

Bridging Home and School Languages: Siblings, Communities and Teachers

*Eve Gregory, Goldsmiths College, University of London, UK
eds01eg@gold.ac.uk*

Abstract

"When I receive official letters, like those from the Council, I have to take them to the school because I can't read them. I want my boy to be free of all that" (Shabbir's father, originally from Bangladesh, now living in Spitalfields, East London).

Over the past three decades numerous studies from the English speaking world have pointed to the advantages for young children of family involvement in their literacy development. However, their emphasis has always been firmly and almost exclusively upon parents working with children in specific ways and often using particular school-sanctioned materials. Paradoxically, the argument in favour of parental involvement in children's literacy development has been particularly powerful where parents own confidence in reading in English might be low because they came to Britain as immigrants. How can parents, who cannot speak or write English, begin to help their children with their school learning? Are they to remain powerless or might there be other resources upon which they and their children might be able to draw? If so, what might schools and teachers learn from these? Although the paper presented relates to one linguistic minority group living in London, Britain, I believe that the findings are highly relevant for teachers working with linguistic minority groups across other continents and particularly teachers working in Latin America today.

The paper presented here investigates first the nature of multilingual learning outside school as a resource in the lives of a group of five year old Bangladeshi British children living in East London. It then presents a portrait of a group of expert 'teachers' of English in the lives of these emergent bilingual children - their brothers and sisters. Finally, it suggests ways in which teachers might build upon young children's multilingual learning outside school in their classroom programmes.

Setting and Participants

The families in this study lived in the East London neighbourhoods of Spitalfields in Tower Hamlets in East London, an economically disadvantaged area abutting the wealth of the City of London which lies directly to the west.

The district of Spitalfields has a long tradition of receiving immigrants; the Huguenots during the 18th century, followed by Jews from Eastern Europe during the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Today, their place has been taken by families from Bangladesh and the streets in the area reflect their Muslim culture and religion. The families come almost entirely from the Sylhet region of Bangladesh. They speak Sylheti, a distinctive dialect of Bengali, with no written form. Although the parents of some young families were born and educated in London, there are still many older men whose younger wives have joined their husbands during the last ten years and these families still remain isolated from the English language and culture. The rate of unemployment is high. For those unemployed or working in local restaurants, there is little necessity to learn English. Life revolves around the mosque, neighbours and shops, many of which sell a variety of newspapers and books in Bengali. All these families uphold traditional values; the children spend long hours at both Qur'anic and Bengali classes and often watch videos in Hindi with their families.

The school was founded in 1901, a huge three storey building and a monument to the vast increase in education in the late Victorian period. Ninety-nine percent of the pupils in the school are of Bangladeshi origin. Nevertheless, the generation at Primary school had all been born in Britain and spoke, worked and played in English amongst themselves. These children embark on literacy learning in English and, at the same time, begin their Qur'anic learning in classical Arabic and their Bengali lessons in standard Bengali. Add to this their Sylheti (mother-tongue), the children are becoming literate in three different languages, each with a different script (English, Bengali and classical Arabic) and developing their spoken language or oral reading in four (Sylheti, Bengali, English and classical Arabic for their oral reading).

Fourteen families participated in this work which was part of a much larger study taking place over ten years and still continuing today¹. The first part of the study presents findings from the language and literacy lives of six young children¹. The second part relates to work with siblings. Each of these families had a child aged nine, ten or eleven with at least one younger sibling. Many children had more than one younger sibling. This meant that forty-six children in total participated in some way in the project. However, taped data was collected only from interactions between an older sibling and a younger child already attending nursery or Primary school.

All the families lived in relatively cramped accommodation or accommodation where children could not play out in the street. Some lived

in tower blocks and children could go out only when accompanied by older family members. However, the strength of religious and community language classes: the Bangladeshi Londoners spent between ten and twelve hours per week outside the home at Bengali and Qur'anic classes where they learned together without the company of their parents. Younger children generally went to these classes with other children or older siblings, thereby gaining independence from their parents.

