

Social Behaviours of Children in a Multicultural Preschool

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This paper describes social behaviours of preschool children in relation to second language development, observed in a multicultural preschool program in Vancouver, B.C. Social behaviours arising from planned curriculum activities and teacher strategies which fostered the use of English were monitored in several play areas of the classroom. Examples are given of behaviours observed early in the year, as well as early stages of cooperative and socio-

dramatic play. Cultural adjustment of children is discussed as the program takes them from the familiar single-culture home situation to the multicultural classroom where customs and festivals of several cultures are included in the curriculum. Finally, observed individual differences in learning English are discussed and further research currently being carried out on the project is presented.

In 1982 the Sexsmith Preschool Project was started in Vancouver, British Columbia, as a model program for young children to learn English and develop social skills within a multicultural environment. The local school board estimated that at that time 46% of its student population was ESL—that is, had English as a second language. (For historical background, see Ashworth, 1979.) While some ESL children in Vancouver are new immigrants, over half of them are, in fact, Canadian-born and a significant number of these may enter the school system with little or no ability to speak English. Their cultural and linguistic backgrounds are so diverse, however, that setting up suitable bilingual programs for all ESL children is extremely difficult. The more feasible alternative is to provide adequate opportunities for them to learn English before entering elementary school.

The Sexsmith Preschool Project is sponsored by the Vancouver School Board, the University of British Columbia Child Study Centre, the British Columbia Preschool English as a Second Language Committee, and the Immigrant Resources Project which has also, since 1975, sponsored preschool classes for new immigrants to Vancouver (described by Fraser and Coulthard, 1982). The Sexsmith Preschool is housed in a local community school and offers two classes, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon, for 15 children in each class. Enrollment is open to all three- and four-year-olds in the area (i.e., first-come, first-served) in accordance

with local school board policy. The children who filled the first morning class in 1982 included one English-speaker, one bilingual Japanese, eight Chinese (Cantonese), four Punjabi (one with good English), and one Filipino. In the first afternoon class were five English-speakers, seven speakers of Chinese (one Mandarin and the others Cantonese), one bilingual Fijian, and two Punjabi-speakers.

OBSERVATION STUDY

During the first year of the project an observation study of children's social behaviours was carried out as one step toward developing the most appropriate curriculum and determining teacher strategies for the program. Questions to be answered included: What are the typical entry behaviours of ESL children? What strategies do children use when they have to interact socially without the medium of a common language? What is the relationship between learning to speak English and the level of play, and are there individual differences in the way children cope with their inability to communicate in a play situation? How does the increasing ability of children to speak English affect the functioning of the group? What factors are important in achieving cultural adjustment?

Written records were made of observations carried out approximately three times a week throughout the year. A running record of language and social interaction was made in different areas of the room on a rotating basis during free play time and informal story time. The examples were then filed under the child's name with date of occurrence, area where the interaction took place, and the kind of activity in which the child was involved at the time. Live observations were augmented by a series of 24 videotapes which were recorded throughout the year and subsequently transcribed for further examination of children's language and communication.

Early Behaviours

Entry into preschool was for many children not only their first separation from family, but also their first exposure to unfamiliar people who had different behavioural expectations and spoke a language they could not comprehend. Their response to this situation varied from silent withdrawal to throwing temper tantrums or sobbing uncontrollably. Some children took refuge in a solitary activity with which they were probably already familiar (such as doing a jigsaw puzzle), and some clustered together with one or two other children from the same cultural and linguistic background. Thus the initial range of behaviours to be accommodated was very wide.

An additional problem was that parents who were unable to communicate verbally with the teacher were often uncertain about how to handle the anxiety of separation. Should they stay with their children, or should they dart out when their backs were turned? Some parents also did not understand the requirement to arrive on time and were late (or sometimes early) in bringing their children to school or fetching them afterwards.

Inability of the children to express feelings and needs would often result in acts of aggression or refusal to cooperate. One boy, angry at being separated from his mother, screamed and stripped off all his clothing regularly in the first two weeks of school. But as children learned to substitute words for actions, this kind of “acting out” subsided and the teacher was able to spend far less time in managing behaviour problems.

As long as their ability to speak English remained limited, the children used non-verbal means to express themselves. They shouted, gesticulated, or “acted silly” in order to attract attention. One child tried to make contact with another by following him around the room, pointing at a toy and saying “me got,” followed by lots of noise and action. He then tried to attract the other child’s attention by banging rolling pins on the table and then, still unsuccessful, he shouted “look it” and “boo” from behind the shelves.

When children first began to use words to communicate with each other, they often used international words such as “pizza,” “hot dog” or “pancake” as a means of involving others in their play with housekeeping materials. Key phrases like “let’s go” were also used as a call to others to join in an active running game, but sound effects (with a toy gun, for instance) would continue to be used to involve others and set the theme for a game.

