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ABSTRACT

This case study describes the language development of a preschool child exposed to Spanish in her home environment and to English outside the family. It is the parents' hope that the child will learn to speak, read, and write Spanish first, while learning to speak English before entering school. Her progress is described in this report, as are outside factors accounting for specific development. Prestige is regarded as a key factor in the learning of a second language, with the degree of success or failure of bilingual education in the home or school proportionate to the degree to which prestige is associated with each language being learned. (VM)

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DIFFERENTIAL RESPONSE TO LANGUAGE STIMULI BEFORE AGE 3: A CASE STUDY

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The case study which provides data for the following report not only is still in progress at the present writing, but is at a stage in which it is impossible to derive even tentative conclusions with respect to the most important of the hypotheses being tested. The report is being written at this time in the hope of eliciting suggestions with respect to further techniques of experimentation and observation.[1]

The basic hypotheses attempt to state the most favorable conditions for the learning, retention, and continuing development of abilities in a minority language throughout the lifetime of the person. In general, it is assumed that although children are capable of becoming skilled in the use of two or more languages before the age of six, practical ability to use a minority language may be lost rapidly after that age unless certain conditions are met.[2] Some of these conditions are thought to be the following: 1) continuing exclusive or almost exclusive use of the minority language by a person of the child's household in speaking with the child; the greater the prestige of this person in the view of the child, the more favorable the prognosis for continuing use and development of the language; 2) development of literacy in the minority language; the earlier

the development of literacy, and the more completely abilities are developed before learning the majority language, the more favorable the prognosis; 3) absence of television or highly restricted viewing of shows in the majority language; the less time spent in viewing television presented in the majority language, the greater the possibility of preserving and developing the minority language; and 4) use of the minority language in teaching the child academic subjects other than language; the higher the prestige of the teacher and the more academic the subject, the greater the possibility of continuing development of the minority language.[3]

The key concept in these statements is regarded as "prestige," and the degree of success or failure of bilingual education in the home or in the school is considered proportionate to the degree to which prestige is associated with each language being learned. In this respect, the following generalizations may be subsumed under the hypotheses previously stated: 1a) the person of least prestige in most households is the family servant, and the father the person of greatest prestige (even though--or perhaps because--emotional ties to the mother are usually strongest); 2a) the prestige of a language is in proportion to the degree to which one is literate in that language; 3a) the prestige of a language is proportionate to the degree to which the family responds to the mass media, especially television programs, presented in that language;

and 4a) in the United States, the most prestigious subjects in school are those associated with cognitive development, and the least prestigious those associated with emotive activities.

In view of the above considerations, the parents of Raquel, the subject presently under consideration, decided to speak only Spanish to her at home, although it is the second language of her father and the family lives in an English-speaking neighborhood.[4] She was expected to learn English as a second language largely from playmates. There is no television set in the home. With respect to written language, they decided to teach her to read and write in Spanish first, while learning to speak English, so that before entering school she would be literate in Spanish and understand spoken English.

In the personal sense, their language policies were chosen for practical, psychological, and socio-cultural reasons, with the purpose of giving the child highly developed capabilities in at least two languages, motivation to use each of the languages as permament vehicles of spoken and written expression, favorable attitudes toward those who speak each of them, and a deep understanding of the socio-cultural value systems associated with each, with preference given to Spanish as a vehicle of personal experience and relationships, and to English for the manipulation of cognitive structures. These purposes are considered desirable by Raquel's parents for most children living in bilingual communities in the United States whose home language is Spanish.

At the present writing, Raquel has spent eight of the twenty months she has been using words in South America (Peru and Colombia), including time periods during which she was fourteen to nineteen and twenty-eight to thirty-one months of age. Her response to English was developed almost entirely, therefore, between the ages of nineteen and twenty-eight months, diminishing in the subsequent five months to understanding of only a few words and use of no more than three of four. Therefore the present report emphasizes response to Spanish language stimuli, including spoken words, names of letters, various forms of writing, sentences, numbers, illustrations, recordings, and one television series.

From the age of nine to fourteen months, active vocabulary was limited to approximately six words in Spanish: mamá, papá, Raquel, gracias, no, and ya. During the following five months, spent in Lima, Peru, approximately twenty words were added. Upon returning to the United States at the age of nineteen months, rapid vocabulary development began within three weeks, and during the twentieth month at least thirty-six new words were used, all in Spanish. In addition, four letters, a, b, c, and e were recognized and named at sight. Raquel's first original sentence was produced at twenty-seven months: "Escribe algo."