Methodology and Analysis

This project formed part of a much larger longitudinal study investigating the home and school literacies and literacy histories of Bangladeshi and Anglo Londoners living in the borough of Tower Hamlets in London's East End (Gregory 1996, Gregory and Williams 2000, Williams 2004). Aims of this part of the project were:

i) to provide an account of the scope, range and nature of literacy activities taking place between young children and older siblings in 2 neighbouring communities.

ii) to contrast the nature of literacy practices taking place in the siblings' lives at home, in the community and in school.

iii) to question and compare when and in what ways children are able to transfer teaching and learning strategies from home to classroom and vice versa.

iv) to inform future policy on home/school and family literacy programmes

iv) to use the explanatory powers of both ethnography and ethnomethodology

The method of multi-layering through a combination of ethnographic and ethnomethodological research approaches was used (Gregory 2001). This took advantage of a minute-by-minute analysis of interaction between individuals through conversation analysis coupled with the longitudinal participant observation, interviews etc. of ethnography. The data set, therefore, comprised:

i) weekly classroom observations in the classes. Both older and younger siblings were observed and field-notes written up. In addition, the Bangladeshi London children were observed in their community language classes; one school literacy hour session which was audio-taped for each child in the project. This gave a total of 11 sessions which were transcribed and analysed; semi-structured interviews with the older siblings in the early stages of the project and at the end of the project. Group discussions with the researchers were also held regularly during the year the younger siblings

at the end of the project one caregiver for each child. The interviews were carried out in the homes or in the mainstream school, were audiotaped and transcribed both head teachers and mainstream teachers. Community class teachers and a Qur'anic class teacher were also interviewed;

ii) home literacy activities recorded by siblings playing together e.g. the children were asked to record themselves playing a game that involved any type of literacy; literacy diaries in which the older siblings recorded their family literacy activities during one term.

The combination of both research approaches proved insightful, particularly in analysing and representing the syncretism taking place as children blended home, school and community learning strategies. Ethnographic methods provided an overview of the scope and range of home and school literacy practices as well as the views of teachers, parents and siblings themselves, highlighting the prolepsis (Gregory, Long and Volk 2004) occurring across generations; ethnomethodology enabled a detailed analysis of teaching and learning strategies used across and between dyads. These strategies are presented in the section following.

Other Worlds of Learning: The Qur'anic Class

'The class takes place in a neighbour's front room. About 30 children of all ages...line the walls like a human square, seated with their raiel (a beautifully carved wooden stand upon which to place the Qur'an or the initial primers) in front of them. There is a loud hum as they all chant their individual practice piece. Their elderly teacher whom the children affectionately call 'nanna' (grandfather) holds a bamboo cane which he uses only lightly as if symbolically. 'These children need discipline, or they will climb the sky!' ... Like many of the children, he (Louthfur) rocks to and fro to the sound of the voices. Children do this because they are encouraged to develop a harmonious voice; they are told Allah listens to his servants and is pleased if time is taken to make the verse sound meaningful. The old man's wife takes children who have already started the Qur'an into a separate room so she can hear the recitations clearly. She comments, 'English is important for this life. But Arabic is required for the life hereafter which is eternal! Therefore, it must be given the greatest importance... Or else, how can our children know?' (Rashid in Gregory, 1996: 41)

Children at Qur'anic classes learn by careful repetition after the teacher, since they are reciting the Qur'an in classical Arabic, a language they do not speak. Sometimes they will have two separate teachers; one who teaches them the words and one who explains the meanings. Here is six year old

Maruf describing his classes:

Six year old Maruf talks avidly about his Qur'anic class:

Maruf: There are eighty-three children.

AW (researcher): Eighty-three children in your Arabic class! And when do you go to that?

Maruf: Seven o'clock to nine o'clock.

AW: On?

Maruf: A night.

AW: Every night?

Maruf: Monday to Friday.

AW: Monday to Friday! You go for two hours every night! Aren't you tired?

Maruf: I don't feel tired.

AW: And are you the youngest then?

Maruf: Yes and I'm on the Qur'an.

AW: You're on the Qur'an now?

Maruf: I'm on the last one.

Maruf explains that he is reading the last primer before starting the Qur'an. He goes on to explain more about the structure of his classes:

AW: How many teachers are there for eighty-three children?

Maruf: There's two.

AW: Only two? Who are they?

