ONE CHILD, TWO LANGUAGES
A GUIDE FOR PRESCHOOL EDUCATORS
OF CHILDREN LEARNING ENGLISH
AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

by

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related for these omega children that it is not possible to sort out primary from secondary factors. If a child is not a good communicator, people will ignore him or her, and if people ignore the child, it is hard to get into social situations in which he or she could become a better communicator.

This, of course, is precisely the situation in which children whose home language is other than English find themselves during the first few months in preschool education settings in which English is used. Automatically, because of their lack of language proficiency, they are extensively ignored by the English-speaking children in the classroom, who treat them as if they are invisible, do not initiate communications with them, and often ignore their attempts at initiation, just as the children in the nursery school did with Byong-sun. Second-language-learning children are relegated to the bottom of the social heap right from the start.

Because of this situation, second-language-learning children like Byong-sun are left alone much of the time at first. They may spend their time playing alone silently, or humming, singing, or talking to themselves—very much the same portrait as was painted of the omega children previously. In interaction situations, these children wait for the other person to be the initiator, and they rarely presume to try to get one of the other children to do something for them; if there is something they want, they do it themselves or they do without. These features also make second-language-learning children look a lot like the description of the omega children. And, in fact, for at least the first few months in a preschool education setting, second-language-learning children are, indeed, omega children. But, fortunately, most of them do not remain omega children. What makes it possible for second-language-learning children to eventually escape this double bind? Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the process of second-language acquisition for these young children and show how it is possible for second-language-learners to gain enough facility with their new language to become social members of the group and to use their social skills to get into group situations where they will be able to hear, understand, and then begin to use their new language as well.

Getting Started in a Second Language

When young children whose home language is not English first arrive in a classroom where English is one of the languages used, they are at the starting point of a new developmental pathway, a pathway that leads to the development of skills in a second language. Although there will be differences in the way that children pursue learning a second language, researchers have noted a consistent developmental sequence for young children:

1. There may be a period of time when children continue to use their home languages in the second-language situation.
2. When they discover that their home language does not work in this situation, children enter a nonverbal period as they collect information about the new language and perhaps spend some time in sound experimentation.
3. Children begin to go public, using individual words and phrases in the new language.
4. Children begin to develop productive use of the second language.
This chapter discusses the first two periods in this developmental sequence for second-language learners. Chapter 4 discusses the second two periods, and individual differences in this developmental process is the topic of Chapter 5.

HOME-LANGUAGE USE

When young children find themselves in a social situation in which those around them speak a different language, there are really only two options: They can continue to speak the language they already know, or they can stop talking altogether.

Some children initially pursue the first of these options. In my study I observed a Brazilian boy, Leandro, during his first day in the English-language classroom, where no one else spoke Portuguese, his home language. At lunch, Leandro tried some yogurt and then pushed it away telling me something in Portuguese, which must have involved an explanation for why he was not going to eat it. After lunch he asked Joanna a definite question in Portuguese. She shook her head and said she did not understand. Later he asked me a question in Portuguese. I also said I did not understand. He did not seem distressed, but he did not get an answer either.

Naoshi, a Japanese child in the same classroom, limited his efforts to the other Asian children. During the first few days in class he tried to speak Japanese to Ling Ling, who was Taiwanese, and Byong-sun, who was Korean; neither of them could respond to him in Japanese. In both Leandro’s and Naoshi’s cases, unsuccessful initial efforts apparently convinced these children that they would not be understood if they used their home language and, therefore, each discontinued the attempt to speak it in the classroom.

Some children, however, have been observed to persist for a considerably longer period of time in the use of their home language in second-language situations. In a study involving 40 second-language-learning children ranging in age from 18 months to 12 years, Saville-Troike (1987) found that 3- to 7-year-old children were willing to engage in what she terms dilingual discourse for some time after arriving in a setting in which a different language was spoken. By dilingual discourse, Saville-Troike means that the children continued to speak their home language as if those around them could understand them. In fact, those around them often did answer them, using, of course, the language that the children could not understand. Saville-Troike reports that this form of communication

was generally effective for achieving desired ends when the children were involved in play, especially when there were objects to be manipulated. When context alone did not suffice for meaning to be inferred, however, the response to an unintelligible verbalization was frequently a blank look. (pp. 84–85)

The older children in Saville-Troike’s (1987) study came to the realization quite quickly that this form of communication would not work; however, two younger Chinese brothers (one 3 years old and one 4 years old) continued to use their home language for several months when communicating with anyone in their English-speaking nursery school classroom. For example, when a teacher (T) was working with a small group of children that included the older of the Chinese brothers (G) and an English-speaking boy (M), the following dialogue occurred (G’s utterances are printed in upper-case letters and represent English glosses of what was actually spoken in Chinese):

T: Do you know what that is?
M: Egg.
T: This is an egg. An egg. And what do we do with an egg?
M: You crack it. In a bowl.
T: You crack it. In the bowl.
G: WE EAT THAT.
T: Right. And we call this an egg.
G: IF WE DON’T USE A REFRIGERATOR, THERE WILL BE A LITTLE BIRD COMING OUT.
T: Right. That’s an egg. (p. 88)

In this case, the teacher responds to G’s comments, even though she cannot understand what he has said. Saville-Troike (1987) reports that this sort of exchange occurred most frequently with teachers; successful dilingual discourse was not a common feature of child–child communication.

The younger of the Chinese brothers continued to use dilingual discourse for 4 more months, but he began to include more and more English in his utterances. The older brother, however,
entered a period when he did not use either language. When he was asked by a Chinese interviewer why he had stopped using Chinese in the classroom after 2 months of bilingual discourse, he replied that he “knew that they could not understand him, and he realized that they were not going to learn Chinese. He said that since he was learning English, he would use that language instead” (p. 103).

THE NONVERBAL PERIOD

Sooner or later, then, children faced with a social situation in which their home language is not useful will abandon attempts to communicate in their home language with people who do not understand them. In an English-language classroom, this means that the children will enter a period when they do not talk at all. In a bilingual classroom, it means that children will only attempt to talk with those who speak their home language and will no longer try to talk with those who do not. This period has been observed by a number of previous researchers who have termed it the silent or mute period.

For example, when I conducted a case study of a young Greek boy, Panos, who was brought to the United States when he was 2 years old, his parents told me that he had attended an English-language child care program five mornings a week for 1½ years before he began to use any English at all. Throughout this period his Greek was developing normally at home, and his teachers reported that he was actively involved in all aspects of the classroom, although he did not use any English. Finally, in the spring of his second year of child care, he began to use some English in the classroom. By the time I visited him at his child care center when he was 4½ years old, his English, although a bit sing-song in intonation, was well advanced, and he was having no difficulties communicating with everyone in the classroom (Tabors, 1982).

In a case study of another young child, Itoh and Hatch (1978) observed a 2½-year-old Japanese child, Takahiro, who was not only silent in his English-language nursery school setting but also chose to be socially isolated. During his first 3 months at the nursery school, he spent most of his time on a tricycle as far away as possible from the other children. Itoh and Hatch called this a rejection period for Takahiro.

Hakuta (1978) also observed a young Japanese girl during a mute period. Although he was eager to begin collecting data about her second-language acquisition, it took from October, when she arrived in the United States, until the following April for her to begin to speak English. During the intervening time she was attending kindergarten and playing with neighborhood English-speaking friends, but she was not producing any English.

Finally, in Ervin-Tripp’s (1974) study of American children learning French in Geneva, the researcher found that many of the children “said nothing for many months” and that her own children, ages 5 and 6½, “began speaking after six and eight weeks of immersion in the school setting” (p. 115).

This mute or silent period, then, seems to be a consistent feature of many young children’s experience in second-language situations. There seems to be an age component to the length of time that children spend in this period: The younger children in the case studies maintained their muteness for lengthier periods than the older children. This difference is investigated further in Chapter 5.

Nonverbal Communication

For all of these children, the realization that they could not communicate with those around them in their home language meant that they stopped talking. But this did not necessarily mean that they stopped communicating. Except for Takahiro, who isolated himself from his classmates, most of the young children who have been studied in these circumstances found alternative ways of trying to communicate with those around them. I am, therefore, calling this the nonverbal, rather than the silent, period, because although children may not produce utterances during this time, most engage in various forms of nonverbal communication with those who do not speak their home language.

