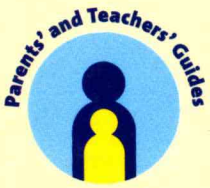


Xiao-lei Wang



**Learning to
Read and Write**

in the Multilingual Family



PARENTS' AND TEACHERS' GUIDES

Series Editor: Colin Baker, Bangor University, UK

Learning to Read and Write in the Multilingual Family

Xiao-lei Wang



MULTILINGUAL MATTERS

Bristol • Buffalo • Toronto

*This book is dedicated to my multilingual children, Léandre and Dominique.
You are my inspiration for writing about multilingual topics.*

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Since the publication of my book *Growing Up with Three Languages: Birth to Eleven*, I have received lots of e-mails from parents. Many of them ask questions specifically about multilingual children's reading and writing issues. I have replied to some parents, but not to many others. This book can hopefully make up for those unanswered e-mails. The birth of this book is the direct result of those who wrote to me. Thank you!

Over the years, I have been fortunate enough to meet, in person and online, many parents who are raising multilingual children. The interactions and exchanges between us have helped me greatly in understanding various aspects of multilingual childrearing. Some parents I have been in contact with are featured in this book. I want to express my sincere thanks to them for allowing me to share their examples.

I am grateful to many people who have helped me with this book in direct and indirect ways. However, space limit only allows me to mention a few.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

On a recent flight from Seoul to Shanghai, I sat near a 5-year-old Korean girl, Choon-Hee and her mother, Mrs Pak. The mother and daughter were on their way to join the girl's father in China. They planned to settle there because of Mr Pak's job relocation. During the nearly 2-hour plane ride, little Choon-Hee was keenly making drawings and experimenting with different ways of forming Korean *Hangul*¹ letters and *Hanja* (Chinese characters). From time to time, Mrs Pak modelled the details of how to write *Hangul* letters and *Hanja* strokes. The mother and the child seemed to enjoy immensely what they were doing.

Watching the interactions between Mrs Pak and her child, I realised that I was witnessing the little girl's multilingual² literacy³ development in the making. I imagined that with this level of child engagement and with this level of parental support, Choon-Hee would certainly become multiliterate in the years to come.

However, as much as I was impressed with the mother-child enthusiasm and as much as I wanted to be optimistic about the girl's future multiliterate development, I could not help but worry if the child would remain so eager down the road and if the child's multilingual reading and writing skills would be thriving a few years from now. My seemingly pessimistic outlook for this child's future multilingual literacy development may not be entirely baseless. You will probably understand my concern after you read an e-mail that I received from a mother.

Dear Dr. Wang,

I am delighted to read your book *Growing up with Three Languages*.⁴ I am grateful that you shared with us your experience in raising trilingual children. Like you, I am also raising a trilingual child in Italian, Dutch and English. My native language is Dutch and my husband's is English. We live in Italy. We have tried to teach our daughter Dutch and English at home because we don't have support in the community where we live. We didn't have problems getting her to speak the languages. When she was little, she was eager to learn to read and write in the two home languages. Now she is in elementary school and we have tremendous difficulties to get her read and write Dutch and English. She is just not interested. Tension has grown because we often nag her about reading Dutch and English books. The other day, she told me angrily why I bothered to request her to read English and Dutch. She said that she was reading Italian in school and that was enough! I don't know what to do. Should

I insist that my daughter read and write English and Dutch? This doesn't look like an option right now. Should I ask her to read one of the languages? I don't know any good strategies to involve my child. I am on the verge of giving up. But, I think it would be a pity! Dr. Wang, can you offer some advice?

Sincerely,

Anna⁵

Anna's frustration is not unusual. Many parents who attended my parents' workshops or corresponded with me have substantiated Anna's sentiment based on their experiences of raising multilingual and multiliterate children. Below are some of their challenges and concerns.

