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The Importance of Literacy in the Home Language: The View From Australia

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Abstract

While advantages of literacy in the home language have been widely documented, the Australian education system has not been proactive in providing institutional support for its development. This paper investigates the impact of (il)literacy in the home language on the academic, affective, and social development of bilingual/multilingual children and proposes principles that home-language-literacy programs should meet to be effective. It discusses programs that, although designed to develop literacy or second-language proficiency mainly in classroom contexts, could be easily adapted to address the needs of the linguistically and culturally diverse Australian context. We argue that the cost of not investing in successful home-language-literacy programs will be higher in the long run than their implementation costs and recommend that Australia should consider supporting grassroots home-language-literacy programs in a push to improve overall literacy outcomes for Australian home-language speakers.

Keywords

literacy, curriculum, education, social sciences, diversity and multiculturalism, educational administration, leadership and policy, early childhood, educational psychology and counseling, disparities

Australia, a country intensely populated by migrants from the 18th century onward,¹ is still one of the strongest targets of migration.² According to the 2011 Census, almost 6 million migrants born in more than 200 countries now live in the country. While migrants from English-speaking countries (e.g., the United Kingdom and New Zealand) are still the largest group of overseas-born residents, 19% of the Australian population over 5 years of age speaks languages other than English at home. Almost half (49%) of longer-standing migrants and 67% of recent arrivals³ speak a language other than English at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012b). One of the most obvious manifestations of this process is the presence in the classroom of students acquiring English as a second language while having to cope with the academic demands of a new curriculum (Verhoeven, 1991). In some geographical areas (e.g., Logan Central, Queensland), up to 70% of the state school's population are from non-English-speaking homes (Queensland Government, 2009). About 30% of these children cannot read or write in their first language and experience difficulties in the transition to a new educational system in a language yet to be mastered (Queensland Government, 2009).

While mastery of the English language by migrant children is undoubtedly a crucial aim, it is still to be noted that languages other than English are neglected in the Australian education system. The lack of institutional support is particularly noteworthy in the area of literacy skills in minority languages. Parents wishing to raise their children bilingually

have very few venues—other than classes offered by Community Language Schools in a limited number of languages—to ensure that their children become literate in their native language(s), or that they can maintain literacy in the home language if the process of literacy development has been interrupted by migration. This affects not only newly arrived children but also second- and third-generation migrants as can be seen from high percentages of language attrition rates (Clyne, 2001; Lo Bianco, 2003). There is ample research that shows that writing is the most fragile skill in linguistic minority situations, as it is not needed in daily life and needs constant use or practice for its maintenance (Clyne, Fernandez, Chen, & Summo-O'Connell, 1997; Oriyama, 2011). Over time, the lack of institutional support results in what has been termed *kitchen* languages, impoverished varieties of community languages that serve mostly oral communication needs around restricted topics. In addition, as we show in the next sections, insufficient support for home languages deprives children of the recognized educational, social, and affective advantages associated with bilingualism and can hinder intergenerational cohesion within families and communities. Moreover, this situation

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entails a loss of potential economic opportunities for the country, as few people develop the advanced language skills required to operate successfully in the international arena.

Paradoxically, given Australia's dependence on international trade (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012a)⁴ and its often-repeated desire to be accepted as part of the Asia Pacific group of nations (Goldsmith & Dun, 1997; Keating, 2000; Smith, 2009), the call is made periodically to enhance the role of languages in the curriculum and improve their teaching. However, when it comes to public debate and educational language policy and planning for languages other than English, there is no clear and consistent conceptualization of how these languages are viewed. In a classic article, Ruiz (1984) discusses three main policy orientations to language: language as a right, language as a problem, and language as a resource. Although Ruiz was reflecting on the United States and Canada, this distinction is pertinent to the Australian context and provides a useful framework for analysis. In Australia, not all language groups have the opportunity to be included in the school curriculum. When it comes to languages other than English, a clear distinction is made between modern foreign languages, indigenous languages, and migrant/community languages (Lo Bianco, 2003).⁵ Only a few "foreign" languages are seen as resources, and, thus, when it comes to justify the selection of particular languages in the education system, justifications are worded either in relation to the high cultural achievements of the target cultures (e.g., French and German) or to economic and geopolitical national imperatives (e.g., Chinese and Japanese). Most of the languages spoken in Australia however are not seen in this light. Except for the few languages that at different times attracted strong financial support from foreign governments or institutions (e.g., Korean and Italian), "migrant/community" languages are seen as a problem, hindering assimilation into the dominant culture and potentially polarizing society. Lo Bianco poignantly summarizes the situation noting that in Australia, languages spoken "in other countries" and divorced from daily life are seen as valuable skills. In contrast, "when the languages are less foreign, when emotional attachment and mastery may be high, their study, public use, and maintenance 'threaten civilization.' No longer a skill but sedition" (Lo Bianco, 2000, p. 99). This reflects the tension that Hakuta and McLaughlin (1996), describing the situation in the United States, take as evidence of "elite" versus "folk bilingualism". Bilingualism in Australia has similarly been mostly confined "to a small and in sociological terms, elite (unrepresentative) category," which learns foreign languages from a historically privileged English-speaking base and to "immigrants and indigenous peoples; a larger but not socially elite category," who learn English as a second language from a historically disadvantaged base (Lo Bianco, 2003, p. 10).