Development of Play and Cooperation

In the first few weeks of school many children chose to play by themselves, perhaps working on puzzles or building Lego. A few children played in parallel situations using a common material such as playdough, but without a common language any ideas for a more complex, cooperative game could not be carried out. One boy was observed to place the ladders of the fire truck against the shelves, but this action got no response from the others. Later in the year, however, by using the words “climb up here, see that,” his friends understood that they were supposed to take on the role of firemen and were able to develop a complex play sequence with a very limited ability to speak English. A group of between six and eight children also developed an involved sequence for holding a birthday party with a minimum number of English words. The activity extended over most of the free play time and lasted for several weeks. Three key labels—“happy birthday,” “candle” and “cake”—were used to initiate and sus-

tain the play.

Later in the year, children began to process chunks of language or key phrases into communicative sentences and were then able to develop true cooperative play. They now assigned roles to each other, such as "he is horsey," "you're Batman and I'm Spiderman," and showed many other examples of using language to enrich their imaginative play. One girl, for example, rolled playdough into oval-shaped balls and demonstrated how to crack eggs, saying "ball—like this—one, two, three, crack!" She then broke the ball and held each half in either hand. In the block corner, a cone-shaped block and a cylinder were joined by another child to form an ice cream cone; "here is an ice cream, I eat," he said as he licked the cone.

By this time the children were able to gain better control over their environment as their second language developed. Now a request such as "can I have some playdough, please," resulted in someone passing a lump across. "No, that's mine, I using that," asserted a child who wanted to keep using the rolling pin. "Don't make pancakes like that" and "you need to take that one off and then it will slide" served as instructions to fellow workers. Children also began to take responsibility for group discipline ("no more water, I said, do you know how I know it, she splash water here"), and the group began to function much more smoothly once the children found they were able to use English to "manage" each other's behaviour.

Cultural Adjustment

The cultural expectations that children meet in the English-speaking preschool may vary greatly from the ones they are familiar with at home. Some of the more obvious cultural differences in behaviour can include how to greet others, who should talk and when, what are good table manners, and various non-verbal means of communication. In addition, boys may be expected to act in a different way from girls. One boy, for example, on being asked to pick up his toys, stated that his sister did it for him at home. A common behaviour at the beginning of the year among some children was to mock a child who cried. One mother informed the teacher that children in her country get sick when they play outside in cold weather. There were also questions as to whether it was really necessary to celebrate the festivals of other cultures represented in the group, such as Chinese New Year, Thanksgiving or Diwali, a Hindu harvest festival.

The small, tight groups of children from the same culture that had formed at the beginning of the year remained intact for the first few months. These children did not get as much exposure to the English language as did other children who had begun to interact much sooner with the English models in the class, and as a result they remained isolated in their own language and cultural environment. Adult intervention met

with little success, however, and may even have had harmful effects by creating negative attitudes towards the first language. Indeed, one Chinese girl was heard to say to another who was speaking Cantonese, "I don't know what you say, you dummy."

Learning to communicate in English enabled some of the children to make cross-cultural friendships. Two boys visited each other's homes and the East Indian child reported, "I know how Chinese eat because I went and had lunch there. They had some of these sticks and did this." He demonstrated by holding two chopsticks in his right hand. Saris and chopsticks in the housekeeping corner also had more meaning to the other children after they had visited each other's homes.

During the school year, festivals from the different cultural groups were celebrated. These occasions stimulated a great deal of language development and it appeared that motivation was high to learn new vocabulary. Children who knew no English when they began school used some of their first English words when talking about Halloween. One girl pointed to her cheeks saying "red" and to her lips saying "lipstick." During the Diwali celebration a Hindu boy told his friends that "if you talk nice, the God will not die you."

Sometimes the children related to the celebrations in unexpected ways. Halloween and Christmas stimulated the most response, whereas a display for the East Indian festival of Diwali had a mixed reception. One East Indian girl whose family appeared to be rapidly adopting a North American lifestyle, reacted to the display by stating, "Yuck, do you still have that there!" One the whole, the children related to some aspect of the festival that had personal meaning to them. The candles in the Diwali display reminded a Chinese girl of birthday parties and she said, "I have some little ones at home. Happy birthday!" A Hindu boy tried to fit Santa Claus into his conceptual framework when he announced: "Santa Claus died. He really did. My Mom said." Celebrating the festivals also provided children with opportunities to express their cultural identity. During the Diwali celebration the same Hindu boy explained how they put out candles at night for the "lady god."

