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To master the world you must know English

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Abstract: *Immigration is an example of global mobility to developed nations such as Australia. Each year thousands of migrants from different parts of the world move here. Using a sociocultural framework, this article reports on English as a Second Language (ESL) parents' views on the role and importance of English in the learning and lives of their children. It also reports on their understandings of how English should be taught. The article draws on data from a doctoral research study, which explores parents' and teachers' perspectives on the literacy learning of ESL children at primary school in Victoria. The parent participants were well-educated and bilingual from five different language backgrounds. They had high academic aspirations for their children. Qualitative data include a questionnaire and individual interviews with newly-arrived parents of children at a government school in suburban Melbourne. The findings show that parents see English as essential for their children to know the world and to fit into global society. These parents encourage their children to learn English and to learn through English. Parents need, however, to make considerable adjustments in their understanding of how literacy in English is included in the school curriculum.*

Keywords: *Bilingualism vs English-only literacy education, ESL parent literacy perspectives, Primary English literacy pedagogy, Role of English*

Introduction

The world is changing rapidly under the influence of globalisation (Bello, 2010; Singh & Papa, 2010). One aspect of globalisation is people's mobility around the globe (Appadurai, 2009; Rizvi, 2009), due to economic, social, political, educational, and environmental reasons (Bello, 2010). The purpose of migration, no matter what the specific reason, is usually the search for a better and more secure life. One impact of migration can be seen in the classrooms of developed *English-speaking countries*, hereafter English-speaking

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countries, with children from diverse social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Thomas & Kearney, 2008). In such a situation, it is important to understand the English literacy teaching/learning expectations of the parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, because parents have an impact on literacy development. If they are involved in their children's literacy learning, this can help children improve their learning (Barnard, 2004; Ford & Amaral, 2006; Rogers, Theule, Ryan, Adama, & Keating, 2009). The ESL parents may have different expectations from those of their children's school teachers', as literacy is understood and valued differently in different societies (Finnegan, 1988; Heath, 1983; Robinson-Pant, 2000; Street, 1993). In Australia, for instance, literacy is viewed not as a set of skills, but as a social practice (Luke, Dooley, & Woods, 2011). This view encompasses many forms of literacy—such as digital literacy, visual literacy, and orality—along with print literacy. This article explores six newly-arrived English as a Second Language (ESL) parents' perspectives on English literacy practices in a primary school in Australia. These parents were bilingual from five different mother tongues and well-educated. They expect their children to succeed academically. The children were proficient in their first language with a range of prior exposure to English language.

Literacy as a social practice

In the last two decades, literacy has been understood as a social practice. According to this understanding, reading and writing can be understood and acquired only within the context of the social, cultural, political, economic, and historical practices to which they are integral (Snyder, 2008), but not in isolation. According to Street (1993), there are 'autonomous' and 'ideological' models of literacy. The autonomous model of literacy, based on the view of literacy as a cognitive ability, emphasises transmission of knowledge without considering social factors. Street (1993) argues against the 'autonomous' model and proposes an 'ideological' one. His notion of an ideological model of literacy examines literacy on the basis of particular social contexts where it is practised. This means that literacy practices valued in one social context may not be valuable in another context. Gee's notion of *Discourses* (1996, 2002, 2011) also helps to understand the view of literacy as a social practice. According to him:

> Discourses are ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social

> identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes. A Discourse is a sort of identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize. (Gee, 1996, p.127)

He distinguishes between primary Discourse and secondary Discourses. The primary Discourse comes from family, where socialisation begins. One's first social identity is constituted by primary Discourse, and is the foundation for other Discourses. Secondary Discourses, on the other hand, are those with which people make contact in the outer world; for example, languages used in churches, schools or offices are secondary discourses. To be a member of any Discourse community, one must know "social" and "cultural" practices, along with the appropriate use of the language itself. Gee uses "discourse" with small "d": to mean language use.