Although it may be to a degree coincidental, rapid vocabulary development began with the gift of a Spanish alphabet book with large clear capital letters, no words, and rather abstract illustrations. Raquel was more interested in the

letters than in the illustrations, and between the ages of twenty and twenty-four months she learned to recognize twenty-four letters, eleven written words (one-inch capital letters written with ball-point pen on 3x5 cards), and had attempted to write several letters, reproducing in recognizable form the written a, e, and o, calling the written letter by its Spanish name. A month later she was able to read ten more words upon sight only, and an additional six after hearing the letters pronounced.

By the age of twenty-five months her active Spanish vocabulary was more than 300 words, but she had used only five words in English: bye-bye, okay, Susy (her next door playmate), water, and this. In other words, during the time in the United States that she was adding approximately fifty words per month to her active Spanish vocabulary, she was adding only one per month to her English vocabulary, in spite of almost daily contact with neighborhood children who spoke only English. She insisted that they "understand" her Spanish rather than attempting to communicate with them in English.

At the age of two years her father administered a Spanish version of the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test used in one of the bilingual elementary school programs, and she scored a mental age of 2 years and 2 months. Her score in English was zero.

One assumption related to the learning of written Spanish first was that it would be learned more rapidly than English might be, due to the predictability and clarity of the sound system and the close correspondence between the sound and the writing systems.[5] This was partially verified by the fact that Raquel wanted to make the systems even more predictable and less ambiguous, with a still closer correspondence between the speaking and writing systems.

For example, she insisted that the "W" was an inverted "M" and at first refused to pronounce the term "ve-doble." She had learned the term "ve" for the "B," and refused to use the same term for the "V." She did not regard it appropriate to use a sound for a double letter, such as "LL" or "CH." Although she learned to make these distinctions, it was with much reluctance and continuing skepticism.

At the age of twenty-one months she was given a set of blocks in order to be able to learn to put letters together to form words, and of course several of the Spanish letters were not included. She apparently missed them, because several months later when she saw a written "Ñ" she repeated the term for it again and again, with all the thrill of having seen an old friend. In the meantime, she had been given a set of plastic lower-case letters with magnets to attach to a slate; she favored the letters similar to capitals and those which did not change name when reversed or inverted.

Shortly after receiving the blocks, she noticed the typewriter and tried to put her blocks on top of the keys, matching them to the typewriter letters. She likes to "write" with the typewriter, but still thinks of it as a machine to produce individual letters, not words and sentences.

During this period from twenty to twenty-five months she seemed to live in a world of letters, discovering them on signs, in newspapers, and through her environment--although largely in English sets, of course. For example, at twenty-two months she was so impressed by the huge letters spelling out SAFEWAY on a store that she cried to climb up and play with them. When she saw an advertisement for K-MART in the newspaper at twenty-four months, she pointed to the name and said "tienda."

From the age of twenty-five to twenty-eight months, although play with words and letters continued on much the same basis as before, generally with Raquel's father, her interest in both letters and words declined steadily. She treated these sessions with ever less seriousness, laughing and often responding in nonsense syllables. One reason seemed to be an increasing interest in other forms of language play and graphic representation.

During this time she accepted English from non-Spanish speakers, understanding most of what was said to her in simple terms, but would protest if her father used English with her, shaking her head and saying, "no, no, no, no, no."

Although Raquel's parents do not have a television set, she viewed television while in Lima at her grandparents' home from the age of fourteen to nineteen months. She was interested in only one program, "Topo Gigio," and this interest extended to a recording of songs from the program, which she insisted on having played five or six times each day. However, she did not become interested in hearing other records until a year later, when her father acquired several records being used in a bilingual program. Of these, she first responded with great enthusiasm exclusively to a recording by Luz Bermejo, wanted to hear it constantly, and did not want any other record to be played. This record, and no other, was "música para niños."

However, two weeks later another record was chosen as "música para niños" and she no longer wanted to hear Luz Bermejo. In this way she changed her enthusiasm regularly every one or two weeks. She generally responded by dancing enthusiastically for an hour or more at a time, and repeating words and phrases heard on the record. During the period of intense interest in one record, she would reject violently all others, even previous favorites.

This pattern was also followed in her reactions to other language stimuli. For example, from twenty-five to twenty-eight months she became interested in drawing, and would reject written symbols: "mamá" became a drawing of <u>mamá</u>, and she did not want the word to be written.

Although she continued to play with English-speaking children only, Raquel's active vocabulary in English continued to expand by only two or three words per month.

At the age of twenty-eight months, she went for a visit with her mother to her grandparents' home in Lima, remaining seven weeks. During this period of time, she forgot almost all the English she had learned, and lost interest in reading and also in responding to words spelled orally. Her response to the latter was by repeating the letters very rapidly rather than saying the word. Her only utterance in English during the week following this visit was in response to her father, when he told her, "You are a lovely girl." She replied, "Thank you. Please." After another month in Bogotá, however, her response to this remark in English was, "No. Soy Raquelita."

