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Implications and Strategies for
Second-Language Learning

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The average child masters nearly all the grammatical forms and constructions of his/her native language before the age of six (Carroll, 1960). The ease and rapidity with which s/he learns the language as compared to the slowness of the second-language learner's progress causes educators in language instruction to question the validity of standard language learning and teaching techniques.

Current trends in language teaching have undergone dramatic changes. Changes to bring relevance, meaning and pragmatics into the classroom have occurred at all levels of the educational process. Second-language researchers, in their attempt to overcome classroom artificiality, have examined the environment in which a child learns his/her first language in order to parallel the two learning environments. The focus of this paper will be on implications for second-language learning from studies in first-language acquisition and some questions dealing with second-language learning strategies.

1. Studies in First-Language Acquisition

Current researches in conditions affecting child language development support the general prediction that the quality of a child's early linguistic environment is the most important external factor affecting the rate of language development (Snow, 1972; Newport and Gleitman, 1975; and Carroll, 1960).

Several studies have shown a rather high correlation between home environment and the development of verbal ability. It was found that mothers regularly adjust their language to the child and use different strategies according to the development of the child. For example, in an experiment of children's early linguistic development, Snow (1972) found the speech of middle-class mothers to two-year-old children to be similar and more redundant than their speech to ten-year-old children. For example :

Give mommy all the red toys. I would like all the things that look like this.
Can you give me all the red things?

It is quite clear that if the child did not comprehend the mother's first statement, the mother was required to find a new way to say what she meant.

Cross (1973) also found an interesting correlation between the mother's speech and child's linguistic development. Her hypothesis was "that many of the features which distinguish mother's speech from adult discourse styles are correlated with the child's linguistic communicative maturity." Cross found that the mothers did indeed adjust their language to the child and the adjustments and methods changed rapidly as the child developed linguistically. The mothers in her study sensitively simplified and lengthened their speech according to the development of the child. In other words, as the child used longer strings, the mother used longer strings. The variable that was most highly correlated with the child's linguistic level was the mother's mean length of utterance.

Other studies (Wulpert, 1975 ; Jones, 1972) have shown in their observations of children's verbal environment that the parents of language-delayed children (children with retarded language skills) interacted nagatively, or did not encourage, caress or boast about them as compared to the parents of normal children. They found that the mothers of normal children enjoyed their children and actively encouraged their development by taking pride in their accomplishments. Whereas the language-delayed children were found to be a source of great frustration to their mothers, and it was obvious to the observers that the mutual interaction was not pleasurable for either child or mother. Verbally, this means that the children were not motivated to speak, or listen, for that matter.

It is suggested from the above studies that the role and attitude of the mother is crucial to the development of children's language. An environment that is warm and exciting encourages dialogue between mother and child.

Observation of parent and child verbal interaction can be fascinating. The mother in the Snow study, for example, reiterated her message three times without repeating the same words in an attempt to facilitate the child's comprehension. The child's verbal environment becomes a "dynamic verbal interchange" (Wulpert, 1975). The verbal interchange between child and mother is linked to activities that are meaningful and exciting to the child. What is crucial, then, is the linking of simple communicative events which are important and meaningful, with richly varied verbal activity.

From the moment the child awakes to the time s/he goes to sleep, s/he is surrounded by stimulating activities, whether it is investigating his/her own body or banging on pots and pans. Language develops in a context that is not only meaningful, but also relevant for the moment, a moment which the parent fills with rich and varied talk. The child's language is not possessed in isolation, as pointed out by Ervin-Tripp (1973), but in conjunction with nonlinguistic events which are closely related to meanings which s/he in spontaneously attending to at the moment.

The following factors in the first-language environment seems to contribute to rapid and

effective learning of second language.

1. Simplification : speech that is redundant and simplified.
2. Sensitivity : sensitivity in adjusting speech.
3. Positive attitude : an attitude of encouragement and praise.
4. Meaningful context : speech linked with meaningful context.