For reasons outlined in the section "Literacy in the Home Language: What Research Tells Us," recognition and support for indigenous and migrant/community languages are

crucial to children, families, and the nation. The section "Minority Language Education in the Australian Context" provides a brief overview of the minority-language-education situation in Australia. We conclude that given the substantial linguistic diversity in Australia, effective support strategies can only be devised through deployment of innovative approaches that are mindful of resources. In the section "Alternative Approaches", we thus discuss a number of such approaches that might be trialed and put to use in the Australian home-language context. The "Conclusion" summarizes the paper, recommending that Australia should consider to systematically support grass-root home-language-literacy programs in a push to improve overall literacy outcomes for a substantial group of Australians—those who speak a language other than English at home.

Before going any further, however, some terminological clarifications are in order: In this paper, we refer to "majority language" as the language used by a socially and culturally dominant group, whereas "minority language" is used by a group that is subordinate in a social and cultural context (Hamers & Blanc, 2000).⁶ With regard to the relationship between the speaker and the minority language(s), a number of alternative terms have been used in the literature (among them "mother tongue", "first language", "home language", "native language", "heritage language", cf. Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000), but their definitions are not straightforward. One of the most commonly used terms is "mother tongue". This concept has taken a variety of meanings in the literature. As Olivier (2011) notes, it is difficult to determine which language used by multilinguals is actually the person's mother tongue. Skutnabb-Kangas (1988, p. 16-17) proposes that when trying to determine a speaker's "mother tongue", it is important to distinguish between four aspects: origin—which language was acquired first; competence—which language the speaker knows the best; function—which language the speaker uses the most; and identification—which language is used to associate with or disassociate from others. It is evident that a speaker may have more than one mother tongue and that the mother tongue can change during the lifetime. Following this definition, it is obvious that the term *first language* is insufficient as it only relates to origin, but the bilinguals' chronological first language may not be their dominant language. For lack of a better term, and given that our focus is on young children, in this paper, we use the term *home language* as the language acquired by the child through immersion at home, usually the language the child knows best before going through child care or school.

Literacy in the Home Language: What Research Tells Us

It should be pointed out at the outset that our approach is ideologically based on the belief in the value of multiculturalism and in the right of minority groups to choose whether to retain their language(s) and culture⁷—in Ruiz's (1984)

terms, in “language as a right and as a resource”. We, therefore, focus our discussion on empirical research that has extensively documented the many educational, social, and affective advantages of developing literacy in the home language and, conversely, the detrimental effects of home-language-literacy neglect.⁸ The following sections report on general research findings. However, unlike first-language-acquisition patterns that typically show consistency in pace and rate of linguistic development across populations (Slobin, 1986), bilingual acquisition involves great degrees of variability and is affected by issues such as quantity and quality of input, context of acquisition, methods of upbringing (e.g., simultaneous vs. consecutive), and even children’s cultural orientation and identification (Verhoeven, 1991b). Many of the studies discussed in what follows give little information about participants and their circumstances, and, therefore, the findings need to be taken with caution, as they may conceal nuances or patterns that only apply to particular contexts. More research in this area is most certainly needed; nonetheless, results of recent studies as outlined in the following sections appear to point toward manifold advantages to developing literacy in the home language, including benefits for literacy in general.⁹

Educational Advantages for the Child

Current research indicates that home-language-literacy acquisition provides a number of educational advantages to bilingual children. These include fostering the development of linguistic skills in the home language to high levels of proficiency, supporting the acquisition of literacy in the majority language, easing the transition into the school environment, and enhancing the child’s general academic achievement. We briefly discuss each of these issues in turn.

Home-language development and maintenance. Research has shown that literacy is important for long-lasting lexical development, fluency, and overall maintenance of a language (Baker, 2006; Cohen, 1989; Olshtain, 1989). Conversely, studies conducted mostly in Canada and the United States have documented the rapid loss of home-language fluency in the early years of schooling when these languages are not reinforced (see Cummins, 2005, for a review of studies). Indeed, language attrition has been reported in the latest Australian census: First-generation Australians had the highest proportion of people who spoke a language other than English at home (53%). It was much lower for second-generation Australians (20%) and lower still for the third-plus generation (1.6%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012b).

Acquisition of the majority language. Underlying the dominant monolingual orientation of the Australian education system, with the consequent disregard for languages other than English, is what Benson (2005) calls the “either-or myth,” that is, the mistaken belief that bilingualism causes confusion and

that it must be pushed aside so that the majority language can be acquired. Children are thus expected to undergo a rapid transition into the majority language, which would ensure academic success and improve their chances of effective competition in mainstream society. Richardson (1998) very aptly summarizes the Australian situation: “In the multi-ethnic Australian society literacy pedagogy and schooling are identified as the equalising instruments in an otherwise complex, heterogeneous and unequal society” (p. 128).

Under this perspective, foreign languages spoken by non-English-speaking immigrants in Australia are seen as a hindrance to the assimilation process (Wright & Taylor, 1995). Migrant and refugee parents, concerned that their children will lag behind their native-born peers, follow the mistakenly dispensed advice of shifting into English in their interactions with their children, despite their limited proficiency in this language (Martín, 2005).¹⁰ These beliefs, however, run counter to the massive body of research providing evidence that home-language promotion is possible at no cost to the development of the majority language and to the documented beneficial role of bilingualism in general, and of literacy in the home language in particular, as discussed in the following paragraph.