I found that the use of nonverbal tactics by the second-language learners in my study was most common in the first few months in the English-language classroom. For example, one day a dispute arose between Ling Ling and Matthew, who were working with a set of plastic straws and stars at one of the tables. As I turned around, Ling Ling mutely appealed to me by turning her face up to me and looking anxious. My interpretation was that Matthew was trying to take something away from her that
she wanted to keep. I moved over to their table, explaining to Matthew that there were plenty of straws and stars for everyone. Then I sat down at the table and began to make a figure out of the straws and stars. When Ling Ling had a problem with what she was building, she handed me the pieces. I put them together for her and handed them back. She was pleased with the result and walked her figure over toward me. I asked, “What’s that?” but she shrugged her shoulders. When I asked her if she wanted to take the figure apart, she shook her head vigorously “no.” Slightly later Ling Ling was playing with the structure I had built and got it caught on her arm. She extended her arm toward me to show me the problem, and I took it off for her. Next she again handed me a straw and a star. I asked, “You want it on there?” and put it together for her. After this she picked up a large number of straws, put them in an empty box, and left the table to go into the playhouse.

In this sequence Ling Ling uses some of the methods of nonverbal communication that were common among the second-language-learning children in the English-language classroom. She uses the expression on her face to tell me that she needs help when Matthew is trying to take something away from her. Several times she hands me something that she wants fixed. She advances an object toward me, probably as a prompt for a comment from me. In addition, she is able to respond nonverbally when I ask her questions.

I had similar experiences with other children. One day, Leandro and Naoshi were working with Legos and a set of cards with Lego structures illustrated on them. Leandro was building a police car using the card as his guide. At one point he showed me the card and pointed to a black Lego piece on the card. The piece he needed had been used by Naoshi in a fire truck, but the fire truck was now partially disassembled. I showed Naoshi the card and asked him if Leandro could use that piece for his police car. Naoshi immediately removed the piece and gave it to Leandro.

Here Leandro and Naoshi, like Ling Ling, are using a combination of nonverbal techniques to get a task accomplished or to respond to requests. In all of these examples, the nonverbal communication employed by the children allows them to successfully participate in interactions in a way that would not be possible if these techniques were not used. In other words, the use of nonverbal communication makes it possible for second-language-learning children to be communicative even before they can use the verbal forms appropriate for these situations.

Although nonverbal communication can be effective, it can be used in only a limited set of situations. In the nursery school, second-language-learning children used nonverbal behavior most often to accomplish one of the following: 1) attention getting, 2) requesting, 3) protesting, or 4) joking.

Attention Getting One of the most typical attention getters used by the second-language-learning children in the classroom involved holding up or showing an object to another person. For example, one day Ling Ling was at a table where there were some piles of different color clay and Popsicle sticks. Joanna was sitting at the table working on a poster for the wall. Rebecca and Matthew were also there playing with the clay. Ling Ling picked up a piece of clay and put it on the end of a Popsicle stick. She held it out in front of Joanna. Joanna took it saying, “Oh, for me?” and pretended to eat it. Ling Ling smiled as she watched, having successfully used a nonverbal attention getter to initiate an interaction with Joanna.

Another morning, at circle time, we were singing the song “Wheels on the Bus.” Naoshi got up from the circle, got the toy
bus from the shelf, and brought it to show to everyone, demonstrating nonverbally that he knew exactly what the song was all about.

Not all nonverbal attempts at attention getting, however, were successful. Frequently, particularly when nonverbal attention getters were used with other children, there was no uptake from the person whose attention was being sought. For example, one day Ling Ling was working at one of the tables on a building project. In order for her to get some more wooden pegs for her project, she had to stand on a chair and reach into the middle of the table. Also in the same container with the pegs were some pieces of paper on which were colored dots. Ling Ling picked up one of these and waved it in front of Jessica. When there was no response, she put it back in the container. Another day, Naoshi was playing at the sand table. He was using a funnel to cover up a dinosaur toy with sand. As he did this, he looked over at Supat, but Supat was busy with his own play. Then Naoshi laughed out loud and pointed to the dinosaur toy that was buried up to its eyes with sand. Again, he looked at Supat, but Supat did not respond.

In each of these instances it is not particularly surprising that the nonverbal effort by the second-language-learning child does not receive a response, as each effort is quite ambiguous in its meaning, and may, indeed, not be interpretable from the other child’s point of view.

Requesting There were many times during the course of the school day when the second-language-learning children needed help with something they were doing or with a problem they were having with another child. Again, as with attention getting, some of the nonverbal techniques that they used in these circumstances were successful and some were not. For example, one day Byong-sun wanted to play at the water table, but he knew he would need a smock. He walked over to the smocks, looking toward Marion, but she was busy with Naoshi. Then he stood near the smocks for a time, touching one of them. Finally, he took the smock off its peg and brought it over to Marion, who obligingly began to help him get organized for play at the water table.

On another occasion Andrew and Supat were sitting at one of the art tables with a pan with cornstarch and water. When I sat down, Andrew said to me, "Look at the cornstarch. It's making a pattern." At this point Ling Ling, who was also at the table, whimpred, looked toward Joanna, and then looked toward me when I asked her if she needed help. She then held up her arms to me so that I could roll up her sleeves so she would not get them wet with the cornstarch mixture.

In each of these instances it is up to the adult in the situation to know what it is that is being requested, because the amount of information that is being provided by the second-language-learning child is extremely minimal.

If the kind of help that a second-language-learning child needs is not available, the child has only two choices: Try to do it without help or forget about it. Both of these strategies were illustrated one day at the water table in the nursery school classroom. First, Byong-sun wanted something from the other end of the water table. He looked at me and then held his hand straight out. I did not respond, so he left his spot and walked around to the other end where Taro was playing. Upon arrival, he reached into the water and retrieved a plastic bottle and returned to his end of the table. In this case, Byong-sun realized that if he wanted the plastic bottle, he was going to have to get it himself.

But sometimes it is not possible for a child to solve a problem so easily. Playing near Byong-sun at the water table, Leandro picked up a pump. He tried to make it work but without much luck. Looking around for help, he saw Joanna at the next table, but she was busy, so he merely put the pump down and picked up a funnel. In this case, Leandro seems to decide that it would be more trouble than it was worth to let someone else know that he needed help with the pump, so he decided to forget about it.

Protesting During the course of the day it was also necessary for the second-language-learning children to let other people know that they were not happy with a particular situation. Examples of children looking upset or whimpering in these circumstances have already been discussed. Another technique, protesting, is revealed in the following two examples.

One day Andrew and Taro were playing with the toy cars at one of the tables. Andrew picked up the car that Taro had left on the table. Taro shrieked. Andrew put the car back and left. On another occasion Naoshi and Leandro were playing with Legos. Each boy had a pile of Legos in front of him. At one point Naoshi reached over and touched one of the pieces in Leandro’s pile.
Leandro gave a squeak of protest and took Naoshi’s hand away from the piece. Naoshi returned to his own pile of Legos.

Each of these examples demonstrates a behavior used by the second-language-learning children to express the fact that they are not happy with a particular situation. In these two cases, the protest is understood and the situation is changed, but, just as with attention getting and requesting, sometimes a protest is not interpretable, and it is difficult for those around to help.

**Joking** It was also possible for second-language-learning children to communicate nonverbally by doing funny things that other people would find amusing. For example, one day Byong-sun was inside the playhouse by himself looking out the window at the end near the bench where Taro happened to be. When Taro spotted Byong-sun in the window, he started to giggle. Then they both giggled and laughed at each other. A little later Taro stuck his head in the window. When Byong-sun saw him, he came back to the window, sticking his hand through again and giggling. Then Leandro came to the end of the house and stuck his head out the window. Taro, who was still on the bench, laughed at Leandro, and then stuck his head in the window.

In this sequence, three second-language-learning children develop a joking game that lets them play together without the use of any language. In fact, this kind of activity was so successful that it had a tendency to become a continuing saga with the children and helped them get into contact with each other and other members of the classroom.

**Imitating Nonverbal Behavior** Interestingly, nonverbal communication was so pervasive at the beginning of the school year in this classroom—where more than half of the students were from homes where English was not the primary language—that even one English-speaking child seemed to adopt the behavior. During snack one day, Jessica came over to Joanna and started mugging and miming and pointing toward the table where a bowl of grated cheese was located. During this mugging she wrinkled up her face into a grimace/smile, while closing her eyes and gesturing strongly with her arm. Joanna refused to play the game of guessing what Jessica wanted. Rebecca kindly interpreted that Jessica wanted cheese. Joanna explained that there was already cheese on the pizza. Several more times during snack, Jessica mimed a request, but Joanna ignored her, seeming a bit perplexed by the behavior. Later, at lunchtime, Jessica used the same helpless act with me, needing extra encouragement to get her lunch and pull in her chair.

