

The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students, v14 p. 227-240, Winter 1994.

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## **PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S HELP TO SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

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Research in second language acquisition has 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 than others do. In Wong-Fillmore's study of first grade Spanish speakers learning English, she identified a child named Nora who was far superior as a language learner to other children in the class (1976). What distinguished Nora from her peers was that she seized every possible 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. Some find themselves in classrooms not organized to stimulate interaction (Enright, 1982; Fathman, 1976), and some are reluctant to interact while they possess only limited language skills (Wong Fillmore, 1985). Tabors (1987) found that in the early months of the school year, most second language learners had very limited communicative interactions with peers.

Yet social interaction plays an important part in the acquisition of language. Numerous studies have shown that interaction with the mother involving special language such as simplification and high pitch promotes language acquisition (Bruner, 1983; Snow, 1977, 1984; Snow & Ferguson, 1977; Wells, 1978). When children move from home to the preschool setting, they are expected to negotiate an environment in which language partners, their peers, and their teachers do not offer the personalized support of their mothers. Finding a conversational partner in school can be problematic for all children, but it is especially so for second language learners.

When second language learners use the presence of native speakers in the classroom as an opportunity for interaction, then this interaction enhances acquisition of the new language. Nora of Wong-Fillmore's study (1976) is an example of the way this works: Nora made many more initiations to native English-speakers than her peers did. By the end of the school year, Nora had learned more English than some of her second-language-learning peers would learn in double that time or more if they had continued at their established rate. Increased interaction with native speakers in this setting was, then, connected to accelerated acquisition of the language.

While the role of the child learning a second language has been explored (Tabors, 1987; Wong-Fillmore, 1985), the role played by native speakers in initiating conversation with second language learners has not been addressed. In this study we attempt to add to our understanding of social interaction between native speakers and second language learners by examining the native speakers' role in interactions. A further

phase of this study (in preparation) investigates the results of training native speakers to offer more frequent and more optimal interactions with second language learners.

## Methods

The methods used to collect data were microethnographic in nature (Garfinkel, 1967; Cicourel et al., 1974; Mehan, 1979, 1982). They differed from the purely ethnographic in that only language interactions between native speakers and second language learners were examined closely. Analysis of the other dynamics of the classroom during this time were not attempted. Prespecified variables were designated as likely to add to the understanding of the language interactions of these groups: interaction (initiations, turns of talk, and utterances per turn), modification (repetition, reinitiation, recast, clarification request, confirmation request, and confirmation check) and the location of the interaction. In Phase I of the study, language interactions of five English-speaking target children were audiotaped in a natural preschool classroom setting, time spent in each free choice center was noted, and field notes were taken. The system of Codes for Human Analysis of Transcripts (CHAT) format (MacWhinney & Snow, 1985) was used to transcribe the data. Reliability of coding was determined by using Cohen's Kappa, a measure of reliability corrected for chance occurrence (Landis & Koch, 1977). The reliability coefficients for the categories of language data were: initiations -  $K = .897$  and language modifications -  $K = .947$ . These reliability levels are considered "almost perfect" according to Cohen's Kappa scheme. The transcribed data were then analyzed using the CLAN (Child Language Analysis) programs (MacWhinney & Snow, 1985).

## Description of the Setting

This study was conducted in a mixed-age (3-5 yr.) preschool classroom. Although the site is a University Demonstration School, its students were selected by lottery from the urban public school population with stratification for representation of the major linguistic groups of the city. The resulting student body consisted of 50% English-speaking, 25% Spanish-speaking, and 25% Khmer speaking (Cambodian) children. About half of the children in the school qualified for free or reduced federal meal programs. For this study, five English-speaking target children (TC) were selected from each of the three, four, and five year old age groups. The children were Robbie (3.5 in September), Arthur (4.2), Janine (4.8), Walter (4.9), and Tiffany (5.1).

## Findings

### A Profile of Native Speaker / Second Language Learner Interaction in the Preschool Classroom

If we view the results of the study as a whole, we can obtain a profile of native speaker - second language learner interactions in the preschool classroom. From analysis of the audiotaped language interactions in the context of the field notes, we see the ways in which native speakers and second language learners interact during typical nonstructured preschool time. The data gathered about these interactions included the amount of time spent together, the rate of native speaker language initiation to second language learners, the rate of response that native speakers receive from second language learners, the number of turns in conversation, and the quantity of talk measured by utterances.

