

The Reality of Reading in Multiple Languages: A Case Study of a Young Trilingual Student

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Abstract

Reading in multiple languages is a daily experience for many ELL families. They learn to read in English and maintain reading skills in native languages simultaneously. The processes become mutually influential and create a complex literacy experience. The current case study of a young trilingual ELL student examines her reading experiences in three languages, categorizes and systematizes the issues she faces during the processes, and identifies the strategies she and her family developed to deal with the challenges. The results revealed that some issues are common for reading in all three languages (e.g., word decoding, text comprehension, text interpretation), but some are unique for each language (e.g., reduced ethnolinguistic vitality for Russian, rejection of the language for Ukrainian, and feeling of empowerment for English). The study also highlighted the reasons for power struggle emerged in the family during the process and the changes in the participant's social and cultural identities.

Key words:

- English language learners
- Language acquisition
- Language maintenance
- Reading process
- Reading issues
- Case study

Researcher: Do you like to read, Maria?

Maria: Which language?

I expected to receive a simple answer to a simple question. However, by her counter question, Maria indicated another direction where my inquiry needed to go. Maria was a 9 year-old English language learning (ELL) student who came to the United States with her family. At the time of my study, she could fluently read in three languages: Russian, Ukrainian (native languages), and English (foreign language). Maria's success in developing almost native-like English reading skills within a short period of time positively influenced her reading self-esteem. She became a passionate English reader. At the same time, Maria did a lot of reading in Russian and continued to maintain a high level of reading skills in the language. However, the more Maria stayed in the United States, the more problematic became her attitude towards reading in her native languages, especially in Ukrainian – the language, which was the least represented in her everyday experiences. Thus, when I asked Maria an ordinary interview question, anticipating an ordinary quick answer, I received quite an unordinary reply that made me look deeper into the intricate nature of the multilingual reading process experienced by a young ELL child on a daily basis.

Regrettably, research lacks studies on the use of multiple languages in multilingual speakers' everyday reading experiences. It also lacks studies examining literacy experiences of Russian-speaking population, whose representation in the United States increases regularly.

Review of the literature on the topic shows that studies on reading examine the process either in one's native (L1) language (Mahapatra, Das, Stack-Cutler, & Parrila, 2010; Mihara, 2011; Nakamoto, Lindsey, & Manis, 2007) or in one's non-native (L2) language (Lesaux, Rupp, & Siegel, 2007) as separate practices, focusing on reading comprehension (Verhoeven, 2000), phonological awareness (Chiappe, Siegel, & Gottardo, 2002; Chiappe, Siegel, & Wade-Woolley, 2002; Gottardo, Yan, Siegel, & Wade-Woolley, 2001; Lesaux & Siegel, 2003; Lipka & Siegel, 2007; Nakamoto, Lindsey, & Manis, 2007; Verhoeven, 2000), and prior knowledge (Mihara, 2011). The degree of similarity between the reader's L1 and L2 languages (Gottardo, Yan, Siegel, & Wade-Woolley, 2001), the reader's motivation to read (Iwai, 2008), the reader's familiarity with the topic and text organization patterns, and the reader's socioeconomic status were also claimed to affect the ELL children's English literacy development (Droop & Verhoeven, 1998; Sharp, 2004).

Finally, the research emphasized that to make the process of L2 reading successful, the reader should exploit various meaning-making strategies. Some of the most effective ones were found to be the use of the reader's native language, when experiencing challenges decoding or comprehending the text; translating the text or its parts to assure the right comprehension; using context and prior knowledge, and searching for cognates (Jimenez, Garcia, & Pearson, 1996). In their study, Jimenez et al. (1996) observed how their Spanish-speaking middle school students used these strategies when reading and demonstrated positive results in reading comprehension. Seng and Hashim (2006) examined how their Malaysian study participants used their native language in a collaborative reading assignment to relate the context of the text to their prior knowledge, to translate the text in order to remove affective barriers that appeared during the comprehension process, and to discuss the text and its conceptual organization to verify the accuracy of their understanding. "The data clearly show that reading in a second language is not a monolingual event and that ESL students access their L1 while processing L2 texts" (p. 44).

Despite the fact that L1 and L2 researchers agree that L1 reading skills influence ELL students' process of acquisition of English reading skills, including accuracy, fluency, attitude towards the process, and motivation to participate in it (Yamashita, 2004), there is a dearth of research on L1 reading in a foreign language environment. The existing studies mainly focus on the heritage language of the second and third immigrant generations who try to acquire or revive the language of their parents and grandparents. In particular, they investigate the availability of heritage language reading materials in immigrant families' homes and communities. For instance, Pucci (1994), Ulanoff and Pucci (1996), and Lambson (2002) examined the availability of books and other printed materials in languages other than English in elementary school and public libraries in California and Arizona and revealed the lack of those even in places with dense minority populations. Tse (2001) argued that to develop one's heritage language literacy, it was essential to "have access to literacy materials ...that are relevant and appropriate" (p. 256). Her study of bilingual adults confirmed that the participants' high level of heritage language reading skills was conditioned by a variety of literacy experiences they had in their homes and communities.

