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## **Susanna's Way of Becoming Literate: A Case Study of Literacy Acquisition by a Young Girl from a Chinese Immigrant Family**

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*Susanna, a young girl from a low-income Chinese immigrant family, develops her oral language proficiency quickly in Head Start and kindergarten; however, she needs more support in her reading and writing. This case study examines an unusual journey of Susanna's learning to read and write in English. Observations in her home indicate a home with limited print, whereas Head Start and kindergarten provide not only print rich environment but also teachers' and peers' support so that she moves from an English language observer to an English language user. However, she still struggles with the use of decontextualized language. Susanna's difficulties are explained from a social-cultural and psycholinguistic perspective. Instructional implications are drawn from the findings.*

On a hot summer day in her home, Susanna was watching the cartoon show "Captain Planet" on TV. "The power is yours," she imitated a line from the show. Then, she announced proudly "I am a superman." I responded to her, "You are not a superman because you are a girl not a boy. You are a super-girl." She looked at me and argued, "I ain't superman's girl friend." We laughed. I grabbed her left arm, attempting to pull her over to me. She protested, "You don't touch me!" (Transcript, August 4, 1998).

Susanna (all names are pseudonyms) was developing her verbal ability to interact with people in English about nine months after she started to attend Head Start at the community center. This five-year-old girl was not able to speak English at all before going to Head Start in September 1997. Susanna was one of many children from low-income Chinese immigrant families whose parents or guardians did not speak English. These children were facing more challenges than their peers in their way of becoming literate in English. How did Susanna handle the challenges and become literate? How did Susanna, whose parents did not speak English, learn to speak English? What print-related literacy practices did Susanna engage in at home? How and to what extent did Head Start and kindergarten contribute to her learning to become literate? These questions led us to undertake a four-year case study to examine Susanna's journey of becoming literate.

We are Chinese Americans, who speak Mandarin and several Chinese dialects. We were teachers of English as a second language for more than 10 years in China before we came to the U.S. in the late 1980s. We have worked with bilingual children through our work and research since the early 1990s. We are particularly concerned with the literacy development among children who are from immigrant families. Susanna was one of the four children we recruited in a short-term family literacy program in the spring of 1996 for a study on young children's literacy development from Chinese immigrant families. We selected children based on the following criteria: (a) they were born in the U.S.; (b) their parents were new immigrants to the U.S.; and (c) their parents did not read or write in English. The study of the other three children discontinued because their families relocated. Data on Susanna were

collected in four consecutive years beginning in the fall of 1996. They include (a) field-notes, (b) video taping, (c) drawings and writing samples, and (d) formal and informal tests. Field-notes recorded our observations of literacy activities Susanna engaged in during 13 home visits (about two to three hours each) and 17 visits to Head Start and kindergarten classes (about two and a half hours each). Home visits were scheduled to cover activities at different hours of the day throughout the week. Class visits were scheduled for the morning from about 9:00 through 11:30 a.m. We videotaped 6 class visits (about 900 minutes in total) during the third and fourth years of the study. We collected Susanna's drawings, writing samples, and formal and informal test results from her home, Head Start, and the 2000 Summer Reading Program for Struggling Readers.

To understand Susanna's literacy development, we framed our study strongly in social aspects, focusing on the physical, cultural and economic contexts that Susanna lived in as well as the language input she received in interactions with people in her home, Head Start, and kindergarten. We believed that a child's development in mental functioning is characterized by the interaction between their natural and cultural development (Vygotsky, 1962, 1960). All learning including language learning takes place first in a social context (Heath, 1983; Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Vygotsky, 1962, 1960; Wertsch, 1991). In homes, community, and schools, adults and teachers promote children's learning by making "new demands" and stimulate their intellect with new goals so that they can reach "highest stages" (Vygotsky, 1962, pp.58-59). In addition, we felt it necessary to examine Susanna's literacy development through a second language acquisition theory (Ellis, 1994). According to such a theory, a child's Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) develop a lot faster than Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS develops quickly and naturally as a result of exposure through communication, for example, saying "Hi" to greet or "Don't touch me!" to protest. In contrast, CALP, for example, using "once upon a time" to begin a story in writing or understanding a subject matter from text in reading takes longer time to develop. These notions of BICS and CALP in second language acquisition helped us understand teacher instruction, classroom activities, and Susanna's progress in English as well as draw implications

from our analysis for the type of language programs that children like Susanna attend.

