

BEGINNING A SECOND LANGUAGE WITH CHILDREN

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A large congress on economic development was held in Tokyo this summer. There were delegates from all of the Southeastern Asian countries represented. Because the meeting was held in the leading industrial country on the Asian continent, it was expected by all that the leading role with the greatest amount to contribute would be taken by the host country. Anticipation by all the delegates ran high. Of course, the meetings got underway in the language that all knew, the international language of English. As the meetings progressed, it was very evident that the Japanese were conspicuously silent. It caused one of them to write a letter to my friend, saying in effect: "At the congress it became more and more evident that though the Japanese had much to contribute, they were not able to communicate with their neighbors. The Vietnamese, the Burmese and the Japanese said little throughout the sessions. The representatives from India, Malaysia, South Korea, and Hong Kong with their versatile and lucid remarks swayed the meetings completely. It is very plain to see that if the Japanese are going to assume the role of leadership in Southeast Asia, it will be necessary for them, not only to be the leader in industry, but also to be able to converse with other peoples about it. Certainly it is more and more evident that the study of English is a requisite."

The experience of the writer of the letter came with conviction and new perception to him; certainly at one time or another it must have been a similar experience that has come to leaders in financial, educational, religious, sociological and other circles. Was it not this same concern voiced again by Dr. Edwin Reischauer

on his last visit and appearance in Japan. Was it not his plea that the Japanese now make an effort to communicate and participate in dialogue with the members of other countries through the use of the linguistic medium common to all. Though the Japanese in the past may have hid their heads in the proverbial sands by reading books, and writing letters, at last Japan has come to the place where she must stand on her feet and engage automatically in the language that is spoken and comprehended instantaneously by all.

Far be it from me to revise the English curriculum or propose a magic, sure-success corpus of materials for immediate adoption, but permit me to offer a few suggestions that might be of assistance. First of all, it is very evident that English teaching is not adequate and I would like to suggest that the acquisition of the language is so important that instruction should be started at an earlier stage in the schooling experience of the child by putting it in the elementary school. This is the practice in European countries and it is becoming more and more a reality in the linguistically retarded country of the United States of America. In the latter country it was for years customary for the second language to be introduced in the college years. During the early '50's, this was reduced to the high school level and during the late '50's it was brought down into the junior high level and in the '60's even to the elementary grades.

The general impression today among those who are working with the teaching of second languages is that the best time to present them is to children. There are many reasons for this. Children are natural imitators and can thus learn a language more effortlessly; they acquire a better pronunciation because of their imitative ability. Dr. Wilder Penfield, the Canadian neurologist, has found in his research with children that the younger the speaking child is, the more easily he can acquire a language. His study revealed that "the optimum age for beginning the continuous learning of a second language seems to fall within

the span of ages four through eight, with superior performance to be anticipated at ages eight, nine and ten. In this early period the brain seems to have the greatest plasticity and specialized capacity needed for acquiring speech.”¹ Furthermore, children are less inhibited and are willing to attempt the unknown and if they make a mistake, they even enjoy the fun that everyone has with the error. Likewise, the habits of their own language are not so much a part of them that they cannot adjust to the new sounds and structures of the second language. Sabine R. Ulibarri substantiates this when he writes: “A child’s organs of speech are flexible and adaptable; his ear is keen and discerning. Thus the ‘impossible sounds’ of a foreign language, the down fall of so many grown-ups, are not only possible but actually easy for the little ones. They find themselves at ease in any climate of sound.”² Because of these qualities which are such an asset in learning, it seems the part of wisdom to take advantage of them while they may be had.

Adults find very distasteful the repetition that learning a language necessitates. Children, on the other hand, thrive on hearing the same thing over and over again. Monotony for them does not become boring and dull. As a child can spend hours on end in repetition as he bounces a ball or skips with a rope, so “repetition is the stimulating pattern of his daily life.”³

There are those who contend that the best time for the introduction of a second language is in the fourth grade of the elementary school. By the time the child has learned good study habits, he has become acquainted with his own language and he has acquired a certain amount of curiosity concerning peoples other than his own. Others maintain that the first grade of

1 Faye L. Bumpass, *Teaching Young Students English as a Foreign Language*, American Book Co., (1963) p. 5

2 Quoted from Harold B. Allen’s Compilation: *Teaching English as a Second Language: A Book of Readings*, (McGray-Hill, 1965) p. 316

3 op cit Allen, p. 316

elementary school is best, for the younger the child, the more easily he retains lexical items in another language and the more correctly he imitates sounds.

The latter view is held by teachers in the primary schools in Puerto Rico where English teaching for children is carried out possibly more successfully than anywhere in the world. In order to see at first hand how it was conducted, I went especially to see the work on that island. I was able to have interviews with those in the Educational Ministry who were working with materials and curricula for the grades. An effort is being made there gradually to introduce English from the first grade of instruction in as many schools as possible. The teachers were also unanimous in their opinion that the place to start the second language was in the first grade. They testify to the fact that the children seem enthusiastic about their study and get pronunciation quite accurately.

It was also my privilege while on the island to visit an English lesson for first grade primary pupils. They took part wholeheartedly in singing English songs, conversation games, contests and pattern practice. As in any class, there were those who participated willingly and volunteered freely, while others were reticent and said very little. It was explained that even in their own language and in all their classes, these pupils had a natural inclination to be hesitant and inactive.

