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Opening Up Research on the Teaching of Reading by Looking beyond US Borders: What We Might Learn from Early Literacy Instruction in China

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This article discusses early literacy instruction in China, including the impact of biliteracy education on Chinese society. This presentation is based on interviews with over two dozen scholars of Chinese literacy instruction, as well as primary early grades language arts classroom teachers from four different regions across China. The purpose of this examination of literacy education in China is to open our views of literacy instruction beyond US borders, especially in those countries with different language/literacy systems. Because of the rapid increase of emergent bilingual students in our schools, we need to gain a better understanding of literacy and biliteracy education in the countries where those students grew up. On the one hand, this insight can help us realize the literacy practices that emergent bilingual students may bring to their learning in our classrooms and the importance of biliteracy as a requisite for our education. On the other hand, this understanding will urge us, both researchers and educators, to reexamine our beliefs and scholarship in reading or literacy education, and open our vision to the plurality of languages, multiple literacies, and diverse methods of literacy instruction beyond our land.

It is ironic that in this day of globalization and connectivity, we, in the United States, seek to construct more barriers between our world and that of others through English-only policies and a reduction of what being “American” means. We need to counter trends that further our national isolation and xenophobia by opening our eyes to the multicultural, multinational, and plurilingual world beyond ours. Literacy education can become a tool for students to learn about and understand their world and beyond. Students need to be exposed to a diversity of cultures, languages, and realities through reading, learning, and communicating with others. Students in the US, and elsewhere, need to develop empathy for others apart from themselves, allowing them to transcend the insular thinking that only tethers

their wills and understandings to their personal interests. Rather than ignoring the different experiences in the US and in many other countries or casting Others as mere outliers and their experiences as only the lives of a few, we need to embrace the multivoicedness of our collective national and international experiences, and gain empathy for the perspectives of others.

Although there are researchers, educators, and others who assume it to be otherwise, the US is a multilingual and multicultural country. Student populations in US schools are increasingly diverse. Incorporating into instruction and curriculum students' linguistic and cultural differences and meeting the needs of the students with diverse backgrounds in reading education is still an unrealized goal, despite progress in the past three decades. One growing group of students who deserve increased attention and consideration are emergent bilingual students.

The concept of emergent bilingualism and emergent biliteracy normalizes and makes mainstream becoming bi/multilingual and biliterate. It is a linguistic and cultural state of being that could be available to all students, if the field of reading/literacy education (researchers, educators, and others) had the vision to recognize the importance of multilingualism and biliteracy to the social, economic, civic, and technological success of individuals, communities, professions, and nations.

Emergent bilingual students come to classrooms in the US with their existing home language and literacy practices. When they begin to learn English, their first language and literacy play a pivotal role in their new language and literacy development. Based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), emergent bilingual students make up over 10% of the student population across US public schools, and by 2050, this number will reach 50% of the total student-age population in the United States. With this rapidly growing student population, we, researchers and educators, need to gain a better understanding of their unique literacy backgrounds, which differ from those of monolingual students.

Consider Chinese emergent bilingual/biliterate students and the educational experiences they and their parents bring to the teaching and learning in US schools. Chinese emergent bilingual students are the second-largest group of linguistically and culturally diverse students in US schools. In particular, let's look at how children learn to read and write in schools in China. Although many Chinese bilingual/biliterate students have attended schools in China, some have not. Even so, their parents have; and their parents' experiences in learning to read and write in Chinese schools provide their children with resources and a framework (funds of knowledge; see, for example, Moll et al., 1992) for learning to read and write in the US. Examining the case of Chinese emergent bilingual/biliterate students does not provide generalizations for instruction of all students; indeed, the argument here is just the opposite. The purpose of examining the situation of Chinese bilingual/biliterate students is to enable us to see all students holistically and design instruction accordingly rather than using a one-size-fits-all formula. In addition, opening our views of literacy instruction in other countries, or other language/literacy systems, broadens our visions in our own literacy instruction.

Early Literacy Education in China

In China, foundational education, called basic education, consists of 12 years from first grade to 12th grade. Chinese is a logographic language, which is very different from a phonographic language like English or Spanish, with its written language being image-based, rather than sound-based. Chinese is meaning-based while also partially aligned with oral language, with radicals at times conveying phonological cues. Despite a variety of dialects (or languages) in China, there is only one unified written form, with about 40,000 different characters. Mastering 3,500 frequently used characters is considered being functionally literate in China (about grade 6 literacy).

