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Developing Heritage Language Literacy: Cracking the code vs reading with understanding

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The primary purpose of any educational institution is to render its 'students' literate – able to read and write. Such ability is embedded in a complex interactive social system and related as much to the elements and members of that system as it is to the individual learner. In his seminal work on *The Foundations of Literacy* Donald Holdaway (1979) revealed how children who developed literacy in English before going to school or very easily in kindergarten had all shared a number of common experiences: they were read to at home; they had been taught to sing and chant and sung many songs and chanted rhymes at home while playing or cleaning or tidying; they had talked with significant caregivers (parents, grandparents, siblings, family members) about many varied experiences to build their vocabulary; they had seen significant caregivers engage with a variety of written forms on a regular basis (such as parents reading the daily newspaper, referring to a recipe book or brochure, consulting a map, opening mail, sending letters); and they had been guided to notice the print in their local environment. In a second or heritage language (HL) milieu the development of literacy is dependent on these same factors; however, they are not all as easily accessible to children, families or communities. This article will review factors that contribute to developing literacy in a HL, including the importance of oral language, and present considerations for beginner HL learners as well as more advanced speakers.

Reading aloud to children at home

Reading aloud to children at home leads to children having favorite stories in the HL. Holdaway (1979) suggests that children have heard between 200-300 stories before they start school and among them are those favourites which they ask caregivers to read over and over again. Bedtime is a popular time for reading by a parent as it provides a way to calm the child before sleep, creates an atmosphere and bond of intimacy between the child and reader, helps the child see the parent as a model of a reader, contributes to increasing the child's attention span, and exposes the child to stories, thus enabling them to acquire a repertoire of stories that will eventually help them to see the structure of beginning-middle-end in stories.

The reading of favourite stories becomes an interaction between reader (parent) and child. At first the reader reads the entire story while the child listens, pointing to parts of the visuals that are told about in the story. Soon the reader only needs to initiate sentences and the child can complete them as they progress through the story page by page. Not long after the child may be able to 'read' some pages on his or her own. And it is not long before parents may see the child reading the story alone, pointing to pictures and mimicking the intonation of the parent. These interactions with stories form the developmental roots of literacy.

Most parents crave the opportunity to read aloud to their children; however, they also face the challenge of finding appropriate stories to read in the HL. Where can they be found? Are there sufficient numbers of stories available to read a different one everyday? Are they affordable? Such questions are ones that the HL community must face collectively. Importing books can be expensive. Finding appropriate books takes time. Sharing books takes organization. Two sources can help you: the public library's multilingual biblioservice and a local community library.

Canada's Multilingual Biblioservice

> The National Library of Canada established the Multilingual Biblioservice in 1973 in response to a perception in the Canadian library community that the demand for books in languages other than English and French was growing. The report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism included a recommendation that Canada's policy on multiculturalism be strengthened. Clearly, the National Library of Canada had a role to play in promoting the multicultural nature of our country. (http://www.lac-bac.gc.ca/multicultural/005007-210-e.html)

This service is available at all libraries in the province upon request. The website also provides guidelines and suggestions for local librarians to follow in creating a collection in a language other than English or French. Be sure to use this service and let others know about it. Also, libraries are looking to create relationships with heritage language communities so elect a member of your HL school board to initiate a discussion with your local librarian about your needs.

Using or creating a local community library

Many HL communities have already established a local collection of books; however, the challenge is making it accessible to the community. If this local library is located in or near the HL school then it might be able to be open for parents during class time. When parents drop their children off or pick them up they can visit the library and take out books. If you are facing a problem in staffing the library consider asking a teenager in your community to volunteer to be there when it is open and to put returned books onto a shelf. Teenagers may use this time as service time for high school credits so the situation is a win-win one for both individuals and the HL school.

If your HL community is newer to Canada and has not yet developed a community library talk to IHLA staff who can direct you to teachers and principals of HL communities that have been here longer and can guide you. All HL communities, having emerged many generations ago, or recently, can benefit from donations of books or for books. "If there is little or nothing to read in a particular culture, literacy development is going to be very difficult if at all possible" (Goodman, 1979, p. 30).