Challenges of Developing Multilingual Literacy

Time constraints

It takes a great amount of time for a child to develop reading and writing skills in one language. Needless to say, those children who grow up with more than one language require even more time to develop the skills in multiple languages. It is already difficult for busy parents to cope with the mundane routines of their everyday lives and it is even harder for them to find time to teach their children to read and write their heritage language.⁶ Many parents commented that even though they wanted to engage their children in heritage language literacy activities, there was simply no time.

Moreover, there is always a competition between the time needed for heritage language literacy activities and the time needed for other events, such as sports, leisure and regular school assignments. Thus, the time constraint is often the major issue that prevents children from continuing with their heritage language literacy development.

Lack of pedagogical information

Parents who are determined to help their children develop heritage language literacy skills often have two options. First, there are community-based language schools.⁷ When they are available and affordable, parents may choose to send their children to these schools. Alternatively, some parents opt to teach their heritage language literacy at home. The issue, however, is that most teachers who teach in the community language schools are parent volunteers⁸ (I call them parent teachers). Even though some may be well educated, they have never gone through any teacher preparation programmes. Some of them simply teach by drawing on their recollection of learning to read as children.⁹ As a result, many parent teachers may lack the skills necessary to engage their students. Even if some parent teachers had teaching experience in their heritage country, they may not be familiar with the

teaching pedagogy in their current country of residence. Therefore, these parent teachers may not be quite aware that their students experience a different kind of world from that of their own.¹⁰ Many parents who teach their children at home face a similar situation.

Hence, while almost all children are ready to learn, not all parent teachers are ready to teach. Consequently, many children grow exasperated and lose their motivation for heritage language learning. The lack of adequate heritage language teaching pedagogical skills of some parent teachers and parents may be one of the reasons why some children do not make progress or continue with their heritage language literacy development. Research has long indicated that teacher qualification is positively related to student achievements¹¹ and teachers and their teaching methods do matter.¹²

I want to stress that some parent teachers' lack of pedagogical information does not mean that all parent teachers in community language schools do not contribute to children's heritage language learning. Many of them have greatly contributed to children's success in their heritage language development.¹³

Conflicting teaching styles

The teaching styles of many teachers in community heritage language schools and parents are sometimes drastically different from the ones their children are used to. As a result, their teaching styles unintentionally conflict with their children's learning styles and hinder the children's heritage language literacy skill development. The following is a quote from a 10-year-old boy who attended a community Chinese language school in Montreal in Xiao-lan Curdt-Christiansen's study:¹⁴

I don't like the Chinese school, it's boring and the characters are too difficult to remember. Plus, there is no action in the class. I feel like sleeping. But my mom says I have to go. I like action. But in the Chinese school, we are not allowed to do anything. We are not allowed to talk or to write except dictations. So all the Chinese I have learned, I forget it all when I come home. In my French school, we are allowed to make up stories, we can talk about our stories in front of the whole class, and the teachers are nice.

This boy's comments pinpoint the obvious differences in teaching styles between his teachers in the community language school and his teachers in his mainstream language school. It is clear that when children are not used to the teaching styles in their community language school or at home, their motivation to learn subsides. I have recently taken my two children out of a local Chinese language school for fearing that they would lose motivation to read and write Chinese because the teaching style there is drastically different from the one in their regular school.

Teaching materials are remote from children's lives

The literacy materials used by community language schools or parents are often textbooks imported from the heritage countries. Frequently, the contents and

vocabulary in these textbooks are too remote from children's lives. For instance, a group of teachers in a Canadian community Urdu language school researched some Urdu textbooks and discovered that the reading materials from the heritage regions were full of political undertones and religious dogma too foreign for the children who grew up in Canada to relate to.¹⁵

A Chinese mother who attended one of my parents' workshops complained that her 12-year-old son refused to learn a poem from the Tang Dynasty.¹⁶ The boy commented that he did not see any point in learning this poem because he had no place to use it. Despite his mother's good reasoning (she argued that it would help him appreciate the beauty of the Chinese language and culture), he remained unconvinced.¹⁷ From his standpoint, the boy may be reasonable. Indeed, why should he learn a poem written hundreds of years ago that is so seemingly unconnected to his life?¹⁸

