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The Role of L1 Literacy in L2 Reading Development

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The Role of L1 Literacy in L2 Reading Development

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By

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Dedication

For Marc, without whom I never would have started or finished this.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

When I was in my third semester as a graduate student in the Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) program at Minnesota State University at Moorhead (MSUM) and in my first year as a tenure-track teacher in a midwestern K-4 public school, a classroom teacher started the referral process for special education (SPED) services for a student we shared. This student and their family came to America as refugees three years earlier when they were a first grader. They were now a fourth grader and their teacher was concerned that they were not making progress. In learning more about the student's language history, I learned that this student had had no formal schooling in their home country as the family was fleeing a war. The older siblings had had some formal schooling, although I do not know the extent to which they could read and write in their home language.

From class readings in my TESL classes at that time, I was learning that the timeframe for becoming proficient in English varies between 4-7 years and oral proficiency takes between 3-5 years to develop (Farbam, 2015; Hart, 2009). While I understood the teacher's concern for this student and their progress, I knew that they were still within that academic proficiency window having only been in school and speaking and learning English for 3-4 years. Had this student learned the basics of reading and writing in their home language, would we be having these discussions about referring them to SPED? We can never know that, but this story illustrates one of the many complex issues that arise with multilingual learners (MLs). Do educators know about second language acquisition, the benefits that come from learning to read

and write in a first language, and the time needed to become academically proficient in another language?

Before starting in the TESL program, I worked as a paraprofessional in a couple midwestern K-4 public schools. While working in one classroom, I was disappointed to hear a teacher make fun of a Somali student's accent, in particular the way he rolled his "r." Each time he rolled his "r," the teacher would imitate him. I could see the student trying to change the way he spoke because of the teasing. Down the hall from this classroom, I could hear students speaking another language to each other at their lockers and in their classroom, to a teacher's disapproval. When I became a teacher, I was shown a student's writing notebook where he had written in Arabic. This was supposed to be evidence of how this student was not working very hard in class. All of these examples shine a light on how some teachers do not always see a student's first language as an asset, but rather as a liability, something to be ignored, discarded, or even imitated and made fun of.

These attitudes always felt wrong to me and pointed to a disrespect for the students and their abilities. As I began my coursework in the TESL program and learned more about second language acquisition and the timeframe required for academic language proficiency, studies that showed how a foundation in literacy skills in a first language can transfer and help strengthen literacy skills in another language were the most intriguing and the impetus for this literature review.

Students identified as knowing or having meaningful and consistent exposure to another language are referred to in many different ways. Sometimes the term non-native English speakers (NNSE) is used; in the public school setting, educators often use the term English language learners (ELLs or ELs). There is an ongoing move to change the way we identify

students with this kind of background from the narrow focus on their relationship with English to capture their relationship to all languages. The term multilingual learners or multilinguals (MLs) or just language learners (LLs) is gaining ground as this more accurately reflects that the students may already know another language besides their home language and the English that they are currently developing, and to celebrate their language abilities and acknowledge the asset that it is to know another language. Throughout this paper, many of these acronyms will be used.

The scope of this project focuses on the effects of literacy in a student's L1 as it pertains to studying in U.S. public schools and learning English as additional language (EAL) or a second language (ESL), situations combined and referred to as second language acquisition (L2). The research is clear that the stronger the literacy skills in the L1, the stronger the literacy skills will become in English as the L2 (Escamilla, Olsen, Slavick, 2022; Head Start, 2021; Ford, 2015; August, Shanahan, & Escamilla, 2009; Koda, 2005; Droop, Verhoeven, 2003). While there is research to show the effects of L1 literacy on literacy development in other languages, this paper will focus on English only as the L2.

At my school we know that MLs are struggling to progress at a rate consistent with their NSE peers. We know that literacy is crucial to closing the gaps. MLs often perform below their native-English-speaking peers at school and the gap widens as they move through the grades (United States Department of Education, 2018) . How will we narrow the gaps and get MLs ready for high school and beyond so they can be successful adults? This paper will explore what the research says about learning to read and write in a first language and how we can facilitate this for students and hopefully it will also inform my advocacy for my students among my fellow teachers and in my district.