After this one day, however, Jessica ceased producing this kind of behavior, perhaps because it did not receive the kind of deference she had hoped it would. Nonetheless, it seems likely that the exaggerated gesturing and facial expressions were an over dramatized version of behaviors that Jessica had seen around her among the second-language-learning children, behaviors that received, in her mind, special attention from the adults in the classroom.

Trying to get a message across nonverbally is an appropriate early strategy in second-language settings; most young children in these circumstances seem to be able unself-consciously to call this strategy into play when necessary. The limitations of this behavior are obvious, however. If there is not a helpful and perceptive person available to interpret nonverbal cues, the message may not be received at all.

**Social Consequences of Nonverbal Communication** As detailed in the portrait of Byong-sun in Chapter 2, there are also social consequences to continuing to use nonverbal behaviors. As long as the second-language-learning children in the nursery school classroom remained predominantly nonverbal, they were treated like infants by the English-speaking children or ignored as if they were invisible. For instance, one child, Taro, remained predominantly nonverbal during the entire year (see Chapter 9 for a case study of Taro). Andrew, who wanted to be everybody’s friend, tried everything he could to communicate with Taro. Andrew’s activities included kissing Taro, sticking his tongue out at him, flapping his lips at him, spinning himself around in front of him, chasing and wrestling with him, lifting him up from behind, handing play objects to him, tickling him, and pulling the hood up on his sweatshirt. This behavior on Andrew’s part seemed most strongly reminiscent of how an older child might play with a much younger baby.

Furthermore, on at least one occasion, Andrew modified his speech as if he were talking to an infant as he helped get Ling Ling ready for lunch. First, he began to talk to her in a very high-pitched voice. He said, “I’ll open your lunchbox.” Then he discovered that one of the teachers had already helped her and said,
"Oh, it's empty already." Then one of the children pointed out that some of Ling Ling's milk had spilled on the floor. Andrew walked around to check it out, and when Ling Ling looked like she might start to cry, he said, "Me fix," and went to get a paper towel. When Joanna came to see what was wrong, he assured her, "Me wipe it."

In this sequence Andrew shows two types of modifications that adults often use when communicating with very young first-language-learning children: a high-pitched voice and linguistically reduced forms ("me fix" and "me wipe it"). By using these modifications, Andrew shows his sensitivity to Ling Ling's communicative difficulties, adjusting his speech as if he were speaking with a very young child.

An example of how the English-speaking children regarded a slightly older child who was linguistically different occurred at the end of the school year when a new student, Pierre, came into the classroom. Pierre came to the classroom speaking French; he did not know any English. He was extensively ignored by the other children, although he did make attempts to join in the run-and-chase games that were sometimes played in the classroom as these required no verbal ability.

When one of the teachers took a series of slides of the children in the classroom and then showed them during circle time, a routine developed of naming all the children shown in each slide. Whenever a slide was shown that included a picture of Pierre, all of the other children's names were called out, but never Pierre's. This occurred even though his name was used daily in the classroom by the teachers and was, therefore, known to the other children. Because he had not developed enough English to become a social member of the group, Pierre was apparently invisible to the rest of the children.

Obviously, in order to truly join in the classroom activities as social equals, then, second-language-learning children need to begin to start using the new language.

Gathering Data

During the nonverbal period, children not only devise ways of communicating nonverbally but also begin to gather information about the new language that is being spoken around them. This data-gathering operation consists of two strategies: spectating and rehearsing.

Spectating Spectating refers to active observations by the second-language-learning children when they are in proximity to English speakers and are focusing on the language that is being used. In the nursery school classroom, these behaviors frequently occurred during joint activities in which secondlanguage learners and English speakers worked or played side by side or were involved in group activities that involved the whole class.

For example, on the morning when Ling Ling had initiated a play sequence with Joanna by using a piece of clay and a Popsicle stick to make an ice cream cone, Joanna extended the play to the other children at the table, Matthew, Leandro, and Rebecca, by taking their Popsicle stick creations and pretending to eat them as well. After that she made a snake from the clay and turned it into a letter S. Then she asked what other letters they could make. Andrew came by and suggested "O for ostrich." During this entire time, Ling Ling was holding her Popsicle stick with a ball of clay on it, listening to and watching what was going on with the other children and Joanna.
Later, at circle time, all of the children were singing the songs and playing the games together. Leandro, who was new to the classroom at that time, was standing across from me, watching my face intently during the songs. He was slow to copy what the other children were doing at first, but began to get involved near the end.

In these instances, Ling Ling and Leandro seem to be concentrating on watching and listening in order to begin to collect data about the new language to which they are being exposed. What sets this spectating behavior apart from simple, non-involved listening behavior is the intensity with which it was carried out.

Rehearsing  Rehearsing refers to verbalizations by the second-language learners that did not appear to be communicative, but that indicated these children were working on producing English. Much of the rehearsing was done extremely quietly as the children played near English speakers and was, therefore, difficult to hear. Sometimes it was possible, however, to tune in to the rehearsal as it occurred.

For example, one day when Byong-sun and some other children were working with playdough at one of the tables, Joanna came by and remarked, “Look at that nice playdough,” and Byong-sun echoed after her, “Playdough.” On another occasion at the water table, Andrew said something that contained the phrase “have to...” and Byong-sun, who had been watching Andrew intently, mouthed the words “have to.” In these instances, Byong-sun is not trying to communicate with Joanna or Andrew; instead, he is rehearsing the sounds that he has just heard by repeating them out loud. Interestingly, in the second example, Byong-sun is combining spectating behavior (i.e., watching Andrew intently) and rehearsing behavior (i.e., repeating something Andrew has just said).

The nature of this rehearsing process has been more extensively revealed in Saville-Troike’s (1988) study as she used directional microphones to capture and record the vocalizations of the young second-language learners. Saville-Troike noted that much of this vocalization was done at such a low volume that even those near the children could not hear what they were saying. Apparently, they were not yet ready to go public with their talk this early in the second-language-learning process.

Similar to the previous examples of Byong-sun’s behavior, Saville-Troike (1988) found that the second-language-learning children used repetition as part of the rehearsing process; the younger children usually repeated the end of an utterance that they heard near them, but the older children sometimes repeated more extensive phrases. For example, a 4-year-old Chinese boy (S2) was playing with his back to a group of English-speaking children, but he repeated to himself what they were saying:

Child 1: Pooty.
Child 2: Pooty?
Child 3: Hey, look.
Child 2: What are you doing?

S2: Hey, look.

Child 2: What are you doing? (pp. 578-579)

Saville-Troike (1988) found that the children also had other uses for this type of private speech, including connecting English words with appropriate objects, actions, or situations or incorporating English in dual-language utterances as if explaining the meanings to themselves.

Sometimes, the children just seemed to be playing with the sounds of the new language, as in this example:


Furthermore, some of the children used this rehearsal time to begin to construct pattern drills for themselves in their new language. For example, a 5-year-old Japanese boy constructed the following:

I finished.
I have finished.
I am finished.
I’m finished.
and:
I want.
During this nonverbal period, then, the young second-language learners were beginning to quietly unravel the patterns of the new language in their environment.

**Sound Experimentation**

Just as babies must develop control over the sounds of their first language, young second-language learners must develop phonological control over their second language as well. As the previous section shows, some of the rehearsing behavior observed by Saville-Troike (1988) included practice with the different sounds of the new language as well as practice with vocabulary and grammar.

It is well known that young children are particularly sensitive to the sounds of language. In fact, the only feature of second-language acquisition that has been shown to be age sensitive is accent. Young children acquiring a second language are likely to attain native-like pronunciation in the new language, whereas older learners may attain fluency in the language but are less likely to have a native-like accent, even after years of contact with the second language (Snow & Hoefnagel-Hohle, 1977).