The need for the present study originated from two important reasons. First, there was a lack of research on early literacy development among children from low-income immigrant Chinese families. Only a few studies documented experiences of children from middle-class Chinese homes and school children living in Chinese communities (Fu, 1992, 1995; Hudson-Ross & Dong, 1990; Li, 2002; Sung, 1987; Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989; Wan, 2000). Second, there was a discrepancy in research findings about whether the school or the home and community played an important role in early literacy development. Sung's (1987) study on children from Chinese immigrant families, for example, found that the school played a more important role. A similar finding was reported by Purcell-Gates (1995), who distinguished between the physical presence of books and the actual use of print at home. Their claims, however, were not agreeable to findings from most studies on nonimmigrant children, which identified the home as playing a vital role in young children's literacy development (Heath, 1983; Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Teale, 1986). We believed that examining how Susanna learned to read and write in English would allow us to understand better ways to address the needs of this particular group of children.

For data analysis, we read and reread field notes, transcription of video tapes, and writing samples so as to understand Susanna's literacy development. We employed a constant comparison method (Merriam, 1988) to look at the data as they were being collected throughout the process of data collection.

### **Living in a Home with Limited Print**

Susanna was born shortly after the family moved to the U. S. in 1994. Her parents worked in a garment factory in Chinatown, about 20 miles away from where they lived. The grandparents were living with them, taking care of their three grandchildren: Jen aged seven, Susanna aged two, and three-month-old Jason, when the study began in 1996. Susanna's parents and grandparents spoke very little English. The adults

mostly talked with the children in Wenzhou dialect, although they were able to speak Mandarin Chinese. Three generations lived in a two-bedroom apartment on the second floor of the building. The apartment building was located in a busy and ethnically mixed working class neighborhood, about a 5-minute walk away from the subway and the business street.

Homes play an important role in helping young children to become literate (Heath, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Teale, 1986). However, Susanna's home played a very limited role in helping the children to learn to read and write English. Younger children might occasionally learn English words from watching TV or from their older siblings, as illustrated by the following vignette.

Jen, Susanna's sister, was doing homework when Victor, a neighbor's boy, was riding a bicycle and Van [Victor's brother] was watching TV in the sitting room. Victor knew when the program started in each of the channels. If he liked the program, he would stop doing anything and sit down to watch the show. Van was following his brother. At 6:30 p.m., Victor switched to Channel Five, the program "Simpsons" just started on time. All of the children sat on the floor. When Simpson's youngest son was chasing the duck in the backyard and yelling "Duck," Van also uttered "Duck." (January 16, 1997)

During our visits to Susanna's home, we saw only limited English or Chinese print materials available. The adults maintained their verbal interaction with the children in Wenzhou dialect. The conversation mostly focused on physical needs and directing experiences, such as "Are you hungry? Give me the ball." The children did not have a quiet place where they could read and write or do their homework. Jen normally held her homework notebook on the left hand while writing with the right hand. Meanwhile, other family members were watching TV in the same room. Several times, Susanna initialized drawing or writing activities, but it took a long time for the children to locate pencils and paper. Once we brought Jen a pencil sharpener when we found that Jen did not have one to sharpen a very dull pencil.

We captured some English words on the pictures Jen brought from school. These pictures were posted on the panel board of the bunk bed that Susanna and her sister shared. Jen had a picture of animals, a picture titled "Beautiful Day," and a picture on "My Favorite Foods." Each item on the pictures had an equivalent word to go with it.

We found a couple of print related activities in Susanna's home. One time, Susanna began to cry because grandma would not draw pictures with her. Grandma explained to her that she had never learned how to draw pictures. She asked Jen to draw pictures for Susanna. Jen drew a girl, but Susanna was not satisfied with Jen's drawing. Finally, grandma drew a Chinese cabbage. The other time, Joe (Susanna's father) was showing some photos he took in France, the U.S., and their home in China. Jen and Susanna took out more photos from a bag hanging on the wall. Jen had written next to each photo about who were in it and her relation to them. For example, Jen wrote "Me and Father. Dad, Mom, and Me. Me and my friends..." Susanna, pointing to one of the photos that she was in, said in English, "It me."

