THE PRE-UNDERSTANDINGS OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Précis: Rudolfo Chávez Chávez discusses second language acquisition for linguistic minority students within a framework of research findings which lead him to suggest key concepts to be considered if these students are to achieve academic success. Such areas as the effects of cultural differences, the consequences of dual language acquisition, and the use of native language for instruction are presented from the perspective of an educator who places primary responsibility for student success upon the school. Rudolfo Chávez Chávez is Associate Professor of Education and Director of the Bilingual Teacher Preparation Program at California State University, Bakersfield.

INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

The argument that the educational system has systematically blamed linguistic and ethnic minority children for their inability to learn has been seriously discussed by several scholars. The repeated theme has been that linguistic and ethnic minority students are unprepared and that they must be made over and shaped to fit the requirements of the educational system (Cummins, 1981; Hernandez—Chavez, 1984; Jones—Wilson, 1983). Students are labeled as unmotivated or troubled, implying that the source of the problem is located within the student. In addition, the institutional values that direct many educators’ roles limit the ways in which learning problems may be identified and solved. Bullough Goldstein and Bolt (1984) contend that students lack the “preunderstanding” necessary to be able to communicate within a school setting. Such preunderstandings are shared meanings carried in verbal and nonverbal forms that “orient us to the world in a manner deemed correct for our culture and language.” Interestingly, for language minority students, language and culture barriers have been identified as the major obstacles to learning; in other words, the language and culture of linguistic minority students are in direct contradiction with those preunderstandings of the dominant cultures. (1) Also, it has been recognized that the condition most needed for linguistic minority students to fully and successfully experience the educational process depends upon teacher acceptance of the students’ language and culture within the classroom setting, as well as the use of that language and culture in the learning process (Cummins, 1980; Hernandez—Chavez, 1984; Lambert, 1984).

Theoretically, a teacher prepared in bilingual/multicultural teaching methodologies will consider and accept the language and culture of linguistic minority students; moreover, the teacher will create a climate that enhances and fosters meaningful learning opportunities for that student. In essence, the teacher prepared in bilingual/multicultural teaching met possesses the cultural pluralistic (2) preunderstandings that provide students with cognitive and affective experiences needed for success within the school and community.

All teachers, not just teachers prepared in bilingual/multicultural teaching methodologies, are concerned with the success of the students they teach. Nevertheless, research by Duran (1984), and The Commission on Higher education (1981), among others, reveal a devastatingly high drop-out rate among language minority students. Therefore, it can be argued that, in general, schools and the teachers within those schools are perpetuating failure by not providing linguistic minority students with the experiences needed for success. (See Zamora, 1975.)

One possibility for all educators involved in public education is to expand their preunderstandings about a critical area in bilingual/multicultural education — second language acquisition among linguistic minority students. An analysis of research on this topic manifests a multitude of educational possibilities that could assist linguistic minority students to succeed in school. The purpose of this paper is to provide such an analysis. This discussion will assist educators to gain insight into the second language acquisition process which will, in turn, help them make decisions and perhaps develop new meanings and values. The following analysis will include (1) brief discussion on second language acquisition research within the last decade, (2) studies that speak specifically to second language acquisition and bilingual language acquisition, (3) key theoretical considerations of second language acquisition based on recent research.

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION RESEARCH

Data on language acquisition and development has increased considerably since the 1970’s. Leopold’s monumental study (1939, 1947, 1949a, 1949b) of the simultaneous development of two languages in the speech of
his daughter Hildegard, stood as the classic source of information about bilingual language acquisition in children (cited in McLaughlin, 1982). Though other explanations of first and second language acquisition have been and continue to be discussed (Rutherford, 1982), Leopold’s study had a decisive impact on the direction of language acquisition research, in general, and second language acquisition research, in particular (Hatch, 1978; Mc 1982). Hakuta and Cancino’s (1977) timely and scholarly article on second language acquisition research trends was a direct result of Leopold’s work and has been of great significance to education. They found that researchers used four analytical approaches: contrastive analysis, errors analysis, performance analysis, and discourse analysis. McLaughlin (1978) comprehensive treatment of the literature on second language acquisition in childhood presented an excellent overview of the topic. He delineated a detailed treatment of misconceptions about second language acquisition that had been perpetuated in the literature, as well as a most fruitful discussion of the literature on second language acquisition including bilingual education programs. Cornejo and Cornejo (1981) presented a comprehensive historical synopsis of the view of language and acquisition. Various philosophical perspectives and early theoretical notions about the phenomena of languages were succinctly discussed.

