



Modeling the relationships of parents' expectations, family's SES, and home literacy environment with emergent literacy skills and word reading in Chinese



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships of parents' expectations, family's socioeconomic status (SES) and home literacy environment (formal and informal literacy experiences and literacy resources at home) with emergent literacy skills (phonological awareness, vocabulary) and word reading in Chinese. One hundred and forty third-year kindergarten Chinese children (71 girls and 69 boys; mean age = 70.54 months) were assessed on nonverbal IQ, phonological awareness, vocabulary, and word reading. Parents also filled out a questionnaire on their educational level and income, the frequency of engaging in different home literacy-related activities with their child, and their expectations about their child's reading/school performance. Results of path analysis showed that formal literacy activities predicted phonological awareness and literacy resources at home predicted vocabulary. In addition, family's SES was a significant predictor of literacy resources at home and parents' expectations was a significant predictor of all home literacy aspects and of word reading. Results of multiple mediation analysis further showed that the effects of parents' expectations on word reading were partly mediated by formal literacy experiences and literacy resources at home. In contrast, the effects of literacy resources at home on word reading were fully mediated by the effects of vocabulary on phonological awareness. Taken together, these findings suggest that the links between home literacy environment (including the factors that shape the quantity and quality of the home literacy experiences) and reading in Chinese are not as straightforward as those previously reported in alphabetic languages.

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1. Introduction

Although teaching of literacy skills such as phonological awareness and vocabulary is sometimes thought to be school's responsibility (Evans & Koblinsky, 2017), there is now a plethora of studies showing that home literacy environment (HLE), defined as the facets of oral and written experiences with print that children engage in interactively with their parents, plays an equally important role in children's literacy development (e.g., Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002; Griffin & Morrison, 1997; Hamilton, Hayiou-Thomas, Hulme, & Snowling, 2016; Leseman & de Jong, 1998; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Stephenson, Parrila, Georgiou, & Kirby, 2008; van Steensel, 2006; see Mol & Bus, 2011, for a meta-analysis).

However, the previous studies on HLE have at least two limitations: first, most of these studies have been conducted in North America and Europe and we do not know if their findings generalize to East Asian cultures. Second, little is known about the role of family's socioeconomic status (SES) and parents' expectations in shaping the quantity and quality of HLE experiences and in affecting children's language and literacy development. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the role of HLE and its antecedents (family's SES and parents' expectations) in emergent literacy skills and word reading in a sample of Chinese kindergarten children.

One of the prominent theoretical accounts describing the relationship between HLE and emergent literacy skills/word reading is the Home Literacy Model (HLM; Sénéchal, 2006b; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). According to the HLM, there are two distinct types of home literacy experiences, the informal and the formal home literacy experiences, which work independently to promote literacy. Informal literacy experiences are meaning-focused and expose children to print incidentally through activities such as storybook

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reading by parents. Formal literacy experiences are code-focused and engage children directly with print through activities such as teaching letters, words, and spelling.

A number of studies have shown that these two independent types of home literacy experiences are related to different facets of literacy development. Being meaning-focused, informal literacy experiences (operationalized with questions on the frequency of shared book reading) have been found to contribute more to vocabulary than to phonological awareness, letter knowledge, or word reading (e.g., Evans, Shaw, & Bell, 2000; Manolitsis, Georgiou, & Parrila, 2011; Sénéchal, 2006a; Torppa et al., 2007). Some studies have further shown that vocabulary mediates the relationship between shared book reading and word reading (e.g., Manolitsis, Georgiou, & Tziraki, 2013; Roth, Speece, & Cooper, 2002; Sénéchal, 2006b). In turn, being code-focused, formal literacy experiences (operationalized with questions on the frequency of different direct teaching activities) have been shown to predict more strongly phonological awareness, letter knowledge, and early reading skills than vocabulary (e.g., Evans et al., 2000; Manolitsis et al., 2011; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Letter knowledge and phonological awareness have also been found to mediate the relationship between formal literacy experiences and word reading (e.g., Evans et al., 2000; Hood, Conlon, & Andrews, 2008; Manolitsis et al., 2013).

Literacy resources at home (often operationalized with a question on the number of children's books at home) have also been found to play an important role in children's literacy skills (Hamano & Uchida, 2012; Kirby, Dawson, Currie, & Parrila, 2005; Kirby & Hogan, 2008; Mol & Bus, 2011; van Bergen, van Zuijlen, Bishop, & de Jong, 2017). However, in some previous studies, the literacy resources at home were subsumed under the umbrella of informal literacy experiences (e.g., Froiland, Peterson, & Davison, 2012; Hood et al., 2008; Manolitsis et al., 2011; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). This leaves open the question whether it is the resources at home or the frequency of shared book reading that has been driving the relationship between informal literacy experiences and emergent literacy skills. Arguably, if the frequency of shared book reading is non-significantly related to word reading (Sénéchal, 2006a, Sénéchal, LeFevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998), then the reported effects of informal literacy experiences on word reading are likely due to the contribution of literacy resources at home.