To understand ESL parent perspectives, the notion of Discourses is very useful and helps to conceptualise important questions about literacy in schools in English-speaking countries. For instance, how do ESL parents interpret the discourses (language use) in their children's school/s? How do they negotiate between home and school Discourses? Do these Discourses differ? There is little research, which explores ESL parent perspectives on literacy education in schools in English-speaking countries such as Australia, the USA, the UK, and Canada (Guo, 2007; Huh, 2006). However, the available studies raise a number of issues of concern for ESL parents. This article considers two issues which have emerged in a recent doctoral study (Sharma, 2011). The first is, whether to maintain their children's bilingualism or to prefer English-only education. The second issue is, parents' understandings of English literacy pedagogy. The next sections give a brief account of what existing studies have found in relation to these two issues.

Maintaining bilingualism versus English-only in literacy education

Some studies (Huh, 2006; Worthy, 2006) reveal that ESL parents want their children to learn both languages, their home language and English. Some parents (Huh, 2006) said that it was the school's responsibility to teach their children their mother tongue (L1) along with English, whereas others (Worthy, 2006) stated that it was parents' responsibility to teach L1 and the school's to teach English. These studies were conducted with US primary school parents of two ethnic groups, namely Korean (Huh, 2006) and

Latino (Worthy, 2006). In both studies, however, participating parents expressed a strong view in favour of maintaining bilingualism in their children. Song's (2010) qualitative study of two groups of Korean mothers has some interesting findings in relation to family commitment to the host country. One group consisted of 15 mothers returning to Korea after some months in the USA. In another group, there were seven immigrant mothers. For the returning group, maintaining bilingualism was not an issue or it could be maintained easily. On the other hand, for the immigrants, it was a dilemma, since success in the US depended on use of English, so they would prefer their children to learn English rather than Korean.

Whereas the research studies above show some ESL parents want their children to be bilingual, other research emphasises English-only. For example, Brown and Souto-Manning's (2008) study conducted in the USA reveals that some ESL parents emphasise their children to concentrate on English-only when they want them to succeed in a school. The researchers conducted their research with one Latino family to understand how they made sense of their two children's schooling experiences, in both Puerto Rico and the United States. The parents in the study said that they focused entirely on developing their children's English. The participating parents in Song (2010), referred to above, and Brown and Souto-Manning (2008), identified proficiency in English as a key factor for success in an English-speaking country.

Parent views on literacy pedagogy

Existing studies (Li, 2006, 2007; Bernhard & Freire, 1999) show that ESL parents are in favour of a traditional approach to literacy pedagogy. Most of the 26 Chinese parents living in the US in Li's (2006) study believed that their children should be taught sound-letter relationships before reading a text. In addition, these parents valued their children's extensive reading outside school. Most of the parents said that their children read every day at home. They also used public libraries to get resources for reading. Above all, these parents preferred a skill-based approach in teaching writing. They said that their children needed to spell correctly and they needed to know rules of grammar to be good writers. Further, they emphasised the neatness of writing, which could be achieved by copying from books. Additionally, Li's study (2007) of two Chinese Canadian families found that the parents valued homework to strengthen children's learning. A mother named Mei told the

researcher that she had demanded more homework from her Grade 3 son's teacher, but she did not get a result. She said, "They told me they would consider my suggestions, but they didn't" (Mei in Li, 2007, p. 13). Another parent, Mr. Tang, from the same study, mentioned that he did not like the school's emphasis on children's drawing, rather than on academic aspects, such as "real" reading and writing. The parents in Bernhard and Freire's (1999) study in Canada had also complained about how their children were learning. One mother said:

> I think they should lead them more toward study, not just painting and playing all day…He never comes with something new, something I learned today, or look, now I know this. I think they should start to learn letters. Here at home I am teaching him to memorize them. But I think he should be doing this at school. (Bernhard & Freire, 1999, p. 85)

Most ESL parents seemed to prefer traditional literacy learning approaches such as memorising written texts and doing regular homework. They did not seem to value playing, painting, and drawing as learning techniques.

