

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND LANGUAGE TEACHING, YOUNG LEARNERS

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This presentation will deal with the subject of language acquisition and some personal experiences in this area. This experience has been mostly gained over the past six years as an English teacher in a bilingual environment. The aim of the bilingual programme is for children to acquire English in much the same way as they would in a family where the parents speak different languages. The programme is currently operating in a kindergarten and 3 primary schools. The author has worked with both kindergarten children and school children.

Keywords: bilingualism, language acquisition, language teaching, young learners, motivation

In the programme, the children are constantly exposed to English during most of the day at school and at kindergarten. Mostly the children have no prior knowledge of English and it is through their desire to communicate that they acquire the language; in kindergarten for example, English is not taught *formally*. At school, all subjects, except for Hungarian and English "language", are taught in both languages simultaneously; the content of a lesson is usually given to the children in both languages. So, for example, if the topic is something to do with spring - then this is communicated in both languages. Depending on the age and English knowledge of the children, the English content may vary, and is possibly more supported through rhymes and games with very young children. It is important that the English teacher speaks only English to the children at all times. Mostly the children have no prior knowledge of English and it is through their desire to communicate that they acquire the language.

Before a more in-depth rendering of the above-mentioned experiences, some thoughts about bilingualism and language acquisition follow.

Man's biggest achievement is language. The most important step in life is when a person can acquire speech. Without language we cannot communicate efficiently and it is through language that people have contact with each other. Am I not communicating to you right now through language?

Children automatically learn language and by about the age of 5 almost all children will have mastered at least one language. Language is essential in all parts of our lives and its acquisition is important for children's physical, social, and cognitive development. Language is strongly linked to emotion, affect and identity. A child will acquire language because he/she wants to communicate. Not much thought is given to this very complex accomplishment; it is considered totally normal and expected.

Bilingualism is a complex phenomenon that is found all over the world. It has been estimated that there may be as many children growing up learning two languages as one. However, being merely *exposed* to a second language is not enough, but young children will become bilingual when they find a need to communicate in two languages.

First Language Acquisition

Generally, a child is capable of articulated speech between the ages of 2-5 and his interest in speech is spontaneous. Children usually learn their first language from their parents. Although there are many cultural differences in how parents interact with their children, most children acquire language at the same rate. To learn a language, children must be exposed to it and be able to interact with others. A crucial factor in both first and second language learning is the provision of a rich and stimulating linguistic environment.

In the early stages children use language from their direct experience, but as their language understanding grows, they can relate to increasingly expanding situations. As children develop their use of language they are learning about various social situations. Through play children extend their language abilities and skills and through play new vocabulary is also acquired.

Young children develop their language skills through interactions with more accomplished speakers of the language, such as parents, family members, and teachers, as well as other children. There is a great value in one-to-one, extended, cognitively challenging conversations, also with reluctant talkers. Children need time for social interaction and play with peers, which provide excellent opportunities for language acquisition. Children acquire language best in *meaningful contexts*, through *conversational interactions*, and later through encounters with written language, *and* this is what we teachers must focus on.

Second Language Acquisition - Bilingualism

Ideally, bilingualism: "*when both languages are spoken equally well for all purposes of life*" (Schreuder & Weltens, 1993). Bilingualism is considered to have three dimensions:

1. societal, pertaining to ethnic diversity in one country
2. individual, pertaining to, e.g., a person whose parents speak different languages
3. educational, pertaining to acquisition and conscious instructed learning

Bilingualism is present in almost all countries of the world and is not restricted to any particular social class or group. According to Genesee (2002) "*it is estimated that there may be as many children who grow up learning two languages as one*". In fact, most children in the world learn to speak more than one language.

Although most children become fluent in their first language, this cannot be taken for granted with a second language. While monolingual children usually learn their language from their parents, bilingual language is often learned from, e.g., society, teaching establishments, and/or peers. The exposure to a second language will often also be quite different: e.g., the

second language is learned only in kindergarten/school, from grand-parents, or even only at home.

It is found that children who are regularly and richly exposed to two languages will achieve the same stages of language development in both languages as those learning only one language. The same applies to both bilingual and monolingual children: some use words and/or sentences earlier than others. Being merely *exposed* to a second language is not enough, and young children will become bilingual when they find a real need to *communicate* in two languages. Children in a second-language learning situation must be sufficiently motivated to start learning.

Bilingualism

Positive Aspects

Basically, there are no negative effects for children who are bilingual. Children use the knowledge gained in acquiring their first language to develop their second language. "*Children who develop proficiency in using their native language to communicate, to gain information, to solve problems, and to think can easily learn to use a second language in similar ways*" (Perez & Torres-Guzman, 1996).

Children use the knowledge gained in acquiring their first language to develop their second language. Learning a second language can help a child to improve his understanding of the first language. Being bilingual gives children the ability to communicate with people they would otherwise not have had a chance to know. Knowing a second language leads to tolerance because the child sees how diverse our world is and that not everybody is like them, that *different is not wrong!* Throughout their education, they come to appreciate other languages and cultures. They gain greater flexibility in thinking and problem solving.

Negative Aspects?

Some researchers believe that it is harmful to introduce a second language to a child who has not fully mastered the first one. This is a common view in predominantly monolingual communities where adults tend to view monolingualism as normal and bilingualism as abnormal.

Bilingual adults and children alike often mix their languages. "*Research has shown that the most proficient bilinguals mix the most and in the most sophisticated ways without violating the rules of either language*" (Genesee, 2002). This is a natural aspect of bilingualism. It has been shown (see, e.g., De Houwen, 2004) that although young bilingual children sometimes use words from two languages in the same sentence, they produce far more sentences using only one language, which shows that they are able to keep their languages separate. Moreover, the social context determines to what extent a bilingual person (child and adult alike) uses more than one language in a single sentence: they use words from two languages in the same sentence only in appropriate sociolinguistic settings, i.e., when the people they are talking to understand both languages.