With regard to mastery of the majority language, there is growing acceptance that home-language maintenance not only supports it (Makin, Campbell, & Jones Diaz, 1995), but also that children who are educated initially in their home language learn a second language, and hence the majority language, more proficiently and achieve more academic success than those who have not had such a solid foundation (Barac & Bialystok, 2011; Cummins, 1999; Cummins, 2000; Swain, Lapkin, Rowen, & Hart, 1990; Thomas & Collier, 1997). In a report commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, August and Shanahan (2010) concluded that teaching students in their home language was beneficial to English-literacy learning and better than English immersion.¹¹ Benson (2005) argues that the more highly developed the first language skills the better the results in the second language, because language and cognition in the second language build on the first. Similarly, Verhoeven (1991) proposes that “[i]t is easier for children to build up elementary literacy skills in [the language for] which they have acquired basic phonological, lexical and syntactic skills” (p. 61).¹²

Studies have shown that strategies involved in reading in the first language can be positively transferred to the other language. Swain et al. (1990) explain that the facilitative effect of home-language-literacy programs stems from the fact that it is easier for children to develop an initial understanding of the functions and mechanics of reading and writing in the language they use to make sense of their life experiences. This effect can be found even when two languages are written differently (Bialystok, Luk, & Kwan, 2005). Studies have also shown that bilingual children have a more complete understanding of the symbolic relation between print and meanings than monolinguals. Bialystok

(2001b) found that “just being exposed to two writing systems, or two kinds of storybooks, enabled bilingual children to appreciate that the written forms are the symbolic systems from which the story emerges” (p. 30). This finding is attributed to the bilingual’s experience in managing two writing systems and the resulting insights about the separation of form and meaning, a crucial prerequisite skill in the development of literacy.

It has also been proposed that, once students have basic literacy skills in the home language and have developed communicative abilities in the majority language, they will be able to transfer the literacy skills acquired in the familiar language into the new language. The posited transfer of skills is based on Cummins’ (1976, 1979) *interdependence theory* and the concept of *common underlying proficiency* whereby the knowledge of the home language and the second language are not separated but interdependent. Thus, language, literacy, and concepts learned in the home language can be accessed and used in the second language, once oral L2 skills are developed. No relearning of elementary-literacy skills is required, provided that there is enough exposure and motivation. There is a proviso, however, that children must achieve adequate levels of proficiency in both languages for this transfer to occur. Cummins (1979) calls this proposal the *threshold hypothesis*. Thus, reaching adequate levels of proficiency in the home language is seen as a prerequisite that leads to positive cognitive and academic consequences for the bilingual child.¹³ The relationship between bilingualism and cognitive/academic outcomes is mediated by the level of language proficiency, which is, in turn, affected by the acquisition of literacy skills.

This proposal does not exclude the possibility of transferring the skills acquired in the majority language into the home language; however, given the arguments discussed above, when the home language is the dominant one, transfer from the majority into the home language would be an unnecessarily difficult and inefficient process (Benson, 2005).

Transition into the school environment. A number of studies have suggested that minority-language-speaking children can potentially experience compounding disadvantage when starting school (Makin et al., 1995; Verhoeven, 1991a). In the Australian context, children who speak English enter formal schooling already speaking the language in which they will become literate. Furthermore, they have been socialized—through child-care and home practices—into the general practices followed at school, are taught by native speakers of English, and live in a society supportive of English. On the other hand, minority-language speakers often do not speak the majority language, or not fluently, when they enter school. They have not been generally socialized into the norms of interaction of a typical Australian class situation. Moreover, the teacher does not speak their language, and they are taught alongside native speakers of English.

These children live in a society that does not support bilingualism and are not able to become literate in their home language (Makin et al., 1995). This situation, which potentially disadvantages migrant/refugee children, as well as indigenous minorities, has been addressed in some countries by creating bilingual and dual literacy programs that roughly fall into three main educational approaches: simultaneous bilingual instruction from the start, successive home-language–majority-language literacy instruction (also called the “staircase approach”), or successive majority-language–home-language literacy instruction (Verhoeven, 1991).¹⁴ In these programs, bilingual teachers who share children’s languages and cultures facilitate the transition into the new academic culture. Such literacy programs would be possible if the number of languages spoken in society was restricted, but they would be extremely difficult to implement in multilingual societies such as Australia, given the human and financial resources needed to implement a project of this magnitude.

While these programs show very promising results in terms of children’s academic achievement (see for instance Devlin, 1997, 2005; Gale, McClay, Christie, & Harris, 1981; Mohanty, 1990) when compared with the typical L2 submersion found in most regions in Australia, they are rare in Australia. Aboriginal education was an exception with dual-literacy education being implemented in some states, but these programs have had a chequered history (Molyneux, 2009).¹⁵

General academic achievement. A number of scholars have proposed that acquisition of literacy in the home language, whether simultaneously or concurrently with literacy development in the majority language, is a source of general cognitive and academic advantages for bilinguals that extend beyond the linguistic domain (Swain & Lapkin, 1991a, in Baker, 2006). Domains in which this claim has been tested include meta-linguistic awareness, phonological awareness, working memory, ability to decode and interpret text, in particular, when the writing systems differ across languages, and enhanced attention and concentration, among other skills (see Bialystok, 2001a, for a thorough review of the literature).

It is thus fair to say that there is complementary evidence pointing to manifold educational advantages to developing literacy in the home language, with positive effects not only for literacy acquisition in both home and majority language but also for academic achievement more generally. We now turn to affective advantages.

Affective Advantages

There is ample research on the positive affective outcomes that derive from literacy in the home language. Expanding the functions and usage of the home language increases the status of that language, which according to Baker (2006) is crucial

for language maintenance. Baker further argues that, where oral communication is in the minority language and literacy in the majority language, the minority language has lower prestige and may have less chances of being maintained.

