Learning through Language

Learning language and using language to learn are at the core of any educational activity. Bringing together a globally representative team of experts, this volume presents an innovative and empirically robust collection of studies that examine the role of language in education, with a particular emphasis on features of school-relevant language in middle childhood and adolescence and its precursors in early childhood. It addresses issues like how children’s linguistic and literacy experiences at home prepare them for school, how the classroom functions as a language-mediated learning environment and how schools can support bilingual students in academic attainment. Each of its three parts – early childhood, middle childhood and adolescence and learning in multilingual contexts – features a discussion from experts in the field to stimulate conversation and further routes for research. Its structure will make it useful for anyone interested in ongoing efforts towards building a pedagogically relevant theory of language learning.

Vibeke Grover is Professor of Education at the University of Oslo, Norway.

Paola Uccelli is Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, USA.

Meredith L. Rowe is Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, USA.

Elena Lieven is Professor of Psychology at the University of Manchester, UK.
Learning through Language

Towards an Educationally Informed Theory of Language Learning

Edited by

Vibeke Grøver
University of Oslo

Paola Uccelli
Harvard University

Meredith L. Rowe
Harvard University

Elena Lieven
University of Manchester
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Contributors

Macarena Alvarado, Servicio Nacional de Capacitación y Empleo (SENCE), Chile

Macarena Alvarado has a master’s degree in economics from the University of Chile and a master’s degree in public policy and development from the Paris School of Economics, France, and is an external consultant for the Inter-American Development Bank and the Chilean government.

Mary Catherine Arbour, Division of Global Health Equity, Brigham and Women’s Hospital, USA

Mary Catherine Arbour, MD MPH, is Associate Professor for Research at Brigham and Women’s Hospital and Assistant Professor at Harvard Medical School. She implements and evaluates interventions to promote child development and reduce inequities in the USA and abroad, using a combination of experimental, ethnographic and quality improvement methodologies. She has particular interests in methods for adapting evidence-based practices across diverse contexts and populations, and at scale.

Bernardo Atuesta, Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), Chile

Bernardo Atuesta is Consultant for CEPAL in Santiago, Chile. He is an economist with a master’s degree in economics from Rosario University in Colombia and a master’s degree in public policy and development from the Paris School of Economics, France.

Gina Biancarosa, University of Oregon, USA

Gina Biancarosa is Associate Professor and Ann Swindells Chair in Education at the University of Oregon. She earned her EdD in language and literacy from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her research interests centre primarily on measuring and tracking growth in reading comprehension and on adolescent literacy, as well as meta-representational skills more broadly.
List of Contributors

Elma Blom, Utrecht University, the Netherlands
Elma Blom is Professor in Language Development and Multilingualism in family and educational contexts in the Department of Education and Pedagogy at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. She studies the parallel development of multiple languages in children, linguistic and cognitive effects of bilingualism, predictors of language development and the distinction between language delay and language impairment, and she works on the improvement of diagnostic instruments for multilingual children.

Si Chen, Harvard Graduate School of Education, USA
Si Chen, PhD, is a post-doctoral fellow at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her research is primarily concerned with the ways in which language/literacy learning curriculums and environments for young children – in and out of school, monolingual and bilingual – can be designed to support children’s development. Much of Chen’s research focuses on detecting the effectiveness of randomized literacy interventions in China.

Evelyn Ford-Connors, Boston University, USA
Evelyn Ford-Connors, EdD, is a senior lecturer in the literacy programme at Boston University’s Wheelock School of Education and Human Development and the Co-director of the Donald D. Durrell Reading and Writing Clinic. Her dissertation research examined middle school teachers’ talk during their classroom-based vocabulary instruction, and she continues to pursue this line of inquiry through research and coaching focused on teachers’ talk during literacy instruction.

Vibeke Grøver, University of Oslo, Norway
Vibeke Grøver is Professor of Education at the University of Oslo, Department of Education. She has conducted research on children’s peer play, on children’s language use in a cross-cultural perspective and on longitudinal relations between language exposure and vocabulary learning in language-minority children. Currently she is undertaking an intervention study of dual language learners and their language learning and text comprehension in urban, multi-ethnic preschools in Norway.

Kenji Hakuta, Stanford University, USA
Kenji Hakuta is the Lee L. Jacks Professor of Education, Emeritus, at Stanford University. His publications are in the areas of theory, policy and practice in the education of English learners.
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List of Contributors

Paul L. Harris, Harvard Graduate School of Education, USA
Paul L. Harris is the Victor S. Thomas Professor of Education at Harvard University. He obtained a DPhil in experimental psychology from Oxford University. He studies the development of emotion, imagination and cognition in early childhood.

