



Home Literacy Environment and the beginning of reading and spelling

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ABSTRACT

Reading and writing are necessary prerequisites for a successful school career. Therefore it is important to identify precursor variables which predict these abilities early in order to identify children possibly at risk of developing reading or spelling difficulties. Relevant precursors include letter knowledge, phonological awareness (PA), vocabulary, and cognitive abilities. Moreover, also social aspects such as the socioeconomic status of the family (SES), the migration background and the “Home Literacy Environment” (HLE) are of importance. So far, only a few studies are available which analyse the early development of different possible explanatory factors simultaneously in the years before and after school enrolment. In particular, the relative impact of HLE on early and later linguistic competencies in a German context remains unclear. Thus, in our longitudinal study, covering the period from kindergarten to Grade 1, we focused on the role HLE plays in the development of language competencies of 921 German children, compared to the impact of several other important variables.

The results highlight the importance of HLE for the development of linguistic competencies also for a German context. HLE was not only a good predictor of early vocabulary and PA, but additionally directly influenced PA at the beginning of primary school. Moreover, HLE acted as a mediator between SES and migration background on the one hand and the precursors on the other hand. This finding indicates that research and policy should focus more on the learning environments in families to improve children’s achievement.

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1. Introduction

When in 2000 the first PISA results in Germany were published, it came as a shock to politicians and education experts that German students not only were at most on average in their academic achievement, but that academic achievement was also very closely associated with the socioeconomic status (SES) of their families (Artelt et al., 2001). Students whose parents had a higher education or worked in a more prestigious occupation performed much better than students from families with a lower SES. Therefore German politicians and education experts put a lot of effort into improving the educational system. In particular, research focused on the early years, because children acquire initial linguistic competencies long before school enrolment, and enormous variability exists already in young children’s cognitive performance (cf. Dowker, 2005; Schneider, Steфанek, & Niklas, 2009).

International research shows that besides individual characteristics of a child and the SES of the family various provisory environmental factors are responsible for such an early heterogeneity. Among these are migration background (e.g. Brooks-Gunn, Rouse,

& McLanahan, 2007; Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2007; OECD, 2001), attendance of kindergarten and the duration of that attendance (e.g. Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004; Walston & West, 2004), as well as the environment the family provides the child to gain specific precursors of reading and spelling, and linguistic competencies.

The latter concept is known as “Home Literacy Environment” (HLE), and it is more specific than the more general concept of SES which focuses on structural characteristics of the family such as education level and occupation of the parents, and sometimes also takes the total income of the household into account (cf. Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Both SES and migration background do not only have an impact on linguistic competencies (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002; Hernandez et al., 2007), but are also closely associated with HLE (cf. Aikens & Barbarin, 2008; Niklas & Schneider, 2010). There is a close association between SES and migration background in Germany, and families with migration background often have a lower SES (Stanat, Rauch, & Segeritz, 2010). However, migration background, often measured by the country of birth of the parents, has also an independent negative impact on linguistic competencies in Germany (e.g. Niklas, Schmiedeler, Pröstler, & Schneider, 2011). This often is due to the fact that different languages are spoken in these families.

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Research shows that the learning environment a family provides acts as a mediator between SES and migration background on the one hand and reading competencies on the other hand (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008; Foster, Lambert, Abbott-Shim, McCarty, & Franze, 2005; Niklas & Schneider, 2010).

1.1. Home Literacy Environment and its impact on linguistic competencies

Before discussing the role of HLE in influencing early competencies, problems with defining this concept shall be briefly mentioned. Although it is beyond question that HLE is important for early competencies in reading and spelling and their precursors (e.g. Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002; Davidse, de Jong, Bus, Huijbrechts, & Swaab, 2011), a generally accepted definition of HLE is still missing. Thus, different studies used different operationalizations when assessing HLE. Sometimes HLE was measured directly in the family by surveillance of the learning environment a family provides (e.g. NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2006; Roberts, Jurgens, & Burchinal, 2005), or questionnaires were used in which the parents were asked to indicate their knowledge about children books or authors of children books (e.g. Foy & Mann, 2003; Hood, Conlon, & Andrews, 2008; Sénéchal, LeFevre, Hudson, & Lawson, 1996).

Most studies about HLE, however, asked the parents about the number of books and picture books in the household, how often they read to their children, how often they watch TV or read for themselves, or whether they have got a library card (e.g. Griffin & Morrison, 1997; Niklas & Schneider, 2010; Rashid, Morris, & Sevcik, 2005). By using questionnaires such as the “Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME)” (e.g. Molfese, Modglin, & Molfese, 2003) it is quite easy to gather information about HLE from huge samples, even though the problem of social desirability cannot be completely ignored. It seems important to note that the significance of HLE for linguistic competencies was highlighted independent of the chosen operationalization.

