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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the importance of bilingual-bicultural programs--which provide instruction in the student's native language and culture and in the American language and culture--in helping Asian-American students to succeed in the dominant culture. Teachers in such programs need to be sensitive to students' home environment, educational background, cultural values and priorities, and linguistic development. The paper discusses factors in the home environment which may affect students' ability to speak and read English; provides a brief description of values, cognitive styles, and learning modalities which are common to many Asian groups; and outlines some linguistic variables in the Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese languages. Final sections of the paper deal with difficulties which English phonology poses for Asian students, effective ways of helping Asian students to reconstruct English syntax, and the importance of assisting Asian students in interpreting what they read in the light of American culture. (GW)

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ENGLISH READING FOR ASIAN STUDENTS

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(Presented at International Reading Association 22nd Annual Convention)
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In the 1960s, with the flower children and the Black Movement, middle-class Oriental youths on the west coast - Japanese, Chinese, Korean - began to rebel against their elders and the dominant white culture. Tired of being mis-classified as model minorities, these idealistic, intellectual, and elitist youths called attention to their frustrations with the myth known as the American "melting pot." They rejected the term "Oriental" which carries overtones of western colonialism and imperialism and stressed the use of "Asian-American" to reflect this new consciousness.

With the liberalized immigration laws, the burgeoning numbers of Asians today include additionally the Pacific Asians - Filipinos, Hawaiians, Samoans, Guamanians, East Indians, Pakistanis and Ceylonese, as well as Southeast Asians - Thai, Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians. Each group has its own linguistic and cultural background; each carries its distinct historical heritage including prejudices against other Asian groups.

Whether rich or poor, new immigrants or American born, there are common goals to which all Asian-Americans aspire vis-a-vis the school community: 1) that each student's heritage, self-esteem and cultural pride be preserved so that s/he doesnot become a marginal person in American society, and 2) that the student's formal schooling will equip him/her for success in the dominant culture.

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Bilingual-Bicultural Program and Reading

Bilingual-bicultural education program providing instruction and usage of both native language and English, including body language used in both cultures, is a national effort in meeting these goals. It needs for its success teachers who can serve as both cultural and linguistic models. When teachers understand both cultures and languages, they can systematically help students to compare and contrast language usages and cultural differences such as "...the way people live their daily lives, how they interact, subjects of conversations, the performance of tasks associated with daily existence, holidays, customs, taboos, role expectations, role performances, interests, values, attitudes, etc." (8) When the Asian student learns to deal effectively with two social settings (cultures) and two symbolic systems (languages) then he becomes truly bilingual-bicultural.

Bilingual teachers are also in the position to detect where along the continuum of monolinguality-bilinguality-equilinguality a student's strength and deficiency may lie. While it is unreasonable to expect a teacher to conduct an Asian bilingual program which studies more than one specific Asian group, it is not uncommon to find many Asian groups present in one classroom. Often, when a bilingual program is provided, say for the Chinese, it makes no provision for differences in students' backgrounds in terms of 1) dialect spoken at home, 2) American born vs. overseas born, and 3) suburban, rural or urban environmental influences. The tasks faced by the teachers are awesome indeed.

Put the teacher in a bilingual-bicultural classroom can try to learn the language and customs of Asian students, thereby indicating that their language and background are valued and respected. Each ethnolinguistic group influences the attitudes and motivation of the learner in its unique way which in turn influences the strength of the desire of the learner to integrate himself with a new language group. (4) When Asian parents and students see their teacher's positive attitude toward acquiring their language and culture, they perceive the educational process as a mutual effort and not one in which the mode of communication is imposed without regard for the students' background.

Home Environment and Reading

An important factor in success in reading is the extent to which a student has developed mastery of that language which is used in textbooks. Research in child development has also revealed that children of different racial ethnic groups display distinctive profiles of mental abilities and those from lower-class homes were substantially below their middle-class counterparts in component parts of intelligence as measured. (9) Some Vietnamese speaking teachers and aides in Los Angeles are experiencing difficulty in communicating with certain Vietnamese children in their native language due to the children's restricted language background. These students who are deficient in their home language as well as in English may suffer from mutual interference caused by the variations in the two languages, (10)

Teachers can help to expand these children's oral language development by creating an environment which is conducive to spontaneous and creative language activities. Culturally, Asian students do not

volunteer in class because this is perceived as directly opposed to modesty and humility. Their lack of facility with English adds to the reluctance to speak up. Use of puppets, creative dramatics, role-playing, and simulation allows students the opportunity to develop a healthy language ego without risking the loss of personal dignity. As students' sociolinguistic competence increases, their ability to communicate can lead to further social interactions and personal growth.