The present study tries to fill in the gaps in research, examining challenges of a young ELL student while maintaining her L1 reading skills in the United States. The study also explores a variety of strategies that the student and her family developed to deal with the challenges and to make the process of maintenance effective and ongoing.

The current study also investigates the student's experiences when learning to read in English. The main focus was on the difficulties during the process and the strategies for dealing with them.

Finally, I was interested in how the student balanced reading in English and in the native languages on a daily basis, as they happened simultaneously and were mutually influential.

1. Methods

The present project is a part of a bigger qualitative case study focused on a multilingual elementary school ELL student, Maria, and her L1/ L2 and L3 literacy experiences in the United States. The goals of the present segment were to examine those issues that emerged during the process of reading Maria did in English and in her native languages and to identify and describe the range of strategies she developed to deal with them.

The study views the acquisition of English reading skills and the maintenance of Maria's L1 reading skills as simultaneous and mutually influencing processes rather than separate independent experiences.

1.1. Site and Participant

The main participant of the study was Maria – a 9-year old elementary school ELL student who came to the United States from Ukraine, following her mother – a graduate student in a Midwestern university. Maria was a multilingual speaker: her native language was Russian (L1); her L2 was Ukrainian. At the time of the study, she was still in the process of acquiring English language (L3), including reading skills.

In the United States, Maria’s family resided in a multicultural, multiracial, multilingual, and multireligious community. Her friends were from European, Asian, and Middle Eastern regions of the world. The children used English as a common ground for making friendships and for personal communication. However, at home, Maria switched back to Russian. In their household, her mother established a “Russian only” rule to keep the vitality of the language high. Although Maria followed the rule, she learned to integrate English language and literacy into her everyday home experiences.

1.2. Data Collection and Analysis

To examine Maria’s experiences when reading in English, Russian, and Ukrainian in depth, a case study approach was used (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). The data for this study were collected over the course of six months through a series of numerous interviews, intensive observations, and various artifacts (Merriam, 1998). During our interview sessions, I asked Maria questions about her reading experiences, reading preferences, comprehension and meaning making practices, difficulties she experienced during the process, and strategies she created to deal with the issues. I also asked Maria to rate her reading skills in each of three languages and to explain her ratings. As Maria read a lot at home and at her American and Russian schools, I had frequent opportunities to observe her during the process that allowed me to create “thick” description of the data (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997; Patton, 2002).

All interview and reading sample recordings were transcribed and coded. Throughout the study, I continuously reviewed the observation notes, interview transcripts, and reading sample tapes, developing categories, themes, and codes for Maria’s reading experiences in each language (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). I looked at how the categories and themes were intertwined within each language and among the languages to examine how Maria balanced the reading process in all three languages. To enhance the trustworthiness of the data, I employed triangulation (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009) and “thick” description (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997; Patton, 2002) and developed rapport with the participant and her family members.

2. Results

At the time of the study, Maria was a nine-year-old Caucasian girl with hazel eyes and long brown hair. She came to the United States when she was just seven years old with a basic knowledge of English and was placed in a pull-out ESL program in a school she began attending. Maria stayed in the program for only six months. Before she was ready to go to 2nd grade, she graduated from the program with an almost native-like fluency in English oral language, reading, and writing. In the middle of 2nd grade, she went back to Ukraine and returned to the United States in eight months. When I recruited her for participating in my study, she was already a 9-year-old 3rd-grader with well-developed English language and literacy skills.

Maria came to the United States with highly-developed oral and written Russian and Ukrainian languages. She fluently read and wrote in both languages. She read challenging books of various genres in both languages. She brought several of her favorite books in Russian from Ukraine and often reread them before bedtime.

Reading was Maria’s favorite literacy activity. At the time of the study, she was a devoted reader. When choosing books, Maria usually looked for humor, adventures, proximity to her reality, female protagonist, and illustrations. She also developed her own strategies for reading different genres. For instance, when reading fiction, she usually read the front and back covers of a book to get an idea about its content. When reading informational literature, Maria would skip the introduction, considering it a waste of time. Although, she knew its function in the book, she preferred going right to the text. She would also use a glossary, when available, and look at the book structure and page layout.

