OFF TO A GOOD START? VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT AND DIFFERENCES IN EARLY FAMILY AND CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN FROM NATIVE-DUTCH AND IMMIGRANT FAMILIES IN THE NETHERLANDS

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Abstract

The present study examined the relationship between language learning contexts in family and classroom, and vocabulary development in the school language of native speakers and bilingual Turkish and Moroccan immigrant children in the Netherlands. The findings of this study offer insights for educational psychologists, teachers, and policy makers, as to how ethnic-cultural and socio-economic differences between families shape the language learning opportunities of young at the start of their school careers and how these learning opportunities in the context of home and the classroom contribute to early language advantages and disadvantages that have been found to be important predictors of later school success.

The measures spanned the months around the time children started kindergarten. Home literacy activities and family characteristics were measured with a questionnaire, administered during personal interviews with mothers. Children's Dutch vocabulary test scores were assessed with a test designed for bilingual research. Teachers filled out a questionnaire about classroom demographics and their classroom language practices. Differences in children's home literacy experiences predicted differences in vocabulary skills before the start of school, and differences in vocabulary growth from that time until two months into school participation. Home literacy experiences in the family context were less favourable for the children from the two immigrant groups, but for different reasons. Classroom characteristics explained additional differences in Dutch vocabulary growth and were less positive for children from immigrant families. This combination of less profitable home and classroom conditions for the children from the two immigrant groups helps explain why these children did not show a stronger increase in vocabulary skills once they were submersed in the Dutch language context of the classroom.

Introduction

Differences in vocabulary skills at the start of kindergarten are an important predictor for later literacy development and overall school success (Stipek, 2001). The lasting effect of early arrears in vocabulary skills indicates that, at least for some children, participation in formal schooling apparently does not suffice to overcome these initial disadvantages. Children from lower socio-economic status (SES) families, from ethnic-cultural minority groups, and children whose home language differs from the school language in particular show arrears in their early vocabulary skills. In the Netherlands arrears are particularly salient among children from Turkish and Moroccan immigrant families (Dagevos, Gijsberts & van Praag, 2003). For many of these children ethnic-cultural minority status coincides with lower SES and a non-Dutch home language. By the end of primary school their vocabulary skills on average are two years behind those of their peers and their reading and literacy skills trail significantly behind as well. This paper will explore home and classroom language learning environments of children from native-Dutch and from Turkish and Moroccan immigrant families in the Netherlands, in order to determine whether possible differences in the experiences that these environments offer will help explain why children start off with limited vocabulary skills and what prevents them to catch up. We will start with a short overview of the literature on language learning environments of young children.

Language Learning in the Home Environment

Early differences in vocabulary skills have been related to differences in children's home literacy experiences (Bus, van IJzendoorn & Pellegrini, 1995; Duursma, Romero-Contreras, Szuber, Proctor & Snow, 2007). Effective home literacy includes shared picture or story book reading, playful name and letter writing, as well as conversations in which genres of spoken language are used that follow the linguistic features of written language, i.e. oral story telling, personal conversations at the dinner table, and discussions about topics of general interest - topics that might occur in books, newspapers and magazines. The reason why these activities, more than other activities such as conversations in general or television

watching, stimulate the development of language skills appears to be that they offer children opportunities to experiences particularly rich language (Weizman & Snow, 2001). This linguistic richness comes from the materials used during these activities as well as from the child-directed speech they trigger. Texts of storybooks for instance, typically offer examples of rare words and coherently connected discourses to convey complex narratives, statements, and arguments (Leseman, Scheele, Mayo & Messer, 2007). Communications during home literacy activities typically involve large quantities of speech with long utterances that are lexically rich and syntactically complex, that frequently include metalinguistic references, and many child directed questions (Alexander Pan, Rowe, Singer & Snow, 2005). The linguistic features of the language use during home literacy activities basically resemble the academic language register that is used in classroom instruction and textbooks (Leseman et al., 2007). As such, home literacy activities seem to provide children with necessary opportunities to encounter and develop a vocabulary that will allow them to participate in classroom activities and understanding instructions in school. A study with kindergarten children for instance showed that children who were more familiar with decontextualized conversations because of their earlier family experiences, initiated and participated more in classroom conversations and subsequently were perceived by their teachers as more competent (Tudge, Odero, Hogan & Etz, 2003).

