

LANGUAGE LEARNING: A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Sen Hi Wong

Lecturer

Education Studies Department

School of Education.

University of Waikato.

Earlier this year, in all sectors of the community, there erupted a backlash against Asians living in New Zealand. For those which this backlash was targeted at, little seemed to have changed since the 19th Century when the first Chinese miners in the South Island goldfields brought the first fears of a "yellow peril" to New Zealand. Barriers have long been used to prevent the entry of Asian immigration, amongst them are educational barriers. In 1907, an education test was required for Chinese immigrants (and non-British immigrants) to prove that they could read 100 words in English before permission was granted for them to settle in New Zealand. Despite recent liberal notions that New Zealand is a country sensitive to minority cultures, the fear of 'yellow peril' seemed to have been passed from one generation to another, and now has re-emerged again. Some of the attacks were directed at young innocent immigrant children who were beginning their schooling in New Zealand. The cry was that the children's lack of knowledge in English is detrimental to the educational system of the country.

Hearing these criticisms in the news and remarks from people in everyday life, I cannot but want to challenge some of these prejudiced judgements.

I recall being one of such children, a child of immigrant Chinese parents coming to settle in New Zealand in the late 1950's. Neither of my parents were fluent in English, my mother had none, and my father had just enough to get by in ordinary life. My brother and I, aged seven and eight entered the nearest primary school where Mum and Dad had a market garden. In six months, we were fluent in English, that is able to communicate with our peers and English speaking adults and to teach our parents some popular Kiwi idioms. We were able to read books in English, newspapers, and understand movies in English. The future showed that in terms of educational achievement, neither of us suffered from the lack of knowing English on entering school. My brother has a law degree and I am working on my doctorate in educational psychology.

In this paper, I'm not trying to establish a theory that all immigrant children have no problems in acquiring English as a second language or in advancing in education. I want to use my personal experience in acquiring a second language as a background for exploring some prominent issues for second language learners. In later life, I had been a primary and secondary teacher and working with school children has enriched my experiences on language and academic development. My experiences as a mother of two children who were brought up in an environment where there was a wide variety of linguistic codes has given me an insight to the impact of many interactions of many factors important for language acquisition and educational achievement. Teaching is a "pressured job", so I would like to make some support suggestions for the teaching

environment knowing that most teachers do not get the support that they should have in catering for students of different linguistic and academic needs.

THE MAIN ISSUES

Discussions in education and language are embedded in issues of cultural, sociological and political importance. These issues can be explored in children's acquisition of a second language. Non-English immigrants settling in New Zealand automatically become the minority due to the paucity of numbers in their culture. With the different groups of minority people in residence, New Zealand has acquired a multicultural setting. When children go to school they are inevitably thrown into this environment where one language, usually English, dominates over others. In language acquisition research, it is well-documented that children born into any socio-economic and cultural groups are all subjected to a variety of genetic, sensory and cultural factors. However, it is also well-known that children can make their own adaptations to different linguistic environments to cope with any linguistic deprivation which may occur due to their particular home environment. There is a notion that language development is a static rigid process allowing no flexibility. This notion has been confirmed to me by what I have heard and observed in everyday life (e.g. during the time of the "Asian backlash, comments were made on radio talk-back shows on this issue). This rigid pattern is refuted by those who have raised and worked with children and by those who have conducted academic research on that area. Although many academic linguistic research has debated over her work, Carol Chomsky's (1969) work on the acquisition of the passive voice by children are based on the notion that children do not have complete competence of language when they enter school. Apart from the linguistic issues, a strong theme closely related to this discussion is the notion that somehow children whose mother tongue is not that of the dominant culture is a source of problems in schooling.

The theme guiding the main issues for this paper, therefore, focuses on culture, language and education. The main issues I wish to discuss are second language learning acquisition, language acquisition, and educational achievement. These main issues are discussed by looking at some theoretical ideas on language development and language acquisition in relation to school achievement.

Firstly, I want to direct the discussion on language development and language acquisition.

There are many schools of thoughts on this topic. In the time given for this presentation, I will concentrate on two main contrasting schools of thought, one takes on the idea that language development and acquisition is a non-continuous process once the learner reaches five years of age, and the other espouses the idea that language development and acquisition is a continuous process throughout life. My personal experience in acquiring English as a second language tend to direct me toward the second school of thought.