A colleague and I were made aware of young children’s abilities to concentrate on the sounds of a new language when working on a study of a young Korean child learning English in a book-reading situation (Yim, 1984). In this study, I was the English-language model for Young-joo, a 3-year-old girl who had very little contact with English speakers prior to the study. For the project, I met with Young-joo on a weekly basis and read a book with her in English. Most of Young-joo’s and my interactions around the book consisted of my naming objects and Young-joo repeating names (e.g., I said, “This is a moose,” and Young-joo repeated, “Moose”), or Young-joo answering questions about objects (e.g., I asked, “Who’s that?” and Young-joo answered, “Baby bunny”). On occasion, however, Young-joo would insert invented words into her responses. These invented words were not intelligible as English words, but they were not Korean words either. In fact, my colleague, who was a native speaker of Korean and bilingual in English, reported that Young-joo was using sounds and intonation features that are not present in Korean but are present in English. In using these invented sequences, it seemed as if Young-joo was practicing the tune—

the sounds and intonation patterns of English—before learning all the words of the new song.

Saville-Troike (1988) found the same phenomenon with the two Chinese brothers in her study. She reports that these boys

Focused extensively on the sounds of the second language, and seemed to relate to the kinaesthetics of pronouncing certain words. High-frequency private vocabulary for them included *butter pecan, parking lot, skyscraper, and cookie monster.* Both children also demonstrated their attention to sound by creating new words with English phonological structure, including *straberver, goch, treer, and tromble*—impossible sequences in their native Mandarin Chinese. (p. 583)

Other observers have noticed this phenomenon as well. The mother of one of the English-speaking children in the nursery school reported that her daughter had spent the previous summer in a camp situation with many Spanish-speaking children. When she came home from camp, Rebecca would “speak Spanish” for her mother. Her mother reported that although what Rebecca was saying sounded like Spanish, it did not, in fact, consist of any Spanish vocabulary items. Rebecca had begun to acquire the sound and intonation system in Spanish, and perhaps with longer exposure, she would have begun to acquire some vocabulary items as well.

The second-language-learning children in the nursery school classroom also showed a growing understanding of the sounds and intonation of English. In the first few months in the classroom, there are numerous instances of children talking but without saying anything that could be understood. On occasion, these unintelligible utterances might have been home-language use, but, after the few instances reported on previously, I do not believe that the children were using their home language in the classroom. In fact, I believe that these unintelligible utterances may well have been the type of sound experimentation that Young-joo was using in the book-reading study.

At the time that these strings of sounds were being used by the children, they did not have enough English to express the full idea in their new language, so they used what they had. For example, one morning Byong-sun and Naoshi were playing together at the water table. Because these two boys were from dif-
ferent language backgrounds, they would have to speak English in order to understand each other. The interaction proceeded as follows: Byong-sun held out a cup to Naoshi, accompanying this gesture with an utterance that I could not understand. Naoshi looked over and answered Byong-sun with an utterance with a questioning intonation. Byong-sun then made another utterance with something that sounded like nice in the middle, but again I could not understand the whole sentence. After this, they continued their play silently.

This “conversation,” one would think, would be considered unsatisfactory, because neither of the participants could have understood the other, but it was not my impression that Byong-sun and Naoshi considered this communication unsatisfactory.

On another occasion, when all of the nursery school children were getting ready to go outside to play, a group of children began fooling around near the door. This upset Ling Ling, who came running in to report the children to the teachers. Although what Ling Ling was saying sounded like English, none of the sentences that she was using could be understood in English. Still, it was clear from the situation what her concern was, and it was quickly taken care of.

Early in the second-language–learning process, then, children may be able to use this ability to mimic the sounds of a new language in a variety of ways. At first, they might structure entire sentences that do not, in fact, contain any English words. Later, they might use these sounds in combination with one or two English words or, eventually, fill in missing slots in a mostly English-language sentence.

For example, one day at the water table Ling Ling had been waiting a long time for one of the pumps, both of which were being used by Byong-sun and Naoshi. Finally, I tried to procure a pump for her by making a request of Byong-sun that ended in “please.” Byong-sun gestured to Naoshi and uttered an unintelligible phrase that also ended in “please”—the suggestion being, no doubt, “take his.”

On another day in the block area, Leandro had carefully constructed a fenced-in area and supplied it with large plastic farm animals. Naoshi, Supat, and Andrew all came rushing into the area to see what Leandro had done, jumping over the fence. This brought a protest from Leandro. “Don’t! (unintelligible) my farm!” Naoshi, Supat, and Andrew climbed out of the fenced-in area and left, leaving Leandro alone in the middle of his farm.

Although not all of the words in the sentence were intelligible, it was clear what Leandro’s intention was in protecting his property, and it is possible to even imagine the words that Leandro might have been trying to supply: “Get out of my farm!” or “Be careful of my farm!” By filling the missing slot with sound, Leandro was able to develop a lengthier utterance, which certainly got the desired result.

CONCLUSION

During the nonverbal period, although second-language–learning children are not yet speaking the new language that is being used in the environment around them, they are, nevertheless, beginning to collect data about that new language. Although the children use nonverbal means to communicate their needs, they also use spectating and rehearsing techniques to tune into the new language. Once they feel sufficiently comfortable and competent in this new setting, second-language–learning children begin going public with what they have learned.
Speaking a Second Language

As the previous chapter illustrates, young children who are faced with a second-language situation sometimes begin by continuing to use the language that they know, even with people who do not understand their language. For these children, it takes a little time before they realize that this new language is different from the one that they know and that at least some of the people who speak this new language do not understand them when they speak their own language. In a bilingual setting, of course, there may be some people who do and some people who do not understand them and that will take time to sort out as well.

In other words, young children must work through a series of revelations: 1) not everyone understands or speaks their language; 2) the people who do not understand and speak their language understand and speak a different language; and 3) if they want to communicate with these people, they will need to learn this new and different language.

Having worked through these revelations, most young children enter a phase of data gathering about the new language before beginning to try to use it. But eventually, sometimes after a lengthy nonverbal period, most young children are ready to try
out what they have discovered about the new language in communicative situations.

TELEGRAPHIC AND FORMULAIC SPEECH

When young second-language learners begin to use their new language, observers have noted two consistent features: the use of telegraphic speech and formulaic speech.

Telegraphic Speech

Telegraphic speech refers to the use of a few content words as an entire utterance; this type of speech is also typical of a period of acquisition by very young children learning their first language. Much of the telegraphic speech in the classroom during the first months of my study revolved around the identification and naming of objects in English. An almost ritualized form was used in soliciting and providing this information. The most basic version of this form involved an adult asking a child “What’s this/that?” and then, if the answer were not readily available, supplying the noun herself. So, for instance, when Ling Ling imitated Joanna by building a bridge out of playdough one day, I asked her, “What’s that?” She apparently did not know the name in English so she shrugged. I then supplied the word for her by saying “Bridge.” She repeated “Bridge,” then paused and said it again. In this way it was very easy for Ling Ling to connect the label for the object with the object that she had just made.

If the child was able to answer the “What’s this/that?” question, then the next step in this process involved an elaboration or extension by the adult, adding new vocabulary to go with what was already known. For instance, when Leandro was playing in the block area, he brought a car over to me and held it up near my face. I said, “What’s that?” He answered, “Car.” I elaborated for him, “A racing car.”

Quite quickly, the children began to answer the question before it was even asked, showing off and confirming what they already knew how to say. For example, one day at snack time Naoshi pointed to a basket full of crackers and told me “ Crackers,” then indicated which ones he had selected for himself and said “Three,” and then showed me his juice and announced “Apple juice.” Each time he received a confirmation from me.

Using these strategies, the second-language-learning children in this classroom began to develop a vocabulary of object names in English that they could use in their interactions with the English speakers around them. Other early accomplishments included counting, naming the ABCs, and identifying colors in English, all basic skills that the English-speaking children in the classroom were also working on at the same time.

Formulaic Speech

The use of formulaic speech has also been documented by researchers studying young second-language learners. This strategy, most extensively detailed by Wong Fillmore (1976, 1979), consists of young children using unanalyzed chunks or formulaic phrases in situations in which others have been observed to use them. These formulas often help children to get into play situations and get their ideas across with a minimum of language.

For example, one day at the water table Naoshi and Byongsun were playing side by side building a structure out of two bottles with a tube running between them. At one point the tube flipped out of one of the bottles, and Naoshi started to help Byongsun put it back together. But as he lifted one of the bottles, Byongsun protested “Stop! Stop!” and when Naoshi did not
stop, Byong-sun took the tube out of the bottle himself. Then Naoshi picked up the tube and tried to insert it in the bottle. Byong-sun started to help him, asking "Okay?" When the structure collapsed again, Byong-sun said, "Uh-oh." As they continued their play, Byong-sun called Naoshi’s attention to what he was doing by saying, "Hey." And Naoshi replied, "Okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, 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he had often heard in the classroom, which contained the word up, would work in this situation; fortunately, this time he was wrong.