Chapter 2: What Is Literacy?

A significant amount of research shows that literacy in L1 improves the outcome of L2, specifically English literacy development (August, Shanahan, & Escamilla, 2009; Droop, Verhoeven, 2003; Escamilla, Olsen, Slavick, 2022; Ford, 2015; Head Start, 2021; Koda, 2005). But what is literacy? The International Literacy Association (2021) wrote that "over time, literacy has been applied to a wide range of activities and appears as computer literacy, math literacy, or dietary literacy; in such contexts, it refers to basic knowledge of rather than to anything specific to reading and writing" (p. 12). However, the original meaning and the definition underlying this study is, simply, literacy is the ability to read and write in a language. Shanahan (2012), a leader in literacy in education in the U.S., wrote that the components of literacy include word knowledge (including how to decode and spell words and parts of words and knowledge of word meaning), oral reading fluency, reading comprehension and learning from the text, and writing.

Writing Systems

Language is a characteristic common in all humans and all societies. While all societies have spoken language, which is innate, some additionally have a written language which must be explicitly taught. Where written language does exist, it commonly shows up in six different forms:

1. Pictograms

2. Ideograms

3. Logographic

4. Consonantal alphabet

5. Alphabet

6. Syllabary

Pictograms are direct representations of the things they refer to, whereas ideograms are pictures that take on the meanings associated with the objects they represent. For example, a picture of a wheel that is an ideogram is not just a wheel; it might also mean travel or move. Both pictograms and ideograms have direct connections to their referents. As a system developed, picture symbols began to look less like the actual things they represent, and they became abstract. Stylized pictures came to represent words for referents, not the referent iself, and a logographic system was developed where a symbol represented a whole word or an individual sound. Chinese is the most famous logographic system. Consonantal alphabets, like Hebrew, do not not include vowels. The reader must fill in the vowels as they read. Alphabets contain vowels. The alphabet we use in English is based on the Latin alphabet with five vowels, but English has 11 vowel sounds giving English a phonemic alphabet not a phonetic alphabet where every sound would have its own letter. Instead, with phonemic alphabets the phonemes and allophones all share the same symbols. For example, in words like "tea," "water," "mat," and "button," the letter "t" in each word has a different pronunciation, but we represent it with "t" every time. We do not need each sound to have its own letter. The number of letters needed would increase dramatically if English used a phonetic alphabet. The result is a phonemic alphabet which is easy enough for a native English speaker to learn, but not for NNSEs (Fromkin, Rodman, Hyams, 2010).

It would be nice if only learning the sounds and symbols of the phonemic alphabet were all that was required for reading, but there are many components required for effective reading instruction such as phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemes are the smallest units in spoken language. There are 41-44 phonemes in English depending on the dialect. Syllables and words are formed when phonemes are combined. Phonemic awareness, being able to hear and manipulate the sounds of a language and to understand that these sounds work together to make words, can predict how well a child will learn to read. It is the foundation for spelling and word recognition skills. (Antunez, 2002)

Phonics and Decoding

Phonics instruction's goal is to show students that there are systems and rules and predictable relationships between the letters and sounds of spoken language. Decoding is the process of using those rules to read the words. (Armbruster, Lehr, Osborn, 2001)

Vocabulary

With regard to vocabulary, NSEs enter school with a vocabulary of approximately 5,000 words and grow their vocabulary at a rate of approximately 1,000 words each year (Nation, 2014). Vocabulary knowledge is a key factor in L2 reading with research showing a strong correlation between L2 vocabulary knowledge and reading abilities (Droop and Verhoeven, 2003). That is because vocabulary, the meanings and pronunciation of words that are stored in the brain, is necessary when students come to a word they do not know and they need to decode

it. They also need to check if it makes sense. If that word is not in their vocabulary, there is not a way to check if the word makes sense, thus making it very difficult to understand the meaning of the sentence. Antunez (2002) said that "vocabulary development is the primary determinant of reading comprehension" (p. 1).

