

Sociolinguistic Competence: Evaluating it and Discerning Important Factors in its Development

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Sociolinguistic competence, which involves awareness of appropriate language use in different contexts, was included as one of four major components of communicative competence by Canale and Swain in 1980: strategic, discourse, grammatical and sociolinguistic competence. This aspect of language includes, for example, both register (variations of language according to different contexts) and style (variations according to use by different groups). It also includes language-specific forms of address, formulaic greetings, apologies and so on.

In addition, the use of certain words and phrases does not necessarily "translate" perfectly from one language to another because they may be used differently. Some examples from English and Spanish are the different uses of "Congratulations" and "Felicidades", "Good night" and "Buenas noches", and "Jesus Christ!" and "Jesus!". As teachers in Mexico, some of us may have done a double-take when students greeted us with "Congratulations!" on a birthday or "Teachers' Day", wondering for a moment what we accomplished that deserved our being congratulated, then remembering the common assumption that the word can be used in the same way as "Felicidades." A fellow-teacher (Mexican) was once surprised when I told him to be more careful with the use of "Jesus!" in English; as a Catholic, he had no intention of using it in a way considered blasphemous by some.

Sociolinguistic competence is seen to develop gradually in children learning their first language, and oral proficiency is an important indicator of sociolinguistic proficiency. It is also of concern to language teachers as they seek to enhance the sociolinguistic development of their students, an even greater challenge in EFL than ESL situations, as students may have little opportunity to acquire this type of competence outside the classroom, where it is most easily acquired. Although simultaneous bilinguals (those who learn two languages before the age of 3) can be expected to have considerable sociolinguistic competence in both of their languages, the degree to which this

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is developed in the minority language may tell us something about the importance of language input and output that can apply to second language learners.

Some studies that have attempted to evaluate language competence in bilinguals have found that the methods of evaluation used did not statistically reflect observations that were made of the children's language abilities. Arnberg (1984) measured lexical development and Rodrigues (1976) measured grammatical aspects of written English, and neither found statistical support for their observations; both suggested that better evaluation methods were necessary.

Studies considering language input and output tell us that increased opportunities appear to enhance language development not only in monolinguals (Cross 1978 and Bruner 1985) but also in bilinguals (Seliger 1970; Soh 1987; Swaine 1985). Lauren (1987) studied errors in the Swedish compositions of Swedish-Finnish bilingual children in Finland as well as those of monolinguals, and analyzed their relationship to factors in their language background. She found a significant relation between scores and school grades, radio and television exposure in Swedish, and the language used in the neighborhood and with friends.

As to methodology, Day and Shapson (1987) used communicative methods in their comparison of French-immersion bilinguals and monolingual French children. They showed filmstrips of a story that the children had to retell and discuss. Results indicated bilinguals were comparable to monolinguals on more communicative measures, but lower on more grammatical measures.

Andersen (1990a and 1990b) used a method similar to story-telling to study the acquisition of register in monolingual English-speaking children. She used puppets to practice role play with the children, and observed increasingly mature encoding of social information as children got older.

The present study sought to evaluate English sociolinguistic competence in simultaneous bilingual children in Mexico, children whose father was Mexican and whose mother was a native English speaker. These were chosen over those with a father who was a native English speaker, because the mother is often the prime caretaker and her language use can thus be much more influential in the child's upbringing (Murata 1992). The area of

oral proficiency was evaluated by means of a "cloze" story, since no appropriate tests or evaluations emphasizing sociolinguistic competence and designed for bilinguals were found. Ten children between the ages of 8 and 12 were studied, half of them being students at bilingual schools. Parents completed a questionnaire ² to help determine what languages were used in each child's family background, school and other situations. Finally, questionnaire scores (indicating the degree of English use) and evaluation scores were compared statistically to determine whether there was a significant relation between the two.

