Cultural Perspectives on Second Language Learning

by Lily Wong Fillmore

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The questions raised in this symposium concerning the relationship between culture and learning are important ones for American educators to consider. The children we serve represent perhaps the most culturally diverse student population in the world. In California schools alone, students represent some 70 to 80 different linguistic, and presumably cultural, backgrounds. This cultural diversity in all likelihood gets expressed in the different ways children approach the business of learning what they are expected to learn at school, especially the school language.

At the same time, the questions being raised here need to be treated cautiously and thoughtfully. They carry with them the risk of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. There is a too ready tendency among many people in our field to seek easy solutions to complex educational problems. Casual conjecture can become accepted as causal explanations, and the most preliminary research findings and generalizations become the basis for reform in educational practices and curriculum.

An example: Some years ago, Basil Bernstein in England studied the relationship between social class and language use. Bernstein theorized that speakers of a language have two levels of speech available to them (1964). One, which he characterized as an "elaborated code," tends to be structurally more complex and linguistically more complete than the other, which he described as a "restricted code." The restricted code is used in informal situations among people who share a great deal of common knowledge and assumptions. Because of this shared background, much information can be assumed rather than made explicit in speech. The elaborated code is used in more formal situations and between people who are less closely related. In a situation in which speakers and their addressees have less shared information and fewer shared assumptions, all information which cannot be presupposed must be made linguistically explicit. By being more informationally complete, speech in the elaborated code is more context independent than is speech in the restricted code. Not dependent on context, it can be understood by more people than those who were present in the situation in which it was produced; not dependent on context, it can be put in writing without, in certain ways at least, losing its communicative value.

In examining the relationship between social class and language use, Bernstein found that working class families tended to make somewhat greater use of the restricted code than they did of the elaborated code. The reverse seemed to be true of middle class families. Further, he found that while middle class children had and made use of both the elaborated and the restricted codes, working class children appeared to have use of only the restricted code.

These findings had a profound and immediate influence in American educational circles. Educators saw in this difference in language use a reasonable explanation for the associations between school performance and socio-economic status. The elaborated code was taken as reflecting linguistic adequacy: it was seen as the vehicle not only for effective communication but also for abstract thought and adequate cognitive functioning as well. Children who had it could deal with the kind

of thinking required in school. Those who did not have it lacked the tools for handling the demands of the school experience: they were linguistically and cognitively deficient. These educators went on to conclude that such deficiencies needed to be dealt with before the educational lot of working class children could be improved. Hence, a great deal of effort and a lot of resources went into the planning and implementation of compensatory education programs which were meant to help the children of the poor make up for their "linguistic and cognitive deficiencies." That these programs did not work is history now, something most educators are willing to chalk up to experience. They did not work because they were based on a fundamental misinterpretation of what the research findings meant. Differences in working-class children's linguistic behavior as compared with that of middle-class children stem from a whole set of social experiences that are sufficiently different from those of the middle-class that this behavior simply can not be taken as representing the same kind of problems it might represent in the middle-class.

Professor Fillmore did her graduate training in linguistics at Stanford University. She was assistant dean in the School of Education at the University of California at Berkeley for five years, and left that position a year ago to devote full attention to teaching and research.

Bernstein himself never intended for his work to be understood or used in this way. His own view (1972) was that while working-class and middle-class children probably have access to both elaborated and restricted codes, they differ with respect to the extent to which they make use of them, and they also differ in their recognition of the social circumstances that call for one code or the other. School is a social context that calls for elaborated code usage. Children are judged as successful communicators, and therefore as socially competent students, if they recognize this fact and behave accordingly. Those who do not recognize this, or who do not have access to the elaborated code, and who therefore tend to use the restricted form of the language at school will be judged as communicatively and socially incompetent. This, Bernstein claims, is where at least some of the educational problems of poor children lie. A negative evaluation of a child's competence can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

And so, while I regard the question of cultural influences on learning–especially on language–an important question for us to consider, it is one that I approach with a good deal of caution and trepidation. Such considerations all too easily become the basis for creating stereotypes, and for misjudging the complexity of learning problems. What I have to say is meant to provoke thought and investigation rather than to inspire immediate change in educational practice. I hope my remarks will be taken in that way.

THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Let us first consider whether or not there is any evidence for believing that culture plays a part in language learning. If culture does affect language learning, then we would expect to find variation in how well or how quickly different groups acquire language. In first language learning, at any rate, there appears to be little such evidence. Children begin learning their first languages at more or less the same time (usually at around 18 months of age), and despite considerable variation across languages in the amount of structural complexity to be dealt with, and despite well-documented variation across cultures in how a child's first language-learning experiences are structured, these learners manage to achieve quite comparable levels of control over their first language in more or less the same mount of time–say at about age five or six (Slobin, 1978). This fact has been a strong argument for believing that first language acquisition is under the control of quite universal learning mechanisms which are not influenced by culture.

The case appears to be different, however, when we consider the learning of languages after the first. Here it appears that even among quite young learners a

substantial amount of variation can be found in how quickly and how well they manage the learning of a new language. Some children do it handily in six months or so; others take as long as three to four years. Some achieve a native-like command over the new language with ease. Others have a much harder time managing it, or never quite achieve that level of control. Such differences offer evidence of individual variation in second language learning. Is there any evidence for believing that there are group differences superimposed over these? Among educators there is certainly a belief that there are group differences in language learning. Asian background children are generally regarded as "good language learners": their need to learn English is viewed as a temporary educational problem that will take care of itself soon enough. These children are frequently given very little help in dealing with their language problem, because such help is seen as unnecessary. Hispanic background children, on the other hand, are regarded as poor language learners: their inability to speak English is seen as a major educational handicap, one that must be overcome at all costs. To that end, some educators are willing to set aside all of these children's other educational needs in order to concentrate on teaching them English. In both cases, the children are victims of a sort of cultural prejudice: in the case of the Asian children, it is a positive one; in the case of the Hispanic, a negative one.

RESEARCH ON CULTURE AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

How much research evidence is there to support the views I have just mentioned? Almost none. Very little in the way of actual research has been carried out comparing learners of different cultural backgrounds with respect to second language learning. I am currently doing some research which deals with this question at least peripherally, and I will tell you of it later in this paper. But concerning research that looks at cultural comparison explicitly, I know of very little that has been done. There is, to be sure, the Dulay and Burt (1974) study which compares the acquisitional order of morphemes in the English learned by Chinese and Spanish-speaking children. They found little difference between these groups in the appearance of the morphemes they were studying. But this study was not designed to be sensitive to the kinds of group differences that might exist. Theirs was a cross-sectional study which compared language samples produced by groups of children at a single point in time, rather than at a comparable point in their acquisition of English. In order to reveal cultural differences one would have to design a study comparing learners at various points during the acquisition period, and the study would have to examine both the processes and the products of learning, rather than just the products.

In designing such research we would want to begin with some fairly good ideas on how cultural differences can be expected to show up in language learning, ideas based on prior research and careful observation. If we do not know where to look for the differences that might exist, we are unlikely to find them. Let us consider a few obvious places to look.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE FIRST LANGUAGE ON THE LEARNING OF THE SECOND

The first obvious place to look for group differences is in the influence of the first language on the learning of the second. It is currently not very fashionable to believe in *first language interference*, but it is hard to ignore the ever present evidence of it whenever we come into contact with language learners. What we need to realize is that the most important ways in which first language interference affects second language learning might not be as straightforward as are the kinds of interlingual identifications of forms or structures we have trained ourselves to look for. There will be that familiar kind of interference, to be sure. But while we can compare groups with respect to the amount and seriousness of the first language interference each experiences, I think we would find that such differences are not, in the long run, all that influential in learning. Instead we should be looking for the more subtle and far-reaching ways in which first languages are liable to influence the learning of new ones.