In Bogotá, during her thirtieth month, her interest in reading was revived when her brother, sixteen months younger, began to receive books. At the age of fourteen months, he would respond with Spanish vowel sounds upon seeing a book, writing instrument, or paper. She would then "correct" him, as well as taking his book away from him.

During this month she also began to draw, first faces, then adding bodies, legs, and arms, and assigning names to her drawings. She was not much interested in attempting to write letters or words, but usually asked for materials by saying, "Quiero escribir" rather than "Quiero dibujar." She apparently does not distinguish clearly between the two activities.

At the present writing, the family has returned to El Paso, Texas, and has been joined by Karen, a half-sister of Raquel, who began to learn Spanish at age five and used it until one year before leaving for India at age fourteen, where within two years her ability to understand it apparently diminished rapidly, and she lost the ability to speak it in normal conversation. This also happened with a younger brother and sister, who had learned Spanish from a maid simultaneously with English. However, an older sister who learned Spanish later (after age seven), but who became highly literate in the language, seems to have retained almost her full abilities after four years in India out of contact with it.

Since Karen speaks English to her father and step-mother, Raquel has become more interested in the language, and at the age of thirty-one months, has just begun imitating sounds consistently, whether they represent new vocabulary items in English or in Spanish, and whether or not she understands their meaning. She asks the name of almost everything new that she sees, and repeats it carefully.

Also, she seems now much more interested in reading words than in letters. It seems reasonable to predict that between the ages of three and five years she will learn to read books in Spanish and to speak English fluently.

This prediction is based upon the expectation of relatively greater strength of family as opposed to school and

community influences, however, with the crucial factors being the continuing use of the minority language by both parents and the development of literacy in it through home instruction before literacy in the majority language is imposed by formal public education.

The two forces later most capable of destroying the full capabilities of the child in the home language, the parents believe, are television and the public schools. Their community, through its proximity to Mexico, offers public and private education as well as television in Spanish, but neither commands the resources--or the prestige--that television and public education command in the United States. Furthermore, the purpose of the parents is not to make the minority language the only or even principal language of the child, but to create a balance between the languages where almost all social and psychological factors are weighted in favor of the majority language.

In this process, bilingual education in the public schools is seen as a possible ally, but at the same time there is reason to suspect that it may, through association of more prestigious persons and language activities with English, sabotage the structures it attempts or pretends to build. The parents in this case consider it their duty, therefore, to put all their weight--all their prestige in the view of their children--on the side of the minority language.

FOOTNOTES

1. One valuable set of suggestions has already been received, though indirectly, through the recommendation by Theodore Andersson of the book by Glen Doman, "How to Teach Your Baby to Read."

It will be clear that some of the errors of technique in teaching the child under consideration to read could have been avoided by consulting this book a year ago. There should have been, for example, more emphasis on words written in lower-case letters. However, in the present case neither size nor color of letters seems to have been of the importance one might expect from reading the book. Raquel easily reads standard pica type, but does favor larger letters.

2. A "forgotten" language may be re-learned rapidly later, however, and with more accurate pronunciation than would otherwise be possible. But the writer has observed children whose parents were born and reared in Latin America speak Spanish with much hesitation and with an English accent, although they had earlier learned to speak it rapidly and with a standard accent. In these cases, prestige may be associated, albeit unconsciously, with hesitating, accented speech in the minority language.

3. The two greatest weaknesses of most bilingual programs where Spanish is used seem to be the lesser prestige of the language as compared with English, which results in its functioning as a crutch to be used only in case of emergency, and the discontinuance of its use as soon as the most severe and obvious stage in the emergency is past. With this attitude prevailing, it is hardly surprising that pupils in general would continue to regard it as a weak secondary means of communication in school, nor that use of it as an officially tolerated jargon should do little to improve the self-image of those pupils who use it as a home language.

4. Raquel was born in El Paso, Texas on January 14, 1969. Her mother is Peruvian, but began to study English at the age of six years in a U.S.-sponsored school, continuing for eleven years and becoming a bilingual secretary after graduation. Her father began to study Spanish as an adult, and has taught Mexican-American and foreign students in Spanish for a total of eight years, beginning in 1959, and developing a progressively stronger interest in and association with bilingual education since that time.

5. The transition described by Carol Chomsky as necessary in English is not necessary in Spanish, and this should allow much more rapid development in Spanish reading. See "Reading, Writing, and Phonology," Harvard Educational Review, Vol. XL, No. 2 (May 1970), p. 297. "It is highly likely that the child, however, in the beginning stages of reading, does assume that the orthography is in some sense "regular" with respect to pronunciation. In order to progress to more complex stages of reading, the child must abandon this early hypothesis, and come eventually to

interpret written symbols as corresponding to more abstract lexical spellings. Normally he is able to make this transition unaided as he matures and gains experience both with the sound structure of his language and with reading.