Research has shown that it is important how children connect to what they read.¹⁹ As literacy experts Jo-Anne Reid and Barbara Comber rightly point out, children's learning from literacy events is contingent on their being able to make sense of the genre, content and social significance of the task at hand.²⁰ When the literacy materials are too remote from their reality, children are not motivated to read. In fact, using existing heritage language teaching materials that are not specifically intended for heritage language learners has generally been unsuccessful.²¹

Lack of practical advice books for parents

Despite the fact that there are many parenting advice books on how to raise multilingual children, few specifically address the reading and writing issues of multilingual children. Although some books may touch on these aspects, parents often find them too general and not practical. When parenting advice books occasionally do mention multilingual children's reading and writing, they tend to focus on young children and not on older children. Many parents like Anna (you read her e-mail earlier in this chapter) are desperate to find help in the parenting literature.

Lack of support

Ideally, to facilitate a child's multilingual literacy development, four elements must work together: family, school, community and society. However, children who grow up in a multilingual family rarely receive adequate support from the four milieux. The balance of power often tips heavily towards the mainstream language and literacy development. Few opportunities are offered for children to study their heritage language literacy outside their homes.²² When school, community and society support for multilingual education is lacking or absent, the responsibility to help children develop multilingual literacy skills falls mostly on parents' shoulders.²³

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of this book is to help parents explore various ways to make their children's multiliteracy development possible. Drawn on interdisciplinary research in multilingual literacy development as well as experiences of parents who have raised their children with multilingual literacy, this book walks parents through the process of multiliteracy development from infancy to adolescence. It identifies the target skills at each developmental stage and proposes effective strategies that facilitate multiliteracy development in the home environment.

However, I want to stress that this book does not intend to diminish the role of community heritage language schools or school heritage language programmes. I would be very happy to see parents working together with these education entities to promote their children's heritage language literacy development (see Chapter 7). Nevertheless, when many parents are currently left alone to shoulder the challenging task of teaching their children heritage language literacy without adequate school, community or societal support, this book can provide immediate help for them to bring up multilingual children.

This book can be used as a guide for home heritage language literacy teaching or as a supplement for those parents who send their children to heritage language schools. It can also be used as a reference for teachers who teach in community heritage language schools and in school heritage (or foreign) language programmes.

Targeted Child Population

This book focuses on typically developing children who are growing up in multilingual households. It excludes children with cognitive (intellectual) and language learning disabilities for two major reasons. First, within the multilingual child population, there is extraordinary variability with regard to the linguistic, social and cultural environments. It is already a perilous enough undertaking to address this diverse population without delving into the issue of disabilities.

Second and most importantly, the issues related to children with cognitive and language learning disabilities are complicated by the fact that many characteristics of these children cannot be generalised. It would not do these children justice if they were included in this book without enough research evidence to support the home teaching strategies for children with disabilities. However, Appendix A lists some useful references for readers who wish to explore the multilingual literacy development issues on children with cognitive and language disabilities.

Advantages of Teaching Children in the Home Environment

Although teaching children at home alone is not necessarily the most ideal learning environment, when parents cannot find a better solution to fit their needs, it is an option. If the right strategies are employed, there will be positive results associated with home teaching. Research has suggested that children who are home

schooled in all the required school subjects tend to perform one grade level higher than their public and private school counterparts and they tend to achieve better educational outcomes. Likewise, research has confirmed that children who are home schooled their entire lives have the highest scholastic achievements.²⁴ In addition, long-term studies found no apparent social deficiency of home-schooled children.²⁵

As of now, little research evidence is available to suggest the absolute advantages of teaching heritage language literacy skills in the home environment. However, studies conducted in different cultural communities have challenged the assumption that school-based literacy is the only legitimate way to engage children with heritage language literacy development.²⁶ There is evidence to suggest that when parents engage their children in heritage language literacy activities at home, children are likely to make headways in their heritage language literacy development.²⁷

Thus, it is reasonable to postulate that children who are taught heritage language literacy skills in the home environment may benefit from the experience for at least the following four reasons.