Consider, for example, the question of pragmatics or language use. Languages differ in the rules which govern their use in social settings. As we have learned from the classroom research of ethnographers such as Steven Boggs and Sue Phillips, children coming from cultural backgrounds that differ from that of the culture found in the standard American classroom may be following quite different patterns of language use.

Phillips (1970), for example, found that the Native American children she was studying followed the discourse patterns of the Sahaptin language spoken by their parents, even though they themselves spoke only English. These discourse patterns, which differed substantially from usual English patterns, had the effect of making it quite difficult for the children to participate verbally in the classroom. The social conditions favoring verbal performance in the classroom ran counter to those required by the culture of these children, with the result that they were unable to find their way into the kinds of classroom activities through which they might have acquired the rules for language use which are associated with English.

Boggs (1972) found that while Hawaiian school children were eager to volunteer information and to answer questions when they could do so voluntarily, they were not so eager to participate when they were being called upon, or when questions were directly addressed to them. Boggs suggested that the difficulty experienced by these children stemmed from their need to interact with adults in groups rather than on a one to one basis, particularly when the interaction was initiated by the adult. In that manner, they equalize the unequal social statuses that exist between children and adults. Such patterns of language use can have an important effect on language learning.

The children studied by Boggs and Phillips were English speakers, although they followed the patterns of language use associated with their native languages and cultures. As such, these patterns affected the manner and degree of success with which the children were able to participate in classroom activities. Now, if the children had been non-English speakers, the effect of their following such patterns would have been far more drastic. For children who need to learn the school language, such classroom activities often constitute a major opportunity for learning and practicing the new language. Activities in which teachers ask questions and children provide responses are particularly important since the learners are provided with instances of the new language, which have been addressed to them and which have been formulated in a way intended to maximize ease of comprehension. Further, such activities require the student to provide some sort of appropriate response, responses by which the teachers can immediately determine whether the learners have understood what was just said to them. If the response is appropriate, its appropriateness will be acknowledged in the continuing interaction; if it is not appropriate, the learner will usually be given help in reformulating it. All of this is the kind of help learners need if they are to progress in the new language. But if the pragmatic rules the learners are following prevent them from participating in such activities, then the children are not in a position to take advantage of these opportunities to learn the language.

CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN COGNITIVE STYLE

The next area we should consider, as a way in which culture can affect language learning, has to do with the way learners approach any kind of cognitive activity--of which learning a new language is a particularly complex type. There has been a smattering of research addressed at cross-cultural differences in cognitive style which seems potentially relevant, but which we should look at cautiously. Language learning is, of course, different in many ways from other kinds of learning. It is quite clearly under the control of some sort of highly specialized, innate cognitive mechanism which permits learners to handle the complexities of the task with relative ease. And while none of us could begin to say just what that cognitive mechanism is like, or how it functions, few of us would want to deny its existence. But while the nature of this language learning mechanism remains a mystery to us, there are never-

theless a number of cognitive behaviors that play a part in language learning and which can be examined as potential sources of cultural influence in learning.

Sustained and Systematic Attention

Learning a new language is an enormous task, one requiring the attention and involvement of the learner for an extended period of time. The task calls for sustained attention and systematic attention. The learner has to be systematically attentive to linguistic and contextual information in order to figure out what people are saying and in order to figure out how the new language is to be used. While the evidence on cross-cultural differences along this cognitive dimension is scant indeed, it seems clear that if there are any, they are likely to affect language learning. In my current research I am following 30 Chinese and 30 Mexican kindergarten and first grade students in their learning of English. I have had an opportunity to watch and compare these children quite closely for a year now, having spent a day each week last year in each of the four kindergarten classes in which they were distributed. What I have noticed have been some rather striking differences between these two groups in the levels of attention they exhibit in classroom activities.