A qualitative case study

To explore the perspectives of newly-arrived ESL parents on school literacy practices, this qualitative case study (Yin, 2009) was conducted at a primary suburban government school in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. According to the Paterson Primary School (name changed) Information Handbook (2009), 65% of the 233 students in the school were from ESL backgrounds. Initially, it was planned to recruit the parents through the school newsletter. After consultation with the school principal, it was decided to send home a brief written explanatory statement through class teachers, and an invitation for parents to participate. It was assumed that the interested parents would contact the respective teacher, who would pass on the information to the researcher. When nothing was heard from any teacher after a month, the researcher started visiting the school before the school dismissal time to talk informally to parents. Finally, six parents from four countries (India, Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines) emerged via this personal networking. All expressed their interest in volunteering for the project. They were given a written explanatory statement for their reference and a consent form to be signed. These parents had been living in Australia for between seven and 20 months at

the time of data collection and their children were all in Years 3 to 6.

Data were gathered from semi-structured individual interviews and a questionnaire (see Appendix 1), and analysed using 'thematic coding' (Creswell, 2008; Roulston, 2010). The interviews were held in different locations at the participants' convenience. For instance, one was at Paterson Primary School, two at the university, and three at the participants' respective houses. All interviews lasted for about an hour and were audio-recorded and transcribed. Among the six parents, five were female and one was male. This gender imbalance was owing to the fact that mothers mostly came to the school to drop off or pick up their children. The following table shows parents' countries of origin, their pseudonyms, and their mother tongues. A short introduction to them, including their academic qualifications, socio-economic status, and purpose in coming to Australia, follows.

Table 1. Six ESL parents

Country of origin	**Parents**	**Mother tongue**
India	Nita	Punjabi
India	Tara	Marathi
Indonesia	Dewita	Indonesian
Indonesia	Lily	Indonesian
Nepal	Binod	Nepali
Philippines	Sharon	Tagalog

Dewita and Lily were PhD candidates in Australia at the time of data collection, Binod had earned a Master's degree in his country, Sharon and Tara held Bachelor's degrees in the Philippines and India respectively, and Nita had passed Year 12 in India. Although Binod, Sharon, and Nita were working in Australia at the time of interview as manual labourers, they had previously worked in relatively high-status jobs in their home countries. Binod had been a journalist for a well-known Nepali English language national daily, Sharon had been a bank employee, and Nita had been an agent in the post office. These parents had come to

Australia for different purposes. Dewita and Lily wanted to earn their PhD. Binod and Tara had come to Australia with their families, since their spouses were doing a PhD. Sharon's family had migrated from the Philippines looking for better life opportunities, and especially for their daughters' education.

For Nita, for example, everything was available in India. She said that her family could afford for her daughters to go to a private school. She and her husband had good jobs. She had worked in the post office and her husband was a motor mechanic, and they were living a relatively affluent life. Nonetheless, Nita mentioned they decided to move to Australia for one principal reason. She had two daughters and the couple did not want more children. In their society, however, sons were more valued than daughters. People kept reminding them, they thought unnecessarily, that they did not have sons. In order to escape this social pressure, Nita's family decided to leave India.

Primary school children

Except for Binod, who had one child, the other five parents had two children each, some of whom attended the primary school when this study took place. There were altogether eight children who were attending Paterson Primary School. Table 2 presents these children with their age and their Year level. Pseudonyms are used for them. They are listed according to the names of their parents, in alphabetical order.

Table 2. Primary school children

Parents	Children	Age	Year level
Binod	Atul (son)	11	6
Dewita	Ardhi (son); Arti (daughter)	10; 6	4; Prep
Lily	Bayu (son); Aini (daughter)	10; 9	5; 3
Nita	Diya (daughter)	11	5
Sharon	KC (daughter)	10	4
Tara	Kush (son)	11	5

The group included four boys and four girls. Dewita's daughter, Arti, however, was not included in the discussion during the interview because she had just started her schooling.

