CHAPTER 3

The Complementary Relationships between Reading and Writing in Children with and without Writing Difficulties

Åsa Wengelin and Barbara Arfé

Introduction

This chapter deals with the relations between the processes of reading and writing, and thus the relation between reading and writing difficulties. Whereas the onset of spoken language development is assumed to happen “naturally” and with little effort for most children, the onset of written language acquisition generally happens later, and for many children not until they have received instruction in school. Children in different countries start school at different ages and acquire orthographies of different complexities concerning phonology, orthography, morphology and syllable structure. Therefore, different language systems will pose different challenges to writers and readers at different stages of the developmental process (Arfé, Dockrell, & Berninger, 2014). For example, in shallow orthographies spelling and decoding will be mastered earlier than in deep orthographies (e.g., Babayigit & Stainthorp, 2011), and this might to some extent affect the development of higher level processes, such as meaning-making processes in reading and writing.

What seems to be relatively universal in languages with alphabetic orthographies is however, that whereas some children learn to read and write before they start school and some even appear to crack the code more or less overnight, many do not and therefore require more explicit instruction. The period before starting to read and write is generally known as the emergent-literacy period, during which the activities of reading and writing cannot always be disentangled from each other. Research on emergent literacy is a vast research field on its own that can likely offer explanations for some of the phenomena discussed in this chapter. While keeping this in mind, we have chosen to delimit our chapter to research dealing with the activities often described as “conventional” reading and writing, as defined by McGee & Richgels (1996):

Conventional readers and writers read and write in ways that most people in our literate society recognize as ‘really’ reading and writing. For
example, they use a variety of reading strategies, know hundreds of sight words, read texts written in a variety of structures, are aware of audience, monitor their own performances as writers and readers, and spell conventionally.

This chapter focuses on such conventional processes at word and text level. We present two different, but complementary, perspectives that exist in research: One that considers reading and writing as two separate—though related—processes (e.g., Berninger, Abbott, Abbott, Graham, & Richards, 2002; Juel, 1988; Mehta, Foorman, Branum-Martin, & Taylor, 2005) and examines the concurrent and longitudinal relationships between these two literacy skills, and one that considers reading as a component of the writing process, and examines the contribution of reading-during-writing processes to children’s and adults’ writing (e.g., Alamargot, Chesnet, Dansac, & Ros, 2006; Wengelin, Leijten, & Van Waes, 2010). We will discuss both perspectives with reference to reading and writing difficulties.

Reading and Writing as Separate Processes

In cognitive research, reading and writing have often been considered two separate objects of inquiry, characteristic of two distinct research areas: reading research and writing research (Connelly, 2014). The connections between these two areas have long been limited and sporadic. This division has led to the development of separate models accounting either for reading (see Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Kintsch, 2004) or writing (Berninger, Vaughan et al., 2002; Hayes & Flower, 1980), and attempts to integrate reading and writing processes—and thus reading and writing difficulties—in a unitary cognitive model have been very few to date (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978). In the next two parts, we will take a closer look at models that explain reading and writing difficulties at word level and at text level.

Models That Explain Reading and Writing Difficulties at Word Level

The relationship between word reading and spelling is one of the most debated issues in reading and spelling research (Tainturier & Rapp, 2002). One view is that they are two distinct processes, with different components, with the only exception being an a-modal semantic system (Caramazza, 1988). Another view is that reading and spelling depend on shared processing components, with the exception of their peripheral processes. The models that have been clas-