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A New Beginning”

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The Role of Literacy in Oral Language Processing:
Implications for Research

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Abstract

Prior literacy can play a powerful role in acquiring literacy in a new language, but how does prior literacy affect oral language development in a new language? This article provides an overview of three second language acquisition (SLA) studies exploring this issue with adolescents and young adults with low levels of alphabetic print literacy. The evidence comes from oral face-to-face interactions with the researcher in tasks involving recasts, narrations of a story, and elicited imitation. Results show key ways participants with low alphabetic literacy are different from the typical highly literate participants in SLA studies. For example, they are not hindered by long recasts as literate learners have been shown to be (Philp, 2003). They also differ in their use of particular morphemes from their more literate counterparts. These results speak to the need to study underrepresented learners in the SLA research, such as those with low levels of print literacy.

Introduction

Much of the adolescent and adult SLA literature has focused on literate learners – often adults in college-level language programs. This is unfortunate given the increasing numbers of language learners in high schools and adult English as a Second Language (ESL) programs who have very low levels of literacy, typically due to interrupted or limited formal schooling. Cities all over the world are welcoming refugees after long waits in refugee camps where access to education is extremely limited. Unfortunately, educators know very little about the implications of limited formal schooling and low literacy and are often overwhelmed by the learning needs of their students. Teachers’ professional preparation may not have included methods for teaching adolescent and adult learners to become literate for the first time, particularly when the learners’ first experience with literacy is in a language they are only just beginning to learn. Likewise, teaching learners who learn primarily through oral

\footnote{In academic years 04-05, 05-06, and 07-08, the adult ESL classes at the lowest level, where students have no or minimal reading or writing skills in any language, made up 17-21\% of the nationwide population in Adult Basic Education Programs according to the National Reporting System (http://wcrorbcollp01.ed.gov/CFAPPS/OVAE/NRS/tables/?CFID=6141148&CFTOKEN). With respect to adolescents, Short and Fitzsimmons (2007) cite dramatic National Assessment for Educational Progress figures that indicate that there is nothing less than a “literacy crisis for English language learners”, a literacy crisis where 96 percent of students with limited English proficiency in eighth grade score below the basic level and 31 percent fail to complete high school. They conclude: “ Adolescent English language learners with limited formal schooling and below-grade-level literacy are most at risk of educational failure” (Short and Fitzsimmons 2007, p. 16).}
language is new to teachers. It is very difficult for many to imagine language learning that is not tied to text. While second language (L2) learning is something many ESL teachers have done, having no print literacy is something most ESL teachers have not experienced. Nevertheless, illiterate adults all over the world are becoming fluent in other languages. Multilingualism and illiteracy co-exist in many places in the world yet SLA research shows little recognition of this phenomenon. Prior schooling and print literacy are major ways in which learners vary and these variables have been largely ignored in SLA research. It is problematic for the field of SLA to attempt to generalize findings when a large segment of language learners are entirely left out of the inquiry (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004). The overarching concern in the studies reported in this article is if and how alphabetic print literacy in the first and/or second language(s) matters in oral second language production.

**Literature Review**

Given the void of research directly from the field of SLA related to this population, it was necessary to turn to research done with monolingual adults who were not literate (e.g., Adrian, Alegria, & Morais, 1995; Loureiro et al., 2004; Morais, Bertelson, Cary, & Alegria, 1986; Morais, Cary, Alegria, & Bertelson, 1979). This research is quite narrowly focused on phonological and phonemic awareness in relation to low/no alphabetic print literacy. What these researchers found was that normally functioning literate and illiterate adults performed the same on some oral tasks, but very differently on others.

Literate and illiterate monolingual adults performed similarly on tasks where they were asked to identify words that rhyme (e.g., *bird* and *word*). They did equally well on identifying words that began with the same sound (e.g., *pen/pig* versus *pen/Ken*). They performed similarly in oral tasks focusing on meaning, such as naming words in a semantic category (e.g., name all of the animals you can think of). Repeating real words was also equally easy for both literate and illiterate adults in these studies. These findings are useful because initial literacy instruction often focuses on these sorts of skills and it is quite likely that English language learners without print literacy will do well with games and activities that tap into these strengths.