Although a positive relationship between HLE and emergent literacy skills has been found in several alphabetic languages (see Sénéchal, 2015, for a review), a closer look at these studies reveals subtle differences across languages. First, different studies have reported different frequencies of home literacy activities across languages. For example, Manolitsis, Georgiou, Stephenson, and Parrila (2009) found that Greek parents engaged less frequently in formal literacy activities than Canadian parents. Similarly low frequencies have been reported in Finnish (e.g., Silinskas, Leppänen, Aunola, Parrila, & Nurmi, 2010; Silinskas et al., 2012). Researchers have argued that Greek or Finnish parents do not engage in early direct teaching of literacy concepts (e.g., letters, words) either because they believe learning to read in a consistent orthography such as Greek or Finnish is a relatively simple task that does not need their immediate attention or because of cultural beliefs that children's literacy learning is the responsibility of teachers. Similar differences have been reported for shared book reading in a cross-linguistic study with French- and English-speaking Canadian children (Bruck, Genesse, & Caravolas, 1997). Parents of French-speaking kindergarten children reported reading stories to their children less frequently than parents of English-speaking kindergarten children. Second, discrepancies across languages can be detected in the relationship between formal/informal home literacy experiences and different literacy skills. For example, in contrast to studies with English- or French-speaking children (e.g., Hood et al., 2008;

Sénéchal, 2006b; Stephenson et al., 2008), studies with Greek and Finnish children have shown that formal literacy experiences are negatively related with phonological awareness (Manolitsis et al., 2009) and word reading (Silinskas et al., 2012). This finding has been attributed to the fact that Greek or Finnish parents engage in direct teaching of literacy skills only when they notice that their child experiences difficulties in learning to read.

1.1. Home literacy environment and literacy skills in Chinese

The observed differences across languages in the frequency with which parents engage in different HLE activities as well as in the direction of the relationship between HLE and word reading suggest that we should consider more closely the role orthographic characteristics and cultural beliefs/values exert in the HLE-reading relationship. Considering cultural variation in literacy-related activities at home is crucial because children's home literacy environment is embedded within a larger social and cultural context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Furthermore, literacy events are culture specific and variation in the types of HLE activities across cultural contexts is largely influenced by prevailing child-rearing beliefs and literacy models (Becker, 2014).

Compared to the volume of research on HLE in North America, there is dearth of research on HLE in East Asia (see Inomata, Uno, Sakai, & Haruhara, 2016; Kim, 2009; Shu, Li, Anderson, Ku, & Yue, 2002, for a few exceptions). In addition, the few studies that have examined the role of HLE in Chinese (e.g., Deng, Silinskas, Wei, & Georgiou, 2015; Li, Corrie, & Wong, 2008; Shu et al., 2002) have not assessed any emergent literacy skills.¹ Examining the role of HLE in emergent literacy skills in China is important because Chinese has a complex orthography and literacy instruction should begin at an early age. Chinese has been described as a morphosyllabic language (e.g., Hanley, 2005). The basic graphic unit in Chinese is the character, which corresponds to a monosyllabic morpheme. Characters are written in a series of squared-shaped objects of the same horizontal extent and usually include two components, namely a phonetic radical that gives some clues to the character's pronunciation (consistent in 23–26% of the compound characters and when tone is also taken into account; see Chung & Leung, 2008) and a semantic radical that provides information about the meaning of the character. This graphic and spatial configuration of written Chinese is in sharp contrast to the linear structure of alphabetic systems such as English, Greek, or Finnish.

First and second graders in China are expected to recognize approximately 1600 characters and to write 800 characters (s Republic of China, 2012a, 2012b;). Given the complexity of Chinese orthography, one would expect Chinese parents to step in and teach their children different characters in order to give them a head start in school. However, because of a widely-held belief in mainland China that a child benefits from instruction in reading or writing when s/he is physically and neurologically mature (at the age of 6 or 7), educational authorities have viewed formal teaching of reading or writing as potentially harmful (Liang, Li, & Wu, 1997). As a result, neither parents nor teachers expect formal literacy teaching to take place in kindergarten (e.g., Li & Rao, 2000). Consequently, formal teaching of literacy skills in mainland China might be less frequent than what has been reported in previous studies in North America.

The few studies that have examined the role of HLE in Chinese reading have provided mixed findings (Deng et al., 2015; Li et al.,

¹ We refer to studies that are based on the Home Literacy Model and not to studies that have examined the role of dialogic reading or mother-child interactions in Chinese reading (see Chow & McBride-Chang, 2003; Chow et al., 2008, for examples of these studies).

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