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**EMERGENT LITERACY IN BILINGUAL CHILDREN:
TEACHING FOR TRANSFER AND BILITERACY**

Keywords: biliteracy, emergent literacy, bilingualism, community languages.

ABSTRACT

The objective of the article is to (1) explain the role of emergent literacy in the community language in developing literacy in the additional language and biliteracy, and (2) demonstrate the need to develop resources supporting emergent reading skills in community languages in Australia. A critical review of literature in the field of emergent literacy and bilingual language development shows that the interaction between languages in the development of biliteracy is complex, but overall it demonstrates a positive impact of emergent literacy in the community language on the development of literacy skills in the additional language in later years. The article presents emergent literacy example materials, targeting bilingual children in Australia with Polish backgrounds, and explains the design considerations underpinning their development. A particular emphasis is on explaining how the materials have been designed to (1) stress the presence of different cultures and languages in the children's environment (2) teach how to transfer reading skills and behaviours from Polish into English, and (3) emphasise those specific grapheme-phoneme relations in Polish which present difficulties for children acquiring Polish and English. The authors conclude that opportunities for transfer of early reading skills and behaviours from a community language to an additional language can be enhanced by designing reading materials for positive transfer, because learners who are acquiring an additional language use the strategies which they find most useful in their first language. It may be equally important to develop reading materials and instruction in the mainstream language in a way that community-language-speaking children are able to draw upon the skills which they bring with them into the reading learning process at school from home.

EMERGENT LITERACY

Concepts such as “early reading” and especially “emergent literacy” represent a perspective in child language education which posits that “legitimate, conceptual, developmental

literacy learning is occurring during the first years of a child's life" (Teale and Sulzby 1986, 28), that is before the start of formal instruction. Emergent literacy encompasses a broad range of behaviours and skills to be acquired by pre-school children. Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) propose that the three emergent literacy factors associated with later reading achievement are: 1) phonological awareness, 2) print awareness, and 3) oral language. Overall, researchers and educational policy makers recommend that children be taught some combination of phonological awareness, print knowledge, and word decoding skills before they go to school, and that speech pathology intervention be offered to children who make insufficient progress in acquiring emergent literacy skills.

Research into emergent literacy is diverse. A large number of studies have focused on the precursors to literacy, with phonological awareness being the single most broadly explored area of literacy knowledge in preschool years. Based on a longitudinal study involving 368 preschool children, Bradley and Bryant (1983) were the first to provide empirical evidence of a causal relationship between being able to categorise words on the basis of common sounds and learning to read. Recent studies have confirmed the strong connection between phonological awareness training and reading ability (e.g., Neumann 2014). Another direction of emergent literacy research addresses the meaning of context in the development of early reading/writing behaviours. Ethnographic research has reported on the role of family and preschool environments in creating literacy experiences for children through word games and storybook reading (Hiebert 1988). Today, we know that children who perform highly in emergent literacy measures are more likely to come from families where parents provide them with alphabet books, building blocks, and shapes. Such children exhibit certain behaviours that can be turned by carers into teachable moments in aspects related to emergent literacy (Hildebrand and Bader 1992). On the other hand, children from families whose members have reading impairments tend to be poorer readers and require more time to reach the same reading competency as children from families who are good readers (Giménez et al. 2017). Other research of a broader context has focused on the patterns of emergent literacy acquisition across diverse societies and cultures (Pérez 2004).

Emergent literacy research aims to determine which elements of emergent literacy can best predict future reading achievements in the school environment. In a study by Costa et al. (2013), conducted with the participation of 150 children followed from kindergarten to fifth grade, word reading at fifth grade was predicted by kindergarten measures of phonological awareness and letter knowledge. Pinto et al. (2012) assessed the predictive power of various components of emergent literacy in 72 Italian children and demonstrated that notational competence was a strong predictor of early writing skills, and that phonological competence only had an effect when it was integrated with notational competence. Roberts, Jurgens and Burchinal (2005) argued that literacy practices in the home – such as shared book reading frequency, maternal book reading strategies, a child's enjoyment of reading and maternal sensitivity to literacy activities – provided an accurate predictor of the level of receptive vocabulary development at ages three and five, and the level of early literacy skills of preschool-aged children and of children

upon entering kindergarten. Finally, Kalb and van Ours (2014) followed a group of over 4,000 Australian children from the age of 4–5 to 10–11 and considered the influence of the frequency of reading to children at age 4–5 on their performance on measures such as reading skills, language skills, and the national literacy test (NAPLAN) scores. The research results indicated a direct causal relationship between the frequency of reading to the children in the study at a young age and their future schooling outcomes.