Wright and Taylor (1995), who studied the effect of education in the home language (i.e., Inuttitut) vis-à-vis education in a second language (i.e., English) in Canada, showed that early home-language education had a positive effect on the personal and collective self-esteem of minority-language students, while instruction in the second language did not have a positive effect. Bialystok (2001a) argues that “the language we speak is instrumental in forming our identity, and being required to speak a language that is not completely natural may interfere with the child’s construction of self” (p. 5) and may impinge on the child’s ability in establishing ethnic and cultural affiliations. Furthermore, literacy in the home language enables the home traditions and culture to be accessed, reproduced, and transmitted (Clyne, 1991; Fishman, 1991; Oriyama, 2011). It may thus encourage in-group affiliation, positive self-esteem, the vision and worldview of one’s heritage culture, self-identity, and intellectual empathy. High self-esteem may result in better performance in English in the long run. Studies have shown positive correlations between self-esteem and academic success (Makin et al., 1995; Wright & Taylor, 1995).

Researchers (e.g., Fishman, 1991; Rosenthal & Cichelloa, 1986) have noted that language shift can result in intergenerational conflict and alienation triggered by a clash of values between the newcomers and their offspring, and diminish feelings of belonging.¹⁶ Conversely, allowing children to develop skills to maintain and expand the home language and to access the cultural heritage of their parents and grandparents may enhance community cohesion and may foster acceptance and understanding of cultural diversity.

Social Advantages

Supporters of a monolingual agenda often base their arguments on the myth of “one nation–one language,” or, in other terms, in the mistaken belief that monolingualism is a crucial prerequisite to social cohesion (Hobsbawm, 1996; Lo Bianco, 2003). They argue that if groups retain their cultures and languages, they will be less likely to identify with the mainstream culture and thus will become disengaged from the society and state. As many have noted, however, minority language oracy without literacy can disempower students and lead to language shift and assimilation. Assimilation, in addition to eliminating cultural richness in society, “can result in lowered self-esteem, poor self-concept and cultural alienation” (Olivier, 2011, p. 22), not only from the in-group but also from the community at large. While the exact mix of contributing factors is still unclear, Barrett, Sonderegger, and Sonderegger (2002) have shown that “Australian adolescents exhibit greater overall self-esteem than young migrants” (p. 229). They discuss the need for culture-specific

early-intervention and prevention programs. The support of literacy in the home language could be trialed as a part of such programs.

Advantages for the Nation

While advanced foreign-language proficiency is seen as a valuable resource to the nation and as an imperative in the age of globalization, foreign language studies in Australia are mostly relegated to the Higher Education level (Clyne, 2005; Martín, 2005). As a result of the late start, very few learners acquire languages to a level at which they can operate effectively across languages and cultures. Paradoxically, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, who could potentially fill Australia’s linguistic needs, are ignored, thus lost to the system. Clyne (2005) refers to this process as a “squandering” of language resources. As many of these children shift into the dominant language, their home language deteriorates to a stage where only passive comprehension and minimal production skills are retained (Clyne, 2005; Oriyama, 2011). Cummins (2005) poignantly characterizes the current situation as a “bizarre scenario of schools successfully transforming fluent speakers of foreign languages into monolingual English speakers, at the same time as they struggle, largely unsuccessfully, to transform English monolingual students into foreign language speakers” (p. 586). In light of this, it suggests itself that fostering the home language and its literacy development would not only be hugely beneficial to the children and families involved but also result in an invaluable gain for the nation and society as a whole.

Minority Language Education in the Australian Context

When it comes to providing resources to develop linguistic skills in general and literacy in particular for minority-language speakers, Australia faces a number of challenges: Migrants come from different places, cultures, and socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. While more than 200 languages are regularly spoken in Australia by 19% of the population over the age of 5 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012b), the second most frequently spoken language after English is Mandarin, which is spoken by only 4% of the population. This contrasts with the situation in the United States where 12.3% of the population speaks just one minority language, Spanish (Shin & Kominski, 2010), or with Canada that has an official policy of bilingualism, thus officially acknowledging a right for children to receive publicly funded primary and secondary schooling in French or English if French or English, respectively, is the minority language of the area they live in (Section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms; Government of Canada, 1982).¹⁷

The wide range of languages spoken makes it difficult to address the educational needs of this culturally and

linguistically diverse sector of the population. Ideological and practical considerations further complicate the issue. As described above, assimilationist policy orientations call into question the value of diverting resources into supporting community languages. Even when the political willingness exists, there are obvious limitations in terms of materials, curricula, and teaching expertise in such a varied range of languages, some of which have few speakers.

Experiences overseas leave no doubts that bilingual school-based programs, in which children are taught part or the entire curriculum in a second language, would be the optimal model of biliteracy development, and there is ample evidence to attest for their effectiveness (Swain et al., 1990; Willig, 1985). However, and despite the fact that this sort of schooling was once very common (Clyne, 1991), in contemporary Australia, bilingual schools are very rare, as language proficiency has become synonymous with mastery of English-language skills (Molyneux, 2009). The few bilingual programs that exist are for target languages that are seen as “resources” (e.g., French, German, Chinese, Japanese), but they are ill-equipped in terms of funding and staffing requirements to cope with the wide range of languages spoken in the community.

Minority language education in Australia has been predominantly pursued through Community Language Schools (otherwise called “ethnic,” “heritage,” “community run schools,” or “Saturday/Sunday” schools). There are at present some 1,000 community language schools attended by about 100,000 school-aged children (Australian Federation of Ethnic Schools Associations, 2012). These schools provide language maintenance in 72 languages (Lo Bianco, 2009; Australian Federation of Ethnic Schools Associations, 2012) and receive State funding supplemented by Federal “per capita” funding.