Environmental print

Holdaway (1979) noted that children who read by the age of five were also attuned to print that they encountered around them, such as road signs, grocery labels, fast food signs and television advertisements. They construct knowledge from the inside out through interacting with their environment – they have an experience and then seek ways to make sense of that experience through creating hypotheses about how and why something is the way it is and then talking with others or listening to others to confirm or change their understandings. The decades of research of the 1980's and 1990's confirmed that children often engage in reading environmental print before reading print in books, and at an early age, perhaps as young as two or three. Having developed concepts about print in their environment and about books before they start their formal education, children had formed primitive hypotheses about letters, words, or messages. In turn schooling helped them to confirm or revise those hypotheses and smoothly move into reading. (Marie Clay, 1991, 2000, 2001)

The challenge for HL children in Alberta is that they live in a world dominated by English environmental print and even if they speak and hear the HL they naturally become curious about English environmental print and quickly acquire it. This curiousity is indeed positive in terms of child development and must be nurtured. However, although HL families and communities cannot compete with the amount of English print in the society, they can insure that there is some exposure to the HL in print form. Newsletters from community organizations can be written in the HL or at least bilingually; posters of upcoming community events can appear bilingually and be mounted in local ethnic stores or restaurants; parents can label objects in the home with word cards written in the HL and parents can find websites of songs, rhymes, stories or movie clips to show their children. The more different the HL script is from English (or sometimes called the Latin alphabet) the greater should be the child's exposure to it.

S*eeing people reading the HL*

A child's identity develops toward the HL based on positive role models or agents of influence. The most significant agents of influence are parents and family members. When children see these people reading in the HL and hearing the HL orally, they develop an affinity or connection to the language (and its culture) through these significant loved ones. They become conduits for values toward the HL and culture. Parents cannot expect the teacher in the HL school to teach the HL without the child having any exposure outside of the school; parents and family members have a responsibility to maintain the discipline toward using the HL and modeling reading it. Cable television and the internet provide many opportunities for exposure to the HL in the home that never existed for previous generations.

Seeing a diversity of text forms in the HL

Children who develop early literacy skills in a language are reported to have seen significant caregivers like parents, siblings and other family members reading. They also see many print forms or text types in their environment – from maps, recipes, calendars, cards, newspapers, newsletters, and magazines in the home to billboards, signs, posters, and advertisements on television and outside the home. Again, HL learners have more limited opportunities to see

people interacting with a variety of text types in the HL because they are either not available or not needed for local survival. Thus again, parents must consciously create such opportunities if they wish their child to develop HL competencies. Just as parents might enroll their child, pay fees, drive to and participate in events such as pre-school or swimming to help their child develop, so too must they make the same time and effort to expose the child to contemporary use of the HL; only this time it is not so easy to simply pay for that exposure outside the home. There is no doubt that trips to visit areas where the HL is spoken instill the reality of the language as one of mass communication for the child living in a minority language environment. Further, leaving the child for several weeks with loving and caring relatives who do not speak English can also contribute to HL development without any negative effects on the development of English. Building these multi-generational multi-country relationships, the HL, and relationships in the HL are lifelong gifts for your child.

Developing oral language ability in the HL child

In the research on the development of literacy skills most researchers assume that learners can speak the language that they are learning to read. Oral language competency always precedes literacy in children because learning to decode the HL (or read it aloud so as to demonstrate knowledge of the relationship between the symbols and its corresponding sounds) does not mean that the 'reader' understands what is read aloud. While it can be relatively easy for a learner to crack the written code of languages that have a high grapheme-phoneme correlation (GPC), such as Ukrainian, Russian, Korean or German, the ability to read or develop literacy means both cracking a code or symbol system and understanding what is read.

