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ABSTRACT

This study examined first exposures to oral and written English from ages 1-16 years, surveying 212 Ming Chuan University (Taiwan) students. The survey asked about the language spoken at home; age at and context of hearing, reading, writing, and speaking the first English word; experiences with conversations in English; and problems learning English. Data analysis found only a slight difference between the later English achievement of students who heard their first English word at the age of 6 years or younger and those who heard their first English word at the age of 12 years or older. These results suggest the existence of compulsory and customary patterns across all kinds of English learning situations in Taiwan. These patterns are largely non-idiomatic and replete with many common errors in using prepositions, articles, verb tenses, and pronouns. They resist teaching efforts aimed at promoting idiomatic English. In speech especially, the compulsory and customary tend to overwhelm the possibility of authentic dialogue in which idiomatic English could be learned. Two appendixes present the survey and the first English words remembered by respondents, listed in order of frequency. (Contains 18 tables.) (SM)

The Insertion of Language: A Study of Relationships Between Early Exposure to English and Later Achievement In Learning English as a Second Language

By David Cornberg, Ph.D.

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Abstract.

This study focuses on first exposures to oral and written English from the ages of 1 to 16 years. First exposures to oral and written English across this range of ages were reported on 212 questionnaires administered to first, second and third year Ming Chuan University Department of Applied English (DAE) students during the week of October 19, 1998. These exposures, along with additional data from this 27-item questionnaire, are analyzed with standard statistical methods such as frequency and correlation. Because of the large amount of data, not all items in the questionnaire are reported and analyzed in this paper. This paper therefore represents the first phase of the analysis and interpretation of the questionnaire data, as it were, a work in progress. The results of the analyses, taken together with non-quantitative data from the same questionnaire, are interpreted from a psychosemiotic standpoint. This standpoint joins psychoanalysis with semiotics along the lines of work done by Jacques Lacan, the French psychoanalyst. Since all of the subjects are students in my classes, measures of their achievement in learning English as a second language are derived from their grades in my classes. The study foregrounds relationships between aspects of first exposures, such as age differences, differences in particular words or phrases, and media or situations in which exposures took place and differences in current English achievement. These relationships are then viewed in relation to the teaching practices and curricula in their current courses. From this process of analysis and interpretation, I attempt to draw some practical suggestions for teaching, learning and curriculum in ESL courses.

Introduction.

I would like to relate a particular event which continues to motivate this particular research effort. This narration will also frame the following analysis wth a concrete setting whose express purposes were teaching English as a second language and teaching English for a special purpose. In the fall of 1998, as an Assistant Professor of English in the Department of Applied English at Ming Chuan University, Gweishan Campus, I taught two first year writing classes. The objectives of the class centered around students learning basic composition for the purposes of describing, informing and persuading.

Since the mid-80's, when I served as Poet In Residence in the Anchorage Public School District, in Anchorage, Alaska, I have used The Writing Process as my primary approach to teaching all kinds of writing. The Writing Process was developed during the 70's by teachers in the Los Angeles area who were dismayed at the consistently meager results of their strenuous efforts to teach writing. Someone finally suggested that those who already knew how to write might be help. Professional writers were contacted and involved in a lengthy process to determine how they did what they did. The effort was initially called "The Writing Project," but its product came to be known as The Writing Process.

What the teachers discovered was that they had been overlooking the most important step in writing—rewriting. Professionals writers of all kinds repeatedly told them that there was no way to get from an idea, an inspiration, a feeling or any other kind of initiative experience to a finished written work without the work of rewriting. Rewriting required a range of skills which teachers had not been teaching. As the teachers learned how to rewrite, they realized that there was indeed a pattern to the process and eventually systematized it as follows:

1. Brainstorm: free the mind, heart and imagination to produce as many ideas, topics, directions as possible and write them down in single words, phrases or sentences on a board or on paper or both.
2. Pre-Write or Fast Write: pick one of the words, phrases or sentences as a starting place and write whatever comes into your mind as fast as you can. Ignore questions of spelling, punctuation, grammar, syntax, diction, etc.
3. Feedback: share your writing with one or more others and let them respond to your writing in terms of where you might go with it as a piece of writing. Continue to ignore questions of spelling, punctuation and so forth.
4. Write: use the feedback from others to shape the writing into some kind of form or format—poem, story, article, essay, play—or whatever the target format is for the particular writing exercise or assignment. Pay attention now to length in terms of numbers of sentences and numbers of paragraphs. Pay attention also now to spelling, punctuation, grammar, etc.
5. Feedback: share your writing with one or more others and let them respond to it in detail. The form or format is now fixed as is the length. The appropriate feedback in this step has to do with how to improve what is already written. Thus the respondents should focus on word choice, phrasing, rhythm, sentence construction, paragraph construction, imagery, tone and rhetorical devices such as metaphors and similes.
6. Rewrite: use the feedback from others to subject your own writing to its most intense scrutiny. Look at it from the comma to the concept. Leave nothing unquestioned.
7. Feedback: share your rewritten work with others. The appropriate feedback in this step now also focuses on the work from the comma to the concept.
8. Final Write: use the feedback from others to do your final write which is, in fact, your final rewrite.
9. Evaluation: once they are done, put the written works aside and talk with others about the process itself. Determine whether or not there are ways in which the use of The Writing Process in your particular situation can be improved.

In using this process with my first year classes, I had them do two things that they had never done before in English. One was to rewrite their writings; the other was to give each other feedback on their writings. The last written assignment that they did before they took their fall mid-term exams included an additional step in which I took all of their writings home with me, wrote detailed feedback on them, returned them to the students in the next class meeting and had them take them home and rewrite them using my comments. The written work that came from that process was far and away the best that any of them had done in the class.