In general, however, the second-language learners were usually quite quick in their acquisition of at least a limited range of telegraphic and formulaic phrases that helped them socially in the classroom, and they were usually right about the situations in which the phrases could be used. At first these phrases were used most often in communication with the adults and the other second-language learners in the classroom, but as the interaction between Andrew and Naoshi illustrates, they also provided the first opportunities for the second-language learners to begin communicating with the English speakers in the classroom.

**PRODUCTIVE LANGUAGE USE**

Once second-language-learning children acquire a number of vocabulary items and useful phrases, they can begin the process of productive language use, which means that they can begin building their own sentences, not just continuing to repeat formulaic phrases or names for people and things. During this process, second-language-learning children must analyze the language being used around them and begin to make guesses about how the language is constructed. Typically, they use everything they already know about their new language, and, not surprisingly, make many mistakes as they work their way through the process of acquiring the more complicated aspects of English.

Some of the earliest productive phrases in the English-language nursery school were ones that had their origin in the building blocks of telegraphic and formulaic language. For instance, the everpresent lookit was often combined with the name of an object, as it was one morning when Ling Ling, Rebecca, and Byong-sun were playing with playdough. Having rolled the playdough into a doughnut shape, Byong-sun presented the results to Rebecca saying, “Lookit dunkin doughnut.”

By combining all purpose phrases such as lookit, I do, I want, and I got with nouns, pronouns, and adjectives, it was possible for the children to generate a variety of creatively constructed phrases, as in the following examples:

One day Akemi, Natalie, Andrew, and Ling Ling were playing with Popsicle sticks and clay. Ling Ling held up a stick with a ball of clay on top and said, “I do a ice cream.”

I sat down next to Akemi at one of the tables. She said to me, “Heart,” pointing to the heart-shaped dough she had created with the cookie cutter. She followed this up with, “Big, I got a big.” In fact, the heart shaped cutter was bigger than all of the others.

One day when Leandro was playing “the baby,” his “mother,” Jessica, went out of the house area, leaving Leandro alone. Leandro complained, “I want my mommy. Mommy!”

Byong-sun was sitting at the table where other children were playing with playdough, but he did not have any. When there was a pause in other talk, Byong-sun spoke up, first very quietly, but then in increasingly louder tones: “I want... I want a playdough. I want a playdough. I WANT A PLAYDOUGH!”

This “frames and slots” approach was typical of the early productive use of constructed phrases by the second-language-learning children and continued to be a consistent feature of their communications for the remainder of the school year.

Another feature of this period, when the children were beginning to use English productively, was demonstrated most often by Naoshi, who enjoyed word play in his new language. One day, when demonstrating his ability to count in English, he apparently found the usual sequence of 21, 22, 23, and so forth too boring and, therefore, varied it by inventing 20-house, 20-car, 20-light, 20-book.

Another example occurred one day when Naoshi and I were looking at some Styrofoam cups that had been filled with soil, planted with bean seeds, marked with children’s names, and put in the sun on the windowsill to grow. As he picked up each cup, Naoshi tried to read the name written on the cup. Several cups, however, did not have names. When he got to a cup without a name he showed me the blank cup and I said, “Nobody.” The next cup appeared to be unmarked as well. He held it up to me and said, “Nobody.” But then he turned it slightly and discovered a
name. He quickly changed his “Nobody” to “Yesbody.” In both of these cases Naoshi is showing his ability to analyze the structure of English words and vary them in a useful or amusing way.

In Wong Fillmore’s (1979) study, the researcher noticed that the children used their longer phrases to begin the process of comparison that would lead them to an understanding of the structure of English. For example, one of the children, Nora, began with the phrase “How do you dese?” Then she began adding other material to the end of the sentence to get “How do you do dese little tortillas?” and “How do you dese in English?” She then realized that other verbs besides do could be used in this construction and came up with “How do you make the flower?” and “How do you gonna make dese?” Next she acquired the form how did you so that she could make a phrase like “How did you make it?” Next Nora began to vary what came after How did or How do to get “How did dese work?” and “How do cut it?” Finally, Nora realized that how could be used as a question word like what and why and produced phrases such as “How you make it?” and “How will take off paste?” As Wong Fillmore comments,

Looking at this data without the time periods specified, we might have guessed that the developmental course went the opposite direction—from the less well-formed versions to the well-formed ones... Indeed, this would have been the case if the acquisitional procedure had been a gradual sorting out of the rules whereby the learner was able to structure the utterances herself. Instead, the procedure was one which might be described as “speak now, learn later.” (1979, p. 215)

It was often possible to observe this acquisition process as the children in my study adopted and adapted the language that other speakers were using. For example, during a play situation with Legos, Leandro neatly piggybacked his usage on another child’s production. As Sally played with the Legos, she said to me, “I want to make a tower.” Leandro immediately said, “I want to make this,” showing me the card with the police car, substituting the generic this for the noun in Sally’s sentence. I said, “Police car.” And he said, “I want to make police.” Naoshi asked, “Police?” And Leandro replied, “Yes, I want to make.”

Similarly, on another occasion, Akemi and Matthew were watching Marion clean out the guinea pig’s cage when Matthew asked, “Marion, can I hold the guinea pig? Can I hold the guinea pig?” After Marion demurred, “I don’t remember making that promise to you,” Akemi immediately chimed in, “Marion! Marion! Marion! Can I have the guinea pig to hold, the guinea pig?” And after Marion demurred again, Akemi persisted, “I want a guinea pig, hold a guinea pig.” And then when it did not look as if Marion was going to relent, “No-o-o-o, I-I, guinea PIG... Hold the guinea pig... [loudly] I WANT TO HOLD THE GUINEA PIG!” Having demonstrated her language flexibility to its fullest extent, Akemi got the guinea pig to hold. Leandro was the child who made the most progress in productive language use during his time in the English-language nursery school classroom. Because I was not concentrating on Leandro alone, I do not have an extensive record of the period when Leandro’s productive language use in English really began to take form. There are suggestions, however, of how Leandro began to break out of the telegraphic and formulaic forms of usage that he adopted in his early months in the classroom and how he began to develop productive use of English.

Like Nora, there were times when it seemed that Leandro’s skills in English were deteriorating. For instance, in December, Leandro, who had always used “I” as the first-person subject of his sentences—but probably in unanalyzed combinations—began to struggle with the I/me distinction that is typical of young children’s acquisition of English as a first language.

On December 7, Leandro, who had been at the nursery school for approximately 3 months, was working on a puzzle at one of the tables. As soon as he was finished, Leandro moved away from the puzzle to a spot on the other side of the table where there were rubber pieces that could be put together as a train. He held up a piece and said to me, “Pat. Me make. With my poppy.” This comment by Leandro has the aspect of being a vertical construction, using “me” as the first-person subject of the construction.

One week later, Leandro used both “I” and “me” as first-person pronouns in adjacent utterances when he was playing in the playhouse with Supat. Leandro was languishing in bed with Supat nearby on the floor with a cup and teapot. Leandro said to Supat, “I want a drink. Me sick, me sick.” Here the I want + noun frame is used for the first statement, but apparently the second statement is being constructed from me (referring to self) + adjec-
tive. On the same day, Leandro also used the constructions “Me’s doctor” (which leads one to wonder if “me sick” might not be “me’s sick”) and “I’m a friend” (most likely a formulaic phrase).

By January, however, Leandro had resolved this conflict and no longer used “me” as a first-person subject pronoun. On January 30 he told me, “I can see ’cuz I have cat’s eyes.”

The same kind of pattern can be seen in Leandro’s developmental negatives. His earliest negatives were formulaic: “Don’t do that!” and “No more.” Then they got broken down into components:

At circle, Leandro said to Supat (in protest over something Supat had done), “Don’t do that.” Then after a moment’s reflection he reversed himself by saying, “Yes, that.”

When the police car seemed finished, I said, “Good work.” And Leandro replied, “No more.” But then, after checking the picture one last time, he realized he had missed a piece and said to me, “Yes more” as he pointed to the piece in the picture. “Oh, you’re right,” I said.

The next step in this process was for Leandro to use “no” as a negative insert into a sentence:

At this point Rebecca brought Leandro some “milk” and some “medicine” in containers from the play kitchen. Leandro reiterated to her, “You no my mommy.”