Cracking the code

The GPC refers to the written symbols that represent the spoken sounds. In the Cyrillic alphabet there is a high GPC, meaning that when the reader sees a certain symbol it will always sound the same. English has the lowest GPC of all languages because it has so many borrowed words (and spellings) from many languages, thus making learning to spell in English a greater challenge than in most languages. Further, there is a natural tendency for learners who already speak and read English to make the sounds of letter combinations as they would in English, and not in the other language. For example, in German "ie" will always sound like a *long e* no matter where that letter combination is located in a word; however, without explicit teaching about GPC, unilingual English speakers will most frequently read it is a *long i* as in *pie* because that is their English eye-ear experience or 'training'. This means that teachers must often provide short discrete lessons in comparative orthography showing young or beginning HL learners how the same symbol can have a different sound in two languages. Some examples of how symbols can have different sounds in different languages follow.

Letter/symbol/ grapheme	Most common sound affiliation (phoneme) in English	Sound or phoneme of the same grapheme in another language
"c"	A "**k**" sound as in "**c**ut", "**c**ute", "**c**oin" or an "**s**" sound as in "ni**c**e", "**c**ent", "pla**c**e"	"**c**" in Italian sounds like "**ch**" as in *cello*
"ent"	"ent" as in "sent", "went", "silent"	"ent" in French is either nasal as in *cent* or silent (not pronounced) as in "ils marchent"
"ei"	A *long e* sound as in "receive" or a *long a* as in weight	"ei" in German always sounds like a *long i* as in English "height"
"s"	"sh" as in "share", "sure" or "pressure"; "s" as in "save"; "z" as in "matches"	"s" in German is pronounced "z" as in "Sie"; in French it is often silent as in "tu as" or "s" as in "satisfait"

Without teaching what researchers once called the sound-symbol relationship and now call the grapheme-phoneme correlation (grapheme means written form and phoneme means the sound) learners will process and decode the second language according to the sounds the grapheme usually makes in their first language, which in the Alberta context is usually English. Thus, learners will impose the English GPC on the new language. E.g. a French sentence such as "*Elles marchent dans la rue."* will initially be read aloud as follows: "*El less march ent danz la roo*." when it should be read aloud closer to "El marsh d*an* la roo". Introducing the print form of a language before learners have a firm oral base or without the comparative GPC can result in either poor anglicized pronunciation in the new language or reading with appropriate sounds but possibly without attached meaning.

<u>Speaking should precede reading</u>

In any natural or authentic language community children learn to speak before they learn to read. Oral language or speaking serves as the foundation for learning to decode and once the code is cracked meaning accompanies it. However, if the child cannot speak the HL or has only a very limited knowledge of it/exposure to it, then there may be benefits to broadening the child's oral language base before teaching 'reading' or 'decoding'. Such broadening of the oral language base requires teachers to understand how to teach oral language skills and the importance of learner memory in that process.

Teaching oral language in a HL school setting demands a wide range of teaching skills. HL instructors must be able to identify and teach language such as in the following ways:

- commonly used or high frequency phrases and contexts in which they are used;
- formulaic expressions that learners will need to be able to ask for help (such as the HL equivalents of *Please repeat. I do not understand. Please speak more slowly. I don't know.*);
- formulaic sequences of phrases that commonly go in tandem (such as *Hi. How are you?* <u>Fine thanks. And you?</u> *Great.)* (Wood, 2006)

- nursery rhymes, chants or songs (with actions) with built in mnemonic or memory devices
- simple pattern stories that children can understand, remember and play with to create their own variations of the pattern stories
- a collection of visuals that represent basic vocabulary and can be used for review in class and at home
- a collection of gestures that connect to the same basic vocabulary and visuals and can be used to reinforce memory outside of the classroom

Teachers must also understand that learning and memory are generally improved by ***repetition*** for learners; however, not all repetitions are equally beneficial. The effectiveness of repetitions depends in part on their distribution in time. Learners need both to learn HL vocabulary and phrases through frequent exposure or repetition through a variety of activities (games, songs, stories) and through regular and repeated exposure over time. Put another way, teaching something over a short time period and then never revisiting or recycling that content is less likely to lead to learner retention. Repetition that takes place on a regular basis is known as distributed practice (Underwood, 1961). Distributed practice (DP) means interrupting practice or study time with rest intervals of up to 24 hours or longer. For example, if a person has one hour of time for practice or review, that hour might better be spent as three 20-minute study periods on each of three consecutive days than on one day for one hour. (Bloom & Shuell, 1981)

Since "distributed practice and increased student involvement can considerably expand the amount of remembered material" (Sildus, 2006, p.67), teachers need to provide students with an abundance of varied and engaging tasks through which they can use, re-use and continue to apply what they know on a frequent and regular basis.

