ENGLISH LANGUAGE USE BY INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED CHILDREN FROM NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING BACKGROUNDS

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Abstract:

This paper examines the acquisition and use of English language by Intellectually Disabled children from Non-English speaking backgrounds, in Singapore.

These children have been identified as having moderate to severe learning difficulties and have been placed in special schools. The language of instruction is English. The subjects range in age from 3 to 7 years, and come from predominately Chinese speaking backgrounds.

Linguistic data was collected from audio and some video recorded transcripts of informal play and conversational settings. The data was analysed using Bloom and Lahey’s (1978) "Categorisation of Content, Form and Use".

Initial analysis of the data indicates delays in acquisition of content and form, however the level of English Language usage is markedly delayed. These children lack competence and confidence in using English language in social contexts.

Implications of the Research for teachers, initial caregivers and teacher educators will be discussed. The paper concludes with suggestions for developing the communicative competence of intellectually disabled children from non-English speaking backgrounds.
Introduction

The language of instruction in Singaporean special schools is English. Although when the communication capabilities of children with learning difficulties, are very low, and progress is poor, then the mother tongue, is used. Where verbal communication is not forthcoming, augmentative/alternative systems are used.

The use of English, as a common language, in Singapore, has an advantage in terms of helping individuals with special needs, to integrate, and socialise. This is across quite a few aspects of life, in domains such as vocation, and leisure. However, in Chinese households, at meal times, the use of English has only increased from around 10%, in 1980, to about 21% in 1990. (Singapore Census, 1991). This is encouraging, in view of efforts to increase English usage. It suggests though, that in spite of the increase, the language of 'comfort', used in the home, still tends to be the mother tongue, as similar shifts have taken place in the other languages of Singapore.

Currently, much debate, is taking place in Singapore about what constitutes English. This is because of the difference between 'Singlish', which might be termed, 'the language of the streets', and 'Educated English' which is virtually 'Standard English'. 'Educated English' varies from Standard English, as in many English dialects, basically, in vowel production. Singlish, on the other hand, seems to vary in every linguistic feature, from Standard English. Of course it is very important not to put any negative connotations, on Singlish, although there is certain amount of pressure put on children, by educated parents to 'speak proper English'.

Educated Singaporeans are able to change register, automatically from Standard English to 'Singlish', according to the required degree of formality. The polarisation given above, is simplified. It has been suggested, though, (Gupta, 1991), that such a 'diglossic' view, (Ferguson, 1959), is more useful in the Singapore situation. Earlier writers, (Platt, 1977), (Tay, 1979), also preferred a lectal continuum, in which speakers operate at different lectal levels, based on educational attainment. Although 'Standard English' is the valid aim of educational authorities in Singapore, five minutes listening in any playground, will establish that 'Singlish' is well and truly entrenched. It has recently been suggested that the use of reading may be one way of getting Standard English features across to children. (Kwan-Terry, 1991). The question of how best to develop Standard English is unanswered, and is complicated by the modelling in homes, and in schools. Some suggestions applying equally to regular, as well as ID children will be offered at the end of this paper.
It is not my intention to fully discuss the issues in teaching oral English, but rather to give the background to the normal situation. In looking at the use of English by intellectually disabled, (ID), children, the dilemma of what to compare their language to arises. On the one hand, ‘Singlish’ as the ‘language of the street’, is valid, as a potent form of integration, into society. On the other hand, only some of the aspects of ‘Singlish’ have been researched. So, for example, only a few of its unique pragmatic rules have been documented. If comparisons with Standard English are made, then one is comparing the language to a model which will have been rarely heard. The model though is clear, and represents the aims and aspirations of the education system. As will be seen, concern about comparison difficulties in linguistic features such as Form (phonology, morphology, syntax), Content (semantics), and suprasegmentals, need not have been as marked, as concern about Use(pragmatics), regardless of the comparison model used.

Data collection

Special Needs teachers on a long term in-service course were asked to collect a language sample of at least 50 utterances from one subject, using a video or audio cassette player. The importance of using conversation, in natural settings, was stressed, and teachers were guided during sample taking. Some of the difficulties struck at this stage include:

- Failure to establish rapport. It had been assumed that as practicing teachers, the sample takers would understand the need to establish a relationship with subjects, before recording a sample.