Maruf: One is the Qur'an...you know, all the Qur'an...he can say it without looking.

AW: He can? What's his name?

Maruf: I don't know. And one is...he can...he knows all the meanings.

AW: Does he? Does he tell you the meanings?

Maruf: Yes he does.

AW: So do you just read the Qur'an for two hours?

Is that what you do?

Maruf: Yes, but I don't sometimes, I talk sometimes.

AW: You don't!

Maruf: I do.

(Gregory & Williams, 2000: 168-9)

These classes are typified by respect by both child and teacher for each other's role - a respect we note later in the play between siblings.

Symposium Proceedings

Other Worlds of Learning: Learning through Play between Siblings

Wahida is eleven and her sister Sayeeda eight. This episode forms a small part of a 'lesson' lasting almost an hour. It follows work on numeracy and spelling, and will, itself, be followed by a reading 'lesson', science and nature.

42: Now we're going to do homophones.

Who knows what's a homophone is?

No one? OK. I'll tell you one and then you're going to do some by yourselves.

Like watch - one watch is your time watch, like what's the time, watch. And another watch is I'm watching you, I can see you. OK?

So Sayeeda, you wrote some in your book, haven't you? Can you tell me some please.

Sayeeda, can you only give me three please.

43: Oh I have to give five.

44: No, Sayeeda, we haven't got enough time.

We've only another five minutes to assembly.

And guess who's going to do assembly - Miss Kudija (Wahida's friend).

44: OK.

45: OK? So tell me one.

46: Son is the opposite of daughter

47: Yeah

48: and sun is ... um ... its shines on the sky so bright.

49: Well done! That's one correct one.

The next one?

50: The cell means you go ... to jail ...in prison ... you're going to prison and another sell means the selling money ... they are giving money.

51: The last one is ?

52: Hear. Hear is you're hearing something... people are telling you something and here is come here, come.

53: Well done! Now you can go to assembly.
Sayeeda line up in order. Otherwise you'll
come back and do lines. So remember your order.
OK? Well done, Sayeeda, you're in your correct
order and Miss Kudija is going to take you down
because I have to do some more things.

It is of no surprise to learn that Wahida's 'teaching' is almost identical to that of her teacher's and so we see how Wahida could almost be her sister's real teacher. The curriculum is clearly focused, the discourse shows respect from both teacher and learner and praise is given where deserved.

This paper illustrates some of the home and school literacy and learning practices in the lives of young second generation Bangladeshi British girls whose home is in East London. I show ways in which the powerful literacy practices of the school extend into the homes of children who are also participating in very different literacies in different languages in their community classes (Bengali and Qur'anic). Despite regular attendance at both Bengali and Qur'anic classes the children all chose to act out and practise only their English lessons. I show the very special role played by siblings close in age as literacy mediators in initiating their younger siblings into the wider school discourses or ways of behaving, valuing and expressing new opinions, beliefs and views. Wahida begins to mediate the precedural, academic and cultural knowledge needed for success in school. When Wahida demarcates different sections of her 'lesson', allocates points for getting something correct, praises and reminds, she directs the younger child to crucial procedures to which she must pay attention. She enables Sayeeda to 'practise what they {she} already know {s}' (Cole in Wertsch 1985: 157) by rehearsing the academic language of science and homophones at home before needing it in school.

What might teachers take from these examples for their classroom practice? First, it is clear that these bilingual or emergent bilingual children possessed many strengths of which their teachers were previously unaware. All teachers listening to tapes of siblings were astonished to hear themselves 'mimicked' by the older child. Such powers of concentration and memory highlight the importance to teachers of making their lessons as explicit as possible, giving them a clear frame and structure and carefully explaining new lexis. Second, is the crucial role of play in learning. In spite of the content of the sessions being serious, learning was taking place in the spirit of play which enabled both children to take risks as well as, in Vygotsky's terms (1978) being head

and shoulders taller in their knowledge and maturity. The lesson for teachers is surely to provide as much space as possible (as well as provision) for sociodramatic play in the classroom. Third, we see the respect paid by children (and their community class teachers) to both the task and each other as they set about preparing for reading the Qur'an. Such respect should be extended to the mainstream classroom. There are many practical pieces of work that can be completed by siblings together at home. Scrap books of photos (disposable or cheap digital cameras can be used if families do not have these - or photos can be taken in school) can be made describing activities in which they engage together. Dual language story-books can be written and dictated by the younger to the older child.