Fluency

Reading words accurately, quickly, and with the proper expression is what is referred to as fluency. Fluency is necessary for students to be able to understand what they read. It is the bridge that goes between comprehension and word recognition. Fluency is necessary to understand a text. When a fluent reader recognizes a word, they also understand it at the same time. Non-fluent readers have to spend their mental load on figuring out what the words says, leaving little time to understand what they just read. (Armbruster, Lehr, Osborn, 2001)

Comprehension

Being able to understand and interpret what is read is at the heart of comprehension. It is the reason we read. There are three parts to comprehension. One, students can decode what they read; two, they can make connections between what is in the passage and their background knowledge; three, they can think deeply about what they are reading. A student's comprehension level is only as high as the number of words they know. (Roberston, n.d.)

Orthographic Mapping

Orthographic mapping is how our brain stores printed words in long-term memory (Kilpatrick, 2015). It is not a skill or a technique, but rather a mental process where students connect new things with what they know. It is an explanation for how children learn to read

words by sight and to spell words from memory (Ehri, 2014). Ehri (2014) explains what needs to be in place before orthographic mapping can happen:

> "To form connections and retain words in memory, readers need some requisite abilities. They must possess phonemic awareness, particularly segmentation and blending. They must know the major grapheme-phoneme correspondences (letter-sound knowledge) of the writing system. Then they need to be able to read unfamiliar words on their own by applying a decoding strategy. Doing so activates orthographic mapping to retain the words' spellings, pronunciations, and meanings in memory." (p. 7)

In this chapter, I have collected research on how literacy is defined and shared the vocabulary that is required to define the skills necessary to achieve literacy. In the following chapters, I will explore the research available on the influence of a L1 literacy on L2 literacy more generally and then specifically.

Chapter 3: General Findings on the Role of L1 Literacy in L2 Reading Development

A wide variety of sources on a wide variety of topics suggest that L1 literacy promotes L2 reading development.

The Role of L1 literacy in L2 reading development

Being fluent in more than one language contributes to academic success. In fact, supporting the home language builds an important foundation for learning English and for all later learning (Head Start, 2021). One of Cummins's (1991) conclusions was that researchers agree that bilingual children's proficiency in L2 is primarily due to their competence in L1 literacy skills before they start learning L2 and that there is a clear relationship between L1 and L2 literacy.

Acknowledging that the bilingual mind processes language differently than a monolingual mind must therefore acknowledge that teaching literacy skills to speakers of other languages will be different than teaching literacy skills to monolingual students. We do not learn a second language the same way we learned our first language. The second language learning "occurs on the bedrock of the first. It is in relationship and comparison to knowledge of the first language that the elements of the new language… are learned, and the understanding of the different language systems develops" (Escamilla, Olson, Slavick, 2022, p. 7).

The process of gaining another language after at least one native language has been learned is the definition of second language acquisition (SLA). Any language acquired after

a person learns their first language can be called a second language and is included in the research of second language acquisition. There are multiple ways for a second language to be acquired, including through naturalistic encounters, structured classes, or a combination of methods. The field of research into how people acquire second languages is still a relatively new field with a long way to go to a complete theory of how it works. (Hummel, 2014)

When a person is learning a second language, the language of the L2 learner is called interlanguage because it is between the native language and the L2. It includes grammatical features that are not found in either language. It is dynamic and in a state of flux as the learner is moving closer towards the L2. Although the language is dynamic and moving, it is not chaotic, but rather systematic. The language learners attend to some features of the L2, but not all of them at once. Some features are in flux and developing more quickly, while others are stabilized or not an area that the learner is focusing on whether by choice or second language acquisition developmental stage. (Hummel, 2014)

Besides developmental stages of SLA affecting the L2 acquisition, transfer can also affect the student's L2 either positively or negatively. In general, transfer refers to the extension of previous knowledge or performance to the new language. Zhao (2019) writes that:

> Positive transfer occurs when the prior knowledge benefits the learning task, that is, when a previous item is correctly applied to present subject matter. Negative transfer occurs when the previous performance disrupts the performance on a second task. The latter can be referred to as interference, in that previously learned material interferes with subsequent material, that is, a previous item is incorrectly transferred or associated with an item to be learned. (p. 1).