How do children develop their literacy skills and learn to read and write in this kind of language system? To answer this question, in collaboration with educators in China, we have interviewed over two dozen scholars in the Chinese literacy education field, and classroom teachers of early primary grades in four different regions across China. The purpose of these interviews was to shed light on the learning experiences and backgrounds of Chinese emergent bilingual children in our schools and reflect on our own K–12 education in the United States.

In China, children receive a 9-year mandatory compulsory education, which was introduced in 1986, with complete implementation across all of China by 2002, which has contributed greatly to decreasing illiteracy among the young and middle-aged population from 80% to 5% across the country within three decades. Of the 9-year compulsory education, 6 years are for elementary and 3 years for junior high. A school year is 38 weeks for elementary and 39 weeks for junior secondary. Teachers are subject-specialized and usually rotate with the students for three years to ensure consistency in teaching and learning. This means a teacher teaches the same classes of students for 3 years (e.g., from grades 1 to 3 in the same subject area) before they take on a new cohort, starting the same rotation again. A language arts teacher usually teaches three classes (with 45–50 students each) and serves as the head teacher for one of them. In addition to teaching language arts, the teacher is also responsible for teaching *labor activity* class (one or two periods a week), which aims to develop children's habits of self-care as well as keeping their environment clean, such as cleaning their bedrooms and classrooms. In a highly centralized country, the curricula and grade standards for foundational education (precollege) are basically unified across the country, with some regional (mainly between city and rural) differences and flexibility.

Chinese children start their formal schooling at 6 years of age as first graders, most having already attended preschool for 3 years (from 3 to 5 years of age). The major subjects for the first 2 years of primary schooling are composed of Chinese language arts (CLA), mathematics, English, science, music, art, labor activity, and physical education. CLA includes three areas: reading, writing, and oral language. Reading, unlike in the US, never stands alone. The language arts curriculum consists of two parts: pre-reading/writing and reading/writing instruction. The pre-reading/writing part has two units: character recognition (4 weeks) and character pronunciation, or pinyin (4 weeks), and the reading/writing section

(30 weeks) is considered the core of language arts curriculum. The 4-week unit on character recognition focuses on learning simple characters, such as frequently used characters with a few strokes like 上 (up), 大 (big), 人 (people), and 一, 二, 三 (one, two, three).

The philosophy behind this practice is that school learning should first relate to children's everyday literacy experiences. Children grow up surrounded by written language in their everyday lives, and the formal literacy instruction is to help children gain conceptual understanding of their lived experiences and connect with the literacy they develop before they come to the school. According to Vygotsky's (1978) theory on cognitive development, teaching enables the cognitive development from spontaneous experience to scientific understanding. During this preliminary formal literacy instruction, Chinese children learn three major principles of the Chinese written language: Chinese characters are formed by different strokes; they are shaped like different pictures; and the meaning shifts with the context when characters are combined with other characters. And with one dot or stroke alteration, the character can have a different meaning, such as 人 (people), 大 (big), 太 (too much), 天 (sky), and 犬 (dog). Children also learn the rules of character writing: from top to bottom, from left to right, from outside to inside, and the balance of different parts of each character. Due to the fact that a slight difference in character writing would change its entire meaning, refining handwriting is emphasized, stressed and practiced daily in early grade language arts instruction. Calligraphy is taught as an art form, a part of language arts.

In order to help students reach this conceptual understanding of the Chinese written language, character recognition instruction has to be meaning-based: a picture-like character not only has meanings, but its meaning varies when paired with different characters in different contexts. For example, when 上 (up or at the top of) is joined with other characters, it can be used as verbs like *climb* in 上楼 (climb stairs) or 上山 (climb mountains) and *go to* in 上学 (go to school) or 上班 (go to work), and as an adjective like *last* in noun phrases like 上周 (last week) or 上辈子 (last life), etc. So when learning to recognize the writing of each character, children can't learn it in isolation. The following was shared by two of the teachers we interviewed about how they connected meaning with their teaching of characters:

Chinese characters are more than just symbols, they are pictures and have stories and poetry behind them. In teaching characters, I connect the shape, the story and meaning of a character whenever I can to help students not only remember it, but understand why it is shaped like that, and what is the story behind it. Take “班” as an example. It means “a class or a group,” which is part of a whole. In the middle of this character, it is like a knife, which divides the “王” into two parts, and becomes “班”.

