

## **Learning a Second Language**

- *The U.S. Census Bureau reports that in 1994 nearly 32 million (or 1 in 7) people in the United States spoke a language other than English at home (Headden, 1995). It is estimated that 2.6 million children attending public school in the same year came from homes in which English was not the first language, an increase of 6% over the previous decade (Hornblower, 1995). At this time in 2010, these figures are old, but the statistics for our diverse population in the United States have drastically increased.*

**Three basic types of preschool educational settings** that foster language development for limited English proficient children are:

- **First-language classroom** – emphasis is on the development of the first language as a basis for later literacy skills
- **Bilingual classroom** – emphasis is on developing both languages of a child (either individual teachers are bilingual or two different teachers have different language backgrounds)
- **English-language classroom** – primary language is English and used for almost all interactions

## **First-Language Acquisition**

- Occurs within the context of social interaction within a child's family structure.
- Five components of language development
  - phonology – sounds
  - vocabulary – words
  - grammar – how words are put together to make sentences
  - discourse – how sentences are put together to deliver a message
  - pragmatics - rules of how to use language in social situations
- Open syllable words (i.e. *baba* or *doodoo*) are easier to pronounce than closed syllable words (i.e. *duck*, *mud*) because the articulators change positions more for closed syllable words.
- Older siblings and adults contribute to the development of discourse in American children by asking appropriate questions and furthering the conversation. The child follows their lead until the child becomes more competent in discourse skills.
- Children learn to modify their discourse to meet the needs of their conversational partner, providing more background information when appropriate.

## Second-Language Acquisition

**Simultaneous acquisition** – from a very early age, children are exposed to two languages at the same time

- Often there is an initial period of acquiring words in only one of the languages, but children quickly become able to keep the two languages separate and know when to use one or the other. According to Hakuta (1986), the process of acquiring two languages from a very early age has cognitive as well as social benefits.

**Sequential acquisition** – child begins to learn a second language after the first language is at least partially established.

- Three factors that might influence the ease with which a second language is learned via sequential learning are:
  1. Aptitude – some people will be more adept at learning a second language
  2. Social – some people will be more willing to take the risks of practicing the second language in social situations
  3. Psychological – some people will be more motivated than others to learn a second language

Researchers have noted a **fairly consistent pattern for second language acquisition** among young children:

1. There may be a period of time when children *continue to use their first language* within a second-language setting.
2. When the first language does not work, children *may become nonverbal* as they gain information about this new language. They may do some sound experimentation. Younger children may remain nonverbal for longer periods of time than older children. Alternative modes of communication may be used during this period of time, such as showing objects or gesturing.
3. In the beginning, children may *use individual words and short phrases* in the new language. They may experiment with sounds, words and sentences quietly as they listen to others speaking this new language.
4. Eventually they will *develop productive use* of the second language, i.e. creating their own sentences.

## **General information on second language acquisition to be aware of:**

- Adults may engage in 'child-directed speech' when talking with young second-language learners. Their voices may become higher pitched and sentences will be shorter and repeated.
- Younger children are more likely to attain native-like pronunciation of a new language, whereas older second-language learners are less likely to acquire a native-like accent.
- Telegraphic speech, or fewer content words within an utterance, is a common stage during second-language acquisition. English speakers may tend to use more object names or nouns in early language development.
- Second-language learners may early on learn that formulaic speech or commonly used utterances, such as *uh oh, stop, lookit* or *I don't know* are useful tools in their interactions.
- Classic double bind – anyone who is learning a new language must be socially accepted in order to use the language, but to be socially accepted they must already know the language. Garnica (1983) describes children in such situations as "omega children – socially ineffective because they lack communicative as well as social competence."
- ". . . research has shown that the bilingual children who do best in school are those who have had a strong grounding in their home language, perhaps including development of literacy in that language, before being exposed to a second language (Collier, 1987)."

Some **cognitive and social strategies** used by those acquiring a second-language:

### **Social Skills**

1. *Join a group and act as if you understand what's going on, even if you don't.*
2. *Give the impression – with a few well-chosen words – that you can speak the language.*
3. *Count on your friends for help.*

### **Cognitive Skills**

1. *Assume that what people are saying is directly relevant to the situation at hand or to what they or you are experiencing. Metastrategy: GUESS!*
2. *Get some expressions you understand, and start talking.*
3. *Look for recurring parts in the formulas you know.*
4. *Make the most of what you've got.*
5. *Work on big things; save the details for later.*

### Factors that may influence second-language acquisition:

- Exposure – the more exposure, the quicker the acquisition
- Motivation – the more motivated the learner is, the better the acquisition
- Age – the younger the child, the less the cognitive demand on what they must learn, however their cognitive capacity may not be as great as an older child therefore making it more difficult to learn a second language
- Personality – the more shy individual may have a more difficult time learning a second language because they may not be willing to take the risks to practice communicating with others

### Strategies to help within the classroom setting

- In the beginning weeks of a child's attendance within a new preschool program, it may be handy to **know a few critical words within the child's home language** in order to avoid some communication bumps, such as toileting words, *listen, eat*.
- May want to accompany beginning communications with **gestures, pictures, or actions** in order to support spoken words in the second language.
- Repetition is an important tool for second-language learning. Expand and extend what a child already knows. Teachers providing a **running commentary** on what they are doing or speaking out the child's actions helps second-language learners develop communication skills.
- Having a **consistent daily classroom routine** and schedule is ideal for second-language learners.
- **Small group activities** give opportunities to practice the new language with minimal audience.
- **Provide opportunities** for communication. For example, have some materials out of reach so children need to request them.
- **Encourage social interactions** between children. Teachers may provide some of the dialogue, such as *Ask Sarah, 'May I please have the juice?'*
- All persons involved with second-language learners need to **keep in mind cultural factors**. I.e. Respect the home culture and ethnicity.

Tabors, Patton O. One Child, Two Languages. Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., Inc., Baltimore, Maryland: 1997.

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