

INTERNATIONAL REPORTS ON LITERACY RESEARCH

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France

International research correspondent, Jacques Fijalkow

Research correspondent Jacques Fijalkow details three research projects conducted in France. These reports include a description of adult literacy skills, an investigation of how study-abroad students were integrated with foreign-language communities, and a study aimed to reduce school failures in reading and math in the late elementary years.

The first report centers on a recurrent debate in France regarding the percentage of illiterate adults in the population. To inform this debate, the official statistics-gathering institution, Institut National des Statistiques et Etudes Economiques (INSEE), conducted an initial inquiry to directly measure illiteracy among adults (Murat, 2005). Although previous studies relied on self-report measures of adult literacy abilities, the present study utilized a direct assessment of reading comprehension skills (e.g., questions about a TV magazine or the cover of a CD), writing ability, oral comprehension, and mathematics. These measures were administered to 10,000 participants, ranging from 18 to 65 years of age. The results revealed that 7% of the participants presented severely limited abilities, 5% fared slightly better yet could not easily use written language to communicate, and another 7% lacked some ability to use written language with functional ease. As only the first two groups were considered to be notably limited in literacy skill, the results may be used to generalize that 12% of people living in France experience significant difficulties in using reading and writing in everyday life. A closer look at this group indicates that three quarters of the participants with severely limited abilities (9% of the total) had been schooled in France, while the difficulties of the remaining 3% may be due to second-language difficulties. Men presented more reading difficulties than women, although men's math skills were higher, and older adults presented more difficulties than their younger counterparts in the areas of reading, mathematics, and oral comprehension.

A second research project (Taillefer, 2005b) found that students who studied abroad faced challenges as they attempted to enter a foreign academic literacy community. Taillefer's study identified possible culturally dependent sources of literacy problems for law and economics students in Great Britain, France, and Spain. Nearly 600 potential European study-abroad candidates of the Erasmus program (a Europe-wide student network with a goal to support and develop student exchange) and 169 of their university teachers from 17 universities in these countries completed a questionnaire on first-language (L1) reading practices. Results revealed

distinct academic literacy profiles within disciplines and between national cultures. Foreign academic reading practices were seen as significantly constraining for students studying in Britain but significantly less so in Spain, and reading practices in France showed some characteristics of both British and Spanish academic codes. The summarized results of a concurrent investigation by Taillefer (2005a) into the foreign-language reading skills of 177 Erasmus students suggested that L1 literacy traditions in the countries of England, Ireland, France, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, and Flemish-speaking Belgium influence success in foreign-language reading among French students studying in those countries. These results have pedagogical implications that may direct future studies.

Fijalkow's third report details a study by Piquet and Suchaut (2004), who adopted a statistical approach to study the effects of an official experimental program in Zones d'Éducation Prioritaires (ZEP) schools in an administrative region of France, aimed at reducing school failures in learning reading and mathematics in the final three years of elementary school. In that program the pupils in each classroom were divided into two groups: one taught by the classroom teacher (ARTE 2) and the other by a special education teacher (ARTE 1). National assessments are carried out annually in France at the beginning of the third and sixth year of schooling. The results of the 205 pupils in both ARTE samples were compared with those of a control group of 205 children statistically similar in gender and socioeconomic status. Progress made between the beginning of the third and the sixth year of schooling in reading and mathematics was analyzed by using multivariate models. Comparisons between children in ARTE 1 and 2 and the control group and between ARTE 1 and ARTE 2 showed that the experimental program did not produce better results for the experimental group or for classroom teachers when compared with special education teachers.

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Argentina

International research correspondent, Melina Porto

In the first of two reports on research conducted in Argentina, correspondent Melina Porto presents the results of a research project (Porto, 2001, 2003) carried out by Miguel Angel Montezanti and Porto at the National University of La Plata. The project examined stereotypical representations produced from narrative texts and expanded on an earlier report that described the process of undergraduate reading in a foreign or second language. The researchers analyzed visual reformulations, defined here as the visual representation of textual content including the combination of words, phrases, or sentences with visual information in different formats such as charts, tables, graphs, grids, mind maps, flowcharts, diagrams, drawings, and so forth. The visual reformulations were produced by undergraduate students in response to two narrative texts with different perspectives on a holiday theme. One text, in Spanish, described the Christmas celebration of a poor Brazilian family from an insider's perspective. The other, written in English, portrayed the Christmas celebration of Navajo Indians in the United States from an outsider's perspective.

After being given a definition of visual reformulation and reading the two texts, all of the participating undergraduate students were asked to produce a visual reformulation. Participants were supplied with white paper, colored paper, and colored pencils and were allowed to choose the language in which they created their reformulations (Spanish, English, or both). One hundred and forty-five visual reformulations were produced.