2. Implications for Second-Language Learning

2.1. Simplification

The studies reported on above strongly suggest that children do not operate under a strategy of imitation or repetition, but rather under a strategy that promotes simplification and regularization of the structure of the language that they are learning. Taylor (1973) reports that this strategy of simplifying the structure of the language is not restricted to first-language acquisition, but that second-language learners operate under a similar strategy. He maintains that both the first-language acquirer and the second-language learner use this strategy when overgeneralizing the target language rules, reducing grammatical redundancies, and omitting those rules which have not yet been mastered.

Overgeneralization of the target language rules is fairly common among speakers of all languages. When I was in the U.S., an ESL student asked :

How did you spended yesterday?

She was extending the *-ed* morpheme to an enviornment where she thought it would logically fit. Selinker(1972) in his discussion of interlanguage describes an Indian speaker of English who produces the sentence :

> After thinking little I decided to start on the *bicycle* as slowly as I could as it was not possible to *drive* fast.

Selinker suggests the probability of the speaker overgeneralizing the use of drive to all vehicles.

Although both the first-language acquirer and the second-language learner use the learning strategy of reducing speech to a simpler system, there is a change at some point of the development process (Jain, 1974). That is, the child expands his/her reduced system in order to correspond with the accepted adult system of his/her speech community, while the second-language learner continues to operate in it.

Continuing to interact verbally in the reduced system can lead to fossilization. The term is defined by Selinker (1972) as "linguistic terms, rules, and subsystems which speakers of a particular native language will tend to keep in their interlanguage relative to a particular target language, no matter what the age of the learner or amount of explanation and instruction he

receives in the target language." Selinker (1972) also devotes considerable space to the phenomena of "fossilization" to refer to permanent characteristics of the second-language speech irrespective of the age at which the second language is acquired or the amount of instruction received in it (Makino, 1979). By interlanguage is meant the linguistic system or output which results from a learner's attempted production of the target language norm, the intermediate stages between the native and target language.

Language teachers are urged to deal with fossilization by teaching the learner to test his/her rules and see their inadequacies (Jain, 1974). The parents' use of expansions and extentions helps use to carry the child from his/her reduced system to the accepted adult system. It would be easier to apply the same strategy in second-language learning than to create new materials.

2.2. Sensitivity

The gap which exists between the home and classroom environment is wide and I will not presume to describe how this gap can be immediately bridged. But rather, it would be more worthwhile to discuss how strategies of mothers can be adapted to the classroom.

For example, as pointed out by Cazden (1972), teachers are quick to correct the student when an error is made in class, but when a child makes a mistake, his/her errors are expanded upon. Notice the differences in voice tone in the following two responses :

Child : He fall down.
Mother's expansion : Yes, he fell down.
Teacher's correction : No, he fell down.

In this case, the teacher's use of correction can strongly inhibit the development of all language skills. The intonational pattern and initial *yes* or *no* greatly affect the child. The use of expansion in substance focuses on how much the child has already achieved, while still providing for further growth. The use of correction, on the other hand, stresses the gap still remaining between where the student is and where s/he is supposed to arrive (Cazden, 1972).

As language teachers, we have to examine our objectives more closely. The emphasis should be on communication of meaning instead of formal correctness. Especially during the beginning of learning activities, the aim should be to help the student learn and verbalize concept, and not harp on incorrect grammar and pronunciation. If students feel that their responses are not acceptable to the teacher, they will often protest themselves by remaining silent during class. Instructions and explanations should be given in conscientious and consistent patterns in order to aid the student in learning the language and more easily understanding it.

2.3. Positive Attitude

It was mentioned earlier that parental attitudes of praise and encouragement correlated with the development of child language. These are also critical in second-language learning. Feenstra (1969) has found that a positive relationship exists between both parent and teacher attitude and their effect in second-language achievement.

