

APPROACHES TO SECOND LANGUAGE ENGLISH PROFICIENCY - PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE

BACKGROUND

Since teaching English at the College, it has become apparent that some students - although from the same social and ethnic background as the rest of the student body - have a far greater English knowledge and ability than others. Undoubtedly, this gives them a far greater academic advantage in a school committed to an English medium of instruction and a school committed to preparing students for study at universities all over the world.

In order to find out why this phenomenon was the case, I conducted a forum of the parents of those 80-odd students whose English was better than their peers'.

At the forum, as well as discuss the issue, I asked parents to fill in a questionnaire so that I could compose this document, offering advice to other parents who may wish to give their children the same advantage in second language acquisition. The questionnaire asked the following questions:

1. To what extent do you regard English as an important language for your child to learn?
2. In order to help your child cope with the English programmes at school, what additional development did you encourage them with:

Reading?

Writing?

Speaking?

Listening?

3. What other things did you do to help develop your children's English?

The quotations written in bolded italics that I use throughout this paper are taken directly from parents' own comments written on the questionnaires.

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

All children who live in a normal environment learn to use their native language to a greater or lesser effect, but it is evident that by the time they reach 11 years of age some children are far more proficient at using their native language than others and this is because of their language history, influenced mainly by their parents.

Language ability at 11 years of age is a delayed response: a child who has been exposed to language in its widest variety at an early age (around 3-5years) will be far more proficient at 11 years of age than a child who has not. By 'exposure to language' I mean a child whose parents have spoken to him/her from an early age; has been read to regularly; has read regularly; has listened to the radio or television and generally been immersed in a vibrant language environment.

A SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

English is the most commonly used language in today's business environment."

Where parents are not from different language backgrounds (and so consciously bring the children up in a bi-lingual environment) and who want their children to acquire another, second language, they must consciously create a second-language environment that will be conducive to second-language acquisition.

This requires a determination and a discipline over and above that of the bi-lingual situation, because the parents themselves must operate a programme in that second language which may well be alien to themselves and alien to the culture around them.

Thus, Cantonese-speaking parents in Hong Kong who want their children to acquire English must create an 'artificial' English-language environment, similar to the one they have established for first language acquisition, within the context of their own linguistic culture and this takes a domestic discipline over and above the normal domestic linguistic arrangement.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

"English is a universal language..."

Young children seek approval and love from their parents. If parents indicate to their children the importance they attach to second language acquisition, then this importance will be signalled to the children and they will be far more diligent in its acquisition than they would be otherwise.

If the parents themselves speak the target second language occasionally, then the implicit message is that the language is of considerable important. If the parents encourage children to read and speak themselves, then again that unstated message is doubly enforced.

Parents, quite unconsciously, can subliminally signal to children that they do not regard a second language as important if they do not talk about it, or positively encourage – through example – children to read, or speak, or listen to that language.

Many parents will help their children with maths homework, but will not consider helping English 'homework' by speaking in English to their children, even for five minutes, because they perhaps perceive – consciously or unconsciously - speaking Cantonese only at home is the way of establishing a safe and cozy environment, free of outside cultural invasion indicated by the second language.

Language is a culturally sensitive issue and it may be that some parents, themselves excellent speakers of English, consider speaking another language – even for only five minutes a day - as a betrayal of their own national identity and as a denial of their cultural heritage: “Cantonese is our native language and identifies who we are.” Hence, they see the second language acquisition for their children solely as the province of the school. But limited time at school cannot always ensure full competency in the target language acquisition.

THE PROCESS OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

English is very important and could affect their future studying and career.”

The following suggested approaches are those provided by Cantonese-speaking parents - mentioned at the beginning of this paper - who have successfully equipped their children with English language skills - of speaking, reading and writing - skills that surpass children of a similar age who have not been exposed to the processes indicated.

READING

Every parent has stated the utmost importance of a rigorous reading programme at an early age as being key to success in the second language, just as it is for first language acquisition:

“Create an environment surrounded by books.”

PRE-CHILD-READING YEARS

“I read a lot with him from kindergarten to primary 2, till he was reading independently. He now loves to read and always has a book nearby.”

“...he started Kumon English at six years of age...he loves reading.”

- Parent-to-child bedtime reading in the target language. The child associates this sort of reading with the security and comfort provided by the parent at a time when the child is relaxed and content

“I read a bedside story every night from when he was three years old.”