**Time together** While being in physical proximity is an expected prerequisite to language interaction, it by no means guarantees that such interaction will take place. In this study, the five target children, Janine, Tiffany, Walter, Arthur, and Robbie, spent an average of 63% of their time playing in groups which included two or more second language learners in one of the classroom learning centers. The time spent

together ranged from 53% to 84% (See Table 1).

**Initiations** A measure of central interest is the degree of language initiation that native speakers offered to second language learners. Since native speakers are a primary source of language input to second language learners, especially in the preschool classroom in which the classroom discourse tends to be less teacher dominated, then it is important to examine the degree to which native speaker initiations took place.

Target children started a language interaction with a second language learner, on average, once every 15 minutes during the time they spent with them. The rate varied widely: from 6 minutes between interactions to 29 minutes between interactions depending on the target child.

**Response** Rate of L2 learner response to initiation varied as well. The mean response rate was 42%, that is, native speakers received some kind of language response to an initiation less than half of the time. To focus on the mean response rate disguises the range of response rates which was from 21% to 67%. It also masks the fact that, at times, native speakers did not receive responses because their utterances were not designed for a response. Sometimes target children sought to explain their actions to second language learners such as when Janine explained to Chanthy (a Khmer-speaker) that she needed to save some playdough for the other children: "Oh, I'll save this some for some nother kids, ok?" Janine knew that Chanthy's English skills were minimal that early in the school year, and it is doubtful that Janine expected a response.

At times too, native speakers did not receive responses because their original turns were so long that the second language learner did not have the opportunity to interject a response. One example of this is when Janine said to Yola (a Spanish speaker), "Yola, Yola, Yola, Yola, Yola, Yola, Yola. Yola, do you want to play? What's that? What that xxx for?" Eventually Yola fit in a short comment.

**Length of interaction** Language interactions varied greatly in length as well. For this study, length of interaction was measured by the number of turns in the interaction. A turn is defined as a verbal contribution which generally alternates between interlocutors (Garvey, 1974). The count of turns includes the initiation, the continuation turns, and all of the response turns by the target child to the L2 utterances, that is, all of the instances of talking to L2 children.

If we look at the total number of turns as a function of time spent with second language learners, we see that Walter took a turn of talk once every 18 minutes while Tiffany took a turn once every .7 minutes again showing wide variability between native speakers in their interaction with L2 learners.

The proportion of utterances per turn were also analyzed. Utterances were defined as being an expression which stood alone to have meaning in the context. In this study it was found that two of the target children (Walter and Robbie) never exceeded 3 utterances per turn while Janine, Tiffany, and Arthur, at times, made up to 10 utterances within one turn of talk to a second language learner.

*Table 1. Profile of Native Speaker/ L2 Classroom Interaction*

Time spent together	63%	range:53% -84%
Initiations per hour	4	range:2-10
Responses to initiation	42%	range:21%-67%
Turns per hour	9.2	range:3-85
Utterances per turn	2	range:1-10

## Interactions with Spanish speakers and Khmer speakers

The target children spent, on average, more time with Spanish speakers than with Khmer speakers. While they spent 61% in groups in which there was at least one Spanish speaker, they spent only 51% of their time in groups in which there was at least one Khmer speaker. Again, there was a great range among the target children: the range of time spent with Spanish speakers was 47% to 97%, and the range of time spent with Khmer speakers was 7% to 78%. Some children spent almost no time with Khmer speakers, and others spent almost all of their time with L2 learners who were Spanish speakers.

There were differences in the initiation rates to the two groups of speakers as well. We saw earlier that, on average, 15 minutes elapsed between initiations to second language learners as a whole. Examining the detail of the two language groups shows that native speakers tended to initiate at differing rates to each language dominance group. Spanish speakers could expect an initiation from a target English-speaking child approximately once every 30 minutes (2/hr.). Khmer speakers received initiations much less frequently; native speakers started conversations with them about once every 53 minutes (1.13/hr.). This is, perhaps, not surprising in the setting of the current study since the Spanish speakers had more English skills than the Cambodian children.