Positive transfer is among the leading explanations for why L1 literacy levels affect the L2 literacy levels according to a comprehensive report on the topic from 2006. The National Literacy Panel (NLP) and researchers associated with the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE) conducted two major reviews of the research on educating MLs. Their goal was to find and share the best knowledge available to help [MLs] succeed in school. Claude Goldenberg (2008) summarized their findings with three major points:

- Teaching students to read in their first language promotes higher levels of reading achievement in English

- What we know about good instruction and curriculum in general holds true for English learners as well

- But when instructing English learners in English, teachers must modify instruction to take into account students' language limitations (p. 14)

To the first point about teaching students to read in their first language, whether to teach students exclusively in English or to incorporate their native language has always been the most controversial part of this issue. With dozens of studies over the last 45 years available for review, where immersion programs were compared with bilingual programs, the NLP focused on 17 that met their criteria in research methodology and found that if MLs were taught to read in their first language and then their second language or if they were taught with both languages simultaneously, compared with just teaching students in their second language, their reading achievement was more successful. (Goldenberg, 2008)

The NLP was also the latest group at that time to conduct a meta-analysis study on the effects of bilingual education on students' reading. What they found mimicked the other four studies in concluding that learning to read in a home language helps with learning to read in a

second language. To have this much consensus on the same issue by five independent researchers is unusual. (Goldenberg, 2008)

The researchers acknowledged that the findings will not make sense to some people, that they do not follow common sense. How can learning reading skills in your first language help with learning to read in a second language? With multiple possible explanations, educational psychologists and cognitive scientists point to something called "transfer" as the most likely explanation for what is happening (Goldenberg, p 15). Clearly they are referring to the phenomenon of positive transfer that Zhao (2019) described. In the research that CREDE and NLP reviewed, much of it suggested that "literacy and other skills and knowledge transfer across languages. [If] you learn something in one language–such as decoding, comprehension strategies or a concept…you either already know it in another language or can more easily learn it in another language" (Goldenberg, 2008).

If languages use different alphabetic systems, there is evidence that reading skills still transfer, though the degree to which they transfer is lower. For example, in studies with English and Spanish, word reading, phonological awareness, and spelling all showed high correlation, whereas studies with English and non-Roman alphabets show much lower correlations. On the other hand, the comprehension skills show high correlations between English and non-Roman alphabets. (Goldenberg, 2008)

It is important to acknowledge that although the gains made through primary language instruction are small, they are real. When figuring out the effect of a program or an instructional practice, researchers look for the effect size which indicates how much the program or practice can improve results for students. Goldenberg (2008) explained the effect size and what the

researchers found with regard to students that received first and second language instruction versus students that received only second language instruction:

> The average effect size of primary language reading instruction over two to three
> years (the typical length of time children in the studies were followed) is around
> .35 to .40; estimates range from about .2 to about .6, depending on how the
> calculation is done. What this means is that after two to three years of first and
> second language reading instruction, the average student can expect to score about
> 12 to 15 percentile points higher than the average student who only receives
> second language reading instruction. That's not huge, but it's not trivial either.
> These effects are reliable and…have been found with secondary as well as
> elementary students, and special education as well as general education students.
> Primary language reading instruction is clearly no panacea…but it makes a
> meaningful contribution to reading achievement in English. (p. 16)

