

DEVELOPING  
FIRST and  
SECOND  
LANGUAGE  
and LITERACY



# The Young Child's Memory for Words

Daniel R. Meier

the most human and the most intimate. These are the sounds and words that we hear before we are born, as we are born, and as we learn to listen, to see, to grasp, to point, to walk, and to talk. It is this intimate foundation of language as internalized memory—in our hearts and in our minds—that children carry with them as they learn other languages.

## SECOND-LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

MR. MEIER: Is learning English hard or easy? [Asked to Brenda, a Spanish/English bilingual preschooler]

BRENDA: Hard. You have to repeat somebody. Spanish is easy; you have to repeat somebody, too.

MR. MEIER: Which language did you learn first?

BRENDA: Spanish. Then the other one.

MR. MEIER: Which do you speak better? English or Spanish?

BRENDA: Both of them.

### First Words in a New Language

Second-language learning, as well as learning even a third or fourth language, has close parallels to children's first-language development. In terms of children's overall learning and growth, and their attachment to their cultural identity and families, maintaining a first language and learning a second language is a powerful journey. Children who are provided with home and school experiences in multilingual language use can become bilingual speakers and bicultural members of community and educational settings. However, if children are only hearing and using a new second language in the home and at school, it is likely that they will stop speaking their first language and adopt the new second language. This process can lead to a loss of cultural identity and the challenge of recovering the first language when children are older.

For second-language learning to become as long-lasting and intimate a process as learning to speak and use a first language, adults in home settings must create the same sense of closeness and power that young children experience in learning a first language. For instance, my wife spoke English and Tagalog (a primary language of the Philippines) to Kaili, my daughter, when she was an infant and toddler. Much of this second-language learning happened within Kaili's daily social interactions and play. As my wife moved a doll up and down in the air and said, "*Taas, baba*" (up, down), Kaili followed the up-and-down movement of the doll and listened to the rising intonation of *taas* and the following intonation of *baba*. Although Kaili could not say *taas* or *baba*, she experienced connecting the movement of objects with the sounds and rhythms of a new second language. In another example, when Kaili banged a toy

or object too loudly, my wife would say, "*Dahan dahan*" (gently), as she repeated the words and showed Kaili how to gently use the toy or object. When Kaili made a parade out of her animals along the kitchen floor, my wife counted, "*Isa, dalawa, tatlo, apat, lima, anim, pito, walo, siam, sampu*" (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10) with Kaili.

Daily routines such as eating, bathing, and walking also help facilitate second-language learning. Kaili learned the names of body parts in Tagalog during her daily bath. In order to get Kaili's entire body washed, and also to learn more Tagalog, my wife made up a game of saying a body part in Tagalog and then letting Kaili point to the part—*ulo* (head), *paa* (foot), *kamay* (hand), *kili kili* (underarms), *pusod* (bellybutton). My wife stretched the game by asking Kaili, "*Asan ang paa?*" (Where is your foot?) and "*Asan ang kamay?*" (Where is your hand?), which made another game for the two of them to play.

## Language Components

For older children, second-language learning continues to involve the process of mastering aspects of phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics in a new language. In school settings, this process can become more challenging if children do not have access to their first language when they are learning how to read and write.

### Phonology

In learning aspects of phonology in a new language, children experience all over again the journey of developing an ear for the particular rhythms and intonation of words in a language, a process that takes time, discovery, and practice. In learning English as a second language, there are particular aspects of the language that can pose special challenges for children. For instance, when I worked with Diana, a Spanish-speaking kindergartner, she said /jello/ for *yellow*, /sebra/ for *zebra*, /de/ for *the*, /be/ for the letter *b*. Han, a Korean-speaking kindergartner, said /huppa/ for *hippo*, /cahmeya/ for *camera*, /bananos/ for *bananas*. Both Diana and Han were giving very close approximations of these unfamiliar English words, trying hard to physically articulate the sounds they heard and to replicate the particular consonant and vowel sounds of English.

