The Literacy Bridge: How Home Language Fuels Academic and Emotional Growth

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Background

Krish Gajaria, one of the co-authors of this paper, launched "Pages for Progress" in 2024, aiming to distribute children's and youth books to underrepresented communities, especially those serving immigrants and refugees. In their early endeavor to reach out to community organizers, Krish and his partner, Emma, were overwhelmed by the high demand for books in Burmese, Creole, and French. Recognizing that learning English is a vital step for immigrants and refugees to integrate into their new American life, Krish and Emma initiate an inquiry into how home-language literacy affects the acquisition of majority-language skills by immigrant and refugee youth, and how it supports them in schools and their integration process.

I. Introduction

In 1948, the American government enacted the first formal refugee legislation. Since 1975, America has become home to more than three million refugees. Amidst one of the most significant global refugee crises in 2023, America alone became home to 60,000 refugees—a mere fraction of the 117 million forcibly displaced persons that year. Many of these refugees came from Syria, Afghanistan, Burma, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Schofield & Yap, 2024).

Within the authors' home state of Indiana, out of the 27,800 refugees accounted for in 2022 by the Refugee Processing Center, the largest group consists of Burmese people, accounting for more than 80% of the arrivals since 2007 (Arun, 2022). In addition, with political unrest continuing in Haiti, as in many other places in the U.S., Indiana has seen a surge of new Haitian immigrants in recent years. The Haitian population in Indiana increased eightfold between 2019 and 2023, reaching 12,465 (Henderson, 2024).

With the aim to understand how home-language literacy impacts refugee and immigrant children's literacy development in their new host country of social settings, the authors conduct search through Google Scholar, ERIC, and JSTOR, with keywords on refugee education, home language literacy development, language in education, and multilingual language education etc. Aligning with literature, in this paper, home language (HL) is defined as the first language an individual acquires in their country of origin, and majority language (ML) is defined as the dominant language used in an individual's social settings.

Upon reviewing existing research, we have gained insight into the importance of home language development in enhancing the literacy and academic performance of refugee children, as well as its benefits to the socioemotional well-being of refugee communities. In addition, we have learned

about institutional and practical barriers that constrain home language instruction in formal school settings, as well as some effective practices that promote home language development among refugee or immigrant children through school or community efforts.

Through a literature review exploring the nuances of why home language development is crucial to strengthening majority language skills and overall quality of life for immigrant and refugee communities, we aim to enhance our understanding of how future policies and programs can be shaped to serve these communities more effectively and improve their futures.

II. Academic Advantages of Home Language Development

Current research has supported the benefits of home language literacy development to future linguistic growth and general academic achievements in bilingual children. Many of the studies are derived from the Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) Model, developed by Jim Cummins in the early 1980s to better understand how bilingual individuals process and transfer knowledge across languages (1979, 1981). Cummins proposes that cognitive and academic skills developed in a child's home language are transferable to the learning of additional languages. Simply put, children who acquire strong reading comprehension, problem-solving, and metacognitive strategies in their home language are better equipped to apply these skills when learning to read or write in another language.

Three studies found evidence supporting the CUP framework from multilingual children of different age groups. Swain et al. (1990), in their study of middle school bilingual children enrolled in English-French immersion programs in Toronto, found that the eighth graders who had literacy skills in their home language demonstrated significantly stronger performance in learning French as a third language than those who were not literate in HL. Furthermore, their study revealed that HL use without literacy did not provide the same benefits, indicating that the advantages stemmed from literacy-based transfer rather than just oral proficiency. A second study by Verhoeven (1990) tracks Dutch literacy development in a group of early elementary-age children whose home language is Turkish. His study found that children's home language literacy skills in phonological, lexical, and syntactic awareness contributed to more rapid reading acquisition and accurate comprehensive writing in learning the majority language. Third, Kan and Kohnert (2008) investigated cross-language relationships in a group of preschool-age Hmong children enrolled in a Hmong-English bilingual program. Their study found a significant positive cross-linguistic relationship between receptive vocabulary in Hmong and expressive vocabulary in English, suggesting that preschoolers with strong language skills in Hmong could transfer positively to learn English.