In teaching characters, we teach them by related groups to show students how characters are meaningfully connected and expanded. Here is an example: 木 (tree), 林 (woods), and 森 (forest), and a noun phrase, 森林 (deep forest or rainforest). By teaching characters

this way, it makes abstract symbol concrete and easy to remember, and help students enjoy character learning and become interest in recognizing the meaning in individual characters and meaningful associations among the symbols or images of characters.

During this preliminary language arts instruction, frequently used characters are taught in connection with other characters to form a variety of phrases, such as the characters 上 or 木 accompanied by pictures, while demonstrating their different meanings in different contexts through videos. This meaning-based learning enables students to gain joy and interest in character learning.

The second unit of pre-reading/writing instruction focuses on pinyin, the Chinese phonics system, which is for character pronunciation. The pinyin system was developed in 1950s and first adopted in schools in 1958. Pinyin is associated with standard oral Chinese language, and not directly connected with the written language. It is used to help pronounce characters, connect oral language with written language, and help standardize pronunciation in the official dialect (Mandarin). Chinese oral language has different language systems, with hundreds of dialects across China, and there are even several dialects within one province. The first emperor, Qin Shihuangdi (211–226 BCE), unified the Chinese written language, and the Communist government (since 1949) made Mandarin (the northern dialect) the Chinese standard official language. Consequently, Mandarin is used for school instruction across China.

The unit on pinyin lasts about 4 weeks in the first grade. Like the written language, Chinese pinyin is also very meaning-based and contextualized. Take *ma* as an example. It can be associated with multiple characters, which may designate nouns like *horse*, *mother*, or *pockmarks*, or even verbs like *scold*, *marinate*, or *wipe*. And if joined with other characters, it can mean *ants*, *trouble*, *careless*, *painkiller*, *question signal*, etc. Almost every pronounced syllable in Chinese has multiple meanings in different contexts. It is shown in the dictionary that over 90 different characters are pronounced as *si*. Therefore, it is impossible to teach pinyin, the Chinese phonics system, only for the sake of pronunciation or decoding, without association with multiple meanings in different contexts.

The pinyin unit in language arts instruction is integrated with the teaching of children's songs and poetry reading. Oral language or speaking is the focus of this unit. Reading aloud and speaking activities are ways to assess the learning of pinyin, and regional dialects often incur challenges in pinyin learning for many students that tend to affect their standard pronunciation when reading aloud, rather than reading comprehension. Gradually, students are expected to improve their pronunciation throughout their education by listening to and immersing themselves in a standard language environment (including TV and radio). After this period, no more systematic pinyin instruction is given throughout formal language arts education. To reinforce pinyin learning, students are often asked to come up with pinyin for new vocabulary (how to read it in standard Chinese (Mandarin) or use pinyin to search for unknown words in a dictionary, activities that are integrated with reading and writing instruction throughout the year.

After the first 8 weeks of instruction of simple written language and pinyin, language arts instruction shifts its focus to reading/writing instruction—the core curriculum on short-text reading/writing till the end of the school year (30 weeks). According to the teachers we interviewed, only reading and writing of cohesive and meaningful texts can be truly considered reading/writing instruction. The reading texts are first presented in both written characters and pinyin (see Figure 1), and later, are only presented in characters, while new vocabulary characters have pinyin to help with the pronunciation. Guided reading, choral reading, and independent reading (silent) are blended throughout reading instruction, through which vocabulary is developed through sight-word reading in context. Reading comprehension and fluency, integrated with oral language development, are emphasized to lay a foundation for children's literacy development. In many schools, there is usually 10–15 minutes of morning oral reading time before school officially starts each day, which is led either by the language arts teacher or by a student. Writing is blended with reading instruction, which includes look-and-write activities (picture reading), summarization of text reading (about the main idea, main characters, and setting), sentence expansion activities, and using academic language for self-expression. Often in writing, many children would use pinyin to depict the characters they don't know how to write, and later they would use a dictionary to find characters to replace the pinyin (see Figure 1). In this way student-writers would not hinder their fluency of writing by searching for unknown characters. Indeed, this is reminiscent of translanguaging practice.