CREDE and NLP researchers found that bilingual education for MLs was overall a great asset because they became bilingual and biliterate. They listed multiple advantages to knowing more than one language, including cultural, intellectual, cognitive, vocational, economic advantages, and concluded that if it's possible, children should be taught to read in their primary language. By doing so, their first language skills are developed, reading in English is promoted, and it can be done at the same time that children are learning content and reading in English. Teachers need to remember that transfer is not automatic, so explicit instruction with regard to what does and does not transfer is necessary. (Goldenberg, 2008)

Academic and cultural self-esteem

The consensus in the research regarding the correlation between a strong literacy foundation in a child's L1 and their competence in L2 is well-established. What is new is the research from the National Committee for Effective Literacy for Emergent Bilingual Students (NCEL) (2022) that looks at how the literacy education that speakers of other languages receive was designed for speakers of one language and how it fails to address the fact that so many students already have a language and thus they have different ways of processing language. No doubt this affects the way a dual language brain learns to read and write. They argue that whether the dual language brain is recognized or ignored, will spell success or failure for the literacy instruction.

Besides just being inadequate for a bilingual student, monolingual pedagogies can lead to students losing their home language and thus losing all the benefits that come from being bilingual. Escamilla et al., (2022) found that when "students [are] given the opportunity to develop their bilingualism[, they] enjoy more cohesive family relations, more possibilities of attending a four-year college, less likelihood to drop out of school, and healthier bi-cultural and bilingual identities" (p. 10).

What is remarkable about giving bilingual students an opportunity to study and learn to read in their first language in a well-implemented dual language program, is that in 4-7 years students "close the achievement gap in English literacy with monolingual English learners–and often surpass their monolingual English peers" (NCEL, 2022). Students' school engagement and positive attitudes toward school also increase while students become biliterate, which is no small feat.

Chapter 4: Specific Findings on L1 Literacy's Role in L2 Reading Development

The research also addresses the components of effective reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). The research gathered here highlights areas that might be of particular concern in L2 literacy for teachers to be aware of and shows how L1 literacy can support L2 literacy.

Phonemic awareness

Phonemes are the smallest units in spoken language. Hearing and manipulating the sounds of a language and understanding that these sounds work together to make words is the foundation for spelling and word recognition skills (Antunez, 2002), but for NNSEs, they might not be able to hear and say the sounds of the new language they are learning because those sounds might not exist in their L1 (Robertson, n.d.). For example, there is no /p/ in Somali or Arabic, so where a /p/ is needed a /b/ is often unknowingly substituted.

Phonics and decoding

Phonics aims to show students that there are systems and rules and predictable relationships between the letters and sounds of spoken language. Decoding is the process of using those rules to read the words. For NNSEs, phonics instruction should be taught in context so that phonics is more than just new words to decode following the rules of English. Stories and content material help reinforce all of the phonics lessons from letter recognition to rhyming

words and silent letters. NNSEs can become very adept at following the rules and recognizing these relationships to the point that they are just as proficient at decoding as their native English-speaking peers, but phonics and decoding skills are not comprehension skills. And their level of decoding proficiency may not correlate with their comprehension level for a couple of reasons. One is that once a student can decode words, they can read anything, but if their vocabulary does not include the new words they are reading, they will not be able to understand what they are reading. Pre-teaching vocabulary is necessary for this reason. (Robertson, n.d.)

Vocabulary

NNSEs enter U.S. public schools trying to catch a moving target as their NSE peers start kindergarten with a vocabulary of approximately 5,000 words and grow their vocabulary at a rate of approximately 1,000 words each year. A NNSE may know that many words in their L1, but not as many or very few in English. We know that vocabulary knowledge is a key factor in L2 reading with research showing a strong correlation between L2 vocabulary knowledge and reading abilities (Droop and Verhoeven, 2003). A student's L1 and L2 vocabularies are factors in English reading comprehension. Interestingly, bilingual children's overall vocabularies may be larger than monolinguals' vocabularies, but each language's vocabulary is probably smaller in each language than a monolingual student's is in their one language. It is the development of vocabulary and background knowledge that contributes greatly to a student's success in reading comprehension (Droop & Verhoeven, 2003). Having students use the target vocabulary as often as possible before they are required to use it in an activity or assessment is key to helping NNSEs grow their vocabulary (Robertson, n.d.).