Family Characteristics and Language Learning

There are several reasons why children from immigrant families, such as the Turkish and Moroccan-Berber children in this study, might have fewer opportunities to participate in these activities and to experience the school relevant language input that comes with them.

One reason might be that for most children in these immigrant families the primary language input they receive in their home environment takes place in their parents' native tongue and not in Dutch (Dagevos et al., 2003). To develop a Dutch vocabulary, a child needs to experience input in that language. Therefore, even if these children have ample opportunities to participate in home literacy activities that stimulate vocabulary skills, the

vocabulary they develop is not necessarily in the language they actually need to participate in classroom interactions.

A further reason is that home literacy activities are associated with family socio-economic status (SES) and ethnic-cultural background. Studies show that children from low SES backgrounds, both in ethnic-cultural majority and minority populations, less frequently engage in these activities than higher SES peers (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Hoff, 2006). Although cultural differences in frequency of participation have also been reported, with lower frequencies for children from ethnic-cultural minorities, the strong covariance between low SES and ethnic-cultural background makes it hard to determine whether these lower frequencies actually reflect a cultural difference or rather reflect the less favourable SES position of families (Hoff, 2006). There are socio-economic and cultural differences between the Dutch, Turkish, and Moroccan-Berber families that are likely to result in different opportunities for children to participate in home literacy activities. Compared to the native Dutch population, the Turkish but especially the Moroccan-Berber populations in the Netherlands have a low SES (Dagevos et al., 2003). Immigrants from Turkey and Morocco primarily work in unskilled or semi-skilled professions and educational attainment (particularly among the Moroccan-Berbers) is limited compared to the native-Dutch population. These SES differences are related to cultural differences regarding education and language use. The Dutch culture has a strong academic orientation. Literacy activities are valued and common even for young children. Nearly all children start kindergarten directly after their fourth birthday. Secondary education has been compulsory for decades and as a result the educational level of the adult population is relatively high and illiteracy is uncommon. Although Turkey has a long academic tradition as well, only few children start school before their sixth birthday. Secondary and tertiary education is less self-evident than in the Netherlands, and illiteracy numbers are still high. Nonetheless, Turkish is an academic language and Turkish newspapers, children's books, and television broadcasts are widely available, even in the Netherlands. This is not the case for the Tarifit language, spoken by the majority of the Moroccan-Berber families in the Netherlands. Tarifit is a non-scripted

language that is used for informal communication. It is not used in Morocco's educational system or in the media. Even though education is compulsory in Morocco from ages 6 to 14, many Moroccan-Berbers, especially women, have not had any educational experience beyond a few years of primary school or Quran School and illiteracy is highly prevalent among women. Given the associations between family characteristics and occurrence of home literacy, these differences in distal characteristics of the home environment suggest that children from these immigrant populations are likely to experience fewer opportunities to participate in early home literacy activities, especially using the Dutch language, and therefore will have fewer opportunities to experience language input that stimulates school relevant vocabulary skills.

Kindergarten Language Learning Environment

The start of kindergarten signifies an important change in the life of any child, but perhaps even more so in the lives of young second language learners. For many of these children, starting kindergarten brings a submersion in a new language. Before these children can deal with the cognitively complex learning tasks of kindergarten, they first need to acquire a substantial vocabulary in the school language for basic communicative purposes. Studies in preschools and kindergartens show that characteristics of classroom language activities affect how well children manage to further acquire, expand, conventionalize, and de-contextualize their vocabulary skills during the initial period of schooling (Huttenlocher, Vasilyeva, Cymerman & Levine, 2002; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox & Bradley, 2002; Smith & Dickinson, 1994). First of all, classroom instruction is important. Children's vocabulary skills benefit when teachers explicitly instruct basic language skills, conceptual knowledge skills, preliteracy skills, and metacognitive skills and when teachers use rich, complex, and decontextualized language during instructional conversations. Instruction is particularly effective if the level is adapted to the child's understanding and when teachers provide feedback that has an evaluative aspect and aims to improve performance. Children's vocabulary development also benefits when children are stimulated to actively participate in

the classroom discourse. Teachers can stimulate children's active participation in language exchanges by posing Wh-questions, adding new information to a discussion, explaining words, emphasizing target words, providing feedback by recasting what a child just said, and by praising and correcting children (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000). There are a number of activities that typically occur in classrooms that seem to provide good contexts for this type of language exchange, for instance shared book-reading activities, circle-time conversations, dramatic-play sessions, and teacher-child one-on-one time (Kontos & Keyes, 1999; Smith & Dickinson, 1994). According to Smith and Dickinson (1994) these activities set the stage for language exchanges in which children have to move beyond the immediate conversational context to create and re-create events, to analyze experiences, and to share opinions and ideas. To do so children need to actively make use of explicit linguistic devices such as syntax and lexicon, and carefully construct chains of reference (Smith & Dickinson, 1994).