Although emergent literacy research mainly argues the existence of a positive correlation between early literacy skills and future reading achievements, there are also voices suggesting that investigations in this area focus too strongly on children's capability, rather than on what is optimal for them, and that emergent literacy arguments are based on weak empirical evidence (Suggate 2013). A systematic and extensive synthesis of published research prepared by the US National Literacy Panel (2008) provides information about several early skills that are implicated in later literacy achievement (alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming of letters, numbers or colours; writing/name writing and phonological memory), but likewise flags significant problems with the quality of much of the research in the area.

Emergent literacy research has thus far focused primarily on monolingual children or has not made a clear distinction between monolingual and bilingual children. The remaining part of the article therefore (1) explains the role of emergent literacy in the community language in developing literacy in the additional language and biliteracy, and (2) demonstrates the need for developing resources supporting emergent reading skills in community languages in Australia by analysing the conceptual basis and the design of example reading materials intended for bilingual pre-school children who speak Polish and English.

EMERGENT LITERACY IN BILINGUAL CHILDREN

There is a view among community language proponents and educators that the best entry into literacy in the mainstream language, such as English in Australia, is through the child's home language, which can provide concepts and skills bases that transfer to reading in a second language (Clyne 2005). This point of view is supported by empirical research demonstrating a positive impact of emergent literacy skills in the community language on the development of literacy skills in the mainstream language in later years. Cárdenas-Hagan, Carlson and Pollard-Durodola (2007), in a longitudinal study involving Spanish-English bilingual children tracked from kindergarten to second grade, concluded that letter names and sound knowledge correlated positively across the two languages in kindergarten, and phonological awareness skills appeared to be the area with the most significant transfer of knowledge between Spanish and English in second grade. In a longitudinal study involving 121 families, Reese et al. (2000) demonstrated that bilingual students entering kindergarten with greater emergent Spanish literacy skills and oral English proficiency were better able to maintain high-level performance in Spanish reading, transitioned more quickly to English reading, and attained a higher

level of English reading proficiency in school. The researchers concluded that early literacy experiences, regardless of language, supported subsequent literacy development. Based on a review of a large number of empirical studies, Bialystok (2002) confirms that bilingualism affects children's literacy development, but argues that the impact is neither simple nor unitary, sometimes indicating an advantage and sometimes a disadvantage for bilingual children. She distinguishes three areas of interdependence between L1 and L2 literacy: 1) language proficiency, 2) conceptual development, and 3) metalinguistic insights. The researcher concludes that language proficiency, measured as vocabulary size and knowledge of literary forms, is tied to the specific experiences in each of the languages acquired by the bilingual child and, consequently, oral language proficiency in general does not provide privileged access to biliteracy. On the other hand, she finds much support for the view that bilingualism relates positively to the development of the concept of print and how different notations represent spoken language. Bilingual children learn to understand that there are always some correspondence rules between written symbols and the meaning of a text, although there may be specific contrasts between different writing systems. Finally, she demonstrates that different languages activate different levels of phonological awareness and, as a result, the level of transfer of phonological awareness between the L1 and L2 is mitigated by the languages present in the bilingual mix.