Of course, though the program on the island was considered ideal, the teachers also spoke equally frankly of the problems, — the additional number of teachers required, the paucity of qualified instructors, curriculum building, scheduling of classes, financial considerations, et al. It goes without saying that these are all inherent in the instituting of the program; they must be recognized as a part of the picture but they must not be the reason for not undertaking the task.

In the States, the public schools have been awakening to the fact that the education of the American Indian and Mexican-

American children is basically a linguistic problem. For their instruction English as a second language is being taught in the areas where such children live. Teachers prepared to teach English as a second language are being sought for these youngsters. For many years it was considered that the children from these educationally and culturally disadvantaged and underprivileged backgrounds were mentally inferior. It has now been ascertained that in their homes they speak their mother tongue and are unfamiliar with the English language, the medium used in the classroom. Because of their inability to understand what the teacher is saying, they fall behind, become disinterested, shy, embarrassed and in the end, they not only cause a large number of drop-outs, but also are candidates for vandalism, delinquency and poor citizenship in the future.

In order to meet this linguistic handicap, the government has appropriated funds for the preparations of materials for such a project. There is teaching of English with attempts made to increase lexical items and correct structures of the language as well as standard and acceptable pronunciation. Of course, this is carried forward along linguistic precepts especially as set forth in Bruner's *Toward a Theory of Instruction* (1966). Not only are the required subjects of arithmetic and the social studies introduced as content materials, but they are also used as items for vocabulary building and structure study and are integrated as such into the corpus of materials. On this project the linguistics and psychology departments work hand in hand.*

It is desirable, then, that a second language be learned and even more desirable that it be started at as early an age as possible. As previously mentioned, in Puerto Rico the second language is introduced from the first grade of the elementary school. As I observed the pupils, it was evident that the outspoken

* Materials are in the process of being compiled with Dr. Robert Wilson of UCLA as co-ordinator of the committee.

ones were reveling in the study; they were responding wholeheartedly to the instruction of their charming teacher, a person who was brought in exclusively for the teaching of English, as it was not possible to find one sufficiently prepared in spoken English among the staff of the school. It was also my observation that there were many withdrawn pupils who said not one word during the entire period. Certainly there is little learning if the pupil refuses to say anything. In the first grade a child is making adjustments to a new way of life and to the disciplines of group living and academic attainment. It occurred to me that the more ideal time to start the second language, therefore, would be after the environmental adjustments have been made and the learner has become more established in his own language as well.

However, regardless of whether the beginning of the second language should be made in the first or the fourth year of primary instruction for Japan, it must be made if its future citizens are to take their places of leadership in Southeast Asia. There will be the customary conventional objections projected; the curriculum is already too heavy for the admission of another subject, the teachers' loads are already too heavy, the time-table will not tolerate an additional discipline, there are not enough qualified teachers, the financial obligations will be prohibitive, and others ad infinitum. All of these objections are valid but slowly the obstacles must be overcome and work started in a gradual way. First of all, Japanese must face the fact that not every pupil has equal ability and it is not necessary to treat everyone equally. Only those with a certain IQ or certain scholastic attainments should be allowed to enter the English classes, regardless of how persistent every mother is that her child should also be admitted into the language class. The classes could meet on certain mornings before the regular sessions begin. The fact, furthermore, must be accepted that once a week for study is practically as good as nothing for proper advancement as children must be taught with the aural-oral approach method and if instruction is

given only once a week, the rate of loss of memory is so great that steady progress is not assured. Ideally there would be a thirty minute period with three sessions a week. Special teachers who are qualified can be brought in only for the second language instruction. Naturally this will entail additional financial considerations; this must be expected.

Teachers of English for children must be able to speak the language with an acceptable degree of accuracy because children are great imitators and unfortunately copy the poor accent that the teacher uses. The pronunciation, intonation and sentence rhythm must be such that one would welcome its imitation by the learners.

Teaching materials are not too great a difficulty. Perfect publications may not be found but adaptations can always be made according to one's needs. British book companies have long pioneered in materials for children's needs and American companies have more recently entered into the competitive field with acceptable materials by linguistically qualified personnel. Some of the more recent companies who have put out materials compiled by linguists using the most modern theories are: *Introducing English*, by Louise Lancaster (1966), Houghton Mifflin Company; *English Around the World*, (1969) Scott, Foresman and Company; and materials are being compiled under the supervision of Mr. A. Ramirez (1969) at the Educational Service Center, Region One, Edinburg, Texas.

Japan is far ahead of other nations in its mechanical and industrial attainments in mass communication. Tape recorders, language laboratories and many other gadgets are tremendous assets and should be used in the acquisition of a second language, but these should not be considered as a substitute for a teacher. "Languages are learned with the heart and with love. If a second language is to be learned at all, the process must be a living emotional experience and not an intellectual experience,"⁴ is the

4 op. cit., Ulibarri, p. 315

conviction of Mr. Ulibarri. The loving and living concern of a warm teacher is a greater factor in learning communication than any mechanical device. Though the mechanical is a great asset, it is still at best only an aid to the teacher, and not a device used in the place of a teacher.

My plea, then, is that Japan start its instruction of English, the international language, in the elementary school where the students with linguistic promise can avail themselves of a tool which is indispensable for the advancement of this great nation in the century that is to follow. To meet the needs of that century, only a meeting of minds in dialogue together can help this nation to progress and lead to peace and understanding among all nations.