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Theories of Writing Paper Draft 2

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Theories of Writing

<div align="center">Learning or Acquiring?</div>

When it comes to literacy, the overall definition requires two important factors in determining how skilled someone is in a language. That includes the ability to read and the ability to write (well), but that is subjective to society. In the western way of thinking, we first learn rudimentary literacy through first listening and speaking before we begin to write. After acquiring that, people generally learn to read next, and sometimes in conjunction with learning to write. However, this also varies culture to culture, and this essay will specifically look at eastern cultures such as students in China and how they learn how to write through acquisition and how acquisition helps learn a language outside of what we learn in the classroom.

In English, we typically learn language through building the first-order processes listening and speaking skills at a young age, as many do with other languages. Those normally are acquired skills, as we learn from our parents and other forms of media in our lives. This is usually done informally and sometimes without "proper" grammar techniques, and later on a second process is *learned*. It is known as the second-order process in which schools teach rudimentary literacy that includes reading and writing (Emig 1977). Gee would argue that "Any discourse (either primary or secondary) is for most people most of the time only mastered through acquisition, not learning". So, it would make sense that mostly our primary discourse is most likely acquired as we spend most of our time observing and listening.

Normally as children we learn how to write in order to bridge spoken language and writing down that language phonetically. Since English is an interesting language in that its written form is mostly different than how people hear it. For example "through" is a word that we pronounce more like, "thru." When comparing it to other languages such as Italian, words are spelled exactly how they are spelled. So, it would make sense in some ways that we learn to write first because of how complicated English grammar is. However, other languages in the western world use this approach.

In a research article on language acquisition in China tells a very different story. Mandarin is a language that is quite difficult for native English speakers, as it is more of a tonal language in comparison to English that heavily relies on phonetics (Grigg 2011). It is similar to English at some level, however, when sentences become more complicated, the order of words will change in a sentence. In Mandarin, the structure of a sentence is as follows: **Subject**—Time—Manner—Place—Negation—Auxiliary—**Verb**—Complements—**Object**. In English, the typical sentence has **Subject**—**Verb**—**Object**, and as it becomes more complicated, more words will still be a bit linear but still different than Mandarin (Grigg 2011). Subjects are not as clear in Mandarin as it gets omitted relatively often, but the sentences tend to focus overall on topics than the subjects like in other languages.

As Mandarin is a language that has "characters" rather than an alphabet; in the basic structure, the symbol has sound and meaning parts, as well as some pronunciation parts embodied in it. However, most of the times, Chinese students have to go an extra step into figuring out all of those parts as there are only "hints" in the character (Everson et al 2016). In total, there are tens and thousands of characters that make up Mandarin, but only 3,500 are needed in order to be considered literate in the language. I found that really interesting, because

then I wonder what the other thousands upon thousands of characters are even there for. But at the same time, I wonder how one would even know how to tell the difference between such subtle cues between the many characters one must know.

In fact, students actually go through school learning individual characters, and more specifically how to write them repeatedly until they learn to commit them to memory (Everson et al 2016). Of course, there are other processes in which students learn how to find patterns in the characters and develop systems to solve these language puzzles. While going to schools here, we learn how to write words that sound like how we say them, but in Mandarin, the case is obviously quite different. This shows not only the huge difference between the two languages, but also that writing seems to have quite an importance in becoming what we call "literate." Gee defines literacy as having control over the secondary uses of language that include reading and writing. From there exist many literacies, but the reality of having to learn how to read and write in Mandarin is more complex and shows how much learning seems to be put over acquisition of learning to be literate.

The research article further discusses an interesting point that Mandarin speakers have to absolutely master writing when they learn to read. Meaning is stressed mostly because of how tonal the language also is (Tan et al 2005). A lot of words and the meaning of words depend on the different inflections in Mandarin; if words are not pronounced right, the word loses meaning or a mistake is made. In writing, there is a specific order of strokes one has to make, which is similar in to how the language is structured. Students usually learn to read as they learn to write characters, although it can be difficult because the strokes are subtle and if done incorrectly, the word changes meaning.

It was very interesting to learn that there is a huge difference between learning and acquiring a language. I usually didn't think about it too much until I decided to take Italian in college. Since it was a new language to me, it was quite difficult at first. However, patterns exist in all languages although they might not be similar languages. So with time, it became easier to "plug-in" words that would create meaning from what I was trying to translate from English (grammar).

In the classroom, I was able to learn the mechanics of Italian and understand how to use grammar knowledge in conversation. Although once I decided to go abroad to a smaller town in Italy, I soon realized that I really did not know how to use my Italian *well* in conversation with locals. I would try to directly translate my thoughts in the way I would say them in English, which sometimes did not always end up how I wanted to. A lot of that was probably due to the fact that a lot of language has idiomatic phrases that do not exist in other languages, so directly translating phrases doesn't really work well in general.

Learning Italian abroad felt like I had to start over in a few ways, and one was because I was not used to using it so much more than I did back in classes. There, professors would still switch to English when explaining vocabulary and other things in our lessons rather than sticking to Italian only; classes were only an hour for four times a week, so it wasn't like I used it all the time either. I felt like the best way get better at the language was to spend more time using it. It helped actually trying, and if I did make mistakes, people still understood me and would correct me if needed, which was nice because I wanted to learn. Being able to learn those mistakes in the moment over and over helped me unconsciously fix those over time, and with that kind of repetition, I was able to get better at using conversational Italian with anyone. It also helped that

I took all of my classes in Italian so that I could hear how Italians spoke their language instead of American professors speaking closer to how we would say things in English.

Languages are one of the most essential tools we use to simply be able to communicate with others around us. As something that has always been interesting to me, languages are different not only across the world, but a lot of times is different across the exact same areas (dialects). In seemingly opposite languages, Mandarin and English actually have some similarities in structure and the focus in the sentences, although as they become more complicated, it does change. How do students learn how to read something we would view as so complicated? That usually comes through being able to acquire certain skills that will ultimately help the students learn how to translate listening and speaking skills to read and write out their languages. With that study, researchers were able to see how Chinese students learn to read languages and what processes help them learn the characters in Mandarin. Even with my own experiences of learning a second language fluently, it is almost impossible to do without going to a place and using it all the time until it becomes second nature in many ways.

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