

Culture, Language, and Academic Success

by Curtis W. Hayes

"Do you think I can make it into Harvard?" Huan Nguyen asked me as I headed toward the door. Huan's question concluded our interview which focused on his widely publicized academic accomplishments, first brought to my attention when I read in a San Antonio newspaper that he had finished in the top forty of the 54th National Spelling Bee Championship held in Washington, D.C. Huan, a Viet Nam refugee, had been in the United States for a little over four years.

Meanwhile, in Austin, Texas, Tu Anh Ngoc Tran finished first in her high school class of 375, graduating with an average of 97. Two years previously, upon her arrival in the United States, she had entered high school knowing no English. Currently, she is an electrical engineering student at The University of Texas in Austin. Tu is also a Viet Nam refugee.

Huan's and Tu's achievements reflect the success of a large number of students, children of the Indo-Chinese refugees, who have immigrated to the United States during the last decade. These comparatively recent immigrations have allowed researchers to begin to make tentative and cautious comparisons between and among ethnic groups so as to determine why certain ethnic groups appear to be prospering more than other ethnic groups in their academic achievements in general and in learning English as a second language in particular.

Research on Culture and Learning

The hypotheses that some researchers are beginning to draw concerning the effect of culture upon learning are only tentative, somewhat sketchy, and in no way can be interpreted to mean that any one ethnic group is *sui generis* more or less gifted, or more or less academically talented than any other ethnic group. What is being suggested is that some cultures may encompass a particular set of cognitive and social styles that together appear to be compatible with the

cognitive and social styles fostered by the public schools in the United States. These styles consist of variables which are neither good nor bad in themselves, as we shall see.

In the San Francisco Bay Area Dr. Lily Wong Fillmore and her colleagues (1982) have been studying (longitudinally) the children from two different ethnic populations, the Mexican-American and the Chinese. These children are in various developmental stages of learning English as their second language. In an issue of the *TESL Reporter* (1981), she reports that "there is a common perception among educators that ethnic groups differ in their ability to learn second languages." She explains: "Asian background children are generally considered 'good language learners' [while] Hispanic background children are regarded as poor language learners. The children," she laments, "are victims of a sort of cultural prejudice; in the case of the Asian children, it is a positive one; in the case of Hispanic, a negative one."

In her paper Wong Fillmore addresses these widely held perceptions. From her observations she has tentatively identified several learner variables, which she refers to as "cognitive styles" and "social aspects" of learning and which appear to be related to cultural background. These may account for the success of some children learning second languages and the limited success of other children who do not learn as fast or as efficiently.

Cognitive Styles

One cognitive style Wong Fillmore identifies is "level of attention." Put simply, it is the time that children are willing to spend upon an assigned task before moving on to another activity. In observing a number of Mexican-American children, she found that they, on the average, sustained interest for approximately fifteen to twenty minutes. The Chinese children, on the average, would spend an hour, or even longer, on a task.

As to "what extent such differences will be reflected in the second language learning of these children" she hesitates to say but she does suggest that this attribute may be significant and as such deserves further investigation.

Benjamin Bloom (1980), in his survey of the pupils of Western and non-Western secondary schools, also mentions the time that Asian students, in this specific case, the Japanese, spend on tasks assigned by the teacher. For example, students in the United States, as well as those in Japan, have approximately two-thousand hours of instruction devoted to the teaching and learning of mathematics. In the United States, Bloom found that only 60% of the instructional hour actually concerned itself with instructing and learning, while in the Japanese school over 95% of the instructional hour is devoted to instruction and practice in mathematics. Time is the constant, then; time on task is the variable. Bloom uses these statistics to explain, partially, why the Japanese student is so much better academically in mathematics than the American student.

A second cognitive attribute that Wong Fillmore identifies is "memory," specifically "rote memory." Memory, according to Robbins Burling (1982:114), has received comparatively little emphasis in Western education. He points out that we in the West have always wanted our students "to understand principles and patterns, not to memorize facts"; yet we "have not offered our students much help in dealing with the areas of language learning that call for simple memory, possibly because to do so would seem to violate our belief that sheer memorization is an undesirable component of education." It is true, and common knowledge at the same time, that the educational systems in a number of Asian societies impose upon their pupils a great deal of memorization, and this emphasis upon memory may well be facilitating the second language learning processes for these children.

A third cognitive attribute is "analyticity", the willingness to generate hypotheses: the attempt, in other words, to guess, to "figure out", whether right or wrong, how

the second language that is being learned works. Children who ask questions, who are curious, who are willing to take risks (at the risk of being wrong) learn more quickly and more efficiently.

Social Aspects

A social attribute is reliance upon adults for direction, specifically the teacher. Wong Fillmore observed that the Chinese children depended greatly upon the teacher for support, encouragement, direction and praise while the Mexican-American children seemed to be more peer centered, deriving their support, encouragement, and direction from their peers.

Wong Fillmore identifies and describes other attributes in addition to these four, but let's return to Huan and Tu and analyze

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the possible reasons for their success, briefly with Tu and more in-depth with Huan, at least partially and informally, in light of sustained attention, memory, analyticity, and adult direction.

Some Case Studies

With Tu Anh Ngoc Tran, we have an example of an individual who learned English, at least well enough to cope with academic subjects, in two years: an extraordinary accomplishment. In fact, she must have learned English in a shorter period of time since she was able to do so well in the two years that she was in high school. Tu succeeded to the extent that her accomplishments also made the newspapers. We can see three attributes at work here: the two years in which she concurrently was learning English and subject matter attest to her capacity to memorize and to her determination to devote sufficient portions of her day to her studies. And her choice of college major and future career, engineering, calls

upon sophisticated and well-developed powers of analyticity and abstract reasoning.

