ESL PRESCHOOLS ACQUIRING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT: *What does it take to learn a second language for young children? What is it that a child does in acquiring a language? These are the questions that prompted the researcher to kid-watch two ESL children in their quest to be proficient in speaking in English as a second language. The children were put in the English language environment when they followed their parents to further his studies in the USA. The two boys went through a rather different path because the elder had already developed his native language, while the younger one had just starting to speak several words. The paper discusses insights and development routes taken by these two children in becoming proficient in speaking. The developmental route taken by the two children were observed to be silence period, experimenting with language, imitating others, playing with language and social contact and interaction with native speakers The paper will also highlight kidwatching as a very useful technique in qualitative research. Kidwatching as a technique is found to be important in gaining insights into the development of intellectual and emotional capacity of children who are developing internally, that would be difficult to get from current technique of interviewing and questionnaire.*

Introduction

What does to take to learn a second language for young children? What is it that a child does in learning a language that is foreign to him? Obviously, many things are involved here. These questions prompt the researcher to look for the answer in two children learning English informally at home before they became proficient in the foreign language. This observation took place within the home environment and the nursery of two preschool children learning and acquiring English as a second language.

Different theories have been forwarded by different researchers in the field of first and second language. One of the many beliefs about language learning in children is that children learn new languages very easily, when many adults find it quite difficult. They must toil and struggle many hours in producing even one correct pronunciation. A child on the other hand, would just pick up the words spoken around him. To a child, it can just be during play. But the question remain, what happen actually?

Research in second language acquisition by preschools have been largely conducted by people in bilingual education. Most educators know something about the language development of native language in children. There is a vast literature on the topic and the stages of language development have been outlined for monolingual children. However, not many studies have been conducted on second language children learning a second language. Children who acquire a second language follow different paths to become bilingual and the stages that they pass through can be quite different.

Purposes of the Study

The purpose of the study is to answer some of the questions regarding the development of ESL preschool in becoming proficient in a second language and to see whether it is similar to the development of preschool acquiring the mother tongue. The second aim of the study is to compare the developmental path taken by the two ESL children in becoming proficient in the L2: one having developed his mother tongue, while the other was just beginning to learn to speak. In addition, another purpose of the study was to ascertain the usefulness of the kid-watching technique, which has been used in other qualitative study to study the development in children. This paper summarizes some of the findings gathered in a longitudinal, naturalistic study of two ESL children learning English as a second language in two different paths before becoming proficient in speaking in English.

Review of Related Literature

A lot can be learned from observing children interactivity in the process of acquiring a language, especially when the language is foreign to them. In the course of development of a second language, the children inevitably experience ups and downs and go through various stages of development.

Stages of Development in Acquiring a Second Language

Children who learn two languages simultaneously usually are closer to one language than the other. One language is more salient from the other language. This can be the results of the input received by the child from the surroundings or because there are more opportunities to use one language than the other.

For children who are learning a second language sequentially, the development is somewhat different. Tabors and Snow (1994) argue that such children pass through four distinct stages:

i.   First, the child uses the home language. When everyone around the child is speaking a different language, there are only two options – to speak the language they already know, or to stop speaking entirely. Saville-Troike (1987) observed that many children follow the first option for some period of time. They become frustrated in trying to make other understand their language.

ii. The second stage is the nonverbal period. After children abandon the attempt to communicate in their first language, they enter a period in which they do not talk at all. This can last for some time, or it can be a brief phase. Although they do not talk during this time, children attempt to communicate nonverbally to get help from adults or to obtain objects. Furthermore, this is a period during which children begin actively to crack the code of the second language. Saville-Troike (1987) noted that children will rehearse the target language by repeating what other speakers say in a low voice and by playing with the sounds of the new language.

iii. The third stage occurs when the child is ready to go public with the new language. There are two characteristics to this speech – it is "telegraphic" and it involves the use of "formulas". Telegraphic speech is common in early monolingual language development and it involves the use of a few content words without function words or morphological markers. Formulaic speech refers to the use of unanalyzed chunks of words or routine phrases that are repetitions of what the child hears.

iv. During the fourth stage, eventually, the child reaches the stages of productive language use. At this point the child is able to go beyond short telegraphic utterances and memorized chunks. Initially, children may form new utterances by using formulaic patterns such as "I wanna" with the names for objects. In time, the child begins to demonstrate an understanding of the syntactic system of the language. Gradually they will apply newly acquired rules to develop productive control over the language.