Although at the time of the study, Maria demonstrated fluent literacy skills in all three languages, she still was in the process of English language acquisition and frequently experienced challenges in all its aspects. Besides, her family struggled not only to preserve Maria’s native level of Russian and Ukrainian literacies but also to further develop them in accordance with the 3rd grade Ukrainian national curriculum.

Both processes (acquisition and maintenance) caused issues that Maria and her family had to face and address on a daily basis. Moreover, the processes mutually influenced each other and created intricate experiences in Maria's life. Therefore, the main questions for the study became:

1. What issues did Maria experience during reading in English and her native languages when in the United States?
2. What strategies did she develop to deal with the issues?

2.1. Story One: Reading in English

In the United States, reading in English became Maria's favorite literacy activity. She read English books every day. She read them in school, at home, and on the school bus. She read them silently to herself and aloud to her classmates, friends, and family members. As a result, at the time of the study, Maria possessed well-developed reading skills in her L3 that was reflected in a self-ranking of her English reading abilities:

Researcher: How would you rank your ability to read in English? (on the scale from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest)

Maria: 4, 4. Well, I read "Harry Potter" [book #4] and there are some words that I really don't understand. I don't have any idea what they are.

Maria acknowledged that her reading in English was not perfect, as she experienced difficulties with vocabulary in the process. She realized that although she read fluently, she had not achieved the level of a native speaker yet.

Maria's reading samples, our interview sessions, and my observations revealed that when reading in English, she also experienced issues with (a) decoding unfamiliar words, (b) text comprehension, and (c) and text discussion.

Decoding Unfamiliar Words: When listening to Maria reading, it was obvious when she was reading challenging words. The main indicator of such words was mispronunciation. Maria demonstrated several reactions to reading such words: she either openly acknowledged that she had mispronounced the word by rereading it several times or by asking for help (What is this word?), or she would leave the word uncorrected. She would also repeat the correct pronunciation of the word, if corrected, translate the word into Russian, or use language transfer to decode it. For instance, when reading the word 'geography,' Maria was hesitant about the correct pronunciation of the first letter. She started with [dʒ], then, uncertain, read it as the Russian word [geografi].

Text Comprehension: In the self-ranking of her English reading ability, Maria confirmed that reading comprehension presented a challenge to her and, therefore, reduced the points that she assigned to her L3 reading skills. When running into a comprehension problem, Maria could openly acknowledge the lack of her lexical knowledge or, conversely, skip unfamiliar words without pausing to ask clarifying questions. I also identified several strategies that helped Maria overcome comprehension challenges: (a) she used illustrations and context to understand the content; (b) familiarity with a book's structure, text layout, and print font assisted her in understanding how the book worked; (c) pictorial and verbal patterns in the book helped her break the text code; and (d) creating intertextual links between the text and Maria's personal experiences and other books became valuable for her when creating meaning.

The example below demonstrates how Maria used book features to understand the content.

Maria: ... And then it says by the picture of the bird that has all the things inside, it says, "Cover photo by King Waulcher." I think it's the person who did it.

Researcher: Are you sure?

Maria: King Waulcher. Ah, no-no-no, I got it. This, I think, the bird that I told you that looked kinda like a turkey. I think that's King Waulcher.

Researcher: That makes sense.

Maria: Because always when I look, like, pretend I turn the first page, and I see a bird. It's called "Atlantic Puffin." And it's in those little, um...

Researcher: Parentheses.

Maria: Parentheses. It says like (trying to read the bird's name in Latin). I think it's on other language.

Researcher: In Latin.

Maria: Yeah, it might be. I think it's what King Waulcher means on the...

Researcher: In Latin.

Maria: Yeah, in Latin.

Understanding of how a specific book was constructed assisted Maria in solving the comprehension puzzle. The first prompt that guided Maria toward her comprehension conclusions was of a grammatical nature. The preposition ‘by’ initially pushed her toward decoding ‘King Waulcher’ as a person. However, her attention to the book structure and to the languages used to open each chapter directed her thinking to another path.

Text Discussion and Interpretation: Text discussion and interpretation presented another challenge to Maria. Usually enthusiastic about reading, she never voluntarily participated in the activities, requiring making text predictions and answering interpretative questions about the text. When her classmates were having lively discussions of picture books, expressing their original ideas and answering higher-order thinking questions, Maria was quietly sitting watching and listening to other students. What could be a reason for such a reaction? The answer is mostly cultural in nature. In Ukrainian elementary schools, where Maria had studied for more than a year, the main focus was more on the knowledge of factual information and the student’s ability to glean it from the text than on text interpretation. Therefore, Maria felt unconfident in her ability to produce ideas original enough to be appreciated by the others. The strategy of avoiding such creative activities worked for Maria as a defense mechanism against her fear of failure. To participate in such kinds of activities, Maria needed a lot of encouragement and reinforcement.