Of the curriculum standards issued recently by the Ministry of Education in China, the language arts standards for first/second grade in Chinese formal education are: students can recognize 1,600 frequently used characters, are able to write (or spell) 800 of them, enjoy learning characters, and have a desire to recognize and write the characters around them. However, based on our interviews, most first and second graders exceed this standard. In this case, teachers often shorten the

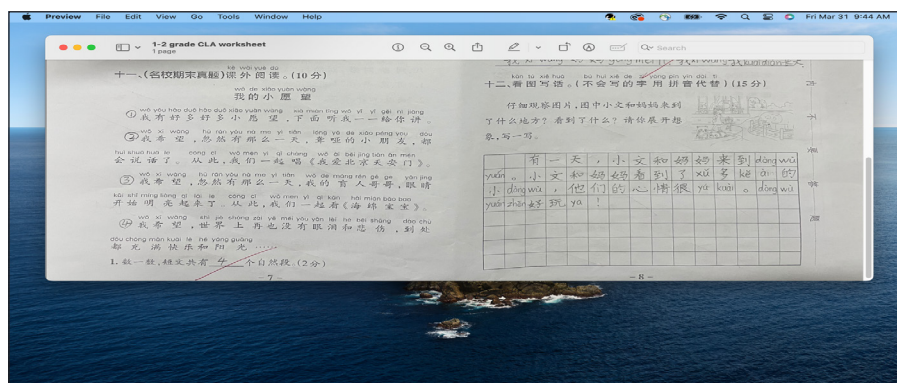


FIGURE 1. A grade 1–2 CLA worksheet for homework: a reading text with pinyin and writing about a picture mixed with characters and pinyin

required time for character and pinyin learning units, progressing to the reading and writing unit as soon as they think most students are ready. The teachers we interviewed all shared that very few children start the first grade without knowing many commonly used characters, and some are even able to recognize over 200, which they learned from reading environment prints (see Figure 2) with the help of their parents or caretakers or in their preschools. Therefore, by the end of the first grade, in general, most of their students can read around 3,500 characters (about 50% of which they can write correctly), read 200–300-word short texts, and produce a written text with 4–5 sentences. There are usually about 10% to 15% of students functioning below grade level, and their performance is usually, according to the teachers we interviewed, attributed to a lack of school preparation or family support, or some individual learning issues.

China is known for its test-driven education. But in recent education reform, “China’s leading government body, the State Council, unveiled a new set of guidelines in 2019 calling for less focus on exams and more consideration of physical, cultural and political education,” according to the state-run Xinhua news agency (Westcott & Giolzetti, 2019). Several of the Chinese teachers we interviewed also pointed out that now grades 1–3 in China are not given any formal tests, because the joy and desire for learning is highly emphasized in the early grades. As one put it, “We believe that children need to learn to love reading and developing a learning habit is very important at the early stage. If not, there is no chance for them to do well later. Frequent and high quantity of reading is the key in literacy development.” In addition, music, art, science, labor activity, and physical education



FIGURE 2. Environment prints on “building good characters” on stairs in a primary school

are part of the required curricula for the early grades. In the first/second-grade curricula, a bullet specifically addresses the need to “protect the instructional time for music, art and physical education,” which indicates that these subjects tend to be less valued and easily taken over by so-called academic subjects in school like language arts, mathematics, and English. In the following section, we will transition from Chinese literacy education to biliteracy education in China, or specifically integrating English. English education is part of early literacy learning for children across China. In this discussion of English education in China, we will focus on the impact of bilingualism and biliteracy on the Chinese nation rather than its curriculum and instruction.

English Education and Biliteracy Development in China

As an international language, English is considered a key academic subject in China, just like language arts and mathematics. According to the Chinese scholars we interviewed, the major purpose of English education in China is to enhance global communication and collaboration. Rather than relying on translated work, educated people in China should be able to directly read any published works in English and communicate in English with people across the world. English education is considered a key component in China’s long-term modernization plan, including catching up with (and going beyond) the developed nations in its economic and high-tech output. China and its people understand the critical role the English language plays in being competitive on the global stage, as well as at the local level.