As with home interactions there are distal characteristics of the classroom that influence children's language experiences in class. Commonly mentioned characteristics are classroom size, age composition, language skills of the other children in the class, teacher qualifications, teacher beliefs, and curriculum. For instance, classroom interactions and instructions appear less effective when the concentration of poverty in the school is high and when percentages of ethnic-cultural and linguistic minorities are high (Pianta et al., 2002; Smith & Dickinson, 1994). Unfortunately, little is actually known about the classrooms and their language practices of the Turkish and Moroccan-Berber children starting kindergarten in the Netherlands.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

We presuppose that especially during the pre-school years home literacy activities provide important opportunities for children to develop vocabulary skills. We hypothesize that regardless of ethnic-cultural or SES background early vocabulary skills are more developed when frequency of home literacy activities is high, but that effectiveness of home literacy activities is related to the language used for communication. We further assume that the start

of kindergarten at age four adds an important new context for language learning to the lives of young children. However, just as with home literacy, the effect of kindergarten on children's vocabulary skills is expected to be greatest if language input is highly frequent and rich in content. We expect classroom language input to be associated with teacher and peer characteristics. In the subsequent sections we will try to answer the following research questions:

1. Do characteristics of home literacy activities differ for children from Dutch, Turkish-Dutch, and Moroccan-Dutch families around the time they start kindergarten, and do these home literacy experiences relate to children's Dutch vocabulary skills?
2. Do characteristics of the classroom language environment differ for children from Dutch, Turkish-Dutch, and Moroccan-Dutch families in kindergarten, and do classroom characteristics relate to differences in children's Dutch vocabulary growth during the first school months?

Method

Subjects

The data reported in this study are part of the ongoing longitudinal study on academic language development and home environment in several medium sized municipalities in the Netherlands[1]. This paper reports findings of 102 families: 36 families with native Dutch parents, 35 families with Turkish parents, and 31 families with Moroccan parents who spoke the Tarifit-Berber language. Day-care and pre-school attendance, child gender, and parental immigration age did not differ between the groups. Data were collected during home visits when the children were 3;10 years old (time 1) and again four months later (age 4;2, time 2). The children started kindergarten immediately after their fourth birthday. The children enrolled in 78 kindergarten classes (77 female teachers).

[1] The DASH-project (Development of Academic language at Home and in School) is a joint project of the Universities of Amsterdam, Tilburg, and Utrecht in the Netherlands, financed by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (reference number 411-03-060).

Measurements

Vocabulary. Children's receptive vocabulary skills were assessed at time 1 and time 2 with the Diagnostic Test of Bilingualism of the national educational testing service CITO. This test is specifically designed for bilingual research and uses target words identified by teachers as important for children's participation in primary school and understanding instructions. The test consisted of 30 items (Cronbach's alpha = .83) and its format is similar to the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. A baseline measure of vocabulary skills at age 3;2 was included.

Socio-economic Status (SES). Family SES was determined as a composite measure of the highest completed educational levels of each parent and the level of their current jobs, resulting in a measure between 1 (no education beyond primary school and elementary profession) and 6.5 (University degree and scientific level jobs).

Family practices. A questionnaire addressing home literacy activities was administered orally during a personal interview with the primary caregiver of the child (always the mother in this sample) at time 1 and time 2. The interview was conducted by a female research assistant from the same ethnic-cultural group in the caregivers' language of preference, i.e. almost always their first language. Questions were based on activities from the Caldwell and Bradley's Early Childhood version of the HOME observation scheme (1984). Interviewees were asked to rate on a five-point Likert scale how frequently children engaged in activities, ranging from never to daily. To assure cultural fairness we applied a broad definition of home literacy. We included not just activities that relied on some form of written materials, but activities that were purely oral as well, such as different genres of oral storytelling (i.e. religious, personal, factual, fairytales, legends, et cetera), and activities that might implicitly stimulate literacy knowledge through participation in everyday events, such as mealtime conversations. The home literacy scale combined questions about talks about personal experiences, conversations about topics of general interest, and oral story telling, with

questions about shared reading of storybooks, as well as reading of topics of general interest from books or newspapers, and name and letter writing activities (Cronbach's α = .87, *N* =12). Scale reliabilities for the three groups on these activities ranged from .72 for the Dutch families to .91 for the Moroccan-Dutch families, and were similar across measurements.