Other researchers present an array of important findings which add to second language acquisition “preunderstandings” needed by teachers in order to create rich learning environments for linguistic minority students. For example, see Burt and Dulay, 1975; Fishman and Keller 1982; Hatch, 1978; Scarcella and Krashen, 1980; studies on Immersion Education 1984. Dulay and Burt’s (1972 and 1974) studies strongly indicated that regardless of first language background children reconstruct English syntax in similar ways. The types of errors in English that Spanish—, Chinese—, Japanese, and Norwegian—speaking children made while learning English were similar. This similarity of errors, as well as the specific error types, reflect what we refer to as creative constructions, more specifically, the process in which children gradually reconstruct rules for speech they hear, guided by universal innate mechanisms which cause them to formulate certain types of hypotheses about the language system being acquired, until the mismatch between what they are exposed to and what they produce is resolved. (Hatch, p.348.)

These data illustrated that a small amount of language transfer occurred, i.e., first language acquisition had little influence on second language acquisition, Hakuta and Cancino (1977), however, questioned, not the data per se, but rather the underlying assumptions on the analysis of the data. Nevertheless, when Hakuta and Cancino (1977) applied Dulay and Burt’s criteria on a study conducted by Duskova (1969), comparable results occurred. Dulay and Burt (1973) also investigated the natural sequences in the acquisition of eight English grammatical structures by Spanish-speaking children. They found that:
... for three different groups of children —Chicano children in Sacramento, California; Mexican children living in Tijuana, Mexico, but attending school in San Ysidro, California; and Puerto Rican children in New York City — the acquisition sequence of the following eight structures was approximately the same: plural (-s), progressive (-ing), copula (is, article (a, the), auxiliary (is), irregular past (ate, took), third person singular (—5), and possessive (Noun_Is)N (Dulay and Burt, 1978).

In another study, Dulay and Burt (1978) compared the order of acquisition of 11 functors for a group of Chinese and Spanish—speaking children learning English. The results indicated that the sequences of acquisition of the 11 functors obtained for Chinese and Spanish children were nearly identical, even though there were differences in the languages; plus, the same sequence of acquisition of 11 functors obtained using three different methods provided strong evidence that children exposed to natural second language speech acquired certain structures in a universal order. Because of the results provided by the above studies they concluded that there was a strong indication that universal cognitive mechanisms were the basis for the child’s organization of a target language, and that the second language system, rather than the first language system, guided the acquisition process.

A study by Garcia and Trujillo (1979) also supported Dulay and Burt’s (1974) conclusions. Garcia and Trujillo attempted to evaluate the effect of Spanish—English bilingual development in early childhood on productive imitation tasks. The researchers studied two linguistically different groups of children residing in urban areas of Salt Lake City, Utah. The experimental group
was composed of 30 children defined as English—Spanish bilinguals be control group was composed of 30 children who were defined as English mono-linguals. The results indicated that the bilingual subjects developed both languages and “that Spanish—English bilingualism during early childhood (was) not necessarily a linguistic handicap with respect to the production of English.” Few transfer errors were observed. Errors that were recorded were no different between bilingual and monolingual children in English lexical and sentence terms. Thus, errors were not attributable to between—language transfer but could be considered developmental in nature. Finally, even though the investigation was seriously constrained by the linguistic tasks that were considered in the study, the data did suggest that children were capable of simultaneous acquisition of both languages without major impairment to either.

