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PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN MULTILINGUAL CONTEXTS

Abstract: The increasing mobility of people creates an increasing number of children who start mastering two or more languages at a very early age. A number of educational institutions provide schooling for different populations of migrant children. International schools are one type of such providers. In order to assist children coming from various language backgrounds, international schools have one language of instruction that is, in most cases, different from the language of the host country and from the home languages of many students in the school. In that environment, a student begins to acquire a second language as soon as they enter an international school, and sadly, their home language development tends to be neglected. Students who follow an international curriculum learn at least two languages, but the lack of sufficient knowledge of their home language impacts their second language competency and literacy.

This paper deals with the importance of home language maintenance in international education. It also presents findings from small scale qualitative research that was carried out in one international school in Serbia with parents of five bilingual pre-school students who acquire two or more languages simultaneously. The school has a large percentage of second language learners and the majority of them are in kindergartens.

Key words: second language acquisition, home language maintenance, multilingual contexts, international education

1. INTRODUCTION

International schools provide education for an affluent clientele. When parents move out of their home country to pursue their careers, their children accompany them and then find themselves in a situation where they have to learn the language (usually English) of a new community as fast as possible. Children need to do so to be integrated in the school community and to be able to function in

everyday situations. English for them becomes a necessity since it is the language of instruction, and they need to master it in order to be educated.

Subtractive bilingualism (Lambert 1974) is a phenomenon that is very common in international schools with children educated in a language that is not their home language. If children start international schooling at an early age and stay in it, then in a majority of cases the language of instruction will become their most dominant language. While attempting to become proficient in English, the home language development of many students becomes neglected, and they gradually lose oral and written literacy in that language. This is unfortunate because for children who are not native English speakers, it is equally as important to master the language of instruction which is new to them as it is to maintain their home language. If that does not happen, students learn a new language at the expense of losing their home language.

Governing bodies in many schools understand the importance of maintaining home language. Therefore, different home language teachers are employed and different ways of providing instruction are developed. The classes are usually organized after school, two to three times a week. Unfortunately, that amount of time is not sufficient to achieve age appropriate language competence. Therefore, parents play the most crucial role in developing their children's home language, and a lot depends on their perception of the importance of its maintenance.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Language and thought are related, and language plays a central role in learning. When a child is learning to communicate in his/her home language, he/she is using the language to construct meaning. When enough language has been acquired, the language becomes a tool for cognitive development and has both a cognitive and a social function. When children are schooled in their second language, their knowledge and skills transfer across languages from the home language they have learned in the home to the school language. It is no surprise that children who have a solid foundation in their home language develop stronger literacy ability in the second language.

The competence in the second language is linked to the competence in the first language. Cummings (1984) formulated an “interdependence hypothesis”, stating that second-language competence depends on the level of home language. Skuthabb-Kangas and Toukomaa (1976) proposed the “threshold level hypothesis”, which states that only when children have reached a threshold of competence in their first language can they successfully learn a second language without losing competence in both languages.

Research informs that children's language and literacy skills in kindergarten are strongly related to later academic success. Dickinson and Sprague (2001: 273) argue that “the receptive vocabulary scores of kindergarten students near the

end of kindergarten were strongly related to the end of seventh grade vocabulary and reading comprehension". If oral literacy is not developing in one language, then there will be a delay in developing literacy in a second language. Home language plays an important role in developing concepts. Copple and Bredekamp (2008) state that it is important for children to continue to learn academic concepts in their native language as they gradually learn the second or new language. Pre-school language development will impact their academic success later on. Evangelou et al. (2009) point out that the role of the home language environment is one of the most powerful predictors of children's achievement. Cummins (1991: 94) argues that "oral language development in the pre-and early school years is closely related across languages and also closely related to the development of reading skills in school. In other words, at this stage a general developmental process appears to underlie both conceptual and linguistic growth in both L1 and L2". Therefore families are not only involved in home language maintenance but at the same time they assist the child's overall academic development.

3. RESEARCH

This small-scale research took place in one pre-K to 12 international school in Serbia. It represents the second part of the research which deals with the perspectives of those involved in bilingual education. The first part dealt with the perspectives of teachers and students. After this part was completed, it became clear that parents, who are very important stakeholders, were left out of the study.

In multilingual settings, developing and maintaining home language competence depends on the attitudes of the learner's family to the maintenance of their first language and on the importance that parents give to it. This is especially true for very young bilingual students. Parents play a crucial role in supporting their children's home language development. With this in mind this small-scale research attempted to examine the impact of parental attitudes towards home language on the support they provide for its development. Furthermore, two primary school teachers were asked to comment on the second language development of their students. Teachers' views and comments provided the starting point for interviews with parents.