Dutch language use Mothers were asked to indicate what language(s) were spoken with the child during each of the home literacy activities. The mean score represented the overall percentage of Dutch spoken with the child during home literacy experiences (ranging from 0%, i.e. never speaking Dutch with the child, to 100%, i.e. always speaking Dutch with the child).

Teacher reports At the second measurement time teachers were asked to fill out a questionnaire about classroom and teacher demographics to answer statements regarding their language practices such as "I summarize what a child tells me" or "I use specific objects or pictures to support circle-time conversations". Teachers were asked to indicate how often they used these strategies, separately for native-Dutch speaking children and for second language learners on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (seldom or never) to 5 (very often or always). Based on these questions a scale for teacher's language strategies was formed (Cronbach's α = .67, *N* =12).

Results

Children's Dutch Vocabulary Skills

Figure 1 shows the development of children's Dutch vocabulary test scores over a one-year period. The scores did not indicate any bottom or ceiling effects.

[insert Figure 1]

A one-way repeated measure ANOVA with time as within-subject factor and ethnic-cultural background as a between-subjects factor, showed significant main effects for time (F(2, 92)=77.94, p<.001, r= .46) and for ethnic-cultural background (F(2, 92)=50.86, p<.001, r= .53), as well as an interaction effect between the two (F(4, 92)=5.96, p<.01, r=.12). These results indicated that although in general vocabulary test scores increased significantly with time for all children, at each time there were substantial differences in vocabulary scores between children with different ethnic-cultural backgrounds, and that growth over time was not always similar for the three ethnic-cultural groups. In fact, children from native Dutch-speaking families at all measurement times had significantly higher Dutch vocabulary test scores than children with Turkish and Moroccan-Berber backgrounds. However, although Turkish children's Dutch vocabularies were significantly behind those of their Moroccan peers at age 3;2 their vocabulary test score showed a stronger growth and they caught up with them, just before the start of school. There were no differences in vocabulary growth from time 1 to time 2 between the children from the different ethnic-cultural groups. However, the standard deviations of the growth measure within the Turkish and Moroccan-Berber group were especially large during the second period, indicating substantial differences in vocabulary growth within these groups, which could mask an overall time effect.

Family Characteristics

Table 1 shows descriptive measures of distal and proximal family characteristics for each ethnic-cultural group separately. The results indicate that Dutch parents on average were schooled on and worked on intermediate to higher general and vocational levels (for instance in the field of healthcare or education). Turkish parents on average had completed lower to intermediate vocational or general education, and worked semi-skilled job levels in factories, hospitals, or offices. On average, Moroccan-Berber parents had little education past primary school; they mostly worked in elementary professions as unskilled labourers (for instance as cleaners or factory workers). The socio-economic background of the families differed significantly between all three ethnic-cultural groups (F(2, 101)=41.57 , p<.001).

These differences accurately reflect the positions of these ethnic-cultural groups in Dutch society (Dagevos et al., 2003).

[insert Table 1]

Table 1 further shows substantial differences between the three ethnic-cultural groups at both measurement times with regard to the mean percentage of Dutch spoken with the children (time 1: $F(2, 101)=148.45$, $p<.001$; time 2: $F(2, 101)=104.95$, $p<.001$). As expected native-Dutch mothers spoke Dutch most often. Turkish mothers used Dutch significantly less often during home literacy activities than Moroccan-Berber mothers. For children from both the Turkish and Moroccan-Berber groups the use of Dutch increased significantly after they started school ($t(34)= -2.88$, $p<.01$ and $t(30)= -2.06$, $p<.05$, respectively).

The reported mean frequencies of home literacy activities in Table 1 show that these activities on average took place between a few times per month and a few times per week for Dutch and Turkish children, while Moroccan-Berber children on average only engaged in these activities a few times per year up to monthly. Again there were main effects of time ($F(1, 99)=9.21$, $p<.01$ $r=.09$) and ethnic-cultural background ($F(2, 99)=16.99$, $p<.001$ $r=.25$), and a marginally significant interaction effect ($F(2, 99)=2.90$, $p<.1$ $r=.06$). Turkish and native-Dutch children did not significantly differ with regard to the frequency of engaging in informal learning activities before or after starting kindergarten, but Moroccan-Berber children engaged in these activities significantly less frequently. However the increase in frequency over time was largest for Moroccan-Berber children.