This second school of thought argues that language development is not complete by the age of five years. It recognises that some very important stages of development are to come. Those who argued that the development of language is complete by five years imply that the development of competence with grammar of spoken language is all but complete by the age of five years. This school of thought seemingly receives the support of critics in New Zealand who say that children having lower standards of learning if they don't know English when they enter schools. When targeted at a specific minority group, feelings of consternation can result.

This criticism has raised much consternation amongst minority groups and I speak specifically for the Chinese people who have settled in New Zealand, some for generations. When it was suggested at a conference at Auckland early this year that Asian children should learn English before being allowed to attend school (Hamilton Press, June, 2). The reaction to this suggestion from the Asian community was one of anger. The counter-criticism to such prejudiced thinking is that such a suggestion is a threat to education for the young Chinese and traditionally the Chinese takes education very seriously. In general, it is thought that it is culturally insensitive to limit access of schooling to their children. Parents of Chinese children came forth to say that the best environment for learning

English is actually in school. Many have given anecdotes referring to the fact their offspring's English is quickly superceding theirs.

"The best place to learn English is actually at school. I certainly notice that from my daughter and my son and their English is better than mine"

A recent immigrant from Hong Kong.

The other school of thought maintaining that language development continues after five years takes on a developmental perspective in language learning. Much investigation in this area comes from studies of children's language development in school environments. After commencing school, Cromer (1977) suggests that an important transition in a child's linguistic and communicative competence takes place between ages 6 to 9 years. This developmental change involves the emergence of a whole range of linguistic devices and abilities which enables the child to structure the organisation of language itself into extended, coherent, spoken expressions. The competence to engage in conversation, or chat, which emerged in pre-school years, is further developed into an ability to sustain narrative in the first years of schooling. These practical aspects of language development are very important for the second language learners. In terms of academic achievement, second language learning research literature has consistently suggested that children who have been exposed to different language codes have enhanced abilities in acquiring languages and that this ability - metalinguistic awareness - seemed to enhance their academic abilities as well (Bialystok, 1987, 1988; Cummings, 1987).

From age 13 to 17, other abilities in language development emerge (Wood, 1992). Around 13, structural complexity of written language exceeds that found in speech thus improving written communication. Studies of classroom discourse and communicative competence imply that many other factors could influence language development while children are attending school. It is important to realise that not all children go through the stages of development in an ordered manner. Some may not need to go through some stages while others need to go from one stage to the other.

Summarising the two main contrasting school of thought in language development and acquisition, through my personal experience it is unrealistic to consider that the most important processes concerned are complete around five. I have known many immigrant children whose first encounter with English occurred beyond their fifth years, and yet, in less than no time (at least it seems to their parents), they are as fluent in English as their Kiwi counterparts.

OTHER MAIN ISSUES

Apart from academic schools of thoughts, there are other important issues involved in any discussion concerning language and education. The three important ones I wish to discuss here in this section are the factors which influence the acquisition of linguistic codes, the optimum time for the acquisition of linguistic codes and linguistic deficit.

ACQUISITION OF LINGUISTIC CODES

Learning a language, be it the first or the second is an exercise in deciphering linguistic codes. How these codes are acquired by a young child depends on many factors. One important group of factors consists of the strategies by which the child becomes aware of these codes and then absorbs them, rearrange them into expressions which are comprehensible to others. Metalinguistic awareness has been mentioned as a factor which could affect linguistic code acquisition. Other workers in this area have investigated other variables considered to be important in the overall development of language.

Basil Bernstein (1960) explored the relations between socio-economic background and academic achievement in terms of differences in linguistic "codes" used in the middle-class and working class culture. His findings concluded that the process of acquiring linguistic codes is a robust, genetically determined and universal.

When taking on this theory which implies innateness in acquiring language, questions which begged to be addressed are: In terms of education, are there linguistic codes that can be perceived by learners in the education system? Are there linguistic codes pertaining to academic achievement? Are educational linguistic codes influenced by factors which influence acquisition of linguistic codes?

