

LA TROBE UNIVERSITY
All kinds of clever

How learning a foreign language can assist with the national "reading crisis"

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LA TROBE UNIVERSITY SOLAR LAB School of Language and Reading Lab

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

La Trobe University acknowledges our campuses are located on the lands of many traditional custodians in Victoria and New South Wales. We recognise their ongoing connection to the land and value their unique contribution to the university and wider Australian society. La Trobe University is committed to providing opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, both as individuals and communities, through teaching, learning, research and partnerships across all our campuses.

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SOLAR LAB

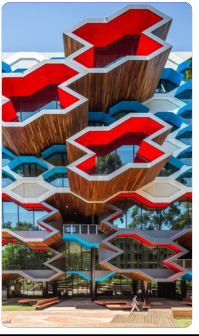
Co-founded in 2020 by
Professor Tanya Serry and
Distinguished Professor Pamela Snow

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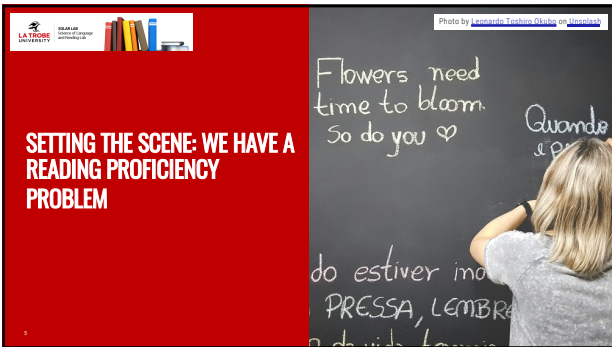
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OVERVIEW

- WE HAVE A PROBLEM WITH READING PROFICIENCY
- WHY READING PROFICIENCY MATTERS SO MUCH
- HOW WE LEARN TO READ (VS. SPEAK)
- A THEORETICAL MODEL OF ORAL LANGUAGE
- THEORETICAL MODELS FOR READING (AND THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF ORAL LANGUAGE)
- FACTS AND FICTION ABOUT LEARNING AN L2
- AND WHEN IT COMES TO LEARNING ITALIAN AS L2



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SETTING THE SCENE: WE HAVE A READING PROFICIENCY PROBLEM

Flowers need time to bloom. So do you ♡

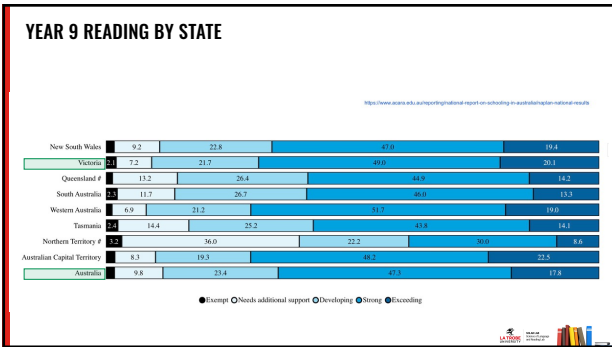
Quando è primavera

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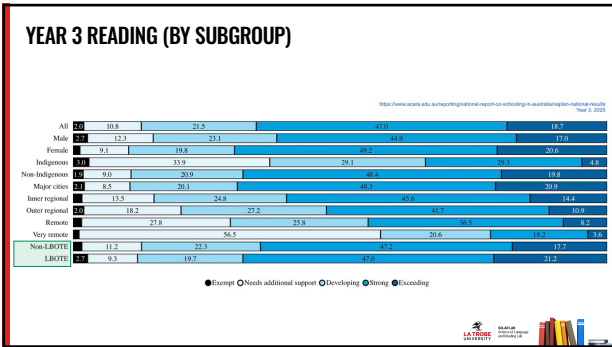
PRESSA, LEMBRAR

de vida longa

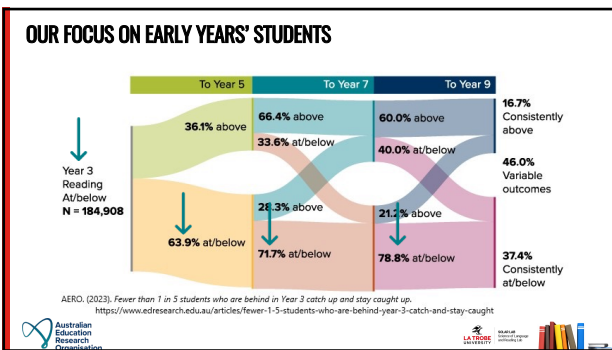
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THE PROBLEM(S)

“National and international studies reveal that significant numbers of adolescents do not adequately understand complex texts, impeding their school success, access to postsecondary learning, and opportunities within our increasingly competitive work environment,” (p. 38)


(Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010; Faggella-Luby et al., 2012; Vaughn et al., 2022)

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HEADLINE MESSAGES [Rice et al. \(2024\)](#)
[Williams et al. \(2023\)](#)

"The ability to comprehend while reading text is an essential skill in learning. Throughout school, students are expected to learn from texts they are asked to read." (Rice et al., 2024)

"Year 3 students who perform below learning expectations are at a high risk of continuing to perform at that level throughout their schooling." (Williams et al., 2023, p. 5)



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READING REALLY MATTERS [Source at Unsplash](#)

Reading is

- central to many activities of daily living, academic and social accomplishments and post-school opportunities.
- associated with meaningful engagement in economic, political, social & vocational mainstream.

Conversely, poor reading proficiency is associated with a range of negative sequelae including:

- Poor physical and/or mental health.
- Social isolation.
- Increased risk-taking behaviours.
- Increased risk of contacts with the justice system.



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LEARNING TO READ IS NOT NATURAL [Geary \(2012\)](#)

Biologically primary skills:

Necessary for 'survival'.

Necessary to be able to benefit from education at school.


Biologically secondary skills:

Domain-specific skills that must be explicitly taught.

The purpose of education systems is to teach biologically secondary knowledge.


e.g.

- L1 acquisition
- walking, jumping
- using a pincer grip



e.g.

- L2 mastery (if beyond early years*)
- reading / writing
- calculus
- flying a plane



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LEARNING TO READ IS NOT NATURAL

- Writing systems are "human contrivances" [-3 to 5K years]. (See Gerry et al, p. 87)
- In contrast, oral language has been in existence for > 150K years.
- Oral language has an enormous "evolutionary advantage" compared to literacy.


- Reading is a language-based task, but strong oral language skills are not enough.



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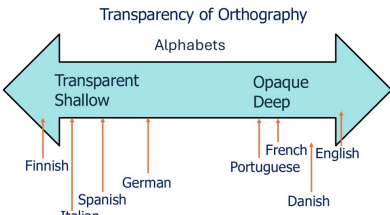
LEARNING TO READ IS NOT NATURAL

- FOR L1 (some L2 learners), language acquisition is biologically primary.
- Paradoxically – growth trajectory is vulnerable.
- Never "set and forget" once students commence school.
- This is where you can have such a profound direct and indirect influence as L2 educators.