### Syntax

Syntactical development, just as in children's first-language learning, plays a critical role in second-language learning. In learning English as a second-language, there are certain challenges for children, given the particular structure and organization of English. The following aspects of English syntax can prove challenging for English learners:

- The verb "to be" ("I am," "you are," "he/she/it is," "we are," "you [plural] are,"
- Subject-verb-object order ("He hit the ball")
- Prefixes and suffixes ("misunderstand" and "standing" respectively)
- Adjectives preceding nouns ("red ball" and "small, low, white fence")
- Auxiliary verbs ("I have gone," "I won't drive," "I can't drive")

For example, Johnny, a Spanish-speaking kindergartner, said "cat with a purple" instead of "the purple cat" from *Brown Bear Brown Bear* by Bill Martin and Eric Carle. He knows from his first language, Spanish, that adjectives follow nouns, and is in the early stages of learning that this order is reversed in English.

In another example, when I read a book with Han and he tried to remember the text, he said "I am smile" instead of the text's "I am laughing," "I am sad" instead of "I am crying," "I am telephone" instead of "I am talking," and "I am sleep" instead of "I am sleeping." This example shows how Han is working toward correct or commonly accepted English word order and sentence structure. At the moment, the English *-ing* suffixes are a bit beyond Han, although he understands and uses the English subject-verb structure in "I am sleep."

In another instance, I read a book with Huma, an Urdu-speaking kindergartner, and wanted her to begin memorizing the new text pattern. I read the book first, pointing to the words and the pictures of the animal characters who go in and out of a bear's cave. The text uses the sentence pattern of "The \_\_\_\_\_ [animal] ran out." As we reread the text to commit it to memory, Huma kept saying "comes out" instead of "ran out." Huma had not quite mastered fine distinctions in English between present and past tense (*ran* in addition to *run*), and so used the present tense *comes* as her verb. This actually worked in terms of the overall meaning for the context—"The goat comes out" has essentially the same meaning as "The goat ran out"—but lacks the more refined and specific sense of the past tense *ran* as indicating the goat being scared by the bear.

### Semantics

English learners use a variety of their own strategies for communicating as they try to learn words in a new language. One strategy is to postpone the challenge of speaking in English and simply talk in the first language with English speakers. For example, Neeral, a 3-year-old from India, speaks Gujarati to his peers and teachers at his preschool. A social child eager to play and be with others, Neeral shows no hesitation in the value and usefulness of speaking Gujarati in order to initiate and maintain social contact and to communicate. Over a period of several months, in

which he continued to use Gujarati, Neeral also increased his understanding and use of English vocabulary with peers and his teachers.

English learners also use gestures and sound effects to approximate new word meanings in English. For example, Han and I were looking at a book and identifying objects in the pictures.

MR. MEIER: This is a picture of . . . ?

HAN: Tchik, tchk. [Han held up his fingers and made the sound that the chain makes when turning a light off] Sssss ssssss. [He then made a snoring sound as if he had just turned off the light and fallen asleep]

MR. MEIER: Yes, that's it. This is a picture of a light or lamp. You turn it off and on.

Han did not know the English word *lamp* or *light* to identify the picture, but he did know how a light functions and so used nonverbal language (turning off an imaginary light) and sound effects ("tchk tchk" to make the clinking sound of the light and "sss sssss" to indicate sleeping) to approximate the English word. Another time, we read a book with a picture of a bathtub.

MR. MEIER: Han, do you take a shower or a bath? [I pointed to the picture]

HAN: I do tsss tsss. [Han made the sound of falling water and put his head up as if standing under a shower]

In both instances, Han compensated for not knowing the exact English vocabulary by relying on what he knew from experience with the objects and his beginning knowledge of English.