Similarly, Padilla and Liebman (1975) were concerned with the simultaneous acquisition of Spanish and English. The purpose of their study was to analyze a body of language from three children who were simultaneously acquiring the two languages. Their primary concern was with the subject’s actual forms produced in speech. The data were compared with Brown’s 1973 (3), and Gonzalez’ 1970 (4), studies of English and Spanish monolingual language acquisition, respectively for insights related to the rate of language acquisition for children acquiring two languages simultaneously. Padilla and Leibman’s (1975) study revealed that there “was no evidence in the language samples that might suggest an overall reduced or slower rate of language growth for the bilingual children.” This study contradicted Swain’s (1972) study which reported a slower rate of language acquisition in bilingual children. Padilla and Liebman found that bilingual children acquiring two languages simultaneously demonstrated a preference in their language output for one language over another. Therefore, “it would be in error to suggest that grammatical structures appear in one language earlier than they appear in the second language because the languages differ in linguistic complexity. These differences may only reflect the subtle realities of the child’s bilingual environment as well as individual variations in language development.” (1975)

In a case study, Huerta (1977) studied the language acquisition of a two—year, one—month—old male experiencing language interactions in all Spanish, all English and bilingual settings. Her findings agreed with Gonzalez’ (1970) and Brown’s (1973) Spanish and English language development studies. Huerta indicated that the simultaneous acquisition and maintenance of two languages did not appear to hamper the child in any way, and that code—switching did not confuse or impede the child’s language development.

In criticism of the above type of studies, Chesterfield and Perez asserted that “language acquisition of young bilinguals (had) been largely limited to case studies or, when larger studies (had) been undertaken, (studies) tended to consider bilingual children as a single group. (1981) The major purpose of their study was to examine the common research practice of classifying children as either monolingual or bilingual. This study examined the differing degrees of bilingualism among a sample of 89 pre—school children from low income Hispanic families living in bilingual environment Three factors related to language acquisition were investigated: the characteristics of bilingual children in comparing their level of acquisition with that of monolinguals, the importance of the dominant language of bilingual children in comparing their level of acquisition with that of monolinguals, and the extent to which monolingual children living in a bilingual environment were completely monolingual. The results suggested that bilinguals differ from each other depending on their language preference. and, since Spanish—preferring bilinguals did not differ from the English—preferring groups, it appeared that bilinguals were not deterred in learning from their preferred language by the simultaneous acquisition of a second language. They concluded that, at least among four—year—olds from lower SES Hispanic families, there was no apparent handicap for dual language acquisition.

Within the last few years, second language acquisition research has turned from examining children’s isolated utterances and their syntactic development to the study of language in social contexts (5) (Hakuta & Cancino, 1977; McLaughlin, 1982). Such research has been labeled discourse analysis and focuses on the communicative interaction and the social and cognitive strategies that learners use in communicative settings. In addition to this research approach, a broader view of second language acquisition must also be considered. Supporting the above studies (e.g., Garcia and Trujillo, 1979; Huerta, 1975), Lamendella (1977) contends that
Second language acquisition may encompass two, three, or more languages learned simultaneously or in succession. It is more typically the result of exposure to a target language in a naturalistic setting, within either child or adult operating in an environment where another language is spoken and the learner needs to use that language with peers for day-to-day communication about real needs ... what is at issue ... is not “learning the target language,” but rather “learning to communicate” in the target language.

In acquiring the facility to communicate in the target language, different language proficiency skills develop. Strong (1983) divided language proficiency skills into two categories: Natural Communicative Language (NCL) and Linguistic Tasks Language (LTL). NCL refers to language used for interpersonal communications and LTL results from formal testings such as comprehension test, doze test, etc. Based on a review of pertinent studies, he grouped and re-grouped the findings in the studies to determine significant relationships. Strong (1983) found that in all cases, except for two, social factors correlated with Natural Communicative Language.

