# STUDENTS' NARRATIVES TELLING US ABOUT THE ROLEOF THE FIRST HOME LITERACY PRACTICES RAPPROCHEMENTS IN THE LEARNING OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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## Abstract

The role of the first foreign language learning rapprochements in a home environment setting is investigated in the present qualitative descriptive – interpretative small scale study. Experiences and feelings about those first literacy practices rapprochement in the learning of English as a foreign language were examined in a group of students at the Santo Domingo convent through narratives. Analysis of these students' narratives demonstrated significantfacts in relation to the role of their first home literacy practices as well as the role of their parents, siblings, teachers, encyclopedias, games, etc. The learners' musical factor was found as a crucial aspect in the desire to learn English due to the attraction and pleasure they felt because they wanted to understand the English's lyrics songs. This positive, as well as some negative results are also explained.

## Resumen

El presente artículo examina el rol de los primeros acercamientos al aprendizaje de una lengua a través de un estudio cualitativo, interpretativo. Las experiencias acerca de esos primeros acercamientos a actividades de escritura y lectura parael aprendizaje de inglés como lengua extranjera fueron investigadas en un grupo de estudiantes del convento Santo Domingo a través de historias o narrativas contadas por ellos mismos. El análisis de dichas narrativas demostró hechos significativos en relación al rol de esas prácticas de escritura y lectura, así como el rol de sus padres, hermanos, enciclopedias, juegos, y otros factores involucrados en esos momentos. Se encontró que el factor musical fue un aspecto crucial en el deseo de aprender inglés por sentimientos como la atracción y placer que ellos sentían por entender las letras de las

**Key words**: role, language learning, first rapprochement, home environment, literacy practices, narratives.

canciones en Inglés. Este resultado positivo, así como otros negativos son también explicados.

**Palabras clave**: rol, aprendizaje, primeros acercamientos, prácticas de lectura y escritura, narrativas.

## INTRODUCTION

Home literacy consists of reading and writing activities which are considered as being either formal or informal. Formal literacy practices consist of encoding or focusing on superficial forms of texts while informal practices are more related to the spontaneity and neutralityof expressing and interpreting information without following grammar rules or any other formal pattern.

Because all students are exposed to some forms of home literacy,this small qualitative research scale study, employing a descriptive – interpretative method investigates the role of home literacy practices in the development of reading and writing skills. A small group of eight young male adult students who were taking English second level at a private catholic institution, Covento Santo Domingo in Tunja, and whose ages range from eighteen to twenty two years old were asked to recall their home literacy practices to analyze the role they have had in their English language learning. Students' reported information is reviewed to see if they are connected to the theories on home practices supporting this project.

This study will help EFL community understand the importance of learner's home literacy practices rapprochements, this way students' background can be considered during the foreign language teaching and learning process.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Literacy

The ways that families offer a context for literacy learning is not newin academic contexts. Different researchers and studies haveattempted to identify home literacy practices; for example the study carried out by Santos et al (2011). The purpose of that case study was to investigate the home literacy practices of parents who take on dual roles as both teachers of literacy for their children and students in General Education Development (GED) programs. The researchers found that parents practiced literacy outside the home for practical purposes, in church, at school, and at work.Parents' literacy engagement depends on their need for text.

In the same sense, Zeece et Wallace (2009) explored the development of the BAGS (Books and Good Stuff) or take-home literacy kits. Deverand Burtis (2002) provided suggestions for content, construction, implementation, and

evaluation to develop and share those literacy bags as an exciting literacy-promoting activity that may be shared with children and families to provide support for emergent literacy.

The researchers found that developing and sharing take-home literacy bags is an exciting literacy-promoting activity that children and families shared because this activity provided supportfor emergent literacy while reducing the pressure on children to "perform"in the presence of a program teacher.These results support the idea that home literacy practices really influence the process of learning a foreign language. Participants were enthusiastic and interested about sharing time with families to read or write in another language different from their native one.

I will start defining what literacy means and then focusing on home literacy practices to contextualize the purpose of this small scale research and the role of those literacy practices for the learning of English as a foreign language.

The term literacy has evolved throughout time from the "quality or state of being literate" (Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary) to more than simply "reading and writing".

