

**Family Literacy and Second Language Literacy Research:
Focus on Language Minority Children**

Özgür Yıldırım

oyildirim@anadolu.edu.tr

Suggested Citation:

Yıldırım, Ö. (2013). Family literacy and second language literacy research: focus on language minority children. *The Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 9(1), 145-159. <http://www.jlls.org/vol9no1/145-159.pdf>

Abstract

Problem Statement: Countries like the U. S. A. or Canada have citizens from various ethnic backgrounds. Although English is the dominant language in many parts of these countries, immigrants generally prefer speaking their native language when they are in their homes. Whatever the reason for using native language at home is, when we consider the children in these families, we can say that being exposed to different languages at home and at school may be a problem for their language development.

Purpose of Study: There are many studies conducted in order to better understand the problems of language minority children. A great deal of literature on language minority students focuses on the ties between these children's literacy development and their literacy practices at home. In other words, these studies aim to see how the literacy events these children are exposed to at home affect their literacy learning in the second language.

Methods: This paper is an attempt to put together and discuss various theoretical and empirical studies conducted on the literacy development of language minority children in English speaking countries.

Findings: Literacy education of language minority students is not an easy task. It is very complicated and difficult to achieve as it requires a complete collaboration among all the responsible parties (teachers, families, researchers, education policy makers, school administrators).

Conclusion and Recommendations: Successful collaboration among all the involved parties would bring successful outcomes in terms of children's healthy literacy development. The collaboration between teachers and families is the most vital one because these two parties are the ones that have one-to-one interaction with children.

Keywords: family literacy, second language literacy, language minority children

Introduction

Countries like the U. S. A. or Canada have citizens from various ethnic backgrounds. Although English is the dominant language in many parts of these countries, immigrants generally prefer speaking their native language when they are in their homes. There are a lot of reasons for their use of native language. Some people naturally find it more convenient to communicate in their native language, some others see their native language as a way of protecting their identity and values, and some others do not speak English simply because they do not know English (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990).

Whatever the reason for using native language at home is, when we consider the children in these families, we can say that being exposed to different languages at home and at school may be a problem for their language development. The number of ESL students has been increasing dramatically in the U. S. A. (Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011). There are more than 7.5 million school age children who are coming from homes where a language other than English is spoken, and these students account for 35 percent of all schoolchildren across the U.S.A (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2002; Jiang & Kuehn, 2001). For these language minority children, learning to read and write is more difficult than it is to the children whose native language is English because these children have to struggle both with the task of conceptualizing and interpreting the new language, and with the task of learning how to read and write in that language (McKay, 2000). Although spoken language abilities of some of these children are considered to be good, they lack success when it comes to reading and writing. O'Donnell, Weber, and McLaughlin (2003) state that many language minority students can be considered as fluent users of English in terms of their interpersonal communication with other people but their English is not proficient enough to succeed at school. Emphasizing the same problem, Grant and Wong

(2003) say that 30-40 % of school age language minority children fail to reach acceptable levels of English reading by the end of elementary school.

There are many studies conducted in order to better understand the problems of language minority children. A great deal of literature on language minority students focuses on the ties between these children's literacy development and their literacy practices at home. In other words, these studies aim to see how the literacy events these children are exposed to at home affect their literacy learning in the second language. This paper is an attempt to put together and discuss various theoretical and empirical studies conducted on the literacy development of language minority children in English speaking countries.

Language Minority Students' Literacy Development and Their Problems

The term 'language minority student' has been defined by many researchers. One of the most comprehensive definitions was given by August and Garcia (1988): being a language minority student "includes the following conditions:

1. Students are exposed 'naturally' to the system of the non-English language as it is used in the form of social interaction, initially at home and possibly later in other institutions. This condition requires a substantive non-English-speaking environment.
2. Students are able to comprehend and/or produce normal aspects of a language other than English. This condition implies normal language acquisition and function in a language other than English.
3. Students are later exposed 'naturally' to the English language as it is used in the form of social interaction. This includes 'natural' exposure in schooling contexts" (pp. 3-4).

