

Faculty of Literature and Humanities

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M.A. Thesis

Title of the Thesis

**EFL Home Literacy Practices of Iranian Middle
School Students: An Ethnography**

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Dedication

To my parents, whose prayers has been a miracle to me,
to my wife, whose support at home made this possible ,
and to my daughter whose smiles recharged me to go ahead.

Abstract

Based on a socio-cultural approach to literacy and three perspectives "*cultural meditational model of literacy*"(McCarthy, 2000), "*scaffolding*" (Bruner, 1986) and "*literacy practices*" (Baynham, 1995; Barton &Hamilton, 1998 and Street, 1995), this qualitative ethnographic enquiry provides a description and analysis of five middle school Iranian students' home literacy practices in EFL. The purpose of this study was to explore different beliefs and literacy practices of students, their parents as well as their EFL teachers. Also, the aim was to investigate the effects of EFL home literacy beliefs and practices on school discourses. The main argument is that why despite receiving equal schooling instructions, some students lag behind in class discourses whereas some other students represent themselves better and get socialized in EFL sooner.

The findings have revealed that some learners bring with them more resources to school from home depending on their social class which includes parental educational background, parent-child interactions, shared family activities, socio-cultural conditions and economical status. By using an ethnographic methodology, it is revealed that the existence of some resources for upper class students reinforce school discourses and learning, while lack of the same resources for underprivileged students brings about home and school disconnection and challenges in (EFL) learning and socialization. The study has also revealed a high emphasis on learning EFL among middle class families. As the data were analyzed, four themes emerged: (a) home literacy practices in EFL and shared book reading at home, (b) home school connections, (c) the impact of media on EFL literacy, and (d) home and school EFL literacy and project based instruction. Implications for parents, teachers and policy makers as well as some suggestions are provided.

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Chapter one

Introduction

1. 1. Introduction

Universal literacy and education for all have for a long time been intimately connected with human basic rights. In plans aimed at development of countries, both first language literacy and second language literacy (bi-literacy) have often been two important parts. A number of research done earlier reported by Street (1993); Barton & Hamilton (2001) on literacy attainment and evaluations have usually taken an individual- oriented, psycholinguistic and cognitive perspective, and research on literacy in formal educational contexts, some thirty years ago and earlier, were predominantly quantitative, focusing on presenting data such as enrolment rates, test results, number of drop-outs and rates on frequency of reading and writing among subjects.

This trend, however, has changed due to the emergence of some renewed philosophical and pedagogical orientations as well as changes in needs across the world. Also, the logic for the new trend lies in giving more voice and dominance to families and out of school contexts (e.g., Heath (1983); Morrow (1989); Paratore (2001) & Purcell-Gates (2000).

This study takes another perspective, and focuses on literacy as a multi-layered, socio-cultural phenomenon that is created by, and exists in, interaction. This view of literacy has mainly been developed with an ethnographical research framework and methodology to complement the traditional, cognitive, individualistic approaches prominent in many educational settings. Issues such as home-school connection, parental partnership at school and the characteristics of the dialogic interactions between significant people and children at home and school regarding EFL literacy are the things that have remained rather intact in research. This study has been carried out in a public middle school in Kermanshah, Iran and focuses on EFL home literacy of five middle school students, the roles and views of their parents as well as perspectives of their teachers about the influence of home literacy practices on students' performance and their projects, and the connections with school discourses. In this introductory chapter the theoretical bases and the objectives are given. Also, this brief

covers research problem, research questions, and primary assumptions, motivation of the study as well as definition of key terms and the organization of the thesis.

1.2. Theoretical Perspectives

The perspectives synthesized in this study originate in a range of studies and research disciplines. The framework used draws from *three perspectives*. The *first perspective* informing this study is drawn from cultural psychology which offers a "Cultural Mediational Model of Literacy" (McCarthy, 2000). Based on this perspective adults' efforts will be more successful if they maintain a social and ethno-cultural relationship with children. Siblings as "important others" (Gregory, 2001, p.251) within this perspective will bridge gaps between home and school experiences as well as past and future events for younger siblings.