In Susanna's world, print and print related activities were very limited in both quantity and quality. Grandma and Joe may have wanted to extend the activities beyond the drawing and take the opportunity to engage Susanna in a meaningful print activity, but they did not know how to do it due to their inability to read and write in English. Such activities as reading a book to the children, or helping the children with their drawing and writing did not happen even in their first language.

A child's proficiency in the first language helps with her second language learning (Cummins, 1981, 1989; Vygotsky, 1962). The more proficient the child is in her first language; the less time it takes for her to perform at grade level in English (Collier & Thomas, 1989). Susanna developed some oral language skills in her native language. She could communicate with her parents and grandparents via everyday conversations in Wenzhou dialect. However, she was not able to use the dialect to articulate complex matters. In other words, her academic or school related skills were not developed in her first language. We did not see the parents and grandparents engage their children in print related

activities. Most of the time, communication among the children and adults at home were concerned about everyday events and direct experiences (Heath, 1983). The first language loss posed more challenges for Susanna to acquire academic linguistic proficiency in English (Yau & Jiménez, 2003).

Income may be a significant factor that affects home literacy environment. Joe and his wife left home as early as seven in the morning to work in a Chinatown garment factory. They were struggling to support three children and four adults. Grandma usually went out to search for used beverage cans and bottles so that she could get cash refunds in order to help support the family. Difficult economic situations appear to be one of the reasons for the limited literacy experiences provided by some low SES families (Heath, 1983; Teale, 1986; Yau & Jiménez, 2003).

### **Entering a World of Print**

In September 1997, Susanna started attending the Head Start program at the community center, which provided her with an opportunity to explore a different world. The classroom had a physical arrangement that encouraged verbal communication among children, rich print on the wall, and an abundance of stationery. The walls were decorated with an alphabet chart, a weather chart, a calendar, and the children's birthday chart. On the alphabet chart, there were 26 letters in lower- and uppercases, with an animal's name that starts with each of the 26 letters. For example, alligator was next to "Aa", bee to "Bb", and cat to "Cc". The weather club chart presented a picture of a barometer and was hung between the door and closet. On the left wall there was a chart covered with Halloween pumpkins. The right wall had a collage tree and the leaves bore the names of the children. The back wall was decorated with spiders made out of paper plates.

#### *Being a language observer*

Head Start provided a facilitating literate environment, where Susanna was engaged in genuine communication with other children and with the teacher. About two months after Susanna participated in Head Start, she was able to understand simple English in meaningful contexts



and began to tune into the activities. The following episode captured how the teacher's deliberate use of contexts helped Susanna's understanding of the contextualized speech.

[During breakfast], Susanna leaned forward and backward on the table. Her elbow pushed the cookie off the table, and it fell on the floor. Ms. Perez saw this and said to her, "Pick up your cookie, put it in the garbage, garbage [pointing to the garbage can nearby], I'll give you another one." Susanna picked up the cookie on the floor and went to the garbage can. Ms. Perez took it from her and threw it into the trash can and then gave Susanna another cookie on a napkin. (Transcript, October 30, 1997)

For the whole morning, Susanna did not say anything, although she actively participated in different kinds of activities, having fun playing with other children. She seemed to understand most of the directions and speech delivered by the teachers and her peers. She was silent for the whole morning except when she, Andrew, and Jose were playing together with the cardboard brick blocks. They built a structure of a significant height and knocked it down. Susanna uttered "Yes!" as she got excited throwing the cardboard brick blocks around. However, as the activity changed to one with minimal contextual cues such as singing a song, Susanna was experiencing difficulty. The students all stood up and were asked to sing along and make body movements as the song was being played:

I wiggle like a worm.  
Swim like a fish.  
Crawl like a spider.  
Tiptoe as quiet as a mouse.

Susanna moved her lips slightly as she followed the rhythm of the song. She was always slower than the rest of the students to make the body movement. She did the same when children were touching parts of their face as they followed the song "Simon Says." Susanna sang along with other students, but she did not quite understand what the song meant.