Anna M. Hartranft, University of Maryland, USA
Anna M. Hartranft is a faculty research associate at the University of Maryland, College Park. Her research focuses on reading and writing difficulties for children with or at risk for disabilities. She has conducted research on the development and instruction of comprehension and has recently completed her dissertation, focused on the role of executive functioning in the comprehension of upper elementary students from linguistically diverse backgrounds and/or with disabilities.

Lowry E. Hemphill, Boston University, USA
Lowry E. Hemphill is Clinical Associate Professor at Boston University. She received her doctorate from Harvard Graduate School of Education with a focus on language and literacy learning. Her main research interests are literacy development among low-income children and adolescents and oral language contributions to reading comprehension. She is the main developer of the Strategic Adolescent Reading Intervention (STARI) and helps lead a large-scale clinical trial into its efficacy.

Lotte F. Henrichs, Utrecht University, the Netherlands
Lotte F. Henrichs is a researcher and educational consultant at the Department of Educational Consultancy and Professional Development, Utrecht University. She obtained a PhD in linguistics from the University of Amsterdam, with a focus on academic language development in early childhood. She currently teaches on the topic of teaching diverse classrooms in the Utrecht University Teacher Education Program for primary education. She collaborates with teachers in various practice-oriented research projects.

James Kim, Harvard Graduate School of Education, USA
James Kim is Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He studies the effectiveness of literacy reforms and interventions in improving student outcomes.

Young-Suk Grace Kim, University of California, Irvine, USA
Young-Suk Grace Kim is Professor at the University of California, Irvine. She received her EdD from Harvard University in human development and
List of Contributors

psychology with a concentration in language and literacy and a minor concentration in quantitative policy analysis in education. Her primary research areas include development and difficulties in language, cognition and reading and writing skills across languages and writing systems.

Nonie K. Lesaux

Nonie K. Lesaux is Academic Dean and Juliana W. and William Foss Thompson Professor of Education and Society at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her research focuses on promoting the language and literacy skills of today's children from diverse linguistic, cultural and economic backgrounds, and is conducted largely in urban and semi-urban cities and school districts.

Paul P. M. Leseman, Utrecht University, the Netherlands

Paul Leseman is Professor of Education in the Department of Education and Pedagogics. He studies language and cognitive development in children with a low socioeconomic status or a migration background. He is involved in intervention programmes to close the early education gap between children from different backgrounds and is currently leading a large cross-national study into the mechanisms of educational inequality and exclusion in Europe.

Robert A. LeVine, Harvard Graduate School of Education, USA

Robert A. LeVine is Roy E. Larsen Professor of Education and Human Development, Emeritus, at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. His research concerns cultural aspects of parenthood and child development in African, Asian, Latin American and other societies. His most recent research finds that across these contexts, much of the effects of maternal schooling on child health and development are due to the language and literacy skills that the mothers learned in school.

Diana Leyva, Davidson College, USA

Diana Leyva is Assistant Professor of Psychology at Davidson College, USA. Her research focuses on how parents support the development of children’s school readiness skills in minority communities in the USA and Latin America. She received her PhD from Clark University, was a lecturer in education and a post-doctoral fellow at Harvard University and was project director of Un Buen Comienzo (A Good Start), an initiative to improve early childhood education in Chile through a teacher professional development programme.

Elena Lieven, University of Manchester, England

Elena Lieven is Professor of Psychology at the University of Manchester. Her research involves usage-based approaches to language development; the
emergence and construction of grammar; the relationship between input
characteristics and the process of language development; and variation in
children’s communicative environments, cross-linguistically and cross-
culturally. She is Co-Director of the ESRC International Centre for
Language and Communicative Development (LuCiD: www.lucid.ac.uk) at
the Universities of Manchester, Liverpool and Lancaster. She is an elected

Stefka H. Marinova-Todd, University of British Columbia, Canada

Stefka H. Marinova-Todd is Associate Professor in the School of Audiology
and Speech Sciences at the University of British Columbia, Canada. She
holds an EdD in human development and psychology from the Harvard
Graduate School of Education. Dr Marinova-Todd investigates the language,
literacy and cognitive development of bilingual children, both typically
developing and with autism.

Marcela Marzolo, Fundación Educacional Oportunidad, Chile

Marcela Marzolo is Executive Director of Fundación Educacional Oportunidad
in Chile, which implements Un Buen Comienzo, a programme that seeks to
improve the quality of early childhood education for at-risk Chilean
children. She is an early childhood educator from the Pontificia
Universidad Católica de Chile. She is a specialist in learning disabilities
from the same university and a specialist in children’s attachment and mental
health from the Universidad del Desarrollo in Chile.