Based on the above review of literature, Strong’s (1983) investigation explored the relationship between a number of personal characteristics, labeled social styles, and the acquisition of a second language (English) by thirteen Spanish-speaking kindergartners over a one-year period in a bilingual setting. The seven social styles examined were talkativeness, responsiveness, gregariousness, assertiveness, extroversion, social competence and popularity. Several assessment procedures (observations and questionnaires) that measured the social styles were used and correlated with three language measures — productive structural knowledge, play vocabulary, and pronunciation (which were developed from natural communicative language gathered from a playhouse environment, where one Spanish-speaking subject played alone with a native speaker of English, and from informal interviews). In brief, talkativeness, responsiveness, and gregariousness accounted for most of the statistically significant correlations. A Pearson r coefficient for contacts with English—only speakers and NCL measures were applied; except for NCL Play vocabulary, no further significant associations were shown. Thus, the additional contact with specifically English-speaking children arising from a gregarious personality does not appear to have the automatic effect of improving a learner’s English skills. It seems that the degree of active participation in the communication is more important than the variety of interactions (Strong, 1983).

Strong’s findings put into question Wong-Fillmore’s (1976) findings that claimed that a key to acquiring a second language centered on a motivation to socialize and be a part of the target language group, thereby gaining more second language input. This did not prove true for the learners in this study. Because of these results other aspects of behavior or personality may account for superiority at acquiring a second language and should be investigated.

In his conclusions, Strong (1983) suggested that teachers should create situations where non-English and English—speaking children would want and need to communicate with one another for the achievement of a common goal. Inter-Ethnolinguistic Peer Tutoring (IEPT) (Johnson, 1983) was an approach that implemented Strong’s suggestion. The IEPT approach provided a structured setting for meaningful and natural conversation between Spanish—dominant students and monolingual English—speaking students through an exchange of information. In Johnson’s (1983) investigation, monolingual English—speaking students (i.e., peer trainers) were taught an activity appropriate for their age level in an area such as cooking, science, or art. This information was to be shared with Spanish—dominant students. Those Spanish—dominant students that exchanged information with their peer—tutors outperformed the control group in two ways: (1) a greater proportion of their total speech was devoted to initiating verbal interactions with English speakers, and (2) a greater proportion of their total speech was devoted to engaging in verbal interactions with fluent English speaking children (Johnson, 1983). These findings suggested that children’s social interaction may be influenced by the way educators structure classroom groups and activities. The use of the IEPT approach shows promise in breaking down communication barriers between different ethnolinguistic groups and helping to create an environment more conducive to informal second language acquisition. As suggested by Strong (1983) and Johnson (1983), the degree of active participation in the communication is more important than the variety of interactions. And as current
theory implies, language acquisition, first or second, occurs only when comprehension of real messages occurs, and when the acquirer is ‘not on the defensive’... (Krasheri, 1982).

In summary, the studies discussed above illustrate the variety of research that has evolved in the last few years. Also, the studies dramatically reveal not only the advances but also the limitations that exist in second language acquisition research. More important, these studies serve as conceptual hooks for expanding our preunderstandings on how linguistic minority students acquire a second language or two languages simultaneously.

**Theoretical Considerations**

The following is a brief discussion of some theoretical considerations based on findings of second language acquisition research. As can be inferred by the above review, the second language acquisition process is complicated; moreover, several factors (6) and variables must be carefully considered before decisions about and for linguistic minority students are made. Factors such as methods of instruction, types of exposure to the second language, and age of the acquirer seen to be related to the second language acquisition process according to Krashen (1982), who says, “the true causative variables in second language acquisition derive from the input hypothesis and the affective filter hypothesis —— the amount of ‘comprehensible input’ the acquirer receives and understands, and the strength of the ‘affective filter,’ or the degree to which the acquirer is ‘open’ to the input” (Krashen, 1982).