Shortly after they had finished that assignment, they took their mid-term exams. My exam for both classes included four different writing tasks. When I got their finished exams I was amazed at how poorly they had written. The contrast between their last classroom assignment and their mid-term exams was so strong that I decided I would try to figure out what had happened.

One of my first steps was to ask both classes whether or not they felt that since the beginning of the class they had improved as writers. No student felt that they had gotten worse. Some students felt that they had stayed the same. Most of the students felt that they had improved. If they had improved, I then asked myself, why had they written so poorly on their mid-terms?

The answer to this question came quickly enough. They could not use the writing process to do their mid-terms. They had one chance and one chance only to write correctly and well. They did not have multiple feedback and rewrite opportunities. Obviously the writing process was allowing them to extend their writing abilities beyond what they had been when they first started the class. But also as obviously, without the support and extension provided by the writing process, they wrote as they had before they entered the class. What then was the mid-term test testing?

There are several ways to answer this question. One is to see the test as evidence of my ineffectiveness as a writing teacher. Another is to see the test as evidence of the effectiveness of the writing process. A third is to see the test as a demonstration of the perdurance of bad writing habits.

With all three of these answers in mind, then, let us now turn to the data and use it to understand this particular event.

Entering a Culture

Let us begin with two questions:

1. What happens when someone learns a language other than their native one?

2. What effect, if any, does early exposure to the second language have on later achievement in learning that second language?

Let us start our inquiry with question 1. If we try to answer this question only in English, we find a plethora of answers concerned with techniques, methods, and processes. Most of what our colleagues write in this area is useful for refining or subjecting to further research the many ways already employed for teaching second languages. Moreover, beyond the extensive literature in that area, psychology and sociology present various views of second language learning as a process of secondary socialization. This idea is closer to what we find if we look at question 1 through the Chinese language.

Through the Chinese language, we find that languages are frequently designated with a double character, the second of which, *wen*, means language. A further step, perhaps motivated by the question of the signifier of second language learning in Chinese, takes us to the translation of the English *culture* as *wenhua*. The English term shares a common history with the *–culture* of *agriculture*. In English, therefore, culture is intimately connected with a specific way of life, namely, that which arose after certain groups of hunters and gatherers began to till the soil for food. The Chinese term, however, intimately connects culture with language. *Wenhua* can be translated as the influence of language. Speaking Chinese, speaking Chinese correctly, and speaking Chinese with the care of a Confucius attempting to rectify the naming of things, is therefore a criterion that suggests a rather simple answer to question 1: When someone learns a language other than their native one, they enter another culture.

But entering implies individual choice. In fact, the Ss in my study, whose genders and ages are shown in **Tables I** and **II** respectively (**Appendix 1, Items 2 and 3**), answered questions about the languages of their childhood (Appendix 1, Item 4). **Table III** shows both the diversity and the dominant tendencies in those childhood experiences. Childhood experiences, however, do not have the same degrees of choice as adult experiences. The languages that were in the worlds of the Ss were **there** and **only** those languages were there. Thus into the dreamlike remnants of the pre-natal aquarium, into the daily radiance of gurgles, coos and howls, sounds with definite qualities were persistently inserted by families, friends, relatives, neighbors, acquaintances, schoolmates, teachers and strangers. For example, **Tables IV, V** and **VI** show the variety of ages at which the Ss first heard an English word and the medium through which that word was first heard, respectively (**Appendix 1, Items 5, 6** and 7).

Table I. Subjects by Gender. (Item #2)

Male	**42**
Female	**170**

Table II. Subjects by Age. (Item #3)

Age	Number of Subjects
18	30
19	74
20	51
21	31
22	12
23	6
24	1
25	4
26	1
29	1
34	1

Table III. Subjects by Language(s) Spoken in the Home Before the Age of Five. (Item #4)

Language(s)	Number of Subjects
Mandarin	42
Taiwanese	33
Mandarin and Taiwanese	114
Mandarin and Japanese	0
Taiwanese and Japanese	1
Mandarin, Taiwanese and Japanese	4
Mandarin, Taiwanese, Japanese and Hakka	0
Taiwanese, Japanese and Hakka	1
Mandarin and English	0
Taiwanese and English	0
Mandarin, Taiwanese and English	2
Mandarin, Taiwanese, Japanese and English	0
Mandarin, Taiwanese, Japanese, Hakka and English	0
Mandarin, Taiwanese and Burmese	1
Mandarin, Taiwanese and Hakka	4
Mandarin and Hakka	7
Hakka	2
Mandarin and Korean	1

Tables I-III offer no surprises. The distributions of genders, ages and first language(s) seem normal and unexceptional for DAE, MCU and Taiwan. Worth noting, however, is that 170, or 80%, of the subjects began their lives in households in which languages other than Mandarin were spoken. None of these languages, with the exception of English spoken in two of the Ss' households, was formalized in a standardized curriculum in Taiwan public schools at the time that these Ss were under 5 years of age. The language situation into which English was inserted therefore already included, for approximately 80% of the Ss, languages operating in at least three different speech registers--compulsory, customary and authentic.

For the purposes of this study, these three can be understood as follows:

1. Compulsory. Compulsory speech is the speech of a subject who is spoken by a speech community that exists prior to the subject, in time and in space, and that becomes the subject's language (Silverman 162-7; Lacan 2, 23, 70-1). For example, the speech of a family is compulsory speech for an infant. The speech of a school curriculum is compulsory speech for a student.