2.2. Story Two: Reading in Native Languages

Reading in Russian (L1) was a literacy activity that Maria had been enjoying since her early childhood. Maria developed love for books at an early age and had become a fluent reader language by the time she started elementary school. She read books of different genres and difficulty levels. When reading challenging books, she naturally experienced comprehension challenges. Maria was very well aware of her shortcomings. That awareness was reflected in the self-ranking of her L1 reading skills.

Researcher: How would you rank your reading skills in Russian?

Maria: 4, 4, exactly 4.

Researcher: Why?

Maria: Because I read good. I read good in Russian, but sometimes I don’t understand some words. I read good but not that strong.

Maria did not consider herself a mature reader yet, because she was still prone to errors and setbacks. Self-criticism made Maria go down on the scale when evaluating her L1 reading skills.

As it became obvious during the study, Maria experienced several issues when reading in Russian. The biggest challenges that she faced were not about the process per se but about resources and incentives to read in her native language. During the process, Maria had to deal with three main categories of issues: (a) access to resources, (b) motivation to read in L1, and (c) issues related to the reading process.

Access to Resources: Living in the United States significantly limited Maria’s access to Russian children’s literature. There were no Russian books in Maria’s elementary school or in the local public library. It was impossible to buy these books in the local book stores. As a result, Maria had been experiencing a lack of accessibility to reading materials in her L1 since the first day in the United States. To provide Maria with Russian books, her parents had to be creative. They brought some books with them from Ukraine. Maria’s mother borrowed books from other Russian-speaking families. Finally, they discovered the Internet library of Russian literature. Although the last resource allowed for a wide selection of children’s books in the language, it presented several drawbacks. First, Maria did not have any access to the website, because she was not allowed to use the Internet on the home computer. Therefore, she did not participate in choosing the books, rather her mother made that choice for her. She picked the books based on her preferences, printed them out, and brought them home for Maria to read. And second, because they were print-outs, the books did not look like regular children’s books: there were no illustrations on the pages but the text that made “the books” unappealing and dull.

Motivation to Read in Russian: The longer Maria stayed in the United States, the less motivated she became to read in L1 on a regular basis. The current study revealed several factors that negatively influenced Maria’s enthusiasm about L1 reading, including lack of accessibility to children’s books in the language and absence of role models. As opposed to Ukraine, where all the members of Maria’s household regularly read in their native language, in the United States, there were no comparable models. She saw her mother reading in English for different reasons but failed to recognize when she read in Russian. Another factor dealt with the absence of necessity to read in L1 for academic purposes.

To deal with the issues, Maria's mother took the situation under her control: she constantly encouraged Maria to read in Russian (e.g., *Пойди, почитай русскую книжку! Go and read a book in Russian!*), controlled the language in which Maria was reading (e.g., *Хватит читать по-английски. Возьми, почитай что-нибудь по-русски. Enough reading in English. Read something in Russian.*), and enrolled her in Russian school.

Process of Reading: Despite the fact that Maria was a fluent reader in Russian, she still experienced several difficulties in the process. The issues that she dealt with when reading in her L1 fell under three categories: (a) decoding difficult words, (b) text comprehension difficulties, and (c) text discussion/interpretation challenges.

(a) *Decoding:* Maria read L1 books chosen by subject matter rather than by a degree of difficulty. Therefore, when reading challenging books she often ran into unfamiliar or difficult words. The data of the study showed that there were two kinds of errors that Maria made when reading such words: (a) word stress and (b) getting vowels mixed up (e.g., 'Ë' and 'E'). When Maria felt that her way of reading the word was incorrect, she often either attempted to reread the word or broke the word into syllables. To Maria's credit, she never seemed embarrassed by her decoding errors, accepted them as a natural part of learning, and assigned them to her inexperience and young age.

(b) *Text Comprehension:* When reading challenging books, Maria also experienced occasional text comprehension setbacks. It was obvious from Maria's reading that she did not understand the text completely when during the process she was decoding words incorrectly and never stopped to reread or to ask for help. Maria's mother and her Russian teacher asked numerous content-related questions as a strategy to make sure that she understood the text.

(c) *Text Interpretation:* Once again, text discussion and interpretation were among Maria's shortcomings. Maria did not feel comfortable when required to participate in these literacy activities even in her native language. However, she had to face her fears because both processes were integral parts of reading lessons in her Russian school. As opposed to her American classroom, where Maria could simply sit through book discussions keeping silent, in the Russian school, she was deprived of such an escape due to a low number of students in the classroom. She had to participate but always expressed her displeasure about it.