The phonological and morphosyntactic differences between languages, and the corresponding differences in writing systems and grapheme-phoneme relationships, can affect the child's progress in biliteracy. The more characteristics two orthographic systems have in common, the greater the potential for transfer of specific reading skills between languages. A child whose native language is English, for example, may have more ease in learning to read and write in French than in Chinese, because French shares more linguistic features with English than Chinese (Wang 2011). Czech-English bilingual children who have mastered the skill of isolating consonants in complex clusters in Czech may be better than their monolingual English-speaking peers in learning to isolate consonants in English clusters. In this context, the distinction between transparent- and opaque-orthography languages is important. In transparent languages, sounds are faithfully mapped onto graphemes, whereas in the case of opaque languages the mapping is complex. In their conclusion on the research of word recognition in a transparent orthography language (isiXhosa) and an opaque orthography language (English) involving bilinguals, Probert and de Vos (2016) claim that there is a transfer of literacy skills from a transparent orthography to an opaque orthography, but positive transfer seems largely limited to sub-lexical decoding skills. The transfer of decoding skills in the opposite direction is however limited. Transparent and opaque orthographies impose different cognitive demands. Utilising neuroimaging, a recent study with the participation of bilinguals has discovered that transparent- and opaque-orthography languages activate, respectively, either the dorsal reading network responsible for processing phonology or the ventral reading network responsible for meaning much harder (Oliver, Carreiras and Paz-Alonso 2017). The researchers conclude that curricula can be designed to

emphasise specific aspects of reading to help children learn. Such knowledge can also be used to stimulate positive transfer in bilingual children. Cummins (2017) proposes that while it is appropriate to maintain a separate interactional space for each language in the process of bilingual upbringing, it is also important to teach for positive transfer or acceleration across languages and create materials dedicated specifically to bilingual children representing different language pairs.

COMMUNITY LANGUAGE LITERACY IN AUSTRALIA

The 2016 Census shows that more than one in five Australians (21%) speak a language besides English at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics [www.abs.gov.au]). In fact, for many Australian children, a language other than English is their chronologically first language; they learn to speak a community language from their carers at home and start learning English as an additional language much later, when they go to kindergarten.

Although it is important to remember that communication patterns in the community language are unique and specific to the ethnic cultures that use the language, a few generalisations may be attempted (Clyne 1991, 2005). Firstly, a common pattern for most immigrant-background parents is to use their community language at home when they speak to each other and to their children, at least in their first years of residence in Australia. Secondly, it is common for immigrant-background children to use the community language with their parents and older family members for everyday communication when they are very young, but to switch to responding in English when they get older, and English becomes their stronger language, especially in order to express more complex concepts, for example, those related to school content, the use of technology, or emotions. Thirdly, in most instances, immigrant-background children have few opportunities to read and write in the community language, and as a result their literacy in the home language is significantly poorer than their speaking and listening comprehension skills. In fact, many immigrant-background children never acquire literacy in their community language. In a survey-based study conducted in ethnic schools in Sydney and Melbourne by Rabiej (2008), 54% of Polish-background children preferred to read in English rather than in Polish, and only 1% preferred to read in Polish rather than in English. Many parents and grandparents do not teach their children to read and write in their home language, since they may not see the usefulness of such skills or may be uncertain how literacy in the community language may influence the development of literacy in English at school (Debski 2018). Many LBOTE (Language Background Other Than English) children in Australia do not develop strong language skills in their home language, and especially the ability to read and write in the community language. It seems that they miss out on the opportunity to build a strong speech/language foundation for learning English and developing English language literacy before they enter school.

EMERGENT LITERACY EXAMPLE MATERIAL AND DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Czytam, bo lubię! [I Read and I Like It!] (Rabiej, Szelc-Mays and Dębski 2016) is a series of booklets created to support the development of emergent literacy in Polish-background children in Australia¹. The project rationale was built on the premise that emergent literacy in the community language will equip such children with skills affording them a head start in English literacy development when they start school (Clyne 2005; Cárdenas-Hagan, Carlson and Pollard-Durodola 2007; Reese et al. 2000). Moreover, once the children have developed emergent reading skills and behaviours in Polish, it is likely that they will continue developing proficiency in the community language (Clyne 2005) in order to become additive bilinguals and experience the cognitive, linguistic and social advantages attributed to bilingualism (Bialystok et al. 2010; Brito and Barr 2012; Marian and Shook 2012; Prior and MacWhinney 2010; Wróblewska-Pawlak 2013). The materials encompass three booklets designed and written for children aged 3–4 (Booklet 1), 4–5 (Booklet 2) and 5–6 (Booklet 3), as well as a guide entitled *Early Reading Program and Handbook for Parents and Teachers of Bilingual Children* (Dębski, Rabiej and Szelc-Mays 2016). The following part of the article explains the design choices made by the authors and how the evidence-based design of the materials can support teaching for the transfer of reading skills in bilingual children and the development of biliteracy.