Nevertheless, the illiterate adults in the studies with monolingual adults of different levels of literacy did significantly worse compared to their literate counterparts on tasks that require an awareness of language forms. The following tasks were harder for participants without print literacy: phoneme deletion (e.g., take the /s/ off ‘stan’ or ‘slide’ → ‘tan’ or ‘lide’); phoneme reversal (e.g., what is /los/ backward? /sol/); syllable deletion (e.g., if you take /ka/ off /kade/ what do you have? /de/); syllable reversal (e.g.,

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2 Consider countries such as Burkina Faso where literacy rates in the population 15 and over is only 21.8% (www.cia.gov), yet there are 68 living languages (www.ethnologue.com). It is highly likely that the population is multilingual.
what is /kade/ backwards? /deka/); list all the words that begin with a specific sound (e.g., /b/); repeat non-words (e.g., skriltch) (Adrian et al., 1995; Castro-Caldas, Petersson, Reis, Stone-Elander, & Ingvar, 1998; Reis & Castro-Caldas, 1997). In sum, illiterate adults performed significantly worse on phonological fluency tasks unrelated to meaning. Is this phenomenon related to educational level, or is there something about being able to decode an alphabetic script that produces this effect?

Charles Read and his colleagues (Read, Zhang, Nie, & Ding, 1986) replicated some aspects of the studies reported previously with monolingual adults in China with older adults who were equally well educated. The only difference was that some could read only logographic characters (semantically based), while others could read characters as well as an alphabetic script called Hanyun Pinyin. Read found the same results as the researchers who studied literate and illiterate adults: those who could read the alphabetic script significantly outperformed those who could not, on the kinds of oral form-focused tasks just described. So, the Read, et al. (1986) study suggests that it is not educational level that matters, nor is it reading per se. It is reading an alphabetic script that improves performance on these kinds of oral tasks. This was a very interesting assertion because most researchers (e.g., Sawyer & Fox, 1991) who focus on native speaking children learning to read say that success with tasks like these result in literacy, not the reverse. It seems that the ability to represent a phoneme with a visual symbol gives a person clear cognitive advantages in performing these tasks (see Tarone & Bigelow, 2005, for more details about this research).

Literacy seems to enable individuals to visualize linguistic segments and manipulate them mentally. Literate individuals have available to them a strategy where visual-graphic meaning is given to units that are smaller than words, units with no semantic meaning. These segments are introduced sequentially in a working memory system with a new content of visual experience (Baddeley, 1986). Then it is possible to play with those written symbols, each mapped to a sound. This involves conscious phonological processing, visual formal lexical representations, and their associations – all of which are strategies available to people who have alphabetic print literacy. Whether a person is hearing the endings of words in a recast or producing morphemes with little saliency (e.g., past-tense –ed) in a narrative, or repeating a sentence crafted by the researcher, this visual-graphic strategy of imagining the orthography of a word, mentally manipulating it, and then producing it, all may rest on the person’s experience with an alphabetic script.

This research does not imply anything about the intelligence, linguistic aptitude, or the humanity of adolescent or adult individuals without print literacy. But it does help develop a theoretical argument for how alphabetic print literacy may change the way a second language learner processes or hears a new language. These researchers conclude that the ability to represent a phoneme with a visual symbol gives learners clear cognitive advantages in performing phonological awareness tasks. It enables the learners
to visualize linguistic segments and manipulate them in their minds. Given how basic these tasks are, educators may think that all English language learners with low print literacy need is a few months of high quality balanced literacy instruction in order to become similar to other beginners learning the language. What the research in this paper shows is that differences persist, even when learners achieve some print literacy. The research question that framed this series of studies is the following: How do low levels of alphabetic print literacy influence L2 oral language processing?

