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Limited English Proficient Children's Literacy Acquisition and Parental Involvement: A Tutoring/Family Literacy Model

Ping Liu

Students' academic performance at school is closely related to the family literacy environment and their parents' educational levels. Home is the place where children spend most of their time while growing up, parents being their primary "teachers" (Three R's Plus, 1978). Unfortunately, not all children enjoy a literacy-rich home environment that strongly supports their academic growth. Many parents missed the opportunity to receive a good education, and are, therefore, unable to provide the academic help their children need in completing their school work. This is an especially severe issue with many parents whose English proficiency, educational level, and cultural differences prevent them from getting actively involved in their children's education (Olsen, 1988; Scarcella, 1990; Shanahan, Mulhern, and Rodriguez-Brown, 1995; Spindler and Spindler, 1987).

Active parental involvement has been considered as a positive contributing factor to students' school success

(Crawford, 1995; Rich, 1985; Scarcella, 1990; Unwin, 1995). However, a great deal of work needs to be done before those parents who lack literacy skills become helpful partners of educators. A step that may lead to the solution of the problem is for parents to understand the educational process by themselves becoming acquirers of knowledge. This experience will empower them to assist their children in learning. Programs such as community literacy programs, Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED), and various adult learning activities create a second chance for parents to learn, which, in the long run, will no doubt improve home literacy environment and positively affect students' learning. Family literacy programs and workshops in which parents and children read and learn together have been reported to be very effective in increasing the literacy level in families (Ada, 1988; Allen and Freitag, 1988; Tizard, Schofield, and Hewison, 1982; Shanahan, et al., 1995).

However, parents' engagement in learning does not guarantee that they can supervise children by providing proper home support. Knowing how school functions and operates and how to work cooperatively with teachers requires extra efforts. The task can only be accomplished through effective communication and cooperation between teachers and parents. Parents are expected to approach teachers about their children's performance at school, and teachers need to enthusiastically involve parents by holding parent orientations and regular meetings, and making individual contacts whenever necessary. Nevertheless, things do not often work out well this way; the communication channel may be blocked either due to parents' intimidation or, to teachers' insensitivity or exclusion (Cummins, 1986; Olsen, 1988; Phenice, Martinez, and Grant, 1986). Therefore, effective parental involvement happens when: 1) parents are equipped with the ability to learn with their children; and 2) a

cooperative and supportive relationship is established between school teachers and students' parents.

Recently a federally supported family literacy program, conducted in an urban community in central Texas, was an attempt to make the two conditions meet. The program was a collaboration between a large university (with an enrollment of over 40,000 students) and an independent school district in one of the twin cities where the university is located. This article, a study of the family literacy project, intends to provide some suggestive input for educational institutions as well as educators that are interested in planning and conducting family literacy activities in their communities.

The College of Education is one of the ten colleges of the university, whose major clients are undergraduate students preparing to be future school teachers. One of the required courses of the undergraduate program deals with teaching literacy to culturally diverse learners. Students taking the course are expected to increase awareness of cultural diversity in the classroom, be acquainted with theoretical approaches and teaching methods in the bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESL) field, and be able to design appropriate lesson plans for students with different cultural and language backgrounds. The majority (about 90-95%) of students attending the course were from white middle class American families, who generally grew up in a majority neighborhood with limited close interaction with language minority people; few of them reported having a friend who is from a different ethnic background and speaks a language other than English. As a result, students often feel it's hard to gain a good understanding of the content related to teaching culturally diverse learners.

The Center for Alternative Programs, a subdivision of the school district, bore the responsibility of training adults in the acquisition of literacy. As a major community resource for social services, the center provided GED assistance and other adult literacy assistance to the community. Most of its programs were operated in evenings because most participants worked during daytime. Clientele of the center were 100% below the federal poverty line, and the majority of them were ethnic minority. Adult learners with children usually found it difficult to attend classes because they could hardly afford baby-sitting. On the other hand, the center, with limited staff, was not able to offer child care for the parent learners.