Fluency

Reading words accurately, quickly, and with the proper expression is what is referred to as fluency. Fluency is deemed necessary for students to be able to understand what they read. Fluency for NSEs is often a part of comprehension because they understand the words as they read them, but for NNSEs this is not always true. They can have good decoding skills because they know all the rules for reading in English, so they are able to move quickly and accurately through a text, but their comprehension skills are not at the same level because they do not know the words' meanings or have the background knowledge necessary to comprehend the text. A NSE may not be good at decoding, but when the text is read to them, they can understand the material because they only have to concentrate on the meaning and not how to read the words as well. For NNSE this does not always work since they do not have the vocabulary and background knowledge that the NSE does. (Robertson, n.d.)

Comprehension

A student's comprehension level is only as high as the number of words they know. For NNSE students that struggle with comprehension, they might be slower readers, not be able to follow the story or find the important events or all of the above. This can lead to unfinished assignments or assessments as well as not being able to reach mastery of the concepts in class (Robertson, n.d.) NNSE students need to read connected text, that is, text that is connected to the content and the skill. It is common for MLs to continue to struggle with reading even when they have mastered decoding skills because without extensive vocabularies and background knowledge, reading comprehension difficulties can persist through high school (Proctor, Carlo, August, & Snow, 2005).

Phonological awareness

Phonological awareness, decoding skills, and specific letter and sound knowledge are all things that likely transfer positively. With decoding skills being a good candidate for positive transfer, students will need to be explicitly taught about which rules do and do not transfer positively. Without this kind of instruction, it will likely take longer to learn to decode in English. For example, there is no silent "e" in Spanish, so a Spanish speaker would look at a word like "note" and make it into a two-syllable word with the pronunciation of the final "e." (Goldenberg, 2008)

Koda (2005) contends that the correlation between L1 and L2 reading proficiencies is not as evident as researchers say it is, but does agree that the higher the level of L1 decoding proficiency, the greater the likelihood of English L2 reading proficiency. Koda adds the caveat that that would be true for children with L1 backgrounds that are based on the same writing systems and not a blanket statement for all children learning English as their L2.

It is often the language of instruction that is the focus of discussions surrounding literacy instruction for MLs. But the evidence is not strong enough to make recommendations for literacy instruction to be exclusively in L1 or L2. It is strong enough to show that having a "strong link between L1 phonological awareness and L2 reading success suggests that efforts to develop literacy skills in L1 will translate into facility with L2 literacy development and that children will benefit from native language scaffolding as they learn to read in a second language" (Ford, 2015, p. 1).

Some research shows that an NSE or a NNSE student's phonological awareness in kindergarten predicts their success in reading into the later elementary years and that gains in reading achievement are attributed to gains in phonological awareness (Ford, 2015). For ML

students, research shows that having phonological awareness in their first language (L1) "predicts successful literacy acquisition in both L1 and a second language (L2)" (Ford, 2015, p. 1) because the skills transfer positively and facilitate L2 literacy development.

Many studies have been carried out with Spanish speakers learning English. The research for this group of language learners strongly suggests that L1 and L2 phonological processing, L1 reading, and L2 vocabulary are the greatest predictors of English word reading ability (Gottardo, 2002). If the L1 and L2 phonologies are more closely related, there will be a greater transfer of skills because children can manipulate the sounds and patterns across the related phonologies more easily. Even though most of the research has been done with Spanish speakers, there is evidence that no matter the language of a student's L1, having phonological awareness in that L1 provides benefits for success in reading in L2 (Goldenberg, 2008) , such as in Cantonese and English (Gottardo, 2002) .