Differences and similarities in schooling in home countries

It was important to find out about the children's schooling in their home countries in order to interpret the parents' views on schooling in Australia. Interviews with the six parents revealed that there were some differences as well as some commonalities in schooling in the children's home countries. For instance, the Indian, Filipino, and Nepali children all had had English as a medium of instruction. As a result of this, they had more opportunities to read extended English texts compared with the Indonesian children, whose medium of instruction was Indonesian. The Indonesian children's English reading was limited to sentence level only, through grammar and vocabulary learning. In addition, these children also had limited exposure to English at school, one to two hours per week. The parents of the Indonesian children indicated there were no real writing activities at school, whereas the children from other countries had had some exposure to writing activities, such as descriptions and essays, according to their parents. In India and the Philippines, English had the status of a second language, whereas in Indonesia and Nepal it was a foreign language.

In fact, these children had much in common in the way they were taught in their home countries. The most obvious things they shared were the use of textbooks, daily homework, and a variety of tests and examinations. They were all city children. When they enrolled at Paterson Primary School, all seven children had had uninterrupted, and quite intensive, schooling in their home countries, equivalent to that of other children in their new Australian school.

Teaching of mother tongue versus English

In individual interviews, all six parent participants were positive towards bilingualism. They expressed the view, however, that since their children had already been exposed to their mother tongue (L1), there was no need to teach them this. According to Binod, everybody in Nepal could speak Nepali, so his main focus was to encourage Atul in learning English. He said:

> As a parent I give more importance to English because it's an international language. All the important knowledge is in

> English. English is ruling the world, digital language, written language whatever. So it's very important. (Binod, Interview, p. 4)

Dewita was worried to see her son, Ardhi speak Indonesian to his friends, despite her efforts in encouraging him to speak English. As she explained, "I tell him even with your Indonesian friends you have to speak English because your friends need to practise [English] as well" (Interview, p. 20). She further said that that since her children already knew their L1, she did not give them any Indonesian books to read. In her experience, Western countries have better education facilities and if her children wanted to learn in these countries they must know English. Lily also felt that she did not need to teach her children Indonesian, because they had had wide exposure to this language. She emphasised that to fit into the global world, their children must learn English, because Indonesian has limited scope compared with English. The following quote shows how she encouraged her children to learn English; to "master the world:"

> I always say, "Well, you know, when you are good in English, you can master the world." "Do you want to be successful next time?" I ask them, "Yes, of course," they say. "Then, if you want to be successful you have to master the English." (Lily, Interview, p. 15)

It was only Nita who said that she noticed her daughter had started to forget Punjabi or Hindi, so she was thinking of teaching Diya Punjabi and Hindi in the near future. Although she was positive towards Diya's learning Hindi and Punjabi, Nita said that her daughter must learn English. According to her, "English is a connecting language. If you want to connect to the outer world, English is very important" (Interview, p. 11). Likewise, Sharon and Tara expressed their views that their children must learn English. Being a permanent resident in Australia, Sharon said that it did not seem essential to encourage KC to learn Tagalog. She explained, "When we are already here in Australia, it's [English] really important because it's the means of communication. So she has to learn English" (Interview, p. 6). Tara was confident that Kush could learn Marathi and Hindi when they would return to India after her husband's PhD completion, so she wanted Kush to learn English while they were in Australia. She expressed the value of English as an international language as follows:

> One must learn English. This is because when we leave India and go to other parts of the world we have to face a problem

> without English. If you know English you can communicate easily; wherever you go, no tension. For example, I don't know much English so I have a communication problem here [Australia]. I think, therefore, Kush must learn English to fit into the world. (Tara, Interview, p. 11)

On the one hand, these parents preferred their children to learn English if they had to succeed in Australian schools or in the wider world. On the other hand, they expressed their anxiety about not being able to understand what 'content' their children were learning in English literacy, even if they were living in an English-speaking country. To some extent this indicated that they did not know how learning was taking place in their children's classes. Parents' anxiety about not understanding was a major finding of the doctoral study.