With Huan Nguyen, we also have a demonstration of remarkable learning ability. Even though he did not win the championship of the national spelling bee competition--he fell on the spelling of "gamut"--his success reflects a powerful capacity to memorize. Huan was persistent in his goal of learning the spelling of many words and by his own admission spent a great deal of his time, inside and outside of class, studying and reading English. Learning to spell also calls upon analytical powers, determining the sound-symbol correspondences and the internal structure of a great number of words.

Tu and Huan, both, derive a great deal of their support and direction from their teachers, and in Huan's case, parents. Tu's parents did not accompany her but she brought with her a culture and its attributes which placed emphasis upon parental and teacher reverence. Huan's parents have high aspirations for all of their children, as do most parents I would suspect. However, Huan looks to his parents to articulate and to identify career possibilities and to his teachers for guidance and advice. Harvard is a possibility, and Huan's teachers have recommended that he pursue his goal.

While not specifying a particular university that they would like their son to attend, Huan's parents do want him to pursue a career, in whatever university he attends, in medicine rather than in business, Huan's preference at this time. What career he will eventually choose is almost predictable: when I asked Huan whether he planned to enter the spelling bee the following year, he said that it would all depend upon his parents' wishes: "They might not want me to do so much studying and use up all my mind." Huan did not enter.

During my interview with Huan, I learned that he had arrived in the United States just after his eighth birthday. Huan's father was a military pilot, his mother a teacher. Both parents still speak French and even though his father knew some English ("pilot" English) his mother knew none. Hence, the

family's native language continues to be the language spoken at home. Both parents are now employed, the mother as a technician at a local computer manufacturer and the father as a manager of a McDonald's.

During this first year in San Antonio, Huan was immersed in English, attending classes in an all English language environment. During the school day Huan was pulled out of his classes for a one-hour session with a bilingual Vietnamese aide (who was, according to Huan, supposed to teach English to him and the five other Indo-Chinese refugees but who instead went over their lessons with them in Vietnamese). In his second year, he was assigned to an American ESL instructor who knew no Vietnamese. Huan remembered this year of English instruction to be the "hard way" of learning English but later admitted that he made much progress during the year. What also aided him in his learning of English were, according to Huan, his American friends, his peers, all native speakers, who after a fashion, immersed him in their activities after the close of the school day. According to his teachers and to his middle school principal, Huan was extremely well liked and sociable, as were the other refugees. Although not achieving the singular success of Huan, all refugees in this school were doing well in their studies. Huan himself received five As and one B the semester that I interviewed him.

Tu and Huan are extraordinary students. I do not intend, however, to generalize from their success that even a majority of children of the Indo-Chinese are doing well in their academic subjects. There are thousands to be assessed, some living with their natural parents and some, like Tu, living with foster or adoptive parents. Yet the success of Tu and Huan (and the other refugees in Huan's school) and the identification of attributes by Wong Fillmore give us some notion of possible explanations--although for the time being these explanations must remain tentative.

Areas for Additional Research

At this juncture I would like to list additional areas of research where my own

inquiries lead, in my attempt to broaden the scope of such research:

1. Socio-economic region of where the school is located. What effect does the socio-economic status of the school district, and even more narrowly the school, have upon the success of the Asian refugees? This area of inquiry does not relate to learner characteristics at all, but is one, I believe, that may be crucial to students' success. Huan attended a school located in an upper-upper middle class region. He also lived within the boundaries of that school. Tu attended an upper middle class school in Austin, where in order to obtain an "ethnic balance", students who normally would have attended a school closer to their home were bussed. In San Antonio, it is extremely important where one lives as there is no bus-sing. There are seventeen individual and independent school districts, some extremely prosperous (Huan's district) and some extremely poor.

2. Success "quotient" of the student body. What bearing does the "success" rate of the student body as a whole (such as merit scholarships per senior class and the number and amount of scholarships awarded, grade point averages, college entrants) have upon the success rate of the Asian refugees? Again, this area of inquiry does not relate to learner characteristics, but is an area that I feel may be crucial. Approximately seventy percent of Tu's graduating class went to a college or university. Only two other high schools in Tu's district had a higher percentage of students going to college, and both had a higher number of merit scholars (Tu's high school had four). In Huan's school, approximately 80% of the students, according to their administrator's guess, would be going to college or to a university. Both Tu's and Huan's schools, according to their administrations, have high achievers and high standards. Thus, Tu and Huan were among peers who had established high goals for themselves.

3. Literacy of Asian students in their native language. Does literacy in the first language translate easily and efficiently into literacy in the second? What is the success rate of

those Asian refugees who were not literate in their native language? Tu, the older, and Huan, the younger, were literate in their native language when they emigrated to the United States; but there is a large number of refugees who were not: how successful are they?

4. Socio-economic status. Does the socio-economic status of the students' families in their native country have any bearing upon their children's success in this country? It is not clear what status Tu's parents were, but Huan's parents had a high socio-economic status in their native country but assumed a lower status in this country upon their arrival.

Conclusion

Finally, where do these observations (all concerned with tendencies) lead? Perhaps culture, and the values that are within each culture, do play a more important and crucial role in learning than we have assumed. While these examples of academic prowess do not prove a case, such observations should serve to build one. While Tu and Huan are extraordinary, and thus newsworthy, children who do not do as well as Tu and Huan seldom make the news. With over a half of a million Indo-Chinese refugees in the United States, and the presence of other ethnic groups, it seems that we can begin to ask about those who are within our schools: how are they doing and why? Lily Wong Fillmore's remarks were "to provoke thought and investigation": it seems to me that she has done just that.

REFERENCES

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