According to Hudelson (1994: 130), "Reading is a language process in which meaning is constructed by an individual through a transaction with written text that has been created by symbols that represent language." This transaction makes the individual act upon or interprets the text which is influenced by certain factors such as the reader's past experiences, language background and cultural framework. Another factor influencing it is the reader's purpose for reading.

Similarly, writing is also a language process in which the individual creates meaning by using symbols to construct a written text. In this sense, this term encompasses different ways of knowing particular content, languages and practices that have been influenced by a variety of "previous experiences, not only with texts but also with parents, teachers and others who are literate" (Gee, 1998) here are some interrelated elements implied in this ongoing process to develop abilities to read and write.

The first element related to literacy development is the nature of acquisition, in which children are exposed to those activities that help them in developing literacy at home, for example when they are readto, sang to, told stories to, etc. Thisprocessalso includes a measurement of the number of books, and/or the average number of children's records/audiotapes/CDS among othersthat people havein their house.

Thanks to this exposure, "people can learn about the world and share their understanding with others, make some changes in the world, enjoy the richness of language" (Hudelson, 1994, p. 130). They can also understand their own and others' cultural heritages to comprehend what to be a human being means. This view or perspective of literacy, applies to both, native and non-native speakers (Hudelson, 1994, p. 130). Thus, literacy is seen as a great potential an individual has to view and transform the world (wells, 1994).

According to Freire (1970), becoming literate means far more than learning to decode the written representation of a sound system. It is truly an act of knowing, through which a person is able to look critically at the culture which has shaped him, and to move toward reflection and positive action upon his world.

The second element is the one that has to do with the learner's role in the acquisition process. This is defined to the extent in which the individual plays an active or passive role as a recipient of the data as adults model the language. It is also related to the question if the learner "must drill and practice the correct forms of literacy in order for literacy to be acquired, if the learner is caught between his or her own motivations and purposes and the constrains of context and culture, all these assumptions made by some socio-literate practitioners" (Johns, 1997 p. 3).

These issues are done by interaction between a literate or fluent reader with a less one. To this interaction, "children begin to understand the structure of narratives and the process involved in constructing meaning" (Heath, 1982, p.49-56).

A third element considers the importance of the parents' involvement in their children's literacy practices. In this regard, authors such Fan & Chen (2001) point out that parental involvement in children's learning positively affects the child's performance at school in both, primary and secondary schools (Feinstein & Symons, 1999), leading to higher academic achievement, greater cognitive competence, greater problem-solving skills, greater school enjoyment, better school attendance and fewer behavioral problems at school (Melhuish, Sylva, Sammons et al., 2001).

Of course, all these facts remain until the university level because it is like an ongoing process that never ends. If all these practices were assimilated as habits, they would continue affecting positively the university students' performance. Some parents tend to think that young adults at the university level do not need any parental accompaniment; even the students themselves think so.

But, research has shown that "although parental involvement has the greatest effect in the early years, its importance to children's educational and literacy outcomes continues into the teenage and even adult years" (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003 p.6.) For instance, Feinstein and Symons (1999) found that parental interest in their child's education was the single greatest predictor of achievement at age 16, which means that it really influences and determines the first university years.

We can reach the conclusion that these three elements associated with home literacy practices are vital for learners' literacy development from their early years and play an important role in their future foreign language skills learning. A way to investigate that role is through students' narratives because I as a researcher can understand their feelings and experiences about those first rapprochements to the learning of English as a foreign language. It could even allows me to understand why some students have a better attitude towards the learning of English than others.

## Home literacy

Familyhas a great impact on individuals' learning literacy process inside and outside the classroom (Burns, 2003) and Moll (as cited in Rudell et al.,1994). Burns affirms that "literacy intimately bound up with the students' lives outside the classroom in numerous and complex ways that affect their L1 and L2 identities" (p.23); likewise, Moll says that families are a social and intellectual resource for students when learning at school.

In the same sense, families differ enormously in the level to which they provide a supportive environment for a learner's literacy development. Hess and Holloway (1984, p. 179) identified some broad areas of family functioning that may influence reading development. They are:

**Value placed on literacy:** by reading themselves and encouraging children to read, parents can demonstrate that they value reading.