Ukrainian was the second language (L2) that Maria grew up around. She was immersed in the language from birth, but only passively. She started a productive use of the language when she went to school, where all academic subjects were taught in the language. It was also the time when Maria began reading in Ukrainian, but mostly for academic purposes. She rarely read in the language for pleasure, even in Ukraine.

Coming to an American city, where there was no Ukrainian-speaking community and no vitality for the language, created linguistic vacuum. Maria's parents were concerned about the situation, because they wanted her to stay at the same level of language proficiency as her peers in Ukraine. They realized that to be able to compete with her Ukrainian peers, Maria would need to possess well developed L2 literacy skills. They were determined to develop Maria's reading skills in Ukrainian during her stay in the United States. However, it became an extremely difficult endeavor; they faced several significant challenges during the process: (a) absence of reading resources in the language, (b) absence of academic vitality, and (c) absence of motivation to read in Ukrainian for pleasure.

Absence of Reading Resources: In the United States, Maria and her family discovered that they had no access to any reading materials in Ukrainian. They had not brought any books in the language with them from Ukraine. In the community, there were no Ukrainian-speaking families who could share their children's books in the language, no supplies were present in the local libraries and book stores, and no resources found on the Internet. As a result, Maria was left without any resources she could use to practice her L2 reading skills. This did not seem to upset her since she was happy to avoid any additional load added to her already busy academic schedule. Maria's parents, however, had an opposite opinion. They agreed that the issue could be resolved only through bringing books for L2 reading from Ukraine. Maria's reaction to her parents' initiative was intense.

She tried to resist the plan and refused to participate, causing a strong power struggle and confrontation in the family. Ultimately, she had to obey her parents, who remained persistent in their determination to maintain Maria's L2 reading skills and ignored their daughter's fierce resistance.

Absence of Academic Vitality: When in a foreign country, the strongest motivational incentives to maintain a person's native language include a regular use of the language for communicative and academic purposes. Both help to maintain the language vitality and meaningfulness.

In Maria's case, because there was neither Ukrainian school in the area nor opportunities for communication, she lacked stimuli to maintain Ukrainian in general and her Ukrainian reading skills in particular.

Researcher: What does the language [Ukrainian] mean to you?

Maria: It's 2, because I don't speak Ukrainian, there are no reasons. There are no Ukrainian schools here.

To help with the situation, Maria used math and Ukrainian language arts textbooks as a reason to read in Ukrainian when working on the assignments regularly assigned by her mother.

Absence of Motivation to Read for Pleasure: The lack of reading materials in Ukrainian in Maria's household resulted in her feeling no desire to read in the language for pleasure. When her father brought several books for her to read in L2 from Ukraine, she refused to do it. The power struggle between Maria and her parents over the issue became intense. To check whether Maria actually read in the language, her mother regularly made Maria retell the reading content.

Mother: Tell me about what you have read today, Maria.

Maria: It is difficult to do that in Ukrainian. May I do that in Russian?

Mother: No, stop inventing things. Do the retelling in Ukrainian.

The parents had to be firm in their intentions and to exercise their parental authority to get the situation under control and to keep Maria immersed in the language on a regular basis.

Despite the three factors discussed above and Maria's general unfavorable attitude towards the Ukrainian language, she still self-ranked her reading skills in L2 rather high.

Researcher: How would you rank your reading skills in Ukrainian?

Maria: Four, four. I still don't know many words.

The main problem that Maria saw in her reading in Ukrainian was her comprehension skills.

2.3. Story Three: Reading in Three Languages: How Does It Happen in Real Life?

As reading was Maria's favorite literacy activity, she read every day. However, she did not do an equal amount of reading in all three languages when in the United States. When observing how Maria balanced the acquisition and maintenance of reading skills, I noticed that the main theme for the processes became resistance.

Although English became the primary language in which Maria read extensively, she still displayed cases of resistance towards it. Despite the fact that Maria was enthusiastic about reading per se, she avoided participating in pre- and post-reading activities that required the use of creative thinking skills. Maria usually sat silently through those experiences, trying to avoid eye contact with her teacher to steer clear of the activities.

The theme of resistance also repetitively occurred during the maintenance of her L1/L2 reading skills. The strongest resistance Maria displayed was towards reading in Ukrainian. The language completely lost its ethnolinguistic vitality in the United States. There was no academic necessity to read in it. There was no accessibility to the reading materials in the language. Maria's friends from the Russian ethnic community did not use the language. To keep the position of Ukrainian afloat and to practice her L2 reading skills, she had to spend extra time and effort working on them. That caused extreme resistance from Maria. To break it, her family had to stay determined in their intention to continue developing Maria's L2 reading skills.