Parent–child relationship

There is a special relationship between parents and children. The emotional bond established with parents can often motivate children to listen to their parents and learn from them.²⁸ Moreover, the nature of the parent–child interaction context enables parents to know about their children in ways that many others, including teachers, do not. Parents certainly have unique advantages in reaching their children over others.

In fact, the first literacy learning experience most children encounter is often provided by parents in the home.²⁹ A growing body of research has shown a close relationship between young children's early home literacy experience, their print knowledge, interest in reading³⁰ and their later engagement in independent reading.³¹ Parental overall responsiveness and support in early literacy is the strongest predictor of children's language and early literacy skill development.³²

Scheduling, location and content flexibility

Each family can set its own schedule based on their family situations. The spontaneous nature of home literacy activities means that learning can occur in the midst of everyday activities, such as mealtimes, shopping and travelling in the car. These kinds of literacy activities do not present an onerous time burden on even the busiest of parents.³³

Children and parents can spend time flexibly on different language topics based on children's progress at their own pace. In addition, parents can use a variety of environmental prints,³⁴ such as food packages, newspapers, advertising flyers, magazines, religious texts, game or toy packages, television programme guides,

shopping lists, letters, e-mails or text messages and catalogues, to initiate and carry out heritage language literacy activities.³⁵ These materials are often directly related to children's lives and tend to be more meaningful to children's learning.

Instruction adapted to individual needs

In the home environment, parents can focus more on children's individual language and literacy learning needs and adjust their teaching pace and method accordingly. Children can benefit from the extra time and learn well when their parents do not have to rush to finish a language-learning task before their children are ready.

Learning centred rather than grade centred

In the home learning environment, children are usually not formally graded or tested on their performance. They also do not have to worry whether they will be promoted to the next grade level if they do not do well. Children can therefore concentrate on the learning activities instead of being stressed with grades or tests.

In addition, parents can help motivate children by providing them with alternative forms of reinforcement or rewards, such as verbal praise or something that is related to children's immediate interests. For instance, my younger son Dominique³⁶ is a football (soccer) fan and an enthusiastic player. To motivate Dominique to read French (one of his heritage languages), my husband introduced him to online European football news. In doing so, Dominique realised that if he read French online, he would be able to get the European football news faster. Such intrinsic motivation (the internal desire to perform a particular task) tends to be longer lasting³⁷ than grades.

Given the above-mentioned home teaching advantages, teaching children heritage language literacy skills at home may present an attractive option for many families who wish to help their children develop multilingual literacy skills in addition to other possibilities.³⁸

Benefits of Developing Multilingual Literacy

There are many benefits associated with developing and maintaining heritage language and literacy. As the well-known second language researcher Stephen Krashen and his associates pointed out, 'Heritage language development appears to be an excellent investment. For a small effort... the payoffs are enormous'.³⁹ Some benefits of being multiliterate are discussed below.

Benefits in everyday life and international travel

Knowing how to read and write in more than one language can provide convenience in everyday life as well as international travel. For example, once on a car trip to a conference in Utrecht (the Netherlands) from Neuchâtel (Switzerland),

our French rental car displayed a French message on the front screen that the suspension was broken and service was needed immediately. Pressed for time to reach Utrecht that same evening, my husband and I were worried that we would not have time to drive the car to a garage and repair it before the conference. While driving, my husband asked our then 11-year-old son Dominique to read the French vehicle manual and figure out whether the electronic message was really true. After studying the French manual, Dominique concluded that if we restarted the car, the suspension would adjust itself. Dominique's ability to read French was obviously handy. We were able to make our Utrecht conference on time.

