

The Not-So-Straightforward Story of Maternal Education and Linguistic Input
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Maternal education is a known individual difference factor in monolingual children's acquisition (e.g., Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2006). This effect is so pronounced that positive effects from maternal education are frequently assumed for children's bilingual development as well (e.g., Hoff et al., 2014). As would be predicted, in research with immigrant and refugee children, some studies have also shown a positive relationship between maternal education and children's outcomes in their first (L1) and second languages (L2) (e.g., Oller & Eilers, 2002; Hammer et al., 2012). However, other studies have failed to find a significant effect for maternal education on L2 development (e.g., Chondrogianni & Marinis, 2011; Paradis, 2011). These conflicting results highlight the need to investigate intermediary input variables as explanations for why the relationship between maternal education and language development exists. Yet, few studies with immigrant and refugee children have considered such interdependencies. One exception is Golberg et al. (2008) who noted that higher maternal education was associated with less English use at home. Accordingly, this paper examines the interdependencies between maternal education and language input in a sample of 27 Somali-Canadian refugee children.

All children spoke Somali as a L1 and were learning English through a preschool program. Children had a mean age of 4;7 (years;months) and had been in the program for 8 months. Maternal education levels ranged from no schooling to 14 years of schooling, mean = 6.5 years. Three research questions were asked in this study. (1) Is mother's level of education a source of individual differences for L1 and L2 development? Linear regression modelling revealed that maternal education negatively predicted individual differences in Somali (*standardized β = -0.03, $t(25) = -3.20, p = 0.004$*), but it did not predict individual differences in English. (2) What is the relationship between maternal education and intermediary input variables? Linear regression modelling revealed that maternal education positively predicted the relative amount of English spoken to the child (*standardized $\beta = 0.47, t(25) = 2.67, p = 0.01$*). Maternal level of education was significantly and positively correlated with self-reported fluency in English ($r(25) = 0.57, p = 0.002$) and with the amount of time spent living in an English-speaking country ($r(25) = 0.62, p = 0.0005$). (3) Does the relative amount of maternal input in English (quantity of input) impact L1 and L2 development? Linear regression modelling revealed that mothers' relative amount of English-spoken negatively impacted children's Somali (*standardized $\beta = -0.46, t(25) = -2.30, p = 0.03$*) but did not significantly impact their emerging English abilities.

This study demonstrates that the effect of maternal education on language development is best understood through intermediary input variables. Higher levels of maternal education are not a guarantee of higher language outcomes. In this study, maternal education did not predict English (L2) abilities and it negatively impacted Somali (L1) development. The negative effect on L1 abilities arose because higher levels of maternal education resulted in less Somali input within this sample. For these mothers, war limited their access to education in their home countries and consequently educational opportunities often only arose upon arriving in the host (English-speaking) country, borne out in the positive correlation between education and residence in Canada. In contrast, many of the mothers in Golberg et al. (2008) where higher education resulted in more L1 use. In that study, mothers obtained a high level of education in their home countries before immigrating. Thus, it is not maternal education per se that is so crucial to language development, but rather the education influences how mothers speak to their children (Hart & Risley, 1995) and in what languages.

References

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