Supporting multilingual children’s literacy development

Dr. Bronagh Catibusic-Finnegan
National College of Ireland
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Introduction

Many children from migrant families enter education settings in which the language of instruction is different from their home language. Children who are learning the language of instruction as a second language (L2) will require particular support with literacy development. This article will discuss some of the challenges they face and how these can be overcome, with a focus on the importance of vocabulary acquisition in developing literacy.

Vocabulary knowledge and literacy

Oral language and vocabulary skills are essential foundations for literacy development¹. Vocabulary knowledge is particularly important for reading comprehension, and engagement with literacy provides opportunities for ongoing vocabulary acquisition.²

Researchers estimate that children have already learned at least 5,000 words in their home language before they engage with formal literacy instruction.³ This means that, from the early stages of education, children who are native speakers of the language of instruction are likely to have a more extensive vocabulary in that language than children who just beginning to learn it as L2. Also, as vocabulary acquisition continues among all children through the school years, children who are learning the language of instruction as L2 are constantly trying to meet a ‘moving target’⁴.

¹ NCCA, 2015
² NEPS, 2016; Cruz de Quirós et al. 2012
³ August et al., 2005
⁴ Cummins, 2000
Depth of vocabulary knowledge is also an issue – ‘knowing’ a word can range from having a general idea about its meaning to having a deep knowledge of what it means and how to use it. Acquiring a sufficient range of L2 words with sufficient depth for successful engagement with L2 literacy can thus prove challenging for children who are non-native speakers of the language of instruction.

**Supporting children’s L2 vocabulary and literacy development**

Children who are learning the language of instruction as L2 may acquire the L2 skills they need for everyday interaction within the first two years of L2-medium education. They may also make good progress in acquiring the basic decoding skills required for L2 literacy development. However, research shows that L2 ‘academic language’, which is essential for literacy and curriculum engagement through L2, takes much longer to develop (at least 5-7 years). Crucial to the development of academic language proficiency is the acquisition of less frequently used vocabulary, i.e. words encountered through extensive reading and subject-specific words.

Supporting L2 vocabulary acquisition is therefore a key aspect of L2 literacy development. Research has shown the benefits of using stories, drama, rhymes, and multisensory methods to build L2 vocabulary. Shared book reading, with opportunities for rich oral interaction, has proven to impact positively on the development of L2 oral language, vocabulary and reading comprehension skills. Multiple encounters with new words and practice using these words in a variety of engaging contexts has also been found increase L2 vocabulary knowledge. Using a range of media and text-types, including non-fiction and digital resources, can further support L2 vocabulary acquisition.

As oral language contributes significantly to both vocabulary acquisition and literacy development, children must have opportunities to engage in meaningful interactions in which they can learn new words. Talk about learning activities enables children to acquire new vocabulary and develop their oral skills. Interactive play also provides rich opportunities for oral language development. Educators can therefore support children’s oral language and literacy development by creating active and inclusive learning environments in which children can draw on their personal interests and previously acquired knowledge, including their home language knowledge.

**Multilingual approaches to literacy development**

To promote inclusive and active learning in multilingual classrooms, multilingual approaches are required. Enabling children to interact using all their linguistic resources, including their home languages, can enhance their oral skills and their engagement in learning activities. Play involving the use of home languages and L2 should be encouraged. By supporting oral language development, these multilingual interactions can have a positive impact on vocabulary acquisition and literacy development.

Home language literacy has also been found to support the acquisition of L2 literacy skills. Bilingual reading strategies – for example, identifying similarities between

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5 Nation, 2001; Beck et al., 2002
6 August et al., 2005; Carlo et al., 2004
home language and L2 words –have proven effective in this regard. Approaches promoting biliteracy, such as encouraging children to write in their home language and translate into language of instruction, not only respect children’s linguistic identities but provide opportunities to learn new L2 vocabulary. Adopting culturally and linguistically responsive approaches, for example, interactive storybook reading based on culturally relevant stories told in both the home language and L2 can support vocabulary development across languages. Structured story retelling through scaffolded activities in the home language and L2 have also had positive outcomes for vocabulary and literacy.

Parents can play an important role in developing home language literacy. Educators should encourage parents to read and tell stories to their children through the home language, as this can enhance vocabulary development and support literacy. They should also develop partnerships with parents and with community-based initiatives such as complementary (home language) schools. Providing opportunities within the educational setting for parents to get involved – for example, in home language story-telling activities – can benefit all children by increasing language and cultural awareness and promoting inclusion.

Conclusion

Rich contexts for oral language use, including play and meaningful interaction in relation to stories and other texts, can enable children to acquire new vocabulary and develop literacy skills. A strong and sustained focus on vocabulary acquisition, including the use of multilingual approaches, can thus support the literacy development of children who are learning the language of instruction as L2.

References


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