Susanna was more an observer than a user of the English language at this stage. (Transcript, October 30, 1997)

*Becoming a Language User*

About five months later, Susanna began to understand English a lot better. She even started to use the language on different occasions to communicate with her peers with goals as illustrated in the following field-notes:

[9:24a.m.] Susanna began to talk to her cousin while motioning her hands to the pegs and the trucks. She said what sounded like, "It no go here. It go here." She dropped her sun glasses from her pocket and looked down at them and then up at me. I picked up her sun glasses. She looked at me again and took them. ... (Transcript, March 3, 1998)

[9:50a.m.] ... as they [Susanna and Andrew] brought their trains together, while facing each other, they said, "Hello" to one another's train. Andrew got up to the other side of the area and put on a hat and picked up a toy tape measure. He began to swing it across the air back and forth rapidly. Susanna said, "You're crazy! Stop that!" He hit Susanna across the head. Susanna looked at him and began to rub her head.

[10:02a.m.] Susanna asked, "Hey Andrew. What are you doing here?" when Andrew began to play with her trains.

[10:27a.m.] "Ha, ha, yours fell over," said Susanna to Andrew when his plastic animals fell off the wooden truck. (Transcript, March 18, 1998)

Susanna's progress in her oral language development bears witness to Vygotsky's conceptualization of cognitive growth through social interaction and scaffolding. The Head Start program provided a literate environment where Susanna could socially interact with her peers and

the teachers in contextualized conversations.

Moving from a language observer to a language user, Susanna used various strategies, such as being silent, using formulaic speech, and replying in first-language. First, it appears that she went through a silent period (Ellis, 1994) before she made important progress in understanding the English language being used in the different settings. The silent period is the time that a learner of a second language listens to people talk before they start to talk. During this period, Susanna may have prepared herself for social use of English. After about five or six months, she started to talk more and understand the functional uses or purposes that language serves (Halliday, 1975).

Second, Susanna used formulaic speech at the beginning. Formulaic speech consists of un-analyzable, entire expressions which are fixed and predictable (Ellis, 1994). The formulaic speech such as "Don't touch me!" "Hello!" "You're crazy! Stop that!" "What are you doing here?" helped Susanna to "say the right language at the right time in the right place" (Ellis, 1994, p. 85). Her use of formulaic speech may be considered as significant development in second language acquisition because it enables her to make requests or comments, say greetings, ask questions, and protest in different settings (Ellis, 1994).

Finally, Susanna may have relied on her first language from time to time. Some utterances had some unique features of the Chinese language. For example, she would say, "You help me;" "You don't touch me," because the second person pronoun is normally used in a Chinese imperative sentence. In Chinese, tense and third person singular are not expressed via verb conjugation. These were reflected in Susanna's "I win" instead of "I won," and "It no go here. It go here" instead of "It does not go here. It goes here."

### **Becoming Literate: Knowing English Language Forms**

#### *Concept about Letters*

During the two years of her attending Head Start, Susanna gained some concepts of fundamental English forms through literacy activities

and instructional routines. For example, 18 months after she attended the program, she learned to respond "I'm here" when seeing the teacher raise the name card with her first name. She benefited a lot from her peers in learning, too, as illustrated below in the Letter-of-the-Week activity. This activity involved the children in coming up with a word that began with the letter they were learning for that week:

Teacher: Susanna. What is the first day of the week?

Susanna: [Looking around, fidgeting, not answering the question, while other children could not help saying it aloud "Monday"]

Teacher: Susanna, can you say it again? What is the first day of the week?

Susanna: Monday. (Transcript, May 7, 1999)

Susanna's progress in the name and letter recognition provided evidence of the power of zone of proximal development (ZPD) and the scaffolding of more capable peers. Although she and her peers were learning the letters at different paces, she was able to accomplish the learning task with the assistance of the teacher and peers. Her development in the name and letter recognition might be at the logographic phase (Ehri, 1994). She might just "read" her teacher's gesture as she saw the teacher raising her name card instead of reading the print. An interesting question may arise about whether Susanna had the concept of the days in a week in Chinese. A bilingual teacher with Chinese and English might have asked the same question in Chinese to see if Susanna would be able to answer it in Chinese but was not able to articulate her understanding in English. However, such probing was not possible because there were no bilingual staff speaking Chinese in Head Start. By March, 2000, Susanna was able to identify all 26 upper- and lowercase letters except for the uppercase "Y" and "X" and the lowercase "g."