As children became aware that they were different in some ways from other children in the group, they began to use English to talk about their cultural identity in several other ways: "I have black eyes because I am Chinese and Chinese have black eyes." "I'm a Punjabi people and Punjabi people eat rottis." "We don't eat meat. It'll choke you and turn you into a monster." "I know how to write Chinese and speak Chinese. A Lee is my Chinese name. You call me A Lee." And as children became more confident, they also became more accepting of others different from themselves: "Hey, teacher, he is playing with me now. He knows how to play!"

Individual Differences in Learning English

Use of the second language was closely monitored in ESL children who had little or no English on entry into the program. Our evaluation was concerned with such questions as: Does the child understand and remember English words and phrases? Does he use them purposefully and in a relevant context? Is he able to adapt their use to suit different situations? Does he communicate readily in the second language, and how much progress has he made?

At the end of the year, in order to provide understanding of the sociolinguistic factors at work in the classroom, development of the second language by each subject was examined in relation to his level of social competence. This level was determined by observation of social skills, outgoing or sociable behaviours, and ability to communicate within the group. Formal measurement had also been obtained in October, January and April using the Preschool Language Scale of Zimmerman, Steiner and Evatt (1969) to assess receptive and expressive language, and the Peer Interactions Quality Effectiveness Scale developed at the University of Western Ontario by Mary Wright (1980). Personal interaction measurements utilizing Wright's scale were taken from videotaped recordings of social behaviour in the classroom.

Our observation findings from the first year of the program correspond well with the results of those of an earlier study which categorized sociolinguistic correlations in young children, the Berkeley Project, reported by Lily Wong Fillmore (1982). Wong Fillmore and her associates investigated the sources of individual differences in second language learning. They studied 43 Cantonese- and Spanish-speaking kindergarten children in California for three years in order to establish the extent to which language learning style and social style affected their speed and success in learning a second language. These investigators concluded that the relationship between variables involved in learning a second language is complex. They found no single way of characterizing either good or poor language learners and concluded that the variations in individual differences in learning the second language were more extensive than they had originally expected.

Of the Sexsmith ESL children one half were rated as good at learning English and half of these were socially competent and interested in talking to their peers. The remaining children in this group were either moderately sociable and unwilling to initiate conversation. In the second half, of those children rated as poor at learning English, one child was typically withdrawn and did not pay much attention to her classmates. Another child was antagonistic, immature, and gained little from the program. One girl who was outgoing and used non-verbal communication to

further her social skills, seemed to have a complete barrier against learning the second language. Another poor learner, a boy who was very sociable—though always as a follower—did not fit into the pattern described by Wong Fillmore. We concluded that on the whole the Sexsmith children demonstrated similar but a broader range of social strategies than those described in the Berkeley Project.

FOLLOW-UP

In the second year of the project further observations were carried out to determine whether social behaviours of children in the two new classes corresponded with those of the previous year. In the morning class there were four English-speakers, five Punjabis (three speaking English), two Filipinos who both spoke English, one bilingual Japanese, and four Chinese (Cantonese). The majority of this class were therefore already speaking English, in contrast to the afternoon class which included nine Chinese (one Mandarin and eight Cantonese, only one of whom had good English), one Vietnamese with some English, and five Punjabi-speakers.

The social behaviours of both these groups followed a similar pattern to those observed in the previous year, but with one significant difference. The morning group had four second-year (returning) children who were already familiar with the program and classroom routines, and their behaviour was accepted as a model by their classmates. This, coupled with the ability of most children to communicate in English, enabled the whole class to develop social skills more rapidly without the formation of same-culture cliques. The afternoon situation was reversed since only two children had any English at the beginning of the year, but one of these was a Chinese girl in her second year at the preschool. It was apparent that she too acted as a model for others and set an open tone for the classroom. Although some of the Cantonese-speaking boys formed a clique, there was less of a tendency initially to cluster into same-culture groups than in the previous year, and it was an evident advantage to have even one returning student in the class.

Further videotape recordings are being made of the Sexsmith Preschool but, unlike the first year when the focus of the tapes was on individual children's behaviour and communication, emphasis is now being placed on examination of group play sequences and planned classroom activities (which include finger-painting and making apple sauce).

Many questions about the project have yet to be answered. For instance, how are the receptive and expressive aspects of children's second language development affected by their inability to imitate modelled

behaviours? Do some children make "silent" gains—in language development, for example—which are not immediately evident but which might be predicted by other measurable gains such as effectiveness of social contact with peers or leadership ability in play activities? How does the success or failure of individual children in learning to communicate in English affect the level of social competence in the group as a whole (and the reverse)? And what is the relationship between the maturity of play behaviour and second language ability? Because of the high proportion of ESL children entering many Canadian schools, these and similar concerns urgently require further study at the preschool level.

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