To explore this question, a partial replication and extension of Philp’s (2003) study of recasts with highly literate college students was chosen for this research design. Philp’s study fits into a robust line of SLA research in the area of recasts in second language oral interaction. She explored whether and how her participants noticed her recasts. She analyzed the types of recasts she offered participants in terms of length and the number of changes to the participants’ utterances. Philp also did a complete analysis of the types of errors the participants made and whether their stage of acquisition (Pienemann & Johnston, 1987; Pienemann, Johnston, & Brindley, 1988) related to how well they were able to perceive and repeat the recasts they received to their initial, trigger utterances. Philp’s study was a useful choice for partial replication because it used research methods that were entirely oral. The tasks were easily explained and modeled and had no printed text. The new variable was level of literacy – something that has not been examined in terms of adolescent/adult oral SLA. Bringing low literate adolescents and adults into the SLA literature through an extension of Philp’s study allowed for the comparison, albeit broad, with her participants. Replication studies are important for the field and this research is a response to the call from many SLA researchers (Polio & Gass, 1997; Santos, 1989) to replicate research more.

**Methodology**

The principal and overarching methodology used in this research was quantitative; however, a close analysis of one participant’s language was supplemental and illustrative of the quantitative analyses. As a partial replication of Philp (2003), two new components were added to Philp’s research procedures in order to do additional analyses: namely, an opportunity for participants to do a story recall in narrative form and an elicited imitation task. Detailed descriptions of the methodology of these studies can be found in previously published work but will be succinctly described below (see Bigelow, delMas, Hansen, & Tarone, 2006; Tarone & Bigelow, 2007; Tarone, Bigelow, & Hansen, 2007, 2009; Tarone, Swierzbin, & Bigelow, 2006).

**Participants**

Table 1 shows the participants and their general characteristics. All of the participants were Somali refugees fleeing the civil war in Somalia and who had spent time in refugee camps. These events were the main cause of their low levels of alphabetic literacy. An attempt was made to balance the groups in terms of overall
language proficiency by doing a SPEAK test (1982) rating\(^3\) and by the fact that all of the participants had reached the same stage of acquisition (Stage 5 of 6 stages) in question form development. In addition, the groups were roughly balanced in terms of formal schooling to minimize the possibility that the results related to schooling, not literacy. In using this sampling method, it was hoped that differences between the groups could be tied to literacy level.

Table 1. Participant profiles for recast and narrative analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID*</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Literacy Level**</th>
<th>Yrs in USA</th>
<th>Years schooling</th>
<th>Oral proficiency SPEAK rating***</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Literacy Mean</td>
<td>L1</td>
<td>L2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abukar</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Najma</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ubax</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fawzia</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khalid</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faadumo</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moxamed</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufia</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Pseudonyms.

**Measured using the Native Language Literacy Screening Device (n.d.).

*** SPEAK test rating scale was used to rate speech samples coming from research protocol, not SPEAK test items.

Participants were recruited in community venues, not schools, after the researchers had spent considerable time in the community building trust and developing relationships with youth and those running after school activities, including homework help programs. After completing a battery of tasks with 35 individuals, four participants with the highest scores on the literacy measures and four with the lowest literacy scores were selected.

Target forms

\(^3\) The scoring criteria for the SPEAK test were used to rate speech samples from the data by a trained SPEAK test rater. The actual SPEAK test items were not administered.
Philp (2003) focused her research on question formation in English, which were also the target forms for Studies 1 and 2. This was useful because question forms have received much attention in SLA research (e.g., Ellis, 1984; Mackey, 1999; Spada & Lightbown, 1993; White, Spada, Lightbown, & Ranta, 1991). SLA researchers have widely accepted that English language learners progress through acquisition stages as they learn questions (Pienemann & Johnston, 1987; Pienemann et al., 1988). In Study 3, the interlanguage analysis focused on plural and verb tense morphemes as well as sentence complexity. This line of SLA study also has a long tradition from which to draw (Corder, 1981; Corder, 1967; Lantolf & Ahmed, 1989; Selinker, 1972; Tarone, 1983, 1985; Tarone & Liu, 1995; Tarone & Parrish, 1988).

