

THIRD CULTURE KIDS: LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THROUGH LITERACY PRACTICES

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Abstract: Over the past few centuries, the world has experienced a number of changes related to global commerce, travel, and technology. The process of globalization has increased interconnectedness and interdependence between people and countries all over the world. Due to mutual interests, many countries around the globe established economic relationships which led to social mobility and migration. By this time, English had become the second language of many former British colonies and also the language of science, engineering, information technology, medicine, and tourism. Consequently, English became an international language between nations. In the midst of this globalized and international scene emerged the phenomenon of Third Culture Kids (TCKs). This term refers to children who grew up in a culture different from the one in which his or her parents grew up. These children need to adapt not just to a different culture, but also acquire new languages in order to communicate and express themselves. Many of them are bilingual or multilingual, and the English language plays an important role in their sense of belonging and fitting in a different culture. This paper will focus on their journey of language acquisition through many schools in the countries they are living in as well as the role of their parents in home literacy.

Keywords: *Globalization, Migration, Language Acquisition, International School, Third Culture Kids*

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1950s the American sociologists couple John and Ruth Unseem migrated to India with their children to study the relationship between American men and their Indian counterparts. They found out that the American expats and the Indians with whom they worked with created ways of working across and between cultures. While interviewing their wives and children, Ruth realized also that those children were being raised by a third culture, created by their parents (Cottrel, 2017). The couple were the first to introduce the term Third Culture Kids to refer to the children that accompany their parents to another society. Those children are exposed to different cultures and languages and need to be able to communicate and express themselves there.

WHAT DOES CURRENT RESEARCH TELL US ABOUT LANGUAGE

Language is one of the most uniquely human capacities that our species possesses, and one that involves all others, including consciousness, sociality and culture. We employ the symbolic system of language to make meaning and communicate with other fellow humans (Ortega, 2013). Many believe that language is the most powerful form of communication (Hill, 2012). According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2021), language is system of communication consisting of sounds, words, and grammar.

The First language is also known as mother tongue, native language and primary language. According to Oxford dictionary (2021) First language is the language you learn to speak first as a child; the language that you speak best. Usually, mother tongue or father tongue, defines the first language we were exposed to, chronologically speaking, our L1, the first language we understand and speak. It is the first language we grow up with or that our parents speak with us. The First language doesn't have to be just one. In bilingual families it can be two or three. But it is usually the language used every day from the very beginning (Limacher, 2015).

According to Ernvik (2019) knowing the family language is also essential to learn other languages. It is important that parents speak with their children in the language they regard as their First language. Parents and children need to communicate with each other using their heart language. If parents talk to their children in a language in which they are not fluent, they will not help their children. The better a child knows his first language, the language of his family, the easier it will be for him to learn additional languages.

The specialists Troike and Barto (2017) stated that Second Language is the name given to the additional language a person has. It may also actually be the third, fourth or tenth to be acquired and can also be acquired through informal learning, taking place in naturalistic contexts or through formal learning at the classroom. For example, the informal learning happens when a Japanese boy is brought to the United States and “picks up” English by playing with American kids or attending school where the children are native speakers without any specialized language construction, or when an adult Guatemalan immigrant in Canada learns English as a result of interacting with native English speakers or with co-workers who speaks English as their second language. In the same way, Formal learning occurs when a high school student in England takes a class in French or when an undergraduate student in Russia takes a course in Arabic. And a combination of both happens when a student from the US takes Chinese language classes in Beijing while also using Chinese outside the classes for social interaction or daily living experiences.

The same happens with Third Culture Kids. They can learn languages (second, third, fourth) through informal and formal learning. They need to learn other languages not just to be able to study in the country where their parents moved, but also to be able to express themselves and to communicate with people around them, their peers.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS IN LITERACY

Literacy, more than the ability to read and write the language, is the ability to synthesize many forms of information in order to successfully function within an environment influenced by social norms. In International school's literacy practices are usually applied with the influence of a western culture which can have advantages and disadvantages for a Third Culture Kid. For a non-Western TCK attending a

Western international school this example scenario would likely cause some difficulties related to behaviour etc (Collete, 2019).