Taking a wholistic perspective, to judge whether a child's language is adequate or not for educational purposes means that investigations should be conducted into their different rates of language development associated with different cultures, socio-economic status, mother tongue competence, and the child's communicative experiences. A child's communicative experience could be as important, if not more important than those theories which imply that language acquisition has innate generative features. The way in which adults converse with the developing child can be predictive of the rates of language acquisition. Language acquisition, therefore, depends on two main sets of factors, one set being governed by in-born biological factors, the other set governed by the child's communicative experience provided by the learning environment.

OPTIMUM TIME FOR THE ACQUISITION OF LANGUAGE CODES

Much discussion centers on when is the optimum time for the child to acquire such linguistic codes. A strong line of argument prevails that there are no set time for a child to acquire language.

Those who suggest that children are required to have certain language skills before they enter school are implying that children have already completed acquiring all their skills when they enter school. This is simply not so. Language and linguistic development is not completed by five.

Many other workers found that children's language development takes on important directions beyond five years of age. Karmiloff-Smith (1979) in her thesis that language can be used as a means

of referring to and representing the world maintained that important changes occur between the ages of around five to eight or nine years. These changes initiate important developments in both the child's linguistic and intellectual abilities. During this development, the child will experiment with different strategies and will adopt the ones which makes the best sense for him/her. Such observations are in accordance to the observations made by Piaget in that children can conceptualise and understand a problem without necessarily being able to express or comprehend that knowledge in language. Young children who are from a different culture have often been described by teachers in school as being reserved and shy and seemingly not taking in any teaching instructions and appears to be not learning. This is a misconception about the children's intellectual skills as in fact, a great amount of learning is indeed taking place despite the lack of any displays of desirable pedagogical skills. Inside each child, in his or her own way, language and other skills are being attended to in problem spaces which continuously confront the child. These problem spaces continuously challenge the child in learning to how to express what they want to say and and what they can understand. In suitable conditions, knowledge is constructed with meaning and with practice, and through trial and error, that knowledge is expressed with competence.

LINGUISTIC DEFICIT

Linguistic deficit of a child has often been used as a reason for his/her slow development in learning. Linguistic deficit is referred to here as the lack of ability in the acquisition of different language codes. Immigrant children seemed to have been designated to have a linguistic deficit by some critics. When this deficit is related to educational achievement, some serious investigations are needed.

When working on the effect of linguistic deficit and the acquisition of different language codes on school achievement, Wells and his colleagues found that any significant differences cannot be explained by the some linguistic deficit or by the interference of different language codes. Competing factors such as pre-literacy experiences and exposure to print however did correlate with school progress. Other studies have related linguistic deficit to the lack of reading progress. Clark (1976) in his investigations of learners exposed to linguistic deficit suggested that linguistic deficit may correlate with socio-economic factors and cultural backgrounds. However, workers in that field of language development seemed to agree that most evidence points to the consensus that whatever the background, any child who are allowed to gain varied experience (acquisition of different language codes) are likely to fare well in learning, that is do well in reading and writing.

So far this discussion has considered some important issues relevant to acquiring a second language. The main strands of the discussion accentuated the importance of a developmental process for language development and acquisition. A brief summary of language development of children is that to age five, children's language functions well in conversational exchanges about everyday events. Between six and eight years children's language appears to pass through a period of change as new linguistic functions are mastered and integrated into a reorganised system. By age nine, a child can handle utterances generated in abnormal contexts (found in school text books) and have acquired the ability to reflect upon, analyse and comprehend linguistic structures and linguistic codes. These stages of development can be recognised in children of all cultures. The ability to take advantage of these skills for academic achievement is the next topic of discussion.

LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE AND SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