Language minority students' literacy development and literacy practices were examined by many researchers in order to better understand the problems and needs of these children. Barone (2003/2004) conducted a longitudinal study to see the literacy development of 13 children in an elementary school. The results of the study indicated that there is no clear pattern of literacy development for children who are learning English as a new language, and home language generally does not serve as a predictor of end of achievement in reading. One of the criticisms Barone brought to teachers of language

minority children was that there were no support for children in bridging their home language to school language.

Many researchers emphasized the effects of family literacy practices on language minority children's literacy development and school achievement. Language and literacy practices in family and community, family culture, and family resources all affect language minority students' school literacy development (Corson, 1993). Discussing how the relationship of family, school, and literacy has been generally conceptualized, Willett and Bloome (1993) suggest that school literacy development and school success cannot be considered isolated from the effects of family and community literacy practices, family and community culture, and family and community resources. All these family and community aspects of language affect the values, resources, organization, practices and culture at school. They all have positive or negative effects on how successful the school literacy development is. We can also talk about similar effects in the reverse direction. That is, school literacy practices, school resources, and school culture obviously affect the literacy practices, culture and resources in the family and in the community (Li, 2010; Li, 2009).

Diener, Wright, Julian and Byington (2003) conducted a study to better understand the parent-child activities and literacy experiences of culturally diverse, low SES (socio economic status) families. The study specifically focused on parents' favorite activities with children, children's book reading experiences, and parents' own reading experiences. The results of the study indicated that families engaged in many daily activities that could potentially facilitate the literacy and language development of their children. Some of the examples to these activities are reading books with or to children, or teaching specific skills such as numbers and writing. On the other hand, lack of children's and adult books in some homes, and limited use of libraries were identified to be potential obstacles to literacy development. These results show that literacy experiences in the family can act both as facilitative factors and as hindering factors for the literacy development of ESL children.

Focusing on the effects of family literacy practices in second language literacy development, Xu (1999) conducted a study to describe home literacy experiences of six Chinese ESL children. The results of the study showed that there were both Chinese literacy practices and English literacy practices in the children's homes. The children were using Chinese to communicate with their family members, and some parents were making

their children learn how to read and write in Chinese. In terms of English literacy practices, the children were reading English books mostly related to school work. In addition, they were often reading environmental prints such as food labels, advertisements and coupons; and they were reading TV guides for their favorite TV shows. The results of this study indicated that language minority children's home literacy practices are more complicated than those of native English speaking children.

Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, and Meza (2003) investigated another aspect of language minority children's literacy development. Their study focused on how the children of language minority families use their knowledge of English to read for their families. The results of the study revealed that children of immigrant families read a diversity of text genres to their parents. Main text genres found to be read by children to their families were letters, forms, advertisements, storybooks, instructional guides, and informational books. The researchers concluded that "these daily family literacy practices are different than typical middle class practices like bedtime storybook reading, but they may be no less significant for children's literacy development. Arguably, they may be more so, in that these activities expose children to a much wider array of genres, domains, and forms of written texts than do storybooks (or for that matter, than do school literacy activities). Para-phrasing also engages children actively in the interpretation of texts, for real purposes, rather than positioning them as the passive recipients of the readings" (p. 31). This study was significant as it showed that any kind of home literacy practice might provide positive contribution to children's literacy development.

Some other researchers focused on the positive contribution of home literacy practices in the native language to the development of second language literacy. Hancock (2002) investigated the effects of native language books on the pre-literacy development of language minority kindergarteners. The results showed that native Spanish-speaking children exposed to books written in Spanish scored significantly higher on a test of pre-literacy skills than did their native Spanish-speaking classmates who were only exposed to English books. In addition, these students also scored no differently than their native English-speaking classmates exposed to books in English.

Similarly, Bankston and Zhou (1995) investigated the effects of minority language literacy on academic achievement. Results of the study indicated that the participants'

literacy practices in their native language contributed to the development of second language. Researchers concluded that ethnic language skills may not always be a hindrance to the social adaptation, these skills may actually contribute to the goals of mainstream education, rather than compete with them.