Hierarchical regression analyses were then conducted to determine to what degree differences in children's vocabulary test scores before the start of school could be explained by these family characteristics. Entry order of the variables was based on their presumed proximity to the developmental process of vocabulary (see Table 2). At the first step, home literacy activities together and use of Dutch were entered as indicators of the proximal language processes in the family. SES was added as an additional predictor at the second

step. As a final step, two dummy variables were included for ethnic-cultural family background, one named ‘Turkish’ (i.e. all children with a Turkish family background) and one named ‘Moroccan-Berber’ (i.e. all children with a Moroccan-Berber family background). Case wise diagnostics identified four outliers outside two standard deviations; i.e. one Dutch and one Moroccan-Berber child, and two Turkish children. These cases were removed for the analysis.

[insert Table 2]

The results in Table 2 show that proximal and distal characteristics of children’s language experiences in the family context predicted a substantial 54% of the variance in children’s Dutch vocabulary scores before school. Literacy activities in the home and particularly use of Dutch predicted the largest part of the differences between children. However, SES predicted a small but significant additional amount of variance (3%), indicating that the effect that SES had on vocabulary skills was not fully mediated by the frequency of home literacy activities and the language used. Ethnic-cultural group explained a similar additional amount of variance, indicating that processes of language stimulation at home and SES together did not fully account for ethnic-cultural differences in Dutch vocabulary development before children start school.

In sum and to answer the first research questions, home literacy activities differed substantially between the three groups and these differences explained at least partly why children from Turkish and Moroccan-Berber families start school with smaller Dutch vocabularies than their Dutch peers.

Classroom Characteristics

The second objective of this paper was to determine if characteristics of children’s classroom language environments differed and to establish if these characteristics explained differences in vocabulary growth after children started school.

Teachers' reports of classroom and teacher demographics showed that Moroccan-Berber children in this study more often were enrolled in single age kindergarten groups than Turkish and Dutch children (51,6%, 20% and 13.9%, respectively; X^2 =13.39, p<.001) and that nearly 75% of their classmates were second language learners (SLL), compared to 56% in the classes of Turkish and 17.5% in the classes of Dutch children (F (2, 101)=37.12, p<.001). Despite the higher percentages of SLL students in the classes of the Turkish and Moroccan-Berber children, their teachers did not have more classroom assistance available to undertake language activities with small groups of children (on average 1.5 days per week compared to less than 1 day per week: F (2, 101)=2.64, *ns*). All kindergarten teachers were qualified on a higher vocational level and the majority of teachers had taken courses concerning language acquisition in general (81%), bilingualism and second language learning (88%), and second language instruction (70%), either when studying for their teacher qualification or during continuing-education courses. Although years of teaching experience differed strongly (range <1 year to 36 years), there were no differences between the teachers of the children from the three ethnic-cultural groups regarding these teacher demographics.

With regard to language strategies, teachers reported that they seldom explicitly told children their language usage was incorrect, regardless whether the child was a first or second language learner. Instead, teachers usually correctly repeated what the child said. Teachers in the classes of the Turkish and Moroccan-Berber children used this second strategy significantly more often (F(2, 101)= 7.81, p<.01). Although all teachers often explicitly explained the meaning of words to children, the teachers of the Moroccan-Berber children did so more often with than the teachers of the Dutch children (F (2, 101)=3.82, p<.05). Furthermore, while all teachers frequently asked children to repeat what has just been said, teachers in the classes of the Turkish and Moroccan-Berber children more often summarized what a child just said (F (2, 101)=11.18, p<.001). On the other hand, in the classes of the native-Dutch children, teachers more often asked open-ended questions (F (2, 101)=6.19, p<.01). Storybook reading practices of the teachers were similar. Teachers

sometimes asked children to retell the story, and quite often asked children about their personal experiences regarding the story's theme, but they most commonly asked specific questions about the story that was read, either during the reading process or after the story was finished. Teachers tried to support language development by often using objects or pictures that illustrated the subjects of conversation, by making sure that newly learned words found their way into different classroom activities, and by matching children with relatively poor language skills with children whose language abilities were more advanced, during play and work activities.