Most of these schools teach language and culture, some also add religion and history to instill in-group loyalty. They would be particularly suitable to develop literacy in the home languages, an area about which parents may feel less confident. Despite the good intentions, there are many challenges these schools face. One of the most problematic aspects is that tuition is usually carried out in addition to mainstream schooling, generally on Saturday or Sunday mornings or after school hours. Many children lack motivation and perceive after-hours school as an unnecessary burden. In addition, Australian cities are extremely spread out and driving children to the schools where the target language (i.e., home language of the child) is offered may be utterly impractical, as it may, for example, clash with parents’ working commitments. Given the diversity of languages, not every language can be offered in each city or suburb, and, because all minority-language speakers do not live in urban centers, their needs are not met by community language schools.

Another challenge these programs face, particularly in small schools, is the vast range in students’ linguistic competence. Catering for this diversity requires a balance between

age/cognitive development and language development in the class composition. The lack of trained teachers in the different target languages and the scarcity of teaching materials appropriate to the Australian situation pose additional problems; the available textbooks are usually intended for much younger children in the country of origin and are, thus, unlikely to motivate students. Community language schools thus struggle to cope with their community’s linguistic diversity.

From a broader perspective, there are additional issues with relying on community language schools for supporting home-language literacy. Not all parents may have the resources to provide their children with the opportunity to attend community language schools. Socioeconomic status of families is thus likely to preselect who can attend, as are other factors such as the value that is attributed to bilingualism and biliteracy. Moreover, the languages on offer at the moment of writing merely represent about one third of the languages spoken in homes across Australia, that is, about two thirds of the language communities do not have this avenue at all to support their children’s home-language-literacy development. It is thus crucial to start exploring which alternative ways might be available, which we do in the following sections.

Alternative Approaches

Because we do not anticipate a large-scale policy shift with respect to home/community languages, and given the high number of languages to be included in any home-language-literacy programs across Australia, we propose that alternative teaching and learning strategies need to be explored to achieve more immediate impact. In Cummins’ (2005) words, we propose a move away from macropolicies and instead focus on working with communities and educators at the local level to implement instructional practices aimed at strengthening students’ home-language literacy and proficiency. As Fishman (1991) points out, overreliance on the education system leads to a frustrating struggle against the monolingual mindset. He suggests that parents need to take more responsibility in bringing up their children in two languages. Furthermore, as Baker (2006) acknowledges, while the school is important in developing literacy, bilinguals also develop literacy in the family and the community, environments that could very well be exploited for home-language-literacy development. Learning outside school and using the minority community’s resources help personalize the experience of reading and writing by relating information to the child’s own experiences and emotions.

We, therefore, propose a bottom-up introduction of literacy through nonformal education practices. To be successful, these strategies will need to be implemented as extracurricular activities, without adding substantial demands on parents and carers’ time and resources. They will also require grass-root community support to persuade different ethno-linguistic

groups to provide competent native speakers and funds for the development of appealing and culturally appropriate pedagogical materials so that students will be encouraged to use these resources—and they need to be easily and cheaply maintained, updated, and expanded. Benson (2005) argues that this type of grassroots-level approach, although not easy from a large-scale organizational standpoint, is the most promising in terms of community commitment and sustainability.

The initial community investment in developing such programs will be offset by its potential benefits: In addition to the positive effects identified in the section “Literacy in the Home Language: What Research Tells Us”, there will be the added benefit for the diverse ethno-linguistic groups in raising the usefulness and status of the home language in the community in the eyes of speakers and nonspeakers, thus fostering a valorization of the home culture and language and a sense of pride. This nonformal approach is also expected to increase parent participation in their children’s education and to foster cultural relevance to the social context of the child, which some researchers consider essential to the enhancement of children’s literacy (Hancock, 2002; Krashen, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1998).

Given the complex nature of the Australian context, it becomes clear that any offerings of home-language-literacy support to children of minority languages have to meet a number of *principles*. From the learners’ perspective, these programs need to be:

- i. engaging and motivating, so that children enjoy the experience and are intellectually stimulated; yet
- ii. nonthreatening, to avoid frustration; and
- iii. culturally relevant and appropriate, to draw on children’s immediate experiences.

In terms of design and implementation, these programs should be:

- iv. easily adaptable, to cater to different levels of proficiency, different languages, and different ages;
- v. flexibly accessible at different times and locations of the children’s choice;
- vi. cost-effective (ideally freely available); and
- vii. easy to maintain and expand.

Programs that meet all these conditions should foster responsibility and autonomy in the learners.

In the remainder of this paper, we describe some approaches that have been implemented overseas to promote home/community-language literacy outside of, or parallel to, the mainstream education system. We, in particular, focus on their suitability to the Australian context. While a single approach is unlikely to work across different cultural contexts and speech communities and for different ages, developmental stages, and literacy levels of children, we nonetheless expect that a sophisticated adaptation and combination of aspects from

these different approaches might lead to an improvement of home-language-literacy levels in the Australian context. This overview is by no means exhaustive but is meant to show the effectiveness of some programs in meeting some (or all) of the principles listed above. As outlined in the following, the programs selected either concentrate on motivating young learners through engaging materials or on involving parents to assist in the learning process.

The “Book Flood” and “Shared Book” Approaches

This approach, initially developed in the South Pacific in the 1970s, was used in a number of developing countries to improve the acquisition of English as a foreign language by children who have already developed literacy skills in their home language. The “Book Flood” approach (Elley, 2000) involves making available in the classroom a “flood” of about 100 high-interest books that children can access independently. The basic hypothesis underlying this approach is that, if children have an abundant supply of engaging books in class (*principle i*), it would increase their exposure to the language and thus expand their lexical and grammatical acquisition. Good quality books that appeal to their interests would also increase reading time and motivation, both good predictors of academic success. Thus, the books are not seen as supplementary materials but as the central pedagogical tools, which allow children to proceed autonomously and learn the language directly by reading.