2. Customary. Customary speech is the speech of a subject who is spoken by a speech community that responds partially to the creative ability of the subject in its formation. For example, the speech of young people in their childhood and adolescent groups is customary speech that participates in the encompassing and penetrating compulsory speech of the adults but includes variations created by the young people themselves. The speech of gossip among residents of neighborhoods, districts and areas is also customary speech to the point that it may even gain the stability and complexity of a recognizable pidgin or dialect.

3. Authentic. Authentic speech is the speech not of a subject but of an I—a first person who has temporarily suspended the hegemony of either compulsory or customary speech and thereby found a voice whose use may be unrecognizable in either the compulsory or customary registers. Authentic speech contains the possibility of its own recognition within it, however, because it creates a space in which it is possible for the other who hears the I to become an authentic I. That becoming may then allow a response, rather than a reaction, in the initiation of dialogue whose condition is awareness of distance between the speech of dialogue and the talk of either custom or compulsion. There is no particular format for this kind of speech. It might be tempting to consider some kinds of creative writing authentic speech, such as poetry, song, or drama, if it were not for the fact that most writers in these genres do not in fact create anything more than insignificant variations on either established forms, such as sonatas and sonnets, or the customary speech of past writers.

With the recognition of this daily complexity in the lives of Taiwan ESL students in mind, let us step back for a moment from the rain of data and ask what the target of ESL in Taiwan is. Taiwan students are exposed to many different kinds of natural English, such as American, British, Canadian, Australian, South African, as well as to the regional variations in those national tongues, such as the New England, Southern and Pacific Coast versions of American English. These kinds are marked by differences in pronunciation, diction, grammar and syntax. Many of the differences are stable relative to the more evanescent aspects of all contemporary languages, such as the production of new technical vocabulary items and popular neologisms, but those differences do not usually create substantial communication problems among native speakers. There is therefore a range of tolerable differences across which native English speakers, like the speakers of any other natural language, carry out their communication tasks. This range of tolerable differences can be considered idiomatic English.

Idiomatic English cannot be standardized and written down as a collection of general rules from which specific English speech or writing acts can be deduced or inferred. Idiomatic English can be recognized, in speech and in writing, by native speakers of English. Idiomatic English can therefore be defined operationally as a kind of consensual agreement among native English speakers to use and tolerate their native language with an accepted range of differences that constitute national, regional and dialectal variations. Idiomatic English would seem to be the proper target for ESL in Taiwan.

This reflection begins to suggest the outlines of an understanding of some of the relationships between early exposure to English and later achievement in learning English as a second language. First, the English that has been inserted into the lives of these Ss has lacked standardization as idiomatic English. Not only were non-native speakers of English—parents, siblings, friends, relatives--the sources of first insertion for most of these subjects, not only were the cram school teachers for many of these Ss non-native speakers of English, but also the public school teachers of English for most of these Ss were non-native speakers of English. Second, and following hard and ineluctably upon this first fact, the habits of speaking, hearing, reading and writing English that were ingrained from the beginning of most of these Ss lives as users of English were non-idiomatic. It seems safe to propose, as a starting outline of the relationship between early exposure to English and later achievement in learning English as a second language, a large, stubborn, complex, ingrained inertial mass of relatively counterproductive English use habits meeting the efforts of teachers like myself, at ages far later than those of the initial ingraining, to teach idiomatic English.

With this initial image in mind, we now return to the data.

Table IV. Subjects by Age of First Hearing an English Word. (Item #5)

Age	Number of Subjects
1	2
2	4
3	1
4	4
5	18
6	19
7	38
8	24
9	11
10	44
11	18
12	16
13	10
14	2
15	1

The distribution of Ss across ages in this table is interesting. First, 151 Ss, or 71% of the sample, first heard an English word from the ages of 7 to 12. This concentration reflects the facts that English is not a required subject yet in the primary grades and that many of these Ss were sent to cram schools shortly after they entered elementary school and just before they graduated from elementary school into junior high school. Second, however, this question focused only on the age of first hearing an English word. **Item #7**, shown in the next table, **Table V**, focused on the age of first hearing a word "with some understanding of its meaning".

Table V. Subjects by Age of First Hearing an English Word With Some Understanding of its Meaning. (Item #7)

Age	Number of Subjects
2	1
3	1
4	1
5	4
6	13
7	23
8	25
9	12
10	40
11	22
12	31
13	26
14	6
15	2

The relationship between memory and meaning is important here for the interpretation of the differences in distribution between **Tables IV** and **V**. For the purposes of this study, we may define memory and meaning as follows. Memory is mental repetition that re-presents experience encoded as meaningful by a subject. Meaning is a connection between experience and the vital energy or drive of a subject. So defined, dreams, imaginings, sensory experiences, gestures and physical motions can all be meaningful. This range naturally includes speaking, hearing, reading and writing. Technically, the distribution of **Table IV** is bimodal with the concentrations at ages 7 and 10. The distribution of **Table V**, however, is unimodal with the largest number of Ss at age 10. This shift, from 77% of the Ss falling in ages 1-10 in **Table IV** to 57% of the Ss falling in ages 2-10, with none in age 1, in **Table V**, suggests that meaning, as a memorable psychic event, lags behind memory in child development.

