Second Language Writing Systems

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Vivian Cook and Benedetta Bassetti

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Chapter 1

An Introduction to Researching Second Language Writing Systems

VIVIAN COOK and BENEDETTA BASSETTI

Over the past 10 years, literacy in the second language has emerged as a significant topic of enquiry in research into language processes and educational policy. This book provides an overview of the emerging field of Second Language Writing Systems (L2WS) research, written by researchers with a wide range of interests, languages and backgrounds, who give a varied picture of how second language reading and writing relates to characteristics of writing systems (WSs), and who address fundamental questions about the relationships between bilingualism, biliteracy and writing systems. It brings together different disciplines with their own theoretical and methodological insights – cognitive, linguistic, educational and social factors of reading – and it contains both research reports and theoretical papers. It will interest a variety of readers in different areas of psychology, education, linguistics and second language acquisition research.

What this Book is About

Vast numbers of people all over the world are using or learning a second language writing system. According to the British Council (1999), a billion people are learning English as a Second Language (ESL), and perhaps as many are using it for science, business and travel. Yet English is only one of the second languages in widespread use, although undoubtedly the largest. For many of these people – whether students, scientists or computer users browsing the internet – the ability to read and write the second language is the most important skill.

The learning of a L2 writing system is in a sense distinct from learning the language and is by no means an easy task in itself, say for Chinese people learning to read and write English, or for the reverse case of English people learning to read and write Chinese. Italian learners of English still face the problem to some extent since, even if both English

and Italian are written with the Roman alphabet, they are read and spelled in different ways. When L2 learners become fully-fledged L2WS users, they still differ from native users of the target writing system. From one perspective, they are less efficient than first language writing system (L1WS) users; they are slower at reading the second language than people who read only one writing system and often have problems with comprehension and memorising due to inefficient decoding. From a more positive perspective, they are simply different from L1WS reader-writers of the target writing system, with different reading and writing processes that result from the interaction of previously developed reading and writing processes with the characteristics of the new writing system. Not only do L2 researchers and teachers need to bear in mind these differences between L1 and L2 users of writing systems but so do those working in the psycholinguistics and neurolinguistics of reading and writing.

Research on L2 writing systems is at present scattered across different research areas within applied linguistics, psycholinguistics and other disciplines. This book aims to present this interdisciplinary research area to students, teachers and researchers in different fields of second language acquisition or writing system research. This introduction sketches the common background and terminology of writing systems research in general, concentrating on the cross-linguistic aspects, as a basis for outlining some of the previous achievements of L2WS research. It provides an introduction to the whole of this field, for those who are unaware of its scope and achievements, as well as to the papers in this volume. It is intended partly as a reference source that readers can go back to while reading the following chapters.

The Nature of Writing Systems

Before looking at how L2WSs work, we first need to establish the basis for the concept of writing system itself. This section provides an overall view of writing systems, together with some of the crucial terms. First we outline the major types of writing system in terms of the meaning-based versus sound-based division, then the variations in sound-based systems, particularly in terms of phonological 'transparency'. Next we outline some other variable characteristics of writing systems relevant to their acquisition and use. More detailed accounts of writing systems can be found in Coulmas (1989, 2003), Cook (2004a) and Sampson (1985).

What is a writing system?

The term 'writing system' has two distinct meanings, one attached to general ideas of writing, one to specific languages. In the first sense, a writing system is 'a set of visible or tactile signs used to represent units

of language in a systematic way' (Coulmas, 1999: 560). The various types of writing system are primarily distinguished by the type of linguistic unit represented, whether consonants (consonantal WSs), morphemes (morphemic WSs), phonemes (alphabetic WSs) or syllables (syllabic writing systems).

In this general sense 'writing system' is related to the terms 'script' and 'orthography'. A 'script' is 'the graphic form of the units of a writing system' (Coulmas, 2003: 35), that is to say, its actual physical form – letters, characters, or whatever. For instance, the Roman alphabet is a script, it is one of the actual physical forms of alphabetic writing systems. A particular type of writing system may in fact employ very different scripts. Alphabetic writing systems take many forms, say, the scripts used in Devanagari, Greek, Cyrillic or Roman alphabets. 'Orthography' on the other hand is the set of rules for using a script in a particular language (e.g. the English or Italian orthography for the Roman alphabet), such as symbol–sound correspondences, capitalisation, hyphenation, punctuation, etc. For instance, the Roman alphabet letter <j> is read as /dʒ/ in the English orthography and as /j/ in the Italian orthography (for native words). The same script may instantiate orthographic rules of different languages: the Roman alphabet is used in different ways in the English and Italian orthographies.

The second sense of 'writing system' overlaps with orthography by referring to the set of rules employed in a particular language for spelling, punctuation etc, namely 'the English writing system', 'the Japanese writing system', and so on. 'In this sense a writing system is language specific' (Coulmas, 1999: 560). The writing system for a language may include more than one script or general writing system type, as in the Japanese combination of kanji characters, kana syllabic symbols and Roman alphabet script. While Japanese is often considered the classic example of a mixed writing system, writing systems of other languages also have elements of other types nestling within them. For instance, English, which is primarily alphabetic, contains syllabic symbols, as in <c u l8er> ('see you later') and morphemic symbols, such as <£ & ed> (representing the meanings 'pound', 'and' and 'past'). We also feel it is important to distinguish a 'language' from a 'writing system' used to represent a particular language; 'Japanese' is not the same as the 'Japanese writing system'; the English language could logically be written in the roman alphabet or in Braille or in the Shavian alphabet and was indeed for a time taught to children through the initial teaching alphabet (ita) (Pitman, 1961).

Writing system researchers rarely agree on how these terms should be used, in particular shifting between the two meanings of 'writing system'. We will try to adopt a few standard terms here, mostly following Coulmas (1989, 2003). These are intended as a rough working guide rather than representing a theoretical position. We will also adopt the convention of