READING METHODS AND GRADATION OF CONTENT

Polish is a language with relatively transparent grapheme-phoneme relations and, in this respect, is similar to other Slavic languages, Spanish or Italian. The transparent grapheme-phoneme relations and the rich inflectional morphology of the language determine the use of phonemic reading as the preferred teaching method used commonly in the development of literacy of Polish school-aged children (Jurek 2012). However, since the *Czytam, bo lubię!* (I Read and I Like It!) program has been created for children aged 3 to 6 years old, a mix of suitable, age-appropriate reading methods is used, from syllabic through global to phonemic. The materials first introduce the Polish oral vowels /i, ε, a, ɔ, u, i/ (I E A O U Y)² in exclamations and onomatopoeic sounds heard and produced by a couple of children during their tour of a ZOO. Seeing a jumping kangaroo, for example, the children produce the exclamation “OOOO”, denoting surprise and admiration, written in large print in a bubble above their heads. Employment of exclamations and onomatopoeic sounds at the start of early reading experiences has been advocated and previously used by Maćkowiak (1958) and Maćkowiakowie (1958), and more recently by Cieszyńska (2005, 2012a, 2012b). Each page is divided

¹ The development of the booklets was supported by a 2016 grant of the Senate of Poland entitled “Edukacja dwujęzyczna – wsparcie nauczycieli polskich za granicą i rodzin polskiego pochodzenia” (www.edukacjadwujezyczna.com).

² Only upper-case letters are used in the booklets in order to simplify the reading tasks for children.

into two zones: a larger zone for children and a smaller one for carers down the page, where they find instructions, explanations and activity ideas written in small print. In this context, the most general concepts related to reading are introduced: the relationship between speech sounds and graphemes, the left-to-right reading order, and the skill of blending discrete sounds into meaningful exclamations. As they repeat vowel sounds after the carer, children are asked to trace letters with their index fingers, point to letters and follow letters in the correct order. Multisensory reading techniques are used throughout the booklets. Reading is combined with singing sequences of syllables rhythmically to a popular tune, or letters shown to children trigger activities that begin with the corresponding sound, such as clapping or jumping.

The materials then start introducing Polish consonants in a developmentally appropriate order (Madelska 2010) across the three booklets, which means that a limited repertoire of sounds and letters is used in Booklet 1, then expanded gradually in Booklet 2 and Booklet 3. The consonants are first linked with the vowels (Cieszyńska 2005) to form open syllables (CV) and then used in popular names and other high-frequency words with syllable structures of increasing difficulty (CVC, V-CV, CV-CV). The syllable is more easily accessible to the child's intuition than the phoneme and is, therefore, introduced as an intermediary before the introduction of phonemic analysis and synthesis (Goswami and Bryant 1990). In Booklet 1 and Booklet 2, syllable reading is used in combination with global reading. Children are asked, for example, to read three-letter words globally and identify the sounds in them that they are already familiar with. Phonemic awareness activities are introduced in Booklet 3, as a significant percentage of 5- and 6-year-old children are able to process words at the onset-rhyme and phonemic levels (Stewart 2004). Children therefore name objects in pictures and are asked to say in which of them particular sounds are hidden, they synthesise onsets and rhymes, and sequences of phonemes spoken by the carer into words of increasing difficulty. The contents of each booklet are synthesised in the final pages, where children are asked to colour, cut out and fold their own booklets that they can read.

BILINGUALISM EMPHASIS AND TEACHING FOR TRANSFER

The materials have been designed to 1) stress the presence of different cultures and languages in the children's environment, 2) teach how to transfer reading skills and behaviours from Polish into English, and 3) emphasise those specific grapheme-phoneme relations in Polish which present difficulties to children acquiring Polish and English.