Recognizing that not all cultures engage in similar reading practices (conf. Heath, 1982), the “Shared Book” approach—developed independently of the “Book Flood”—is used as a preparation step and to avoid early frustration (*principle ii*). Here, the teacher shares a good book with a class of pupils over several days until they become familiar with the language of the book (Elley, 2000). The teacher introduces the stories, discusses the title and illustrations, and encourages children to make predictions about the content. This builds up children’s confidence in their abilities to work out meanings from illustrations and/or context later on. The stories are discussed and reread until children are familiar and can join in. The process is meant not only to introduce children to particular stories but also to ensure that children interact constructively with books on a daily basis and to provide modeling and guidance on how to engage with books, thus preparing children for independent reading.

Programs using these approaches have been evaluated by Elley and her colleagues in a variety of cultural contexts, languages, and age levels. The results show that the “Book Flood” approach can double the rate of reading acquisition, improve writing, listening comprehension, and related language skills, and increase motivation and enthusiasm for reading. Moreover, students appear to transfer their enhanced skills to other subjects of the curriculum that depend heavily on reading (Elley, 2000).

Although the aim of the “Book Flood” approach is to improve linguistic proficiency in a foreign language, we believe that this model could be even more effective in promoting literacy in a language in which children are already fluent. Adapting such a model to the Australian context would also address one of the criticisms raised against the original implementation of the “Book Flood”, namely, the lack of cultural relevance and appropriateness (*principle iii*; Elley, 2000), given that the approach was based on books imported from abroad and developed for widely different cultural contexts. We propose that the community can contribute to the creation of texts and that texts can be shared within the community, thus also reducing overall costs. Moreover, members of the community could easily be trained to assist children in the initial stages of literacy development (see the two programs discussed in the section “Family Literacy Programs”), thus addressing potential shortages of community teachers fluent in particular languages. Furthermore, these resources could be digitized and made freely available online, thus overcoming the scarcity of resources and obstacles of accessibility.

A recent implementation based on similar principles is being conducted by Worldreader, a U.S. and European non-profit organization, who is making digital books written by foreign and local authors and publishers available to children in the developing world. As of May 2013, they have distributed more than 609,000 e-books to 4,300 children in sub-Saharan Africa. Their initial evaluations, reported on their website (<http://www.worldreader.org>), indicate marked improvements in reading abilities and high levels of engagement. In the Australian context, where children have computers readily available through schools and public libraries if not at home, such initiatives could be easily implemented involving the different ethno-linguistic communities, and they could be expected to yield positive results in terms of motivating and engaging learners while meeting the design and implementation principles (i.e., *principles iv-vii*) listed above.

Family Literacy Programs

“Book Floods,” in the traditional and recent guises, have been implemented in child foreign-language-acquisition contexts in which all children in a class are learning the same foreign language. The situation of minority languages in Australia as described above involves a wide variety of languages, and this poses additional challenges, one of these being the scarcity of trained teachers. One way of addressing the linguistic diversity would be to make parents partners in the literacy-development process. We turn now to two programs or interventions originating in the United States in the late 1980s (Hannon, Brooks, & Bird, 2007) that support the idea that parents can be instrumental in helping children develop literacy (Hancock, 2002). Although these projects aimed at improving literacy in the mainstream language, the results hold promise in the Australian situation.

The idea that parents can assist children in developing literacy is not new. Andersson (1981), for instance, argues that reading is learned rather than taught and that the best teacher is the one who is intimately associated with the child and provides the environmental stimulation to learning through oracy and literacy experiences (Gilliam, Parten Gerla, & Wright, 2004). Furthermore, parents’ participation can empower children in English-dominant classrooms by fostering a closer alignment between home and school practices (Hancock, 2002; Krashen, 2000) that may enhance academic progress. A number of projects have been implemented following these tenets. Of those, two are summarized below.

Project ROAR (Reach Out and Read). This project was developed by Gilliam et al. (2004) and implemented in a predominantly Hispanic elementary school in Texas, United States, in a low-socioeconomic area characterized by poor educational levels in adults and low levels of adult literacy, a situation that applies to a number of emergent communities in Australia, such as, for instance, the Dinka community from Southern Sudan (cf. Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 4 and the 2011 Census results).¹⁸ The basic premise was that parents want to enhance their children’s academic success but may not have the skills to do so or the confidence to try. To address this challenge, university faculty and student volunteers engaged in interactive-literacy activities with parents and children, meeting monthly over a period of 10 months. Sessions were conducted in a public library to familiarize parents with the venue and expose them to books they could borrow and included workshops on the importance of literacy, storytelling, basic techniques, and activities that parents could implement at home. In evaluating the program, parents reported gains in their confidence, closer bonds between parents and children, and increased enjoyment of books (*principle i*). More important for our purposes, parents reported that children were beginning to “read” to them and that older siblings who did not enjoy reading previously were also eagerly participating.

While this project was conducted in English and only explicitly addressed one of the principles we identified as necessary to develop autonomous reading in the home language—although probably the most crucial one, increasing motivation—it could easily be implemented in the Australian context. Based around family practices, programs such as ROAR offer families a nonthreatening experience (*principle ii*), ease of accessibility (*principle v*), and the flexibility to cater for any language, age, and level of proficiency (*principle iv*), given the necessary resources. Moreover, the community could be involved in the creation of resources, thus addressing the issue of cultural relevance (*principle iii*).