The phonological skill in question is an important factor and Durgunoglu (2002) notes some literacy concepts and strategies operate across languages and are universal and need to be learned only once. They apply in all languages of MLs.

The current climate in public schools has returned to a focus on phonics or structured literacy. Escamilla et al. (2022) says this is "inappropriately referred to as "the Science of Reading" (Action Network, 2022) because it does not include the critical components necessary for MLs to be successful. The science of reading for ML students is not the same as the science of reading for monolingual native English-speaking students. Escamilla et al. (2022) points to a major gap being

> the isolation of reading skills from other domains of language and
>
> literacy–particularly the lack of adequate focus on the development of oral

language skills, the focus on teaching sounds and letters and words in isolation

rather than connected to discourse, and opportunities to discuss and write about

what is being learned (p. 12).

When we call it the Science of Reading "it misrepresents the actual science of reading as

singular. It's not" (Escamilla, Olsen, Slavick, 2022, p. 12). There is not one method that will

work or has been shown to work for all students. The current trend toward "the Science of

Reading" is "woefully inadequate" (Escamilla, Olsen, Slavick, 2022, p. 12).

Metalinguistic skills

It is interesting to note that with the research of phonological awareness and transfer, the

overall suggestion is that the metalinguistic skills of bilingual children are more highly

developed than those of monolingual children. Researchers point to these early encounters with

another language as the trigger for this development resulting in children beginning to think

about the form of the language rather than the content. This is important to consider when

developing programs for MLs as effective literacy programs for MLs use these metalinguistic

skills to the students' advantage by making use of explicit instruction in phonological awareness

and phonics (Slavin & Cheung, 2005).

Chapter 5: What Can Be Done to Create Positive Transfer of L1 Literacy

From my first days as a paraprofessional to my current work as an EL teacher in a K-4 midwestern elementary school, I see many teachers with an assumption that students' L1 does nothing to help them with learning their L2. That assumption is countered by decades of research, of which so many teachers are ignorant. Decades of research has always shown that it makes sense to learn how to read and write in the L1. Positive transfer is much stronger than any negative transfer or interference. This misunderstanding in U.S. schools is the challenge all of us in education must work to overcome. Here are some things we can do now to build toward a less-monolingual model of teaching.

What Teachers Can Do

As well as explicit instruction in phonological awareness and phonics, Helman (2004) recommends teachers start out with the sounds and patterns that the bilingual students' languages have in common with the L2 and then move on to the sounds and patterns that are different.

For MLs, one strategy for increasing L2 vocabulary learning is to use a student's L1 to provide translations. The core meaning of a word is quickly explained which "gives the learner a sense of certainty about the meaning of a word, a certainty that is a vital first step for reinforcing the form-meaning connection and retaining the new word in long term memory" (Liu, 2008). Besides giving a sense of certainty, using L1 translation helps connect an L2 word with the well-established semantic and linguistic structure of the L1, thus helping with retention. Fraser (1999) calls the semantic structure of L1 the steadiest "cognitive hook to hang [new words] on" (p. 238).

If it can be done, then there is no reason not to use L1 as a way to solidify meaning and to check for comprehension. However, it should not be the only way to do these things. Researchers agree that a mixture of extralingual, intralingual and translation will have the best overall effect (Fraser, 1999).

What Schools Can Do

Educators in my school district, and probably in other districts, too, need more training on how to celebrate what MLs can do and their unique abilities among all the students in our schools to speak other languages. Besides celebrating what they can do, learning better about their needs and how to meet them needs to be at the forefront of professional development days for all teachers in the district. With the big push for phonics instruction making its way into U.S. schools with its science of reading, more explanation and research for how this affects MLs needs to be presented to educators.

The status quo is not working and there is research that has shown more effective ways to reach and support MLs. Policy makers and educators need the will to make this research a part of their every day work so all students develop their maximum potential to thrive in a changing world.

