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ABSTRACT

Noting the importance of language acquisition for children's physical, social, and cognitive development, this paper discusses first- and second-language acquisition in children. After providing background on second-language acquisition, the paper discusses the controversy surrounding bilingual education programs. The paper then explores what is known about language learning, noting that in both first- and second-language acquisition, a stimulating and rich linguistic environment will support language development. The paper concludes with a discussion of factors that contribute to students' academic success, including using students' first language to provide academic instruction for as long as possible and using an active discovery approach to teaching and learning. (Contains 37 references.) (Author/HTH)

First- and Second-Language Acquisition in Early Childhood

Beverly A. Clark

Abstract

Noting the importance of language acquisition for children's physical, social, and cognitive development, this paper discusses first- and second-language acquisition in children. After providing background on second-language acquisition, the paper discusses the controversy surrounding bilingual education programs. The paper then explores what is known about language learning, noting that in both first- and second-language acquisition, a stimulating and rich linguistic environment will support language development. The paper concludes with a discussion of factors that contribute to students' academic success, including using students' first language to provide academic instruction for as long as possible and using an active discovery approach to teaching and learning.

> Language is inextricably entwined with our mental life—our perceiving, our remembering, our attending, our comprehending, our thinking—in short, all of our attempts to make sense of our experience in the world.... (Lindfors, 1991, p. 8)

Although there are many differences in parent-child interaction patterns around the world, virtually all normally developing children become language users at the same rate. The way children learn language follows a specific pattern and is inherently systemic in nature. It is clear that children must be exposed to language and be able to interact with others, but how that exposure and interaction occur is extremely variable. Even though young children are not formally taught language, language acquisition is part of the overall development of children physically, socially, and cognitively. There is strong evidence that children may never acquire a language if they have not been exposed to a language before they reach the age of 6 or 7. Children between the ages of 2 and 6 acquire language so rapidly that by 6 they are competent language users. By the time children are of school-age, they have an amazing language ability; it is a seemingly effortless acquisition (Cole & Cole, 1993; Curtiss, 1977; Goldin-Meadow, 1982; Lindfors, 1991; McLaughlin, 1984; Newport, 1991).

There remains a great deal that we do not know about language development in children. A child's language is constantly developing and changing. Children are actively engaging in communication as they are learning to communicate. The child is the active party in the language-learning process and in the process of making sense of language. His experience and interaction with others give him the background to relate language to the sound/meaning relationship and to the purpose it represents. Children naturally obtain a "communicative competence," intrinsically understand the rules of grammar, and gain knowledge of the rules of using language. Linguistic structure comes through the child's own cognitive and social activity. Although there is great variation between individual children and the rate of their language acquisition, there is little variation in the pattern of development between languages. One language is not more difficult than another, as we can establish by observing the ease with which

children acquire different languages by the same age. Virtually every child develops linguistic and communicative competence, and it is learned naturally and in context, not arranged in an easy-to-difficult sequence. The fact that both children and adults constantly communicate with a high degree of success is evidence that we are all following the same rules for appropriate communication behavior (Lindfors, 1991; McLaughlin, 1984). Patton Tabors asks educators to think of language as a "puzzle" with all of the pieces needing to come together for language to really work. These pieces of the puzzle are phonology, vocabulary, grammar, discourse, and pragmatics (Tabors, 1997).

Language is also an important way for us to make sense out of our past experience, to learn from it, and to make it comprehensible. In the beginning, children's language growth comes from their direct experience. It is personal and related to the present. As their language understanding grows, children can relate to ever more expanding situations. This early language experience is necessary to be able to use language symbols apart from actual situations. Children use language metaphorically, providing evidence that for children language is creative as well as imitative. For children, language is a powerful tool for understanding the world around them. By questioning, children become active in their attempt to comprehend and learn (Lindfors, 1991; Winner, McCarthy, Kleinman, & Gardner, 1979).

Children are constantly modifying their speech depending on their audience. An example of this behavior is when children modify their speech when talking to younger children. As children develop their ability to use language, they become more and more understanding of social situations and learn how to control their own actions and thoughts. By listening to children's self-corrections, questions, and language play, we realize the extent of their knowledge of language structure. Those things that children can articulate give us an understanding of what they can comprehend. Their active, creative invention of language is amazing and unique to each child. Language development is a gradual process and reflects a child's cognitive capacities. Language is purposeful. As children play and work, they do so through language (Garcia, 1994; Lindfors, 1991; McLaughlin, 1984; Shatz & Gelman, 1973).