#### *Interest in Books and Concept about Print*

The occasional "Read Aloud" and other literacy activities in Head

Start nurtured Susanna's interest in books. She enjoyed being read to and started to explore for books as illustrated by the following vignettes:

During playtime, Susanna went to the library and looked at the books... [She] kept looking at the books and then at me. She timidly smiled at me as she brought a book entitled *Machine at Work*. Apparently, that was a clue for me to read the story aloud to her, so I complied. I read it three times. (Transcript, May 15, 1998)

About two weeks later, Susanna picked up the same book:

Susanna was sitting next to Christie in the library looking at pictures in the book. She was sitting with her favorite book *Machine at Work*. Then, she started to leaf through the pages... Now, Susanna was looking at the pictures of a book by Eric Carle with Christie. She was smiling and laughing while pointing to certain pictures in the book. Then, she clapped her hands. ... Susanna was sitting with Randy, "reading" a story called *The Brown Bear*. (Transcript, May 29, 1998)

As Susanna was exploring the world of print, she began to understand how to handle a book as a reader. Her development of concepts about print was illustrated in the following vignette when she was "reading" *A Tree is Nice* and *Curious George*:

She spent about 20 minutes going through the pictures of these books. She demonstrated the concept of the cover page, turning pages, holding books in the right way. Once the book was held up side down, she turned the book immediately. She was in the library center all by herself while other children were playing cards with Ms. Perez. (Transcript, June 16, 1998)

### *Reading and Writing*

Susanna experienced other difficulties in learning to read and write

in English, specifically in understanding decontextualized language, developing sight words, and expressing herself clearly in writing. She appeared to get lost in class instructions and became absent-minded when confronted with more demanding tasks as presented below:

[Ms. Smith, the kindergarten teacher, was doing guided reading with *A Friend for Minerva Louise*. She was activating children's prior knowledge by asking questions about a hen and a baby stroller on the cover of the book.]

Teacher: What would be the characters in the story based on the picture?

Susanna: [Did not raise her hand. She started to play with her shoe lace and then look at the floor with her head turning left and right.]

Teacher: What's the setting?

Susanna: [Bowing the head, playing with the shoe lace and her fingers] (Transcript, May 15, 2000)

Towards the end of her second year at Head Start, Susanna was able to write her name correctly. In the summer of 2000, Susanna came to the College Summer Reading Program, where she had more writing experiences as indicated in the instructor's teaching log:

When she [Susanna] was told that she could write a story about anything she wanted, Susanna wrote: "I look UP The tooth And The tooth we will have a [ ] tooth t .". The instructor did not understand the writing so asked Susanna to explain her story. Susanna was very shy and refused. She obviously was trying to tell some story, but had difficulty getting her ideas across clearly. Later in the program, Susanna was able to complete several writings.

With the teacher's help in providing most of the words, she was able to complete these stories. She started to recount the birthday party experience for the first time in her writing. Susanna's meaning making in writing largely depended on her experiences. She did not show signs of using literary language in her stories. Literary language refers to phrases such as "once upon a time" or "live happily ever after." These expressions are not commonly found in everyday spoken language (McGee & Richgels, 2000).

Susanna's sight words developed slowly. On an open-ended writing vocabulary assessment (Clay, 1993), Susanna was able to spell 18 words correctly as compared to an average of 30 words for a six-year-old child. The same teacher evaluated her oral reading by using a short passage titled *My Cat* (Durrell & Catterson, 1980). In her journal entry, the teacher summarized the results and observation as follows:

She [Susanna] read monotonously and word by word. She did not even try to pronounce difficult words. She looked at me every time she did not know a word. Her sight vocabulary is low. She didn't even know words such as "in" and "not". Her decoding skills were also low. She needed practice with blends. She was easily distracted and looked up at the other child in the room.