**Tasks**

The research protocol involved the same procedures for all participants. It began with informal conversations with the participants to make sure that they were giving informed consent and to gather background information on their prior schooling and time in the US. Participants then did a practice spot-the-difference task where researcher and participant each looked at pictures that were slightly different and the participant asked the researcher questions in order to identify differences between the two pictures. When the participant asked an ungrammatical question, the researcher recast it and then signaled the participant to attempt to repeat it correctly. After this, the researcher answered the question that the participant had asked. The next set of tasks, called story completion tasks, involved the participant looking at pictures, one-by-one, of a story that raised questions because the pictures were incomplete. Participants were asked to clarify what was happening in the pictures and the researcher completed the story. After each of the story completion tasks, participants were asked to retell the story as if they were telling it to someone who did not know it. Finally, participants did an elicited imitation task (Naiman, 1974) in which they were asked to repeat a set of researcher-generated questions along with a number of distractor sentences. This task was designed to elicit questions across all stages of acquisition. An example of an elicited imitation sentence is the following: Would you ask if I could attend? (highest of 6 stages). The task involved participants repeating sentences such as this after the researcher said them once. It is relevant to note that in the elicited imitation task, the trigger utterance comes from the researcher, not the participant, as in the recast task.

The following table shows the number and types of tasks done in each of the two one-on-one sessions. In some cases, the sessions were conducted on the same day, with a break in between; at other times, they were done a couple days apart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Session</th>
<th>Second Session</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informal conversation with participant</td>
<td>Informal conversation with participant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Analyses

The types of errors participants made with regard to the target forms were analyzed and quantified according to stage of acquisition of the participants’ original or trigger utterances. Whether the participant was able to provide full, partial, or no recall of the recast from the researcher was also analyzed and quantified. Furthermore, participants’ ability to recall long recasts (6 or more morphemes) and recasts with multiple changes were analyzed and quantified. Results of the higher literate group and the lower literate group were compared for statistical significance using exact permutation analyses (Chernick, 2007; Efron & Tibshirani, 1993; Good, 2001; Marden, 2001). The learner narratives were analyzed for instances of marking plural or past as well as learner failure to use morphemes when they were needed. Complex sentences were counted and sorted into types of clauses. For these analyses, percentages were calculated, but statistical tests were not used.

### Results

With her highly educated and literate participants, Philp (2003) found that: (a) when proficiency level (stage) matched recast, recall was higher; (b) an increased number of changes to the trigger utterance in the recast made recall more difficult; and (c) the longer the recast, the more difficult they were to recall. The participants reported here behaved somewhat differently.

### Study 1: Recasts in elicitation tasks and literacy level

In the first study, the following question was addressed: Is accuracy of recall of a recast related to the literacy level of the learner, the length of the recast, or the number of changes made by the recast? Results show that literacy level was significantly related to the ability to recall recasts in correct or modified form (i.e., when participant recalls of the recasts were perfectly correct or partially correct). The exact permutation analysis showed that the moderately high literacy group performed better overall ($p = .043$). On

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4 This study was reported in Bigelow et al. (2006).
the other hand, the ability to recall a recast was not related to the length of the recasts for either group. There were no statistically significant differences in recast length between the two literacy level groups or the participant group as a whole. In other words, participants in the two groups responded similarly to long and short recasts, as in the following example:

Short recast

Trigger: Why he’s so happy?
Recast: Why is he so happy?

Long recast

Trigger: What he doing, the man in the sitting chair?
Recast: What is the man sitting in the chair doing?

Regarding the complexity of the recasts, as in the long recast in the example above with multiple changes made to the trigger sentence produced by the participant, the more literate group recalled recasts with two or more changes significantly more accurately ($p = .014$). The more literate group was better able to recall more complex recasts.

The second portion of the analysis in Study 1 involved a close examination of one participant: Abukar. The goal was to explore how one participant with low print literacy processes recasts on questions in English. Abukar was 15 years old at the time of the study. He was very fluent, but his literacy level was very low. He had spent four years in a refugee camp during some of his school-age years. His common challenges included lack of subject/auxiliary inversion (e.g., “…what, what his is looking”) and not using do-support (e.g., “…why he come this room?). He seemed to find it particularly difficult to repeat target-like inversion in recasts, as in the examples below:

Abukar: What he sit on, what he SIT on, or whatever?
MB: What is he sitting on?
Abukar: Mhm.
MB: What is he sitting on? Again. Repeat.
Abukar: What he sitting on?
MB: What IS he sitting on?
Abukar: Oh. What he sitting on?
MB: What IS he sitting on?
Abukar: What IS he sitting on?