The Interaction between first and second language acquisition principles has also been discussed by Hakuta (1976) in the study of a 5-year old Japanese girl acquiring English as a second language. Hakuta made the point that second language acquisition is a dynamic, fluid process in which the learner's system is constantly "shifting in a slow and gradual manner either toward the maintenance of an internal consistency within the structures that the learner possesses, or in the direction of an external consistency, where the learner attempts to fit the internal system into what is heard in the input" (p 331). During this process, the children use what they possess, i.e they use the knowledge of language they know. The transfer of the old onto the new can produce negative as well as positive results. Thus, Hakuta suggested that his subject was late in acquiring full control of the English article because a distinction between definite and indefinite is not marked in Japanese.

Wode (1978) in his study compared first language acquisition and second language acquisition on German speaking children learning English as a second language revealed developmental sequences different from those observed in English monolingual children. He argued that these differences result from first language transfer and overgeneralization.

The Use of Formulas

Research have also found that children acquiring a second language use prefabricated or formulaic expression before they become proficient in the second language. Hakuta noted that his subject was able to construct *where* questions: "*Where's purple?" Where is potato?,"* and etc. According to Hakuta, his subject was relying on a prefabricated patterns which enables the children to express functions that they are yet unable to construct from their linguistic system. As children's system of linguistic rules develops

over time, the externally consistent prefabricated patterns become assimilated into the internal structure.

A similar point was made by Lily Wong-Filmore (1976) in her study of five Spanish-speaking children ages 5 to 7. Wong-Filmore argued that second language children use these prefabricated expressions to enable them to speak before knowing anything of the structure of the target language. Examples given by her are "Lookit," "Wait a minute," Whose turn is it?" Once the child discovers that constituents of the expressions are interchangeable and can be transformed into other expressions from the original patterns, the child has an abstract structure consisting of a pattern or rule by which the construction of a novel utterance becomes possible (Wong-Fillmore, 1976). She gave the example of the formulaic expression *"How do you do dese?* Which becomes *"How do you do dese flower pot?"* or *"How do you do dese little tortillas?"* Eventually the pattern *"How do you make the flower?"* appeared and then *"How do cut it?"*, and finally *"How you cut it?"* Thus phrases with *"how"* were progressively analysed until only the question word remained. Wong-Fillmore found such sequences to be extremely common in ESL children's speeches.

Imitating Adult and Peer

Children learn from watching and listening to others that they are in contact with. Most children attempt to imitate the actions that they see other do or say. They try to copy everything. They imitate the sounds and words that people around them make. However, peers assert a much greater influence on preschool children, especially on ESL children who are normally the minority in a school or nursery that adults do. In order t attend to the pressure to communicate, children imitate what their peers do and say. Joseph Huang (1971), in his study of a 5-year old Taiwanese boy name Paul, paid special attention to the process of imitation by his subject. Huang noted that extraordinary well-formedness of some of his subjects early utterances, such as "Get out of here," and "It's time to eat and drink." He attributed Paul's perfect utterances to the process of imitation. In the second month of observation, Paul began creating ill-formed utterances. He attributed the ill-formed utterances to the strategy of "rule-formation." An important point that Huang makes is that the strategy of sentence imitation did not disappear altogether when Paul began producing utterances out of his own syntactic system.

Social Contact and Language Interaction with Native Speakers

Research has also shown the importance of social contact and language interaction between second language learners and native speakers. Some children learning a second language seek interaction with native speakers more that others do. One of the subjects in Wong-Fillmore (1976) study, Nora was far superior as a language learner to other children in the class. What distinguished Nora from her peers was that she seized every opportunity to use her English skills in social contacts with other children.