FRED (Families Reading Every Day) Books. This program, developed by Hancock (2002), combines elements of the two projects summarized above: quality books as in the “Book Flood” and parents’ involvement as in the ROAR project.

However, it extends the discussion to the importance of developing literacy initially in the home language. ROAR was developed as a response to the challenge of teaching linguistically diverse populations resulting from the increase of minority-language children in American schools, a phenomenon common to Australia. Hancock saw promise in using and building from what children already bring to the class, namely, their home language. To test the claim that proficiency in the home language facilitates the development of proficiency in the second language (Barac & Bialystok, 2011; Cummins, 1999, 2000; Swain et al., 1990; Thomas & Collier, 1997), Hancock conducted an experiment involving 52 native Spanish-speaking kindergartners and FRED books—books that have been used in the United States since the 1990s to develop pre-literacy skills in kindergarten children. In this study, Hispanic children were assigned randomly to two conditions: The 26 children in the treatment group received FRED books written in Spanish, while the 26 children in the control group received FRED books written in English. Each day, children took the books home for parents to read to them. The results in standardized tests conducted at the end of the semester supported the claims found in the literature: Children in the treatment group outperformed children in the control group in pre-literacy skills. In addition, children in the treatment group performed no differently than their native English-speaking classmates when exposed to books in English. These results provide further evidence that literacy in the home language does not negatively affect literacy in the majority language and points to the gains that stem from out-of-school literacy initiatives. Furthermore, by being based in the home, the principles we identified above were met by the ROAR project.

Self-Directed Learning

The final model discussed in this paper was designed by Mackey (1991) in bilingual Acadia, Canada, to develop second-language acquisition through self-directed learning. The basic premise of this program was that learners can teach themselves a foreign language if sufficient stimulating materials in the target language are made available and provided that the learning process is scaffolded by organizing the materials according to learners' proficiency levels. The materials used in this project were analyzed and coded for degree of difficulty, and menus were created to supply as much freedom of choice as possible according to the child's level and interests.

Participants were young children, aged 8 and up who were provided with hundreds of books, audiotapes, videos, and software. Children selected books that seemed appealing. Because each book was linked to an audiotape, they could either listen as they read or opt for reading or listening only, for as long as they were interested in the task. The thorough evaluation of the program provided evidence that

“children can learn a second language in the absence of trained specialized second language teaching staff or native speakers” (Mackey, 1991, p. 247), which led to its wide implementation.¹⁹

What distinguishes this program from traditional language teaching is, first, the direct contact with the new language, bypassing teachers' input. Second, it differs in its belief that learners this young can and should be responsible for their own learning. Children not only selected their materials but also kept track of the work done by completing individualized control sheets. And third, the program was innovative in its use of widespread and generally available technologies that handled the mechanical and repetitive tasks usually performed by teachers, while it catered for individual needs, interests, and proficiency levels of students.

The self-directed learning program differs from the focus of this paper in that its aim was to develop second-language proficiency—rather than literacy in a home language that the children already speak. Another distinctive feature relates to the participants' abilities, because at age 8 and above they would already be literate, or at least could be expected to have developed basic reading and writing skills, while we are looking for models to develop literacy from scratch. However, of all the models discussed in this paper, the self-directed learning one seems to be the core and most important one for the Australian context, as it could fulfill all the principles required to promote autonomous learning while bypassing the need of trained teachers in many of the community languages: A wide variety of interesting materials (*principle i*) that are culturally and linguistically relevant (*principle iii*) could be created through community involvement, thus making it cost-effective (*principle vi*) and easy to maintain and expand (*principle vii*). Teachers who are native speakers of the languages could be recruited to grade and code materials according to levels of proficiency and ages (*principle iv*), thus scaffolding the learning process (*principle ii*). Moreover, because teachers would not be needed on location after the grading and coding are completed, schools and libraries could make these materials readily accessible (*principle v*).

Moreover, in the two decades since this model was initially introduced in Canada, the use of technology has grown exponentially. Computers are widely available and accessible from schools, public libraries, and homes in Australia, and software development and applications have become much more sophisticated and interactive. It would now be easy to supplement books (possibly even presented as e-books or online textual materials) with additional self-access materials and activities, such as games, which would be highly motivating for children. There are many reasons to believe that if a self-directed program is effective in teaching a second language, it would be at least as effective in teaching children to read in a language that they already speak fluently.

Conclusion

Despite the wide recognition of the cognitive, affective, and social advantages associated with bilingualism in general and literacy in the home language in particular, community languages continue to be neglected in the Australian education system. This entails a loss of opportunities for individuals, migrant and refugee groups, and the wider society. The lack of support for home languages stems not only from assimilationist-policy orientations but also from the widely diverse ethno-linguistic composition of Australian society, which poses great practical challenges in the implementation of such programs, such as the lack of trained teachers in many of the languages, diverse levels of competence in classes, and scarcity of culturally relevant materials.

In this paper, we have attempted to address these challenges by shifting the focus away from top-down approaches to literacy that would involve a large-scale policy shift to a bottom-up approach based on nonformal educational practices that could supplement mainstream education. To this end, we have proposed a number of principles that home-language-literacy programs should meet to motivate children, involve the diverse communities in the responsibility of helping them become literate, and promote autonomy in learners, so that the challenges originating from the tremendous linguistic diversity can be met. We have discussed some innovative programs that, although designed for the development of majority-language literacy or foreign languages mainly in classroom contexts, illustrate some of these principles in action and have highlighted aspects of these programs that could be adapted to the linguistically and culturally diverse Australian context.