The Mexican children were very much like children their age—they were just learning to give sustained attention to tasks requiring care and precision in execution, such as in printing letters or numbers and in tracing detailed drawings. They had difficulty staying engaged in such activities for much longer than fifteen or so minutes at a time.

The Chinese children, on the other hand, not only were able to stay at such tasks for the duration of the activity (between 15 and 20 minutes usually); they could actually keep going for an hour or more, if they were left alone. Indeed, if they were not stopped, they would just continue working until they wore their pencils and knuckles down to nubs. Once I made the mistake of giving a child who wanted to practice his writing a 12 x 18 sheet of paper rather than the 9 x 12 sheets the teacher usually gave the children for this purpose. An hour later, I noticed the child still hunched over the paper which by now was almost entirely covered with tiny letters and numbers. I convinced him he probably didn't need to practice anymore, pried the pencil from his fingers, and sent him on to do more interesting things. I saw him a few minutes later at the blackboard—he had blocked off an area, about 12 x 18 in size, and had begun to fill it with meticulous rows of numbers.

I don't know yet in what way or to what extent such differences will be reflected in the second language learning of these children. It is a characteristic that warrants more careful examination than I am giving it in my present work.

Verbal Memory

The second capacity that seems rather clearly related to language is verbal memory. Learning a new language requires a healthy exercise of memory functions. The learners have got to remember how things in the new language are said, otherwise they will never have use of its forms. One assumes that cultures are not likely to differ much on this basic dimension, but again they just might, at least in the area of rote memorization skills. Cultures that encourage the memorization of poems, stories and songs are likely to have members with better developed verbal memory skills and strategies than groups that do not encourage such activities.

At present there is little in the way of cross-cultural research examining verbal memory in children. What little cross-cultural research on memory has been done has looked at the development of memory in general, rather than that the development of memory for verbal materials in particular (Kagan et al, 1977).

Analyticity

The third type of cognitive activity that we might consider in our attempts to find cultural effects on language learning involves analyticity or hypotheses generation. Learning a new language requires learners to make use of both the linguistic information available as input and the contextual information that needs to be extracted from the speech situation to help figure out

how the language is constructed and how it is used socially and communicatively. Once they have figured out some of the principles according to which the language is structured, learners can follow those principles in constructing their own utterances in that language. All of this requires a high degree of analytical activity. The learner has to make astute guesses based on the available data as to what rules appear to be operating in the language, and then to try these out productively. These processes are no doubt a major aspect of that language learning mechanism I have mentioned.

These analytical mechanisms seem to work in a comparatively smooth fashion, for most learners, in the learning of a first language. In second language learning, however, there is evidence of considerable variation in how easily and accurately learners engage in this kind of analytical activity. In my own earlier work in second language acquisition (Wong Fillmore 1976, 1979) I have found that learners seem to vary considerably in how quickly and successfully they are able to figure out the patterns of the new language. Some are able to find patterns—right or wrong—almost immediately. These children are putting their own sentences together soon after they get started learning the new language, and therefore are able to achieve a degree of communicative freedom from the beginning. Others are quite slow at finding patterns. These children can acquire expressions they hear others using and put them to use in their own speech, but they tend to preserve what they learn in precisely the form in which they learn them, rather than to extract the structural principles represented in them for their own use. Such children tend to be much more limited in their language use, at least during the early periods of language learning. Obviously, they eventually analyze the linguistic materials they have available to them, but it takes them a lot longer getting to it than those children whom I regard as highly analytical.

Playfulness

The children who are best at this kind of activity are inclined to be playful with language. When they hear anything new and catchy, they are liable to put it to immediate use. They experiment with it, trying out its possibilities, whether or not appropriate occasions for its use turn up. My favorite example of this kind of language play comes from my earlier research in second language acquisition. Nora, the best of the five learners I followed in a longitudinal study on the use of cognitive and social strategies in language learning (1976), had just picked up the expression "cookie cutter" which she enjoyed saying. In a conversation with a friend who had just corrected her language use, Nora used "cookie cutter" first as an insult and then as a refrain:

> And you're a cookie cutter! How do you like to be a cookie cutter? (Sings:) How do you like to be a cookie cutter?