As for a TCK raised up with western education the schools tend to protect them from the culture of the country they are living in. Which can also be a disadvantage for them in learning literacy. Speaking more than one language is like any other skill. In order to do it well the children need practice. The role of the school is to help the children to be able to read and speak in the target language considering their cultural background. A common mistake made by teachers and even parents is to think that bilingual children have a hard time to read than students who only know one language. According to Eta (2020) that is not true. Research has found that from being exposed to multiple languages from a young age, children actually have an easier time understanding word structure and also having advantages while acquiring other skills.

International schools, are inclined to introducing literacy at earlier and earlier ages due to the tendency to believe that ‘earlier is better’ when referring to many things related to education. However, schools need to reconsider the right time and the right way to approach literacy in international schools, especially with our language learner students (Crisfield, 2019).

Unfortunately, literature suggests that the knowledge, skills, and abilities that immigrant children bring to school are in many cases overlooked or considered of no value by the teachers and school administrators (Ríos & and Castellón, 2018). For that reason, parents also play an extremely important role in their children developing skills.

THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN THE PROCESS OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THROUGH LITERACY PRACTICES

Parents contribute to their children’s reading acquisition by exposing them to a rich home literacy environment (Torppa et al., 2006; Manolitsis et al., 2011; Niklas and Schneider, 2013). According to Tien Ho (2019), an expert in Education, home literacy encompasses parent and child practices in the home that inspire linguistic and cognitive development. These linguistic and cognitive development foster early academic skills that contribute to “school readiness.” Early academic skills include oral language, literacy, and numeracy skills. The combination of these skills determines how ready a child is for school. Home literacy has been found to provide important preparation for school entry (Sénéchal, & LeFevre, 2002).

According to the Home Literacy Model created by Sénéchal, & LeFevre, (2002) young children can be exposed to two distinct types of literacy activities at home. First, meaning-related literacy activities (also often labelled as informal literacy activities) are those where print is present but is not the focus of the parent–child interaction, for example, when parents read storybooks to their children. In contrast, code-related literacy activities at home (often labelled as formal literacy activities) focus on the print, for example, activities such as when parents teach their children the names and sounds of letters or to read words. Meaning-related activities predict children’s reading acquisition indirectly by enhancing language development, whereas code-related activities predict reading indirectly by enhancing children’s early literacy skills.

Although the Home Literacy Model postulates that parental literacy activities at home enhance children’s literacy outcomes, other evidence has shown that children’s own reading as well as children’s interest in literacy activities predict their literacy outcomes (Levin et al., 1997; Pomerantz and Eaton, 2001; Martini and Sénéchal,

2012; Silinskas et al., 2012, 2013; Torppa et al., 2019). Ernvik (2019) states that children are not going to learn a language they don't need, but once acquiring another language will help the child to fit in school and with their peers in a class they will become more motivated on doing that.

Research also shows that to learn other languages well, a person needs to be fluent in the family language. This means that the child needs to study their own language as well as the regular school work. However, the Third Culture Kid experience might mean that they will never be fluent, especially not in reading or writing, in their family language which can have consequences to their future. (Ernvik, 2019). She also states that if the parents talk with their children in a language in which they are not fluent, they will not help their children. The better a child knows his first language, the language of his family, the easier it will be for him to learn additional languages.

How frequent parents engage in family literacy practices with their kids is extremely important to help them determine the child's readiness for language acquisition. The more the child is exposed to home literacies, the more interested they will be in doing literacy activities by themselves. Some examples of those home literacies practices that will help to develop children's language and literacy skills should include book reading, storytelling, parents teaching or singing a song to or with their child, showing picture books, playing games or puzzles, doing arts and handcrafts together, practice reading or working with numbers like in a card game or even counting money to buy candies at the store nearby (Tien, Ho, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Literacy practices go beyond teaching children how to read and write. It plays a vital role in helping children become socially engaged where they are and able to communicate and understand the world around them. When children are learning literacy in an International School where the language of learning is not the parents mother tongue (s), parents need to decide how they will deal with this situation and how they are going to encourage and help their children through the literacy practices necessary to acquire a new language. Through much research we now know that children need to be literate in their parents' mother tongue before acquiring another language. The role of the parents is to work closely with the school in order to provide an environment at home that will enable the kids to learn a new language without pressure and where the children are able to express themselves etc.

As for International schools they need to take into consideration the children's language background while applying literacy practices. Language is extremely important to Third Culture Kids, it is part of their identity or cultural identity, who they are as an individual and how they communicate and express that to the people around them.

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About the Author

Solange Francielle Silva, is a Brazilian teacher that loves travelling and teaching.