Apart from this general and unexceptional reflection, however, there does not seem to be, at this stage of the analysis, any simple explanation for the difference in distribution between the two tables. It would seem plausible to suggest, pending further investigation of this aspect of the data, that the shift in numbers of Ss toward older ages in **Table V** signifies an increasing ability of Ss, with more or less continuous exposure to English in cram schools and other settings, to connect English words to their vital energy and so give them concrete meaning in the practices of their lives. For example, from my personal experience, it is at about the age of 10 that many young people begin to offer spontaneous and situationally appropriate "Hello!"'s and "How are you!"'s on the streets of Taipei. The full, particular variety of first English words that Ss remembered hearing, and recorded as answers to item **#8**, is presented in **Appendix 2**.

Memory and meaning, however, are only two parts of hearing. Another part is the medium through which a word is conveyed by sound to a hearer. The next table presents the frequency of subjects by the medium in which they first heard an English word.

Table VI. Subjects by Medium of First Hearing an English Word. (Item #6)

Medium	Number of Subjects
Someone said it to you or near you	123
From a radio	9
From a TV	48
From a tape player	9
From a movie in a theater	8
From a movie in an MTV	0
From a music video on TV	2
Other	13

The thirteen answers under "Other" were:

1. **My mother or father said "Good Morning" and "Good night" to me.**
2. **From the English class**
3. **From a English teacher**
4. **From a Catholic-American school**
5. **I went to a small cram school for children to learn English.**
6. **From my dad**
7. **To learn English after school**
8. **My father taught me.**
9. **My classmate ask me: Do you know what it is? And tell me this is an apple in English.**
10. **From English cram school**
11. **From teachers**
12. **From a cram school teacher**
13. **My teacher taught me.**

Note to Table VI: All spelling, punctuation and grammar are as in the original hand-written answers. Obviously any one of these could also have been marked as "a."

The fact that only those languages were there definitively moves the choice of native language and of natal culture out of the hands of the infant or child. There is no question that human infants **can** learn any language into whose group of usage they are born. There is also no question that human infants **do** learn the language of the group into which they are born. It would seem reasonable to suppose, therefore, that the persistence of insertion molds the infant and the child into a wenhua, a culture.

But the molding of human young to the fittings of different cultures has many dimensions. There is the traditional dimension of reproducing the established practices of the group. There is the religious dimension of aligning the young with unseen powers that can help or harm the group. There is the social dimension of creating another social participant who begins increasingly to produce and consume along with other members of the society. There is also the psychological dimension of personality formation that uses the raw energy of biological drive to form a person. We may then entertain the idea that when someone learns a second language, all of these dimensions are in play.

However, we know that the kind of English language learning that has taken place not only in Taiwan but in all of Asia has been anchored in the educational traditions of old Asia not of contemporary America or Europe. Asian students learning English have been taught to be seen, not heard, and the image which they have been taught to present is a body at a desk stooped over and reading, writing, or using a dictionary or translating machine. English has been treated by Asian educators as a rather complicated verbal instrument whose primary use is silent reading.

Viewing English as an instrument or tool presents a certain irony in a Chinese context. While the Chinese language centers culture around language, English, which would seem to be another cultural center, abstracts itself from its way of life to become an appropriation of Chinese culture. For example, most of my students during my Fall 1998 classes, all the participants in which filled out the questionnaire (**Appendix 1**), on one occasion or another tried to hand me paper held with both hands, setting their bodies squarely facing mine, and making a certain deflection of the head and upper body towards me. However, all of my students were English majors, all of the classes were given in the Department of Applied English, and all of the classes were aimed at the students learning to use English in some specific way. Yet still, in the midst of all that English, the ancient partial gesture of humility and respect, especially appropriate as a traditional practice between student and teacher, persisted.

By way of contrast, many of my students, as well as many people whom I have encountered in various sites in Taiwan, have acted out rather complete combinations of contemporary American greetings and farewells. They have taken their limbs, their tongues, and their minds temporarily out of traditional Chinese practice and taken on a momentary American identity. In these moments, English cannot be viewed solely as an instrument or a tool. Instruments and tools, strictly speaking, do nothing without the deliberate intention and attention of a living being. Instruments and tools derive their life from their users. They are objects whose limitations are fixed far more firmly and specifically than are the limitations of languages. Knives, for example, can be made by any language group and used by any other language group without language passing between the two groups. The indifference of instruments and tools to their uses and users clearly limits the usefulness of viewing English, or any other language, as an instrument or tool.

Indeed, in the moment of a Chinese person greeting me or saying goodbye to me in a contemporary American way, English is a medium of communication. Using its words along with appropriate gestures creates a blip, a space, a local oscillation in which identities shift. The student, for example, becomes a speaker of English who, in that moment, has achieved some kind of parity with me, the teacher, whose identity transforms into a contemporary speaker of English. The moments of greeting and farewell, the moments of "OK," "How are you?," and "That's cool!," are not formal, structured teaching moments in which I am imparting a curriculum to a receptive student. Rather, they are moments of communication in which our identities are mutually, reciprocally defined by English.

With these reflections in mind, we may refine our initial answer to Question 1. What happens when someone learns a language other than their native one?, as, When someone learns a language other than their native one, they diversify their identity. However, the diversification of identity involved is complicated by the fact that at least three different kinds of speech—compulsory, customary and authentic--are possible between a teacher and a student in either English or Chinese.

Invoking these three kinds of speech, moreover, is not a substitute for the understanding that all three may occur in what is perceived as a single exchange or conversation or even in what is perceived as a single sentence, especially when such exchanges involve shifts between Chinese and English. This complexity is natural and in no way accidental. **Tables VII-XII** show the diversity of Ss' first reading, writing and speaking an English word, as well as the type of situations in which the first speaking occurred, whether or not the S has had a conversation with a native speaker of English, the age at which the S first had such a conversation, and the type of situation in which that first conversation with a native English speaker occurred **(Appendix 1, items 10, 14, 20, 23, 24** and **25)**. Because authentic speech involves the unquantifiable dimension of self-awareness, it is not possible to demonstrate, with this kind of data, the occurrence of authentic speech in any particular situation recorded by the Ss. The fact that it cannot be demonstrated, or even inferred with any certainty, does not annul the possibility that it did take place.