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YET, WE ALL LEARN TO READ IN ROUGHLY THE SAME WAY




Transparency of Orthography

Alphabets

Transparent Shallow

Opaque Deep

Finnish, Italian, Spanish, German, Portuguese, Danish, French, English

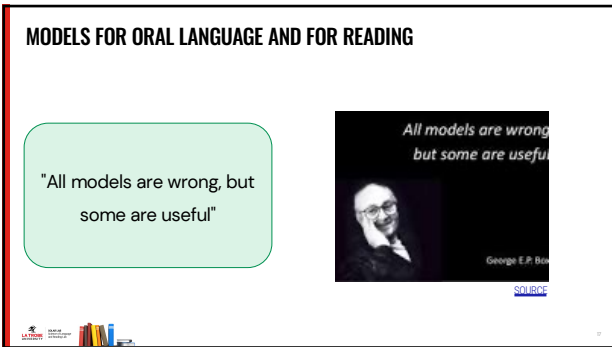


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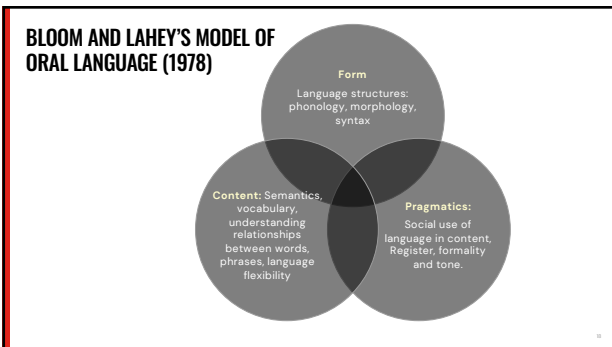
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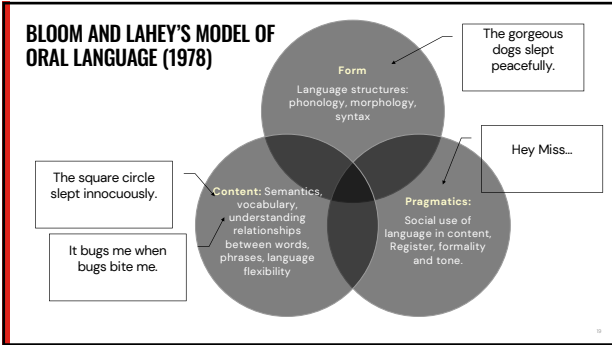
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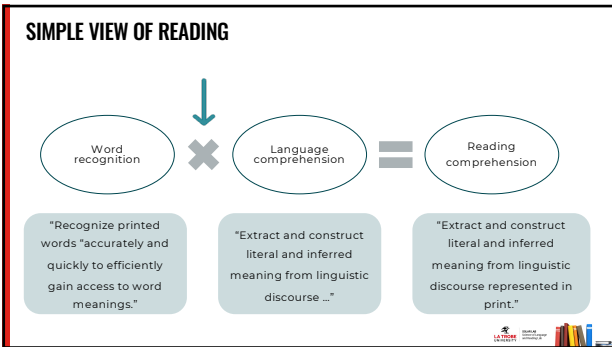
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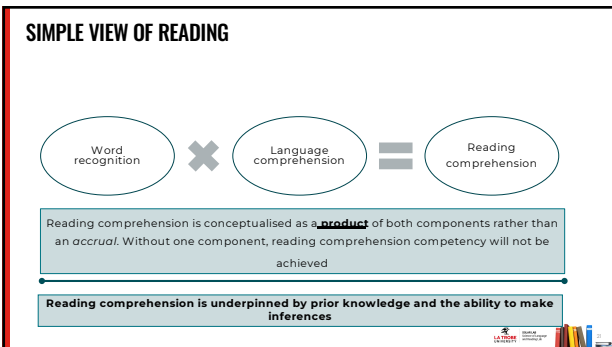
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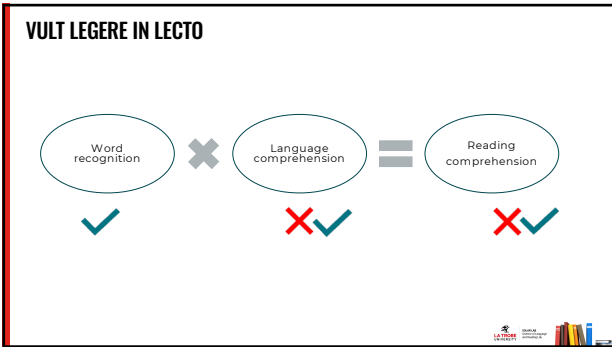
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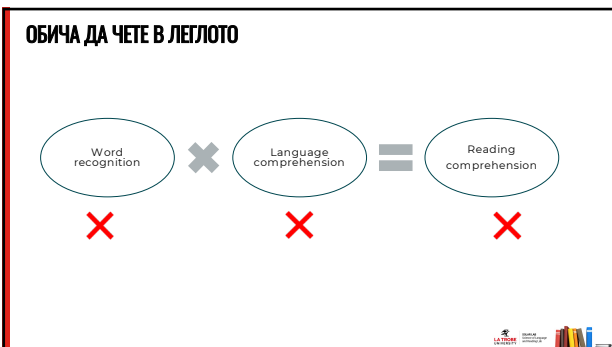
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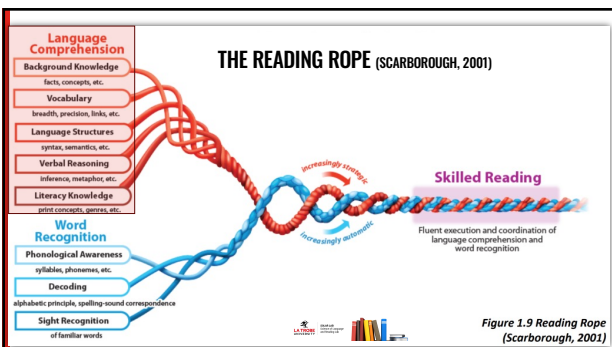
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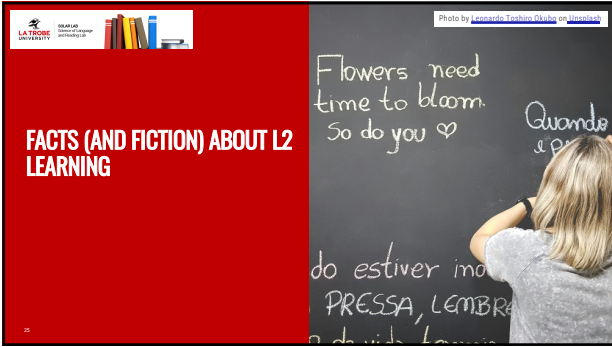
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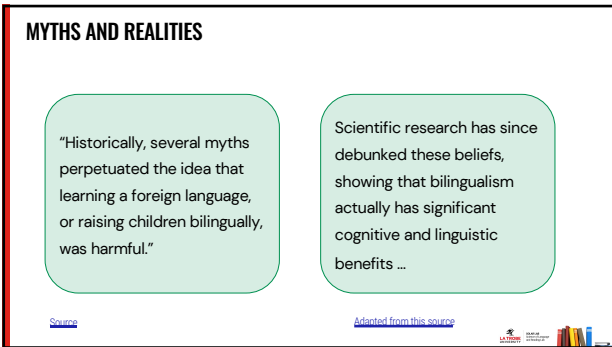
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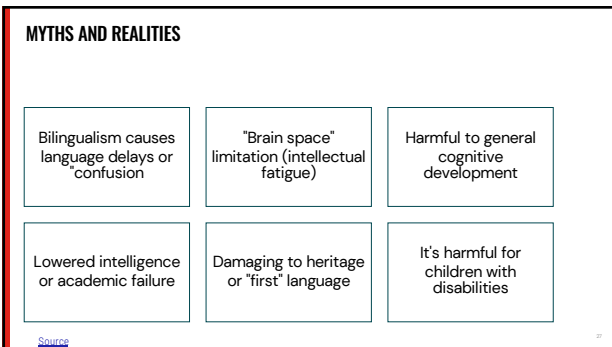
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L2 AND ITS INFLUENCE ON L1