He has the same challenge many turns later:

Abukar: Oh. What he try to write down?
MB: What IS he trying to write down?
Abukar: What he’s, he’s try to write down?
MB: What IS he trying
Abukar: What he is t, try to, write down?

Later in the protocol, Abukar focuses on stress on the second syllable/word, as in the following:

Abukar: Why he is mad? Why [he], he is mad?
MB: [yeah]
MB: Why IS he mad?
Abukar: Why HE is mad? Why
MB: Why IS he mad?
Abukar: Why IS he mad? Why is, [is he]…

On the other hand, Abukar uses interaction very well to learn vocabulary. (See Tarone and Bigelow, 2007, for a detailed analysis of this phenomenon.) His skill in focusing on meaning again resonates with the literature reported above where adults with little literacy are very skillful at processing language semantically.

**Study 2: Recast versus elicited imitation tasks**

Another analysis of the data collected in this research protocol compared how participants responded to the elicited imitation task versus the recast task, reported in Study 1 above. Specifically, the research questions were: (a) Is the ability to recall target sentences in an elicited imitation task related to the literacy level of the learner? and (b) Is there a difference in accuracy of recall of utterances in the elicited imitation task and the recast recall task?

Results show that literacy level was related to accuracy on both the elicited imitation and the recast tasks. The difference between literacy groups in elicited imitation recall accuracy approached significance at $p = .057$ (one-tailed test) while the difference between literacy groups in recast recall accuracy was significant at $p = .014$ (one-tailed test). For both literacy groups, accuracy of recast recalls was significantly better than for elicited imitation recalls at $p = .008$ (two-tailed test).

**Study 3: Interlanguage variation and literacy level**

The last analysis to report involves an examination of the nature of the variation of grammatical forms used by the two groups of learners when they did the story retell
task. The exploration focuses on the following question: Does literacy level correspond to the grammatical forms participants use in retelling the same stories in narrative form? Specifically, would illiterate or low literate learners use fewer semantically redundant grammatical morphemes (e.g., plural -s, third person singular -s, past tense -ed)? Would their sentence complexity suffer from their difficulties in processing grammatical forms in the oral input? Because this third analysis focused on grammatical forms produced in meaningful communication in a comparatively small study, inferential statistical analysis were not carried out, but rather a linguistic analysis to explore patterns was used. These results will have to be tested more rigorously in future studies. The semantically redundant grammatical morphemes included bare verbs (verbs with no morphological marking) versus verbs with -ed, third person singular -s, auxiliary be and bare nouns versus noun with plural –s. Sentence complexity included an examination of relative clauses, noun clauses, and clauses with because, so, and since.

The moderate literacy group provided more morphemes for verbs than the low literacy group. The low literacy group produced more bare verbs (205/321 or 64%) in obligatory contexts versus the moderate literacy group (230/458 or 50%). The following examples show how participants from the two groups used morphemes with verbs in their story retells:

Her mom says, “Come in now, in a car.” (Faadumo, moderate literacy group)

Her mother they say, “We going right now…” (Najma, low literacy group)

So, she called him (Khalid, moderate literacy group)

Somebody call him. (Fawzia, low literacy group)

Call him. (Fawzia, low literacy group)

However, this is a matter of degree: the two groups’ performances overlapped.

With regard to plural noun marking, the total number of plural nouns is much smaller than the number of verbs. Again, individual performances in the two groups overlapped, so caution in interpreting these findings is important. However, there seemed to be a tendency for the low literacy group to leave off the plural -s on plural nouns: The low literacy group produced more bare nouns in obligatory contexts (36/69 or 52%) versus the moderate literacy group (13/57 or 26%), sometimes substituting quantifiers as in the following examples:

A lot of monkey they take his hat. (Ubax, low literacy group)

The monkeys took all his hats. (Khalid, moderate literacy group)

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7 This research was reported in Tarone et al. (2006).
Nevertheless, a low number of plural nouns supplied in the samples along with individual variation prevent firm conclusions.