In contrast to Hancock (2002) and Bankston and Zhou (1995), some other researchers focused on negative effects of home literacy practices on second language literacy development, and they emphasized the problems language minority children face in their literacy education process (Gersten, 1996; Goldenberg, 1996; Urrieta, 2000; Hadaway et al., 2002; Grant & Wong, 2003; Li, 2006). Li (2006) painted a rich picture of ‘battles’ of literacy and schooling between teachers and immigrant families. Li’s study showed how the literacy development of the eight focal children negatively affected by “cultural disconnections, disagreements, and disarticulations” (p. 8) between families and teachers.

As the studies reviewed above suggest, the mismatches between families and schools generally stem from parents’ and teachers’ different attitudes towards language minority children’s education. Therefore, the next section of the paper will present a closer look at the families’ and teachers’ different attitudes in literacy instruction.

Teachers’ and Families’ Attitudes towards Minority Language Education

Lee (1999) conducted a study to better understand the linguistic minority parents’ perceptions of bilingual education. Results of the study indicated that majority of the parents supported bilingual education, and majority of the parents said that they understood the objectives of it. However, most parents did not recognize the different models and programs in bilingual education. Considering these results, Lee (1999, p. 121) suggested that “educators must help linguistic minority parents to develop an increased understanding of the different models and programs.”

Another study on language minority parents’ attitudes towards language minority education was conducted by Li (1999). The results of the study indicated that “language minority parents’ positive attitudes toward both languages and cultures and supportive interactions with their children at home are very important to the children’s bilingual education and identity establishment in the new environment” (p. 131).

The studies conducted by Li (1999) and Lee (1999) show that it is vitally important for families to have positive attitudes towards minority language education. However,

parents and teachers are the two parties of this issue and teachers' attitudes are equally important for successful literacy development of language minority children (Byrnes, Kieger, & Manning, 1997; Rueda & Garcia, 1996). Byrnes et al. (1997) conducted a study to address the issue of regular-classroom teachers' attitudes toward language diversity and linguistically diverse students. Results of the study indicated that teachers who work more with language minority students develop more positive attitudes toward them. Another result of the study was that formal training is associated with positive language attitudes as formal training gives teachers skills and knowledge to work effectively with children who are limited in their English proficiency. The results also indicated that teachers who have a graduate degree have more positive attitudes towards language minority education.

Emphasizing the positive effects of classroom interaction and language communication between teachers and pupils on second language acquisition, Leung (2001) states that “the teacher modifies his or her output (e.g. slowing down and repeating and reformulating information) so that it becomes more comprehensible to the pupil; and the pupil tries to make his or her own output progressively like the target language in order to be understood. This process of negotiated adjustment, if successful, provides comprehensible input and, at the same time, an opportunity to use the target language for the pupil” (p. 179).

How Can Teachers Help Language Minority Students?

It is almost impossible for teachers to achieve the goal of providing language minority students with comprehensive and effective instruction without taking any help from other sources. Therefore, families, teacher educators, literacy researchers, education policy makers, curriculum development teams and school administrators should provide teachers with necessary help and encouragement. Researchers can help teachers by investigating different methods teaching under different classroom conditions, and by bringing practical suggestions to teachers.

Literature suggests various practical suggestions to teachers to help language minority children (Andersen & Roit, 1996; Necochea & Cline, 1995; Sturtevant, 1998; Enge, 1998; Winsler, Diaz, Espinosa, & Rodriguez, 1999; Araujo, 2002, O'Donnell et al., 2003; Roberts & Neal, 2003; Rubinstein-Avila, 2003; Hawkins, 2004; Hickman, Pollard-Durodola, & Vaughan, 2004). Some of these suggestions will be discussed below.

Storybook reading: Storybooks are generally found interesting and attractive by children. In classrooms, teachers can use storybook reading to systematically build the vocabulary and comprehension skills of primary-grade English language learners through daily read-alouds (Hickman et al., 2004).

Vocabulary networking: Teachers can use the method of vocabulary networking especially for vocabulary teaching. Vocabulary networking is also called ‘semantic webbing’ or ‘mapping’ and it can be effectively used to develop vocabulary with language minority children. Vocabulary networking lets students graphically organize vocabulary from texts or other sources into related group of words (Anderson & Roit, 1996).