Ageliki Nicolopoulou, Lehigh University, USA

Ageliki Nicolopoulou is Professor of Psychology at Lehigh University. She is
a socio-cultural developmental psychologist whose research interests
include the role of narrative in development, socialization and education;
the influence of the peer group and peer culture as social contexts for
children’s cognitive and socio-emotional development; the relationship
between play and narrative; the foundations of emergent literacy; and the
developmental interplay between the construction of reality and the
formation of (gender) identity.

Catherine O’Connor, Boston University, USA

Catherine O’Connor is Professor of Education and Linguistics at Boston
University in the Wheelock College of Education and Human
Development. She received her PhD in linguistics at the University of
California, Berkeley with a focus on language documentation of Northern
Pomo, a dormant indigenous language of northern California. Her research
in education centres on language use in school settings, including classroom
discourse and discussion and its role in literacy development and mathematics learning, and how teachers learn to orchestrate productive classroom discussion.

P. David Pearson, University of California, Berkeley, USA

P. David Pearson is an Emeritus faculty member in the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley, where he served as Dean from 2001 to 2010. His current research focuses on literacy history and policy. He also holds an appointment as Professor of the Graduate School and is the Evelyn Lois Corey Emeritus Chair in Instructional Science.

C. Patrick Proctor, Boston College, USA

C. Patrick Proctor is Associate Professor of Literacy and Bilingualism at the Lynch School of Education, Boston College. His research interests include cognitive and sociolinguistic explorations of bilingualism in elementary and middle school–aged children, language and literacy development among linguistically diverse learners, collaborative partnerships with teachers in multilingual classrooms and the intersections between technology and literacy development in urban school settings.

Andrea Rolla, David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University, Chile

Andrea Rolla is a post-doctoral researcher at Harvard University and an advisor to the Un Buen Comienzo project in Chile, an interdisciplinary partnership with Fundación Educacional Oportunidad. Previously, she worked for four years as Senior Advisor at the Chilean Ministry of Education as well as at the US Department of Education, the UK National Foundation for Education Research and the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile and as a consultant in Costa Rica, Chile, El Salvador, Colombia, Ecuador and the USA. Andrea holds a BA in literature as well as an elementary school teacher certification from Princeton University, a master’s degree in educational research from the University of Oxford and a doctorate in education from Harvard University, having specialized in language and literacy development.

Meredith L. Rowe, Harvard Graduate School of Education, USA

Meredith L. Rowe is Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where she teaches courses on language and literacy development. Her research focuses on uncovering features of parent communication with children that contribute to children’s language and cognitive development across early childhood and on translating these findings into intervention programmes for parents.
List of Contributors

Sara Rutherford-Quach, Stanford University, USA

Sara Rutherford-Quach is Director of Academic Programs and Research for Understanding Language at the Stanford Graduate School of Education. She received her PhD in linguistic anthropology of education from Stanford University. Her interests include language development, classroom discourse and instructional practice and with respect to bilingual students and their educators.

Robert L. Selman, Harvard Graduate School of Education, USA

Robert L. Selman is the Roy E. Larsen Professor of Human Development and Education and Professor of Psychology in Psychiatry at Harvard University. Currently, he studies the developmental and cultural antecedents of the capacity to form and maintain positive social relationships, as well as ways to prevent negative educational, social, and health outcomes in youth.

Rebecca D. Silverman, Stanford Graduate School of Education, USA

Rebecca D. Silverman is Associate Professor of Early Literacy at the Stanford Graduate School of Education. Her research focuses on language and literacy development and instruction of children in early childhood and elementary school. She has focused especially on vocabulary and comprehension for children from socioeconomically disadvantaged and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Lauren Skorb, Davidson College, USA

Lauren Skorb graduated from Davidson College, where she worked with Diana Leyva in the Food for Thought programme. After graduating, she worked for two years as a manager of the Language Learning Lab at Boston College, with Joshua Hartshorne. She will start her graduate programme at Georgia Tech University in fall 2018.

Catherine E. Snow, Harvard Graduate School of Education, USA

Catherine E. Snow is the Patricia Albjerg Graham Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She teaches courses and conducts research on language and literacy development, with learners from preschool through adolescence, and with special attention to learners facing elevated risk of academic failure.

Ernesto Treviño, Facultad de Educación, Pontificia Universidad Católica, Chile

Ernesto Treviño is Professor and a researcher of the Facultad de Educación, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. He was the director of the Centro
List of Contributors

de Políticas Comparadas, Universidad Diego Portales, in Chile, between 2011 and 2016. He has been Senior Advisor to the Latin American Laboratory of Evaluation of the Quality of Education of UNESCO-OREALC since 2013. He is an economist from the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey and holds a doctorate in education from the Harvard University Graduate School of Education.

