

English as a Second Language

THEDA M. WILSON *

WITH a giant roar the huge plane touched ground, taxied over to the busy terminal, and discharged its load of passengers. For most of them this was a foreign country, and their immediate problem was that they were surrounded by people speaking a strange language—English.

Each would have to discover a new identity. Each would need to master the intricacies of the new language and a different culture to make a living or to improve his status.

Among the passengers who alighted were three children, aged six, eight, and ten, who neither understood nor spoke any English. Yet these children were, within two years, to become so proficient in using the language that their performances on standardized tests would enable each to be in the upper quartile of her class in school.

What was the formula that worked so successfully in their learning of English as a second language?

Total Involvement

Even though the children had passed the four most crucial years for language learning, their teachers and new family cooperated closely as teachers of English. Recognizing the natural interrelationships of experience, thinking, and language, teachers encouraged the children from the very beginning to participate in the work and play activities of their peer groups.

They learned English through the activities and interests in their environment and through their experiences. They played games at home, on the playground, and in

the classroom. Among the games that worked most effectively in providing word practice were the following:

"Simon Says": The leader gives directions for placing hands or moving the body (hands on your head, behind your back, touch your toes, etc.). The children carry out the directions only when directions are preceded by "Simon Says," otherwise they do nothing.

"Guess What I'm Thinking": A child whispers the name of a color, sport, month, number, etc., to the teacher, and the class tries to guess by asking,

"Is it _____?"

"No, it is not _____."

"Twenty Questions": A child leaves the room while the others agree to think of something in the room. The child returns and asks questions such as, "Is it big?" "Is it small?" "Is it brown?" The answers may be, "No, it is not" or "Yes, it is."

In the more active games of the playground, certain sound symbols or vocabulary associated with popular games of their different age groups soon became part of the emerging speech patterns of the children. Among the first words to be reported at home were: "We win," "No fair," "Run," "Out," and "Jump."

They also learned English in their classes by having challenging, tactile, actual, and vicarious experiences, through

* Theda M. Wilson, Division of Elementary Education, Baltimore City Public Schools, Baltimore, Maryland

activities designed to stimulate thinking and speech. Teachers considered spoken language to be their primary need. The children were required to interact with others, so they were encouraged to react at first by using the language that was most comfortable for them. In the beginning stages the children used their learned language, embellished with gestures. When this happened, classmates enjoyed sharing roles of interpreters.

Hearing and Speaking

Vocabulary was the first aspect of the acquired language to be developed. *Content* words of things and actions developed before the *function* words. However, as the function words were taught, they were always introduced in connection with the topic being developed. For example, when the class studied a unit in science or social studies or health, picture charts illustrated ideas, parts, or concepts. Experience chart stories also became invaluable teaching materials.

Through practice, repetition, and some drill, the vocabulary items on the charts became familiar, and many became part of their active thinking and speaking.

Grammar developed with vocabulary. Through the transitional phase, while they were expressing themselves by using the newly acquired English, there were many times when they used a combination of the two languages which their family jokingly called "Spinglish."

Kenneth Pike calls this phase "nucleation" in speech,¹ in which social interaction encourages the student to use the language even though it is not completely correct. The importance is that the person is thinking in the acquired language and using functional dialogue.

One child's first version of a fire drill remained a family classic.

"Today we play a new game in eschool. I like. The bell ring. Everybody go for a walk but—I don't know—we don't go nowhere. I no understand."

¹ In: Harold B. Allen. *Teaching English as a Second Language*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965. pp. 67-74.

Even though their two languages interacted as they were learning, there were many things that the semantics of both languages did not seem to help them to understand. However, as they repeated experiences, meanings began to emerge.

"Picking up" the language without formal instruction allows for the possibility of not learning it well. Therefore, some formal instruction is necessary in order to correct errors of pronunciation and form.

The children's formal instruction was carried on in several ways at home and in school. At home their parents encouraged them to talk and each day worked on the correction of an error.

"I like eschool."

"Say school, not eschool. The letter s is not pronounced by itself. Listen to these and say after me: school, see, salt, scratch" (using words in their active vocabulary).

"Now say one by yourself."

"Street."

"Good. Now try to remember."

This formula worked—the error, correction, rule, practice, and independent attempt.

The school provided drill that aided in the understanding of connected speech through dictation. Words, phrases, and short sentences were first used and repeated as said. This was followed by practice in choosing endings such as:

"I like _____."

"I want _____."

"Dogs can _____ and _____."

"I do not like _____."

"You are _____."

Reading and Writing

The children looked forward to their regular trips to the library in school where they enjoyed listening to story-telling. Even though they missed much of the detail because of natural limitations, the regular listening sessions were important because they enabled them to absorb the inflections and intonations of the language.

Their parents extended the school's

efforts by taking them to the public library and insisting that each of the children "read" one book a week of his own choosing. The first books had very simple reading matter and were of frustratingly low interest levels for the children. Books selected gradually became more difficult, and the reading habit was fixed.

Commercially prepared material of a self-testing type also provided more opportunity for practice at home.

Writing was a source of pleasure from the very beginning. Letter writing provided opportunities for self expression and reward because of the praise each received for her efforts. They were encouraged to use their new language and each developed a characteristic style.

The dual instruction from home and school paid off in the children's mastery of English in a short period of time. In fact, within a year good standard English was dominant over their native language.

Success was assured when they began to hear errors in the dialects of their teachers:

a gayon—again
beero—bureau
cohen—coin
theayter—theater.

In another school community, Puerto Rican children whose parents spoke no English required twice the amount of time to acquire the language. Yet here the children actually became their parents' teachers. The school insisted that children teach parents what they had learned, thus providing practice for them and ensuring the use of some English in the home.

Special Efforts for Urban Children

A research team from Johns Hopkins University's Center for the Study of Social Organization of Schools has developed an "effective training program in standard English for children whose first language is a divergent dialect of English." The materials and instructional procedures are being tried in some elementary schools in Baltimore City.

Of special interest is the method being used. This method has great similarity to some of the procedures employed so successfully in enabling the foreign-born to learn English. Self-instructional materials provide more opportunities for proficiency in the speaking of standard English.

The Linguistic Research Project studied the speech patterns of the student population for whom the training program is being developed and prepared sets of lessons with accompanying visual materials. Evaluation of the method will extend into 1971.

This project has already noted that providing frequent feedback to the learner facilitates the learning process considerably. Also of significance is the fact that the "presentation of grammatical rules markedly improves the acquisition of the oral production of standard English."

Communication effectiveness and strategies make a big difference in the quality of self-identity. It is the task of both the school and the community to cooperate in enabling all of its members to command the standard English of the larger community with effectiveness and ease.

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Language and Linguistics. Vol. 2, No. 4, December 1967; Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. 20007. □

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