TERKULE ET AL. (2011)
MITCHELL, L., TSUJ, R. K-Y., & BYERS-HEINLEN, K. (2024).

- L2 learning can positively influence the development and use of a learner's first language (L1) in relation to cognitive, metalinguistic and literacy-related mechanisms.
- Metalinguistics: one can consciously reflect and analyse language as an on object rather than simply use language to communicate.
- L2 learning can expand word knowledge (lexical) in L1 by becoming aware of etymology (word roots), morphology and word cognates.
- When we study a foreign language, we become more attuned to the structural features (FORM) of language overall.
- This heightened awareness improves the ability to analyse, manipulate and use L1.

Adapted from [https://www.esoliance.edu](#), ChatGPT.

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BLOOM AND LAHE'S MODEL OF ORAL LANGUAGE (1978)

The diagram consists of three overlapping circles:

- Form:** Language structures: phonology, morphology, syntax. Associated with **Explicit grammatical instruction**.
- Content:** Semantics, vocabulary, understanding relationships between words, phrases, language flexibility. Associated with **Word cognates, etymological and morphological patterns**.
- Pragmatics:** Social use of language in content, Register, formality and tone. Associated with **Awareness of conversational discourse, formality, use of language across different contexts.**

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IN SUM:

Foreign language learning supports L1 growth and expansion through shared linguistic resources, increased metalinguistic awareness, cognitive enhancement, and transferable literacy skills.

Far from hindering L1 proficiency, it provides a complementary pathway for deepening linguistic competence and flexibility.

Adapted from [https://www.esoliance.edu](#), ChatGPT.

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WHEN IT COMES TO LEARNING ITALIAN AS L2: IS THERE A SPECIFIC BENEFIT TO L1 (ENGLISH)?

- Increasing grammatical awareness because of the deep morphological inflectional system.
- This includes syntactic constructions – especially since in Italian, subject pronouns may be omitted.
 - "Mangio"
- Increased pragmatic language awareness due to the formal/informal aspects embedded in Italian
- Deepening of vocabulary since English has borrowed SO heavily from various Latinate cognate forms.
- Word decoding and spelling practice: Italian is highly transparent
- Discipline specific vocabulary (music, culinary language, literature)

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IN SUM: SEE MURPHY (2015)
SOURCE

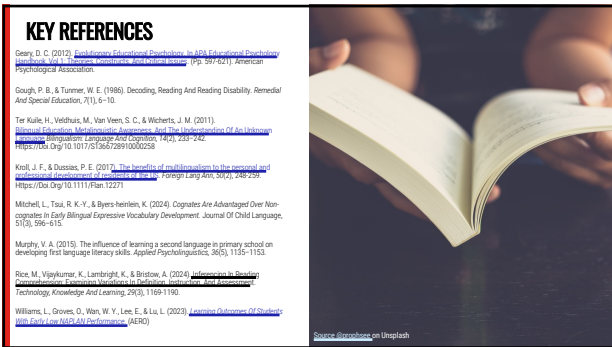
Learning Italian as L2 is likely to **strengthen L1**.

Through shared semantic and morphological roots, increased grammatical awareness, and enhanced metalinguistic insight, Italian learning provides a powerful framework for refining and extending first-language competence.

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