By January, Leandro had abandoned the negative insert strategy and was able to produce a fully correct negative sentence:

Then Leandro displayed the wallet to me and said, “I don’t have any money in here.”

In this same period Leandro was also working on questions and past tense. In October he asked me, “Your name is what?” but by January he was able to frame a question to Ling Ling as follows, “What you putting in here?” showing that the “what” placement had been regularized but that the auxiliary verb was still missing. In play with Jessica and Andrew, Leandro, who had been pretending to be sick, hopped out of bed as Jessica approached and fled up the ladder to the loft announcing, “You don’t gotted me,” demonstrating that he had noticed that English verbs in the past tense are usually constructed by adding -ed, but that he had not noticed that this irregular verb was already in the past tense.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL SEQUENCE: A CUMULATIVE PROCESS

In presenting the information about young children’s acquisition of a second language, the developmental sequence was outlined as consisting of four periods: home-language use, nonverbal period, telegraphic and formulaic use, and, finally, productive use. In discussing each of these periods, examples were presented to illustrate the type of interactions that are typical of these periods. It is important to realize, however, that children learning a second language do not move discretely from one period to the next; in fact, except for home-language use, which is usually eliminated when speaking to those who do not understand it, young children add skills to their repertoire from the next level of language use, but maintain the previous techniques as well. In this way, they can bring a range of communicative possibilities to any situation, giving them the best possible chance of getting their meaning across.

The following transcript excerpts illustrate this point. These excerpts are taken from an audiotape-recorded conversation that Leandro and I had one day in April, after Leandro had been in the English-language nursery school for 7 months. We were building with some blocks that could be put together to make a house. During this conversation Leandro demonstrated the variety of levels of competence that he had developed in English by this time. (In the following transcript —— = unintelligible material, L = Leandro, and P = Author.)

L: I need help.
P: Okay. What do you need help with?
L: To —– to building a house.
P: Gonna build a house? (consulting the booklet that came with the building blocks) Which one you gonna build? Which one?
L: This one. Here.
P: Oh, wow.
In the above sequence, Leandro uses a few basic phrases to get my attention, using contextual cues to get his message across.

L: Now we have to make it apart.
P: You want a whole big house.
L: Yeah.
P: Well, I have to start with a wall.
L: I make them apart.
P: You're making a what?
L: Part.
P: Apart? You're going to take them apart. Okay.

In the above sequence, there is a classic miscommunication about the word apart, which we manage to recover from using appropriate feedback techniques.

P: Let's see, Leandro. You taking them all apart? Let's get some room here.
L: You know what? I want to do it a bell.
P: A... a bell?
L: Yeah.
P: What do you mean, a bell. You want to do the house with a bell in it? Where? Show me (looking through the brochure together).

L: —.
P: You want to build it, huh?
L: Yeah.
P: Okay.

In the above sequence, I continue the conversation by reinforcing the use of the term apart. Then Leandro uses a formulaic phrase ("You know what?") to initiate another request for how he wants the house to look, but again I do not understand. Finally, I decide he may mean build instead of bell, and we proceed.

P: Are you getting all the pieces you need?
L: Yeah.
P: How about some windows? Can you get some windows?
L: The door is a square (looking at the brochure).
P: The door is a square?
L: Yeah. (pause while he goes through the pieces) Can't find.
P: There's no... oh, come on, there's got to be a door in here somewhere. There are a lot of things in here. Here're some windows.
L: Windows... Here (having found a door).
P: There's a door! Good. Now.
L: No, here's a door —.
P: Uh! We have two doors... Now we need lots of pieces, right?

Here Leandro introduces the terms door and square, uses a negative construction correctly ("can't find"), and answers some of my questions appropriately.

P: Let's see if we can get this door here.
L: How?
P: We have to go up to the top here... We need the... lintel. (pushing pieces around)
L: And what is for that (showing me a piece)?
P: That's for the corners.
L: For the what?
P: Corner. To go around a corner. Oh, look at this nice big long one. I'm looking for something to go on top of my door.
L: Look at one like that, and one like that.
P: Yeah... And here's another one. That can be the other side.
In this sequence Leandro initiates a question about a particular piece (getting the sequence of words slightly wrong), and then asks for a clarification about a new vocabulary item (corner).

L: You know what?
P: Oh, here's a window.
L: Lot of windows . . .
P: You need a lot of windows?
L: The house has a lot of windows. (pause) I know what, why have windows?
P: Why?
L: 'Cuz to we can see outside.
P: That's true.
L: It's tru-u-u-e.
P: You couldn't see outside if you didn't have a window, right? (pause) Do you think it would be very dark inside, Leandro, without a window? It would be dark, wouldn't it?
L: Yeah . . .

In this complicated sequence, Leandro shows off his ability to construct sentences in English. First he starts with “lot of windows” and puts together “The house has a lot of windows.” Then, rather than merely making a statement about why houses have windows, he uses his knowledge to construct a rhetorical question (“I know what, why have windows?”) and the answer (“‘Cuz to we can see outside”). Although neither of these phrases is correctly formed in English, it is possible to see how far Leandro has come in the process of developing ways to communicate these more complex ideas. Interestingly, Leandro’s question and answer encourage me to pose several more questions, which seem to be too sophisticated for Leandro to follow, perhaps because he does not understand the vocabulary.

L: I think that window, window . . .
P: Is that one of these windows? One of these corner windows? Let me put it on the corner, huh?
L: Corner . . .
P: Can you get that one to go the right way?
L: Can you put it?
P: . . . There, you can do it. You just had to get those things lined up. (pause) Good. I think you got it . . .

L: The corner window.
P: Yeah . . .
L: Corner window. I didn’t know it was a corner window.

This conversation returns to the vocabulary item corner about which Leandro had asked for a clarification earlier. Here I use the word, then Leandro repeats it alone and with the term window, ending with a statement about his previous lack of knowledge about this term.

L: And we have to do it like that (pointing to the picture).
P: Really big?
L: Yeah.
P: We’ll have the world’s biggest house, huh?
L: Like . . . (gesturing with his hands like a roof).
P: You mean with a roof?
L: Yeah . . .
P: Okay. That looks like it’s going to be hard.
L: Yes. How we going to put it . . .?
P: I don’t know.
L: I think we’re going to do it with windows.
P: Okay. We’ll have a solar roof.

This sequence demonstrates the full range of Leandro’s communicative skills, from nonverbal use when demonstrating the need for a roof, to construction of a complex sentence such as “I think we’re going to do it with windows.”

From these excerpts it is possible to see how volatile the language abilities of young second-language learners are. When they have both the vocabulary and the grammatical form under control, they can express themselves in highly sophisticated ways, but when a piece is missing from the puzzle of their knowledge, they have to drop back to techniques that they used in previous stages of their development of the second language. This is what makes conversation with young second-language learners such an adventure, as well as what makes assessment of their language skills a very complicated process (see Chapter 9).

It is also possible to see from these excerpts, however, that by this time Leandro had developed all of the building blocks necessary to continue to develop his second-language ability, acquiring vocabulary items and grammatical forms from the
interactions he was able to initiate with the English speakers in the nursery school setting. From his first day in the nursery school in September, Leandro had been working hard at figuring out how to understand and make himself understood in this new language environment and by April he was certainly well on his way.

As mentioned previously, however, Leandro was more advanced in his second-language skills than the other children who entered the nursery school at the same time. Chapter 5 explores the reasons for individual differences in second-language learning in young children.

Individual Differences in Second-Language Learning

The previous two chapters establish that the second-language-learning process for young children follows a particular developmental pathway. As in all developmental processes, however, there are definite individual differences in how children approach this developmental pathway, and there are differences in how quickly they proceed along it. This chapter discusses these individual differences and the factors that may be involved in creating these differences.