Using new words in a second language also involves an understanding of the "sense," or subtle uses and meanings, of words. For example, Lupe, a Spanish-speaking kindergartner, and I were reading a book. Relying on her memory of the book's text pattern, and in looking at the pictures, Lupe read, "I am hearing" for the book's text of "I am listening." Lupe is technically correct—the girl in the book is hearing the person on the other end of the phone—but in terms of the sense of the scene, it is closer to "listening." In English, which has many words with somewhat similar meanings, *hearing* and *listening* are similar in meaning but are not always used in the same ways. It will take time—and lots of talking, reading, and writing—for Lupe to internalize the subtle distinctions.

In another example of learning the nuances of word meanings, Jesus, a Spanish-speaking kindergartner learning English, was identifying objects in a bag. The bag happened to contain (1) a plastic lid for a yoghurt container, (2) a small metal cap (pulled off) from a bottle of soda pop, and (3) a



slightly larger metal top (twist off) from a bottle of juice. I did not anticipate the variety of possible English words for these three common objects when I put them in the bag, but Jesus soon revealed their complexity of vocabulary. He called all three objects *tops*, which is essentially correct. Yet there were subtleties of meaning that he missed; I explained that one was a *lid* (for the yoghurt), one was called a *cap* (for the soda pop bottle), and the third object was called a *top* (for the juice bottle).

### Using Two or More Languages at Once

Children who are in varying stages of learning and using more than one language may combine the different languages depending on the linguistic and social setting. This mixing can happen within a single sentence when children insert a word or phrase from another language (code-mixing), and it can also happen when children say one sentence or more in one language and then switch to saying whole sentences in a different language (code-switching). When children act as family translators, translating what a teacher or another adult says, they often code-switch, talking with the teacher in English and then speaking another language to their parent in order to translate what their teacher said.

In some situations, young children are exposed to multilingualism at a young age. For example, Diana, who is 26 months old, is learning more than one language at once. Her parents speak to her in Chinese and English; her babysitter in Tagalog; her grandmother in Bicol (dialect from the Philippines), Tagalog, and Chinese; and other family members in Tagalog, English, and Chinese. In the following conversation, three languages—Chinese, Tagalog, and English—are used with Diana.

MOTHER: Diana, *siob* ["come here" in Chinese], *ligo na tayo* ["let's take a bath" in Tagalog]. *Tan-ne* ["later" in Chinese] *ka na maglaro* ["you can play" in Tagalog], *chang diao cha ti-thoh* ["after you have taken a bath you can play" in Chinese].

DIANA: Ummm. (Diana doesn't get up to take the bath)

MOTHER: *Dali na, hindi ka ba sasama?* ["Hurry, aren't you going with us?" in Tagalog]. We're going to the zoo later *kaya* ["so" in Tagalog] you need to take a bath *na* ["already" in Tagalog].

DIANA: No. (Diana continues to play)

Each of the three languages used by Diana's mother conveys different intentions and subtleties, and the combination of all three is intended to coax Diana into her bath!

In an example of using more than one language in school, three preschoolers are playing at the play-dough table. Leilani and Nathalie speak Spanish and are learning English, while Nyalah speaks only English.

LEILANI AND NATHALIE: Hi! (to Norma, their teacher, passing by)

NORMA: Hi, you three.

LEILANI: (turning to Nathalie) *Quiero ir afuera*. [I want to go outside.]

NATHALIE: *Yo tambien*. [Me, too.] (Both girls go outside; a few minutes later Nathalie comes back and talks to Nyalah) You want to go outside?

NYALAH: OK. (The girls run outside and join Leilani on the swing)

In another example, Lupita and Ana, two Spanish-speaking kindergartners learning English, use English and Spanish as they play a game of Go Fish with me.

ANA: My turn? Your turn. (To Lupita)

LUPITA: *Este turno?*

ANA: I got four. (I.e., four cards) Hey, give me. This is mine. (Wants two cards back from Lupita)

LUPITA: *Que pasó?*

ANA: *Nada*, nothing.