In reading a 20-word passage orally, Susanna appealed for teacher's help on nine words, including white, drinks, sleeps, in, chair, does, not, get, and wet. However, she was able to answer all the comprehension questions correctly.

As the story about Susanna's learning to read and write unfolds, some interesting themes start to emerge. Consistent with Sung's (1987) observation, Susanna's home does not seem to play an important role in helping her to learn English, although home facilitates her concept and language development in her first language. Since the adults are unable to provide meaningful and engaging print related literate activities due to their inability in English and their difficult economic situation, they have to leave their children to public programs such as Head Start. Low-income inner-city children have unequal access to print as compared to

their middle class peers (Neuman & Celano, 2001; Purcell-Gates, 1995). They have to rely on public institutions to equalize the resources. The Head Start and kindergarten programs have played an important role in providing the Chinese girl with a facilitating literate environment where language use is contextualized in rich cultural heritages and traditions.

### **Some Thoughts about Susanna's Progress**

According to Vygotsky (1962), young children's language learning is a social process. Susanna was not able to speak English when she began the Head Start program. She started to experience and communicate with English as a member of the learning community in the Head Start and kindergarten programs. In this learning community, she had ample opportunities to interact with the teachers and peers. These and more capable language users played an important role in helping her develop English proficiency.

To facilitate Susanna's English language use, the teachers in the Head Start and kindergarten programs mainly relied on modeling and encouragement as instructional strategies. The modeling was situated in instructional routines and events. Teachers tended to model language use with the help of gestures and facial expressions, or deliberately stretching the English words and sentences. For example, when Ms. Perez saw Susanna drop her cookie on the floor, she said to her "Pick up your cookie, put it in the garbage, garbage." She also pointed to the garbage can nearby so that Susanna could understand how the particular language was being used in the context. Sometimes, teachers would encourage or invite Susanna to participate in the conversation. When Susanna was working on her artwork, Ms. Perez asked "Did you do big circles?" Susanna nodded. Although Susanna did not respond in words, this kind of invitation may also have facilitated Susanna's language use.

As compared to the teachers' scaffolding, the peer supports for Susanna's development in language use were on the spot and implicit. For instance, Stephanie picked up a peg piece that Susanna dropped, "Here, you left it on the floor." It is through these social interactions that Susanna learned to understand what English language is and how it is used to communicate with people in the real world.



Vygotsky's (1962) notion of the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD) also helped us understand Susanna's progress in oral language development. Susanna was able to accomplish some learning tasks that she could not do without the teachers' assistance. For example, at the initial phase of learning English, Susanna was only able to imitate what the teacher asked her to say. Such imitation might not be appropriate for other students, but it was for Susanna's ZPD. On May 29, 1998, a parent was filming a party celebrating her son David's birthday with a video camera in the Head Start classroom. After Ms. Rosa, an educational assistant, asked another student to say "Happy Birthday to David," she turned to Susanna, "Say, Happy Birthday to David, Susanna." Susanna looked into the camera and said, "Happy Birthday, David." According to Vygotsky (1962), such imitation was particularly important for Susanna because she possessed "the means of stepping from something [she] knows to something new" (p. 103). However, teachers in the programs did not always purposefully and successfully identify Susanna's appropriate ZPDs in other aspects of language learning such as her understanding of decontextualized language, developing sight words, and expressing herself in writing.

### **Understanding Susanna's Needs**

Susanna started to recognize letters, associate letters with sounds, develop a strong interest in books, and make some progress in reading and writing. However, her ability to read and write developed less impressively as compared to her ability to speak and understand English language. Teachers in the Head Start and kindergarten programs faced challenges in assisting Susanna to understand decontextualized language, develop sight words, and express herself in writing.

The discrepancy in Susanna's English language development may be explained by the notions of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Susanna's BICS seemed to develop quickly as she was scaffolded by her peers and teachers. However, it may take Susanna five or seven years to develop her CALP so that she can approach the grade norms for L2 academic skills (Cummins, 1981; Ellis, 1994). In the present study,

Susanna was able to communicate in a situation where a shared reality can be assumed, and a topic is more related to everyday life. However, she was not able to communicate in a situation where shared reality cannot be assumed, and a task is cognitively challenging (Cummins & Swain, 1986).