**Press for achievement:** by expressing their expectations for achievement of their children, providing reading instruction, and responding to the children's reading initiations and interest, parents can create a press for achievement.

**Availability and instrumental use of reading materials:** literacy experiences are more likely to occur in homes that contain children's books and other reading and writing materials.

**Reading with children, teenagers and young adults:** parents can read to preschoolers at bedtime or other times and can listen to schoolchildren's oral reading, providing assistance as needed. They should continue supporting the literacy outcomes in the teenage and young adult years as predictorof achievement at the primary, secondary and even the university level.

According to the previous criteria, it is confirmed that when parents demonstrate the value placed on literacy when they readand encourage their children to read. This value is shownif parents providereading instruction to their children and respond to their interest in reading, or express their expectations for achievement. That is why, literacy activities are more likely to occur in homes that contain children's books and other reading and writing materials (cf. Ortiz, 1986; Snow et al., 1998, as cited by Hammer et al., 2003).

An extensive literature suggests a positive relationship between reading to children and language development and literacy abilities. The benefits of this value placed on literacy show children's greater social and emotional development (Allen & Daly, 2002), including greater self-direction and self control, greater social adjustment, greater mental health, more supportive relationships, greater social competence, more positive peer relations, more tolerance, more successful marriages, and fewer delinquent behaviors (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003).

In general, it is of great importance that parents are aware and reflect on the significant contribution they can make to their children's learning by providing a stimulating environment around language,

reading and writing as well as supporting at home the school's literacy acquisition during the early years as well as the primary and secondary and even the university years of education.

In this sense, there are also other studies done in Colombia about this topic that emphasizes the contribution of home literacy practices in the learning of a foreign language, for example the article research done by Lopez (2009), it is a study in which the characteristics of the Spanish home reading practices of a US immigrant Hispanic household are studied highlighting the many connections existing between the reading practices at home and at school.

The home literacy practices documented in her article provide an example of the home reading practices that were centered on books, and school reading practices were related to the reading practices of the home. The learner's reported understanding of reading as meaning-centered suggests the influence that her home-school reading experiences have had on her perceptions of the purpose of reading. Both home and school offered the participant a diversity of opportunities to develop literacy in the native language, which enabled her to enjoy reading, to actively participate in the classroom, and to identify herself as a reader of Spanish, and gradually, of English.

The data about how the girl (the participant) spontaneous exploration of English text (Reyes, 2001) led the researcher to interpret that the combined efforts of school and home in the native language gave her the confidence that she was a reader, which empowered her to jump into reading a new

language. Likewise, this small scale research study proposes to explore a group of learners' home literacy experiences to identifythe role they have had in the learning of English.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Purpose of the investigation

Because literacy learning is deeply linked to home and family environment and reflected in the learners' school development, literacy practices of families play an important role in that performance.

In the beginning of the second semester in 2011, students had the opportunity to tell the teacher their expectations about learning English, so some of them said they have had many difficulties learning it, while others reported they really liked learning English because it was interesting and easy for them. In an effort to understand what factors were involved in these positive and negative feelings towards the learning of English as a foreign language, I as a teacher and researcher asked them different questions related to their habits and experiencesin this learning process.

A common answer between some of the students was that they had the chance to start learning English since they were very young or little children helped by some members of their family. Some other students told me they had very little English language input or negative feelings towards English sincethe first time they read or wrote it.

For that reason, I felt decisive to carry out a small scale research with the purpose of

understanding the role of those first English language rapprochements. Studentswere asked toremember their first rapprochements to the learning of English, specifically focusing on reading and writing activities done at home, recalling their experiences and feelings about them. The information was gathered throughstudents' stories (narratives), they had time to concentrate and remember that specific moment, content, person involved and feelings and then wrote about them.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Eight male students attending a Dominican priesthood program at "Convento Santo Domingo" in Tunja participated in the small scale study. Students are from different cities and towns in Colombia. At the time of this report, participants were in the second level of English and also in their second semester of the "pre-novice Dominican priesthood program". Students have similar language learning performance. Based on the information gathered through a survey, (see annex 1) students reported very different home literacy environment and practices.

