



Early literacy research with children speaking German as an additional language

Evamaria Zettl, M.A.

University of Education Thurgau (Switzerland)

(Evamaria.Zettl@phtg.ch)

Abstract: This paper offers an overview of some current qualitative research and support projects on early literacy with a special focus on children speaking German as an additional language. It also outlines further possible directions for research.

Keywords: Early literacy, qualitative research, kindergartens, children with German as an additional language.

Qualitative studies on Early Literacy

Early literacy is defined in this paper according to Nickel (2007: 87) as children's early experience with books and written language in general before they start reading. It is now recognized as crucial for the development of reading competence and thus for success at school in general. Abilities like understanding literary language, being able to concentrate on a story and forming abstract mental concepts are practised e.g. in picture book reading (Wieler, 2009: 9) or nursery rhyme chanting, and familiarity with books is fostered

Seminal qualitative studies on early literacy in German-speaking countries include Wieler's (1997; 2009) and Künzli/Isler's (2010) contributions. Both studies look at social practices of literacy from a qualitative perspective in order to get a more detailed insight into the process of early literacy learning.

Wieler presents case studies of mothers reading picture books with four-year-olds and finds out how different literacy practices correlate with social environments; an interaction format which leaves space for the child's questions and comments seems to be typical of middle-class families whereas lower-class families tend to read monologically, giving less opportunities for the child to learn (Wieler, 2009: 11). Taking into account the importance of early literacy, especially families with a low level of education should be encouraged to enter into a dialogue with their children.

Künzli, Isler and Lehmann (2010) also observe early literacy as a social practice, focusing not only on picture book reading in families but also on the possible transfer of literacy knowledge from the family to day-care and kindergarten. Using ethnographic methods, they present two contrastive case studies: Jana, nearly six years old, from a Swiss-Ethiopian middle class family "has acquired advanced language and literacy abilities by multifaceted and supportive family literacy practices, but cannot draw on these resources in



her day-care setting because of social exclusion processes” (Künzli, Isler, Lehmann 2010: 60). At home, she is an expert on books and proudly displays her knowledge, but in day-care, she tries in vain to enter into contact with other children with the help of a magazine- she is simply ignored and excluded by children and caregivers alike and her skills aren’t valued. Liridon, an Albanian boy of the same age from a socially underprivileged family who learns German as a second language, is not familiar with literacy practices at home and rarely participates in social interactions at kindergarten (Künzli, Isler, Lehmann, 2010: 60; 68). However, when the educator offers him cultural capital he is familiar with – Liridon draws a picture – he speaks German and finds a prominent role that he is comfortable with.

As a conclusion, Künzli, Isler and Lehmann argue, following Bourdieu, that “socially responsive literacy education needs to be based on the recognition of diverse forms of cultural capital” (Künzli, Isler, Lehmann, 2010: 60). Literacy competence is only indirectly linked to economic, cultural, social capital, but the recognition of this capital by peers, parents and teachers is essential to activate it.

Early Literacy projects for children with German as an additional language

The integration of children in German-speaking countries whose first language is not German remains a crucial social issue, and it is widely recognized that the language and literacy skills they need for being successful at school have to be fostered from early childhood on (Häusermann, Zolliger, 2009: 6). Surprisingly, though, there is little basic research on the process of acquisition of literacy skills of those children apart from the work by Künzli et al. mentioned above.

However, there are many early literacy projects designed to foster the language competence and literacy skills of children with German as an additional language. Unfortunately, they are often not evaluated. For example, Kristin Wardetzky initiated a long-term project called “Erzählzeit” (story-telling time) in Berlin kindergartens, day-care centres and schools. It is not designed exclusively for children with German as a second language, but given the linguistic background of many Berlin children, it takes their needs into account. Professional storytellers regularly perform rhymes and fairy tales from diverse ethnic backgrounds in kindergartens- the tales are told in German, using a poetic, literary style (Kolbe, Wardetzky 2010), thus promoting the literacy skills of young children. This ambitious



project is very popular, but its kindergarten section is still awaiting evaluation for lack of funding, as Ms Wardetzky told me.

Another support project for children with German as an additional language is called “Rucksack” and is widely employed throughout Germany, coordinated by RAA (Regional support for young persons from immigrant families). “Rucksack” specializes in bringing together family literacy and literacy training in kindergartens and in building bridges between kindergartens, day-care centers and immigrant families with little formal education (Bainski, 2010) (In Switzerland, “Schenk mir eine Geschichte” / “Give me a story”, is comparable in many aspects, see Salzmann, 2010).

During nine months, mothers who don’t speak German as a first language attend regular meetings held either by a professional educator who is an immigrant herself or by an immigrant mother who has been trained. They are taught to promote their children’s language competence at home by using picture books and other material in their first languages; at the same time, this material is presented in German in the kindergarten. An evaluation of “Rucksack” by Lütters and Romppel (2009) shows overall positive effects: better integration of parents, more literacy activities in families; however, the children themselves are not interviewed or observed in this evaluation but just parents and educators. Qualitative research could fill this gap and analyze the details of parent-child interaction and the interaction of children and educators.

Desiderata: Qualitative research on Early Literacy and children with German as an additional language

There are many open questions left in the field of early literacy studies, qualitative research and children whose first language is not German. Current programmes often await evaluation- such as Wardetzky’s- or their evaluation neglects the children’s point of view.

To further enhance the success of interventions in the field of early literacy, it is crucial to closely observe the micro-levels of literacy strategies and knowledge. We know too little yet about questions such as: How do peers of different cultural backgrounds and languages interact with picture books in one group? How do the different levels of language proficiency in a multilingual group affect picture book preferences? Which picture books are perceived as funny, thrilling or boring by which children, and why? Are there any strategies of children to support other children who are less linguistically competent, or do children



employ strategies to seek help from peers and adults? Are children who don't understand enough German excluded from a group of listeners, or do other children try to explain things to them or translate for their peers? And if so, could those strategies be used in early literacy trainings? The concept of children's social capital and its recognition which was presented by Künzli and Isler (2010) could possibly be helpful in explaining findings.

It would be worth while to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in a German-speaking kindergarten with a high percentage of children speaking German as a second language and possibly in the children's families. Trying to answer some – if not all – of the questions mentioned above might lead to a better understanding of literacy practices. This may enable the design of even more effective early literacy projects for children who are learning German.

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