Whether the differences in basic linguistic competence at school entry and throughout the years of schooling makes any contribution to the determination of educational achievement is a controversial topic for discussion. There is a strong correlation between learning ability and encoding of language. In research on mathematical achievement, how children manipulate their basic cognitive representation to master basic mathematical skills has been investigated at length. There is an area of research whereby researchers have investigated the differences in cognitive representation between children from Asian and non-Asian linguistic backgrounds and have related this difference to differential achievement in mathematics of children from different cultures. The general feeling is that Asian learners in mathematics seemed to be advantaged cognitively in that the linguistic codes which they are exposed to are empathic to the numerical codes necessary for understanding basic mathematical concepts. It is thought that Asian numerical language characteristics are more amenable to understanding of basic concepts such as the base 10 numeration system. Asian languages are rooted in ancient Chinese, the numerical names are congruent with the traditional base 10 numeration system. These follow very orderly sequences. English numerical languages lacks the orderly system (Miura & Okamoto, 1989), hence understanding of base 10 numeration, which is vital for mathematical achievement could be impeded. Although arguments such as differences between parental attributions and expectations can be raised, studies has shown that that fundamental difference in cognitive functioning may be a key contribution in differential mathematic achievement. Of course, linguistic competence is not judged only by the acquisition of basic symbols. In fact, it is not also judged by the acquisition and the use of single sentences. Maturation of linguistic strategies and the ability to reorganise these strategies have to be taken into account. In school environments, the ability to analyse and understand language produced in unusual contexts is essential for academic achievement. Bruner (1966) calls this ability "analytical competence". In the context of this discussion, the main point is that the processes involved in the development of linguistic competence contributing to literacy continues throughout the school years and beyond. We could be quite certain that the linguistic competence of a child who is destined to become literate undergoes further development and reorganisations.

Whether classroom discourse provides a good background for language development has been investigated in academic research. The conclusion is that more extensive research is required before any conclusive evidence can be drawn about whether such environments do encourage the development of linguistic and communication skills. Anecdotal evidence however abounds, particularly anecdotes from immigrant families who have to adjust to another language as well as to another culture in a short space of time. My own experience with this process of enculturation shown by my own family and my extended family indicates that immigrant children do learn much of their second language in school environments. If not from the actual school environments, much of the learning comes from being with friends made in school. The activities which most children indulge in, such as their interests in television programmes, video-tapes, music, movies, and books all contribute to their language development. That kind of extraneous influence outside their homes are so strong that at times immigrant families see such influence as detrimental to their own language development and maintenance (mother-tongue). The focus of this paper is not on the loss of the mother-tongue, but I wish to use some quotes to show its importance to people (I speak for most Chinese) who are concerned with this aspect of their everyday life.

"In my family, my sisters and brothers and I have varying degrees of Chinese speaking ability. When I was young, we had to speak Chinese at home and were told off for speaking in English. For T..., the eldest in our family, this led to troubles when she started school as she could only speak Chinese..." (Female Chinese born in New Zealand.)

"Gradually, we started to speak English more and more at home. What this meant is that the older children in the family learnt more Chinese than the younger ones. As the second to youngest in the family, I speak a little Chinese - or what I would call pigeon Chinese - although I can usually understand most of what is being said. My younger sister, who is seven years younger than me - hardly speaks or understands any Chinese." (A young male Chinese living in New Zealand.)

The point of interest from the above quote is "I can usually understand most of what is said", and this applies in other linguistic environment, such as that found in schools.

The loss of the first language lead to concerns for immigrants and educationalists for many reasons. Immigrants feel that loosing their language is like loosing their culture and language educationalists feel that maintaining the first language could help with all aspects of language learning. At the present time, in New Zealand, the effort made for language maintenance of the mother tongue (apart from English) remains the responsibility of the family. In my family, it was parental pressure which preserved my mother tongue.

Society seemed to be expressing some concern and anxiety over the plight of young immigrant children's academic achievement in schools. To appease these anxieties, studies conducted overseas reveal that scholastic success of immigrant children is well- recognised. In fact, their success has often astounded the host country, bringing out some deficiencies of its educational system (Caplan, Choy, and Whitmore, 1992). Those who have come to terms with this perspective agrees that Western schooling is not preparing students adequately to compete in a global economy (Stevenson, 1992). Deficiencies have become apparent as early as kindergarten and persist throughout school years. Such deficiencies are more evident when compared with their peers in Asian education systems. Another important finding is that the reputation that Asian students achieve as a result of rote-learning and repeated drilling leading to over-tensed youngsters are now considered to be stereo-typic. In fact, children from Asian backgrounds are motivated to learn, teaching is innovative and interesting and children are encouraged to construct their own ways of representing knowledge. These findings were acknowledged by Stevenson and his colleagues when they explored children's experiences both at home and at school in the U.S.,

China, Taiwan and Japan. In exploring academic motivation, it was found that Asian children were more enthusiastic about their education than their Western counterparts (for example, in terms of hours spent on homework and on the strength of support from their parents). Stevenson acknowledged that this educational enthusiasm comes in part from the well-known societal emphasis on education of the Eastern culture. Many studies of immigrants have documented the willingness of Asian children to work hard (Caplan, Choy and Whitmore, 1992). This attitude stems from Confucian beliefs about the role of effort and ability in achievement. Such beliefs have been ingrained for centuries in ancient Chinese writings and philosophy. In general, great importance is placed on the role of effort and diligence. In terms of second language development, although Chinese parents

themselves may not have the first hand skills to assist their children, the support which these parents give to their children can compensate their own language deficiencies in the second language.

