

The social basis for learning: considerations for the bilingual child

For young bilingual children entering an English medium setting in which they have yet to learn the language, the processes of language learning, social interaction and enculturation are closely linked. As Ochs states: 'It is evident that acquisition of linguistic knowledge and acquisition of socio-cultural knowledge are interdependent... Children develop concepts of a socio-culturally structured universe through their participation in language activities' (Ochs, 1988:14)

The need to engage in social interaction with peers can be a particular difficulty for young developing bilingual children in the early years. The ability to interact with others, and the understanding of the shared cultural framework essential for learning are closely related to the acquisition of English. At the same time, the learning of English depends on being able to interpret the cultural rules and expectations of the setting, and on being able to successfully engage in activities and interact with peers. This interdependence of language acquisition and social interaction is referred to by Tabors (1997) as a 'double bind' which many children who are new to English may experience for a period of time.

In the vignette below we see how young bilingual children starting school face the challenges of learning both the language and culture they find in early years settings.

Amadur and Mohiuddin start Reception

The outer door opened and Amadur and Mohiuddin were shepherded in by their mothers. As it closed behind them, all four stood stiffly just inside the room, staring ahead. Mrs Goode approached them with a welcoming smile: 'Hi there, come in, lovely to see you! Mums, you can go, these two will be fine. Come on boys.' She took the hands of the 4 year-olds and led them cheerfully towards the sandbox, leaving their mothers to exchange glances and then exit, backwards through the door. Amadur and Mohiuddin stood beside the sandbox looking blank and bewildered. Mrs Goode collected shovels, gave one to each of them, and dug industriously herself. After a few moments both boys dutifully squatted on the floor and begun to dig, in imitation. They continued this way for some time, and Mrs Goode, after praising their efforts, moved off to another activity. The two boys, who were cousins, slowed their shovelling, stopped, and stared at each other.

(Brooker, 2005, p.115)

As Amadur and Mohiuddin enter Reception, they encounter the rules and expectations of their new social world. Haste states that 'in acquiring these rules, the child learns the basis for interactions with others, and the shared cultural framework for making sense of the world' (Haste, 1987, p.163). The acquisition of these rules represents a significant challenge, including the ability to interact with others and to engage in activities and the understanding of the shared cultural assumptions. The norms of the reception class culture are not necessarily made explicit and may only be understood through patterns of behaviour and through the subtle and indirect forms of language used to express approval and disapproval. These may be difficult for a developing bilingual child to interpret. One example of the rules which children are expected to understand and follow is that children should choose an activity and participate in play, independently and with others.

In addition, developing bilingual children have to start the process of learning English, and this involves not only language learning itself, but also understanding how to socially interact and what is valued in the new social context. They also need to discover what is acceptable from their existing knowledge which includes the use of their home language. The use of mother tongue, which has so far been a central aspect of their conceptual development at home, is likely to be increasingly unavailable in most early years settings. As a consequence, the linguistic basis of much of the learning of new concepts may not be accessible to young bilingual children.

Tabors highlights the importance of the social context of the early years setting for young bilingual children's learning and suggests that without careful consideration of this 'they may spend their time playing alone silently, or humming, singing, or talking to themselves...' (1997, p38). Drury's study of three four year old bilingual children learning at home and at school reveals how the child herself may play a critical role in enabling a move beyond this double bind by rehearsing and practising classroom learning in the home (Drury, 2007).

Authors

Rose Drury

Leena Robertson

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