Not all second language learners interact with their native-speaking counterparts as freely as Nora did. The reason can be the classroom is not conducive for interaction, while some children are reluctant to interact because they possess only limited language skills.

Methodology

Kidwatching as Ethnographical Study

This paper will summarise some of the major data gathered in a longitudinal, naturalistic study of two Malaysian boys learning English as a second language. It will also discuss the development routes the children experienced in learning a second language. Both of them took a rather different route before they became proficient in speaking in English. This is related to the role of first language influence in one of the two children: one was already proficient in the mother tongue at the time of arrival, while the other child was just beginning to experiment with sound. The subjects of this study are Hazim and Nazirul. The boys' family came to the United States for a period of four years while their father was doing his doctoral degree in one of public university in the USA. The children that they interact in the apartment area and a nursery they went to were the primary source of language input for the two children, apart from the parents and television.

They were observed over a period of four years, from age 3 to 7 for Hazim and from age of 1 to 4 for Nazirul. Notes were taken when the boys produced something new such new utterances. Notes were compiled and recorded speeches were also done, which was transcribed verbatim.

Kid-watching as an instrument of research

What is kidwatching? Kidwatching is careful observation of children in order to determine the development, strengths, needs and other areas of interest. Children are so young and naïve. At the very young age, children are actually internally developing at a very fast pace in terms of intellectual and emotional capacity. It is difficult to carry out a study using normal conventions of doing research by giving questionnaires or interviewing children as they would not be able to understand your line of questioning. Therefore, kidwatching is the solution. Kidwatching as an instrument in research has been around for centuries, but has yet to be discussed much.

According to Clyde & Condon (2000), kidwatching involves prolong "engagement" or "active involvement" of the people who try to understand children's development through observation. The notes taken from the observation are then constructed into a more complete report to understand the phenomenon. In many ways, kidwatching is actually within the sphere of qualitative ethnography. According to Owoki and Goodman (2002), the main aims of kidwatching are to understand and uphold our knowledge in children's learning by "1) intensely observing and documenting what they know and can do; 2) documenting their ways of constructing and expressing knowledge; and 3) planning curriculum and instruction that are tailored to individual strengths and needs" (p.x). Clyde and Condon (2000) came up with the tips of dos and don'ts in kidwatching.

1. Do have in mind the questions you want to observe before the observation.

2. Don't attempt to answer any questions while you are observing. You can sort things later.

3. Do record observations in a small notebook or talk into a hand-held tape recorder to capture the details of the kidwatching event. It is difficult to remember.

4. Do begin the experience by just "taking in" the setting. Draw a floor plan; describe the sights, sounds, smells, potential learning opportunities, and the tone and general feeling of the place.

5. Don't let the child spot you observing. Behave casually, as you normally would in that setting. Children are excellent observers and readily pick up on attention from adults. "Showing off " can follow.

6. Do keep track of *what* the looks at or attends to and *how* the child behaves while examining things, experimenting, and talking. That is, try to be *comprehensive*, collecting data on *everything* you observe. Be prepared to be writing constantly. Reflection and analysis can come later.

7. Do keep track of the nature of specifics of conversations and other interactions. (A small tape recorder can be helpful; be sure to place the microphone closer to the children).

8. Don't interact with the child unless the child initiates the conversation, and then confine your interactions to responding. Otherwise you will alter what the child would have done. You are trying to *understand* children, not teach them.

9. Do use a note form for note taking (a format given).

10. Do take a few minutes afterward to read through all of your notes, clarifying penmanship, completing phrases, fleshing out events that might not have been fully recorded.

11. Finally, do jot down your *hypothesis, your interpretations* of the learners' behavior. Be sure to speculate about anything the child said or did that seemed unusual or surprising.

Results and Discussion

Hazim – the elder of the two.

Some children receive a great deal of exposure to two languages, whereas for others, one language predominates. It can also happen when children may be in an environment where the two languages are intermixed in normal adult speech.