SUPPORT SUGGESTIONS

Lastly I want to make some suggestions for the improvement of language development and acquisition of any willing learner.

It is important to make room in the present education system for programmes of language awareness for learners. The aim of such programmes are to develop the learners' awareness of language, to increase the learners' knowledge about language and to encourage them to think about ways of listening to and looking at language. Such basic skills can be transferred from learning one language to another. In fact these basic skills can be transferred from one school subject to another.

A second suggestion is that there should be more emphasis on developing pragmatic programmes when teaching language is concerned. In these programmes, students should be encouraged to communicate even when they are not absolutely competent with the language. Students' listening skills should be developed and they should be encouraged to be responsible, intelligent listeners as well as speakers.

Thirdly, teachers need to be aware of children's stages of development and abilities and to be able to use alternative ways to present lessons. For that to be successful, teachers, therefore need support in terms of speech and language therapists, workshops, resources and all types of learning media. It is essential that support includes up-to-date materials and that support materials are in good quality and supply.

Lastly, concluding this section and the paper, I wish to entreat to all concerned that creativity in language use should be recognised. Be positive about young children's skills when they are learning a new language. At the same time, have a greater awareness of cultural and individual differences by recognising and appreciating the contributions these differences can make in language learning.

REFERENCES

- Berstein, B. (1960). Language and social class. British Journal of Sociology. 11, 261-76.
- Bialystok, E. (1987, April). Metalinguistic demensions of second language proficiency. Paper presented at a symposium on language acquisition and processing by bilingual children at the annual meeting of the society for research in child development. Baltimore, MD.
- Bialystok, E. (1988). Aspects of linguistic awareness in reading comprehension. Applied Psycholinguistics, 9, 123-139.
- Bruner, J.S. (1966). The Process of Education. Cambridge. Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Caplan, N., Choy, M.H. & Whitmore, J.K. (1992). Indochinese refugee families and academic achievement. Scientific American, February. 266(2), 18-26.

- Clark, M. (1976). Young Fluent Readers. London: Heineman.
- Cromer, R.F. (1977). Developmental strategies for language. In V. Hamilton and M.D. Vernon (eds). The Development of Cognitive Process. London: Academic Press.
- Cummins, J. (1987). Bilingualism, language proficiency and metalinguistic development. In P. Homel, M. Palij, D. Aaronson (Eds.), Childhood bilingualism: Aspects of linguistic, cognitive, and social development, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Garton, A. & Pratt, C. (1989). Learning to be Literate. The Development of Spoken and Written Language. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1973). Explorations in the Functions of Language. London: Edward Arnold.
- Hickman, M.E. (1985). The implications of discourse skills in Vygotsky's developmental theory. In J.V. Wertsch (eds.). Culture, Communication and Cognition. Oxford : Edward Arnold.
- Karmiloff-Smith, A.(1979). A Functional Approach to Child Language. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- Karmiloff-Smith, A. (1986). Some fundamental aspects of language development after 5. In P. Fletcher & M. Garman (eds). Language Acquisition (2nd edn). Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.
- Miura, I.T. & Okamoto, Y. (1989). Comparisons of U.S. and Japanese First Graders' cognitive representation of number and understanding of place value. Journal of Educational Psychology. 81(1), 109-113.
- Stevenson, H.W. (1992). Learning from Asian Schools. Scientific American. December, 267(6), 32-38.
- Stevenson, H.W. and Stigler, J.W. (1992). The Learning Gap - Why our Schools are Failing and What we can Learn from Japanese and Chinese Education. Summit Books.
- Watson, K. (1976a). The education of racial minorities in South East Asia with special reference to the Chinese. Compare. 6, 2, 14-21.
- Wood, D. (1992). Culture, language and Child Development. Language and Education. 6(2, 3 &4), 123-139.