In early 2000, English became an officially required subject starting in third grade throughout the foundational education. But soon it was adopted as one of the core subjects, starting in the first grade in all private schools and most public schools in cities across the nation, due to pressure from parents and local communities. In college, students are required to study English in their first and second years, transitioning to an elective in the junior and senior years. This means that high school graduates in China should have 10–12 years of English education, and college graduates would have 12–14 or more years of English study. English is a subject required for all high-stakes tests, such as Zhongkao (high school entrance) and Gaokao (college entrance), and functions as a gatekeeper for graduate school and some well-paid professional jobs. This indicates the importance of English learning in China, and English proficiency can affect a person’s future and social mobility. As a matter of fact, there are English/Chinese bilingual or dual-language private preschools for children ages 3–5 in most urban cities. According to a report published in *People’s Daily* on April 27, 2020, titled “English Education in China: An Evolutionary Perspective”:

English is a compulsory subject in China’s standard national curriculum. Many Chinese students begin learning English at an early age, some even in kindergarten [3–5 years of age]. In general, they receive their first English lessons in the third grade in primary school.

There are estimated to be around 400 million Chinese people learning English, larger than the entire population of the United States. In 2018, the number of TOEFL [Test of English as a foreign language] test takers reached 300,000, ranking first in the world.

With a high emphasis on English learning in formal education, rather than foreign language education, English is now treated like a second language. This means that most Chinese people are biliterate after they graduate from high school or college. Through learning the English language, they also learn about the English-speaking world, including that world's culture, history, politics, and people. "Foreign language learning is not simply about learning a second language," said Shi Minghui, a former staff member at the Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China in Toronto. "Ultimately, it is also about learning a fresh pattern of thinking. It is a way for you to discover an entirely new world. You can get a deeper understanding of the nation, the culture, and the people by learning the language. English is a powerful tool for you to connect to the outside world." This sentiment was echoed by a scholar of English education in China:

I studied in various language programs (of both the traditional and the bilingual/immersion type) and have acquired a working knowledge of English. However, I am in no way convinced that I have a perfect character, that I have had my intellectual and creative powers boosted by the bilingual and immersion programs I attended, that I have been civilized and enlightened because of my command of English, that I am more politically aware as a result of learning English, and that I have English or the bilingual programs that I attended to thank for my way of looking at the world. (Hu, 2008, p. 206)

English education has contributed significantly to strengthening China's overall international competitiveness and has opened doors for individuals in China to greater opportunities. Within the country, people with good English proficiency have opportunities to get well-paid professional jobs. Also, with English proficiency, they are able to pursue their education abroad. According to data released by Textor (2022) on the Statista website, the number of Chinese students going abroad for study steadily increased until 2019. That year, around 703,500 Chinese students left China to pursue overseas studies. The number increased by 6.25% compared with the previous year and made China the largest country of origin for international students in the world.

Chinese international students also make up the largest group of international students in the United States. Data published by Statista Research Department in June 2, 2023 show there were 948,519 international students studying in the United States in the 2021–2022 academic year. This is an increase from the previous year, when 914,095 international students were studying in the United States, international students from China were the largest group of international students in the US. (https://search.yahoo.com/yhs/search?hspart=tro&hsimp=yhs-freshy&grd=1&type=Y219_F163_204671_102220&p=Chinese+international+students+in+the+US+from+2021-22).

Even though these numbers indicate that English-speaking countries have benefited from English education in China by the enrollment revenue of the Chinese students, China has also benefited from having these students return to the home country with new knowledge and skills they have learned in the Western world, which has contributed greatly to its economic growth. According to a press release by the Chinese Ministry of Education (2020):

The total number of Chinese nationals studying overseas in 2019 was 703,500, marking an increase of 41,400, or 6.25%, over the previous year. In 2019, 580,300 learners returned to China, representing an increase of 60,900, or 11.73%, over 2018. In the period 1978 to 2019, a total of 6,560,600 Chinese nationals had studied abroad. By the end of 2019, 1,656,200 were still pursuing studies or research, while 4,904,400 had their studies. Of this number, 4,231,700 students or 86.28% chose to return to China after finishing their courses. <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/International-network/china/PolicyUpdates-China/Pages/Ministry-of-Education-announces-new-measures-to-assist-stranded-Chinese-international-students/>