Dressler and Kamil (2006) conducted an extensive review of research on cross-linguistic relationships in first- and second-language literacy development. The studies synthesized in their review provided

evidence supporting Cumming's framework of transferable literacy skills from first language to second language learning. According to their review, literacy skills acquired in a child's first language, especially those higher-order skills such as reading comprehension and reading strategies, correlate significantly with the same set of skills applied in learning a second language. These literacy skill transfers, according to the review, tend to be facilitative rather than interfering.

As August and Shanahan (2017) state in the executive summary of "Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth":

"*Language-minority students are not blank slates. They enter classrooms with varying degrees of oral proficiency and literacy in their first language. There is clear evidence that tapping into first-language literacy can confer advantages to English-language learners."*

Research suggests that bilingual education, which enables children to continue acquiring literacy in their home language while learning concurrently in the majority language, benefits students' overall academic achievement (beyond language) by promoting school engagement and strengthening cognitive development (Eisenchias et al., 2021). Several studies focusing on multilingual education in African countries provide supporting empirical evidence (e.g., Bühmann and Trudell, 2008; Heugh et al., 2007; Nikiema, 2011; Walter and Chuo, 2012). In Cameroon, Walter and Chuo (2012) examined schools that implemented home-language instruction in Kom for children in the first to third grades, observing significantly stronger performance in reading, comprehension, and mathematics than students taught solely in English. Walter and Chuo emphasized how early exposure to culturally relevant literacy materials in Kom improved student engagement and reduced dropout rates, highlighting a benefit along with cognitive advantages.

Bilingual or multilingual learners demonstrate stronger cognitive flexibility through the frequent switching of languages (Secer, 2016), which reflects their ability to shift between concepts or notions and is considered crucial for both language learning and mathematical learning (Dahm & Angelis, 2017). In their study of 600-plus secondary school students in France, Dahm & Angelis (2017) found that when students' family socioeconomic status (SES) is controlled, multilingual students who are literate in their HL perform better in English tests than native French peers and other multilingual students who are not literate in their HL. In terms of mathematical achievement, multilingual students with literacy in HL significantly outperform their peers without HL literacy and perform similarly to their native French-speaking counterparts. The authors argue that mother tongue literacy provides an overall benefit for mathematical learning and helps Multilinguals reach their native peers faster.

III. The Role of Home Language in Identity Formation and Emotional Well-Being

Beyond academic performance, home language development plays a significant role in supporting the emotional, psychological, and cultural well-being of

immigrant and refugee children. Language is deeply intertwined with identity, belonging, and social integration, particularly for children experiencing the dislocation of forced migration.

Ball (2010) argues that minority children often perceive their language and culture as having no value when there is linguistic and cultural discontinuity between their homes and schools, which leads to low self-confidence and self-esteem, and thus negatively impacts their learning. Ample research has shown that immigrant children, from preschoolers to adolescents, when pressured to assimilate into schools and new society (English dominated in most cases), often quickly give up or even hide their home linguistic background (e.g., Cho and Krashen, 1998; Cummins, 2000; Dryden-Peterson & Mulimbi, 2017; Norton, 1997; Tse, 2001; and Valenzuela, 1999). These children tend to feel emotionally and culturally detached from both their own culture *and* the dominant culture, resulting in academic disengagement and identity conflict (Velenzuela, 1999; Cummins, 2000); some of them also reported long-term regret, fractured family relationships and intergenerational tensions, and identity confusion during adolescent years (Cho and Krashen, 1996; Tse, 2001).

On the other hand, other studies find that allowing children to maintain and continue using their home language can foster emotional stability, improve self-esteem, and promote cultural diversity (e.g., Bartlett et al., 2011; Wright & Taylor, 1995). Wright and Taylor (1995) studied Inuit students from a subarctic indigenous community of Canada in the early 1990s. They found that students educated in their heritage language for a year showed a substantial positive increase in personal and collective self-esteem and cultural pride. That self-esteem increase, however, did not happen to the comparison group students who received instructions in just English or French.

