



Promoting Literacy in Second Language Families



Deborah J. Chitester presents guidelines for fostering literacy within second language families

Children who come from homes where English is not the first language are increasingly represented in American schools. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that the immigrant population tripled from 1970 to 2000, and is expected to escalate at even higher rates in the future.

Teachers interested in maintaining home literacy in the primary language, which much research supports, often want to know how to encourage families to maintain their home language. The concept of literacy is clearly culturally defined, and it is viewed differently according to culture. There are various studies in second language learning that support the premise that the extent to which a child is literate in the home language will in large part determine the extent to which she or he will have a positive experience in second language learning. Teachers often see the lack of family literacy in linguistically diverse families as a predisposing factor to the child having problems in school. In practice, it can complicate the second language acquisition process substantially. Such children can and often do wind up in special education instead of in an English Language development paradigm when critical opportunities for language building are missed and the absence of a strong family literacy base may have been the first “domino” in a series of falling dominoes.

LN is an example of a child who was almost referred to special education, but, after a careful look at home literacy opportunities, this was avoided. As a first grade boy, he was referred for a speech language screening by his teacher. The Speech Language Pathologist (SLP) assessed the child informally in the classroom setting. The student conversed readily and spoke of wanting to be a doctor in the future. LN was hard to understand due to morpho-syntactic errors and misarticulations. The SLP reviewed the Home Language Survey and learned that the mother indicated that English was the language most often used in the home by both the child and by the family. This being the case, the SLP decided to send consent home to prepare for a formal speech language referral and testing.

After receiving this notice, the father came to school and informed the SLP that Mom spoke Cantonese with the child mainly even though this was not noted on the Home Language Survey. The mother who was not a proficient English speaker, tried to tutor her child in English daily. The father was from Mexico and spoke English with a heavy accent and made many grammatical and articulatory errors. The parents did not feel the child had difficulty learning English. Rather, the language models in the home impacted the child's speech patterns. Although the child had some expressive limitations, it was determined his needs could be met within the classroom. The “problems” did not appear to stem from a disorder so the child, at this time, was not referred for special education.

This example highlights the consequence of unrealized home lan-

guage literacy opportunities. It also illustrates the importance of early experiences with the home language. Often, children are not fully encouraged to participate in home language literacy opportunities which may make it look like they are disordered in a language when in reality they have not received ample exposure or experience in this particular language. As in the example above, if there are literacy experiences that are inconsistent in English, it may look as if a child is delayed in English language development, which is probably not the case. An extensive home language background history would need to be conducted to ascertain this information as it would reveal language background and use.

An additional factor that can impact home language literacy for English language learners, or children for whom English is not the first language, is language loss. Language loss is defined as the gradual replacement of the native language by English when the child's opportunity or contact for language exposure in the native language are hampered or interrupted in any way. This can occur in school or may begin at home when parents feel it is better for their children to receive English input “at any cost.” Parents who are English language learners themselves will inadvertently supply less than rich, optimal language input in a second language of which their command may just be emerging, which impacts language learning experiences. In this situation, it is better for parents to use their stronger language, which is often their native language to communicate and provide enriching language experiences for their children. The extent to which this notion is supported by educators and professionals determines the extent to which native language use is retained. According to Cummins (1983), if the L1 is nurtured and strong, this foundation will positively impact the development of the second language. This concept is not shared with parents nearly enough to make a difference. Language loss is more prevalent in Hispanic families where parents often deem it necessary to drop the Spanish language at home in an attempt to “prepare” the child for school. This often occurs because parents believe that the abandoning of their language and heritage will facilitate and speed up the acculturation process, which is not the case.

Another aspect of second language acquisition which is often misunderstood is the “silent period” when a child is initially exposed to English in school and it is quite normal for there to be a period of time when the child does not use the language to speak. This is often misdiagnosed as being problematic and possibly a sign of a possible language disorder.

The implications of an inappropriate referral to special education for children who are bilingual are enormous. Children can miss out on specialized language support as well as access to the mainstream curriculum which alters the status of their academic future.

Parents need to know how much and the type of language support