The examples above are but a few from numerous others taking place in the homes of the Bangladeshi London children.¹ We could say that the older siblings are simply expert imitators of the language and pedagogic style of their teachers and are, therefore, able to 'play' school literacy practices as well as the role of 'teacher' in their interaction with younger children. Play is, of course, of crucial importance in their learning (Williams 2004) as the children not only imitate but transform school practices, extending and exaggerating them (for example, through giving 'lines' for bad behaviour) as well as syncretising them with styles used in Qur'anic and Bengali classes).

This paper thus provides an example of what is now referred to as 'Syncretic Literacy Studies' in early childhood (Gregory, Long and Volk 2004). These studies share the following beliefs:

i) Young children are active members of different cultural and linguistic groups and appropriating membership to a group is not a static or a linear process;

ii) Children do not remain in separate worlds but acquire membership of different groups simultaneously i.e. they live in 'simultaneous worlds' (Kenner 2003);

iii) Simultaneous membership means that children syncretise the languages, literacies, narrative styles and role relationships appropriate to each group and then go on to transform the languages and cultures they use to create new forms relevant to the purpose needed;

iv) Young children who participate in cross linguistic and crosscultural practices call upon a greater wealth of metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies. These strategies are further enhanced when they are able to play out different roles and events;

v) Play is a crucial feature of children's language and literacy practice with siblings, grandparents and peers;

vi) The mediators, often bicultural and/or bilingual, play an essential role in early language and literacy learning. Studies investigate different forms of ‘scaffolding’, ‘guided participation’ or ‘synergy’ as young and older children or adults work and play together.

Syncretic Literacy Studies, therefore, go beyond issues of method, materials and parental involvement towards a wider interpretation of literacy, including what children take culturally and linguistically from their families and communities (prolepsis), how they gain access to the existing funds of knowledge in their communities through finely-tuned scaffolding by mediators and how they transform existing languages, literacies and practices to create new forms (syncretism). This whole process takes place within the wider sociocultural framework.

In this paper, the older sibling’s lessons reveal a syncretism of school and Qur’anic class practices. Far more than parents, siblings are able to pitch their lessons at exactly the right level, showing how ‘culture and cognition create each other’ (Cole 1985 in Rogoff 1990:14) as they rehearse the cultural world of the school.

This research was funded by the ESRC (Siblings as mediators of literacy in two East London communities: R000222487, 1998-2000). I should like to thank Ann Williams and Ali Asghar for their work on this project and Charmian Kenner for her assistance in analysing data collected. I am also grateful to all the families and teachers participating in the project.

Bibliography

Cole, M. (1985) ‘The zone of proximal development where culture and cognition create each other’ in Wertsch, J.V. (ed) *Culture, Communication and Cognition: Vygotskian Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gregory, E. (1996) *Making Sense of a New World: Learning to read in a second language*. London: Sage.

Gregory, E. (2001) Sisters and brothers as language and literacy teachers: Synergy between siblings playing and working together. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*. Vol. 1. No. 3: 301-322.

Gregory, E. and Williams, A. (2000) *City Literacies. Learning to read across generations and cultures*. London: Routledge.

Gregory, E., Long, S. and Volk, D. (2004) *Many Pathways to Literacy. Early learning with siblings, grandparents, peers and communities*. N.Y. and London: Routledge/Falmer.

Kenner, C. (2003) *Living in simultaneous worlds: difference and integration*

Symposium Proceedings

in bilingual script learning. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*. (forthcoming).

Rogoff, B. (1990) *Apprenticeship in Thinking: Cognitive Development in Social Contexts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Vygotsky, L. (1978) *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Williams, A. (2004) 'Right, get your book bag! Siblings playing school in multiethnic London' in Gregory, E., Long, S. and Volk, D. (eds.) *Many Pathways to Literacy. Early learning with siblings, grandparents, peers and communities*. N.Y. and London: Routledge/Falmer.