SOME NEEDED RESEARCH INTO TESOL IN AUSTRALIA

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(Received September 1971)

Although the history of immigration in Australia is as old as the nation itself, it is only in the last twenty years that large numbers of speakers of languages other than English have come to settle there. One would think that by now most of the social and linguistic problems that migrants encounter would have been thoroughly researched and an enlightened policy formulated for their solution. One would think that migrants arriving in Australia would now be entering a carefully prepared and controlled situation in which steps had been taken to minimize the likelihood of social and psychological maladjustment. Unfortunately this does not seem to be the case, and it is only in the last few years that the failure of many migrants to adjust to their new way of life has become a matter of serious concern to government and private agencies. Acquisition of English is obviously a key factor in promoting a well-integrated migrant community, and although the Department of Education and Science, like the Commonwealth Office of Education before it, has an impressive record of endeavour in the field of English teaching, it is surprising how little is known about solutions to language-teaching problems that have existed in Australia for the last twenty years. The teaching of English to migrant children in primary and secondary schools is now officially recognized as a matter of urgency, but it is my opinion that an ad hoc approach is being adopted lacking the necessary foundations of empirical and theoretical research which should have been started twenty years ago.

Studies on the child's acquisition of his first language, aided by insights from transformational-generative grammar, may reveal much which bears on the learning of a second language. Whereas linguists once believed that by the age of five or six the child has mastered the structure of his native language, it has now been shown that the development of language is part of a maturation process and that some children experience difficulty with certain important English structures long after they have turned five. Carol Chomsky[1] has demonstrated that even children of eight, nine and ten may confuse ask and tell. Further research studies might reveal other areas of difficulty and until problem areas of first language acquisition have been identified it would be unwise to construct definitive syllabi and materials for migrant English in primary schools, since it is safe to assume that what

constitutes an acquisition problem for the native speaker will also be a problem for the migrant laerner. I vividly recall observing earlier this year a student teacher attempting to teach the uses of ask and tell to a group of eight year old migrants. The lessons were not successful in spite of the teacher's enthusiasm and competence - the children constantly confused the two words and were often asking when they should have been telling. For teaching English to primary school children research into language acquisition may prove to be more important than contrastive analyses of English and migrant languages.

As remarkable as the child's ability to acquire a first language is his ability, under certain conditions and in certain environments, to acquire a second language at the same time and in the same way. In Australia this ability is supported by a wealth of anecdotal evidence, and belief in it has fitted in most obligingly with a former prevailing attitude which seemed to imply that any child of any age, exposed to English at school, would simply pick it up. A similar naive approach is even advocated by the psycholinguist Jakobovits as a method of teaching a second language. He advocates [2] that language teachers take specific account of the developmental stages characterizing the acquisition of the native language by allowing the second language learner to hear and produce semi-grammatical sentences. For Jakobovits communication is of greatest importance and he feels that if the second language learner enters wholeheartedly into communication situations, his mistakes will gradually disappear and his performance will approach that of the native speaker of the target language. A similar attitude was implicit in the direct method which was tried and found unsuccessful. In Australia experience has shown that the urge to communicate does not automatically lead to second language proficiency. Nevertheless something can perhaps be salvaged from the fallacious direct method theory.

We know that migrant children do in fact pick up a considerable amount of English structure in non-instructional settings such as the school-ground and in information language-teaching situations such as the geography, history, science classrooms. But the strategies children adopt and details of what they learn remain pretty much a mystery. It is not known, for example, (i) whether certain English structures are acquired before others regardless of the type of learning situation, (ii) whether children of different age-groups pick up structures in the same sequences, (iii) whether children from different language backgrounds learn certain structures more easily than others, and (iv) whether the child's native language facilitates the learning of certain structures. Studies of the acquisition of a second language in a non-instructional foreign language setting are quite

rare, certainly nothing has been done in Australia. However, Ravem[3] reports on the acquisition of English do in interrogative and negative sentences used by his six year old Norwegian-speaking son going to school in Scotland. His transformational analysis suggests that a child learning a second language without systematic teaching creates his own grammar whose rules are influenced by his competence in his native language. Language interference was quite noticeable; the child was not learning English "bilingually". One would hesitate to generalize these results to other children of other age groups from other language backgrounds. But here at least is an attempt to document a process which most people tend to take for granted.

At the other end of the language acquisition continuum is a study by Clyne[4] of the German spoken by a group of Spanish, Greek, Turkish and Yugoslav adults working in Germany. The study indicates the features common to the German of all or most of the subjects, such as omission of articles, prepositions, pronouns or verbs, generalization of a particular verb form, a tendency to drop bound morphemes. Certain other characteristic features seemed to be attributable to the fact that the foreign workers imitated their employers and those around them, who spoke to them in a sort of pidgin German. Clyne makes no attempt to construct grammars for his subjects, nor is his study a longitudinal one of language acquisition. But both his study and that of Ravem point the way to possible research projects in Australia. Similar studies, both diachronic and synchronic, are urgently needed to document the developmental stages of the migrant's acquisition of English in Australia. If, for example, it were to be shown that certain groups of children readily pick up certain structures anyway, the migrant English teacher would decide not to spend time treating those structures in the classroom. If it were possible to construct grammars of the English of teenage migrants from various language backgrounds these might show that specialized instructional modules suited to the specific needs of the learner were needed. Most importantly it would be possible to select the most appropriate gradation of English structures presented for learning.