- Repeat reading of favourite books, accompanied by flash cards of important words
- Flash cards used with above reading schemes to familiarise child with important words

CHILD-READING YEARS

“Allow a variety of reading materials: comics, newspapers, magazines, not just books.”

“We buy many books.”

- Parent-and-child shared reading activity through a graded reading scheme, which has the same emotional and psychological connotations as the bedtime reading
- Reading series and serial books to establish and maintain interest:
 - “Ladybird” Books
 - “Thomas the Tank Engine” series
 - Oxford Reading Tree series
 - Yellow Magic School Bus series
 - Dr. Seuss
 - A-Z Mystery
- Reading books linked to films – the Narnia series, Star Wars, Harry Potter, etc.
- Incentive reading, where regular reading is rewarded in some way
- Subject interest books – for children who are interested in science, animals, sport
- Reading comics and magazines
- Kumon Reading Programme, or other, similar reading programmes

AN INDEPENDENT READING PROGRAMME

For reluctant readers, a reading regimen of just ten minutes a day will have very beneficial results over a year. The same time should be set every day – ten minutes when the student is not doing anything else, perhaps just after coming home from school, or ten minutes just before the evening meal – and the student reads quietly for the designated ten minutes: no more, no less.

At - (school) students...had to follow a rigid English reading programme.”

WRITING

“Write about books which he has read.”

Writing grammatically correct, clear, fluent English is essential for all students of English, not just for passing exams, but also for life-long communication. It goes without saying that written English is greatly enhanced and strengthened by a broad and regular reading programme and it is no surprise that those students who read regularly also write fluently.

Here is some advice from parents to encourage students to write from an early age and so gain advantage in second language learning. The most important thing that parents can do is to praise and encourage all the time, but not force children to write. It is a fact of life that children will prefer to read than to write and we must acknowledge this:

- Encourage the writing of short passages and to copy out favourite passages
- Keep a diary. This tends to work better with girls than with boys, but worth trying.
- Writing short stories
- Attend British Council courses
- Free writing
- Singing English songs and taking an interest in singers, actors, sports personalities
- Keep and write a scrapbook in English; cut out pictures and articles from English magazines

SPEAKING & LISTENING

Grasp every opportunity to practise. Be confident

In the native language, speaking is a primary skill because a child does not have to learn how to do it like s/he has to learn reading and writing. However, there are all sorts of factors which make students reluctant to speak in a second language: embarrassment; fear of ridicule; fear of making a mistake; a sense of inferiority.

It is essential to create an environment – both at home and at school – free from these inhibiting factors and to create a situation where it is perfectly all right to experiment and make mistakes.

Here, again, is some sound advice and suggestions from those parents who have put into practice the very ideas itemised:

“Watch English movies with English subtitles.”

- Provide, for a short span of time every day, an English environment at home
- Watch English TV. and films
- Speak English for five minutes every day when you ask how the school day has gone
- Go to western restaurants and let student order in English
- Attend summer schools in England
- Encourage him/her to speak to other people in English
- Attend English speaking playgroups and drama groups
- Play in sports teams where English is the medium
- If possible, speak to the amah in English
- Employ a native speaking tutor

“The three golden rules are: practise, practise and practise.”

WHAT OTHER THINGS DID YOU DO TO HELP DEVELOP YOUR CHILD'S ENGLISH SKILLS?

One of the big obstacles to efficient English acquisition in Hong Kong is school holidays when there is an automatic - and total - reversion to the native language and when English is not practised at all for anything up to six weeks. This inevitably means a deterioration in the quality of English already acquired, which takes time to make up again when school resumes. One way to avoid this is to follow some of the advice offered:

- Travelled to English-speaking countries for holidays
- Encouraged him to attend summer camps in England
- Maintained an English programme during the holidays so he could practise all his English skills
- Bought her a really good dictionary
- Encouraged him to support an English football team and keep lots of pictures and articles about the team
- Encouraged her to read in English every day during the holidays

Whatever is done to enable English acquisition, nothing succeeds so successfully as full and enthusiastic parental support and parental valuing of language in general. Obviously, school is an important factor in second language learning, but equally so – as has been proved by the parents who attended the Forum – it is what goes on at home that can sow the seeds for the school syllabus to build on.

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