3.1. The Aim of the Research and the Research Question

This qualitative research was carried out in order to uncover parents' perspectives, implicit beliefs and assumptions about the importance of their home language.

The research attempted to answer the following research question:

– To what extent do parental views on language learning and the importance of maintaining a child's first language impact his or her second language development?

The research was explorative in its nature. Its results were meant to acquire new insights that would be used to improve practice in that particular institution. For that reason, the results of this research could not be generalized.

3.2. Data Collection

Some of the kindergarten classes were observed and the language development of several EAL (English as an Additional Language) students was discussed with their teachers. The informal discussions with the teachers helped to establish what problems those students face when following instruction and mastering the content in a language that is not their home language. After the observations, informal conversations were carried with two kindergarten teachers. They were asked to comment on the way they teach English and on development of EAL students.

Teachers were asked about the achievement of children who had exposure to the language other than English at home. Discussions with teachers helped identify those EAL learners who displayed high vocabulary levels and background knowledge while still in the process of developing their second language. Spoken language is an integral part of literacy development. Achieving high level of vocabulary is related to the quality interaction that children have with adults, therefore the interviews with parents were to establish what parents do in their home environments to help children develop linguistically and to promote literacy in their home language.

In order to understand parents' perspectives on their children's language development, several parents were invited to participate in this research that deals with parents' perspectives on home language maintenance and the importance of English. Six parents responded positively to the invitation and agreed to be interviewed (two were the parents of the same child). Three parents spoke Serbian as their first language, one French, and two Swedish.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with the parents. Guidelines for parents' interviews included questions concerning family background and language use at home for each child. Parents were asked to comment on the amount of exposure each child had had to printed materials in the home. They were also encouraged to talk about their attitudes and expectations concerning their child's linguistic proficiency. The questions were followed by an open-ended discussion and that focused mainly on the parent's opinion on the importance of maintenance of home language and language learning in general. The open-ended discussion provided the opportunity to probe more deeply and explore parents' opinions and concerns.

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Data were organized into categories centered around our research question until several themes emerged.

3.3. Findings and Discussion

a) Second language development in school

The two interviewed teachers had been employed in that institution for a number of years and both taught five year-old students. Both teachers believed that children in the multilingual context tend to pick up language from other children relatively quickly because they want to play and make friends. For those children, language is important since it helps them communicate with the world around them.

Teachers believe that students acquire a language without being aware that there are more languages. “They love to talk in front of others, although sometimes they do not know what they are saying. It often only sounds like English.” Another teacher points out: “It is exciting to see students who are not native speakers develop their language skills. Sometimes they mix the languages, but that is fine with me.” On the other hand, teachers realize that it takes time to learn the language and that second language learners constantly have to catch up with the native speakers. “Their progress is fast, but the language of their English-speaking friends develops, too, and somehow children who learn English as their second language often seem to be lagging behind.”

When asked what arrangements had been made during school time to help second language learners maintain their home language, the answers indicated that not much was done. The school does not organize mother-tongue classes for preschool students, so parents play the key role in developing their child's first language.

One teacher noticed that parents are working with one student on home language. She noticed the code-switching, and she did not discourage the student from doing so. “If she were not encouraged to speak French at home, she would not mix languages when talking to me. But I like that she uses French and English. It reassures me that parents work on her home language development”, the teacher pointed out. There was also an interesting point about parents' perceptions. “Some parents get upset if I talk to their children in Serbian, our common language. They insist that whatever I say has to be in English. There are times when children just do not understand what's going on.”

One of the teachers remarked that if she knew some words in a child's language, she would try to use them to see if students would be happier to respond in their home language. “I have a student in my class who is a French speaker. At home she speaks French and her parents do not want her to lose it. In school, we

start with survival English and now that she can use some English, she uses less and less French when talking to me.”

b) Parents' perspectives on the importance of home language maintenance

The school developed a language policy that states that all languages are valued. The school encourages students to develop literacy in their home languages. In order to assist parents with that, the school organized home language after school program. Unfortunately, the home language provisions is only for grade 1 students or older.