Thus, the family literacy program was created to meet the needs of both the university and the community. It solved the problem of both parties by providing an excellent opportunity for college students to work with Limited English Proficient (LEP) students and parents, while relieving the tension caused by a lack of personnel in child care at the center. In fact, participants from the university and the community all benefited from the program, including LEP students, parents, undergraduate and graduate students. The program operated on Tuesday and Thursday evenings each week from 6:00 to 9:00, when adults could attend the literacy program. Parents brought their school-age and preschool-age children and dropped them at the children learning center headed by a doctoral student coordinator. Undergraduates enrolled in the Literacy Acquisition and Culturally Diverse Learners class served as volunteer tutors for these children. The ratio of tutor and children was about 1:2-3. School-age and preschool-age children were separated into two rooms for the convenience of instructional activities. Each meeting was supposed to accomplish specific tasks. The time table ran as follows:

6:00-6:30 — Reading and writing tests;

6:30-7:30 — Homework and reading activities;

7:30-8:00 — Interaction among parents, children, tutors and coordinators;

8:00-9:00 — Lesson plans and very important kid activities.

Having given a general introduction of the program, I will shift the focus of discussion to the roles participants from each group played and the benefit they received for being a part of the program.

Parents

Parents were informed of the program from classroom announcement, radio broadcasting, and public school announcement. Applications were accepted from all interested families. Most adult applicants, however, were interested in obtaining GED certificates, and, interestingly, the characteristics of these adult students nicely fit the goals of the family literacy project.

Parents, preparing for GED tests, worked with the staff of the Center for Alternative Programs in their own classroom while their children were being taken care of by undergraduate tutors. Parents enjoyed the advantage of participating in the program in several respects. First, they saved the worry of hiring a baby-sitter, which was a particular relief for the economically disadvantaged parents. Second, tutors did much more than merely baby-sit the children; they actually provided them with academic help and support, supervising them on their homework, and teaching them reading and writing skills. Third, during a 30-minute period parents were kept posted about their children's learning through interacting with tutors and the coordinator of the program. The

interaction provided a communicative channel through which parents achieved a better understanding of their children's educational process, and gradually they were able to identify the role of parental involvers. Most important of all, parents learned to approach and interact with their children's school teachers through working with these preservice teachers.

Preschool and school children

Children enrolled in the program were 2-11 year-old preschool and elementary school attendees. Most of them apparently needed academic help with their school work, which was usually not provided by their parents because of low literacy skills or tight work schedules. Moreover, with low school achievement, these children could not establish high self-esteem and self-confidence. Very Important Kid Activity, aimed at assuring students that they had high potential to succeed in the classroom, was therefore set as the keynote of the program. The activity emphasized positive attitudes and high expectations from the tutors, and "self-fulfilling prophecy" (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968) was expected to take place among these children in the classroom. Meanwhile, tutors worked hard in teaching the children literacy skills that would enable them to stand firm on their own feet in performing academic tasks.

Preschool children were still in the stage of acquiring oral language proficiency and were just starting on literacy. It was time to introduce them to the close relationship between oral language and literacy, and literacy and their life. The purpose of making the connection was to draw back on their prior knowledge so that a meaningful context would be created for natural learning (Abramson, Seda, and Johnson, 1990; Boyle and Peregoy, 1990; Freeman and Freeman, 1992; Lim and Watson, 1993). In the program, the children had ample

Each child was allowed to select and keep a book they liked as a reward for attending each meeting. The free books served as a motivation for them to learn and participate in the program. In addition, they were required to read the books to their parents and siblings at home so that a stronger literacy bond would be established in the family.

The school children were also involved in two writing activities in the program. One of them was prompt story writing. Each Thursday night students were required to write a story with a prescribed beginning. A total of 15 minutes was allowed for the whole writing process. A tutor read the story starter to a student (for example: "I went up to the old, deserted house. The door was open so I walked in. Suddenly ..."), then gave one minute for the student to think about it before starting to write. Discussion between the student and the tutor about the story was generally permitted, but the student should not write during the thinking time. Ten minutes were allotted for the actual writing. Three minutes after they started writing, students were required to put a star mark on the paper and use the remaining seven minutes to finish the story. The students were encouraged to write for the whole ten minutes. In this type of writing children need to follow the story starter, but they can also use their own imagination and rely on personal experiences to complete the writing. Therefore, it was structured writing with room for students to contribute as individuals.