Although Maria enjoyed reading in Russian, she still displayed occasional resistance towards the process, namely reading Russian books printed out from the Internet library because they lacked those characteristics of a regular children's book in which Maria took pleasure (quality, illustrations, text layout, color). She avoided reading such "books" the best she could.

During the study, I have also identified other parameters that characterized the process of balancing reading skills in the three languages. First, Maria read in all three languages at home. Maria also did a lot of reading in English at her American school and on the school bus. Besides reading books in Russian at home, she also did a lot of L1 reading at her Russian school. She read books and other materials in English and Russian daily and in Ukrainian occasionally.

Second, Maria read in all three languages for academic and nonacademic purposes. The greatest diversity of reading materials that Maria had to read for academic purposes was in English. She read a variety of genres such as text-books, informational books, fiction, non-fiction, fairy tales, newsletters, poems, and so on.

The variety of genres that Maria read in Russian included stories, poems, factual materials, fiction, and fairy tales. Maria also used reading in English, Russian, and Ukrainian for homework purposes. She also did a lot of reading for pleasure. Although she did it in all three languages, the volume of reading was different for each language. Due to free access to books in English and because of limited access to reading materials in Russian and no access to any reading sources in Ukrainian, Maria read more in L3 than she did in L1 and L2 (English reading > Russian reading > Ukrainian reading).

Third, the ethnic vitality (EV) of each language greatly influenced Maria's motivation to read in the language and her general attitude towards the process. Strong EV for English created a high level of motivation in Maria to read in the language. She also experienced a positive attitude towards the process and displayed genuine enthusiasm about participating in it. At the same time, Maria experienced a reduced level of EV for Russian. Despite the fact that she still displayed a positive attitude towards the activity, Maria demonstrated declining motivation to get involved in the process. Finally, with the absent EV for Ukrainian, she felt no motivation to read in L2 and expressed a negative attitude towards the language, in general.

Fourth, because Maria displayed different attitudes towards reading in L1, L2, and L3, the initiation of the process also happened differently. Maria was the main initiator of reading in English. Because of her declining interest in reading in Russian, she did not often initiate it on her own but rather her mother took the process under control. Maria's mother also became a main initiator of Maria's reading in Ukrainian that caused her daughter's resistance.

Thus, it is possible to claim that Maria did not read in the three languages on equal terms. She arranged her preference in the following order: #1 – reading in English, #2 – reading in Russian, and #3 – reading in Ukrainian.

3. Discussion

3.1. Acquisition of English Reading Skills

The Vygotskian concept of the zone of proximal development (Bodrova & Leong, 2009; Dunn & Lantolf, 1998; Zuengler & Miller, 2006; Hall, 1997) became pivotal in Maria's acquisition of English literacy skills. When she first came to the United States possessing a minimal knowledge of English, she constantly operated within her ZPD, guided and scaffolded (Bodrova & Leong, 2009; Ellis, 1999; Foster & Ohta, 2005) by her ESL and classroom teachers, native-speaking classmates, and her parents. Scaffolding and discussions either in the foreign or her native languages helped Maria in text comprehension, creating intertextual links, and developing interpretative skills. This is congruent with the research that shows that it is crucial for an English language learner to be able to discuss unfamiliar concepts or challenging ideas expressed in a foreign language in his/her native language with other L1 native speakers. In the study by Seng and Hashim (2006), undergraduate students, native speakers of Malaysian, used discussions in their L1 when reading a text in English in a collaborative environment. The results of the study revealed that the students used their L1 to make meaning out of the text and considered their L1 discussions a key factor in the L2 reading comprehension process. The current study, however, differs from those on the issue in several ways. First, its participant is a young elementary school student as opposed to high school and undergraduate students, who were the focal participants of the existing research. And second, L1 discussion about L2 text occurred between Maria and adults as compared to the studies in the literature, where discussions usually happened between peers. These child – adult discussions became essential for Maria's successful comprehension of English texts where a child – child discussion tandem could fail.

One successful approach that helped Maria create meaning while reading in English became her ability to create intertextual links between the L3 text and other books, her personal experiences, and the surrounding world (Allen, 2000; Tompkins, 2011).

Such intertextual connections created a foundation for Maria's reading comprehension. They also pushed her on to the paths of creative thinking, analyzing, comparing, contrasting, and making inferences. Intertextuality stimulated Maria's perception of herself as an experienced reader in all three languages. It helped Maria understand that reading was a complex process.

Maria came to the United States with well-developed reading skills in her native languages. Maria's understanding of how the reading process worked facilitated effective transfer of that knowledge on to the new linguistic situation.

