having access to books, magazines, and newspapers in the home, are well-established as contributing to emergent literacy in children (Scarborough and Dobrich, 1994). Children from homes which support reading do better on reading and vocabulary tests than those who do not (Senechal et al, 1996; Dickinson and De Temple, 1998). Considerable research evidence has shown the lasting effects of home literacy on reading achievement in school (de Jong and Leseman, 2001; Levy et al, 2006). Parental influence through the home literacy environment is thus a critical factor for the development of literacy in children and the support for this in the research literature is overwhelming. However, there is little if any evidence in the literature of the impact of the home literacy environment on Thai children’s literacy development. The conference presentation will address this.

L1 TO L2 TRANSFER

Reading rates in a first language (L1) are of concern to us as foreign language teachers, for if reading rates in L1 are low, second language (L2) reading rates are also likely to be low. Certainly, there is a considerable body of evidence of a cross-linguistic transfer to support this.

First of all, a number of studies have shown that high levels of phonological awareness across a range of L1 populations (e.g. Czech, Spanish, English, Hebrew) accompany high levels of word recognition and spelling in an L2 (Caravolas and Bruck, 1993; Durgunoglu et al, 1993; Cisero and Royer, 1995; Comeau et al, 1999; Kahn-Horwitz and Shimron, 2006). Ziegler and Goswami in their investigations of reading across languages best sum it up when they say, “The development of reading depends on phonological awareness across all languages so far studied” (2005). Poor phonological awareness in L1 is likely to result in poor phonological awareness in L2, leading to poor reading development in both languages.

Using a 20-item multiple choice test of grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, Meschyan and Hernandez (2002) found that L1 word decoding skill of college-age adults in their native Spanish was one important predictor of L2 competency. A number of researchers have supported the role of L1 vocabulary skill as a predictor of overall L2 proficiency (e.g. Sparks et al, 1995; Sparks et al, 1997). Proctor et al (2006) found a significant effect for Spanish (L1) vocabulary knowledge on English (L2) reading comprehension. Swanson et al (2006) investigated the reading, vocabulary and memory growth of Spanish speaking children (aged 5-10) at risk for reading disabilities in learning English as an L2. Their results showed only growth in L1 working memory predicted growth in L2 reading. Ganschow et al (1998) in a review of studies of L2 difficulties cited numerous authors to show the strength of support for a link between oral and written L1 abilities and L2 aptitude.

In summary, there is a significant body of evidence to support the cross-linguistic transfer of a number of critical linguistic skills central to reading performance. Therefore, it is probable that someone who is a poor reader in their first language is likely to be a poor reader in a second. It is possible that a reluctance to read is also transferred and when it manifests itself in our L2 classrooms, as professionals we should be aware that its origins may lie in L1.

CONCLUSION

This paper was a brief survey of some of the factors that may affect reluctant readership in Thailand. It started by comparing newspaper readership rates across a number of countries. These suggest that in international comparisons Thailand read less than people in other countries. Adult newspaper readership rates also appear to mirror Thailand's economic and human development in the international ranking tables. For example, Thailand has a lower newspaper reading rate than Malaysia and is ranked significantly lower on the UNDP's human development index. To sum up, lower reading rates appear to be associated with lower economic and human development.

This paper then compared Thailand with the UK on public access to books. The findings were that public library provision in the UK is higher than in Thailand by a factor of five. The literature suggests this is likely to lead to different reading outcomes for their children. For children who visit libraries more often read more, and those children who read more become better readers. Reluctant readership may in part be explained by a reduced access to books. It also has implications for human development.

In addition, the home literacy environment has also been identified as a key factor in the development of literacy in children. Children who are read to at home and live in a reader-friendly environment read more and are better readers than those children who do not. However, there is little if any research data available on the impact of the home literacy environment in Thailand. If we wish to account for the phenomenon of Thai reluctant readership, we may need to investigate the impact of the home literacy environment on Thai children. This can be done by studying the reading rates of Thai adults and then comparing these with their home literacy environments as children.

The conference presentation will report on such an investigation, one that looked into the reading rates and habits of 600 students from a Thai university and then compared these rates with the students' home literacy environments as children. Descriptive and statistical analysis revealed several significant associations which will be reported on at the conference.

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