Teaching reading strategies such as predicting and imagery: In order to help students in their comprehension process, teachers can teach them how to use reading strategies. Predicting what is coming in a text and visualizing or creating a mental image of something in a text are some of the most helpful strategies (Anderson & Roit, 1996).

Using culturally familiar texts: Using culturally familiar texts in literacy instruction can be another way of helping language minority children. Anderson and Roit (1996) say that reading texts written in a culturally familiar content can enhance comprehension. Using culturally familiar texts were also considered a successful method of involving parents in their children’s literacy learning process.

Collaboration among educators who work with language minority students: Sturtevant (1998) state the importance of establishing collaboration among teachers who teach literacy to language minority students. The most important outcome of such collaboration will be providing a more coherent and effective program to language minority students. In addition, Rubinstein-Avilla (2003) points out the importance of collaboration between other subject area teachers and ESL teachers.

Class size: Placing students in small classrooms can also contribute to their literacy development process since the students can receive more from one to one attention from the teacher (Rubinstein-Avilla, 2003).

Accepting diversity: ESL literacy teachers should also need to accept that language minority students are a highly diverse population with diverse needs. Teachers should be aware of the fact that language minority students are diverse in personal history, education history and competence in English (Sturtevant, 1998).

Knowing about the culture of children: Enge (1998) and Wason-Ellam (2001) point the importance of knowing language minority children's culture in order to better serve their needs. According to Enge (1998), the teachers should recognize universal traits among cultures, they should learn about the child's birth country, its food, music history, games and customs, and they should be aware of the fact that the meanings of words, gestures, and actions may change from culture to culture.

Valuing the home language: Teachers of language minority students should value the home language of these children because they may use that home language to facilitate the development of second language (Barone, 2003/2004).

How Can Families Help Language Minority Students?

Families are equally responsible in children's second language literacy development (Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011; Li, 2007a; Li, 2007b). It is impossible for teachers to achieve the highly demanding task of literacy teaching without the contribution of families. Teachers and families should take all the necessary actions to turn the home-school interaction into a fruitful process for the students. Both of the parties should be aware of their duties in the process, and act accordingly. Li (2006) suggests that teaching of second language literacy should be changed by the equal and cooperative contribution of both teachers and families. Li states that both teachers and parents are change agents, and in order to achieve cultural reciprocity, they need to reflect on and learn from each other's cultural beliefs, pedagogical traditions, and culture knowledge.

Conclusion

This paper yields to two main conclusions. First, literacy education of language minority students is not an easy task. It is very complicated and difficult to achieve as it requires a complete collaboration among all the responsible parties (teachers, families, researchers, education policy makers, school administrators). No matter how hard one of the parties works, it seems to be very hard to achieve fruitful results without taking the support of other parties. Successful collaboration among all these parties would bring successful outcomes in terms of children's healthy literacy development.

Secondly, among all the parties mentioned in the previous paragraph, the collaboration between teachers and families is the most vital one because these two parties

are the ones that have one-to-one interaction with children. However, as the literature suggests, there are a lot of mismatches between the values of these two parties, and those mismatches bring the most fundamental problems to language minority students' literacy education. Therefore, both teachers and families must be aware of their vital roles in children's literacy development, and they should follow the suggestions that are brought by researchers.