No textbooks, no homework, no examinations, and no guidelines from the school

The parents said that they did not know what their children were studying at school because they did not have any textbooks, regular homework, or frequent examinations. In addition, the school also did not give the parents clear guidelines about what they were doing to teach children literacy. Binod, Nita, Sharon, and Tara expressed more concern than Dewita and Lily about the lack of textbooks, daily homework or assignments, and different kinds of examinations. They repeatedly raised these issues. In the absence of prescribed textbooks, all parents felt unable to tell what exactly their children were learning at school. For example, Lily said, "I cannot find textbook here from school. And it's very hard for me to know what they have been doing at school" (Interview, p. 2). Even though the parents acknowledged that their children wrote "stories, recounts, and reports," they did not have a clear picture of how writing was being taught, and expressed their concern, saying that their children were not learning much writing. In reading also, parents knew that their children read the books borrowed from either the school library or public library, but did not know what and how teachers were teaching inside the classroom. The following quote from Nita shows their feelings about the lack of textbooks and homework:

> In India there used to be ten to 15 textbooks whereas there is not any here. As a result, parents have very little knowledge about what is happening at school. There is nominal homework.

> We need some more homework. (Nita, Interview, p. 8)

It seems that these parents believed textbooks and homework were the clearest sources of information to know what and how their children were learning at school. Without these sources they were frustrated and could not figure out what and how teachers were teaching.

These parents also expressed their dissatisfaction about the lack of regular examinations in Australian schools. Although Sharon was not as critical as Binod, Nita, and Tara regarding examinations, she preferred some kind of examination so that she could see where KC stood among her peers. She said:

> In the Philippines they teach children how to score. You have a mastery test, and then achievement test. And you have to pass it. They [children] have a notebook, notes what the teacher have taught, so I can see them and review them. After one week they have a test. When we first came here, we are very new, if there is test, I can know where you are [ranking] because there is always a test in the Philippines. (Sharon, Interview, p. 4)

Except for Dewita, all other parents were in favour of regular testing, which they did not find in Australia. For Dewita, such testing would put pressure on children and hinder their gradual progress.

Binod, Nita, and Tara explicitly said that they had seen no specific curriculum from the school. Even though Binod had attended two curriculum nights at school, where teachers explained their yearly plan to parents, which he found generally useful, he felt his queries were not answered clearly. According to him, "The curriculum night was obviously helpful but they were just briefing. And they were presenting the whole year program quickly. I didn't understand many things" (Interview, p. 11). Similarly, Nita stated that the yearly curriculum night was not enough to keep track of everyday school activities, because parents were too busy to remember all this. Tara agreed with Binod and Nita. According to these parents they needed to see a specific curriculum or syllabus, to know the exact teaching content. Such expectations were clearly drawn from their prior experience.

Discussion

The ESL parents came from a range of countries, including India, Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines and, therefore, had various perspectives on school literacy practices. Sometimes their

perspectives did not match with what they found in their children's school in Australia. This is because literacy is a social practice and its use differs from one social context to another (Heath, 1983; Gee, 1996; Street, 1993). This group of ESL parents came from a traditional literacy teaching background, underpinned by a theory of literacy as a cognitive ability, activated when all children learn the same content, usually prescribed in textbooks. That is, school literacy practices in their countries were based on what Street (1993) called the "autonomous model of literacy," according to which all students must read the same textbooks and experience the same activities and assessment processes. In contrast, literacy practices in Australia were based more on an "ideological model of literacy," (Street, 1993), where practices were underpinned by the cultural belief that every individual learner has different literacy needs. In fact, teachers at Paterson Primary School used neither particular textbooks, nor the same assessment processes for all students.