This sample was produced by Nora just 29 weeks after her first contact with English.

Mental Flexibility

Verbal playfulness seems to go along with mental flexibility, a kind of talent for seeing and entertaining multiple possibilities. The children who tend to be mentally flexible in my research are able to generate multiple guesses as to what this or that means, and they are able to come up with different ways of doing or saying almost anything that you might suggest to them. If they want to say something but lack the linguistic resources to say it, they can get around their linguistic handicap by using paraphrases. Children who are not as flexible tend to be stymied when they do not find obvious ways of saying what they want to say.

I am convinced that individual differences exist among language learners in this aspect of cognitive behavior, and that these differences constitute important sources of variation in second language learning. Whether culture affects such behavior or not is another question. If we believe that early experience—the kind involved in cultural transmission—affects patterns of cognitive behavior, then quite likely we will find differences along these dimensions that are related to culture. At the same time, we should ask whether all such culturally related differences in cognitive behavior as we are able to find are likely to affect language learning.

Field Dependence/Independence

The cognitive style construct which has been most thoroughly investigated and which has been shown by many different researchers to be related to cultural experiences (e.g., Berry, 1966; and Ramirez and Castaneda, 1974) is Field Dependence/Independence (FD/I). In its simplest formulation, FD/I can be described as a perceptual tendency–it is the ability to overcome embedding contexts and to perceive identities and relationships independent of their backgrounds. But while there are clear indications of cultural differences to be found along this dimension of cognitive functioning, there has been scant research evidence indicating that FD/I has any effect on language learning. There are those who would argue that a cognitive style construct such as FD/I is "a major organizing principle around which many aspects of a learner's functioning can be shown to cluster" (Kagan and Kogan, 1970), and that showing that an individual is Field Dependent as opposed to Independent reveals much more about general cognitive functioning than about perceptual style. That being the case, one might find relationships between a broad construct such as FD/I and language learning which are not directly related to perceptual style *per se*, but rather to some other cognitive dimension that is associated with it. This question is certainly worth pursuing in research.

SOCIAL ASPECTS

But let us turn our attention to ways in which culture more obviously affects language learning. This has to do with the social aspects of language learning. Susan Ervin-Tripp and I are presently engaged in a three year longitudinal study which addresses the question of individual variation in second language learning. We are looking at sources of variation stemming from both the cognitive and social aspects of language learning. Among the learner characteristics being examined are language learning style–aptitudinal factors which affect the ways learners approach the cognitive activities involved in language learning–and social style–interactive factors which affect learners' abilities to get access to the linguistic data needed to support language learning. The assumptions on which this research is based are (1) that the process of second language acquisition has both social and cognitive aspects, (2) that learners play an active role in both aspects of the process, and (3) that anyone can learn a second language, given adequate exposure to it, but how fast and how well any individual does depends on the nature of the exposure and on his or her characteristic approaches to learning tasks of a complex cognitive and social nature.

The social side of the task involves the social activities the learner has to engage in, in order to get access to the language input which is necessary for acquisition. The cognitive side of the task relates to the analytical activities that the learner must carry out, in order to figure out how the language is structured and how meanings get expressed in it. Learner characteristics such as social skill, sociability, communicative needs, interactive style, and activity preference will affect the learner's ability to interact with the speakers of the language to be learned, and hence the quantity and quality of linguistic input to which the learner has access. Learner characteristics such as verbal memory, verbal fluency and flexibility, and sensitivity to linguistic patterns and meanings can affect the speed and success of the learner's efforts to discover a set of rules to use in producing his own versions of that language.