The *second perspective* draws upon the concept of "scaffolding" (Bruner, 1986) from the childhood early literacy. The concept describes how adults (here in my studies parents and siblings for the middle class students) provide a scaffold to assist the young EFL learners. Similar to this is the notion of "zone of proximal development (ZPD) about children learning process promoted by Vygotsky (1978). The second perspective is also in line with Lave and Wenger (1999)'s theory of Legitimate Peripheral Participation" (LPP) of EFL learners in different schooling discourses. The third and the most important perspective for this study comes from what is known as New Literacy Studies. Based on this, literacy is not single and autonomous: rather there are "literacies or "literacy practices" (Baynham, 1995; Barton & Hamilton, 1998 and Street, 1995) which vary from one context to the other.

1.3. Statement of the problem

Literacy practices differ noticeably from family to family (Cairney & Ruge, 1998), as well as within families. Although there are similarities in the EFL literacy practices of different families in relation to the requirements of formal schooling such as homework (common among families), there is also great variation in the purposes for which literacy is used, the way children's literacy is supported, the demonstrations of literacy observed, attitudes toward literacy, the role that family members play in children's EFL literacy learning, the amount of time spent, and the value placed on literacy learning. Based on a socio-cultural

approach to literacy, this qualitative ethnographic study provides a description and analysis of five Iranian students' home literacy practices in EFL. The aim is to understand families' beliefs about literacy and their actual literacy practices considering that these practices vary mainly due to the EFL learners' age, cultural differences, parents' education, family economy, children and parents' language competence and so on.

The fact is that attitudes towards and trends in schooling and home literacy in EFL have not been thoroughly scrutinized by research despite the remarkable impact on literacy development programs and policies of these attitudes and trends.

Within this particular study, I will argue that the nationwide literacy practices of schools will be deficient in practice without considering the major roles of home (family members) as significant literacy mediators, (in parallel with the school discourses for language literacy developments). The question that has been a motive for me to initiate this project is why some English language learners have trouble understanding the EFL discourses and syllabi despite receiving equal instruction at school. In other words, why are some EFL learners struggling too much to enter the required school discourses while other learners have less difficulty?

My initial claim is that some learners bring more resources and possibilities with them into the required discourses of the school curriculum in general and EFL in particular. The answer, I believe, lies in exploring home literacy practices as well as the roles that families play in helping EFL learners to deal with school requirements. In order to unpack the issue thoroughly, four main themes were decided upon to be analyzed: a) home literacy practices in EFL and shared book reading, b) home literacy and project based instruction, c) home and school connections, and d) the impact of media on EFL literacy development. However, the space will be open for the emergence of more themes as the issues are unpacked and more and more ideas are teased out.

1.4. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is threefold; the first purpose of conducting this study is to understand different attitudes and experiences that make up learners' EFL literacy practices at home, and the impact these have on EFL practices at school. The second aim is to explore the effects of home literacy practices on schooling in learning EFL from an

often-silent voice, EFL teachers' perspectives. Little research has been conducted reflecting the ideas, practices and concerns of teachers as one of the cornerstones of education regarding EFL literacy. My third objective is to highlight families' beliefs and practices, and the roles they play in supporting their children with EFL curriculum. The implications of this investigation for schooling success are to be outlined as well.

1.5. Research Questions

This study investigates the home literacy practices of EFL middle school Iranian students. It seeks, additionally, to consider the beliefs, perspectives and practices of parents and EFL teachers regarding the first issue. The findings are bound with theories of literacy as a set of "social practices" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), "Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)" (Vygotsky, 1978) and "scaffolding" (Bruner, 1986). To back up the claims and assumptions and in order to move in the right direction, the following questions were used as the guides for the research.

1. What do the home literacy practices of the study participants look like?
2. What are the parental beliefs about literacy? How do parents' beliefs and practices influence their children's school literacy in EFL?
3. What are the attitudes of students as focal participants about EFL home literacy practices? And how do they express the effects on schooling practices?
4. How do EFL teachers perceive the impacts of home literacy practices on schooling?
5. How do the participants, their parents as well as their teachers perceive and interpret the roles of media in EFL literacy practices?