The conversation with the classroom teachers helped separate parents into two groups. The first group consists of the parents who have plans for their children to continue their education in a different, national system institution. The other group consists of parents who have plans for their children to complete their education in an international school (this particular institution). It is worth noting that all the parents that accepted the invitation for the interview belonged to the first group – they did not see their children's entire education in an international setting. From their answers it was clear that they considered the issue of home language to be important and worth discussing. Those parents wanted their children to have a quality education, and they saw the benefits of bilingualism. However, they did not see their children in need of being educated entirely in English. The parents from the second group enrolled their children in an international school because they wanted their children to be educated only in English. When talking about those parents, one teacher called them “the invisible parents” explaining that they would not be seen often, adding that their main concern would be that whatever was done in school to be in English. None of the parents from this group responded to the invitation to be interviewed.

The interviewed parents saw home language as an important aspect of their identity and would not see their language as inferior. “I do not think that my language is inferior to English. I do not want my child to think that our language is inferior.” Another parent commented: “We live in Serbia, we work in Serbia, she is a part of Serbian culture”. Home language was evidently encouraged and played a special part in child's life. “Whenever there is something emotional to say, then she does it in Serbian.” When asked why they devote time to home language, one parent answered with the following question: “Why would anyone deny their child of the most natural thing in the world – and that is home language?”

The interviewed parents had different reasons for enrolling the child in an international school. They did not necessarily see their children's future in English speaking context. All of them expected that the schooling of their children would in the national system (in their home language). “I wanted my child to acquire another language.” “It is important to me that my children learn English. And I work in this school, and it is easy for me to bring my children to school here.” “She needs to be good at both languages.” “Eventually we will move back;

she has to have Swedish.” Those parents saw international schooling as a way for their children to learn English well before they start compulsory schooling in their home country. “My plan was for her to learn two languages in pre-school and then to go to the regular school.”

Personal experience of parents proved to play an important role in their perception of the importance of home language. Also, their expectations of schooling were shaped by their experiences. One parent experienced difficulties, originally due to the lack of second language, and later due to the lack of home language. She shared her anxieties: “My parents decided to move to Canada when I was eleven, and there I learned English. It was hard for me to translate what I knew into English. And then we moved back to Serbia and then my problem was even bigger. Every time I was to say something in school, I had to start with an apology... apology for not knowing the right vocabulary... I do not want my child to be in the same position.”

Most of the parents reported that their children used more home language than English in speaking with them, but they are very aware that English was becoming the strongest language for them. Some parents have only a limited command of English, and very fast their children speak English better than their parents. One comment confirms it. “Sometimes she corrects me. She is turning 6 and she is speaking better English than me, I guess, depending on what we are talking about. She corrects me, when we sing a song, if I do not know lyrics, she teaches me.” One parent commented, “It never occurred to me to use English at home. My husband does not speak good English, so it would sound strange if he communicated with children in English”. Speaking home language is crucial for transmission of cultural values and for communication with the extended family. Another parent pointed out: “It is easier for me to communicate with them in French.” However, the parent also saw French as a tool for his children to stay connected with the extended family: “I want them to speak proper French and when they travel to France, I want them to be able to communicate with their relatives”. This parent expressed his attitude that French needs to be the main medium of communication at home. “If we have a problem, I do not want to solve the problem in English with my children.” On the other hand, the language of communication between siblings was predominantly English, with only one child using more the first language more than English to talk with older siblings. “When they play, my children use English. Maybe English is the language of play for them.”

Parents also shared about their efforts to provide home language rich environment for their children. They reported that their children listened to stories or folktales often and that these were told in the home language more often than in English. “I am more confident telling stories in French”. On the other hand, another parent pointed out: “Stories are usually in Serbian, but sometimes, I read her a story in English”. “We go to the bookshops together and I let my child pick the books... and they are in Serbian.” The majority of children were reported to look at books either alone or with an adult at least several times a week. “We brought

books from Sweden. I will make sure my children read them.” A French-speaking parent also emphasized the importance of providing books for his child: “It is important to learn how to read and write. That is why we bought a book over the summer. To make sure she knows how to read”.

Parents reported code-switching at home. Children frequently used English words when talking in their first language. “The words she learned at school, she uses in English... Sharpener, eraser ... I do not think she knows the words in Serbian. Once she wanted to explain how you ice skate and that she watched ice skating in an English cartoon. She did not translate.” Another parent had an interesting observation: “If she cannot think of the word in Serbian, she would use English word, but then, she would carry on talking in English. I do not stop her”. “Recently I noticed that she uses English words, but uses Serbian endings and makes them sound Serbian.”

4. LIMITATIONS

This data represents six personal opinions among more than fifty parents who have children in one institution among several similar institutions in Serbia. In addition, there are constraints of recruiting parents willing to take part in the study. The facts that only parents who understand the importance of home language responded, provides views of only one category of clients involved in the examination of this issue. As such, the data cannot be generalized.