Table 3 shows the hierarchical regression analysis that explored if family and classroom characteristics predicted growth of children's vocabulary from two months before until two months after school enrolment. The dependent variable, vocabulary growth, was expressed by the unstandarized residuals of vocabulary test scores at time 1 compared to the vocabulary test scores at time 2. Measures of the classroom language environment were entered at Step 2 and included percentage of SLL students, a composite measure of courses taken by the teachers regarding the different aspects of language knowledge of language development, and the composite of language strategies.

[Insert Table 3]

Table 3 shows that 36% of differences in vocabulary growth was predicted by the model. In addition to the indicators of language stimulation in the family context, classroom characteristics predicted vocabulary growth. For children in classes with more knowledgeable teachers, larger vocabulary growth was predicted, while smaller growth was predicted when children had many SLL peers. Although the proximal family characteristics and the classroom characteristics did not fully mediate the positive effect of higher SES on vocabulary growth, the effect of ethnic-cultural background was fully mediated.

To summarize, classroom demographics differed significantly between the three groups, and teachers used different language strategies with Turkish and Moroccan-Berber

children. These classroom characteristics predicted differences in vocabulary growth, even when controlling for differences in home literacy experiences.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was twofold. The first objective was to explore if difference in Dutch vocabulary skills commonly found at the start of primary school between children from native-Dutch speaking families and children from non-Western immigrant families in the Netherlands, could be explained by differences in the language learning environment that was created for these children within the family context. In line with earlier studies, Dutch vocabulary skills of Turkish and Moroccan-Berber children showed considerable arrears compared to skills of native-Dutch peers, both before and after starting kindergarten (cf. Dagevos et al, 2003). The initial differences in vocabulary test scores between the children from the two immigrant groups at age three disappeared just before they started school. As found in previous research, Turkish children's Dutch passive vocabulary test scores showed quite a strong increase during their fourth year of life (cf. Leseman, 2000), more so than the children from the Moroccan-Berber families.

The results of the study supported the assumption that home literacy experiences provide important opportunities for children to develop Dutch vocabulary skills. The findings further indicated that language-learning experiences were less effective in the homes of immigrant families, but apparently for different reasons. Moroccan-Berber children's Dutch vocabulary skills fell behind because they seldom engaged in home literacy activities, however if they did, the Dutch language was quite often used. For Turkish children, who did regularly participate in home literacy activities, the limited occurrence of Dutch language during these activities seemed to be the primary reason why their Dutch vocabulary skills were less developed in comparison to their native-Dutch peers. Furthermore, Turkish children might have had more actual opportunities to experience Dutch school relevant language input than their Moroccan peers because of the higher frequency of activities,

which could explain why Turkish children's vocabulary skills increased more over the period preceding kindergarten.

The differences found in frequencies of home literacy activities and language use seemed to mirror cultural differences between the ethnic-cultural groups. The relatively high frequency of literacy activities in their language of origin in the Dutch and Turkish families for instance seems to reflect the academic traditions of their cultures. We suspect that the high prevalence of Turkish during home literacy activities has to do with the fact that Turkish community in the Netherlands, much more than the Moroccan-Berber community, strongly values the maintenance of their native language (Backus, 2005). Use of Turkish is further facilitated by the availability of Turkish literacy materials for young children. The low frequency of literacy activities in the Moroccan-Berber homes and the relatively frequent use of Dutch during these activities, on the other hand, seem to point to the fact that literacy activities do not play a prominent role in their original culture. As Tarifit-Berber is a non-scripted language and is primarily used for personal, informal communication, many of the activities that are traditionally associated with vocabulary development, such as shared book reading, or discussions about topics that might occur through reading in books, newspapers, or magazines, are less likely to occur in these families than in Dutch or Turkish families. Furthermore, as literacy materials are unavailable in their home language, Moroccan-Berber mothers need to be literate in Dutch in order to engage their child in reading and writing activities. Difference between the ethnic-cultural groups probably also mirror differences with regard to their experience with formal schooling in general and the Dutch school system in particular. Studies among immigrant families show that parents often are unaware of what schools in their new country expect from children (Duursma et al., 2007). Most of the immigrant parents in our study had received no schooling in the Netherlands. However, as Turkish parents had more experience with schooling than Moroccan-Berber parents in their countries of origin, it is possible that Turkish parents generally had a better understanding than Moroccan-Berber parents of what goes on in classrooms and how they as parents can help their child prepare for school.