English education or bilingual education has spurred biliteracy development among the Chinese people in the past three decades and contributed greatly to China's economic growth and visibility on the international stage. Since the 1980s, when the country first adopted its Open Door Policy, not only has the government realized the importance of English education, but English learning across the country has become an insatiable need, starting younger and younger. "Chinese students are getting younger [in learning English] and preschoolers are one of the biggest submarkets for English language education," said Zou Yimin, a former staff member at China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and founding editor of China's English newspaper *China Daily*. After-school English tutoring programs are among the most profitable instructional enterprises in China. English education has brought China a great global visibility and contributed to its rapid economic ascension from being one of the poorest countries to the second-largest economic giant in the world within four decades. Bilingualism and biliteracy (Chinese/English) is seen as one of the most important human capitals in China. It opens the door for the country and opens the minds of the people. It has improved drastically the living standards of the nation (based on World Bank data) and introduced its people to global perspectives on their own land and the world beyond their insular, inward-looking gaze.

However, we need to point out that the insatiable appetite for English education in China, on the other hand, also reveals its postcolonial or neoliberal orientation. While English education is widely adopted at every education level, many local dialects or ethnic languages in China—such as Tibetan, Uyghur, and Inner Mongolian languages—are mostly neglected. Even though there are bilingual (Mandarin and local ethnic) schools in the ethnic autonomous regions like Tibet, these varieties of bilingualism do not have the same financial and social investment as Chinese/English bilingualism. About this phenomenon, the unified response

from the Chinese scholars we interviewed noted the function and the impact of bilingualism on the nation and individuals. As one of these individuals specifically stated, “Learning local dialects or language is to maintain the traditional culture, but learning Mandarin and English provides more and better opportunity for individuals, and for the nation as a whole. When we don’t have funds to reach both goals, we’d better choose one that meets the immediate needs and can produce tangible results. China, as a nation, we are a pragmatic people, as we say, ‘No matter if it is a white or black cat, if it can catch mice, it is a good one.’” With a unified national drive in English education, China is on its way to becoming a Chinese/English bilingual nation.

What Can We Learn from the Early Literacy Education in China?

From the early grade curriculum (grades 1–2) of Chinese language arts instruction in China, it is clear that Chinese children’s learning to read and write starts with character recognition (sight-word) or reading, and is always meaning-based, with oral and written languages integrated. Without the foundation of these two principles, characters or pinyin in the Chinese language system would be meaningless symbols, nonfunctional for reading comprehension or for oral/written communication. The meanings and contexts associated with these two semiotic symbols are essential in the Chinese language. We have also learned that reading is a part of language arts instruction and does not stand alone from writing or other language learning activities.

When Chinese emergent bilingual children come to our classrooms, they bring both their first language literacy and ways that they have acquired that literacy. In their first language learning experience, they have learned that language functions only when it is meaning-based and contextualized, and in Chinese, oral language is different from written language; the former is widely diversified, and the latter is unified. Through the ways Chinese children learn to read, they understand that reading is based on connecting oral with written language, text with living experience, and in-school with out-of-school literacy. As Cummins’s (2000) iceberg model in linguistic interdependency theory shows, under the surface, there exists much more that influences emergent bilinguals’ new language learning and bilingual and biliteracy development. It goes beyond Scarborough’s (2001) rope model of reading as the intersections of language-crossing, culture-crossing, and learning experience—crossing complicate the learning-to-read process for emergent bilingual students. There can’t only be a simple approach in reading or language arts instruction for emergent bilingual students.

For emergent bilingual students, learning a new language is to expand their language pool and gain new knowledge about different language systems, advancing their communicative abilities beyond the territory/community in which they were born and grew up. And learning to read in a new language for emergent bilinguals is to develop their bilingual and biliteracy competence. To do so, the knowledge and skills they bring into their new language learning need to be activated to assist the new learning, rather than neglected. Emergent bilingual students’ bilingualism

should be leveraged to drive conceptual development in their new language and literacy learning. As Fu et al. (2019) suggested, “rejecting assimilationist agenda that demands that all students ‘blend in’ and adopt the mainstream monolingual and monocultural identities, this education brings the cultural capitals of the students to the forefront of the education process” (p. 30).

Without consideration of how emergent bilingual students bring their first literacy background into their learning in our classrooms, we not only ignore the existing knowledge and literacy skills they bring into the new learning process, but also may rupture the foundations of knowledge and concepts about language (its function) or the reading process (connective) they have obtained in their first language literacy developed at home and in their previous schooling (Ruíz, 1984). These neglections and disruptions would not only confuse them, but also cripple their ability, numb their interest in learning to read and write, and constrain the development of their multicompetence. In addition, due to the wide popularity of English language learning across the world, when entering our classrooms, many emergent bilingual students probably know more about the English language and the United States or Western culture than we know about their language and culture.