Similarly, when 20-year-old Marco from New York travels to his heritage country, Italy (Milan to be specific), he feels at home largely because he is literate in Italian. For example, he can read restaurant menus and find exactly what he wants to eat. He can read local newspapers and find out what's going on in town. He can read advertisements before he goes shopping. Most of all, he can keep in constant touch with his Italian relatives via e-mail communication while he is in New York.⁴⁰

Benefits in academic learning

There is clear evidence that multiliteracy does not pose a major academic disadvantage to the individual. In fact, research shows that there is a very tangible academic payoff for those children who invest in heritage language learning.⁴¹ There are, of course, multilinguals who do poorly in school, but there are more who do well. Research indicates that retention of the heritage language is related to better school success and better grade point average.⁴² Children with more than one language have often been shown to outperform monolinguals in many cognitive tasks.⁴³

Furthermore, in academic subject areas, children with more than one language have advantages in transferring their concepts from their heritage language to the mainstream language or vice versa.⁴⁴ Educators Debra Giambo and Tunde Szecsi gave a good example of this. They stated that understanding in a heritage language of how an electrical circuit functions, for example, is the same understanding in English (school language). When discussing or learning about such concepts in English, a child who is already familiar with the concept in his/her heritage language may only need to learn the new vocabulary to talk about the concept in English.⁴⁵

Benefits in mainstream literacy development

Research shows that literacy in heritage language does not detract from children's mainstream school language literacy development and even supports school literacy development.⁴⁶ Frequently, those children who have developed heritage literacy skills progress more in their school literacy skills than those who have not developed heritage literacy skills.⁴⁷

Heritage language literacy knowledge and skills can help children enrich their literacy experience in their mainstream literacy. Children can draw on their cultural

and linguistic knowledge from heritage language literacy and use it as a starting point in their mainstream literacy. For example, the young writer of a ghost story can draw on knowledge of ghost stories from Bangladesh, while the writer of poetry can draw on rich imaginary and use of metaphor in Bollywood film songs or ideas from the Buddhist tradition about peace and harmony.⁴⁸

Moreover, the ability obtained in the heritage language reading and writing process can help children participate in mainstream literacy events with a critical lens.⁴⁹ For instance, 5-year-old Kanya told her kindergarten classmates that her native Thai language book, *Snow White*, did not use the same words to describe Snow White as the English book.⁵⁰ At such a young age, Kanya has already formed emergent analytical (critical) abilities when reading books.

Thus, supporting children's home language and valuing their culture can actually enhance their mainstream literacy development.⁵¹ Additionally, developing the attitude and disposition of a reader through the use of the heritage language can be carried over to the mainstream language.⁵² A longitudinal (long-term) study of a 15-year-old boy named Gurdeep, who is bilingual in English and Panjabi, has shown remarkable literacy achievement in both English and his heritage language (Panjabi).⁵³

Benefits in oral language development and other language learning

Research suggests that learning to read a language can facilitate the development of oral language proficiency.⁵⁴ Learning to read and write a heritage language can help children improve their spoken heritage language. I have noticed that my two children often 'import' the French vocabulary and sentences from their favourite French books to their daily French conversations.

Moreover, research has shown that reading can prevent children's attrition in their home language. For example, a study by Elena Zaretsky and Eva Bar-Shalom indicates that reading in children's home language, Russian, has lessened the degree of deterioration in that language.⁵⁵

Research also suggests that mere oral proficiency in the heritage language might not affect either second or third language learning in a positive way. However, a strong positive effect of heritage language literacy knowledge in learning the third language is certain.⁵⁶ The metalinguistic ability (e.g. the ability to notice and analyse different language features) developed in the process of learning more than one literacy will facilitate the learning of additional languages.