**Procedure**

The students were enrolled in the small-scale investigation during the second term of 2011.A survey was carried out to determine what their main home literacy practices in English were. Then, based on that information, the researcher instructed students to do a retrospective exercise in which they recalled the most important experiences related to their first English language literacy (reading and writing activities) rapprochement.

Then, they focused on different aspects such as a moment in their childhood or adolescence in which an important person of their families constantly shared any reading or writing activity in English. They had to write how they felt about that experience, what turned out to be significant in terms of positive or negative feelings and what constituted lasting learningseen as positive or negative impact for the learning of English.

The second step for the group of students was to emphasize on a specific moment in which they felt apathy or interest in English through reading or writing activities done at home.
Finally, they had to retell the specific content of that first rapprochement to the English language at home.They also had to describe what called their attention about this foreign language.

**Instruments**

Narratives were used as students' written reflections, they were contextualized (in a preliminary meeting) on how to start writing about their home literacy practices and the possible influence they have had on their language learning. First, students were asked to make a brainstorming (in a silent place) about those home literacy practices, and then, to concentrate on a specific moment or experience in which any of those literacy practices have impacted – influenced or affected their language learning. They wrote short stories - in which they had to reflect on that experience

including the most important details of what happened in that moment.

Students' narratives were analyzed following the Grounded theory approach which refers to a theory that is developed inductively from a corpus of data. Therefore, as aresearcher I took different home literacy practices cases to be a main category so that these variables interact as a unit to produce certain outcomes (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

A set of steps were taken to "guarantee" a good theory as the outcome. For example, students' narratives were read (and re-read) to label variables (called categories) and their interrelationships, to get to that point, four stages were done following the qualitative coding process of Grounded theory analysis (Glaser, 1978, 1992).

The first one was *Open Coding*: This is the part of the analysis where researchers identify, name, categorize and describe phenomena found in the text (field notes) focusing on adjectives and adverbs — like the properties of these categories (Strauss and Corbin pg. 78) a line – by line analysis (naming each line of written data) was done.

The second stage was *In vivo codes*: These in vivocodes helped me preserve what the meanings, views and actions participants gave to the initial codes: they condensed meaning of a general term, as in the following example, where all the information focuses on the same subject.

Example

TEACHER'S INFLUENCE

*"Pero en el segundo semestre llego una profesora llamada Luz que era atea, y hago referencia a este tema porque ella se dio cuenta que yo quería ser sacerdote. Me acuerdo que en una clase ella me dijo, " F—— yo le aseguro que ud nunca va a ser sacerdote". Desde ese momento jamás volví a prestarle atención en una sola palabra que decía, y ni siquiera estudiaba".*

*Taken from the priesthood program's "student 3" narrative. September, 2011.*

The code in the following example is more directed, selective and conceptual (Glaser, 1978) since it is referring to information analyzed and compared to existing theory.

EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION DUE TO PARENTS INFLUENCE

*"Cuando empecé a estudiar en el colegio, tenía unos 6 años, me gustaba mucho cuando aprendía mis primeras palabras y me daba mucha alegría poder decir en mi casa cosas en Ingles. Mi principal motivación era esa, mostrar a mis padres que estaba aprendiendo otro idioma y que de alguna forma me parecía a los grandes actores de cine norteamericano".*

*Taken from the priesthood program's "student 5" narrative. September, 2011.*

The third stage was *Axial Coding*: This is the process of relating codes (categories and properties) to each other, combining inductive and deductive thinking causal relationships, and fitting things into a basic frame of relationships. I developed a major category to sort, organize and synthesize the large amount of data I collected. I linked the categories with the subcategoriesI previously had.

This process gave as a result a series of main categories to be analyzed and supported withsome theories.

