
Title	Five- year-olds crack the code
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Five-Year-Olds Crack The Code

In January 1979 preprimary classes were opened in a number of Chinese medium primary schools. One of the objectives of these classes is to give the five-year-olds a better start on the path to "effective bilingualism" in English and Mandarin. Few would doubt that the earlier the child has an opportunity to listen and to speak in two languages, the better chance he has of functioning confidently and fluently in those languages. These children from truly bilingual homes¹ would seem to be at a distinct advantage here since it is highly likely that they will have already "cracked the code"² in both languages. They can approach the task of learning without having to acquire a whole new set of labels for concepts they already possess. So how does the preprimary class hope to compensate for the fact that the majority of children in these classes will have had little or no contact with English? The school can control the quantity and quality of "language time" for the children. The structure of the primary timetable has provided for the former, the latter is the prerogative of the teacher. The children are "exposed to"³ 50 per cent English and 50 per cent Mandarin. The curriculum guidelines determine what the child learns in the classroom but it is the teacher, through her consideration of how, when and where the child learns his language, who determines the quality and kind of instruction. She does so through her provision, organization and techniques of language teaching combined with her own personality and attitudes. What principles and practice can the teacher employ to ensure that, at least in the classroom, the children have a maximum opportunity to crack the code of English?

The following suggestions are culled from two primary sources: the publications of the Schools Council Communication Skills in Early Childhood Project (Tough, 1976, 1977) and the work of Edie Garvie in her book *Breakthrough to Fluency* (1976). At first glance, these two works would seem to contradict each other as far as

principles of learning a second language are concerned. Joan Tough maintains that we should be improving the child's use of speech language by looking to the child's natural motivation for learning to use language rather than by trying to teach him patterns and forms of speech. Edie Garvie stresses focusing sessions with the children when the focus is those very patterns and forms of speech which Tough decries. It would appear to be an argument between the formal approach to language learning and the informal, functional approach to language learning. However a closer look at their materials shows that we are really considering two faces of the same coin. Tough emphasizes the functional, notional aspects of learning a second language at a young age while Garvie stresses the structural strategies that can be used. It would seem that the classroom teacher would do well to try and blend the two approaches. To find out what this implies we need to examine more closely what it is that the two writers advocate.

The Schools Council Communication Skills in Early Childhood Project, working from Leeds University, arose from the experiences of the Preschool Education Project which revealed that nursery and infant teachers had a great deal of interest in but comparatively little knowledge of the development and use of language in young children. The methods suggested in the two publications of the Schools Council project were formulated and tested as a result of the work of approximately 1,500 teachers of young children all over Britain. Part of the work was concerned with teachers of young children learning English

¹ See the case studies in Andersson and Boyer, *Bilingual Schooling in the United States*, 1978.

² A term used by Edie Garvie to describe the period after initial orientation into the first language, akin to Tough's adjustment and attunement stage.

³ This is an unfortunate term in some ways since learning a language is not *just* a matter of being "exposed" to it.

as a second language. The project's first publication guides teachers in making appraisals of children's language used when talking with one another and the teacher as they go about their everyday classroom activities. The second volume, *Talking and Learning*, examines ways in which the teacher can promote the development of the child's skill in using language. The author of both publications is Dr. Joan Tough, the project director.

Eddie Garvie's ideas are based on her work in the Bradford Infant Centres where she was helping non-English speaking children of Asian background to acquire some English before entering primary school.

At this point it is important to bear in mind that both Tough and Garvie are working with *immigrant* children for whom English is a second language. Obviously differences exist in how, when, where and why English is used by immigrant children in Britain and say, Chinese children in Singapore. This does not deny the usefulness of their suggestions but does imply that such suggestions need to be reviewed for their adaptability for use with young Singaporean children. For instance, in the preprimary classes, where 50/50 exposure to Mandarin and English is the aim, one can expect few children to come from English speaking homes; therefore there is less likelihood that the children will use English amongst themselves. Immigrant children, on the other hand, will join classes where the medium of communication between most of the children will be English. There is an added problem for the children in the preprimary classes in that both languages of instruction, Mandarin and English, may be second languages.

Tough and Garvie approach the problem of teaching English as a second language in similar ways to some extent. They review the stages of language development in the young child and note the differences between first and second language learning. Tough brings out these differences clearly and recommends that we should be attempting to make use of those conditions which encourage first language learning in the second language learning situation. Garvie (1976) emphasizes that, although the young child has learnt his first language remarkably well under these conditions, as teachers we must be aware that "the learner comes to the learning of his second language as a developed being" and for this reason he must be specially motivated to learn his second language (p. 4). Both authors recognize the problem of "interference" of the first language with the second language and note that this will affect the

child's early learning. Garvie explains the situation for the young second language learner well when she describes him as a person who has to be helped to "crack the new code" and later to switch when the need arises (p. 5).