THE APPLICATION OF COGNITIVE AND SOCIAL STRATEGIES

At the beginning of her study of Spanish-speaking children from Mexico, Wong Fillmore (1979) expected that

The second language development of the five [children] would be fairly uniform after 9 months of exposure to the new language... But the results were quite different. By the end of 3 months of observations, it became quite clear that there would be enormous differences among the five children in what they would achieve
during the study year. In fact, after just 3 months of exposure, one child, Nora, had already learned more—or at least she was producing better-formed and more varied sentences—than two of the others, Juan and Jesus, would be able to manage by the end of the study period. And by the end of the study period, Nora herself was speaking English as well as her friends who came from bilingual homes, and very nearly as well as her English monolingual friends. (p. 207)

In looking for the reasons behind these differences, Wong Fillmore (1979) came to believe that "the individual differences found among the five learners . . . had to do with the way in which cognitive and social factors of language acquisition interact together" (p. 207). Therefore, Wong Fillmore used her data to derive a set of strategies that she believed the children had used in the second-language-learning situation. As she explains, "these strategies are phrased as maxims that the children might have formulated for themselves" (pp. 208-209). The level of proficiency that any individual child achieves in the second-language-learning setting might well be related to how well these strategies are employed by the child. The following are Wong Fillmore's (1979, pp. 209-218) social and cognitive strategies:

Social: Join a group and act as if you understand what's going on, even if you don't.

This strategy is critical as a first step in exposure to a new language. By getting into a group situation in which others are speaking the new language, the second-language-learning child will begin to hear language embedded in that context and relevant to that situation. For example, by joining a group of children about to make soup with a teacher, by finding a spot at the water table next to an English-speaking child, or by helping a group of children build a tall tower of blocks, the second-language-learning child demonstrates that he or she is ready to be part of the social network in the classroom. A child who is reluctant to put this strategy into play will remain isolated from helpful social situations and will have less exposure to the new language.

Cognitive: Assume that what people are saying is directly relevant to the situation at hand or to what they or you are experiencing. Metastrategy: GUESS!

In order to make sense of the new language, the second-language-learning child will need to assume that actions and words are connected. When a teacher is holding an object and talking, the second-language-learning child will need to assume that one of the words being used refers to that object, particularly if one word is repeated or emphasized. If another child uses a gesture or action accompanied by a word or words, the second-language-learning child will need to take a chance and act accordingly, testing the hypothesis that the action and the words are connected. The second-language-learning child who is not prepared to take these risks will take longer to make the necessary connections between the immediate context and the language being used.

Social: Give the impression—with a few well-chosen words—that you can speak the language.

Cognitive: Get some expressions you understand, and start talking.

These strategies show why the development of telegraphic and formulaic phrases is so critical. Socially, it is important that second-language-learning children be able to begin to sound like members of the group in order for them to get further exposure to the language; cognitively, these phrases give the second-
language-learning children material to begin the process of deconstruction and reconstruction that will eventually lead to the productive use of the language. Furthermore, by beginning to use phrases in the new language, the second-language-learning child will receive feedback on what does and does not work. The child who does not pick up on the possibilities of using telegraphic and formulaic phrases may remain socially isolated, will have less information about how the new language works, and will have less opportunity to use his or her cognitive processes to unravel the new language.

Cognitive: Look for recurring parts in the formulas you know.
Cognitive: Make the most of what you’ve got.
Cognitive: Work on big things; save the details for later.

All three of these strategies deal with the process of moving from using formulaic phrases to productive use of the new language. Getting beyond the use of formulaic phrases requires considerable cognitive work on the part of the second-language-learning child. It seems as if the child must understand that there are regularities and commonalities in the phrases that he or she hears, extract them for future use, be willing to try them out, and be relatively unconcerned about being wrong. The second-language-learning child who is willing to take chances and use all of the language resources available at any given time will continue to make progress both in comparing his or her own language output to what is heard and in elicits language input from others. The child who is less ready to employ these cognitive strategies will require a longer period of time in developing productive control over the new language.

Social: Count on your friends for help.

In Wong Fillmore’s (1979) study this primarily meant that the children needed to count on the English-speaking friend who was paired with them for the purposes of the study, but in other contexts this could refer to both adult and child friends. Of course, it is imperative that the friend be a speaker of the new language that the child is trying to learn. In order to develop information about the new language, the second-language-learning child must be in communicative contact with those who speak the language; having a friend who is able to maintain this communication is an important part of the process of breaking through the social isolation that accompanies the second-language-learning situation. In a classroom situation, that friend may be a teacher at first or another child who is particularly tuned in to the social needs of a second-language learner. (See Chapter 6 for suggestions about how to provide this sort of friend for second-language learners in preschool classrooms.) The second-language-learning child who is able to recruit a friend or friends in the second-language-learning situation will be included in the social network and will be exposed to more input in the new language; the second-language-learning child who finds this a difficult social challenge will have a harder time eliciting useful input in the new language, thus slowing down the second-language-learning process.

In order to proceed with rapid second-language learning, children would optimally use these social and cognitive strategies to the fullest extent possible, depending on where they are along the pathway of second language development. But, as we have seen from Wong Fillmore’s (1976, 1979) study, as well as from my study in the English-language nursery school, young children progress at very different rates. What underlying factors, then, are involved in determining how available these strategies are to young children in the second-language-learning situation?

UNDERLYING FACTORS

Based on the research on young children learning a second language, there are at least four factors that may determine how available the social and cognitive strategies discussed previously may be to an individual child and, therefore, may strongly influence the progress that a child makes in the second-language-acquisition process. These four factors are motivation, exposure, age, and personality.

Motivation

A young child must want to learn a second language. This decision to actually take on the process of learning a new language is one that different children come to at different times and in different ways.
It is known that this is an actual decision for children, because there are some children who decide not to learn a second language. For example, in Saville-Troike's (1988) study, there was a 5-year-old Japanese girl who informed a Japanese interviewer that English was too hard so she was not going to speak to people who spoke English. She actually followed through with this plan and did not learn any English during the course of the year-long study.

In the same way, one of the children, Juan, studied by Wong Fillmore (1979) “refused to have anything to do with English-speakers, and would only play silently beside the ones I attempted to pair him with for the purposes of the study” (p. 206). Unlike in the study (Yim, 1984) mentioned previously (see Chapter 3) of a young Korean girl learning English in a book-reading situation, the same process of my reading a book with another second-language child, in this case a 3-year old Korean boy, was a total failure as a second-language-learning situation. Unlike Young-joo, the boy listened politely but made no effort to repeat the English words or phrases I was using.

In all three of these cases, therefore, the children simply refused to play the game of second-language acquisition, at least for a particular time period. And, as long as children are placed in communicative situations in which they can continue to speak their home language or in which they can get by without speaking the second language, they may choose not to undertake the difficult task of learning a second language.

Even in situations in which children eventually do decide to begin the second-language-acquisition process, it is possible that the amount of time they spend in the nonverbal period may be related to how long it takes for them to make the decision to start learning the new language. As mentioned previously, the early period in his nursery school classroom was considered a rejection period for Takahiro, the Japanese child studied by Itoh and Hatch (1978). One explanation for this, they believed, was that he “was attempting to avoid dealing with the second language . . . , hoping it would not be necessary to cope with this new learning task” (p. 78).

Other children, although not cutting themselves off entirely from the second-language situation, find ways of avoiding learning much of the second-language being used around them. In situations in which there are sufficient numbers of children who speak the same first language, some children will continue to associate with their same-language friends, forming social groups on that basis. For example, Meyer (1989) studied a group of Korean girls in an English-speaking nursery school who spent most of their time in class playing with each other. When they sought communication outside their group they were highly selective, most often concentrating on communication with their teachers rather than with their English-speaking peers.

In bilingual classrooms, where a group of children speak the same home language, the children can function by using that language in play situations and with any native-language-speaking adults in the classroom who speak their language. If there are also English-speaking adults in the classroom, the children may develop receptive understanding of English, but they may not feel sufficiently motivated to begin speaking the language themselves.

A final factor in how motivated young children may be to learn a new language might have to do with what their parents tell them about language. Children who are short-term visitors may understand that learning a new language is not a high priority for their family; they may develop enough receptive knowledge to get along in the classroom and, perhaps, a few high-utility phrases to get into play with other children, but they may not advance beyond that level. If families have come to the United States to stay, however, and/or if learning English is given high priority within the family, young children will be exposed to a different attitude and may, therefore, make more of an effort to learn English. (Chapter 8 discusses the kinds of decisions that families face when learning English is a high priority and the ways that teachers can help advise parents for whom this is a concern.)

Young children, then, certainly seem to understand that learning a second language is a cognitively challenging and time-consuming activity. Being exposed to a second language is obviously not enough; wanting to communicate with people who speak that language is crucial if acquisition is to occur. Children who are in a second-language-learning situation have to be sufficiently motivated to start learning a new language.
Exposure

Another factor related to how children approach the second-language-learning process is exposure, both prior exposure to the second language and the quantity of exposure in the second-language-learning environment.