*Table 2. Native English speaker interactions with Spanish and Khmer speakers*

	Spanish	Khmer
Time spent together	61% (47%-97%)	51% (7%-78%)
Initiations per hour	2	1.13

**Location of interactions** Target children spent at least some time in a free choice activity with a second language learner in all of the thirteen centers which were set up during the observations (Figure 1). The mean proportion of time spent together varied widely, however. The greatest proportion of time was spent at the art table. At 39%, art greatly outdistanced the second choice of puzzles and games (19%). Following in descending order, the target children spent 11% of their time with L2 learners having a snack and 9% both in dramatic play and in using manipulatives. They spent 6% of their time at the writing table and 2% at the science table. The target children spent, on average, less than 1% at any of the other free choice centers with L2 learners (books, blocks, easel, gross motor, listening, replicas) (See Figure 1).

**Gender Differences in the interactional profile** A comparison of the ways that female and male target children interacted with L2 learners provides another focus. In the measure of proportion of time spent together, there are no great differences between boy target children and girl target children except that boys tended to spend a greater part of their time with male L2 learners.

What is of interest, though, is that instead of playing predominantly in the same-gender pairings that we would expect in preschool (Garvey, 1990), both male and female target children played much more in groups that included female L2's than male L2's than would seem to be warranted by the ratio of boys to girls. (There were six L2 boys and thirteen L2 girls. On average, female target children spent 80% of their time in groups with one or more female second language learner while they spent only 8% of their time in

groups which included a male second language learner. Male target children spent an average of 75% of their time in groups with female second language learners while they spent only 17% of their time in groups with male second language learners.

*Table 3. Native speaker time spent with both genders of L2's*

	Female L2's	Male L2's
Boys	75%	17%
Girls	80%	8%

Another difference between boys and girls emerges when we look at the way they interacted verbally during the time they spent together. First, girls tended to initiate to second language learners of both language dominances about three times as frequently as boys did. Boys started conversations, on average, as infrequently as once every 19 minutes (3.2/hr.); girls initiated conversations once every 6.5 minutes (9.2/hr.). Boys' response rate was somewhat higher than girls', but this may be an artifact of the extremely low initiation rate: they initiated so infrequently that they received responses proportionally more often than girls whose many initiations could not all receive responses given the limited language of their interlocutors (See Table 4).

The number of turns taken, the time between turns, and the number of utterances per turn are other indicators of the differences between girls' and boys' interactions with second language learners. Girls took about 10 times as many turns of talk in conversations with L2's; the rate of turns per minute was more than 5 times greater for girls than for boys. In addition, the boys' mean number of utterances per turn was about two thirds that of the girls. Another revealing measure is the actual utterance count: five utterances for boys and 303 utterances for girls. Girls seemed to use language differently than boys when interacting with second language learners.

*Table 4. Gender differences in interactions with L2's*

	Initiations	Turns	Utterances per turn	# Utterances
Girls	9.2/hr.	30/hr.	2.87	303
Boys	3.2/hr.	6/hr.	1.76	5

Gender differences were revealed in the locations of the interactions between target children and second language learners. In general, the two girls spent time with L2 learners in a greater variety of areas of the classroom than the boys. Girls spent time with L2 learners in an average of 10 out of 13 centers in the classroom; the boys' L2 time was divided among only 6 centers.

Tiffany, in particular, showed a great diversity of activity while with L2 learners. She and Janine played with L2's at ten different centers, but Tiffany distributed her time much more evenly among the activities. Walter, at the other extreme, spent time in only four of the thirteen centers.

**Individual differences between children** When examining L2 learners' approaches to learning English, Wong-Fillmore (1976) found that the differences among children were striking. One child was reluctant to interact with native speakers while Nora, mentioned earlier, took an assertive approach to engaging in conversation with native speakers.

So too, from the other side of the conversational equation, are there important individual differences in the way native speakers choose to interact with children who do not speak English. The children in this study interacted with the second language learners in their class in very different ways.