It is sadly ironic that the US does not seemingly have a widespread goal to become a bilingual and biliterate nation, despite its being the most multilingual country in the world, with 350–430 languages spoken across the United States. According to the US Census (2019), 78% of Americans do not speak a second language, and only 17% of high school graduates, 20% of college graduates, and 36% of postgraduates declared that they could speak more than one language fluently.

What might be the consequence to the US as a nation when the majority of the world’s population is bilingual and biliterate and the US is overwhelmingly English monolingual? They can speak our language, read our works, and communicate with us directly or with others across the world. Yet we are forced to use either translators or translation software to communicate and collaborate with non-English-speaking people across the world. By contrast, China has invested enormous funds in its English education at both its government and individual household level. It considers becoming a Chinese/English bilingual nation as a necessity for its modernization, for economic advancement, and for its global competitiveness. With 400 million students studying English every year since the early 2000s, China has witnessed the tangible results that English education or bilingual education has brought to its economic growth, science, and technology advancement, as well as its rise to a world power. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2023; reported in Krishankutty, 2022), Americans are increasingly seeing China as a world superpower and a threat. If our nation remains monolingual, the threat that diminishes our influence on the world stage would be very real.

As a multilingual country, if the United States can value its diverse linguistic and cultural resources sincerely, and see this diversity as its strength, as a source of important human resources and assets for its economic and social advancement, and as a key to its homeland security, it will take steps to move into building a biliterate nation. But the Americanization movement, an ideology with deep roots

in many places in the US, has been an obstacle for the US to embrace non-English languages or non-Western cultures as truly American. As Flores (2015) posits, since the early 20th century, the Americanization movement has sparked widespread opinion that foreign language instruction was/is a threat to the integrity and the unity of US society.

The ideology of Americanization leads to national isolation, which prevents the US not only from embracing the diversity in its own land, but from seeing the value in other languages and cultures. As a policy brief of the National Education Association issued in 2010 points out:

Our increasingly interconnected and interdependent global society mandates that American students be educated to develop habits of the mind that embrace tolerance, a commitment to cooperation, an appreciation of our common humanity, and a sense of responsibility—key elements of global competence. However, not enough is being done in public schools and classrooms to expose students to global issues. Research shows that most American students, low-income and minority groups in particular, lag behind their peers in other countries in their knowledge of world geography, foreign languages, and cultures. (p. 1)

Since 2000, Chinese education has been working hard to develop global competence for its citizens through English learning and biliteracy development. In contrast, the US has not seriously sought to develop students' global competence, though it never stops pushing for global competitiveness, with a focus more on economic development and technological advancement rather than cultural, language, or world knowledge for its citizens. Brandt (2001) states:

As democratic institutions, schools are supposed to exist to offset imbalances that market philosophy helps to create—including, especially, imbalances in the worth of people's literacy. The more that the school organizes literacy teaching and learning to serve the needs of the economic system, the more it betrays its democratic possibilities. The more that private interests take over the educational development of our young citizens, the less of a democracy we will have. (p. 205)

Unfortunately, with the struggle for global competitiveness, US education is moving toward standardization rather than humanization. In literacy education, there is a fixation on conforming to mandated standards, with the prioritization of phonics instruction and the "science" of teaching reading (Sanden et al., 2022). These shifts, when taken together, portend a troubling trend, not just in how literacy and science are conceived but also in how we position our students.

With the increasing numbers of emergent bilingual/biliterate students, and many compelling reasons for normalization and making multi/bilingualism / biliteracy an educational priority, both researchers and educators need to reflect on how they are conceptualizing the teaching of reading and the "science" of reading. The reluctance of US-based researchers (and researchers based in English-language-dominant countries) to interact with and learn from researchers of the teaching

and learning of reading outside the US inhibits and constrains the philosophies and theoretical frames and assumptions of reading or literacy education research. As researchers and educators, we need to reexamine our beliefs, and open our vision to the plurality of languages and ways of thinking that defines our nation. By learning from those experiences beyond US borders, including non-English-speaking contexts, we can reflect on and refine our scholarship and literacy practices.

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