The second objective of this study was to determine if characteristics of classrooms in which children enrolled were similar across ethnic-cultural groups and if two months of language experiences in the classroom would account for differences in children's vocabulary growth. The results showed that classroom experiences indeed had an impact on vocabulary growth, but that unfortunately classroom experiences were not necessarily in favour of the children whose initial vocabulary skills showed arrears. The differences in the classroom characteristics between children from the three ethnic cultural groups for instance showed that Turkish, but especially Moroccan-Berber children had many classmates who were young, second language learners like themselves. This could mean that language abilities of their classmates were limited too, and therefore that peer-to-peer communications were less sophisticated than in classes with older peers and more native speakers (Ollers & Eilers, 2002). Furthermore, although teachers' knowledge of language development was found to positively predict vocabulary growth, teachers of the immigrant children were not necessarily more knowledgeable about effective practices and instructions for SLL students. The data from the teacher reports on their strategy-use hold some tentative indications that this might in fact be the case. The teacher reports showed that although it was common for all teachers to engage children in activities that are thought to stimulate language skills, such as asking questions about stories that have been read, asking children to retell stories, asking them about their personal experiences with story themes, recasting what children say, using objects to illustrate conversations, and incorporating new words in other classroom activities (cf. Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000), there were differences between the teachers in the classes of the first and the second language learners in the ways they talked with the children. In the classes of the second language learners, more so than in the classes of the Dutch children, communicative strategies- such as repetition, summarizing, and clarification- were used to ensuring that a child had a basic understanding of what was going on or of what was being asked, but children were less frequently asked open-ended questions. According to Hargrave and Sénéchal (2000), question-asking, and more specifically open-ended question-asking, may be a key cause of language learning because it provides

children with occasions to structure responses, to use language, and thus to improve their language skills. When children are not commonly asked to formulate answers to open-ended questions, they will have fewer opportunities to actively apply and expand their skills in a relatively complex way (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000; Smith & Dickinson, 1994).

Limitations and conclusions

The present study was conducted with a relatively small sample of Dutch, Turkish, and Moroccan-Berber speaking families in the Netherlands that differed strongly with respect to family SES. Home literacy and classroom characteristics were measured by a self-report questionnaire, and therefore vulnerable to measurement error, socially desirable response tendencies, and cultural response bias. In the teacher questionnaire frequency of teaching strategies was an indication of practices on the class level, not on the level of the individual child. Although the study included several measurements, it spanned only a short period of time, and only the first few months of kindergarten. Longitudinal studies including a longer period of school attendance, and adding observational measures for family activities and classroom practices, are needed to strengthen the tentative conclusion presented in this study and to provide more definite answers to the question why differences in early learning experiences lead to early in life differences in vocabulary development, and why the school system does not manage to help children overcome their initial arrears. Despite these limitations the present study offers some insights to how and why the process of early vocabulary development in the language of the school is so different for children from different ethnic-cultural and groups.

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Figure 1

Dutch Vocabulary Development over a One-Year Period of Children from Dutch, Turkish, and Moroccan-Berber Families