The most widely used textbook for teaching English in Australia, Situational English, adopts a traditional procedure of teaching structures in an order of increasing complexity. There is some evidence that in certain situations such sequencing is not really necessary. Upshur[5] conducted some experiments with university level students studying English as a foreign language and American law at the University of Michigan. Three groups were formed: for seven weeks one group had no EFL instruction, the second had one hour per day,

the third had two hours per day. At the end of seven weeks no significant differences could be found among the groups which could be attributable to language instruction. Upshur therefore concluded that the English language learning of these students was not related to the amount of formal language instruction the students had received. Similar research amongst groups of migrant children in Australian schools might perhaps show that the teacher is far less responsible for the child's learning of English than has been thought; perhaps his purpose is primarily a remedial one; perhaps, on the other hand, the results would be different. But clearly there is a need for research into the effectiveness of the teacher of English to speakers of other languages. In a second experiment Upshur formed two groups of eleven students each matched on initial language tests, started one group at lesson 1 of the course, the other at lesson 11. When each group of students had finished the course (forty days and thirty-four days respectively) they were tested on the whole course. There was no significant difference in favour of any group, in fact the experimental group did slightly better. Upshur therefore accepted his original null hypothesis that mastery of early course materials is not related to mastery of subsequent course materials. It would be relatively easy, and perhaps most revealing, to mount similar experiments in the Australian TESOL classroom to see whether all pupils need to be drilled in the very simplest structures in a fixed sequence. It is tempting to hypothesize on the basis of the studies by Ravem, Clyne and Upshur that the crucial factor in language learning in a second language environment is not motivation to speak but rather opportunities for listening. Perhaps language production would be more effectively promoted than it is at present in migrant English classes in primary and secondary schools by exposing migrant children to massive amounts of controlled and graded listening comprehension materials.

Another widely held assumption about language learning might be challenged on the basis of research results. Recent methods of teaching language lay great stress on the acquisition of structure. There is a tendency to play down vocabulary learning on the grounds that the structure of a language is a closed system of which considerable mastery is possible; on the other hand vocabulary is an open system. Certainly it is useless for the student of French and German to amass vast quantitites of vocabulary items if he cannot use them in sentences. However, it may be that the teacher does the migrant a disservice by de-emphasizing the information-bearing content words and adopting an as yet unproven method of forcing the production of correct structure in the initial stages of language learning. The migrant child might fare better in the subject classroom if more time were devoted to equipping him with a large and useful vocabulary to enable him to understand what he hears

and reads. This raises the question of vocabulary selection. Vocabulary lists based on frequency will be of limited use. They serve a purpose in preparing the foreign language learner to communicate in the greatest variety of unforeseen situations. The migrant child, however, urgently needs to function in a number of quite limited circumstances, namely the subject classroom. There is a need for research projects to ascertain and programme those words of highest frequency in specific subject areas.

Certain educational problems would probably be lessened if there were opportunities for some migrant groups to be educated in their native language. The newly arrived migrant in the Australian secondary school, suffering as he often is from a dose of culture shock, finds himself unable to continue his education until he has learnt English. He is likely to give up before such an enormous task and become a drop-out. In some of the metropolitan inner-suburban schools a start could be made in some form of bilingual education, with instruction in the native language being carried on side by side with instruction in English and gradually tapering off as English proficiency increases. Such organization, although difficult, might lead to the disappearance of examples of migrant children who could be said to have no language in the sense that their English is not sufficiently developed to enable them to realize their full potential in society, but do not have adequate control of their native language because it is not used as a medium of instruction. John and Horner[6] offer a strong case for not attempting to educate the young child in a language which is not his own. They quote research to demonstrate that children of this age -

> "... use language at an accelerating rate for purposes of problem solving. When ideas are being formed in one language it is difficult to state them in another and the child's unsuccessful attempts at translation may lead to great frustration and a loss of interest in expressing ideas."

Elsewhere John[7] claims that children at this age need "cognitively rich dialogue with adults in their dominant language". John and Horner further believe that reading comprehension in the native and the foreign language is more effectively promoted if the pupil first learns to read his native language. The migrant child in Australia finds himself in the midst of a foreign language society, his schooling has to be done in a foreign language. If he does not give up, he may feel disposed to forget or at least to refuse to communicate in his native language, and that causes many heartbreaks in migrant families. Australia, by not fostering language maintenance, seems to have concurred in this situation.

The list of needed research topics is seemingly endless. I have not mentioned test development, or attitude surveys to ascertain how migrant children feel about Australia, about English, about their family, about their native language. The sad fact is that the need is urgent but almost nothing has been done.

NOTES :

(1) Chomsky, Carol. The Acquisition of Syntax in Children from 5 to 10. Cambridge, Mass. M.I.T. Press, 1969.

(2) Jakobovits, L. Foreign Language Learning. Rowley, Mass. Newbury House 1970 pp. 22-24.

(3) Ravem, R. "Language Acquisition in a Second Language Environment". International Review of Applied Linguistics, 6, 1968, pp. 175-185.

(4) Clyne, M. "Zum Pidgin-Deutsch der Gastarbeiter" Zeitschrift fur Mundartforschung, 35, 1968, pp. 130-9.

(5) Upshur, J. "Four Experiments on the Relation between Foreign Language Teaching and Learning" Language Learning, 1968, pp. 111-24.

(6) John, V. & Horner, V. Early Childhood Bilingual Education, New York: Modern Language Association, 1971. p. 171.

(7) John, V. "Cognitive Development in the Bilingual Child" in Alatis, J. (ed.) Report on the Twenty-First Annual Round Table Meeting on Linguistics and Language Studies, Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1970, p. 63.