

Second Language Acquisition of Japanese Children Who Are Learning English in America :

How Do They Acquire Native-like Pronunciation ?

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Abstract

Young children are believed to acquire their second language pronunciation perfectly in a short period of time. The reality is, however, some children cannot acquire authentic pronunciation even after an extended period of residence in the host country. The most important factor in deciding the pronunciation skills of children is not the age at arrival in the host country or the length of residence, but the degrees of interaction with the peers who speak the language as their native tongue.

1. Introduction

Many researchers say that young children surpass adults in acquiring their second language (L2) (Scovel, 1969, Krashen, 1970). It is often said that adults who can acquire authentic pronunciation of their L2 are exceptional, but children are quite capable of mastering the phonological system of their L2. Scovel, for example, has attributed the child-adult difference to biologically determined critical period (Scovel, 1969). If every child can acquire authentic pronunciation of their L2 in no time, all the immigrant children who are studying at American schools are expected to start to speak English just like native speakers in a short period of time. In reality, most of the children from foreign countries speak English with foreign accents. According to an ESL teacher who had been teaching English as a second language to immigrant children for twelve years, those who can speak English just like Americans are rather exceptional. There are, however, a few children who start to speak flawless English in a very short period of time. Why can some children acquire native-like command of their L2 in a short period of time while others cannot even after an extended period of residence in the host language environment ?

Schumann suggests that social factors play important roles in adults' L2 acquisition (Schumann, 1978). Seliger reports in his study that the no-accent group had more friends who spoke L2 than the other group did (Seliger et al, 1975). The patterns of social interaction may have strong relationship with

the degree of achievement in pronunciation skills. The relationship between the two was studied to test the hypothesis.

2. Subjects

Subjects were 26 Japanese children who were learning English at an American elementary school located in suburban Washington, D. C. area. The youngest child was five years old, and the oldest child was 11 years old. Their lengths of residence in America were between two and seven years.

3. Method

The children were asked some simple questions in English. Then they were given a book and were told to read a few paragraphs aloud. Then they were asked some questions about the book. Their English pronunciation was evaluated by an American woman who had been teaching English to adult immigrants for 8 years. The woman checked their pronunciation both in natural condition (free talk) and unnatural condition (reading) because people tend to reveal their accents more in unnatural condition. The interview questions, paragraphs used for the reading test, and the guidelines for the evaluation of the pronunciation skills are listed on the appendix. As for the degrees of interaction with English-speaking peers, the children were asked questions such as "tell me the names of your friends" or "who do you eat lunch with?" In order to verify their answers, the author observed the children's in-school and out-of-school activities for two months.

4. Results

Children were divided into 4 categories according to their English pronunciation skills. The categories are the following: A: native-like pronunciation, B: near-native pronunciation, C: accented pronunciation, D: heavily accented pronunciation. As for the degrees of interaction with English-speaking peers, the children were again divided into 4 categories. The categories are the following: Group 1: children who play mostly with American peers, Group 2: children who play with American peers and Japanese peers, Group 3: children who play with Japanese peers most of the time, Group 4: children who play only with Japanese peers.

Table 1 shows the relationship between their lengths of residence in America and their pronunciation skills. Table 2 shows the relationship between their degrees of interaction with American peers and their pronunciation skills. Table 3 show the relationship between their ages at arrival and their pronunciation skills.

Table 1

The length of residence and the pronunciation skills

| | ~1 | ~2 | ~3 | 3~ |
|---|----|----|----|----|
| A | | 1 | | 2 |
| B | 1 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| C | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| D | 2 | | | |

~1 : less than one year
 ~2 : less than two years
 ~3 : less than three years
 3~ : over three years
 $r = .518$

Table 2

The interaction with American peers and the pronunciation skills

| | G1 | G2 | G3 | G4 |
|---|----|----|----|----|
| A | 2 | 1 | | |
| B | 1 | 6 | 9 | |
| C | | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| D | | | | 2 |

G1 : strong interaction
 G2 : some interaction
 G3 : little interaction
 G4 : no interaction
 $r = .73$

Table 3

The age at arrival and the pronunciation skills

| age | 0~3 | 4~7 | 8~ |
|-----|-----|-----|----|
| A | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| B | 9 | 7 | |
| C | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| D | | | 2 |

$r = .405$

5. Discussion

Although a very subjective judgement was made to assess the children's English pronunciation skills, it seems clear that a child needs strong peer interaction to acquire good pronunciation of his target language ($r = .73$). There was an impression that younger children speak English with less accents than older children, but the age at arrival does not seem to be a very important factor in deciding children's pronunciation skills ($r = .405$).