Another writing activity was photo story writing ("Photo Story Book," Parker, 1993). Students and their parents were loaned a Polaroid camera to take home along with a pack of ten instant films. They were required to take pictures that featured family members, friends, and pets engaged in typical domestic activities in casual poses. The photos could also include familiar tools, toys, cooking utensils, and furniture, etc.;

they may also be of indoor or outdoor activities such as washing the car, fixing the roof, skating on the sidewalk, and so on. In short, students had entire freedom to choose whatever situation they were familiar with and would like to include in their photos.

Six out of ten pictures were selected by both students and tutors in order for the former to write stories on. Students then discussed each photo with their tutors before sitting down to write about it. The tutor would ask questions such as "What would you like to say about this picture?" or, "What is going on here?" or, "Can you tell me something interesting about this?" From the conversation, students were expected to generate, organize, and finally verbalize ideas. The time allotted for the actual writing of the story was around ten minutes, the same amount used for the story starter writing.

In normal school settings, cameras are usually not available for students to check out and take pictures at home. However, nowadays they are so common in people's lives that even economically disadvantaged families can afford one or more of them. (When asked to check out a Polaroid instant camera for their children to take photos at home, some parents said they already had such cameras.) Therefore, photo story writing should be a feasible and affordable method in improving students' writing ability in normal classroom applications.

Apparently, all teachers need to make photo story writing happen is to first discuss with parents about how to take pictures appropriate for picture writing. According to Scarcella, it is not uncommon that "teachers have not known how to encourage parents to become involved"; "many minority parents," in particular, "feel that they have been excluded from participating in our schools" (Scarcella, 1990, p.

161). In a sense, this activity provides an opportunity to elicit parental involvement which should be another advantage in implementing the strategy in addition to improving students' writing skills. Furthermore, parents' engagement in these activities enabled them to know about their children's literacy achievements in a consistent manner. For families with parents who have little literacy education, this activity may turn out to be an all beneficial event. Through discussing, describing, writing, and reading these picture stories, parents can acquire writing skills and literacy along with their children; so photo story writing can be applied as a means to encourage family literacy acquisition.

Photo story writing can be categorized as an "authentic" (Edelsky, 1989) assignment meaningful to students, who then use language naturally to fulfill real-life purposes. Participants in the program were very excited and highly motivated to write about their pictures. For example, one of the boys was highly stimulated by motivation. When earlier asked to work on the routine writing prompt tests, the boy tended to bargain with the tutor before reluctantly starting to write. However, he was so enthusiastic and eager to write about his photos that upon finishing with one picture, he asked permission to work on another. The student may not demonstrate an immediate better performance in his photo description than in his routine writing products, but the high motivation will pay off in the long run.

Undergraduates as tutors

When a large university is located in a small town, it is not always easy for an education major, during regular school hours, to get maximum exposure to classroom teaching as a pre-service teacher. With little access to elementary and high school classrooms, college students' comprehension of theories learned from textbooks may be inaccurate, because

connections between theory and practice can be lacking. For students enrolled in Literacy and Culturally Diverse Learners, class observation is not an official component of the course, and none of them had experience teaching LEP students. By participating in this literacy program, they were able to approach the children and parents, understand LEP children's learning process, involve parents in children's education, and finally, discover for themselves the connection between theories and actual teaching practices.

These tutors were assigned to work with two or three children throughout the program. They kept records of every child's progress and performance by filling out an evaluation form for each meeting as a collection for a portfolio. Continuous observation provided them with a clear picture of children's strengths and weaknesses in the development of literacy and content areas, and they were able to adapt their tutoring to facilitate the learning of every child. Each tutor was also required to conduct a thirty minute mini-class teaching in addition to tutoring. There was a group instruction and discussion topic for each evening, and two tutors were responsible for preparing and conducting the lesson. Tutors had usually conducted research to collect various sources of information for their lesson plans, and then organized the topic in an enjoyable manner to pique children's interest. They emphasized children's participation in the lesson, making connections between what they already knew and the new information. Real objects, manipulatives, and models were selected to make the lesson more vivid and comprehensible.