Hazim was 4.6 years old when he traveled to the United States. Before Hazim came to the United States, he had been exposed primarily to the mother tongue, Malay. The mother tongue was used at home, at the grandparents' home, at the care-taker's home and during play with friends in the neighborhood. All his friends around the area spoke

to him in Malay at all the time. He watched movies and cartoon in English, but the environment he was in was not favourable towards the acquisition of English. English was seen as a totally foreign language by him. He had been talking in the mother tongue long before he arrived in the U.S. He was already able to talk and ask different questions using Malay.

When Hazim arrived in the United States, he was forced into a totally foreign and new environment – the English environment. He arrived in spring and it was during the thick of winter. He stayed home for the whole winter, spring and summer the year he arrived because he did not go to nursery. His mother cared for him and his brother. His only friends who lived a few blocks away were one boy about his age, with two other younger sisters. His friends had been attending nursery with the local American children. Therefore, his friends were already speaking in English. In a sense, the children had started experimenting with English by using different English expressions. They however, were still using the mother tongue when they talked with Hazim. During the first few months, as expected, Hazim responded to his friends using the only language he knew, the mother tongue. However, some of his friends began to interact with him in English. Here, the strategy taken by Hazim was to try to repeat words he heard for the first time in English. Sometimes in a day, he would mumble the words from morning until he went to bed. Some of the words cited by him are "okay," "button" (pronounce using American slang with silent T), mill (milk), and other daily words such as eat, drink and toilet. Hazim's parent understood that he needed the language to be able to communicate with friends and started using the language at home. Although he was seen to constantly practicing his newly learned words in English, Hazim was observed to have the interest in learning more words in the mother tongue. Probably, the mother tongue that he knew provided the emotional comfort needed to overcome the anxiety in understanding the new language. Adult who are learning a new language would go back and forth from the mother tongue to the new language which is called code-switching.

Eventually, Hazim's English language development started to expand beyond just a few words. It took him several months to be comfortable listening and understanding English being spoken to him by his friends and adults. He stopped asking his parents the meanings of different words he heard. After three months, Hazim was observed to response appropriately to his friends through short verbal exchanges in English. It soon became clear that he not only used more English words in his speech, he also understood more in English than he did in his mother tongue.

The Use Formulaic Expressions

Hazim's language development went through various stages and made use of prefabricated or formulaic expressions. Similar to Hakuta's subject, Hazim was able to construct Wh-questions before he was able to produce complete sentences. After he had the confidence to use English, he would ask, "Where we go, dad?" He seemed to be hooked with one wh-question form before learned to use another one. 'Where' was the first wh-question form that he used in his language. Eventually, he began using 'where' to ask different questions, such as "Where is your name?." Other question type form he used early at the beginning of his language function is 'how'. 'What' also was used early once he learned the question form. It seems that the sequence of question form used by Hazim to be determined by the frequency of occurrence used by adults he had interaction with.

After he was put in a nursery, Hazim began to develop and expand his vocabulary counts further. The nursery provided vast opportunity to come in contact with speakers of the target language either with other American children or with the teacher. On several observations made when he was attending the nursery, for the first few weeks, Hazim tended to be passive and alone and kept to himself most of the time. He maintained a silent period at the nursery, and if he were interested to join in an activity with other children, he would just follow and smile at them without saying a word. His silence was of two things: he was sure what to say because he did not have the confidence or he did not want to make mistakes in English. At that time, he understood English easily when asked.

Imitating Others

The next stage of language development in Hazim is imitating the words he heard from other people around him. It seemed that a majority of the utterances produced by Hazim at the time were the results of imitating the expressions made by people around him. The phrases he memorized were usually long chunks of sentences or phrases and not at word level. The expressions are "What do you say, dad?", "Stop it" and "I want it". At word level, he was observed to produce swearing words in English when talking with his brother, such as "cool", " stink", and "my butt". The words became jokes to him and he seemed to be enjoying himself by laughing every time he says the words

or phrases. He would repeat the words and phrases at home with his brother and laughed at them. He continued repeating the same words until he memorized them or until he learned new more interesting words or phrases. It is amazing to state that he had strong memory and were able to use the words and phrases correctly every time. On different occasion, I asked him whether he understood what the words meant. And to my astonishment, most of the answers were correct, although at times he used them incorrectly. Hazim's repeating words and phrases seems to have one purpose, which is to produce perfect pronunciation of the words and phrases.