Metaanalyses carried out by Scarborough and Dobrich (1994) and Bus, van IJzendoorn, and Pellegrini (1995) revealed that reading to children could explain about 8% of the variance in children’s linguistic competencies. Although this amount of explained variance does not seem to be impressive, it indicates that this variable is important, given that reading to children can be more easily manipulated than, for instance, SES. Moreover, initial advantages by a positive learning environment may cumulate over time (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2001; cf. Stanovich, 1986).

By now, studies about HLE do not focus only on reading to children, but several aspects of the learning environment are taken into account. In comparison to more passive aspects of HLE such as seeing a parent read a book or watch TV, the “active HLE” (i.e. reading to and together with child) seems to be more closely associated with PA, vocabulary, and early reading (Burgess et al., 2002). Interestingly, such associations could not be found for SES (see also Sylva et al., 2004).

Longitudinal studies in the US using the HOME inventory showed that the early HLE significantly predicts early linguistic competencies such as receptive and expressive language (e.g. NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2006) as well as later reading competencies (e.g. Molfese et al., 2003). Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, and Taggart (2008) found similar results for another HLE questionnaire in a large sample in the UK.

Moreover, HLE measured by the knowledge parents had about children book authors significantly correlated to vocabulary, even if the IQ and the working memory of the children were controlled for (Davidse et al., 2011). It could be shown that groups with different HLE profiles differed in vocabulary and reading comprehension

even after SES and migration background had been controlled for (van Steensel, 2006).

HLE is mainly linked to later reading performance by strengthening its precursors in a positive learning environment (cf. de Jong & Leseman, 2001; Roberts et al., 2005; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). For instance, in a Canadian study by Sénéchal and LeFevre (2002) with children from English-speaking homes, HLE explained significant amounts of variance in vocabulary, phonological awareness and listening comprehension in preschool. However, it did not contribute to the prediction of reading skills at the end of Grade 1, after these precursors had been taken into account. Thus, these findings support the assumption of a cascading model with SES influencing HLE, HLE influencing precursors, and these in turn influencing reading and spelling competencies.

1.2. Precursors of reading and spelling

In regard to the precursors of reading and spelling, many studies identified core aspects that are important for the competencies development in both English and German. One can differentiate precursors that are very specific for linguistic competencies from non-specific precursors that have an impact on different competencies. In the following, first specific and then non-specific precursors will be briefly introduced.

One very important and specific precursor is children’s phonological awareness (PA; Bus & van IJzendoorn, 1999; Ennemoser, Marx, Weber, & Schneider, 2012; Schatschneider, Fletcher, Francis, Carlson, & Foorman, 2004; Schneider & Näslund, 1999). Children who are better in rhyming and detecting phonemes learn to decode words more easily even when intelligence and social class are partialled out.

In addition to PA, a large and accurate vocabulary is necessary to become a skilled reader (Torgesen, 2002; Torppa et al., 2007). The more words you know by heart, the faster and more accurate your reading will be, and often children at risk of becoming dyslexics quite early show a below average vocabulary. Closely linked to the vocabulary and also of importance is the memory for sentences, which measures additionally to vocabulary the capacity of the phonological working memory (Archibald & Joanisse, 2009; Goldammer, Mähler, Bockmann, & Hasselhorn, 2010).

A third important specific predictor for later linguistic competencies in school is early letter knowledge (e.g. Torppa, Poikkeus, Laakso, Eklund, & Lyytinen, 2006). Compared to children from English-speaking countries, German children learn letters somewhat later in development. However, German children similarly benefit from earlier and better letter knowledge in regard to the development of their reading and spelling competencies (Näslund & Schneider, 1996).

Non-specific precursors influence both the development of linguistic and mathematical competencies. They also have to be taken into account here as they significantly predict later reading and spelling abilities. Non-specific predictors such as intelligence and rapid naming are mainly indirectly linked to academic performance by influencing the specific precursors (Koponen, Aunola, Ahonen, & Nurmi, 2007; Näslund & Schneider, 1996; Puolakano et al., 2008; Schatschneider et al., 2004; Schneider & Näslund, 1999).

1.3. Home Literacy Environment in English and German contexts

Although the HLE construct and its impact on the development of early reading and spelling competencies have found much attention in English-speaking countries over the last decade, only a few studies are available in German speaking countries (Niklas & Schneider, 2010; Wieler, 1997).

In the study by Wieler (1997), case studies were carried out to analyse the quality of mothers reading to their children. Mothers

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