As participants of the program, tutors not only learned how to apply what was learned to teaching practices, they also learned to accept and respect diversity. Through close and frequent contacts with the parents, tutors became aware that these parents cared very much about their children's

education and eagerly wanted them to succeed in school. However, many factors, such as working schedules, ignorance of school systems, and language barriers, had earlier hindered them from getting involved. The supportive, risk-free, and friendly environment made children and parents feel comfortable, and positively affected family learning. Tutors' hugs, encouragement, hard work, and patience were returned with smiles, self-confidence, academic achievement, and thank-you cards from the children, and appreciation and cooperation from the parents. The experience, as program tutors, no doubt prepared these university students for more effective work with minority students and their parents in the future.

Graduates as program coordinators

The coordinators of the program were responsible for training undergraduate tutors, providing on-site monitoring and assistance to them, facilitating the interaction among children, parents, and tutors, ensuring sufficient material supply on-site, and so on. Several doctoral students were recruited as the coordinators of the two-year program, who happened to be instructors of Literacy Acquisition and Culturally Diverse Learners at the university. The double role enabled them to monitor college students' performance both as learners and tutors. They were able to gain an in-depth understanding of what students most needed to learn from the class about teaching LEP students.

In managing the program, the coordinators discussed with tutors, both on the university campus and on the program site, such issues as how to teach LEP children, how to communicate with parents, and how to apply theory to practice. They also had the opportunity to listen to student tutors' concerns and the difficulties they encountered in their learning and tutoring, so that the coordinators/instructors could

make appropriate adjustments in their teaching. Without the program, communication between instructors and students would very likely be limited to the classroom.

Moreover, the coordinators participated in the evaluation and assessment of the program by assisting the evaluation specialist in preparing the instrument and procedures and monitoring the implementation of the evaluation. The program was also an ideal site for educational research, which generated valuable data. Based on the research, papers were completed on LEP students' literacy acquisition process and on the family literacy program. Presentations related to the program were given at national and state conferences and were warmly received. Therefore, being centrally involved in the literacy program as coordinators provided the graduates with an excellent opportunity for educational research that is not only a vital part of a doctoral program but also benefits the university and the community.

In conclusion, the family literacy program was designed to actively involve both LEP children with their parents in literacy acquisition and preservice teachers as learners. An efficiently planned and conducted program should not only attend to children and their parents' learning development but also maximize the gains for all program participants. This program highlighted the two-way responsive learning/teaching interaction between families and (pre-) education professionals by breaking the "we teach, you learn" family literacy program dichotomy (Shockley, 1994). The parents and children taught the tutors many valuable lessons about the complexity of the learning process, human relations, and family involvement. The benefits that (pre-) educators gained from participating in the program were evident. Their understanding of the function of family literacy may hopefully result in a commitment to involving families for the purpose

of facilitating the learning process of children, when the future teachers are assigned to teach in the public schools. Without any doubt, our children will develop more potentials in learning when a better understanding and a strong collaboration are achieved among parents, educators, and communities.

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1997 Kellogg Institute — June 27 - July 25

The Kellogg Institute for the Training and Certification of Developmental Educators has announced dates and application procedures for its 1997 training program. The 1997 Institute will be held from June 27 through July 25 on the campus of Appalachian State University in Boone, NC.

The 1997 Kellogg Institute will train faculty, counselors, and administrators from developmental and learning assistance programs in the most current techniques for promoting learning improvement. The Institute program consists of a summer session followed by a fall term practicum project on the home campus of each participant. The 1997 summer program will focus on the use of learning styles and their implications for instruction, the process of designing and implementing developmental evaluation activities, developmental instruction techniques, classroom assessment, research in developmental education, advising and counseling the developmental student, as well as the use of computers for management, data collection, and instructional purposes.

Institute fees are \$795 plus \$550 for room and board. A graduate credit fee for the three-hour practicum will also be charged. Up to six (6) hours of graduate credit may also be obtained for participation in the summer program. Applications and additional information about the Institute may be obtained by contacting Elaine Bingham, Director of the Kellogg Institute, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608; (704) 262-3057. Early application is encouraged to ensure a space in the Institute. The application deadline is March 14, 1997.