The use of stereotypes in the visual reformulations was classified into two broad groups: those corresponding to the native culture or C1 (i.e., the learners' culture) and those referring to the target culture or C2 (the alien culture). In each group, stereotypes were arranged into three categories depending upon whether they made reference to the main characters on the basis of personality and physical appearance, the Christmas celebration itself, or the story line. In general, learners used words, phrases, and complete sentences to mention the exotic and attractive features in the cultural content of both texts and to refer to the differences between themselves and the character and between their own practices and those of others.

For example, for the Spanish text, contrasts were general, revolving around differences mentioned in the text itself, and the differences did not often reveal stereotyped views. Stereotyped references primarily involved the participants' own Christmas traditions. Recurrent examples included the Christmas tree with ornaments and a star, carefully wrapped presents around the Christmas tree, fireworks, tables full of food (chicken, wine, cakes, cider or champagne for the Christmas toast), the family gathered around the table, and Santa Claus. Predominant colors were red and white for Santa Claus, green for the Christmas tree, white and silver for the stars, and bright colors (yellows, reds, oranges, blues, greens) for the fireworks. As for shapes, circles dominated the tree ornaments, with squares for the presents and star-like shapes for the sky. Distinctly personal interpretations, where participants imposed their personal opinions regarding the text, were frequently found in these depictions.

In the Navajo text, learners portrayed contrasts through dichotomies such as *Indian reservation/civilization*, *wildlife reservation/people from the town*, and *Aboriginal reservation/white people*. Most stereotypes found in these reformulations referred to the Navajo themselves, while only a small portion made reference to the learners' national culture (e.g., fireworks, typical houses). For instance, the Navajo were portrayed as dark Indians with feathers and hair bands, with their chests uncovered, living in huts in a deserted landscape with cactuses and hills, and yelling (sometimes upon horseback). Blacks and grays were commonly chosen for the Indians' skin, browns for their clothes, and light browns and greens for the landscape. The reformulations of this text were much darker than those corresponding to the Spanish text.

In general, the mental representations of the texts revealed in the visual reformulations contained information derived both from the texts themselves and the learners' idiosyncratic interpretations. In all cases, the pervasive perception of exotic and attractive features in the cultural content of both texts materialized in the visual representations. Such features seemed to help focus attention on the differences between the learners themselves and others. Although a confrontation with the values and ideas present in the perspectives of others (i.e., members of other cultures as well as members of different social groups/subcultures within the national culture) favored a process of decentralization or critical distancing from one's perspective, the change of perspective generated did not lead to the affective and cognitive reciprocity necessary to judge and understand a dif-

ferent cultural reality from the perspective of its members. These findings suggest that these undergraduate students used the materials at their disposal to approach otherness in general from an ethnocentric position, reduced incongruities to their cultural codes, failed to recognize the importance of cultural aspects within other cultural contexts, assumed that many aspects of the other culture or subculture were similar to their own, and assimilated the unknown into the known.

Porto's second report presents the results of a project involving mixed-level English classes carried out in 2003 by Alicia Artusi, a curriculum materials writer and head of the English department of a private school in Argentina. The study involved a sample of 800 students in General Basic Education distributed across 27 classrooms, with an average of 30 students per class. The classes were determined to be heterogeneous in language proficiency, although 50% of the students attended private language institutes to learn English. As many as five language levels existed in each class, especially in seventh, eighth, and ninth forms (ages 12 to 14), as school facilities and scheduling limitations did not allow for the organization of classes of different language levels in separate classrooms. Therefore, the management of mixed-level classes was the teachers' and the administrators' main priority.

Artusi implemented a plan that accommodated students of different language levels simultaneously within the same classroom. She and her colleagues believed that diversity of language proficiency need not be a drawback in this mixed-level English class if they could successfully incorporate the heterogeneity of the group within the instructional program. The resulting instructional plan involved using the same material while grouping students into three main categories (weak, midlevel, and strong) and classifying classroom tasks according to these groups. The instructions of all class materials were displayed on the chalkboard. All the students in a class completed instruction as it was presented in a course book, as this was required. Midlevel students worked on the same exercise with the same timing, though the tasks for this group were adapted to make them more challenging by changing the instructions. Weak learners completed the basic task; stronger students worked on the same exercise with more challenging tasks. Artusi designed a baseline measure including the contents of the curriculum with such degree of difficulty that the students who passed it were ready to go on to learn new language items. She added a more challenging task 1 and a more challenging task 2 with the purpose of informing learners that they were

performing a task at a higher level. This additional task included the same language items present in the baseline measure with a higher level of difficulty.

Artusi gathered information from a variety of sources to assess and adjust the instructional plan, including interviews, questionnaires, classroom reflection notes, surveys, classroom observation, and teacher discussion meetings. Records of the students' performance and group composition were maintained throughout the year. As a result, by the end of the year she was able to determine how many students had progressed (moved to a higher group). The instructional plan has proven useful to mixed-ability students in English-language classes at Artusi's school

and has been implemented every year after its initial launching. Because most public and private institutions in Argentina face the problem of having mixed-ability groups in English-language classes, the plan described here may be of interest to other teachers in Argentina.

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