The main categories are:

| Home influences | Family context is included in this part, members of the family, family activities, parents' influences that determined English language learning. |
|---|---|
| School influences | School context such as teachers', partners', curriculum's influences are analyzed in this main category. |
| Affective dimension | Students' feelings, experiences, resolutions in front of different situations are very important since they determined past - present and future life experiences. |
| Linguistic dimension | This category informs about students' performance in relation to English language learning. |
| External factors | Factors, different from the mentioned above that also affected somehow students' target language development. |
| Present perception about English | Students' current perceptions about the process of learning the target language |
| Future plans | Students' future plans and intentions related to a foreign language use in a real context |

The fourth stage was *Memos:*They are short documents that researchers write to themselves as they proceed through the analysis of a corpus of data. In this part of the process,students did a retrospection activity to mentiona specific experience that they remember was significant for them in relation to English language learning at home. This instrument was done with the purpose of answering the research question, "What do students' narratives tell us about the role of theirfirst home literacy practices rapprochements in the learning of English as a foreign language"?

## RESULTS

Home literacy environment, for these university students, involves the following factors. They read newspapers, then magazines and books about drama, politics, science and comedies at home. Very few students like reading academic articles ontheir field. Students really prefer reading by themselves because they need to concentrate; however some of them read withsome members of their family: mother, father and cousins. The most common are their mothers, then their fathers and finally

their cousins. Students have very few reading and writing habits, they devote little time to those activities either at home or university.

These factors related to their home literacy practices were collected through a survey in which they reported their first English writing and reading practices at home so that they started remembering the most important facts about those experiences and started writing their narratives.

Language learning development is affected and influenced due to different factors, for example, home context influences, in which family members, especially the closest ones, have an active role for some learners. Brothers, cousins and friends represented positive impacts because they awaken learners the desire of learning English words and translate meanings. When parents encourage children or adult students to learn a second language or show positive attitudes about this issue, children seem to experience a positive impact and try to learn it so that they respond to their parents' encouragement to learn English.

Brothers and cousins also seem to create a comfortable environment in which literacy practices can be developed. Even though these participants and also their parents are monolinguals and do not understand foreign language utterances, the fact of feeling happy for their sons' language activities are of great importance. In some cases, they even help them to do these language activities such as spelling and memorizing.

On the other hand, school context is another very crucial aspect in the development of the learning of a foreign language. First of all, we have the teacher influence, in some cases negative, in other cases, they have resulted in positive effects for this learning process. Negative influences when teachers' beliefs about students' language performance –and their opinions can stop a learners' interest in learning the target language. Positive influences, if teachers encourage learners to continue studying it by means of simple but rewarding sentences. Competitions in classes were also found as powerful motivation tools to awaken this interest of learning the FL. Some students felt fascinated about demonstrating others they understood English words.

The affective dimension, also implicit in all the categories previously mentioned, is very important that many feelings, reactions and decisions are present. They have had repercussions in the past, present and future. For example, a student has been affected a lot by a teacher's comment that he decided to stop paying attention to her English class (he used to be a good student), but then, his perception changed totally to the point that he developed a general dislike about English learning. Even current English language experiences are still uncomfortable and meaningless for him.

In the linguistic dimension I found a tendency of students who used to have a positive impression about language – when it was first listened / first contact – but then, they started to find it very difficult in terms of grammar structures, writing process, listening - due to pronunciation variations, speaking, etc. They just enjoyed the idea of understanding some sentences that called their attention in a specific context, but when

learners started to learn the language in a deeper and more formal way, they found it hard to learn.

There are also some external factors such as: television – radio – neighborhoods' friends, etc. The one that called my attention the most was the "musical factor" in which students felt attracted by and in that way they felt pleasure learning English due to the fact that they wanted to understand the English's lyrics songs. This is a very interesting point because this like for English music seems to be intact. This issue has been observed instudents with certain gift for languages.

In the "present perceptions about language" category, I found that most of students have a positive perception of English. Although many of them find it difficult to learn, they think it is necessary for professional life and for that reason they are trying to understand it and devotingmore time to get this goal.

Finally, in the future plans intentions category, that is of course closely related to the present perceptions about English category. Many students affirm theydream of traveling to a foreign country. They know English can help them communicate almost everywhere, and they have finally decided to learn it. When writing their narratives, students reflected about their language learning process, they agreed that it is a difficult process but they also got the conclusion that English is crucial for their future lives.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present small scale study was to determine what students' narratives inform us about their home literacy practices and English language learning and the role of those home literacy practices in the learning of this foreign language in pre-novice priesthood program students. The findings revealed that parents' – teachers' - school and other external factors can be related to motivation issues, such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (e.g. deCharms, 1968).The analysis of students' narratives letus know that some of them enjoyed listening, reading, writing and producing oral language (intrinsic motivation) when they started to have their first contacts with the language.