However the strategies for helping the children to do this are tackled by the authors from different viewpoints. Garvie considers the steps of concept development in terms of the second language which she labels Identification, Qualification, Relation, Classification and Manipulation. She sees the young learner working through the five "tions" in all areas of experience where he uses his second language. Tough, in developing her "Framework for Learning a Second Language" considers first why we should *not* be adopting these tactics employed by adult second language learners. Young children, she maintains, have not reached the level of conceptual development that makes possible the kind of thinking and motivation employed by the adult when acquiring a new language. She urges teachers to make use of the conditions which encourage children to learn their first language in the activities of the classroom. She examines the purposes for which children use language in the classroom (and there is no reason to suppose that Singaporean children differ from British children in what they use language for) and concludes that they come under four main headings: self-maintaining, directing, reporting and reasoning. She suggests that the teacher's objectives should be to establish the use of English for each of these purposes, labelling them

1. language for helping the child to become adjusted and attuned,
2. language for self-help,
3. language for joining in activities,
4. language for finding out,
5. language for extended learning.

While accepting that this framework reflects excellently the uses to which the child will put his second language in the classroom, the samples of dialogue supporting Tough's framework (recordings of actual conversations in the classroom) demonstrate that the factors which are required may not yet be present in the Singaporean preprimary class:

- a) a teacher who is well versed in making appraisals of children's language and who can grasp opportunities easily for helping children employ certain language in activities,
- b) a well-established and tried programme of activities for the children,
- c) a teacher:child ratio which allows for frequent teacher:child dialogue.

Eddie Garvie, on the other hand, accepts that these conditions are not always possible. She looks more closely at *what* it is we want young children to learn and suggests that since language learning is both a matter of making discoveries and forming habits, that the teacher should be providing "a field of learning" in which there is a certain amount of direction and "focus". It is this idea which is reflected in the curriculum guidelines for the preprimary classes in the form of "Centres of Interest". Garvie herself advocates the centre of interest as a means of focusing on part of the whole language field. Given a centre of interest, or to use Garvie's term a "category of experience", say "My Family", a natural limit is provided for the language to be learnt. A closer examination of Garvie's Language Checklists which arise from the focusing done by the teacher on an aspect of the curriculum or category of experience reveals a structural/functional approach to the analysis of language, which, when combined with Tough's Framework for Learning a Second Language, would seem to produce a very useful checklist of items for the teacher to cover. At this stage however it must be emphasized that on no account should the language that is relevant to a particular activity be sacrificed for the preplanned items that the teacher may have in mind. In other words if the perfect tense is required then it should be used. The child should not be denied the chance of learning it just because he has not "done" the present tense. Practice shows that often a child will acquire whatever language we want, provided that the situation is stimulating enough and the language to be used really relevant to the task in hand. At no point would either of the authors suggest that language learning for young children become so structured as to exclude all those well established infant teaching strategies which revolve around play. Rather through the informal play activities which the teacher makes provision for, she can help the child focus attention on language by talking with him about whatever he is doing. Through more structured activities, such as those suggested by Eddie Garvie, specific vocabulary, structures and formulae can be practised.

In her book, *Children's Minds* (1978), Margaret Donaldson explores the changes of thinking that have occurred during this century as to how children acquire language. Research carried out at Edinburgh University in the last ten years is proving that "it is the child's ability to interpret situations which makes it possible for him, through active processes of hypothesis testing and inference, to arrive at a knowledge of language"

(p. 38) and that language learning is very closely bound up with all other learning that is going on. We say that children understand before they speak but Donaldson regards this as an oversimplification since the correct understanding of a word on one occasion certainly does not guarantee the interpretation of that word on another occasion. Research carried out at Edinburgh University has shown that, by varying the situation, different levels of understanding in the child can be achieved (thereby questioning some of Piaget's work). Findings such as these would indicate that for the young child who is developing communication skills, it is the language in the situation which is all important. If this is the case for a child's first language, then it must be taken into account when a young child learns his second language, i.e. a child learns language best when it is acquired *through* his activities.

The five-year-old in the preprimary class has to learn to "crack the code" before he can learn later to switch codes whenever the need arises. To help him do this the teacher would do well to try to combine the best of well tried strategies for infant teaching with up to date principles of how young children best acquire a second language with which to learn. In the preprimary class both English and Mandarin will act as vehicles for further learning to take place. This means that the teacher needs to provide the children with the motivation for learning the second language by setting up communicative learning situations in and around the classroom. Any activity, be it creative activities, block-building, playing in the sandpit, or enjoying books in the reading corner, has a potential for dialogue. It is for the teacher to grasp the opportunity to encourage children to use the second language in these activities. With a centre of interest to provide focus for language learning, the teacher can be sure that the children have a chance to become familiar with a limited number of vocabulary items and to some extent a limited number of structures. Five-year-olds *can* crack the code and break through to fluency if they are sufficiently motivated to use the second language. Until the five-year-old has cracked the code, his overall learning progress will be limited. Perhaps, with some of the above ideas in mind, the preprimary teacher will be better equipped to take on the task. ¶

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