That helped her learn to read and write in the foreign language within a short period of time eventually demonstrating native-like fluency, word recognition skills, and spelling performance. In their study of sixth-grade Hispanic students' progress in a transitional bilingual program, Royer and Carlo (1991) received data that confirmed that "reading skills are transferred across languages and that second language reading skills are a function of the level of skill achieved in the native language" (p. 453).

3.2. Maintenance of Native Reading Skills

When in the United States, Maria's family did not set a goal of her complete cultural and linguistic assimilation. Although they were proud of the quick linguistic and academic progress Maria demonstrated in the new environment, her parents strongly believed that Maria should stay Ukrainian by culture and a Russian/Ukrainian speaker by language. Such a strong family commitment to their native cultural roots was reported to be one of the crucial factors in the process of minority language and literacy skills maintenance (Kondo, 1998; Park & Sarkar, 2007; Schecter, Sharken-Taboada, & Bayley, 1996; Tse, 2001).

The use of pop culture (books, video tapes, and computer games) was also claimed to facilitate the process of maintenance of minority children's native language and literacy skills. The strategy was actively used by Maria's parents, who believed that reading in Russian and Ukrainian on a daily basis positively influenced Maria's L1/L2 oral and written language skills. The strategy was also popular among Korean parents (Park & Sarkar, 2007), who used Korean books in their attempt to help their children maintain their heritage language.

When in the United States, Maria remained an enthusiastic user of Russian literacy. However, it was extremely challenging for her family to meet her needs in reading materials. As opposed to Asian and Latino communities that often have a variety of reading resources at their disposal (Kondo, 1998; Pucci, 2000; Tse, 2001), the Russian-speaking community that Maria's family belonged to was small in number and did not possess any additional sources but its members' personal book collections. Maria's parents did not buy any children's literature from online Russian bookstores, because it was too expensive, but used the Internet library instead. Such a situation with the reading resources negatively influenced Maria's motivation to read in her L1. There were also several reasons for her lack of enthusiasm that became more evident by the end of the study. First, Maria was bored from rereading the same books she had brought with her from Ukraine. Second, she was disappointed with the absence of books in her native languages in the public and school library collections, which, however, did contain reading material in Spanish, French, and Asian languages. And third, when reading, Maria was not only an information seeker but an aesthetic reader. She always paid close attention to illustrations from the perspective of the color, the style, and the correspondence between the text and its pictorial representation. The computer print-outs of the books deprived Maria of receiving aesthetic pleasure from reading, which made the whole process tedious and unstimulating. As a result, by the end of the current study Maria had demonstrated a gradual shift in her preferences to reading in English when reading for pleasure.

The issue of low ethnolinguistic vitality of the Russian and Ukrainian languages in the United States became evident to Maria as soon as she came to the country. Besides the minority status that the languages acquired in the country, Maria immediately felt a lack of necessity to use the languages outside her household and the Russian-speaking community. They lost their majority position in all the spheres of life (social, political, economic, academic, recreational, and so on) and preserved their primary role only for interpersonal communication at home and in the ethnic community. Maria quickly realized that she had to acquire English to be successful in the new linguistic and cultural environment where her native languages did not receive any support from the dominant culture or official institutions. The situation negatively affected the process of maintenance because of Maria's reduced motivation to spend extra time, effort, and energy in developing her L1/L2 reading skills, especially for academic purposes.

To revive EV for the languages, Maria's mother created an "individual network of linguistic contact (INLC)" (Kondo, 1998, p. 373) for her daughter. A constituent part of Maria's INLC—the Russian school—created a formal environment for practicing Russian language and literacy skills and provided educational support for their development. Studies on the topic revealed that many immigrant families from various cultural backgrounds also enrolled their children in ethnic schools to enhance the level of their heritage oral and written language skills (Dagenais & Berron, 2001; Pacini-Ketchabaw, Bernhard, & Freire, 2001; Tse, 2001). The absence of the Ukrainian school in Maria's area made EV for the language extremely low and made the issue of its revival solely her parents' responsibility. Therefore, reading in L2 became a chore and a subject of manipulation and constant power struggle in the family.

Although Maria's attitude towards the maintenance process was generally positive, she did not automatically accept the strategies developed to assist her with it. As a young child in a situation demanding a lot of effort to survive socially, linguistically, and culturally, Maria tried to make her life easier by avoiding any additional load that the maintenance process inevitably included. She often compared herself to her American peers and friends from other countries who did not have additional academic load. As a result, Maria developed resistance towards the process, which was gradually increasing with the length of her stay in the United States. Consequently, the power struggle between Maria and her mother for the control over the situation became ongoing. Maria's attitude was congruent with the feelings expressed by other immigrant children. For instance, in Kondo's study (1998), some of her Japanese second-generation participants felt overwhelmed by everything they had been made to do to maintain their Japanese language. They also felt disempowered because of their parents' rigid control of language use at home. They stated that "although they now appreciate their mothers' persistence in encouraging them to learn ... Japanese, they did not when they were children" (p. 392).