On the other hand, many recent immigrant students of middle or upper middle-class Asian families have a wealth of knowledge and experience about their native land and the world. Being literate in their native language, they already have insights into the reading process as well as a firm foundation for success in second language reading. (11) Some of these students have also attained various degrees of oracy and literacy in English. They are eager to perfect their English so as to be freed for self-advancement in the new country. They are unenthusiastic about bilingual-bicultural education programs since what schools are able to provide in terms of their native language and culture pales from what they already know. These students seem happiest in English as a Second Language programs.

Cultural Variables

With the exception of some Vietnamese refugees who are now separated from their language groups, members of Asian groups tend to live in close proximity to lend support and encouragement to each other thereby reinforcing their native cultures and identities. Cultural variables common to many Asian groups which teachers need to be familiar with are as follows:

Values. As Asian societies hold scholars in high esteem, every parent's wish is for the child to become learned. Overwhelmed by the availability of free public education, they often exert strong but subtle pressure on their children to excel in school. The immigrant student, in the meantime, is undergoing culture shock while attempting to scale the language barrier. If he fails, he experiences what is culturally known as "shame" for having "lost face." Ultimately, this manifests itself in lowered self-concept which often becomes internalized by the student as being "inferior."

Asian cultures generally emphasize a strong sense of past history, familial relationships, and development of oneself in harmony with nature. The American middle-class values as reflected by the schools are forward-looking, encouraging individual endeavors in mastery over their environment. Modesty and humility are considered virtues, and Asian parents teach their young to defer, yield, restrain and refuse politely. These signs of "mature" behavior may be perceived by Americans as a lack of courage and conviction because western culture rewards self-reliance, independence, and individual freedom.

Cognitive Styles. Sue and Frank (13) found Chinese- and Japanese-American male students to have higher quantitative scores in comparison to verbal performance. They attributed the phenomenon to the cultural values which emphasize restraint in verbal expressions, especially of strong feelings, and an emphasis on the structured, logical, concrete, and impersonal attributes.

It was also hypothesized that reflective children are more efficient in inductive reasoning and tend to make fewer errors in reading, while

impulsive thinkers may be more willing to take risks, and therefore, become faster readers. (1) Asian students who have been imbued with the traditional customs of perseverance, reserve, and patience, thus demonstrate a reflective conceptual tempo (5) and may sacrifice speed in reading for higher standards of performance in accuracy and reasoning ability.

Learning Modalities. In Asian societies learning is equated with literacy. Children are discouraged from physical exploration or manipulation of environment while emphasis is placed on visual incorporation and mastery. (7) Visual learning is further reinforced by writing systems that include logograms, such as in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese. In learning to read and write logograms, which are ideographic, the student must make visual discriminations as to the distinct placement of each stroke or dot. One slip can change one logogram into another with an entirely different pronunciation and meaning.

Other Asian students have learned to read and write at the same time due to the traditional method of teaching which is by rote memory and copying from teacher's dictation. Many of these students can be seen in American schools with dictionaries in hand, learning new words and language patterns while tracing letters in the air or on desk tops. This need for visual and tactile-kinesthetic input is a learning trait characteristic of Asian students in addition to the fact that many may lack facility with the deep structure of English language (semantics and syntax) and, therefore, come to rely heavily on the surface structure of letters and words.

Linguistic Variables

Chinese. Chinese is a tonal language with the tone as a word-forming constituent and the stress denoting grammatical or semantic differences. Of the five major dialects, Mandarin and Cantonese are spoken most often in the United States. Chinese uses monosyllabic meaningful units with no inflections of person, tense, voice, number, or case. Word order of subject-predicate, verb-object, or adjective-noun are strictly adhered to. Other parts of speech are pronoun and sentence ending particle. As in many other Asian languages, article, preposition, and conjunction are almost non-existent. Phonemes differ with each dialect so that speakers of various dialects cannot readily understand each other.

Japanese. Japanese borrowed from classical Chinese in reading and writing around 4 century A.D. Today, the language contains loan words from European countries as well. Chinese logograms are used for sound value and comprise five per cent of Japanese writing; two modern syllabaries make up the balance. Japanese phonology is highly consistent with open syllables ending in five vowel sounds. As in some Chinese dialect, the rl beginning sound combination causes speakers of these languages to occasionally substitute r for l or vice-versa when they encounter English words which begin with either letter.

Korean. Korean is probably related to Japanese as the two languages are remarkably similar in grammar. Korean uses its own phonetic script in addition to Chinese ideographs which comprise approximately ten per cent of the writing.

Vietnamese. Vietnamese is also a monosyllabic language which can be written either in Chinese characters or in the Romanized alphabet which is

widely used today. Under the influence of Chinese civilization since the Han dynasty (111 B.C.), the language remains noninflecting, tonal, with grammar marked by rigid rules of word order. Major parts of speech include nouns and verbs of several kinds, and the use of kinship terms as pronouns. There are some conjunctions and sentence ending particles. Tone markers in Vietnamese writing are similar in concept to that used in Chinese though they are different in appearance. These tone markers can be adapted to mark pitch sounds in spoken English. For example:

Try it, you'll like it.