Moreover, it is clear, in the first place, that the language of a questionnaire can only be compulsory in the double sense that the printed terms and only the printed terms are the terms of the questions and that there is no way to question the questions. That is, a questionnaire is a one-way demand for an answer, but an answer it not a response. It should also be clear, in the second place, that asking Ss to write down descriptions of experiences of speech necessarily obscures the distinctions among the three kinds of speech described above. Nonetheless, it seems reasonable to suppose that across the great variety of speech acts represented by the following Tables **VII-XII** there were moments of all three kinds of speech.

Table VII. Subjects by Medium of First Reading an English Word. (Item #10)

Medium	Number of Subjects
A school book	147
A comic book at school	4
A comic book from a store	0
A magazine at home	6
A book at home	18
A sign board	5
A TV movie title or subtitle	4
A movie title or subtitle at a theater	2
A movie title or subtitle at an MTV	0
A TV commercial	6
A video movie title or subtitle	2
A music video	4
A toy	4
A food item such as a cereal box	4
Other	6

The six answers under "Other," along with those tallied under other answers, were:

1. **My sister taught me to read it and told me what it meant.**
2. **English cram school (10 Ss wrote this; recorded also as a.)**
3. **Not from the media**
4. **Told by my mother**
5. **Children's language school (2 Ss wrote this; recorded also as a.)**
6. **A writing book at home (1 S wrote this; recorded also as e.)**
7. **With an American friend**
8. **English class**
9. **Vocab. cards in school**

All spelling, punctuation and grammar are as in the original hand-written answers.

Table VIII. Subjects by Situation of First Writing an English Word. (Item #14)

Situation	Number of Subjects
Taught by public school teacher	101
Taught by cram school teacher	77
Self-taught	14
Taught by parent	8
Taught by sibling	7
Wrote to a friend	3
Taught by a private tutor	2

Table IX. Subjects by Situation of First Speaking an English Word. (Item #20)

Situation	Number of Subjects
Spoken in a public school	78
Spoken in a cram school	52
Spoken to parents	22
Spoken to a sibling	12
Spoken to a friend	12
Spoken at home	11
Spoken to other people	8
Spoken alone	5
Sung alone	4
Spoken to a relative	2
Spoken to classmates	2
Spoken to a private tutor	1
Spoken in a private school	1
Spoken to a waiter	1
Spoken in a McDonald's	1

Table X. Subjects by Ever or not Ever Having A Conversation with a Native English Speaker. (Item #23)

Yes	No
196	16

Table XI. Subjects by Age of First Conversation with a native speaker of English. (Item #24)

Age	Number of Subjects
4	1
6	2
7	3
8	2
9	8
10	11
11	14
12	11
13	15
14	10
15	15
16	31
17	19
18	28
19	16
20	7
21	2
25	1

Table XII. Subjects by Situation of First Conversation with a Native Speaker of English. (Item #25)

Situation	Number of Subjects
As a cram school student	40
As a university student	30
As a public school student	26
Talking to a stranger	20
Felt nervous	13
Helping a foreign stranger	11
Felt excited and nervous	5
Afraid	5
As a churchgoer	4
Talking to a relative's friend	3
Talking with a tutor	3
At a summer camp	3
As a summer school student in the US	3
As a visitor in America	3
As a traveler abroad	3
As a junior college student	2
As a visitor at a classmate's home	2
Talking to a foreigner in my own home	2
Talking to a relative who is an American	2
Talking to siblings	1
Taught by foreigners in my own home	1
Very shy	1
As a student doing homework with another student	1
As a college student	1
Hard to understand because it is fast	1
As a business employee in Taiwan	1
Entrance interview for college	1
As a home-stay student in California	1
In a bilingual kindergarten	1
As a clerk in a family store	1

As a visitor at a family friend's home	**1**
As a churchgoer on Christmas eve	**1**
Talked to missionaries	**1**
As a customer at McDonald's in the US	**1**
Talked by phone with a DJ on ICRT	**1**

Note to Table XII. The actual written words of the Ss have been glossed to produce categories that represent the diversity of the actual responses in a verbally manageable format.

Both conceptually and empirically, we have refined our initial answer to Question 1. What happens when someone learns a language other than their native one?, as, When someone learns a language other than their native one, they diversify their identity.

This answer allows us now to consider more directly the second question: What effect, if any, does early exposure to the second language have on later achievement in learning that second language?

Early Exposure and Later Achievement

Almost all of the Ss have shared with me in one way or another and at one or more times their feelings of fear, anxiety, or nervousness before using English with a native English speaker and while using English with a native English speaker. Many of these same subjects have framed their emotions with an English term that closely connects their use of English with their identities as persons: *confidence*. The fear of not being understood, the fear of making a mistake and the fear of failure in communication have often been cited along with **lack** of confidence. The lack of confidence has been further specified as lack of ability in pronunciation, lack of understanding of grammar and syntax, and lack of vocabulary.