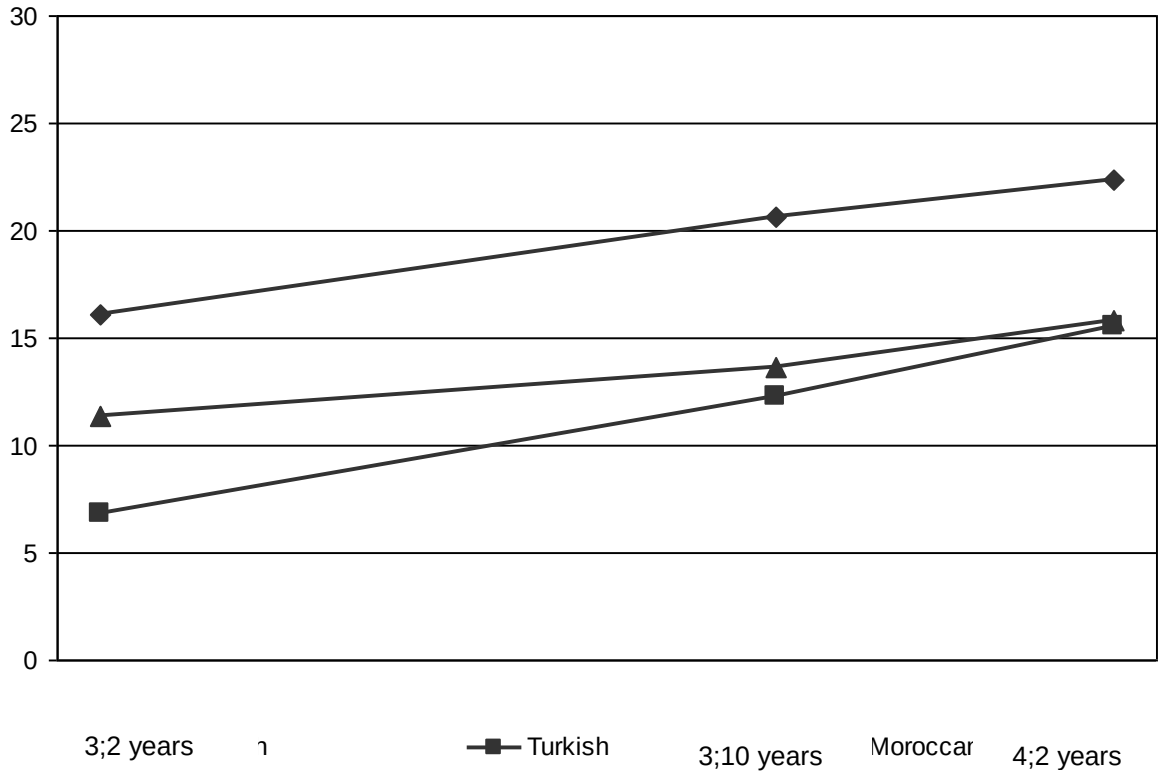

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Range of Family Characteristics for Dutch (N=36), Turkish (N=35) and Moroccan-Berber (N=31) Families

	M	*SD*	*range*
SES			
Dutch	4.57	1.17	1.50 - 6.50
Turkish	3.36	0.88	1.75 - 6.00
Moroccan-Berber	2.40	0.82	1.00 - 4.00
Percentage of Dutch spoken at time 1			
Dutch	99	3.86	79 - 100
Turkish	25	18.39	0 - 61
Moroccan-Berber	41	27.91	0 - 100
Percentage of Dutch spoken at time 2			
Dutch	99	2.37	92 - 100
Turkish	32	22.05	0 - 75
Moroccan-Berber	50	27.52	0 - 100
Home literacy activities time 1			
Dutch	3.33	0.56	1.70 - 4.31
Turkish	3.13	0.69	1.70 - 4.59
Moroccan-Berber	2.28	0.88	1.00 - 3.86
Home literacy activities time 2			
Dutch	3.42	0.54	2.19 - 4.41
Turkish	3.20	0.76	1.89 - 4.86
Moroccan-Berber	2.68	0.89	1.30 - 4.63

Table 2

Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Receptive Dutch Vocabulary Test Scores at Time 1 from Family Characteristics, Presenting R^2-change, Standardized ß's of the Final Model, and R^2- total (N=98)

		Vocabulary test scores time 1	
		Δ R^2	Final *ß*
Step 1	Language environment at home	.48***	
	- Home literacy Activities Time 1		.06
	-% of Dutch spoken Time 1		.26†
Step 2	SES	.03*	.17
Step 3	Ethnic-cultural background	.03†	
	- Turkish		-.37*
	- Moroccan-Berber		-.32*
	Total R^2	.54***	

† *p* <.10; * *p* <.05; ** *p* <.01; *** *p* <.001.

Table 3

Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis to Predict Dutch Vocabulary Test Scores at Time 2 from Family and Classroom Characteristics, Presenting R^2-change, Standardized ß's of the Final Model, and R^2- total (N=97)

		Growth vocabulary scores time 1 to time 2	
		Δ R^2	Final *ß*
Step 1	Language environment at home	.17***	
	- Activities Time 2		-.15
	-% of Dutch spoken Time 2		.32†
Step 2	Language environment in class	.13**	
	- Language knowledge		.20*
	- Language practices		-.09
	- % of SLL classmates		-.24†
Step 3	SES	.04*	.23
Step 4	Ethnic-cultural background	.02	
	- Turkish		.24
	- Moroccan-Berber		.06
	Total R^2	.36***	

† p <.10; * p <.05; ** p <.01; *** p <.001.