Expanding vocabulary

Reading is also a major vehicle for second language vocabulary development (Bamford & Day, 2004; Day, 1998; Day, 1993) and like the development of any other skill, can be taught in a scaffolded way for learners. It is said that when a reader cannot understand five words on a page s/he will abandon the reading of a text. Thus to entice learners to read and develop the habit of reading in the new language it is necessary to find or create texts that have few words on a page, few new words among them and ample contextual cues (e.g. visuals) to decipher what may be new, and simultaneously provide interesting and somewhat familiar information to learners. For beginning readers it is often very motivating to discover that they can understand a text whether or not it provides "new" information to them; after establishing confidence in reading in the new language, the content of reading becomes more important to them.

Some commercially created graded readers can meet the needs of strong beginner or intermediate level language learners since such books often begin with a minimal vocabulary of

500-600 words[1], but for beginners or less confident new language learners, teachers may have to create texts of interest. A teacher- or class- made newspaper may be a format to meet the needs of a range of beginner level readers (differentiation) and create opportunities for student written production as well. Ideally a newspaper could be created monthly, and distributed by hand or online; it might capture events in the class or school (present or upcoming) and attract a variety of readers with pictures, captions, titles and a variety of text types (or forms). Each section of the newspaper can also feature an icon that indicates the language level of the section (e.g. a one "book" icon indicates the easiest text; a two-book icon is more difficult and a three-book icon the most difficult). As in any local newspaper, each component is self-contained so that a student can select any text and read it in its entirety without having to have read any previous or following components or pages.

Examples of junior and senior high level newspapers in French, German, Italian, Punjabi, Spanish, and Ukrainian can be found on my website. http://www2.education.ualberta.ca/staff/olenka.bilash/Best%20of%20Bilash/LiteracyDevelopment2.html They have been prepared by 4th year second language education students as examplars of what students might read in a teacher-created newspaper. Since teachers play an important role as language models in both oral and written language, it is highly recommended that they create several models of newspapers for students to read and that students have experiences reading such models for several months before they are asked to create or co-create such a project. This will also sensitize the teacher to the demands of creating such a project, learning how much time it takes to create, which skills are required, and which copyright issues must be considered. Notice how each newspaper on this website:

- integrates a variety of text types (written forms)
- includes a range of visual support
- contains components for a range of language and literacy levels (differentiation)
- covers contemporary topics

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[1] In ESL samples of such graded readers can be found at: http://www.penguinreaders.com/ or http://www.pearson.ch/LanguageTeaching/PenguinGradedReaders/ or http://www.oup.com/elt/global/products/bookwormsleveltest/ .

In French see: http://www.europeanbookshop.com/languagebooks/subject/FRE/m4

http://french.about. com/od/reading/tp/begreaders.htm

In many other languages see: https://www.eurobooks.co.uk/packs

- creates space for local school and community events.

Please feel free to adapt these for use in your own classrooms. See tips for scaffolding the development of independence in student creation of a newspaper in Appendix A. We are also happy to share your teacher-created newspapers with others (and your proposed corrections on the website), if desired.

Reading for different purposes or modes

Once children know how to read in the HL (or crack the code of GPC) they want to read to learn. They want to read for pleasure. Louise Rosenblatt (1978) argues that reading is an interactive process between a text and a reader and differentiates two separate modes in the experience of reading: the efferent and the aesthetic. When reading in the efferent mode the reader identifies and collects information from the text. The reader must also identify data in the text and create a referential structure in order to internalize and retain that information as knowledge. When responding from efferent mode, readers want to understand what the text is saying. Answering comprehension or **display questions**[2] is designed to engage the efferent mode.

In the aesthetic mode readers engage with the story and decide if they like it or not by allowing their memories, experiences and emotions to guide them through the text. The reader contemplates the totality of the text and attempts to understand the experience recounted in the text. When readers are responding in the aesthetic mode or stance, their own unique lived-through experience or engagement with a text is primary. **Referential questions**[3] about one's feelings or thoughts during the reading of a text calls the reader to embrace an aesthetic stance.