The literature on language attitudes distinguishes between an integrative and an instrumental motivation for learning a second language. The integrative motivation represents such reasons as a desire to be liked or accepted by members of the target language group. Such reasons as to get a job or to get into college would presumably by instrumental reasons for studying the target language. A significant correlation has been found between an integrative motivation and acquiring second-language proficiency (Gardner, 1968).

Gardner (1968) has also found that children tend to pick up the attitude expressed by their parents towards the target language group. The parents that were integratively motivated tended actively to encourage their children to learn the target language, and as a result, the children acquired the same motivation for learning.

Students who do not receive active encouragement from parents and teachers will eventually lose interest. When learning their first language, the children receive constant praise and encouragement. Macnamara (1973) has made some interesting observations concerning the attitude of parents' eagerness to accept readily anything the child says and the pride they take in every attempt s/he makes to express himself/herself. The child is virtually rewarded for any utterance.

Students are seldom rewarded or praised for incomplete sentences, in fact, the opposite is true. A typical interaction between teacher and student would be :

Teacher : What time did you get up this morning?
Student : At 6 : 30.
Teacher : Answer in complete sentences. I got up at 6 : 30 this morning.

Crystal (1976) has also shown similar examples like this. The expectations of the language teacher differ in many ways from those of the parents. In the classroom the attention is seldom on *what* is said as long as it is said correctly. The focus of the parents' attetion is on meaning, not on the child's language.

It appears that in order for students to receive acceptance and praise during the initial stages of language learning, teaching objectives may have to change. The change lies in viewing language as the child does, as a means of communication.

2.4. Meaningful Context

In the introduction of this paper it was mentioned that a child acquired his/her first language rapidly and successfully. It has been hypothesized by Hildreth (1958) that the reason

for this astonishing feat is because the learning is done in the setting of meaningful, non-linguistic behavior.   In other words, the child uses the language in every aspect of his/her daily life, such as eating, playing, responding to instructions, etc. Language is spontaneously practiced all day long. Hildreth's theory explains that the reason words are easily stored in the mind is because of the meaning they have acquired through use as symbols of behavior.   It is within this behavioral setting that the children learn language as a functional tool for communication.

It is evidenced from studies in both first- and second-language acquisition that learning takes place in meaningful contexts which are linked to current events, or action that is going on at the moment.   Asher (1973) goes as far as to say that language is biologically related to language learning and that language teaching is more successful when students are required to make physical responses.   In a study by Asher and Price (1967), adults were found to be superior to children (contrary to the popular belief) in second-language learning, when the adults were asked to respond physically to commands given in Russian.   The theory suggests that when language is synchronized with physical activity, as it is with children, the activity will be more meaningful and language learning more successful.

The suggestion of this section is that language should be taught in an environment that is meaningful and where communication is essential.   The key to setting up the classroom in such a way that language is needed as a functional tool for communication is to teach the target language through a content course.   In other words,   instead of teaching the language as an object in itself, use it as a medium to teach something else : for example, teaching ESL through a science, business, sewing or math course.

3. Content Course Description

Although the strategy sounds worthwhile and exciting, it is important to make a sober estimate of the course.   The lack of empirical evidence, and the lack of assessment of long term consequences, has caused some to question the viability of the content course used as a medium to teach a language (Gardner, 1975).   It is true that the concept has not been empirically tried for a long enough period yet to be assessed, and for this reason, I have observed a particular school which is a vocational school for women, Albuquerque, New Mexico, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor.

The design of the ESL course at Albuquerque was still in the formation stage, and for the purpose of this study, only a sketchy outline will be presented.   The population of the Job Corps Center fluctuates between four hundred to five hundred students, of which approximately 35 percent are Spanish-speaking.   Ninety percent are from Mexico, a few are from Latin-America, and the rest are from Texas border towns.