- A lack of understanding about what discourse is. This was exemplified by the constant use of closed questions, which tend to act as blocks during conversation.

  Difficulty in moving out of the teacher role. This manifested in two ways. In the first case, teachers, for example, asked ‘unreal’ questions, such as ‘What colour is your shirt?’ A real question is defined as a genuine question, to which the questioner does not know the answer. eg. ‘What colour is that dog you’ve got at home?’ In fact there was considerable overuse of questions to elicit utterance samples. In the second case the problem is more serious, if it indicates the way teachers act in class. This is the tendency to dominate and control conversation. This ranged from a failure to give subjects sufficient time to respond, through to complete lack of turn taking by the teacher towards the subject. This will be commented on later.

- Little attempt to elicit a range of word classes eg. prepositions and verbs, the result of this was over eliciting of nouns and simple adjectives. Although sample results demonstrate a dearth in these word classes, a
breakdown of the teacher’s initial sample taking utterances shows little attempt to ‘contrive naturally’, situations that allow emergence of these classes.

**Tentative Results**

A preliminary breakdown of the data on use of English by ID children from non-English speaking backgrounds, indicates similarities to some of the linguistic phenomena observed in regular children placed in bi-lingual settings. They are as follows:

**Code mixing**

Use of English, with Chinese syntax.
Mixing of English and Chinese.
Use of Chinese with English syntax.
Use of particles from ‘Singlish’, in English. [Some particle usage in English comes directly from Chinese dialect usage in the home, (Kwan-Terry, 1991b)].

All of these confusions have been reported in regular Singaporean pre-schoolers. (Ko, 1992).

**Educational level of the parents**

The overall quality of the language in all aspects, was better in homes where parents had attained higher educational levels.

**Vocabulary confusions and paucities (Content)**

There is evidence of children confusing words, for example confusing ‘lipstick’ and ‘chopstick’, and the extent of vocabulary seems limited. This reduced vocabulary, is part of what has been termed ‘semi-lingualism’, and has been identified in children of immigrant workers. (McLaughlin, 1984). It is also, a reflection of the developmental stage of the child. In the situations where intellectual disablement is combined with another factor, such as a home lacking language stimulation, the effect on linguistic development is far greater than the simple addition of the two factors. (Dowson, 1987).

**Phonological difficulties (Form)**

Substitutions, omissions, distortions, and additions were apparent in the phonological repertoire of subjects. This included errors that could be accounted for developmentally, and others, that appear to be a result of code mixing at the phonological level. Another possibility is that apparent phonological errors are simply reflections of Singlish. An informal comparison of standard English with Singlish reveals phonological changes, such as, /d/ for/ θ / in
words like /@aet/ ‘that’, /tri/ for three, /t>bau/ for ‘talk about’.

Syntax (Form)

Errors in syntax occurred, and seemed to indicate in some cases, a reflection of Singlish, and in others classic language delay. For example one subject asks, ‘The hen – Where?’ However, many ID children are still at the single word utterance stage.

Suprasegmental features

Intonation patterns used by the subjects, were similar to those found in regular use by Singaporean children. For example, the rise and fall for emphasis in strong denial. ‘Noo – Lah!’ Others still used intonation, on occasion, at the pre-verbal development stage.

Stress patterns were mostly similar, for example, to Singlish.

For example, equal stress on the syllables in ‘banana’ – ‘ba-na-a’. In sentences, emphasis was also given to certain words, for example, ‘Then so the glass drop all’, as in regular use.

Pragmatics (Use)

Before discussing the tentative findings, I would like to look at the area of Use. I use the term, ‘use’, firstly as defined by Lois Bloom (1978). It is part of her model of language acquisition components. It as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Use</th>
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Phonology can be included as part of Form, and Suprasegmentals should also be mentioned. This model is useful for looking at the language of children with special needs. A child attaining normal levels in language components, can be placed in the middle. That is, the child is equally competent in all aspects of language. Given the dangers of generalising, we could place a ‘typical’ autistic child in the Form area only. This would signify regular syntax, but problems with Use (pragmatics) and Content, (Semantics, or meaning). A visually impaired child, with good conversation skills, for example, might be placed in the Form-Use area only, but may, because of perceptually different, and perhaps limited experience, have delays in the Content area.