References

- Anderson, V. & Roit, M. (1996). Linking reading comprehension instruction to language development for language minority students. *The Elementary School Journal*, 96, 295-309.
- Araujo, L. (2002). The literacy development of kindergarten English language learners. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 16, 232-247.
- August, D. & Garcia, E. E. (1988). *Language Minority Education in the United States: Research, Policy and Practice*. Illinois: Charles C. Thomas Publisher.
- Bankston, C. L. & Zhou, M. (1995). Effects of minority language literacy on the academic achievement of Vietnamese youths in New Orleans. *Sociology of Education*, 68, 1-17.
- Barone, D. (2003/2004). Second grade is important: Literacy instruction and learning of young children in a high-poverty school. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 35, 965-1018.
- Byrnes, D. A., Kieger, G. & Manning, M. L. (1997). Teachers' attitudes about language diversity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 13, 637-644.
- Calderon, M., Slavin, R. & Sanchez, M. (2011). Effective instruction for English learners. *The Future of Children*, 21(1), 103-127.
- Corson, D. (1993). *Language, Minority Education and Gender*. UK: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Diener, M., Wright, C., Julian, J. & Byington, C. (2003). A pediatric literacy education program for low socioeconomic, culturally diverse families. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 18, 149-159.
- Enge, N. (1998). Do I belong here? Understanding the adopted, language minority child. *Childhood Education*, 75, 106-109.
- Gersten, R. (1996). Literacy instruction for language minority students: the transition years. *The Elementary School Journal*, 96, 227-244.
- Goldenberg, C. (1996). Commentary: The education of language minority students: Where are we, and where do we need to go?. *The Elementary School Journal*, 96, 353-361.

- Grant, R. A. & Wong, S. D. (2003) Barriers to literacy for language minority learners: an argument for change in the literacy education profession. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 48, 388-394.
- Hadaway, N. L., Vardell, S. M., & Young, T. A. (2002). Highlighting nonfiction literature: literacy development and English language learners. *The NERA Journal*, 38, 16-22.
- Hancock, D. R. (2002). The effects of native language books on the pre-literacy skills development of language minority kindergartners. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 17, 62-68.
- Hawkins, M. R. (2004). Researching English language and literacy development in schools. *Educational Research*, 33, 14-25.
- Hickman, P., Pollard-Durodola, S. & Vaughan, S. (2004). Storybook reading: improving vocabulary and comprehension for English language learners. *The Reading Teacher*, 57, 720-730.
- Jiang, B. & Kuehn, P. (2001). Transfer in the academic language development of post-secondary ESL students. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 25, 417-436.
- Lee, S. K. (1999). The linguistic minority parents' perceptions of bilingual education. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 23, 113-125.
- Leung, C. (2001). Evaluation of content language learning in the mainstream classroom. In B. Mohan, C. Leung & C. Davison (Eds.), *English as a Second Language in the Mainstream: Teaching, Learning and Identity*. (pp. 177-198). Singapore: Longman.
- Li, G. (2010). Race, Class, Gender, and Schooling: Multicultural Families Doing the Hard Work of Home Literacy in America's Inner City. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*. Special issue on poverty and reading, by Nathalis Wamba.
- Li, G. (2009). *Multicultural families, home literacies, and mainstream schooling*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.
- Li, G. (2007a). Home environment and second language acquisition: The importance of family capital. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28(3), 285-299.
- Li, G. (2007b). Second language and literacy learning in school and at home: An ethnographic study of Chinese-Canadian first graders' experiences. *Journal of Language Teaching and Learning*, 11(1), 1-40.

- Li, G. (2006). *Culturally Contested Pedagogy: Battles of Literacy and Schooling between Mainstream Teachers and Asian Immigrant Parents*. NY: SUNY Press.
- Li, G., & Christ. T. (2007). Social capital and home literacy engagement: Case studies of low-SES single mothers' access to literacy resources. *English in Education, 41*(1), 21-35.
- Li, X. (1999). How can language minority parents help their children become bilingual in familiar contexts? A case study of a language minority mother and her daughter. *Bilingual Research Journal, 23*, 113-124.
- McKay, P. (2000). On ESL standards for school-age learners. *Language Testing, 17*, 185-214.
- Necochea, J. & Cline, Z. (1995). Bridging the gap of language minority students. *Thrust of Educational Leadership, 25*, 29-32.
- O'Donnell, P., Weber, K. P. & McLaughlin, T. F. (2003). Improving correct and error rate and reading comprehension using key words and previewing: a case report with a language minority student. *Education and Treatment of Children, 26*, 237-254.
- Orellana, M. F., Reynolds, J., Dorner, L. & Meza, M. (2003). In other words: translating or paraphrasing as a family literacy practice in immigrant households. *Reading Research Quarterly, 38*, 12-34.
- Portes, A. & Rumbaut, R. G. (1990). *Immigrant America: A Portrait*. USA: University of California Press.
- Roberts, T. & Neal, H. (2004). Relationships among preschool English language learner's oral proficiency in English, instructional experience and literacy development. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 29*, 283-311.
- Rubinstein-Avila, E. (2003). Conversing with Miguel: an adolescent English language learner struggling with later literacy development. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 47*, 280-301.
- Rueda, R. & Garcia, E. (1996). Teachers' perspectives on literacy assessment and instructions with language minority students: A comparative study. *The Elementary School Journal, 96*, 311-332.
- Sturtevant, E. G. (1998). What middle and high school educators need to know about language minority students. *NASSP Bulletin, 82*, 73-77.