Children expand their development of language by relating what they already know to what they encounter. "It is only with one foot placed squarely, securely within the known, the familiar, that the child can place the other foot in the beyond" (Lindfors, 1991, p. 282). Play is a way for children to extend their language abilities; it is where new vocabulary can be introduced as well as new ways to use it. It also allows children opportunities to express their point of view, solve disagreements, and persuade peers to work together. Language play has a focus on the very language elements that children will need to consider later when they learn about language. Language is a major means of influencing thinking and behavior—that of another person or one's own. For language to expand, children need to be given many opportunities to interact. Children learn from speaking. Children need to feel socially competent and accepted to become competent language users. Language is the way children are socialized by adults and the way children learn to guide their inner voice. The central role of language is the way we communicate with other people and with ourselves (Berk & Winsler, 1995; California Department of Education, 1988; Lindfors, 1991; Tabors, 1997).

In the average child, at whatever developmental stage we observe, language is alive and well. Children's language development is a creative process that only needs a rich environment to thrive (Lindfors, 1991).

"Because Vygotsky regarded language as a critical bridge between the sociocultural world and individual mental functioning, he viewed the acquisition of language as the most significant milestone in children's cognitive development" (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 12). Put another way, language is the verbal way we express our understanding of the world (Piaget, 1926, 1983).

Background on Second-Language Acquisition

Most children in the world learn to speak two languages. Bilingualism is present in just about every country around the world, in all classes of society, and in all age groups (Grosjean, 1982; McLaughlin, 1984). "In the United States monolingualism traditionally has been the norm. Bilingualism was regarded as a social

stigma and liability" (McLaughlin, 1984, p. 3). Language represents culture, and the bilingual person is often a member of a minority group whose way of thinking and whose values are unfamiliar to the "majority." Language is something we can identify and try to eradicate without showing our distrust and fear of others (McLaughlin, 1984).

Even strong supporters of bilingual education such as Cummins (1981, 1996) do not claim that bilingual education is the most important element in a child's education. In Cummins' view, it is more about good programs and about the status of the language group in their community that will determine success (Cummins, 1981, 1996).

There are no negative effects for children who are bilingual. Their language development follows the same pattern as that of monolingual children (Goodz, 1994). "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" (Pérez & Torres-Guzmán, 1996, p. 96). Even young children who are learning a second language bring all of the knowledge about language learning they have acquired through developing their first language. "For these children, then, second-language acquisition is not a process of discovering what language *is*, but rather of discovering what *this* language is" (Tabors, 1997, p. 12).

There is, however, much more variation in how well and how quickly individuals acquire a second language. There is no evidence that there are any biological limits to second-language learning or that children necessarily have an advantage over adults. Even those who begin to learn a second language in childhood may always have difficulty with pronunciation, rules of grammar, and vocabulary, and they may never completely master the forms or uses of the language. There is no simple way to explain why some people are successful at second-language learning and some are not. Social and educational variables, experiential factors, and individual differences in attitude, personality, age, and motivation all affect language learning (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994; McLaughlin, 1984; Wong Fillmore, 1991a; Tabors, 1997).

McLaughlin notes that "ultimate retention of two languages depends on a large number of factors, such as the prestige of the languages, cultural pressures, motivation, opportunities of use—but not on age of acquisition" (McLaughlin, 1984, p. 73). It should not be surprising that bilingual children often have one area of language learning that is not equal between the two languages. It does not happen very often that both languages will be equally balanced. The society that children find themselves in and how important each language is viewed within that society are very important. Children will only continue to use two languages if doing so is perceived to be valuable. As children go through school, they usually lose much of their ability in their native language. Children bring their attitudes toward a second language and those who speak it as well as their attitude toward their first language. These attitudes are important to the success of the child learning a second language and retaining his or her language (Collier, 1995b; Lindfors, 1991). Young children may appear to be better second-language users because the language they are learning is less cognitively complex to learn and they can learn to speak a second language quickly and often with a native-like pronunciation. But research has shown that adolescents and young adults are actually better at acquiring a second language (Collier, 1995b).

Children do seem to forget languages more quickly than adults, which can result in negative cognitive effects (for example, if they lose their first language and, thus, the ability to communicate with other family members who may continue to speak only the first language) (Cummins, 1976, 1977, 1979; McLaughlin, 1984; Wong Fillmore, 1991a). There is some thought that children who may appear to be learning a second language very quickly at a very young age (before the age of 5), accompanied by the loss of their first language, have really replaced the first language with the second language (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994). Many researchers believe that there is little benefit and potential harm in introducing a second language at a very young age unless caregivers are careful to maintain both languages as equally important and valuable (McLaughlin, 1984).