Additionally, specific and different language proficiency skills are necessary and are employed by individuals acquiring a first or second language. For example, Strong (1983) made a distinction between natural communicative language (NCL) and language that is a product of a linguistic task (LTL). Hernandez—Chavez, Burt and Dulay (1978) distinguished between “natural communication” tasks and “linguistic manipulation” tasks. The former task “is one where the focus of the student is on communicating something to someone else - - an idea, some information, or an opinion in a natural manner ...”; the later task is one “where the focus of the student is on performing the conscious linguistic manipulation required by the task” (Burt and Dulay, 1978). Cummins (1980) speaks of Basic Inter—personal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency Skills (CALP). The former skills (BICS) are the phonological, syntactical, and lexical skills necessary to function in everyday inter—personal, contexts and are universal across native speakers; although individual differences are found among native speakers, the differences do not strongly relate to cognitive or academic performance. Of great importance, the latter skills (CALP) refer to language proficiency skills and are strongly related to literacy skills and academic success.

For linguistic minority students acquiring a second language, the above distinctions are essential. Based on his investigations and those of several other researchers, Cummins (1980) has hypothesized that the cognitive/academic aspects of the first language and the second language are interdependent and that the development of proficiency in the second language is partially a function of the level of first language proficiency at the time when intensive exposure to the second language begins. Nam other words, previous learning literacy—related functions of language (in the first language) will predict future learning of these functions (in the second language)” (Cummins, 1980). Even though a variety of factors affect the rate of acquisition of second language skills among several age groups, “the consistency of the findings in relation to second language CALP acquisition strongly suggests that (the) level of first language CALP is a major determinant” (Cummins, 1981). Put another way, when linguistic minority students’ first language is fully developed and is used in the classroom in a way that results in learning, then the acquisition of the second language and concomitant academic success will also result. This is contradictory to many educators’ perceptions (meanings and values) toward linguistic minority students. Generally, educators’ preunderstandings have dictated that they jettison linguistic minority students out of the first language and into the second language or out of bilingual/multicultural classrooms and into all—English/dominant cultural classrooms as soon as those students have developed Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills. The cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency Skills (CALP) are not sufficiently developed to ensure success in the all—English classrooms and the linguistic minority students fall progressively further behind grade norms in the development of English academic skills (Cummins, 1981) (7).
Summary and Conclusions

The research discussed illustrates that linguistic minority students a second language do not “get mixed up” in their language use. Also, the notion that the first language of the child should be eradicated before the second language is acquired is nothing more than a xenophobic argument that is destructive to the well-being of all and counter—productive to those who are developing pedagogical methods responsive to the needs of linguistic minority students. The research findings do show

1. That a minimum of language errors transfer from the first language to the second language and the errors that do occur are not attributable to between—language transfer, but are more developmental in nature.

2. That the acquisition of English grammatical structures are approximately the same; and when children are exposed to natural second language speech, certain structures are acquired in a universal order.

3. That children are capable of simultaneous acquisition of two languages without impairment or deference to either.

4. That children will acquire a second language more successfully in settings where second language acquisition occurs informally as a part of a meaningful communication.

The key theoretical considerations derived from research suggest that:

1. Second language acquisition programs (bilingual/multicultural programs) should include a strong first language and cultural component. In order to eliminate the negative feelings linguistic minority students harbor toward their language and culture (Genessee, 1984; Lambert, 1984); Hernandez—Chavez, (1984) contends that:

The language of home and family is a central aspect of sociocultural identity and self-esteem. If this language is stigmatized in society and repudiated by the school, an individual’s self-esteem must necessarily suffer. If this language fails to be used as the primary vehicle for social, affective, and cognitive development, these aspects of the child’s growth will be damaged, bringing great harm to the child’s educational potential.

Native language development is critical to second language acquisition and academic success:

Padilla and Long (1969), found that Spanish—American children and adolescents can acquire English better and adjust more effectively to the educational and occupational demands of American society if their linguistic and cultural ties with the Spanish—speaking world are kept alive and active from infancy on. There are, in fact, numerous recent examples where the home or primary language is used as a medium for education (Hanson, 1979; McConnell, 1980; Rosier and Holm, 1980; Troike, 1978), and they all point in the same direction (Lambert, 1984).