It is obvious that language learners need to be exposed to various situations in order to acquire the target language thoroughly. Some exposure time is required to achieve the goal, but the quality of interaction is also important. A closer social relationship with the speakers of the target language helps the learners get opportunities to use the language in various situations. The three children who attained native-like pronunciation had closer social relationship with American peers than others, and they had strong motivation to speak English fluently.

An interesting finding is that these three children (two boys and a girl) had minimum or no interaction with Japanese peers. They seemed to identify themselves with American peers, and did not show much interest in the games or books with which their Japanese classmates were fascinated. According to a few Japanese boys, their playgroup excluded the two boys because they did not comply with their (Japanese) play rules.

Lambert (1963, cited by Oyama, 1976) attributes individual differences in language learning ability partly to differences in desire to identify with speakers of the new language. My finding agrees with his suggestion. Those who desired to be identified with American peers acquired English very quickly. However, such Americanized children tend to have culture shock when they go back to Japan as returnees. Since most Japanese parents were worried about this problem, they often discouraged their children to acquire American cultural values. At the same time, however, they wanted their children to master English since it is difficult to do so in Japan. Such ambivalence in the parental attitudes might have affected their children in many unknown ways. It is possible to suspect that these Japanese children were avoiding Americanization by keeping company with Japanese peers so that they could please their parents. It is unknown, however, how much the parents' attitudes can affect their children's mastery of their second language and culture.

6. Conclusion

Children desire to become just like others and such desire extends to language. When they desire to identify themselves with the members of a certain language group, they are strongly motivated to learn the language. Most children in this study were not so strongly motivated to learn English and some of them retained foreign accents even after an extended period of residence in America. There are some possible explanations for the slow development of their English pronunciation skills.

First, they had some Japanese friends in their neighborhood and were not desperate to learn English to survive. Second, most of the children understood that they would go back to Japan sooner or later, and that building close relationship with American peers was meaningless. They might have been even discouraged to play with American children by their parents. Third, many of the Japanese children were too busy to have time for socialization because they went to juku after school and the Japanese school on Saturdays.

It is necessary for a child to have close social ties with the speakers of the target language in order to speak the language without accents. However, building a strong relationship with a new language and the

culture often means that the child is risking his old cultural tie. Bilingualism is indeed an uneasy balancing act. It is partly up to the parents to decide which language and culture should be more emphasized to benefit their children the most in the long run.

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Appendix

Interview questions asked to the subjects

1. How old are you? What grade are you in?
2. How long have you been in America?
3. Tell me the name of your classroom teacher.
4. Do you enjoy your (American) school?
5. What do you enjoy the most at your school?
6. Choose five of your close friends and tell me their names. How many of them are Japanese?
7. Who do you eat lunch with? Why do you choose him/her?
8. What do you do after school? Tell me the names of your friends who you play with after school.
9. What is your favorite TV program? Do you talk about the program at school? Who do you talk with about it?
10. Do you go to the week-end Japanese school? Do you enjoy the school? Do you have many friends there?

*Two stories used in the reading test

Story A : For kindergarteners to third graders

A happy school of little fish lived in a corner of the sea somewhere. They were all red. Only one of them was as black as a mussel shell. He swam faster than his brothers and sisters. His name was Swimmy.

One bad day a tuna fish, swift, fierce and very hungry, came darting through the waves. In one gulp he swallowed all the little red fish. Only Swimmy escaped.

He swam away in the deep wet world. He was scared, lonely and very sad. (Swimmy, by Leo Lionni)

Story B : For fourth graders and up

The first snow came, and the bitter cold. Every morning Pa took his gun and his traps and was gone all day in the Big Woods, setting the small traps for muskrats and mink along the creeks, the middle-sized traps for foxes and wolves in the woods, He set out the big bear traps hoping to get a fat bear before they all went into their dens for the winter.

One morning he came back, took the horses and sled, and hurried away again. He had shot a bear. Laura and Mary jumped up and down and clapped their hands, they were so glad. Mary shouted "I want the drumstick! I want the drumstick!" Mary did not know how big a bear's drumstick is. (Little House in the Big Woods, by L. I. Wilder)

*Questions

1. What is this story about?
2. What do you think will happen to Swimmy (Mary) next?

Guidelines for pronunciation evaluation

A : Native-like : speaks English fluently and makes no or very minor phonological errors and can pass as a native-speaker

B : Near-Native : speaks English pretty fluently but makes a few phonological errors that native speakers would not make (ex. /a/for/æ/, /z/for/ð/)

C : Some Accent : cannot speak English very fluently and often makes major phonological errors (ex. /b/for/v/, /r/for/l/)

D : Heavy Accent : cannot speak English fluently at all and makes many major phonological errors