Benefits in having access to heritage culture

Reading and writing a heritage language can help children from multi-heritage backgrounds gain access to the wealth of their heritage cultural resources⁵⁷ and enable them to examine the world from multiple perspectives. For example, in her social studies class, 14-year-old Adrienne could give a dynamic discussion on the early people of the Aegean by using information she read in her Greek heritage language books.⁵⁸

Higher self-esteem and confidence

There is convincing evidence that children who are proficient in their heritage literacy tend to have higher self-esteem and confidence. For example, a study examining 1500 Chicano college students concluded that heritage language maintenance was not a problem but rather an advantage. Fluency in the heritage language was positively related to self-esteem, more ambitious plans for the future, confidence in achieving goals and the amount of control that subjects felt they had over their lives. All these factors were positively related to grade point average. All the participants in the study had very high competence in English.⁵⁹ Another study reported similar results: Mexican-American eighth graders who described themselves as biliterate had higher self-confidence than monoliterates (Spanish or English).⁶⁰

In summary, as multilingual literacy expert, Charmian Kenner, remarked in her book, *Becoming Biliterate*, by helping our children develop multilingual literacy abilities, 'we will help children become accomplished communicators who can draw on a range of different culture experiences. These young people will grow up well equipped to benefit from and contribute to our complex global community'.⁶¹

Key Features of the Book

Treating parents as active partners

This book treats parents as active rather than passive consumers of information. I try to include you (from here on, I will use 'you' instead of 'parents' to involve you directly in the dialogue) as my partners in exploring heritage language literacy teaching issues through:

- inciting you to build on what you have already been doing;
- inviting you to think about the strategies suggested in the book by providing opportunities for you to practise and reflect on how to incorporate these strategies into your particular circumstance;
- motivating you to become reflective parents by keeping reflective journals so that you can systematically reflect on your teaching practice and adjust the strategies that best suit your children;
- encouraging you to treat the information I have provided as provisional and to search for new information to enrich your experiences.

Moreover, I have moved away from the common practice of parenting advice books to omit the original source of information. I intentionally kept the original references in the endnotes to give you a head start in case you want to pursue further on these topics. I also purposefully included some terminologies (with explanations, of course) to help you get familiar with them in case you want to access research literature to learn more about a particular topic of interest.

Furthermore, I promote the idea of 'parent as a researcher',⁶² that is, you are encouraged to experiment with your home teaching, reflect on what you do, be an active consumer of research information on multilingual children and find the best way to help your children.

Expanding the traditional definition of literacy

Traditionally, literacy has been regarded mainly as an individual's reading and writing ability.⁶³ In the past few decades, there has been a growing concern about the limitation and simplicity of this traditional view. This book recognises the changing dimension of literacy and pays attention to the multiple abilities that children need to function as literate people in the modern world. The activities suggested in this book reflect the contemporary understanding of literacy in several ways.

First, this book considers literacy as a social and cultural practice rather than a context-free cognitive achievement.⁶⁴ This implies that the beliefs and attitudes of participants (children, parents, other family and community members) and their *habitus*⁶⁵ (the lens through which people interpret and relate to the world⁶⁶) play a central role in a child's literacy development process.⁶⁷ This also implies that what is considered an appropriate literacy activity is determined by its specific cultural or social context. Therefore, the activities suggested in the book value the different ways that parents and children practise literacy.

Second, this book treats heritage language literacy development and the dominant (mainstream) literacy development as a power relationship.⁶⁸ Conscious of this power relationship, the strategies and activities suggested in this book aim to help children negotiate between the different genres, styles and types of texts in the heritage culture and dominant culture by involving them in diverse reading and writing practices that are meaningful to them.⁶⁹

Third, this book endorses the view that literacy includes other domains, such as visual, audio, spatial and behavioural.⁷⁰ The activities suggested in the book go beyond the traditional text form by including different communicative practices in children's lives, such as drawings, songs, sports, cartoons, movies, and talking while playing video games. Although these domains are not congruent with the traditional literacy, they nevertheless offer a good opportunity to use the materials and genres that children are familiar with and help them represent meanings in print. For example, research shows that children who play video games have a different way of developing texts. The structure of their stories tends to be recursive rather than follow the traditional story-telling style (beginning and ending).⁷¹

Moreover, the development of information communication technology has significantly changed the way we communicate⁷² as well as the way we read and write. Reading and writing on the internet and through digital modalities require different ways of interacting with texts.⁷³ When we use the internet and other multimedia, we move away from the narrow, linear, print-only expectations of reading.⁷⁴ Today, both monolingual and multilingual children are living in a