Analyzing Maria's reading in her native languages and in English, it is possible to make several claims: first, the data of my study showed that Maria experienced the same issues when reading in three languages. Namely, she displayed difficulties when decoding words, comprehending texts, and interpreting reading materials. In all three languages, she developed similar strategies when dealing with the issues. These facts allow stating that the nature and the mechanisms of the reading process are universal, no matter the language.

Second, the processes of literacy acquisition and maintenance are mutually influential through the increasing/decreasing dichotomy: the more passionate Maria felt about reading in English, the less enthusiastic she became about reading in her native languages. The more time and effort she invested in the development of her English reading skills, the less of that she had left to devote to the improvement of her L1/L2 reading. As a result, she required a lot of encouragement, reinforcement, and control to continue reading in Russian and Ukrainian.

Third, the study also highlighted the fact that the process of balancing three literacy systems in Maria's daily experiences became a sole responsibility of Maria and her family, whose inputs were invested in different directions. Maria devoted more efforts to the acquisition of English, while her parents intensely invested in the maintenance of Maria's L1 and L2. Their active position towards the maintenance of their native languages supported research in the area, which confirmed that it became a parental responsibility to preserve and develop their native language and culture when abroad (Li, 1999; Worthy & Rodriguez-Galindo, 2006).

Fourth, different investment directions resulted in a mother-daughter power struggle for the right to control the linguistic discourse of their household, including the process of reading. Although Maria often lost her battles and had to obey her mother's authority, she never stopped creating an environment conducive to the development of English reading skills that her mother tried to minimize. Therefore, the dynamics of the process was always unstable and caused tensions in the family. Thus, power struggle, that can bring positive outcomes for the maintenance of native language literacy skills, might have a negative impact on the relationships between adults and their children in ELL families.

Finally, such a constant conflict between the acquisition and maintenance processes has a direct influence on the ELL child's literacy identity. Maria came to the United States with a strongly developed reader identity. However, the English reader facet of her reader identity that was developed only in the country broke the identity unity. The breakage did not happen evenly. The facets of Maria's reader identity were not equally proportioned: the longer she stayed in the United States, the stronger her English reader facet of the reader identity became. By the end of the study, the Russian reader facet of Maria's reader identity was weaker while the Ukrainian reader facet was at the point of disappearance.

These changes in the L1/L2 reading experiences, Maria's realization of the languages' minority status, and rigorous control exercised by adults over her reading choices resulted in the child's resistance towards participation in her once favorite literacy activity – L1/L2 reading.

4. Conclusions

In the course of this study, I realized that even children with already developed L1 literacy system gradually lose their motivation necessary to maintain their native reading skills when in a foreign country where their L1/L2 are not official or culturally accepted. Maria was not an exception. The fact that reading in Russian was her favorite literacy activity did not prevent her from viewing it as unnecessary for her successful adaptation (social and academic) to the new cultural environment.

She treated her reading in Ukrainian as an extra load imposed by her parents on her and having no cultural, social, or academic value in the new linguistic situation. Overall, Maria's example demonstrates that children who come to the United States from other countries need a lot of support, encouragement, and reinforcement not so much for the acquisition of a new language but for their understanding that it is important to continue developing their native language skills to remain attached to their cultural and linguistic roots.

The current research also highlights several findings in the ELL area. First, due to their young age and inexperience, young ELL children may develop L1/L2 literacy shortsightedness, deciding that as long as they are not in their native countries, they do not need to work on speaking, reading, and writing in their native languages. Second, ELL children's parents or other caretakers suddenly realize that everything regarding their native language and literacy development becomes totally their responsibility if they want their children to preserve their linguistic and cultural roots and to develop linguistic multicompetence. Third, investing into different literacy processes, children and adults often get involved into power struggle causing tension in the family. And fourth, American schools and teachers do not help ELL families resolve their linguistic and power conflicts but put oil into them, instead. As schools are social and cultural institutions that require all students speak the same language during the academic procedure, they motivate non-native speaking children actively invest into the new language acquisition process, leaving the L1/L2 maintenance process out of the realm of their functioning.

To balance out the position of Russian and Ukrainian with the one of English in Maria's life, her family, like other immigrant parents, introduced various resources to Maria to use to maintain her native languages and culture. Although all their efforts, creativity, and determination made a positive impact on the maintenance process, they were still not enough to hold back the development of the subtractive nature of the multilingual environment, in which Maria functioned in the United States.

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