Of course, none of this is news. It is also not news that some of those students who are most reluctant to speak English in classroom situations or in office hour conferences are among the most loquacious when speaking Chinese or the most competent when reading English for comprehension. From the standpoint of psychological development, therefore, we can safely assert that their confidence as Chinese speakers is much more highly developed than their confidence as English speakers. We can add to this that their identity as Chinese is far more developed and established than their identity as Yanks, Brits, Aussies, etc. Furthermore, we would still seem to be on solid ground to state that building confidence and developing personal identity are processes that begin before birth and continue well into the early adulthood of most human beings. Therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that the earlier a native speaker of Chinese began using English the better their later achievement in learning it would be.

To more closely examine this assumption we may consider one additional group of frequency data from the questionnaires. **Tables XIII-XV** present the data from **Items 9, 13**, and **18** respectively. These items focused on the numerical ages at which Ss had specific initial experiences with English (**Appendix 1, items 9, 13,** and **18**). This group connects with data already presented in **Table IV (Item #5)** and **Table XI (Item #24)** on age of first hearing an English word and age of first conversation with a native speaker of English, respectively.

Table XIII. Subjects by Age of First Reading an English Word. (Item #9)

Age	Number of Subjects
2	1
4	2
5	2
6	4
7	14
8	18
9	8
10	38
11	27
12	45
13	40
14	7
15	1

Table XIV. Subjects by Age of First Writing an English Word. (Item #13)

Age	Number of Subjects
5	1
6	5
7	8
8	18
9	8
10	37
11	27
12	48
13	49
14	6
15	3
16	2

Table XV. Subjects by Age of First Speaking an English Word. (Item #18)

Age	Number of Subjects
2	1
4	1
5	7
6	8
7	19
8	22
9	12
10	40
11	21
12	34
13	33
14	8
15	2
16	4

The distributions of Ss from the ages of 7-14 are quite close in **Tables XIII-XV**: 197 or 93%, 201 or 95%, and 189 or 89%, respectively. The distributions of Ss across these same ages in **Tables IV** and **XI**, however, are quite different: 162 or 76% and 74 or 35%, respectively. These differences suggest that grouping Ss in particular ways might more specifically illuminate relationships between early exposure to English and later achievement in learning English as a second language.

I carried out this kind of grouping in the following way. All of the questionnaires were divided into three groups depending on the age given in their answers to **Item #5**: "How old were you when you first heard an English word?" Group 1 included all of those whose ages were recorded as six (6) or younger; Group 2 included all of those whose ages were recorded as seven (7) to eleven (11); Group 3 included all of those whose ages recorded as twelve (12) or older. Group 2 was then ignored. Also, no effort was made, in the subsequent analysis of Groups 1 and 3, to stratify the samples by gender, age or year in school. Since the questionnaires asked for the names of the students **(Item #1)**, I could then use their mid-term grades, their daily grades and their final exam grades in my Fall semester courses as measures of achievement in learning English as a second language. Those courses were, 1st Year Pragmatic Writing, 2 Sections, 2nd Year International Etiquette and Business English, and 3rd Year Speech, 2 Sections. Since students from all three years and all four classes fell into both Groups 1 and Groups 3, all four of the basic skills—speaking, listening, writing and reading—are represented in this analysis. The analysis is presented in the following steps:

1. Number of Ss in Groups 1 and 2. **(Table XVI)**
2. Distribution of ages recorded in response to **Item #5**. **(Table XVII)**
3. Groups 1 and 2 by the averages of their mid-term grades, daily grades and final exam grades.
4.

Table XVI. Number of Ss in Groups 1 and 3.

Group 1	Group 3
46	29

Table XVII. Groups 1 and 3 by Ages Recorded in Response to Item #5.

Ages	Group 1	Group 3
1	2	
2	4	
3	1	
4	4	
5	18	
6	19	
12		16
13		10
14		2
15		1

Table XVIII. Groups 1 and 3 by Averages of Their Mid-Term Grades, Final Exam Grades, Daily Grades and Final Course Grades.

Average	Group 1	Group 3
Mid-Term Grades	91.02	87.83
Final Exam Grades	92.11	90.86
Daily Grades	87.57	86.00

The differences between these averages, which were obtained in the arithmetically simplest way by adding individual scores and dividing the sum by the number of individuals, can be framed first with the consideration that the average age of all the Ss in Group 1 was 3.50 years and of all the Ss in Group 2 13.50 years. There are 10 years between these two points and there are 6 years between the ages of highest frequency in the two groups—6 and 12. The differences between the averages grades of the students are not commensurate with these differences in ages between these two groups.

This point can be put in another way. Suppose that a group of Taiwan parents, with children 6 years of age and younger, were trying to decide whether or not to send their children to English cram schools or to involve them in other kinds of English learning experiences where the teachers were not native-speakers of English. Suppose that they were told that, on average, their children's daily grades during their first three years of college would be 1.57 points higher than children who started hearing English at approximately 13.50 years of age. Suppose that they were told, furthermore, that their children's average mid-term grades would be less than four points higher than the older group. And suppose, finally, that they were told that their children's average final exam grades would be less than two points higher than the older group. How do you think they would then feel about the time, money and energy required to place their children in those English learning experiences?

This point can also be approached by way of anecdotal evidence. Since I arrived in Taiwan in July of 1998, I have had opportunities to meet and talk with many different kinds of people in Taipei. Among them have been the four best speakers of English whom I have yet met here. Three of them were females, one was male; two of the females and the male were out of school and working in regular, full-time jobs in Taipei. One of the females was a student in one of my fall courses and her answer to **Item #5** was "7". When I heard them speak English, and heard them respond to my spoken English, I felt that their pronunciation, diction and syntax were all nearly idiomatic and that their listening comprehension was comparable to that of a native speaker. On this later aspect, I was particularly impressed by the fact that none of them had to ask me to repeat my English, although it was spoken at normal speed, before they gave sequential, appropriate responses.