Margaret Troyer, Strategic Education Research Partnership Institute, USA

Margaret Troyer is currently Project Director at the Strategic Adolescent Research Partnership, and she recently earned her EdD from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her research interests focus on adolescent struggling readers, reading motivation and teachers’ adaptations and implementation of curriculum.

Paola Uccelli, Harvard Graduate School of Education, USA

Paola Uccelli is Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her research examines socio-cultural and individual differences in school-relevant language and literacy development in monolingual and bilingual learners. Her projects in the USA and abroad seek to inform research-based pedagogies that empower all learners’ voices. Being a native of Peru, she is particularly interested in Latin America, where she collaborates with local schools and organizations to conduct pedagogically relevant research.

Yuuko Uchikoshi, University of California, Davis School of Education, USA

Yuuko Uchikoshi is Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of California, Davis. She holds an EdD in human development and psychology from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Dr Uchikoshi’s research focuses on the language and literacy development of young children from linguistically, culturally and economically diverse backgrounds.

Josje Verhagen, Utrecht University, the Netherlands

Josje Verhagen is a post-doctoral researcher at Utrecht University and the University of Amsterdam. She studies language development in young children, with a strong focus on bilingual children. In previous studies, she investigated the relationships between phonological memory and language learning in monolingual and bilingual children. More recently, she examined effects of bilingualism on statistical learning and on children’s reliance on non-verbal communicative behaviours, such as pointing.
List of Contributors

Hirokazu Yoshikawa, New York University, USA

Hirokazu Yoshikawa is the Courtney Sale Ross Professor of Globalization and Education and University Professor in the Department of Applied Psychology, New York University. He co-directs the Global TIES for Children Center at NYU and serves on the advisory boards of the Open Society Foundations Early Childhood Program and the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report.

Joonmo Yun, Florida State University, USA

Joonmo Yun received his PhD in education at Florida State University. His research interest is in students who struggle with literacy acquisition.

Qianqian Zhang-Wu, Boston College, USA

Qianqian Zhang-Wu is a PhD candidate in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the Lynch School of Education, Boston College. Her major research interests lie in the areas of bilingualism, bilingual education, teacher education and literacy development in K–20 settings. Prior to her doctoral studies, Qianqian received her MSEd in educational linguistics (TESOL) from the Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania.
Foreword

For decades, research on child language acquisition followed a tradition of looking to work conducted in the lab, often with homogeneous samples of children and families, to address questions about typical and atypical patterns and processes of development. Less common was work motivated by questions about the context of language learning – questions about language use and exposure, questions about the influence of specific inputs at home and school on trajectories of learning and questions about the role of second language acquisition. An exception to this trend is the work of Catherine Snow – a scholar who articulated the link between children’s early language interactions, whether at the family dinner table or while engaged in joint storybook reading with a parent or caregiver, and their later language and literacy behaviours. Within her expansive and innovative programme of research, Snow has paid special attention to identifying those high-lever interactions – the questions, the types of utterances and the kinds of texts – that are linked with children’s vocabulary and language growth.

Tracking with the increasing diversity of the school-age population, including linguistic diversity tied to immigration and globalization, the widening income-achievement gap and a press for policy and practice-based solutions to these challenges for education, Snow’s early work, mostly conducted in homes and with young children, was followed by almost two decades of work that has been foundational to a next generation of research focused on examining and describing solutions to the dire need for richer classroom language-learning environments. This body of research ranges from large-scale intervention work in US classrooms serving high numbers of linguistically diverse learners to preschool classrooms in Latin America serving academically vulnerable children.

Fittingly, then, we have before us an unparalleled volume – one that focuses on building a pedagogically relevant theory of language learning. This book is based on the idea that developing an educationally relevant approach to language demands an investigation of language and literacy learning in its diverse cultural contexts, as evidenced by chapters that focus on learning and development in China, Chile, the Netherlands, Norway, Canada and the USA.
Combining methodological rigour and a sophisticated lens on development with both ecological validity and practical relevance, the chapters address how language exposure and language use in early childhood at home and in school are precursors to academic language use and literacy in the school years. The volume goes further to address how academic language and its precursors can be supported through instruction and specific discourse practices at home and in classrooms.

The volume solidifies a new era of research – research that is at once robust methodologically and substantively but equally attentive to issues of context and pressing problems of policy and practice. Today’s policy makers and education leaders need guidance on how to improve the forms of language practices to which children and adolescents are exposed at home and in school. And at the same time, much more discussion among researchers is needed about the qualities of language use and competency that prepare all children, recognizing multilingualism as a feature of today’s population, to become language and text users in modern societies. The volume, and the trailblazing work on which it is based, is therefore inspirational and much needed; it showcases the fundamental developmental ideas and understandings that have had a profound influence on language and literacy research and practice initiatives taking place in many parts of the world and will serve as a guide for such work in decades to come.

Nonie K. Lesaux