### **Pedagogical Implications**

We contend that in order to develop Susanna's CALP, teachers and adults need to make "new demands" and stimulate her "intellect with new goals," so that she can "reach the highest stages" (Vygotsky, 1962, pp. 58-59). The appropriate ZPDs for curriculum and instructional routines need to focus on CALP. First, teachers need to provide extra support for developing Susanna's ability to use the decontextualized language. Young children like Susanna need to have more opportunities to talk about things that require more decontextualized language, such as recounting what happened the previous day or retelling a story from a book they read or the teacher shared with them (Dickinson & McCabe, 2001; McGee & Richgels, 2000). Children's frequent exposure to explanatory and narrative talks facilitates their academic performance (Beals, 2001; Fazio, Naremore, & Connell, 1996; Menyuk et al., 1991).

Second, teachers should purposefully and routinely select books to share with the children and engage them in meaningful discussions or instructional activities. On several occasions, Susanna demonstrated a strong interest in books, but it was spotted by an assistant teacher only once accidentally. On that occasion, Susanna got so interested in the book titled *A Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle that she complained about the noise her cousin Andrew and the other boy made, sitting next to her in the library. She was showing the pictures to her cousin and the other boy, but they kept shouting and yelling. She almost gave up the attempt and left the book on the floor when an assistant teacher came and read aloud to the three children. She pointed out the unknown words along the way such as *strawberry*, *watermelon*, and so on and asked the children to sound out the words. Such a meaningful print related book sharing should have happened regularly in class.

Third, purposeful and explicit teaching of reading and writing skills

should be integrated in early literacy programs. Preschool teachers should be aware that reading environmental prints and name recognition are the first steps for a young child to become literate. Preschoolers who are good at reading signs may not be able to read print when the cues are removed. Teachers may infuse the literacy component in preschools with meta-linguistic games and exercises and tasks involving word, syllable, and phoneme manipulation so as to promote phonological awareness (Ehri & Wilce, 1980; Lundberg, Frost, & Petersen, 1988; Majsterek, Shorr, & Erion, 2000; Wagner, Torgesen, & Rashotte, 1994). This kind of training has a facilitating effect on subsequent reading, vocabulary, and spelling development.

Finally, children like Susanna really need extra support to help them to become more proficient readers (Ehri, 1994) because they do not have sufficient exposure to the target language. According to Krashen (1977) and Horvitz (1986), such an exposure is a necessary condition for L2 acquisition. In addition to the purposeful and explicit instruction of reading and writing skills discussed previously, teachers may offer extra help through explaining some special terms (e.g., character, setting, etc.) by using concrete examples, using non-special terms at the beginning (e.g., Who are the people in the story?) and gradually shifting to more abstract terms in the discussion (e.g., Who are the characters in the story?), engaging them in a carefully designed question-and-answer activity around the content of the books, and allowing them to take books home for review and preparation for the next day class. Such practices may expand these students' access to English print and promote their experience with the target language in the programs that may not have bilingual teachers of their home language.

## **Conclusions**

We have learned several things by looking closely at Susanna's experience in becoming literate. First, young children like Susanna from low-income immigrant families whose parents do not speak English will experience difficulties in becoming literate, particularly in acquiring Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, although they may develop Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills quickly with the help of their peers and teachers in Head Start and kindergarten. Second, teachers in

Head Start and kindergarten need to find better ways to help these children to develop their ability to understand and use decontextualized language so that they can catch up to their peers in academic subject areas. Third, public institutions such as Head Start and public schools share important social responsibilities of providing these young children with equal access to print and opportunities that lead to their success in becoming literate (Neuman & Celano, 2001). Young children like Susanna from low-income immigrant families and poor neighborhood have to rely on public institutions such as Head Start, Even Start, and public schools for resources they need. Fourth, in order to address the needs of these children, educators have to collaborate with public schools and community centers to develop effective programs and instructional strategies that incorporate current understanding of early literacy development and challenges that children from low-income immigrant families face (Adler & Fisher, 2001; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Heath, 1983; Majsterek, Shorr, & Erion, 2000; Ortiz, 2001; Yaden et al., 2000).

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