Generally speaking, HL teachers tend to emphasize efferent reading in reading tasks, frequently asking the reader to look up the meaning of new words in a dictionary during a reading and asking comprehension questions about the text. This leaves readers with the impression that reading in a HL or learning a HL is hard work and no fun. Using tasks that require aesthetic reading may counter balance this impression and thus increase student engagement. For example, offer students a text that is quick for them to read (i.e. a text with little to no new vocabulary) either for pleasure or with a simple oral or written follow up such as asking them to write one or two sentences about their opinion of the contents of the text.

Reading is both a habit and an ability; the habit of reading and ability to read are both developed by reading. In a HL program, teachers need to help learners find texts that call forth aesthetic reading. Just giving them time to read for pleasure – to read texts at *and not above* their language level – will promote the habit of reading in the HL. A teacher's job is to provide such

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[2] A display question is one to which the asker already knows the answer. E.g. What is this (pointing at a table)? Most comprehension questions that follow a written text consist of display questions. E.g. Who wrote the story? Who is the main character? What di the main character do? Where did the story take place?

[3] A referential question is one to which the asker does not know the answer. E.g. How are you feeling?

texts; if they are not commercially available at the language level of the learners then perhaps teachers or community members must gather to write them. Parents, grandparents and even great grandparents can be asked to write stories of coming to Canada, making Canada home or inviting relatives from other countries to visit. Children can also write about their lives, their pets, their hobbies, their vacations, or their experience learning or using the HL in Canada.

Closing

As your school year comes to a close you may wish to use your creativity to compose stories or newspapers for your students for next year or to organize a special summer writing camp so that older and more able HL speakers can write their stories or interview family members to share their experiences in written form. OR as you are travelling, think about book purchases that could enhance your school's library. Once your students have cracked the HL code, continue to nurture their appetite for reading with good stories at the appropriate level.

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Appendix A: Scaffolding toward student creation or involvement in the creation of a class newspaper:

1. Make your first edition a teacher generated one.

2. Write several articles on various topics that would be of interest to your students. Be sure that they represent a variety of language and literacy levels and **text types**.

    a. Some examples of topics and text types include: current events in your area, comics, sports, classroom activities (eg. a field trip, or special class event), word puzzles, crossword puzzles, word search, horoscopes, picture captions, cultural events, features on countries or cultures, recipes, fashion commentary, advertisements, movie reviews, book reviews, etc.

2. Choose clear pictures to accompany each article or component

3. Keep words to a minimum and repeat key words as often as possible (instead of using pronouns).

4. Bold or italicize new vocabulary.

5. Use an icon to indicate the relative difficulty of the passage (e.g. one book or star for a simple text, two for a more difficult one and three for the most difficult text.) Remember that there should be more level 1 and 2 texts than level 3 texts because level 3 language students can actually read all of the parts of the newspaper while level one students are more restricted.

6. Authenticity is the key! Try and make the work look as much like a real newspaper as possible with a catchy title, formatting in outlined textboxes, headlines, bylines, dates etc. You may also consider printing your final product on double sided 11"x17" paper and folding it in half, so it even looks like a newspaper (instead of printing it in book form with staples down the side or in the corner).

7. Hand out to students for their reading pleasure. Avoid testing or even comprehension questions associated with the newspaper. It is designed to increase opportunities for students to engage in aesthetic reading (without having to use the dictionary).

Once you have completed and circulated one to three class newspapers invite students to co-produce a few issues by taking responsibility for a few components only, perhaps the writing of an opinion article, poem, or story or finding a HL comic on line or making a puzzle. Eventually they may be asked to compose a complete newspaper in groups. See Figure 2 below. NOTE: the biggest mistake teachers make is giving students the responsibility to create a newspaper without having the experience of reading appropriate models of class newspapers. This lack of preparation can lead to products that are weaker in quality than they need be.

Save students' work so that you can edit and adapt, thus increasing the number of model issues in the next year! Most students are flattered to know that their work can be read by others.