Using songs in learning English

Songs seem to have a strong impact on the learning of English observed of Hazim. At the very beginning, he became fascinated by English he heard from the television or radio or even from his nursery. He began singing. However, his singings were sometimes interrupted because he forgot certain words or did not know how to pronounce them. In that case, he would resort to his mother tongue. One of the songs that interest so much was songs with funny lyrics such as songs by Al Yankovich "I am fat" and "Eat it". He sang the songs everyday.

Nazirul – learning to speak the only language exposed to him

Nazirul was only 1.4 year when he traveled to the United States. Unlike his brother, he was only starting to learn to speak the mother tongue when he arrived in the States. To him, learning English is like learning his first language. When he arrived, he could only say a few words in his mother tongue in his stunted pronunciation, such as the word for drinking "minum", he would just say the last syllable "num". In a sense, Nazirul was immediately "immersed" into the English speaking environment, a situation he was not really aware of. He did not have to go through the transition from using his mother tongue and to think in it before trying to find the English counterpart. The adjustment he had to make was not as hard as his brother. During playtime with his friends, he seemed to be able to adapt easily to the use of English with his friends. His confusion in the use of the language was very much inexistence. Although it took a much longer time for him to be able to use English than his brother, I did not see him trying to memorize words by repeating them aloud. However, he had the opportunity to play with words that Hazim brought home started to repeat to himself. Nazirul would try to follow Hazim with the words or phrases.

After several months, the children began to have their own system of chatting that they understood. The chats were mostly about "bad guys" and "good guys" of the toys. Sometimes, the "bad guys/good guys" became personalized, "I am good guy, you are bad guy."

When he attended nursery, Nazirul like his brother remained quiet most of the time. His friends were non-native speakers from China and Taiwan. When he tried to say something, the children and the teacher did not understand him altogether. They resorted to pointing at objects in order to try to understand him. After about six months attending nursery, Nazirul began to be able to produce words and even sentences. However, he still was not sure of many grammatical structures, such as between male and female pronoun.

A Comparison between the Two Children Competence and Confidence in Using English

In terms of proficiency, Hazim was much more proficient in using English than his younger brother, Nazirul. However, in terms of confidence in using English and the degree of confidence in initiating conversation, Nazirul was more confident than Hazim. For example, whenever Nazirul met someone in the lift, he would instantly start a conversation by asking all sorts of questions. When someone asked him, he would respond to the person instantly. On the other hand, it was more difficult for Hazim to start and maintain a conversation with someone whom he did not know. Also Hazim did not answer easily when people asked him. In this case, Nazirul did not have the inhibition to interact, while Hazim was more reluctance to interact with people. The reluctance to speak in Hazim could be caused by the interference of the first language on the second language.

Conclusion

Children learn a second language through having experienced different stages and ups and downs. There are many factors that can contribute to the success and failure of children learning a second language. From the study conducted, it seems that a lot can be learned from observing children acquiring English as their second language.

Kidwatching can be an important instrument in observing children in the natural behavior, especially when it comes to learning and acquiring a second language. From the kidwatching of two ESL children learning a language that is totally foreign to them, several conclusions can be made. First, social contact and abundance of language interaction with the native speakers or people who speak the language, especially their peers in the case of children, will determine the pace and speed at which the children will get the language. Peers have stronger influence on them than parents do. Second, introducing children to word-level language did not seem to work out very well with them. Children memorize and remember language in chunks. They learned better when the language is presented in short sentences or phrases in context. Third, children, acquire a second language through the process of imitating the people around them, especially their peers. They have a vast memory for sentences and phrases.

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