

Learning to Read in a Second Language: Parent Involvement still Counts

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For children learning to read in their first language, parental involvement has an important role in the development of language and literacy. Informal experiences such as shared book reading are related to the development of children's vocabulary and listening comprehension skills. These language skills predict reading skills once children have learned the mechanics of reading and become independent readers. In contrast, formal experiences such as parents teaching their children about reading and printing words are related to reading development when children are learning how to decode words (Sénéchal & LeFevre, in press). In the present research, we applied this model of parental involvement to children who are learning to read in a second language. We will discuss data from a longitudinal study of children (n=87) in Early French Immersion. First, does the model developed for the role of parental involvement for children learning to read in their first language apply to children learning to read in a second language? Second, is there evidence of cross-language transfer of skills? We found that the model held for the children's English skills and thus replicated our previous work. The model also held for French, although the formal and informal home experiences in French were more closely related than in English. Further, there was considerable evidence for cross-language transfer of emergent literacy skills. Even after controlling for home experiences and a variety of other factors, French emergent literacy skills predicted English emergent literacy, and vice-versa. Several aspects of these results are important. First, for languages like French and English that are quite similar, there may be considerable cross-language transfer of knowledge. Second, to the extent that parents were able or willing to provide French some experiences at home, these experiences were related to their children's acquisition of French skills.