1.6. Basic Assumptions

There are certain assumptions that any researcher makes prior to beginning an investigation. These include assumptions about the research setting, how research shall be conducted, what might be found, in addition to how participants might respond. My conjectures as the conductor of this study, however, revolved around some preliminary expectations I hoped to attain by the end of the inquiry. The followings are the assumptions made prior to the beginning of the study:

- ❖ Some EFL learners bring with them some resources which finally help the teacher and the classes come up with a shared understanding about the course.
- ❖ The strategies, approaches and methods the EFL teachers employ in EFL classes are of paramount significance in socializing the learners into the second language.
- ❖ Gee (1999) puts that lower (working) class children are perceived as less responsive to teachers' questions in classrooms than middle class children, but at home they reveal themselves to be very apt communicators. My assumption is in sharp contrast with what Gee (1999) has put, that is, since home does not reinforce working class EFL learners, they most often lag behind in schooling discourses. Having said that, the target society for the research by Gee is ESL learners while the society under study within my project are all EFL students.
- ❖ Many school curricula in EFL school literacy in the target society of my study put an emphasis on sentence level grammar and fail discourse-based understanding.
- ❖ Since literacy is no longer a cognitive, personal concept but a socially constructed phenomenon, the success of any endeavor, however, can be affected by a number of factors outside as well as inside the classroom. So let's presuppose in advance that school has failed to answer all the challenges of contemporary life.
- ❖ For underprivileged, suburban, working class learners, schooling still seems to be very dominant whereas for middle-class students with educated families the position of school has downgraded as far as EFL is concerned.

Let me remind the readers of this study of an important point; that is, we never claim and/or believe that poor performance of some students in EFL and their disconnections with home and school discourses are the direct effects of poor home literacy practices, nor do we presuppose that whatever good the other students do is the result of desired home literacy and strong links between home and school. However, to move on the safe side of the debates, it should be ascertained that schooling success and high performance in EFL depend to a wide range of factors and parameters such as personality factors, socio-cultural conditions, and institutional variables, just to mention a few.

1.7. Delimitations of the Study

This is a qualitative ethnography of a small group of middle school students (N=5), their parents (N= 4 couples) as well as of their EFL teachers (N=2). Choosing a small number of

students and parents participants is not a limitation by itself, but to tell the truth, I sent consent letters to 12 families and within a few days just five families volunteered to take part in the study. This, I think was the first limitation of the study.

Another limitation stems from the number of available EFL teachers in the particular school district where research was conducted. There were teachers in other urban or suburban schools volunteered to participate, but the aim was to choose teachers from schools with more diverse students.

1.8. Significance of the study

This study contributes to the field of foreign language education (FLED) by examining an underrepresented group's (middle school learners), EFL home literacy development, as understood through an often-silent voice (teachers' perspectives), learners as well as parents.

First, unlike ESL contexts which have been studied by many scholars (Cairney, 1991; Kantor, & Klein, 1988; Green, Kantor, & Rogers, 1991 cited in Cairney 2000), EFL literacy contexts still need to be scrutinized and there are some unscratched areas requiring more digging and touching. Home literacy for EFL in the local context I have chosen, is totally different from the ones that have been studied in the literature review. Having said that middle school EFL learners are different from other groups due to a number of reasons; they are in a distinctive position in their academic career, in their physical, psychological, and cognitive development, and in the language-learning continuum.

They need to be considered as a particular group of learners with specific characteristics who merit attention. Also, there is a big difference between the middle school learners in Iran and those in many other mainstream or even other peripheral countries; that is, children from many mainstream or non-peripheral countries start learning and acquiring a second language from almost elementary school, whereas in Iran the EFL education with a few exceptions begins by the age students start junior high school.

Second, the study serves to bridge school and home literacy gaps in EFL. If schools are to create helpful connection with families in our society, it is important for educators and other authorities to understand children's literacy practices as they occur naturally in the home setting. **Third**, due to the nature of EFL learning and teaching in Iran

and the very little amount of exposure to English speaking contexts, investigating the roles that are being given to home EFL literacy practices is of significance for learners and teachers as well as researchers working in the field.

1.9. Motivations of the Study

The motivations for this study are rooted in both personal and professional experiences. As an EFL practitioner, I have become deeply engaged in ways to help my students become bi-literate as well as bilingual. Research and writings by Bialystok and Hakuta (2001), Dunn (1998), and Myles (2003) cited in Barton (1998) inspired me to create opportunities for my students to use their bilingual skills because of the cognitive and social benefits of learning and knowing a second language. Their bi-literacy development became an important concern as I recalled Dunn's (1998) comment: "Keeping a foreign language alive appears to be linked to the ability to read" (p. 187).