- Urrieta, L. & Quach, L. H. (2000). My language speaks of me: transmutational identities in L2 acquisition. *High School Journal*, 84, 26-38.
- Wason-Ellam, L. (2001). Living against the wind: pathways chosen by Chinese immigrants. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 33, 71-101.
- Willett, J. & Bloome, D. (1993). Literacy, language, school, and community: A community-centered view. In A. Carrasquillo & C. Hedley (Eds.), *Whole Language and the Bilingual Learner*. (pp. 35-57). New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Company.
- Winsler, A., Diaz, R., Espinosa, L., & Rodriguez, J. (1999). When learning a second language does not mean losing the first. *Child Development*, 70, 349-362.
- Xu, H. (1999). Young Chinese ESL children's home literacy experiences. *Reading Horizons*, 40, 47-64.

Dr. Özgür Yıldırım works at Anadolu University, Faculty of Education and teaches language acquisition, testing, applied linguistics, and statistical research at undergraduate and graduate levels. His research interests include literacy development and ESL, learner autonomy, high-stakes testing, and international education.

Aile Okuryazarlığı ve İkinci Dilde Okuma Yazma Araştırmaları: Göçmen Aile Çocuklarının İkinci Dil Gelişimi

Öz

Araştırma Konusu: A.B.D. ya da Kanada gibi ülkeler pek çok milletten vatandaşlara sahiptirler. Genellikle bu ülkelerin büyük kısmında İngilizce geçerli dil olarak kullanılsa da göçmenler özellikle evlerinde ana dillerini kullanmayı tercih ederler. Evde anadil kullanmanın sebepleri her ne olursa olsun, bu ailelerin çocukları düşünüldüğünde bu çocuklar için evde ve okulda farklı dillere maruz kalmanın bir problem oluşturabileceğini söyleyebiliriz.

Araştırmanın Amacı: Bu tür problemleri daha iyi anlayabilmek için yapılmış pek çok çalışma vardır. Bu çalışmaların büyük kısmı çocukların okur-yazarlık gelişimi ile evlerinde yaptıkları okur-yazarlık faaliyetleri arasındaki ilişkiye yoğunlaşırlar. Diğer bir deyişle, bu çalışmalar çocukların evlerinde maruz kaldıkları okuma-yazma süreçlerinin ikinci dildeki okuma-yazma becerilerini nasıl etkilediğini araştırırlar.

Araştırmanın Yöntemi: Bu makale İngilizce'nin geçerli dil olarak konuşulduğu ülkelerdeki göçmen ailelerin çocuklarının okur-yazarlık gelişimi ile ilgili teorik ve uygulamalı çalışmalardan yola çıkarak çeşitli saptamalar yapmak ve önerilerde bulunmaktır.

Bulgular: Göçmen aile çocuklarının okur-yazarlık eğitimi, öğretmenlerin, ailelerin, araştırmacıların, eğitim politikalarını belirleyenlerin, ve okul yöneticilerinin ortaklaşa yürütmeleri gereken önemli bir süreçtir.

Sonuç ve Öneriler: Göçmen aile çocuklarının okur-yazarlık eğitiminde sorumluluk sahibi olan tüm kesimlerin işbirliği içinde çalışmaları sürecin başarısını önemli derecede arttıracaktır. Çocuklarla sürekli iletişim halinde olan öğretmenler ve aileler arasındaki işbirliği bu süreçte başarı için anahtar konumdadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: ikinci dilde okuma-yazma, göçmen aile çocukları, evde okuma-yazma