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LITERACY ISSUES IN SECOND-LANGUAGE FAMILIES

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Abstract

Literacy attainment for second language families is culturally defined. Guidelines for fostering literacy within these families will be discussed so educators can have an enhanced awareness of important points in this regard. Information regarding optimal environments and best practices for maintenance of home literacy for culturally linguistically diverse children will be discussed as well.

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 has tripled from 1970 to 2000, this increase is expected to escalate at even higher rates in the future.

Teachers interested in maintaining home literacy in the primary language, which much literature supports, often want to know how to encourage families to maintain their home language. The concept of literacy is clearly culturally defined and is viewed differently by different cultures. There are various bodies of research including NABE and OELA research in second language learning that support the fact that the extent to which a child is literate in the home language will in large part determine the extent to which he will have a positive experience in second language learning. Teachers often see the lack of family literacy in culturally linguistically diverse families as a predisposing factor to the child having problems in school. Actually, it can serve to complicate the second language acquisition process substantially. These 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 language may have been the first “domino” in a series of falling dominoes. Other factors such as lack of professional development in the area of being prepared to make accurate diagnoses play a role as well in this phenomena.

An example of a child who could have been referred to special education but due to a careful look at home literacy opportunities, this was avoided.

LN, a first grade boy, was referred for a speech language screening by his first grade teacher. The 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 let the SLP know 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 in English. 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 may serve to illustrate the consequence of home language literacy opportunities when they are missed or not fully actualized. Clearly, the above example 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. For example, as seen 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 in reality is likely 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 begin at home where parents often 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. This can impact and often does affect language learning experiences. What is advisable is that parents use their stronger language, which often corresponds to their native language to communicate and provide enriching language experiences for their children. The extent to which there is support provided to support this notion by educators and professionals, determines the extent to which the dropping of the language may not occur at relatively high percentages. According to Cummins(1983), if the L1 is nurtured and strong, this foundation will positively impact the development of the second language. This notion is not understood often and is not shared with parents nearly enough to be able to make a difference. This author must note at this time that this phenomena is more prevalent in Hispanic families where parents often view it necessary to drop the Spanish language in the home in an attempt to "prepare" the child for school where English is suspected to be the only language recognized. This author has noted that to the extent to which it occurs may depend upon diverse families' belief that the abandoning of their language and heritage will facilitate and speed up the acculturation process, which of course is not the case.

The following guidelines were written and presented to many educator audiences so as to increase the likelihood parents will not feel as though dropping the home language is necessary for success in school. The following advice has been reported by

various educators as helpful in facilitating home language literacy in diverse homes, where English is the second language.

It has been well established that the demographics of American schools are changing. The National Center for Education Statistics tells us that many students come from ethnic, racial or linguistic backgrounds that are different from the dominant culture and that the number is steadily increasing. Educators are often at a loss for knowing how to reach these children and to lend the necessary support for their academic needs.

Following is some general pieces of advice and guidelines for reaching this population:

- 1- Make sure the input the child is receiving from you is comprehensible by slowing down and allowing the child to process the information.
- 2- Focus on teaching meaning rather than focusing on modeling appropriate grammar for these children as meaning will emerge more readily in English language learners.
- 3- Try to avoid having the child respond immediately to any questions asked.
- 4- Encourage the child's growth and development via the use of his/her primary language. This will give the child a sense of pride in his/her heritage and native background.
- 5- Do encourage the child to interject their own cultural backgrounds into learning and classroom situations.
- 6- Include parents and community members in classroom activities who represent the cultural diversity in the community.
- 7- It is a good idea to collaborate with people from the local cultural community who may act as cultural informants and interpreters. To use knowledge from those in the child's community will help you obtain accurate information about the child and his community and help lessen the gap between school and family.
- 8- Educate yourself as much as possible about the family's culture and language. This information can be obtained from a local library or the cultural group in question.
- 9- It is recommended to learn some basic working vocabulary in the student's language so the child can see you, the educator value his/her language. Multicultural families' often appreciate the efforts put forth by professionals to connect with them and it also shows a deference to the minority culture.

Clearly, it has been documented in various bodies of research that pre-service teacher education and continuing professional development for all educators is a need in addressing literacy issues among diverse children. Often, there exists a mismatch between the backgrounds of teachers and students that may act as a serious barrier to student achievement unless schools, social entities and other organizations attempt to understand the other's expectations. Tensions can develop as geographic, cultural, linguistic, and cultural communities differ.

Parents of culturally linguistically diverse children need to be encouraged to participate in school and also to maintain home language literacy as well.

To enhance families' involvement in your program, it will be important to reach out and communicate with the families. Meetings can be scheduled in order to disseminate relevant information about advantages of bilingualism as well as the importance of maintaining the primary home language. To the extent this is occurs, the better the

outcomes can be in the attainment of literacy including English literacy for multicultural families.

Deborah Chitester is a licensed Bilingual/Bicultural Speech-Language Pathologist, with specialized training in methodologies consistent with the facilitation of Bilingualism and Biliteracy. She has many special certifications and extensive expertise necessary for mastering spoken language so as to use it as a tool to enhance reading, writing and spelling skills, where true literacy will be the result. Also, Deborah's own success as a fluent/competent second language learner (English/Spanish) and knowledge of second language development combine to effectively allow her to develop communication competence for her diverse client mix.
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