I made it a point to ask them directly why their English was so good. After the usual disclaimers about the quality of their own English, they shared with me the following common facts about their mastery of conversational English. First, none of them had achieved their mastery in any kind of school—public, private, cram or otherwise. Second, none of them had studied English abroad. Third, all of them had had a personal interest in learning English that was authentically theirs and not a function of schools, peer groups or any other external compulsion or motivation. At this point, their stories diverged in interesting ways. The two older people, the male and one of the females, shared with me that they had learned their English primarily in the course of doing their jobs that required regular, intense and repeated communication with native speakers of English. The two younger people, the other two females, shared with me the following techniques that they had devised for themselves. Both told me that they had had inadequate opportunities to speak English in their public school classes. Neither of them had attended cram schools. One told me that she made herself read her homework aloud. The other told me that she talked aloud to herself. Both affirmed that they had devised these practices on their own, without promptings or suggestions from others, and that they had used them repeatedly over the years of their studying English as public school students.

By my estimation, as an educator who has worked with students for almost forty years, all four of these people were above average in what would normally be considered verbal or mental intelligence. Indeed, the female who was in one of my classes was the best student in the class. This anecdotal evidence therefore shows that there are two ingredients, besides any curricula, techniques, methods or approaches, that figure strongly in later achievement in learning English as a second language. These are authentic interest and verbal intelligence. Authentic interest, by definition and by psychological fact, cannot be taught. Measurable verbal intelligence can certainly be increased but there is a portion of it that is simply given at birth.

Moreover, the fact that I, as a native speaker of English, considered the conversational English of these four people as nearly idiomatic suggests that the combination of authentic interest and higher verbal intelligence allowed them to avoid ingraining of bad habits of conversational English.

I want to make one final, briefer approach to this same point before concluding the interpretation of the data presented in this study. In the course of discussing possible senior research projects with approximately forty junior year students in MCU DAE during the Fall semester of 1998, I listened to many of these students tell me that they were interested in issues around teaching English to children. I asked them if they had ever worked with children in English learning situations. Several of them informed me that they were currently teaching English to younger people in pre-schools, kindergartens, bushibans and language centers, schools or institutes. All of these junior students were Ss in this study. Here, clearly, is the concrete evidence of the process of preserving and transmitting non-idiomatic, substandard habits of English usage across the generations of Taiwan students.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Research

We started with an event and two questions. The event was a strong constrast between the quality of written works by first year students in MCU DAE. The two questions were, What happens when someone learns a language other than their native one?; and, What effect, if any, does early exposure to the second language have on later achievement in learning that second language? Our answer to the first questions developed from entering another culture, or, wenhua, to diversifying identity. The answer to the second question involved analysis of data from a questionnaire administered to 212 MCU DAE first, second and third year students, including all of those first year students involved in the motivating event.

The analysis of the data proceeded in the statistically simplest and most direct fashion by showing frequency counts and using percentages and arithmetic averages. The outcome of the analysis indicated only a slight difference between the later achievement of students who first heard an English word at the age of six or younger and those who first heard an English word at the age of twelve or older. The interpretation of the absence of larger differences in later achievement scores used a threefold distinction among compulsory, customary and authentic speech.

In terms of this distinction, compulsory speech and, more generally, compulsory English usage, can be found in school curricula, religious rituals, and institutional processes. Customary usage can be found among both formal and informal groups but differs from compulsory usage in its responsiveness to variations produced by the users. Authentic English usage differs more strongly from both compulsory and customary than either differ from each other. Authentic usage cannot be formally described, prescribed or proscribed. Authentic usage happens when someone disengages from the norms of compulsion and custom long enough to find a personal, individual voice that they use to shape language around the particularities of their own experience. Authentic usage calls for a response from another authentic user rather than reinforcing the compulsory formula or the customary cliché.

The fact that there is so little difference between the English use habits of Ss whose early exposure began at the age of six or younger and at twelve or older indicates the existence and perdurance of compulsory and customary patterns across all kinds of English learning situations in Taiwan. These patterns are largely non-idiomatic, replete with many well-known errors in using prepositions, articles, verb tenses, and all kinds of pronouns, and they stubbornly resist teaching efforts aimed at the insertion of idiomatic English. In speech, particularly, the compulsory and the customary tend to overwhelm the possibility of authentic dialogue in which idiomatic English could be learned.

This conclusion, of course, should for the most part come as no surprise to ESL educators in Taiwan. The fact that there is so little difference across early English exposure age groups may perhaps be unexpected but it is certainly understandable under the interpretation offered here. If the insertion of idiomatic English into the linguistic repertoire of Taiwan young people is the target of Taiwan ESL instruction, then simply starting students learning English earlier in life is obviously not a viable solution. Moving the age of exposure back chronologically would predict greater later achievement if and only if it were coupled with instruction by native users of English. This coupling would in turn require a much greater openness in the public school system to the use of native English users as instructors of English at every level from pre-school to the fourth year of post-secondary education. Such openness is certainly imaginable and not at all contrary to the increasing internationalization of all aspects of Taiwan society.

Further research would first complete the analysis of the data already gathered in the questionnaire partially analyzed in this study. Beyond that analysis would be an effort to refine the format of the questionnaire to make it more sensitive to certain items such as actual attendance at cram schools and ages of involvement in different types of English learning situations. The refined questionnaire could then be used with a larger sample to continue to clarify the existence and nature of non-idiomatic English use habits and the utility of the interpretation in terms of the compulsory, the customary and the authentic.