However, the parents' perspectives on teaching and learning as given in the institution are of particular importance for policy makers in international education and for parents whose children are schooled in a language different than their own.

5. CONCLUSION

For students who are enrolled in international education at a very early age, maintaining the home language is the key for developing a second language, and it requires the conscious effort and support of parents and family. Children need to be exposed to rich language at home since they need to develop literacy in both the language of instruction and their home language. Rich exposure to home language can only happen if the family does not perceive the home language as a hindrance for second-language development. However, when the home language is neglected in the home environment, children are at risk of losing it.

International schools should promote home language in their context and draw parents' attention to the importance of its maintenance. There should be systematic communication with parents that would aim raising awareness of the relation of home language proficiency and conceptual development. Parents need

to be informed that use of the home language at home is reflected in the academic achievement of students. It is important to start with parents of pre-school students. Often parents see rapid progress in their child's language proficiency, but they need to be informed that learning a language does not only mean that the child is able to use language complex vocabulary in everyday situations, but also that they would need to develop literacy.

The findings indicate that the way parents view the status of their child's home language will determine the quantity and quality of language input they provide for their children in that language. Since proficiency in the first language is an advantage in learning a second language, children whose home language is maintained seem to have better success in school. The next step would be implementing strategies that would enable educational institutions and parents to work together on promoting home language.

Parental involvement depends on their educational experiences and the perception they have of their language in relation to school's language of instruction. With that in mind, schools should also promote and support home language development by organizing home language programs. For students who do not have enough exposure to their home language in the home, that would mean that they would at least stay in touch with the language. If a home language program could not be incorporated during school time, then an after-school program could be the first step.

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APPENDIX

Guidelines for in-depth interviews with parents

1. How many languages do you speak?
2. What is your child's language of instruction?
3. What language do you use to talk to your child at home? Why?
4. Do you sometimes use a different language to talk to your child?
5. How important is it for you that your child speaks your language?
Why is it important that your child speaks home language?
Cognitively – Do you read stories to your child? If so, in what language? Do you sing lullabies?
Affectively – When your child is sad/angry, what language does he/she use to communicate?
Socially – When your child is playing with other children, what language does he/she use to communicate? What language comes more naturally to your child?
When your child initiates a contact, what language does he/she use?
With children? With adults?
6. What do you do to maintain home language?
7. What language does the other parent speak? If it is different from yours, does he/she speak to the child in that language?
8. How well does your child speak the language of instruction?
9. Are you happy with the way the school helps your child acquire the language of instruction? What else could the school do?
10. How could school help your child with home language maintenance?

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РОДИТЕЉСКО ВИЂЕЊЕ ЈЕЗИЧКОГ РАЗВОЈА ДЕЦЕ У ВИШЕЈЕЗИЧНИМ СРЕДИНАМА

Резиме: У срединама у којима деца на раном узрасту усвајају више језика, очување матерњег језика је од кључног значаја у процесу усвајања другог језика. Уколико се школовање не одвија на матерњем језику детета, неопходно је да се у процес очувања матерњег језика укључе родитељи и, по могућству, шира породица. Да би до тога дошло, пре свега је неопходно да породица не доживљава свој језик као инфериоран или као препреку усвајању другог језика. Ако један од наведених сценарија јесте случај, тада се матерњи језик занемарује у породици и постоји велика опасност да ће га дете временом изгубити.

Међународне школе треба да подстичу употребу матерњег језика и да систематски указују родитељима на значај који он има у процесу усвајања другог језика. Налази овог истраживања указују на то да ће значај који родитељи придају матерњем језику бити показатељ у коликој ће мери родитељи користити матерњи језик, као и квалитет интеракције на том језику. Језички развој матерњег језика помаже код усвајања другог језика и код развоја писмености на другом језику. Стога не изненађује што више успеха у школи имају она деца која имају развијен матерњи језик.

Мера у којој ће родитељи бити укључени у развој матерњег језика код свог детета у многоме зависи од образовања родитеља, као и од њихове перцепције матерњег језика у односу на језик на коме се одвија настава. У међународним школама, чест је случај да родитељи не раде довољно на промовисању и очувању матерњег језика. Из тог разлога велика одговорност лежи на самим школама које треба да промовишу језике кроз организовање језичких програма, и то уколико је могуће у току школског дана, а уколико није могуће, онда свакако у оквиру ваннаставних активности.

Кључне речи: усвајање другог језика, очување матерњег језика, вишејезичне средине, међународно школовање.