It has been noted, (Rondal, 1988), that different sized delays in the various components of language, means that the special needs child cannot be compared with a younger normal child. The linguistic system is truly different. One
The further effect of Bloom’s model is that it constantly reminds of that often neglected area of language, pragmatics (Use).

The main points of my paper, are that firstly, there are very large delays, or deficits in the Use, or pragmatics of Intellectually Delayed children from Non-English speaking backgrounds. Secondly, this deficit is significant, in that the lack of pragmatics of such children contributes greatly to their overall poor performance in Language. This is not only in areas such as turn taking in conversations, but in a broader definition of the word, ‘use’. That is, the actual amount of quality time spent using English. Quality time will be discussed later.

There is evidence, in some of the samples of ID children, that the highly structured, analytical approach often used with, intellectually disabled children, may also act as a restriction of language growth. To put it another way, the failure to engage ID children in natural conversation, leads to further reduction of expressive language output. It may be the case, that children not given full opportunities to talk, do not learn to talk, so well. It also suggests that care-givers, including teachers, are influenced by their perception of Intellectual Disablement, and constantly seek to ‘test’ the linguistic capability of the child through factual questioning. For example, object naming, ‘What is this?’, or simple description, ‘What colour is that?’ If you have dealt a lot with parents of regular children, you have probably experienced this, quite often.

Recent research on bi-lingualism in regular pre-school children in Singapore, indicates some similarities in the regular setting. Ho (1992) notes, that "face to face communicative skills in a social situation encompass more than word knowledge (a sub-skill), or surface fluency."

Implications

Initial examination of the data then, indicates that English language usage skills are lacking in ID children, and the inference is made that developing conversation skills may assist overall language growth. Further, the amount of quality time spent using English is important. To carry out conversation, it is necessary to have something to talk about.

- The implication of this is that child’s environment, and sub-environments must be language enriching and stimulating. There must not only be things to talk, but there must be things to do, and children must do things, in and out of the classroom, and home. Such an approach is commonly called a Language Experience Approach, (L.E.A.)

- There must be opportunities to use the language. In the classroom, this means an integrated approach, in which communication (conversation), is central to all other activities. It is particularly important that teachers allow children the time to express themselves verbally, no
matter how hesitant they may be. In the home, care-givers must be sensitive to the child’s communication attempts, and be prepared to work with the child in what is virtually a companion-type relationship.

Provision needs to be made for assisting care-givers with effective communication. Although many of the techniques used are pure ‘motherese’, this does not necessarily occur naturally. This is particularly so if the child has Special Needs, as there is evidence that in such cases, parent-child interactions are often seriously disrupted, and care-givers need guidance.

- The objective of ‘teaching language’, should be copious production, for social use, rather than correction of phonology and syntax. Correction, as in a monolingual setting, is best done through modelling, at this early stage.

- Although it is not necessary to go ‘full on’, non-stop with conversation, quality time, means that in general, communication is ‘real’, meaningful to the receiver, involves an active, rather than a passive role, and has intent.

Some specific implications

- It is O.K. to target a particular language in a sub-environment. eg. Where new migrant parents do not feel competent in the host language, it is better that they use their own language and carry out enriching experiences. It is best that they do not present poor models of the host language.

- Adults involved with young children, need to be ready to accept code mixing, and code switching.

- No implication that any language or dialect used other than the host language is inferior, should be made. The socio-linguistic perspective is that language is such a deep part of our being, that any criticism affects self-esteem.

- There may be a need to deliberately teach pragmatics, particularly if awareness of environmental cues is essential to correct usage. For example, the manner of addressing relative strangers may have to be differentiated from the manner, or style for addressing peers.

- Environmental cues are a useful way of helping the young bilingual language learner. These can be faded as competency increases. Input must allow for individual differences in ability.

Conclusion

What I have done is to lay out before some tentative findings from a small study, ID children in a bilingual setting, and offer some possible strategies. Thank you for your attention.