Appendix 1

Survey of Personal Language History

A. Purposes of the Survey.

This survey has two purposes. One is to give me more information about your background in the English language. The other is to give me a sample for a research project I am doing on relationships between early language exposure and later language achievement.

To fulfill the first purpose, I need you to put your name on this survey. However, your name will **not** be used in any research finding or report. Each survey will be given a number and **only** the number will be used to refer to the information in a particular survey.

For the purpose of this class, I need to know about you. For the purpose of my research, all the information you give me will be kept completely anonymous.

B. Answering the Questions.

1. I need you to answer every question. Some of them will be easier to answer than others. However, I need you to use your memory and make your best guess even if you are not certain of your answer. Please remember that I need you to give me an answer to every question. It does not matter that you are not absolutely certain about some of your answers.

2. Some questions have more than one possible answer. Please be sure that you read the entire question, including all the possible answers, before you write down your answer.

3. Please answer all questions in English.

Thank you for your cooperation.

1. Name (English and Chinese: for example, Betty Yao)________________________________

2. Age (In number of years: for example, 19)______________

3. Gender (Circle one) Male Female

4. **What language(s) was (were) spoken in your home <u>before</u> you were <u>five years old</u>? (Circle one)**

Mandarin

Taiwanese

Mandarin and Taiwanese

Mandarin and Japanese

Taiwanese and Japanese

Mandarin, Taiwanese and Japanese

Mandarin, Taiwanese, Japanese and Hakka

Taiwanese, Japanese and Hakka

Mandarin and English

Taiwanese and English

Mandarin, Taiwanese and English

Mandarin, Taiwanese, Japanese and English

Mandarin, Taiwanese, Japanese, Hakka and English

Other (Please specify):

5. **How old were you when you first heard an English word?**

6. **In what medium did you first hear that word? (Check one)**

   a. Someone said it to you or near you

b. **From a radio**

c. **From a TV**

d. **From a tape player**

e. **From a movie in a theater**

f. **From a movie in an MTV**

g. **From a music video on TV**

h. **Other (Briefly describe):**

7. **How old were you when you first heard an English word with some understanding of its meaning?**

8. **What is the first English word that you remember you heard?**

9. **How old were you when you first read an English word?**

10. **In what medium did you read that word? (Check one)**

a. **A school book**

b. **A comic book at school**

c. **A comic book from a store**

d. **A magazine at home**

e. **A book at home**

f. **A sign board**

g. **A TV movie title or subtitle**

h. **A movie title or subtitle at a theater**

i. A movie title or subtitle at an MTV

j. A TV commercial

k. A video movie title or subtitle

l. A music video

m. A toy

n. A food item such as a cereal box

o. Other (Specify):

11. How old were you when you first read an English word with some understanding of its meaning?

12. What is the first English word that you remember you read?

13. How old were you when you first wrote an English word?

14. Briefly describe the situation in which you first wrote an English word?

15. What is the first English word that you remember you wrote?

16. What was the first English word you wrote with some understanding of its meaning?

17. How old were you when you wrote that word?

18. How old were you when you first spoke an English word?

19. What is the first English word that you remember you spoke?

20. **Briefly describe the situation in which you first spoke an English word:**

21. **What was the first English word you spoke with some understanding of its meaning?**

22. **How old were you when you spoke that word?**

23. **Have you ever had a conversation in English with a native speaker of English? (Circle one)**

Yes **No**

24. **If your answer to #23 is Yes, how old were you when you first had a conversation with a native speaker of English?**

25. **If your answer to #23 is Yes, briefly describe the situation in which you had that first conversation:**

26. **For you, what is the most difficult part of learning English?**

27. **For you, what is the easiest part of learning English?**

THE END

You have now completed this survey. Please use a few minutes to go back through the survey to be sure that you have given an answer to every question.

Thank you again for your cooperation.

Appendix 2

Subjects by First English Word They Remember Hearing. (Item #8) Ordered from greater to lesser frequency. Spellings as written by the Ss retained.

1. apple	39
2. Hello!	17
3. Thank you	15
4. Good morning	14
5. Good	11
6. How are you?	6
7. dog	6
8. Love!	5
9. book	5
10. Mother	4
11. Bye-Bye	4
12. pig	3
13. OK!	3
14. A	3
15. Goodbye	3
16. Yes	3
17. hi	3
18. English	3
19. teacher	3
20. pen	3
21. I love you.	2
22. Good night	2
23. Yes, No	2
24. Father	2
25. name	2
26. monkey	2
27. I	2
28. ABC's	2
29. happy	1
30. One, two, three	1
31. nice	1
32. Julie*	1
33. quickly	1
34. Happy Birthday to you	1
35. orange	1
36. Clock	1
37. brother	1
38. okey	1
39. Thanks	1
40. money	1
41. big	1
42. mouse	1
43. How are you today?	1
44. I'm fine, thank you.	1
45. here [roll call in school]	1
46. Dad	1
47. Good afternoon	1
48. Good evening	1
49. Happy	1
50. Mary*	1
51. cat	1
52. monkey	1
53. honey	1
54. you	1
55. bicycle	1
56. Good morning, Miss Mai.*	1
57. a	1
58. sorry	1
59. Superman	1
60. Happy Birthday	1
61. Hello! Everybody!	1
62. woman	1
63. Good morning, teacher.	1
64. student	1
65. umbrella	1
66. don't know	1
67. basketball	1
68. one, two, three, four	1
69. candy	1
70. I don't know.	1
71. ICRT	1
72. pillow	1
73. I, you	1
74. watermelon	1
75. ant	1
76. school	1
77. He, she, I	1

*Proper names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

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