How would we (teachers and parents) help our children become literate in English? How would we help them learn to write, read, listen, speak and think in EFL? I personally believe that language learning goes beyond its narrow and discrete components (e.g., knowing vocabulary or learning grammatical points) but we ought to include broad and interconnected goals (e.g., using language for communication).

The parenting act of reading stories to school students as well as to my own child led to an adjustment in my own perception of how EFL literacy can be situated in home setting as in school context. As an EFL instructor, I have realized that our present pedagogy does not provide this perspective that is, "bringing in home and EFL together". In many ways, our EFL students are quite similar to our children acquiring their mother tongue. They are trying to master the EFL's oral and written systems: how to read and write in the other language, and how to create personal and public meaning through their oral and written production in English.

Having been alert to Persian literacy and English, a question has boggled my mind. That is, what we as parents and teachers can do to help our children in their journey toward bi-literacy. My conjecture is that becoming conscious of and exploring home and school EFL practices can help us see the roles given to each person in this process.

1.10. Definitions of key terms

Literacy: traditionally, generic skills mainly reading and writing and knowledge that can be transferred from one context to another. But in the new perspective it is a complex set of social practices. So it is a multidimensional phenomenon.

Family literacy programs: programs that provide parents with the knowledge, skills, and strategies they need to support children's early language and literacy development to ensure success in school.

Schooling literacy: According to Masny (2001) cited in Wikipedia, schooling literacy refers to the process of interpretation and communication in reading the world and self in the context of school. Cook (2006) divides the history and changes of schooling into four phases based on a decade to decade progression in ideas and notions; 1) the 1960s, schooling was solely linguistic, disempowering minorities, 2) the 1970s, attention moved away from sentence –level to language use. Sociolinguistic aspects were highlighted, 3) The 1980s, classroom communication was seen as a discourse process and 4) The 1990s and beyond: discourse, ideology and communicative practice were replaced. He later ascertained that "as in sociological research on the transmission of knowledge, critical-discourse analysis began to deal with factors of power, economic resources, and occupational and class division in the broader society" (Fairclough, 1996& Blommaert, 2005) and language was considered as a "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1977, p.73).

EFL contexts: contexts in which learners are not exposed to authentic English language.

School discourses: a particular discourse among school staff, parents and learners.

Curriculum: the aims, content, methodology and evaluation procedures of a subject in the school system.

Social class (middle class and working class in this study): it is a comprehensive label for a variety of complex components including "parental education, occupational status, and income, housing conditions, time allocation to children at home for practice, attitudes toward school and schooling, experiences with school, expectations for future educational and occupational success and the nature of the family's social network. As Goodman and Hemphill (1991) argued social class refers to the "style of parent-child interaction" (pp. 3-4).

By labeling three of the students as middle class and the two others as underprivileged, working class all the mentioned factors are at work. Parental education and family economy are two crucial aspects but they are never adequate to define social class.

1.11. Organization of the thesis

This introductory chapter has provided the background to EFL home literacy practices of Middle school Iranian students in Kermanshah, and aims at giving a synopsis of objectives, significance, motivation, assumptions as well as the research questions of the thesis. The organization of the upcoming chapters is provided as follows:

Chapter 2 provides a theoretical and empirical framework for the study by reviewing current literature on home literacy practices in EFL/ESL and home–school connections and family literacy programs. Some important concepts such as EFL/ESL literacy, middle school learners, and ESL/EFL acquisition will be reviewed as well.

Chapter 3 explains the conceptual framework, qualitative enquiry as the approach chosen for the study, ethnography as the methodology, in addition to methods that have been used for conducting the research and analyzing the data. It also describes the study sites and participants, the selection of data for analysis, and the methods of interview analysis.

Chapters 4 and 5 present the results of the enquiry based on the emergence of themes and research questions, and provide discussion of the themes and the issues raised in the questions. Chapter 4 reports results of interview analysis, questionnaires, and the journals of EFL learners' activities. It gives some insights into the views of EFL teachers, parents and students, and their views on the importance of home literacy practices. Chapter 5 discusses the results of the study based on the proposed questions and emerged themes. Each theme will be interpreted according to the analysis of the ideas and practices in chapter 4.

Chapter 6 summarizes the research findings, draws conclusions from those findings, and indicates some of the implications of the findings. Suggestions for further research in this field are considered.

Chapter two

Review of Literature