The general philosophy of the ESL component is "that the English language program must be combined in a larger sense and in an 'interdisciplinary' sense with the overall vocational training program. The ESL component cannot, and must not, remain a totally separate

component devoid of any interaction with the other vocational components of the complete training program in which the student is engaged" (U. S. Department of Labor, 1973). Obviously, the content course concept would fulfill the general philosophy.

Although the design is intended for ESL and adult Spanish-speakers, it is hoped that the model can be applied to other second-language learning situations. The proposed course would be compiled of approximately fifteen (maximum) students and would be scheduled in such a way that each student would receive two hours of instruction a day.

The title of the course would be Construction of Clothing and Language Skills, and would be divided into three interest groups along with a Language Skills Group. The course would operate eight to twelve weeks, depending on the new input of students, under the direction of an ESL instructor with experience and skills in the three interest areas. A brief description of language skills and some interest groups will follow.

3.1. Language Skills

During the first phase of the course, instructions and explanations will be provided in both English and Spanish. Each student will be expected to select a project from one of the other three interest groups and participation in language skills will be required of each student.

Instead of words for sentences, vocabulary which is specifically related to the interest groups and every day life will be introduced first. This will ensure motivation to learn it as well as opportunities for repetition and reinforcement. Vocabulary development should be closely correlated with the student's language needs outside the classroom and within the interest groups. For example, she will need to know the meanings of thread, scissors, material, etc. Labelling objects would also assist the learning of new vocabulary. I agree with the notion that vocabulary is of foremost importance for understanding—knowing the names for things, actions, and concepts (Saville-Trioke, 1976). It will be useful to have the students maintain a notebook for new words, and words they might want to use in the future. One or more examples of the words in context plus a simpler paraphrase in English, or translation into Spanish, would be the easiest way. I have also found it useful in the past to have students arrange vocabulary items for the different subject areas on 3 x 5 index cards with a picture of the word.

Different theories and methods have been devised in an attempt to make the learning of the grammatical structure of the language easy. Basically, the approach reflects the way a child learns his/her native language, by beginning with one-word utterances and systematically leading the students to compound and complex sentences. This approach would be easily adapted into the content course, and applied to the project instruction cards.

3.2. Interest Groups

Within the three interest groups, each student will be assigned a project. The design component will offer instruction in techniques and materials used in designing clothes. The

catalogues and magazines will be simplified in order to control the different levels of proficiency.   Instruction cards will be provided for each project and will also be controlled.   The instruction cards will be sequenced and will provide step by step directions as well as indicate materials needed.   This idea has been successfully used in an elementary "open classroom." The students have to follow directions from the cards to complete the project.   The written material was simple enough to be understood by most of the students.   In the ESL course, the directions would become progressively more difficult.

The same process would apply to the other interest groups.   For the construction of clothing component, the pattern instructions would be simplified.   A more advanced student would be able to read a pattern without a primer.   The possibilities are enormous.   The instructor would have the task of recording the vecabulary, grammatical forms, methods of simplifying meterial, etc. during the first attempt course.   As the course unfolded, the instructor would continue to prepare and develop materials.

4. Conclusion

Important areas of language teaching such as evaluation, pronunciation, etc. have not been included in the description of the content course.   The aim of the paper was to present a part of the content course for second-language learning, based on research in first-language acquisition.   The following are second-language teaching strategies suggested by studies of first-language acquisition and the observation of the ESL classes in the vocational school.

1. Approaching language teaching with sensitivity :
   a. Presentation of materials in simplified and redundant forms.
   b. Expanding and extending instead of overcorrecting what has not yet been mastered.
   c. Positive support and praise for the materials being learned.
2. Creating a classroom environment in which communication is essential :
   a. Maintaining relevance and realism through meaningful and real contexts.
   b. Teaching vocabulary that is specifically related to the interest areas and needs of the students.
   c. Sequenced written materials (direction, catelogues, patterns, labels, etc.).

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