Obviously, if a child arrives in the second-language-learning setting with a prior exposure to the new language, this may affect how quickly he or she might start to use the second language in this new situation.

In the English-language nursery school I studied, a 4-year-old Japanese girl, Akemi, joined the class in January. Although she had not been at the nursery school, Akemi had been in the United States for approximately a year before coming to the classroom and had apparently spent considerable time with English-speaking children in her neighborhood. For this reason, Akemi never went through a nonverbal period in the nursery school, but began to show off her high-utility language skills right from the start. On the first day I observed her, Akemi went into the playhouse, picked up the toy telephone, and said, “I know. How are you? You go. Okay. Okay.”

The amount of time spent in contact with the new language is also important in terms of the speed with which a child may acquire the language. At the English-speaking nursery school, parents had the option of enrolling their children in school for two, three, or five mornings a week. Only Leandro, the child who made the most progress among the second-language learners, attended the nursery school 5 days a week. Furthermore, Leandro had two older brothers who were attending public school, and his parents reported that the boys often played together using their new language. Leandro, therefore, could be said to have been in a high-exposure condition during the year that he attended the English-language nursery school.

Children are also exposed to different levels of a second language depending on how they spend their time in the second-language setting. If they remove themselves from English speakers and keep mostly to themselves or remain in a group of children who speak the same home language, they will be exposed to less second-language talk than if they solicit interaction from the English speakers in the classroom. In my study, for example, when comparing Ling Ling, Naoshi, and Leandro, I found that Ling Ling talked the least to English speakers, and when she did talk to English speakers, it was mostly with adults. In contrast, Naoshi talked more often than Ling Ling with English speakers, but concentrated mostly on talking with English-speaking children. And Leandro, who spent the most time (of these three children) communicating in English, started with a strategy of talking with the English-speaking adults and then moved on to primarily talking with English-speaking children. At the end of the school year, Leandro had made the most progress in English. Naoshi and Ling Ling had also both made progress, but their achievement was not as great as Leandro’s.

Age

Age may also play a distinctive role in how a child approaches the second-language situation. As Chapter 1 discusses, young children are at an advantage in second-language-learning situations because the cognitive demand of what they must learn is quite low; they do not have to use language in as sophisticated a way as older children. However, younger children are also at a disadvantage, because their cognitive capacity is not as great as that of older children. For this reason, younger children may take longer to move along the developmental pathway than older children.

First, as is seen with the two Chinese brothers in Chapter 3, younger children may persist in the use of their home language for a longer period of time than older children. This may be because it takes younger children longer to figure out that the language they are speaking is not being understood and that it is another, completely different language that is being spoken to them.

Second, younger children may also spend a lengthier period in the nonverbal period as well. As mentioned in Chapter 3, there seems to be an inverse relationship between the age of the child and the length of time spent in the nonverbal period. For Panos, who came to the United States from Greece when he was 2 years old, this period lasted for almost 1½ years. For Ervin-Tripp’s (1974) children, who were 5 and 6½ years old, the period lasted for only a matter of weeks. Again, it can be assumed that it may take younger children longer than older children to formulate a strategy for breaking out of the nonverbal period.

Third, younger children may also take longer to acquire formulaic phrases, to develop strategies for breaking down phrases into useful pieces, and to create productive phrases in their new
language. In Chapter 4, the differences between the phrases being used by the children in my study (who were 3 and 4 years old) and those being used by the children in Wong Fillmore’s (1976, 1979) study (who were 5, 6, and 7 years old) are striking: The older children were able to acquire and use much lengthier phrases. All other things being equal, then, this would indicate that older children should move into productive second-language use much more quickly than younger children.

Age, then, may be a critical factor in how quickly a child moves along the developmental pathway of second-language acquisition. Because of their more limited cognitive capacity, it may take younger children longer to mobilize their learning skills and apply them to the challenging cognitive task of learning a second language. This lengthier mobilization period may extend the time a child spends in any one of the stages of second-language acquisition.

**Personality**

Personality may also play a part in the way an individual child approaches the second-language-learning situation. Researchers studying young children’s second-language acquisition have observed that there seems to be a personality continuum stretching from shy and reserved at one end to outgoing and socially tuned in at the other end. Where an individual child’s personality can be located along this continuum may have an impact on how quickly that child learns a second language.

Children who tend to be shy and reserved are more likely to approach the second-language situation with more caution. These are the children who take a long time to go public with their newly acquired language skills, spending their time practicing quietly to themselves before anyone can hear them. Byongsun certainly fits this profile (see Chapter 3), mouthing other children’s words before he began to say them out loud himself. In Saville-Troike’s (1988) study, six of the nine children entered a nonverbal period during which five of them used private speech as a means of mobilizing information about the new language. (The sixth child who entered a nonverbal period was the Japanese child mentioned previously in this chapter, who decided not to learn any English.) Saville-Troike characterizes the five children who used private speech as inner directed and more reflective in their general learning style. In Wong Fillmore’s (1979) study, she characterizes Juan, the child who did not want to communicate with English speakers, as the “most cautious of all” of the children she studied, who “rarely said anything in English unless he was quite sure of himself” (p. 224).

At the other end of this personality spectrum are the children who approach the second-language-learning situation in a more outgoing and socially oriented fashion. The most detailed example of the use of this style comes from Nora, the child in Wong Fillmore’s (1979) study who learned the most English during the study year. Wong Fillmore characterizes Nora as

Quite uninhibited in her attempts at speaking the new language. After the first 2 months, she was able to get by almost exclusively with English, and from the first she was far more concerned with communication than with form. She used what she knew to say what she needed to say, and she usually made good enough sense. (p. 224)

Although she was the youngest of the children studied by Wong Fillmore (at 5 years 7 months at the beginning of the study), Nora
"experienced spectacular success as a language learner" (p. 221). None of the other children in the study even approached her level of achievement. Wong Fillmore comments,

Nora was particularly motivated by the desire to be part of the social group that spoke the new language, and thus she sought out the company of the children she wanted to be with. At the other extreme, Juan avoided contact with people who did not speak his language. Thus Nora was in a position to learn the new language where Juan was not. That difference presumably had nothing to do with intellectual or cognitive capacity. It was solely a matter of social preference, and perhaps of social confidence as well. (p. 227)

It is easy to see how more outgoing and socially oriented children would find the second-language setting a particular kind of challenge: If they want to communicate with the children who speak the new language, they have to make every effort to learn the new language as quickly as possible. These risk-taking children often plunge almost fearlessly into communication in the new language, making many mistakes, but getting by nonetheless while receiving a lot of exposure at the same time. Instead of hanging back until they believe they are totally competent, they use whatever words they have and hope for the best, counting on those around them to help in the process of getting the message across.

Of course, most children do not fall at the outer extremes of this personality continuum. For most young children, the process of learning a second language means finding a balance between their social needs and their knowledge of the new language. Juggling the social and cognitive demands of the second-language setting is the hard work that these children do on a daily basis.

Obviously, these four factors—motivation, exposure, age, and personality—may combine in any number of different ways for different children, and they can also be highly interrelated. In my study, Leandro was the child who learned the most during the study year. In Leandro's case, it also happened to be true that he was the oldest of the second-language learners (4 years 2 months in September), that he came to the nursery school every morning, and that he was an outgoing child who made friends easily with both adults and children. This combination of factors, rather than one particular factor, certainly gave Leandro a definite advantage in the second-language-learning situation and can be seen to be the source of his success. We can only guess at how different his level of achievement might have been if one or more of these factors had varied.

CONCLUSION

In both Wong Fillmore's (1976, 1979) study and my study, our objective was to document the process of second-language acquisition among young children. In neither case did the researcher make any attempt at intervention in or manipulation of the second-language-learning process. The variations in the achievement levels of the children at the end of the study periods were, therefore, seen to be the result of the interactions among the strategies and factors that this chapter discusses. The fact that children gained more or less control over their new language in a certain time period was seen to be the end product of a series of natural processes. The implication of this research was: That is just the way it is.

From an educator's point of view, however, how quickly a child gains control over a second language may be of more than simply academic interest. Educators of children who will soon be moving into or are already involved in primary school classrooms are certainly under pressure from parents and other educators to help children progress as quickly as possible along the developmental pathway of second-language acquisition. The second part of this book therefore presents information about the role that teachers can play in supporting and facilitating the second-language-learning process in their classrooms, as well as their role in working with parents and assessing young second-language learners' progress.