**Robbie.** Robbie spent the least amount time with L2's and was an infrequent interacter. He spent the greatest proportion of his L2 time at the snack table and the art center where he seldom initiated conversation with L2's.

**Arthur.** Arthur spent much of his time with second language learners, but he rarely initiated conversations during the time spent in their proximity. Although infrequent, when Arthur did initiate a conversation, he often took several turns talking and included many utterances per turn.

**Walter.** Walter spent an average amount of time with L2's, but interacted infrequently when he was with them. Even when Walter started a conversation, it was a very brief interchange. Walter did not circulate much among centers in the classroom.

**Janine.** Janine was the one target child chosen for her gregariousness, and this quality was evident in her interactions with second language learners. She initiated frequently to L2 learners with most of her initiations being directed toward Spanish speakers. Her initiations were characterized by many turns and a high number of utterances per turn. Janine moved freely about the room spending time in ten of thirteen centers during the period of this study. She spent 20% of her time in the dramatic play area interacting with L2 learners.

**Tiffany.** Tiffany also interacted frequently with L2 children. She initiated the most and received the highest percentage of responses of all the target children. Her initiations were followed by many turns and had many utterances per turn. Tiffany frequently choose Khmer-speakers as conversational partners. Like Janine, Tiffany divided her time among many of the free choice centers of the classroom.

## **Implications for the Multicultural Classroom**

**1. Native speakers should be trained to interact with second language learners.** This approach to conducting a classroom in which many languages are spoken views the interactional setting from a new perspective. Rather than concentrating on nonnative speakers' lack of social skills (Li, 1992), it capitalizes on the native speakers as a primary language resource for second language learners. These native speakers have varying skills in engaging second language learners in interactions and should be trained in strategies that have specific benefits for second language acquisition. These strategies include repetition, restatement (Chaudron, 1983), and request for clarification (Pica, Young, & Doughty, 1989). We know that children have the ability to adjust their language to meet the needs of conversational partners with less linguistic proficiency (Cross, 1977), so we should expect that native speakers can be trained to be more optimal language partners for their peers who are learning English as a second language.

**2. Language interaction should be a goal of the class as a group.** It is important that native speakers

assume their share of the responsibility for assisting in the development of nascent language and social skills of second language learners. Kohn (March 1991) reminds us that many studies have shown that children show a readiness to help other children from an early age. Yet, he laments, "interaction between students is rarely seen as integral to the process of learning" (p. 498). In the case of multilingual classrooms, interaction is not only a value that should be established for the good of the group but also for the success of second language acquisition.

**3. Develop all classroom areas with language goals in mind.** We have seen in this study that some students tended to remain playing in only a few of the classroom centers available to them. Boys, in particular, played in only a few areas of the classroom. What is needed, then, is development of all classroom centers for their potential for enhancing language acquisition. Some areas lend themselves quite naturally to that function. For example, preschool children's talk has been demonstrated to be more linguistically complex during play in the "kitchen corner" than in play with blocks, wagons, and dolls (French, Boynton, & Hodges, 1988). The "kitchen corner" then, needs to be exploited by elaborating that setting with scripts, costumes, and props which could complement other classroom activities.

**4. Pay attention to gender differences.** L2's showed a tendency to choose girls as conversational partners rather than play in the same-sex groupings usually found in young children's play (Garvey, 1990). This is significant because girls have been shown in some studies to display "greater communicative competence (and perhaps more attentiveness to their partners' speech) in nonpretend as well as in planning and describing pretend play" (Garvey, 1990, p. 151). In the classroom, this might indicate the organization of groupings of native speakers and second language learners so that girls are included as much as possible in all groups. Time spent in all-boy block play may tend not to be the most productive for second language acquisition.

Another tendency related to gender was also noted: some of the non-English speaking boys were clearly isolated in the classroom. This lack of social interaction is not desirable from the point of view of second language acquisition, and there is also a risk of future social problems (Asher & Coie, 1990; Hartrup, 1989; Schneider, Rubin, & Ledingham, 1985). Teachers need to find ways to include all members of the class in activities and, in some cases, social skills training of the isolates may be required.

Learning a new language is a challenging task. The perspective on language interaction explored here builds on research and suggests new ways to address the challenge of second language acquisition in the multicultural classroom.

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