



The Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers

&

The Canadian Modern Language Review



Present the:

LINKING SECOND LANGUAGES RESEARCH AND PRACTICE SERIES

In this Issue:

*Family Treasures: A Dual-Language Book Project for Negotiating
Language, Literacy, Culture, and Identity*

Research study by Hetty Roessingh*

*An Examination of supports for English language
learners' negotiation of language, culture, and
identity during early literacy development*

(*) Roessingh, H. (2011). Family treasures: A dual-language book project for negotiating language, literacy, culture, and identity. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 67(1), 123–148.

Reflect — What experiences do I bring to reading the research?

1. How do I affirm my students' identities?
2. How do I select instructional strategies that respond to my English language learners' needs in particular?
3. What role does English language learners' first language play in my classroom?
4. How do I enhance my students' vocabulary development?
5. How do I encourage English language learners' parents to be involved?

What experience does the researcher bring to conducting the research?

Introducing Hetty Roessingh

Hetty Roessingh was a schoolteacher for 29 years and then switched to her current position in the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary where she teaches courses in teaching English as a second language (TESL). Her favourite work has been that of making this Family Treasures/ Grandma's Soup project a success. It has involved hundreds of children, their teachers at different schools, and B.Ed. students in the University of Calgary over the years. Her related research includes tracking youngsters' unfolding language use over time. Early interventions and ongoing/ shifting supports for learning English are the key.

A conversation with Hetty Roessingh, author of *Family Treasures: A Dual-Language Book Project for Negotiating Language, Literacy, Culture, and Identity*

Where did you conduct your research? With whom?

Most of the research was conducted in the Calgary area with partnering schools from various Boards. It involves youngsters/students of all ages, 5 to 18, and their teachers.

What were you trying to find out?

I wanted to learn more about how language unfolds over time for different profiles of learners: ESL and native speakers alike. As children shift to becoming literate around Grade 2 or 3, what does their written output need to look like with each year of educational advancement if they are to succeed with the demands of curriculum and the tasks their teachers set for them? In short, which words? how many? and when? And then, what do teachers need to DO in order to respond to the language learning needs of the increasing numbers of youngsters all across Canada who are coming to school for the first time with little, if any, developed English language proficiency? We must do much, much more than simply putting conversational language “out there” for them. Over time, we have to target our vocabulary instruction carefully/thoughtfully/strategically and then measure and assess whether those little kids are really “getting the words.” The Family Treasures/Grandma’s Soup project was designed to do just that.

How did you gather your information?

I collected samples of children’s language output. For the youngest learners who are pre-literate, I audio recorded them telling me a story from a wordless picture book, Mercer Mayer’s *A boy, a dog and a frog*. This research has been published. Once children can print and write, it becomes a bit easier to collect data. I gathered writing samples over time for each grade, and compared the vocabulary profiles over time. I worked closely with teachers as well, getting their insights about what’s going on. I encouraged them to reflect on their classroom practices, “tweaking” them as necessary to put the instructional focus on language learning in the context of the mainstream classroom if that piece seems to be missing. We have developed some online vocabulary profiling tools that allow for comparing children’s output (oral or written) to a level corpus of children’s words that represent the amount and kinds of vocabulary you would expect a child of a given age to be able to use. Anyone can use these tools: www.lex tutor.ca/vp/kids.

What did you do with the data?

The data were analyzed holistically with a trait-based rubric and then input to the online profiling tool. Then we looked for patterns within the data to tell us whether the vocabulary profile or “footprint” is a good one for the grade level and proficiency level of the child. We provide feedback to teachers to help them adjust their instruction and to think about vocabulary use in their classroom.

How would you summarize what you found?

ESL/ELLs are “coming from behind” and are “forever chasing a moving target.” Their native-speaking counterparts are picking up language and learning so much at home, especially from their mothers over dinner-table conversations, book reading, and so on. It’s a huge challenge for elementary teachers to attempt to close this gap, but we can certainly make gains with these kids (and we MUST). I can’t emphasize strongly enough the need to measure and track language learning/growth over time, and the need to intervene early! Teacher professional development and classroom-based research can really support this.

What practical messages come from this study?

We need to be aware of the role of “talk” in the language learning of ALL children, including many native-speaking youngsters who are not exposed to or who lack opportunities to practice and manipulate new and sophisticated vocabulary.

What next?

1. Which lessons can I take and apply to my practice?
2. How can I verify if/when my practices contribute to vocabulary development?
3. How can I build a stronger partnership with English language learners’ parents?

Additional Research Articles

- Cummins, J. (2007). Rethinking monolingual instructional strategies in multilingual classrooms. *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics, 10*(2), 221–240.

Cummins presents a review of literature to challenge the sole use of the target language in classrooms. He offers a list of bilingual instructional strategies to enhance language development. For example, Cummins suggests a focus on cognates, the use of dual-language books, and class exchanges. He concludes with an example of a Grade 7 student’s co-creation of a bilingual book to meet social sciences and English curricula.

- Ma, J. (2008). Reading the word and the world: How mind and culture are mediated through the use of dual language storybooks. *Education 36*, 237–251.

Ma explored a mother’s use of dual-language books (Chinese–English) with her seven-year-old child through video recording of their reading sessions. The researcher discovered that the reading sessions were of mutual benefit to the mother learning English and the child learning Chinese. He advocates for schools to encourage language of origin maintenance.

- Naqvi, R., Keoma, J., Pfitscher, C., Nordstokke, D., & McKeough, A. (2012). Reading dual language books: Improving early literacy skills in linguistically diverse classrooms. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 11*(1), 3–15.

This research examined the graphophonemic knowledge of 105 kindergarten students from diverse backgrounds. The researchers found that those children who were read dual-language books and spoke their language of origin at home made greater gains than those who only read in English.

- Taylor, L., Bernhard, J., Garg, S., & Cummins, J. (2008). Affirming plural belonging: Building on students’ family-based cultural and linguistic capital through multiliteracies pedagogy. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy, 8*(3), 269–294.

In this study, culturally diverse kindergarten children created books in English with the help of the teacher and parent volunteers. The children then took their books home to have their families provide the corresponding story in their language of origin. The families appreciated their role in the development of their children’s literacy practices and identity formation.