What Parents Can Do

Families whose L1 is not English and who may not speak English well or at all feel like they cannot help their children because of their language, but there are many things that parents can do for their children regardless of their English language abilities.

The practice of reading story books together is not common across cultures and many parents cannot afford to buy books in English or a home language. Access to books in home

languages is limited in many cases. With these challenges, it is important to help parents

understand the power that providing L1 literacy experiences can have on their children and to

find ways to bolster their L1 literacy by offering them books in home languages, supporting

school libraries to carry more books in students' home languages, and helping parents understand

that their children's English development can be greatly enhanced with literacy experiences in

their first language (Ford, 2015).

A study involving Spanish-speaking preschoolers found that if the children entered

preschool with a strong understanding of letters and math skills in Spanish, their English

improved dramatically during preschool. When we connect what children already know in their

L1, their L2 is bolstered and they make more gains than children that did not have the strong

foundation in their first language. Encouraging parents that do not speak English to engage with

their children and teach them literacy and math skills in their L1 will set up their children for

success in the English mainstream classroom (Mitchell, 2016b).

Mitchell (2016b) shared examples of ways schools are reaching out to engage with

families of English language learners and to prepare their children for school. To encourage

parents to read to their children, one school in San Jose, California opens their school library for

50 minutes before the first bell and 50 minutes after the final bell so parents and families can

have access to books to read with their children. Another school in Tulsa, Oklahoma is creating

literacy programs in preschool classes for English language learners because they know that that

will help these students not only when they enter school, but later on as well. A principal in a

Tulsa dual language school emphasizes how important vocabulary is for students and reminds

her teachers that by the end of the preschool year students need to know 5, 002 words regardless

of how many they came into the school knowing.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services through the Head Start (2021) program created *Strategies to Reinforce the Value of Bilingualism* in an effort to support families of English language learners:

- Support families as they learn to view their home language as a gift to pass down to their child.

- Encourage families to honor the strength of their home language and use it to support their relationships.

- Make it clear to families that their child benefits most from words, stories, songs, and conversations provided in the language they are most comfortable speaking. This helps their child learn in both their home language and in English.

- Build families' confidence as they use their home language as the best way to communicate and nurture their child to strengthen parent-child relationships.

- Provide some socialization activities in the family's home language and some in English to achieve a balance that supports strong bilingual skills.

- Share ways families can help their child learn English so they are ready for school. Assure them that their child will learn English during socialization activities and interactions in the community.

- Work with families to understand what English and home language supports their child might receive in their local school district as they prepare their child to start school.

Head Start (2021) recommends that children, dual language learners or speakers of English, have "many experiences in each of the Big 5 skill areas" in order that they are ready for school (p. 1). These are the Big 5 skill areas:

1. Background Knowledge

2. Oral Language and Vocabulary

3. Book Knowledge and Print Concepts

4. Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing

5. Phonological Awareness

To support families that do not speak English, Head Start (2021) offered suggestions for the things to do in each of the Big 5 skill areas. Some of their suggestions included using the library to find books or requesting family members send books from their home country; using wordless books when it is hard to find books in the home language; creating stories using family photos; participating in family traditions and activities where children can learn vocabulary and develop oral language; teaching families that children can learn phonological awareness in any language; celebrating bilingualism by pointing out all the words children know in two languages.

What Researchers Can Do

Although the research is informative about how a strong foundation in literacy can be beneficial to language learners, it focuses mainly on native Spanish speakers. More research needs to be done for other languages. In my school, Somali, Arabic, and Kurdish are the predominant languages spoken by MLs. Additional research should be done on these language and others. Another avenue for research would be to see how a student's confidence in their abilities to speak other languages and the recognition of their unique ability in U.S. schools affects their ability to be successful in their new language.

A nearby town has recently introduced a Somali language program aimed at teaching literacy skills to native Somali speakers that only have or mainly have oral skills. Following students in this program and researching the course's development would be useful for our district as we continue to think of how we can best serve the MLs in our schools.

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