Although languages and the way different cultures expose their children to language vary, the outcome of

first-language acquisition is clear. Almost all children become fluent in their first language. This kind of guarantee is not automatic with the acquisition of a second language. Second-language acquisition is as complex as the acquisition of the first language but with a wide variety of variables added in. An interesting metaphor that Bialystok and Hakuta (1994) use is comparing the addition of a second language to home renovation vs. new construction. People have the ability to learn languages throughout their lifetime. How well they may be able to learn other languages (after the first) depends on many variables. The same strategies used for first-language acquisition are used for subsequent language learning (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994; Collier, 1995a; Lindfors, 1991).

This individuality in regard to the acquisition of a second language is part of the controversy surrounding bilingual education. Should programs support true bilingualism, a transitional program that only supports the native language until children have learned enough English to be taught in an English-only environment, or should every effort from the very beginning be an immersion in English? "Confusion of goals—maintenance versus transition—has contributed much to the controversy swirling around bilingual education" (Hakuta, 1986, p. 193).

From the very beginning, Americans have wrestled with their feelings toward other cultures and languages. At risk is the definition of what it means to be an American. Many believe that bilingual programs do not encourage children to learn English but only give them an opportunity to use their native language. There is also a strong belief that young children acquire languages easily, even second languages, so if they are in English-only classrooms they will learn English (Hakuta, 1986).

Secretary of Education Richard Riley's goal of having every English-language learner proficient in English in three years represents the thinking of many politicians and educators. To their way of thinking, there is no reason why this goal cannot be accomplished, and English language learners have spent too much time in native-language instruction (Gersten, 1999).

What We Know about Language Learning

In both first- and second-language acquisition, a stimulating and rich linguistic environment will support language development. How often and how well parents communicate with their children is a strong predictor of how rapidly children expand their language learning. Encouraging children to express their needs, ideas, and feelings whether in one language or two enriches children linguisticly and cognitively. Engaging the children and encouraging them to express themselves interactively while building on their prior knowledge in real-life situations is an effective way to build language experience (Cuevas, 1996; McLaughlin, 1984).

Young children will become bilingual when there is a real need to communicate in two languages and will just as quickly revert back to monolingualism when there is no longer a need. If children's interactions outside the home are in only one language, they may quickly switch over to that language and may only have a receptive understanding of their first language. This process may occur even more rapidly when there is more than one child in the family. Children are not usually equally proficient in both languages. They may use one language with parents and another with their peers or at school. At the same time children are acquiring new vocabulary and understanding of the use of language, it may appear that they are falling behind in language acquisition; however, it is normal for there to be waves of language acquisition. Overall, continued first-language development is related to superior scholastic achievement. When children do not have many opportunities to use language and have not been provided with a rich experiential base, they may not learn to function well in their second language, and at the same time, they may not continue to develop their first language. This phenomenon occurs whether children are monolingual or bilingual with the result that their language level is not appropriate for their age. Language learning is not linear, and formal teaching does not speed up the learning process. Language learning is dynamic—language must be meaningful and used (Collier, 1995a; Grosjean, 1982; Krashen, 1996; McLaughlin, 1984).

Tabor states that "young children, then, certainly seem to understand that learning a second language is a cognitively challenging and time-consuming activity. Being exposed to a second language is obviously not enough; wanting to communicate with people who

speak that language is crucial if acquisition is to occur. Children who are in a second-language learning situation have to be sufficiently motivated to start learning a new language" (Tabors, 1997, p. 81).

There is real concern that if children do not fully acquire their first language, they may have difficulty later in becoming fully literate and academically proficient in the second language (Collier, 1992, 1995a; Collier & Thomas, 1989; Cummins, 1981, 1991; Collier & Thomas, 1995). The interactive relationship between language and cognitive growth is important. Preserving and strengthening the home language supports the continuity of cognitive growth. Cognitive development will not be interrupted when children and parents use the language they know best. Experience and ideas must be familiar and meaningful to the child to be learned. Everything acquired in the first language (academic skills, literacy development, concept formation, subject knowledge, and learning strategies) will transfer to the second language. As children are learning the second language, they are drawing on the background and experience they have available to them from their first language. Collier believes that the skills children develop in their first language form the foundation they must have to be academically successful in their second language.

