PREDICTORS OF LITERACY SUCCESS FOR LANGUAGE MINORITY STUDENTS

Whether they are receiving support services or are in the mainstream classroom, English Language Learners (ELLs) often struggle to gain meaning from print as they read in the content areas. It is natural, but mistaken, for educators to conclude that ELLs have home environments that contribute to difficulties with second language (L2) literacy. This Bulletin examines some of the home contexts for L2 literacy acquisition, discusses home predictors of success, and offers suggestions for assisting learners to succeed in reading.

Characteristics of L2 Home Environments
1. Different family home literacy practices. Children may come from home environments where traditional literacy practices, such as reading and writing, may appear to be nonexistent. Families, however, may engage in oral literacy practices through storytelling as an integral part of family and ethnic community life. Additionally, many families may engage in specific, intensive literacy practices such as religious observances, where the written word is important and meaningful.

2. Varied child literacy acquisition experiences. In the process of acquiring literacy, ELLs often serve in complex roles where they are called upon to translate and read for their parents in a variety of settings. In some situations, children may be conceptually unprepared for the literacy task (such as helping a parent purchase a car or translate in a medical or legal situation); many experiences, however, do serve to expand an ELL’s experience with language.

3. Correlation of a healthy home environment to literacy acquisition. Providing a safe and loving home environment allows for learning to occur. For children to succeed, it is important that their home lives are positive and that basic needs are met so that they can be psychologically and physically prepared to learn in school.

4. Families differ culturally with regard to use of language, such as amount used for communication, initiation patterns, intonation patterns, volume of talk, and the use of questions. Distinctive communication styles, unique to different cultures, are an adequate and appropriate preparation for schooling in that culture; however, these different styles are an inadequate preparation for the U.S. classroom, which requires developing a questioning, problem-solving attitude towards learning or learning how to collaborate in small groups. Students need time and consistent modeling to adjust to features of U.S. classroom learning practices, such as labeling and describing, recounting past events, following directions, and linking ideas to events.
Home Predictors of Success
Socially and culturally, ELLs are at greater academic risk of not achieving success than native English speakers. Fundamentally, continued literacy development for ELLs of all ages, regardless of literacy in the first language, rests on specific qualities of the home environment:
1. **Value Placed on Reading and Writing.**
   Parents do not have to be educated or even literate to provide a foundation for academic success for their children; it is important, however, for parents to place a high value on literacy and learning for their children through encouragement and a home environment conducive to learning.

2. **Emotional ties between parents and children.**
   Dysfunctional, estranged, or abusive relationships inhibit potential for learning in a safe and secure psychological environment; loving, intimate relationships provide psychological security for growth and disciplined support for schooling.

3. **Cultural Heritage Validation.**
   A positive attitude towards one's home culture and country of origin, especially if expressed in the school curriculum, can reap enormous benefits for individual student literacy development and general learning.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR ASSISTING STUDENTS TO INCREASE THEIR LITERACY DEVELOPMENT**
Success in reading and language development depends on matching learner cultural expectations with school expectations. Educators need to acquire an understanding of experiences, values, and background knowledge of language minority students in order to provide the appropriate learning setting. The following are some suggestions:
1. **Adapt the curriculum to include the interests, needs, and learning styles of students.**
   Students from various cultural backgrounds exhibit different interests and styles for learning. For example, Somali students are generally highly social in their learning. They learn well in settings where there is plenty of active oral processing.

2. **Be aware that students come from home and previous schooling environments where language patterns and use of language is different from school language expectations in the U.S.**
   Both young students, who may lack experience in having stories read to them, and older students, who may lack experience in U.S. classroom interaction, will have difficulty using language to label and describe, recount past events, follow directions, or link ideas to events. These language functions will have to be modeled consistently. In addition, students may not have experience in linear, topic-centered, oral presentations or with narrative and expository structures typically found in texts.

3. **Call attention to how language works in the texts the learners are using!**
   Each day, provide attention to any of the following features of language, at any grade or content area of instruction:
   - **Vocabulary** - multiple meanings and uses of words; choice of words reflecting denotative vs. connotative meaning or for subtle gradations of meaning; and choice of words for precision of meaning.
   - **Grammatical structures** - how grammar is used to structure ideas for organizing and structuring ideas in academic writing.
   - **Cohesive devices** - connectors that link ideas into larger, coherent discourse;
   - **Rhetorical devices** - how grammar structures texts into manageable organizational pieces; and
   - **Phraseological patterning** - "elusive" elements of language, such as idioms or unique and preferred ways of expressing ideas.

**SOURCES:**