Needless to say, there are costs involved in adapting and implementing elements of these programs, in terms of human resources and materials development. For instance, the initial collection of appropriate materials and the adaptation and development of new resources would be time-consuming and involve financial investment. However, we strongly believe that, for all the reasons discussed in this paper, the cost for individuals and societies of not investing in successful home-language-literacy programs will eventually be higher than that of implementing them.

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Notes

1. This time period does not take into account the arrival of the ancestors of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people,

which certain estimates date to as far back as 60,000 years ago (Blake, 1991).

2. This is demonstrated by the current Migration Program. For the period 2013-2014, the migrant intake has been set at 190,000 places. This comprises 60,885 places for family migrants who are sponsored by family members already in Australia (or 32.%), 128,550 places for skilled migrants (67.7%), and 565 places for “special eligibility” migrants (0.3%). The Humanitarian Program is set at 20,000 places (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2013). Moreover, the latest census of population reveals that Australia has one of the highest proportions of overseas-born residents (27%), the third highest behind Singapore (41.5%) and Hong Kong (39%; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012a).
3. “Longer-standing” arrivals are those who arrived before 2007, and “recent” arrivals are those who arrived in the period from 2007 to the Census Night in 2011 (August 9, 2011; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012a, section on “Cultural Diversity in Australia”).
4. According to the then Minister for Trade, Dr Craig Emerson MP, in 2010, “Australian exports generated more than 20 percent of Australia’s gross domestic product. Both exports and imports create employment: One in five Australian jobs is related to trade and expanding our international trade will help secure a high-skill, high-wage future” (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2011).
5. It is important to note that there is a “substantial overlap between ‘foreign language’ and ‘community language’ [that] is either not recognized or only seen as a problem. Some of the most frequently taught ‘foreign languages’ (Chinese, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean) are also major ‘community languages.’ However, instead of recognizing this fact as an opportunity, it is widely seen as a problem. Most heritage speakers end up being better off choosing another language or no language at all, than pursuing their heritage language through mainstream schooling,” as “heritage speakers” are considered as having “an unfair advantage” over “non-heritage learners” (Piller, 2012).
6. The term *subordinate* here should be understood in relation to the asymmetrical power between the cultural and economic support afforded by English (the Australian majority language) as compared with the (at best) limited support given to indigenous and community languages (the Australian minority languages).
7. The right of minorities to maintain their own language has been officially recognized by UNESCO (1960) and the United Nations (1966).
8. The benefits of bilingualism are many and have been extensively documented, so we do not include a discussion of these here. See Barac and Bialystok (2011) for a thorough review.
9. Possible drawbacks and challenges are addressed throughout the paper in the relevant sections (e.g., issues affecting the transition to the school environment).
10. *The First Report on the Progress and Assimilation of Migrant Children in Australia* (Commonwealth Immigration Advisory Council – Special Committee, 1960), noting that a minority of migrant children may lag behind their native-English-speaking classmates, recommends implementing “a national campaign, particularly through foreign-language newspapers

to encourage parents to speak English in the home for their children's sake" (p. 4). While, nationally, the value of bilingualism is now officially recognized (most recently in the *Our Land Our Languages* report; Commonwealth of Australia, 2012), what Clarke (2009) describes is still upheld by a non-negligible part of the Australian population, who believe "that it is a disadvantage for children to be learning two languages at the same time" (p. 27), with parents and teachers being "mistakenly advised that parents should give up speaking their languages at home so that children can learn English." This attitude is, for instance, evidenced in social blog discussions such as at <http://www.mamamia.com.au/social/no-english-in-this-house/> from November 2012.

11. Similar conclusions have been previously reported in major reviews, such as Francis, Lesaux, and August (2006), Genesse, Lindolm-Leary, Saunders, and Christian (2005), and Rolstad, Mahoney, and Glass (2005).
12. This conclusion should not be taken as an argument in favor of sequential bilingualism. The findings relate to situations where minority-language speakers are submersed in the mainstream-education system at early stages of acquisition of the majority language.
13. Although Cummins's discussion assumes the interdependence of two languages, his proposal would presumably also apply to speakers brought up with more than two languages, provided the children are motivated and have reached adequate levels of proficiency in each of their languages.
14. For a discussion on whether it is better to expose children to simultaneous or subsequent literacy, see Baker (2006) and references therein.
15. In 2008, the government of the Northern Territory eliminated bilingual education in that part of Australia after more than 30 years of operation, by mandating that the first 4 hr of each school day be taught in English (see Devlin 2009). This decision had detrimental effects such as a reduction in children's engagement and attendance at school (Dickson, 2012a). It has recently been reversed, and the bilingual ban has been quietly abandoned (Dickson, 2012b); however, the new Literacy Framework replacing the previous policy "has been billed as a far cry from genuine bilingual, bicultural education. It places a primacy on reading and writing in English, while allowing children's home language to be used to explain new concepts" (Murphy, 2012). For a chronology up to 2009, cf. Australian Broadcasting Corporation (2009).
16. Interestingly, it is to avoid intergenerational conflict that the *First Report on the Progress and Assimilation of Migrant Children in Australia* (Commonwealth Immigration Advisory Council – Special Committee, 1960) recommended that parents switch to English, not taking into account that it would be easier for children to maintain the home language than for parents to acquire the new language to high levels of competence.
17. Note, however, that this disregards all other languages spoken as home languages in Canada.
18. The quoted report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) focuses exclusively on adult literacy, and, hence, its literacy improvement results are not directly transferable to children's home-language-literacy development.
19. By 1990, there were around 3,000 learners from Grades 3 to 12 involved in self-directed-language acquisition.

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