Now?

No. Tomorrow.

OK.

Of course, there are other markers used in Vietnamese. But the Romanized writing allows this kind of adaptive technique to be used in English reading. (The National Indochinese Clearinghouse, Center for Applied Linguistics, 1611 North Kent Street, Arlington, Virginia, 22209, has many Indochinese Refugee Education Guides which teachers may find helpful.)

English Phonology: An Enigma

Difficulties posed by English phonology for Asian students abound. English has beginning and ending sounds, blends and diphthongs which are not spoken in Asian languages. Along with auditory processing of speech sounds (acuity, discrimination and perception) the Asian student needs to be able to integrate the auditory input into ongoing experiences in order to gain comprehension, develop concept, and store information in the memory bank for later retrieval. Clinical studies reveal that young

children learn auditory patterns for each word or utterance rather than sounds in isolation. When the auditory input is structured in such a way that it becomes a transferable pattern, only then do children develop the idea that words can be broken into sound parts. (12)

Many Asian students have their progress in English reading arrested at the decoding stage in terms of phonetic analysis such as differentiating between short vowel sounds. This is not only inefficient, it is downright discouraging. Actually, phonological interference in second language learning is important only to the extent that it hampers understanding (3) and the skillful teacher supplies sufficient cues in context to help the students make the differentiation and "map" sound patterns at the syllable level. "This is a pet," and "This is a pit," using pictures or objects is a much more meaningful way to learn these vowel sounds rather than to be able to differentiate them in isolation. Cue systems used to aid auditory patterning should also draw upon the learning strengths of Asian students, namely, the visual mode with tactile reinforcement.

English Syntax

The age of the student appears to be a factor in second language performance. For a younger student, the language acquisition process for a second language, as with the first language, is largely inductive with the student actively though subconsciously acquiring information through "undifferentiated input." In fact, error correction and conscious learning techniques are probably non-productive at this stage. For the adolescent or adult student who has the ability to do abstract thinking, this "acquisition" ability diminishes while the conscious "monitor system" for language

increases, and error correction becomes useful in modifying production. Krashen (6) referred to the first as "acquisition" which is more related to affective factors, and to the second as "learning" which is more related to cognitive factors. The older student apparently uses both systems.

Language learning as an inductive process was also studied by Dulay and Burt (2). From hearing the patterns of a language repeatedly, children infer the underlying grammatical structure and generate their own constructions. Using error analyses, the researchers found that regardless of first language background, children tend to reconstruct English syntax in similar ways, called "creative construction," and "...it is the L₂ system, rather than the L₁ system that defines the acquisition process... (p. 52.)"

As syntactical load increases with the increased demands of more complex reading, a student may be further confused by the syntax of home language and English syntax. Teachers can help students to monitor differences in the syntax of the two languages as well as provide feedback. Syntactic cues Asian students need most are: 1) use of inflectional endings, 2) punctuation marks, 3) use of possessives, 4) use of parts of speech which do not exist in the native language, and 5) grammatical relationships.

Semantic Cues

In order to gain meaning from reading, the Asian student must bring into play his/her experiences and knowledge of the English language which would enable him/her to anticipate the words which would follow in context or to construct meaning from unfamiliar words. As language is always used in the context of culture, the teacher's role is also to assist the

student in making interpretations of what is read in light of the American culture. Sometimes, words and expressions are not translatable from one language to another; but only a teacher who is familiar with the student's language and culture would be able to point that out. Failing that, it may make the teacher as "ignorant" in the student's eyes as the student is in the teacher's.

A student who lives in poverty sees little sense in solving math problems dealing with the cost of five pounds of roast beef or a bushel of apples. A student who has lived under oppression has little understanding of democracy. When the student's life has been antithetical to the urban middle-class, he may see little value in reading or going to college. Asian students who came from such backgrounds may not be able to relate to the traditional American curriculum. They need to know that students from other ethnic backgrounds may have similar problems. Furthermore, they need to understand that not all American kids go to college, and those who do, do not always succeed.

Conclusion

We know very little about the reading process. We know even less about second language reading process. A teacher who is sensitive to the student's linguistic development, cultural values and priorities, personality, educational background, age, maturity, social status, and home environment, can make the reading experience an enjoyable and successful one for the student and a challenging and rewarding one for the teacher.

As feelings of competence and worth develop, the Asian student begins to experience reading as a part of the process of communication. Language, sociability, and self-concept all become parts of a sense of awareness of how one culture reads another.

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