Limited empirical studies have examined how these emotional and identity-related impacts may translate into more immediate academic consequences, such as lower classroom engagement, reduced participation in group activities, or underperformance on assessments. Cummins et.al (2005) argue that it takes at least five years for bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL) students to catch up with native English speakers in academic English. These students, without sufficient support, often struggle with the identity of being "ESL students," who have limited knowledge of English or are unable to express their intelligence. Therefore, many of the students drop out of school before they can catch up academically.

Linguistic research with a specific focus on refugee children is rare. As Reddick and Dryden-Peterson (2021) summarize, language background plays a role as crucial as other identity factors, such as ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status, in determining who has sufficient "power" to speak or to be heard. As compared to economic migrants, refugees often experience more challenges with marginalized social status and uncertain legal or citizenship futures in the host countries; to the refugee groups, what languages are "worthy" of use goes beyond just cultural

identity and belonging. Therefore, research is needed to distinguish refugee students from a homogenous group of minority language learners or bilinguals to study the impact of language choices and language education, with "power" in consideration.

IV. Barriers to Home Language Instruction

Despite the clear benefits of home language development, incorporating home language instruction in formal school settings has faced both macro-level (i.e., national education policy) and micro-level (i.e., local resource) barriers.

Globally, schools face significant obstacles, including national assessments, monolingual curriculum systems, and shortages of qualified bilingual teachers and culturally relevant materials, which hinder the provision of sufficient home-language instruction in classrooms. This is particularly noted in sub-Saharan Africa, as observed by Piper & Miksic (2011) in a large-scale evaluation of the language of instruction in Uganda and Kenya. In this study, researchers found that standardized assessments, which are typically administered in the majority language, create intense pressure on educators to prioritize test performance over inclusive instruction. As a result, even in linguistically diverse classrooms, schools often default to majority language instruction to align with national testing standards and curriculum. Walter and Benson (2012) critique national curriculum frameworks for failing to incorporate linguistic diversity, arguing that such frameworks naturally treat monolingualism as the norm. In research across Southeast Asia and Africa, it is emphasized that when learning outcomes and instructional materials are exclusively tailored to the dominant language, this reinforces systemic inequity and undermines the development of high-quality bilingual programs.

In North America, for example, although language minority students are eligible for special services such as English as a Second Language (ESL), the national curriculum, assessments, and mainstream school instructional strategies are predominantly monolingual. ESL students, even in the early stages of language acquisition, often spend only one or two periods per day with their ESL teachers, while the majority of their learning time is spent in mainstream classrooms where instruction is conducted in English (Cummins et al., 2005). According to Cummins et al. (2005), the assumption that only ESL teachers are responsible for ESL learning, and not all teachers in supporting the academics of language minority students, is problematic. In addition, an ERIC Digest piece on Asian American Linguistic Autobiographies (Hinton, 2001) noted that although some students have ESL in school, true bilingual education programs are rare. The digest mentioned an example in which an Asian American student was offered sign language at school because the only ESL classes available were for Spanish speakers.

Host countries worldwide have increasingly included refugee students in their national school systems over the past few decades (UNCHR, 2016; Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Being integrated into the host country's school system, on one hand, increases educational access and provides

more consistency and stability in schooling opportunities to these refugee children; on the other hand, refugee students are likely to be "submerged" or "assimilated" into the majority language in the host country's school system (Reddick & Dryden-Peterson, 2021). Lack of home-language instruction in schools could impede refugee children's academic outcomes and social development than other minority language children, given their premigration experiences of trauma and interrupted schooling.

V. Home Language Books and Family Literacy Programs

In situations where the formal education system fails to support home-language development, non-formal language education practices, such as home-language books and family literacy programs, provide a practical and effective alternative for sustaining children's linguistic, academic, and emotional well-being.

Ball (2010) emphasizes that when families have access to books in their native languages, they are more likely to participate in literacy activities, establish consistent reading routines, and model positive language behaviors for their children. Dawson Hancock (2002) found, in his semi-experimental program, Families Reading Every Day (FRED), that Hispanic kindergarteners who took Spanish books home to have their parents read to them significantly outperformed their control group peers, who were exposed to English books, in pre-literacy skills. Two other programs, the O Mundo initiative in Belgium (Devos, 2018) and IBBY in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Daly and Limbrick, 2020), provide more powerful examples demonstrating how culturally relevant book selections, when distributed in partnership with schools and community libraries, lead to increased parental engagement, heightened student confidence, and greater educational equity for immigrant and refugee learners. Daly and Limbrick (2020) describe home-language books as "safe spaces" where refugee families could share traditional stories, reinforce their cultural values, and engage in intergenerational dialogue that bridged past and present lifestyles.