In my presence, Ana and Lupita try out English phrases that show possession ("I got four") and turn-taking ("My turn").

Two other examples, both from a English/Japanese bilingual preschool, show how the use of a single word in a second language can have an important function for children who are learning to speak in two languages. In the following example, Toshio, a Japanese-speaking preschooler learning English, is at the sink washing his hands as Kayoko, his teacher, walks in.

KAYOKO: *Oshiko ni itta?* [Did you go pee-pee?]

TOSHIO: *Toshio ne try shitakedo denakatta*. [I tried, but pee-pee did not come out.]

KAYOKO: *Honnto?* [Really?]

TOSHIO: *Honnto dayo*. Try *shita yo*. [Yes, I tried.]

Toshio experiments with the English verb *try*, by inserting it in the middle and at the beginning of two sentences. By only using one English word, with the rest of the words in Japanese, he can rely on his Japanese as a stepping stone for learning more English.

In another example, Soniki is in line at the bathroom and gets pushed by another boy standing next to him.

SONIKI: *Sensei, Danny ga push shitayo*. [Teacher, Danny pushed me.]

KAYOKO: Did you push Soniki, Danny?

DANNY: No, I did because Soniki stepped on my foot first.

SONIKI: *Soniki wa step shitenaiyo*. [I did not step on his foot.]

In both instances of inserting English words (*try* and *push*), the children use a single English word to experiment with English while relying on their first language of Japanese with their teacher and peers.

Mixing two or more languages allows children with advanced bilingual language skills to participate in sophisticated language play and social interaction. The following two examples show how Erin, a 4-year-old who understands and speaks both English and Ilocano (a dialect from the Philippines), uses two languages to play with and have fun with her grandparents. In the first scene, Erin and her grandmother come home from a morning trip to the supermarket.

GRANDFATHER: *Ania't ginatang mo diay tienda?* [What did you buy at the store?]

ERIN: I don't know. (Shrugs her shoulders and repeats in Ilocano) *Diak amo "apo lakay."* [I don't know, Grandfather.]

GRANDFATHER: *Kasta.* [Good, like that] (Nods approvingly)

ERIN: (Laughs)

GRANDFATHER: *"Apo lakay" nga ruden nya.* [Just call me *apo lakay* from now on, OK.]

ERIN: *Haan ka na "tatang" en apo lakay en.* [You are no longer *tatang* (father), now you'll be known as "*apo lakay*."] (Jokingly)

GRANDFATHER: *Apo lakay an en.* (From now on I'll be *apo lakay*.)

ERIN: *Haan! Sika ti tatang ko.* (No! You're my *tatang*.)

Erin uses *apo lakay*, a term of respect for elders, in addressing her grandfather and uses English and Ilocano to tease and play with her grandfather verbally. Erin closes the exchange by informing her grandfather that she'll stick to her favorite name for him (*tatang*).

In the next example, Erin and her grandparents all switch back and forth between English and Ilocano in a spirited discussion on religion.

GRANDFATHER: *Nalipatam sa met ti ag loalon.* [I think you forgot how to pray.]

ERIN: In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

GRANDMOTHER: *Kasta, nya ti bagam ti apo?* [Good, like that. What do you want to ask God?]

ERIN: I wish I had a baby brother.

GRANDMOTHER: *Apo.* [God.]

ERIN: *Apo.*

GRANDFATHER: *Siak mut wish ko mut?* [What about my wish?] I wish that I had a lot of money.

ERIN: (Laughing) I wish *tatang* [grandfather] had a lot of money.

GRANDFATHER: *Ala.* [Oh, my gosh.] What about *nanang* [grandmother]?

ERIN: I wish *nanang* would buy me an accordion.

Again, Erin uses English and Ilocano to engage her grandparents in humorous, lively exchanges that bring them closer together socially.