The main hypothesis being tested in this study is that speed and success in language learning from a particular type of input depend on a felicitous combination of such social and language learning characteristics in the learner. The research problem, then, centers on determining the part that each component of these two personal-style constructs plays in producing variation in speed and success in second language learning, with *speed* defined as how quickly learners are able to express themselves in the new language, and *success* as how efficaciously and accurately learners are able to sort out the rules of the new language and put them to productive use. Both variables involve a comparison of the developing skills of learners across time, but "success" involves comparisons of the range of patterns learners control productively and grammatical accuracy in the exercise of those

patterns, whereas "speed" involves comparisons only of learners' ability to express themselves and to communicate in the new language irrespective of correctness or complexity.

While the data are not all in yet, it is clear that the variables we are interested in are indeed important sources of differences in second language learning. At this point, both kinds of characteristics appear to be equally involved in producing the enormous variation we are finding in our 60 subjects. However, while there appear to be only suggestions of cultural differences on the cognitive characteristics we are examining, there appears to be quite clear evidence of such differences related to the social characteristics.

Socially Dependent Behavior

Among the social characteristics that seem to be most influenced by culture is something we might describe as socially dependent behavior—the extent to which children need support from others, or are able to maintain separate identities, especially with respect to authority figures such as adults. The Mexican children we are observing are far more inclined to be socially sufficient and independent rather than dependent. While they are undoubtedly dependent on adults to a certain extent, they nevertheless are a lot less dependent on them in shaping their activities than are the Chinese children in our study. The Chinese children are more likely to turn to adults for guidance than they are to turn to one another, or to seek activities on their own. They ask: "Now what should I do?" "What do you want me to do with this?" And when they have done what has been suggested, they turn to adults again for evaluation and recognition: "Look at my paper." "I'm finished." "Is this right?" The Mexican children are much more oriented to their peers—it is to their friends and classmates that they turn for ideas and recognition. These, of course, are differences in degree rather than absolute differences. At the same time that the Mexican children tend to be peer-oriented, they also look to the adults in their world for guidance and recognition, and while the Chinese children tend to be adult oriented, they were obviously also concerned with one another.

Peer Orientation

The children of both groups who are peer oriented tend to spend a lot more time talking to classmates than t ıey do to adults, not surprising since there are more classmates around to interact with than there are adults in the classroom. However, we have noticed that such children tend to pay more attention to the speech of their peers, and to model their own speech to a greater extent after that of their peers than that of the adults in the same setting. Or so it seems to us. How is this likely to affect language learning? Drastically, of course. If everyone in the peer group shares a common first language, there is likely to be little incentive or opportunity for them to learn or use a new language, particularly for those who are peer-oriented rather than adult-oriented. Since they already speak a language that can be used with their classmates, there is no obvious need for them to learn a new one. And if they did choose to use the new language among themselves, the result would be that they would supply each other with an imperfect version of it as input. And so, in a classroom consisting mainly of limited or non-English speaking children, the major reason for learning the new language would be to please the adults in their world. If the learners are peer-oriented, chances are that they will make less use of adult language for language learning purposes, with the result that they will probably not have adequate exposure to the new language.

Individual Needs of Children

I have called this evidence—they are actually observations for the moment. They reveal some aspects of language learning that culture may affect in unexpected ways. What we need to do now is to examine the relationship between language learning and culture more directly so that we can discover how much such differences actually affect language learning. Until then, we do not have any basis on which to say just how best we can tailor educational programs to suit the needs of particular groups. I began this paper by suggesting that we take a cautious approach to examining the relationship between culture and learning. I would like to end it by urging restraint in applying research findings on such relationships to edu-

cational practice. I believe that the safest practice is to always consider individual needs of children before we consider group needs. Cultural differences are never absolute—they are ordinarily expressed as group tendencies towards a particular kind of behavior or characteristic.

The fact is that no matter how much culture influences learning, these influences will be expressed in unique ways in individual children. And while we can consider such influences in our planning, we need always to be ready to assess and to meet the individual learning needs of the children we serve.

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