There was also evidence of increased sentence complexity in the oral narratives of the more literate group. On average, the moderate literacy group used almost twice as many ‘so’ clauses and dependent clauses than the low literacy group. Literacy level seems related to sentence complexity. The moderate literacy group used almost twice as many ‘so’ clauses indicating causality and dependent clauses (131 v. 72). But here again, there was individual variation across the literacy groups.

**Discussion**

The results from the quantitative portion of Study 1 suggest that literacy level is significantly related to the ability to recall recasts with multiple changes. This finding is consistent with Reis and Castro-Caldas’ (1997) assertion that literacy has a positive impact on working memory. The participants in the low literacy group seem to lack phonological awareness skills that would allow them to hold information from the recast in working memory, manipulate phonemes, and produce a reformulation that indicates uptake of features in the recast.

Results from Study 2 suggest that corrective feedback that is based on learner generated language, rather than teacher or researcher generated language, may be easier to process and, therefore, promote acquisition. It is likely that learner generated language is easier to process partly because the learner has already processed the utterance for meaning and can then focus attention on the form-focused feedback in the recast.

Philp’s (2003) study, the initial inspiration for these studies, showed that highly literate adult learners did not do as well with long or complex recasts as they did with short recasts that made few changes to their original utterance. The participants in the present studies, on the other hand, differ from Philp’s participants in that they did not struggle with length. This is an interesting and perhaps unsurprising finding from a community with many oral language traditions. It would also seem that having low literacy might encourage the development of other skills, such as easily holding long segments of oral text in working memory. Complexity (number of changes to participants’ trigger utterances) of the recasts did, however, matter for both Philp’s participants and those in the current studies. The more changes, the more difficult recall was. This may be due to the fact that the recast changed the intended meaning to the degree that it was incomprehensible to the participant. Perhaps, as with Philp’s participants, it was too difficult to hold so many changes in working memory long enough to recall the utterance grammatically. But complexity of the recasts seemed to matter more for the participants in the low literacy group. Perhaps they lacked the metalinguistic tool of being able to visualize the corrections to English question syntax.
and, in essence, “re-read” the “edited” sentence correctly from a mental picture in their minds.

In Study 3, the issue of whether literacy level is related to the grammatical forms and morphemes used by L2 learners in their oral narratives was explored. It appears to be so, but more information is needed. There is some evidence that the lower literacy group did not mark verbs and nouns with redundant morphemes as much as the moderate literacy group. And on average, the moderate literacy group used more dependent clauses, including more relative clauses, than the low literacy group. It seems that the findings are consistent with claims of Ravid and Tolchinsky (2002) that children do not acquire more complex syntactic forms of the native language until they are literate; literacy broadens genres of use and accompanying structures. But more and larger studies are needed to examine this phenomenon. The findings of the present study fall in the predicted direction, are consistent with studies in related fields, and set out a clear agenda for the next steps of research.

This research reported here has limitations. The analyses included a small number of participants, and even though the assumptions of the exact permutation analysis were met, future studies should include more participants and different statistical measures which have the ability to more carefully pinpoint individual variables between participants. Another limitation is the literacy measure used. This measure was not fine-tuned enough to gather data on anything more than the participants’ approximate and holistic literacy skills in Somali and English. Future studies should more carefully measure participants’ phonemic awareness, for example.

Conclusion

One of the most important findings from this research is that L2 oral language processing is likely to differ between literacy groups in some important ways in the adolescent and young adult population studied. This suggests that teachers may need to find alternative means of teaching certain grammatical forms while learners are becoming literate. Level of alphabetic print literacy may influence the way morphemes are noticed in oral input and the way L2 oral skills are acquired in interaction. Another key finding is that one cannot assume that current SLA findings apply to less literate adolescent and adult populations. The results show that participants with low literacy behaved differently than the Somali participants with moderate literacy and also from Philp’s (2003) highly educated college students. Until more research is done, it is impossible to make assumptions about what it is like to learn to speak a new language without strong literacy skills. In this spirit, scholars must not dismiss the possibility that some aspects of L2 oral language learning may, in fact, be easier among learners with low literacy. These and many more questions remain with regard to the role of literacy in L2 oral language learning.
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