On the other hand, some other students did it because of the external motivationaspects they got in their life experiences. These motivation facts influenced students' language learning development and still do, they have repercussions in their current and future life.

Therefore, there are other variables that also influence this language learning such as the affective dimension in which students developed a negative reaction to learn a second language due to a negative influence, according to Krashen (1982), "the **affective filter** is an impediment to learning or acquisition caused by negative emotional ("affective") responses to one's environment". This aspect is so crucial – several students develop affective filters and that is the reason why they do not understand the language. This complex issue can last for years.

Finally, the linguistic dimension also plays an important role. It has to do with the

various mistakes and difficulties non native speakers find when learning English. These difficulties can make students feel frustrated about the learning process and react negatively in front of it. So, students do require a lot of work to overcome this issue and accept it as a normal stage of the learning process and not something that can stop definitely their desire to learn.

## Pedagogical implications

The implementation of this retrospective activity such as students' narratives about their first rapprochement to the English language will give students the opportunity to ask,reflect and understand the several facts that have influenced their language learning process. To discover their own feelings about the learning process experiences, as well as developing their analysis competence about their own language performance.

My intention with this descriptive interpretative study is to contribute to the field of learning English, since this study will shed light on important issues related to whatlevel the home literacy practices influence or affect the learning of English in a group of eight students by means of writing narratives. This instrument allowed them to retell their English learning process and see if their family members have or have not performed an important role in that.

This study is relevant to the students, because it will help them reflect about their present and future English learning process since narratives give them the opportunity to reflect not only about their past experiences and feelings but also to

continue investigating their actual and future impressions about that. The development of this retrospective work makes them able to make decisions about their foreign language learning process after analyzing the role of the many factors their home environment has had.

This small scale research project is also pertinent for the educational institution for which I work, because it will lead the convent Director and teachers realize that other factors, besides the academic ones have influenced students English language development and performance. Having success in English subject is a requirement these students have to accomplish to be able to pass their academic year there

## CONCLUSIONS

This small scale research has identified different home literacy practices that can be seen as an explanation to the good or low English language performance because as we have seen not only parents but also other members of the family really plays an important role in students' learning process. What is really interesting is the fact that these practices and of course what students felt and experienced about them actuallyhave repercussions in their current life and will impact their future life too.

Home literacy practices involve many variables affecting the target language learning. However, much work needs to be done in the continuation of students narrative development which will tell us in a deeper view what other factors influence the language learning process. This research is of great relevance for our

Colombian context because, it can contribute teachers to understand what factors, besides the school or university ones, have played a significant role in the learning of English.

Therefore, participants had the opportunity to reflect upon their own home literacy practices and understand in some way, the development of their literacy skills process. It could even also help parents be aware of the importance of their children's home literacy practices and how they play an important role in their future performance in the school as inthe university levelwhen related to literacy skills in general.

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ANEX 1

MAESTRIA EN DOCENCIA DE IDIOMAS

ENCUESTA
PRACTICAS DE LECTURA Y ESCRITURA EN EL HOGAR

La presenta investigación busca identificar las prácticas de alfabetización en su hogar. Por favor conteste las siguientes preguntas de la manera más completa que pueda. Gracias

1. Qué tipo de lecturas hace en su casa?

2. ¿Como hace la lectura?

3. ¿En qué momento del día lee?

4. ¿En qué parte de la casa acostumbra a leer?

5. ¿Qué genero le gusta leer?

6. ¿Con quien lee en casa?

7. ¿Qué hábitos de escritura practica?

8. ¿Con qué frecuencia lee y/o escribe

9. ¿Utiliza algún medio tecnológico para practicar actividades de lectura o escritura? ¿Cuáles?

10. ¿Hace algún tipo de actividad de lectura/ escritura en Inglés? ¿Cuáles?

Gracias por su colaboracion