Ways of communicating in certain social situations can be quite different in some languages and children may not have acquired the ability to express themselves appropriately. This comes from experience and with time.

Bilingual children learn words in each language from different people and thus sometimes know certain words in one language but not in the other.

Generally, the total sum of vocabulary in both languages equals the total sum of vocabulary of a monolingual child.

Language Teaching - Personal Experiences

General

In teaching a second language it is crucial to remember that children have much to offer! They need experiences and stimulation for language to develop. Successful programmes must be highly interactive and child-focussed. Children must be given the opportunity to grow and must be strongly motivated. "*Active learning using constructivist and whole language approaches uses meaningful activities and children's prior knowledge, experiences, and perceptions to build real knowledge*" (Clark, 1995; Cuevas, 1996).

A different methodology has to be used for children as compared to adults. Children are more open to learning a new language since they have no preconceived ideas.

In school and in kindergarten there are many opportunities for children to interact with peers and new adults and encounter a variety of new ideas. Young children are led by feelings and emotions: imagination, experiences and memories are extremely important to them.

Motivation

Motivation has many forms. According to an article in "Blikk" (March 17, 2004) the use of puppets can be useful in teaching a second language. The puppets can understand only the second language and can be taken home and "talked to" for further practice. Additional useful aids are colour cards and various types of role play in daily situations. Songs, fairy tales and verses are further good ways of teaching and learning language, because music and rhythm facilitate the absorption of the new words and sayings. As the children grow, the amount of play will decrease as the actual practice increases.

In content-based second language instruction (CBI) the language acquisition is natural and occurs in context. CBI is suited for young learners because it focuses on message and not on memory or grammar.

Pre-school programmes can provide many opportunities for children to interact with peers and new adults, and encounter a variety of ideas. Young children are led by feelings and emotions; imagination, experiences and memories are extremely important. Children will develop and become ready for school in a loving environment and through *play*.

If a child likes something, he will do it wholeheartedly. Thus, the teacher must win the child over, must encourage the child, promote his feeling of success and not let the child feel failure. Children must be allowed to think freely, and they must feel secure, both in the family and with the teacher; love is very important.

So, one of the key words in teaching a language is *motivation*. Not only do we as teachers need to motivate our pupils, we also have to keep their interest. It is an important task to make also grammar interesting. To keep up motivation any lesson should be varied and a number of different methods should be used. We can further keep up interest by using themes from daily life. For young learners the following themes are always relevant:

- greetings
- family/home
- food and drink
- celebrations/seasons
- plants/animals
- colours and numbers

As teachers we must furthermore always encourage success and remember that each child has a lot to offer and contribute.

Personal Experiences

In September 2009, this bilingual programme started with a first grade at *Széchenyi Primary School in Budakeszi*. Mostly, the children had no previous knowledge of English at all.

Often at the beginning (and even more so in kindergarten), the children are sceptical of this "strange" person in the classroom, who can't seem to understand them, even if they raise their voice or repeat their sentences over and over! This was no different in Budakeszi. In the very first lesson the author was met with a class full of slightly nervous faces, some reluctant and even defensive. Quickly though the rhymes and games did the trick and things started to "click"; from "Number six, pick up sticks" the awareness of numbers developed.

The English teacher becomes accepted very quickly, and as language miraculously develops, his/her presence is natural and expected. The children realize that to communicate with this person they need to acquire his/her language. And they do want to communicate! At first with gestures and a few words (the first word is usually "no"!), and then in increasingly longer sentences! The children are usually proud that they can communicate with this teacher, something that is special to them. Often they will help in explaining to the teacher what is happening around them.

The author considers it to be very important that the children know that they can communicate only in English with the (English) teacher. This is extremely important for the development of their communication skills: if they do not know how to say something, using words that they *do* know and gestures will usually do the trick. Having to think for themselves as to how they can describe something, get their message across, is much more valuable and stimulating than simply asking "what's the English word for...?" It is most rewarding to see the children's language develop.

Now by the end of the first year, for example, addition and subtraction in English is an easy task for the children. They do not seem to translate when they say that "1+1=2" - they just automatically say it in English when they speak to the English teacher. Their feeling of "who me? I can't speak English" is long gone. Daily tasks and activities, such as open your books on p..., or let's make a circle, and so on, which seemed almost insurmountable tasks a few months ago, flow as smoothly in English as in Hungarian.

Of course, some children have acquired English more quickly than others. Some believe that they can translate anything the teacher says for those who might not understand. For example, recently, some children were happily, and noisily, playing with cushions in an adjacent room when they were asked to please be a little bit quiet and not throw the cushions around. The author I was pleased to see that the children had understood: one boy explained to the others what had been said: In Hungarian he said: the teacher said we have to be quiet because she said "kuss" (in Hungarian this mean

"shut up" and is pronounced "cush")! The irony of the situation made a lasting impression!

There have been many rewarding moments this year and many frustrating ones as well! But there is no doubt that being able to communicate in English with the children, and on a variety of topics, is a wonderful experience.

Conclusion

The importance of language in general has been discussed. The differences between first and second language acquisition have been touched upon, as have some of the problems that may be encountered in bilingualism. The learning of language and its importance for young learners has been dealt with in a little more detail.

Language is very complex and children only learn to speak when they hear people talk to them in many different situations; a strongly supportive and rich environment is crucial. It is well-known that young children generally learn a second language easily. Therefore, the earlier a second language is introduced into their educational programme, the better. As new generations speaking more than one language emerge, communication between various ethnic groups, across visible and invisible borders will become facilitated and prejudices and intolerances dispelled.

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