The differences in literacy teaching/learning practices can be seen as the result of two secondary Discourses (Gee, 1996, 2011). One is that of the children's school in their home countries and another is that of their school in Australia. Differences between the two Discourses were found to create anxieties in the families. This was arguably because the new ESL parents did not have full participation in, or understanding of, the secondary Discourse of the Australian school. For example, these parents were not aware of the fact that teachers at Paterson Primary School selected authentic texts suitable for different groups of students, instead of following fixed textbooks.

English-only education for their children in their Australian school was favoured by all parents in this study. While these parents were positive towards bilingualism like the parents in Song's (2010) study, they did not have an intense desire to teach the first language to their children. They thought their children already knew their mother tongue, so more attention was needed to develop their English. This finding contradicts the findings of researchers in different contexts, such as Huh (2006) and Worthy (2006). Their findings were that ESL parents prefer developing their children's first and second language equally. This difference may have arisen because of the time spent in Australia. The parent participants of this study had been living in Australia for only seven to 20 months at the time of data collection.

Being new in Australia, these parents were keen to see their children improve their English. Whether they were returning to their home countries or staying on in Australia, all parents equally expressed the desire to encourage their children to strengthen their English. All six parent participants involved in this study said that their children must learn English to fit into mainstream Australian and global societies, where English is the main language of communication. This finding aligns with the findings of Brown and Souto-Manning's (2008) and Song's (2010) studies, which highlight tensions between English-only and bilingual instruction within the American education system. Regarding literacy pedagogy, the parents were in favour of a traditional teaching approach, like the parents in other studies (Bernhard & Freire, 1999; Li, 2006, 2007). As these ESL parents come from contexts where an autonomous model of literacy has been in practice, they tend to prefer a traditional, skill-based literacy teaching approach.

Conclusion

All ESL parents in this study, who came from different social contexts and language backgrounds, preferred their children to learn English rather than their mother tongue. As mentioned earlier, they were bilingual and with academic qualifications. They also agreed that they were not fully aware of what and how their children were learning literacy at Paterson Primary School. Therefore, to broaden the new ESL parents' understanding of literacy pedagogy in Australia, it seems that they need more effective chances to participate in the school Discourse.

To become a member of a particular Discourse, we must know all the rules and regulations of that Discourse in order to participate in it. For newly arrived ESL parents, classroom observation of a series of lessons could be a starting point to participate in the Discourse of Australian schooling to know about what and how teachers teach literacy lessons. Although the school principal stressed to the researcher that parents could come into the classroom, the problem was that the parents were not sure if it was appropriate to enter the classroom and observe the lessons. This was not usual in their cultures.

At the beginning of each year, Paterson Primary School organises a curriculum night to disseminate information about the school curriculum to parents. This program seems to be rather general, however, targeted to all parents, regardless of their experience of schooling in Australia. It would be useful if the

school could organise a special curriculum night program, or at least a dedicated session, for newly-arrived ESL parents. This would address in detail issues such as textbooks, homework policy, the assessment system, and literacy pedagogy. The parents should also be provided a real opportunity to raise questions about these matters during curriculum night. In addition, the school newsletter could include a section for new ESL parents' questions, which could be sent in and answers published.

Unless new ESL parents are included in the current discourses of Australian schools, they may continue to find English literacy teaching a puzzle and to believe that their children are missing out on the effective learning of English.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire for parents

General information

1. Where are you from (Your country of origin)?
2. Your gender
3. How long have you been living in Australia (Please enter the year and month that you first arrived here; if you remember, date too)?
4. Is this the first time you are abroad?
5. Have you planned to go back to your country?
6. If yes, when?
7. What is your residential status in Australia (e.g., permanent resident, temporary resident, student)?

8. What do you (or your spouse) do in Australia (occupation: optional)?
9. What did you (or your spouse) use to do in your home country

   (occupation: optional)?
10. What is your first language?
11. Which language do you speak/use at home?
12. Your age group (please tick one)

    a. 20 – 30

    b. 30 – 40

    c. 40 – 50
13. Your academic qualifications

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