3. Development of the native language will not impede the acquisition of English; nor are bilingual/multicultural programs designed to foster separation or avoid English fluency.

…for language minority children in the United States, strong English proficiency in all domains is essential. English proficiency is indispensable in today’s world for advanced academic training. Participating adequately in business, commerce, or the occupational market without a full command of English would be extremely difficult for an individual. And the use of English for inter—ethnic relations in most situations is natural and appropriate and thus very important (Hernandez—Chavez, 1984).

The second language acquisition research findings and theoretical consideration discussed are of paramount importance and serve as an integral foundation to the “preunderstandings” now needed by all educators whose genuine goal is the full cognitive—academic development of linguistic minority students. Without such preunderstandings, linguistic minority students will continue to suffer from pedagogie ignorance and attempts to reshape them to fit within the format of an established educational paradigm which has failed (8).

The demographic trends are clear. The task ahead is staggering. In California alone, 10,000 bilingual/ multicultural educators are needed. It won’t be enough to say that “we are doing our best” or that “teachers trained in bilingual/multicultural education will only be needed in the lower grades not the upper grades” or that what we
really need is some program where those kids will quickly learn English so we can get on with it.” 4e now need a consistent, humanistic approach to Education which will develop students’ identities, their language abilities, their cognitive skills and give them multiple opportunities for success.

REFERENCES
1. Addressing this same point, Hernandez—Chavez (1984) states: “Thus, the child, the child’s family, and the child’s culture are defined as the principal causes of educational failure. Schooling and academic learning are assumed to be uniform and objective processes; children, he arrive in various stages of preparedness to benefit from these processes. According to some points of view, if children are unprepared, they must be made over and shaped to fit the requirements of the educational system. For language minority children, the language barrier is identified as the major obstacle, and breaching this barrier is the principal strategy for opening the doors to learning. Rarely is the adequacy of the educational system itself questioned. Rather, educators have concerned themselves almost exclusively with ways in which to change the child to adapt to the norms of the school” (p. 145).

Similarly, Lambert (1984) speaking of the French Canadians states: “Their style of life has been ignored, ridiculed, and blamed as the cause of their social and economic position. Unfortunately, this type of thinking becomes contagious, and in time even members of the marked minority group begin to believe that they are inferior in some sense and blame themselves for their inferiority. It takes much reflection in frustrating situations of this sort to see through the sophistry and realize that one’s ethnic or social class group is in no way inherently inferior but simply that those with the advantages have learned well how to keep the advantages and that their social class cushion makes the maintenance of their superiority relatively easy for them. Stereotyping or otherwise marking minority groups — people they really know very little about — becomes an effective way for the majority group to keep others out of the power sphere (p.10).

See Banks (1984) for his differentiation of multiculturalism and pluralism and Appleton (1983) for his discussion on cultural pluralism.

3. Brown conducted a longitudinal study which identified 14 morphesies in the speech of three native speakers of English. He found that morp occurring in more than 90% of obligatory contexts for three consecutive samples were aa in a roughly invariant order.

4. Gonzalez conducted a study with four Mexican American children between the ages of two and five years. The children were interviewed for a total of two hours. Error analysis of language structures characterizing each age level were conducted. The study illustrated apparent changes in grammatic structures between one age level and another. Also, the emergence of transformations such as interrogatives, imperatives and relative clauses (Gonzalez, 1975, p. 363).

5. Even though it was discussed as early as 1968 by Brown (cited in Hakuta and Cancino, 1977) and even earlier by Pritchard (1952), cited in Strong (1983).

6. Other affective factors such as language stock, attitude, motivation and ego permeability to second language are also influencing the process (Schumann, 1975).

7. Please see Cummins (1981, p. 3 - 6) for an in—depth discussion on this trend.

8. For example see:

Bibliography