The child characters in the booklets are ethnically diverse: they have different types of skin tones and wear clothes with subtle ethnic elements. In one activity, there are characters wearing T-shirts with either Australian, American or Spanish flags on them; in another, children read Polish words and their translations into "ufuski", an artificial language introduced in Booklet 1 and used throughout the series to exploit letter combinations which would not be allowed or would be meaningless in Polish. The page zones dedicated to carers contain numerous suggestions of parallel reading/play activities in

Polish and English. When the letter “A” is being introduced, in the context of a Mama Bear putting her little cub to sleep, carers are encouraged to sing the “AAA” vowel sequence to the tune of a popular Polish lullaby and then talk with children about other lullabies that they know in Polish or English. Similarly, children are asked to read and make sounds of animals who speak either Polish or English (MU vs. MOO, HU HU vs. HOO HOO) or read the expression of surprise in Polish (OOO) and then talk about how surprise is expressed in English. Parallel activities in Polish and English also involve rhyming, dividing words into syllables and looking for words beginning with the same sound. The materials enhance the child’s general awareness of print and highlight that there is a relationship between the language sounds and their graphemic representations, i.e. the kind of skills that are the most readily transferred across languages (Bialystok 2002).

Although the grapheme-phoneme relations taught in the booklets are on the whole transparent, children learn that there are instances in Polish where the same sound is represented by two different graphemes or diagraphs, for example, /z/ can be represented by the graphemes “RZ” or “Ż”, /u/ by “U” or “Ó” and /x/ by “CH” or “H”. Thus, children are given the opportunity to gain insight into the relativity of grapheme-phoneme relations, a concept that is essential in reading English. Employing syllable reading for the most part, the booklets also introduce global reading, therefore practicing the lexical route, which is important in English (Probert and de Vos 2016).

Finally, a special focus is on those sounds and their graphemic representations which have proven to be difficult for Polish-English bilinguals. When vowels are introduced, the sounds /i/ and /i/, and the corresponding letters I and Y, are stressed, because they are poorly differentiated by English-Polish bilinguals. Appropriate articulation advice is provided, positioning of the articulators explained, and phonological awareness practice with the use of minimal pairs is offered. Similar activities have been developed to increase the English-Polish bilingual children’s awareness of the contrast between the affricates /ts, tʃ, tɕ /, /dʒ, dʒ, dʒ /, and the fricatives /s, ʃ, ɕ/ and /z, ʒ, z/.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the phenomenon of interdependence between the languages of the bilingual child is complex, there is scientific evidence of a positive impact of emergent literacy skills in the community language on the development of literacy skills in the mainstream language in later years. Opportunities for transfer of early reading skills and behaviours from a community language to an additional language can be enhanced by designing reading materials for positive transfer purposely because learners who are acquiring an additional language use the strategies which they find most useful in their first language (Coady 1979). It is therefore important to design reading materials in community languages so that they enable the transfer of some emergent reading skills and behaviours. It may be equally important to develop reading materials and instruction in the mainstream language so that community-language-speaking children are able to draw upon the skills which they bring with them into the reading-learning process at school from home.

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Wczesna nauka czytania i pisania dzieci dwujęzycznych. Transfer umiejętności i dwujęzyczność w czytaniu i piśmie

Słowa kluczowe: dwujęzyczność w czytaniu i piśmie, wczesna nauka czytania, dwujęzyczność, języki społecznościowe.

STRESZCZENIE

Celem artykułu jest (1) wyjaśnienie wpływu wczesnej nauki czytania w języku społecznościowym na naukę czytania w języku dodatkowym oraz osiągnięcia przez dziecko dwujęzyczności w czytaniu i piśmie, a także (2) wskazanie na potrzebę tworzenia materiałów dydaktycznych wspierających naukę czytania i pisania w językach społecznościowych w Australii. Krytyczny przegląd literatury z zakresu wczesnej nauki czytania i pisania oraz dwujęzycznego rozwoju dzieci pokazuje, że interakcja pomiędzy językami w procesie rozwoju dwujęzyczności w czytaniu i piśmie jest procesem złożonym i wykazuje istnienie pozytywnego wpływu wczesnych umiejętności czytania w języku społecznościowym na naukę czytania w języku dodatkowym w latach późniejszych. Należy projektować materiały dydaktyczne, które stymulują taki pozytywny transfer oraz dwujęzyczność w czytaniu i piśmie, jak pokazuje omówiony w artykule projekt.