Eisenchias et al. (2013) described multiple effective models for delivering home-language books to refugee and immigrant families, emphasizing the potential of these approaches to transform literacy outcomes. One particularly impactful model was the "Book Flood" approach cited by Elley (2000), which involves distributing large quantities of culturally relevant books in children's native languages to homes and classrooms. This model, used in several countries, including Fiji, Sri Lanka, and Singapore, has been associated with significant improvements in reading engagement, vocabulary development, and reading fluency, particularly among minority learners who previously lacked consistent access to literary materials in their home language. The availability of engaging, culturally and linguistically relevant texts not only creates a love for reading but also provides the necessary support for language development in both home and majority languages.

While these models demonstrate high levels of success, they often rely heavily on external funding sources, such as NGOs,

international donors, or university partnerships, and operate within localized, well-resourced pilot contexts. This makes them vulnerable to sustainability challenges. Once short-term funding ends or external partners withdraw, these programs frequently struggle to maintain operations. Moreover, the infrastructure needed to support such initiatives, such as access to culturally relevant books and trained bilingual facilitators, often lacks in under-resourced refugee settings. In many host countries, refugee camps and low-income urban settlements often lack access to public libraries, consistent electricity, and strong school-community partnerships —essential components for running effective family literacy programs. Without broader policy support from national or regional governments that institutionalizes these efforts, these programs remain isolated interventions rather than integrated components of the education system. As a result, while the documented outcomes of initiatives like "Book Flood" or O Mundo are encouraging, their scalability and transferability to more fragile or resource-constrained refugee contexts remain uncertain.

In addition, studies in Western countries have found that bilingual family literacy programs involving parents in guided workshops, organized book collections, and bilingual materials designed to encourage consistent reading practices at home, not only improve children's early literacy skills but also greatly enhance parental satisfaction and engagement (Anderson et.al., 2017; Boit et.al., 2025). In the Parents as Literacy Supporters (PALS) program in Canada, many parents indicate that it's essential to have the program operate in their home language; they also report feeling more empowered to support their children's education, even when, many times, they themselves lack fluency in the majority language (Anderson et.al., 2017). In a Share Book Reading program with four Burmese mothers and their pre-school children using dual language books, Boit et.al (2025) found that mothers (limited English skills) and children (more advanced in English than their mothers) navigate both home language and English to ask questions, talk about words, and book contents. Based on the findings, the authors encourage families to read in their own language while learning English. They also recommend providing dual-language books with reading instructions in the home language for parents as a suitable method to introduce reading to refugee families, who often had no access to printed text in the past.

VI. Conclusion

This paper offers greater insight into the functional, social, and emotional benefits of home-language development within immigrant and refugee communities, as well as its relationship to cognitive acceleration in the majority language. In considering barriers to proper home-language development, such as policy restrictions, underfunding, and multilingual instructor shortages, it identifies the need for more effectively streamlined programs to promote linguistic diversity. Finally, this paper also examines the importance of independent literacy programs in helping to improve access to home-language books and literature for refugee and immigrant communities.

Given the limitations in access to literature and the authors' research capacity as high school students, this paper focuses on general reviews of literature in related fields, including multilingual education and home literacy programs. The authors have not conducted a meta-analysis of empirical studies to evaluate the impact of home language literacy on language development, as well as other academic achievements.

Altogether, this paper finds that home language development is crucial for creating a brighter future for the growing refugee and immigrant communities worldwide. Whether this entails the deconstruction of systemic oversight, increased funding for multilingual programs, enhanced teacher training, or heightened awareness of home language book programs, home language development must be considered more carefully. We draw emphasis to grassroots organizations that target the issue of literacy within individual communities from the inside out. The benefits of this course of action are sufficient not only to improve international literacy rates but also to enhance the well-being of immigrant and refugee youth worldwide.

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