Children who are literate in their first language may experience cognitive difficulties as they acquire a second language. Literacy not only transfers across languages, it facilitates learning to read in another language even when the language and writing system appear to be very different. Reading in all languages is done in the same way and is acquired in the same way. The common linguistic universals in all languages mean that children who learn to read well in their first language will probably read well in their second language. Reading in the primary language is a powerful way of continuing to develop literacy in that language, and to do so, children must have access to a print-rich environment in the primary language (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994; Collier, 1995a; Cummins, 1981; Krashen, 1996; McLaughlin, 1984; Pérez & Torres-Guzmán, 1996). "When we learn a new language, we're not just learning new vocabulary and grammar, we're also learning new ways of organizing concepts, new ways of thinking, and new ways of learning language. Knowing two languages is much more than simply knowing two ways of speaking" (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994, p. 122).

When children learn all new information and skills in English, their first language becomes stagnant and does not keep pace with their new knowledge. This may lead to limited bilingualism, where children never become truly proficient in either their first or second language. Supporting only English also gives children the impression that different languages and cultures are not valued. On cognitive and academic measures, children who have lost their first language (so-called "subtractive" bilinguals) do not score as well as children who have maintained or expanded their first language as they acquire the second language (additive bilinguals) (Collier, 1992; Ramsey, 1987; Saville-Troike, 1982). When the first language continues to be supported (and this support is especially important when the first language is not the power language outside the home), introducing a second language between the ages of 5 and 11 will ensure full cognitive growth in the first language, which will support full cognitive growth in the second language (Collier, 1995b).

The learner's social skills and styles are also important to language learning. Children who are naturally social and communicative seek out opportunities to engage others. If these children are given lots of opportunity to interact positively with others who speak the target language, their language learning is promoted. Personality, social competence, motivation, attitudes, learning style, and social style in both learners and speakers influence the way a child learns the second language. With the variety of programs available to children, these elements become variables that are difficult to factor in and whose effect is difficult to predict (Lindfors, 1991; Wong Fillmore, 1991a; Wong Fillmore, 1991b).

Successful Programs

Collier and Thomas have been compiling data about language minority student achievement across five program models from a series of three- to six-year longitudinal studies from well-implemented programs in five school districts. They have found that, among the variables, these programs had three components

in common that predicted academic success. Collier and Thomas found that these components were more important than either the specific program type or the student background variables. These three components were (1) using the student's first language to provide academic instruction for as long as possible, (2) using an active discovery approach to teaching and learning, and (3) treating the bilingual programs as "gifted" programs so that the relationship between minority and majority students changed to a positive environment for all. Within these components runs the key thread of making sure that instruction is always cognitively challenging and complex (Collier & Thomas, 1995).

Collier and Thomas have developed a conceptual model for acquiring a second language at school that has sociocultural, linguistic, academic, and cognitive processes as the main components. They feel that second-language acquisition needs to be looked at as the very complex interdependent learning it is. There is an enormous difference between the time it takes for a second-language learner to obtain oral fluency or social language and academic language. It may take only a short time for oral fluency, but it may take from seven to ten years to become academically fluent—while the English only student is progressing as well (Collier, 1995a). "Developing proficiency in academic language thus means catching up and keeping up with native speakers, for eventual successful academic performance at secondary and university levels of instruction—a monumental achievement" (Collier & Thomas, 1989).

In bilingual programs, students—whether they are language minority students or not—continue to build their cognitive and academic growth in their native language while they are acquiring the second language. Many studies have found that cognitive development and academic development in the first language have an extremely important and positive effect on second-language schooling (e.g., Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994; Collier & Thomas, 1989, 1995; Garcia, 1994).

The big difference in thinking about best programs for children is to trust that children bring so much to school and have so much to offer. They need opportunities and experiences to grow and to have more to relate their prior knowledge to. Programs need to be highly interactive and child centered rather than teacher centered. Children need to have the opportunity to solve problems and discover the world around them. Children who are in a child-centered environment where discovery learning is the instructional method will be prepared to know how to get access to new knowledge and how to apply, evaluate, and solve problems as new information becomes available. Active learning using constructivist and whole language approaches uses meaningful activities and children's prior knowledge, experiences, and perceptions to build real knowledge (Collier, 1995b; Cuevas, 1996).

Effective programs know that support for language learning and interaction is key to children's growth. Language is a good example of an area in which children come to preschool with a great deal to offer. Teachers need to learn to recognize how much language children have and how to encourage its use and growth through meaningful conversations. The way children perceive, remember, comprehend, and make sense of their world is all tied up in language. Preschool programs can provide many opportunities to interact with peers and new adults and encounter a variety of new ideas. Through the child's own talk and interactions with others, their own ideas take shape, and they have the opportunity to explore what other people are thinking and go beyond their own personal experience. "It is in children's use of exploratory language—the language of wondering, their inquiring, their conjecturing, their considering, their imagining—that we are occasionally able to glimpse through windows into our children's thought" (Lindfors, 1991, pp. 8, 9).

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