Although the statistic significance of specific input-output factors does not seem to have been considered in many studies of bilingual children, some of the factors considered to be important by researchers have been: bilingual education, prolonged stays in the country where the "minority" language predominates, language of caretakers, language used between parents, contacts with relatives and other speakers of the minority language, mass media, and reading. All of these aspects were considered in the questionnaire prepared for this study and, where appropriate, responses were on a 5-point scale expressing languages used, ranging from "all Spanish" (1 point) to "all English" (5 points). Frequency was also indicated for several areas.

The evaluation method used might be called a modified "cloze" story³, which rather than eliciting a specific word involved the reading of a story to the child with pauses at certain points to ask the child "What would you say here?" or "What do you think he/she said then?" Some of the responses elicited were story-beginnings, greetings and forms of address, requests for information, and an apology. These were tape-recorded, and transcripts were made so that responses could be evaluated on a scale of 1 to 5, depending on how grammatically and sociolinguistically appropriate they were. (For example, one subject could not think how to say "Pleased to meet you" and said "You're welcome" and fished for something better with no luck, so received a low "1"). Finally, these points were totaled to give a score, the highest possible score being 92. The results are shown in the following chart under "Test score".

Because of the low number of subjects, I found that statistically it was not worthwhile trying to correlate each factor of input or output to the test

² Contact the author for a copy of the questionnaire.

³ Contact the author for copies of the story used.

score. So the two largest categories were classified as "Family language" (including child-parent and sibling-sibling communication, for example) and "Media language" (including television, videos and reading). The totals for these categories are included in the chart.

Some items (such as frequency of time abroad) did not fit into either of these categories, but were added together with the points from the other categories to give the score for "Overall" language use, also given below.

Subject	Test score	Family language	Media language	Overall
1	91	18	14	54
2	84	18	14	54
3	89	21	15	57
4	57	21	16	58
5	77	8	14	39
6	87	12	12	41
7	91	13	16	41
8	88	15	14	49
9	60	9	13	36
10	85	17	14	57

These scores were compared by means of a t-test to note whether there was a significant difference between those attending a bilingual school and others. In addition, a correlation test was used to compare the test results with the children's questionnaire scores indicating the degree of English input and output. Besides the score for "overall" English influence, separate scores for use in the family and media exposure were also compared to test scores.

As for attendance at a bilingual school, no significant correlation was found ($p < .375$), although test results were lower for those not attending one.

One of my hypotheses, that bilingual schooling would be related to higher scores, was thus not supported. At the same time, the fact that these schools are not geared towards simultaneous bilinguals and their needs should be considered in making any conclusions.

On the other hand, neither was a significant correlation found between test scores and overall English background, family use or media exposure. This was unexpected, considering the above-cited studies and even from my personal observations in carrying out the study (where children with less English input tried to use Spanish, asked for words to be explained, etc.). For example, one of the 2 lowest test scores (60 out of 92 points) was that of the child with the lowest overall background score (36, the highest score for any child being 58). Upon looking at the data, it appeared that two of the children were somehow exceptional in that their results were unexpected. One of these children (subject 4) had low English input and output on the whole, but did very well on the evaluation. I suspected that this was due to a half-year stay in the United States, when she also attended school there. The other child (subject 7) had a high English background score, but a low test grade affected by numerous answers such as "I don't know". It is possible that she was shy or nervous, but it may be important to note that she was the only 8-year-old, under the 9-year-old lower "limit" originally set for subjects.

Although removing these two subjects to look at the resulting comparative statistics left only eight subjects, I did this to see if my hypothesis seemed tenable. In fact, this "pruning" showed both overall English background and family use of English to be significant. However, media input still had no significant correlation to test scores. How can these results be understood when compared to Lauren's, where media was significant and family language was not? Some factors that should be noted are that the Finnish study involved written and not oral language, that some Finnish children had the opportunity to live in a Swedish neighborhood (which proved to be more significant than family language), and that media input was fairly homogeneous among the Mexican subjects.

In conclusion, although the subject pool was small and the hypothesis relating to input and output was only supported if two subjects were pruned out, the results suggest that a larger subject pool would give stronger correlations between minority language input-output and sociolinguistic competence, especially as to language use at home. If this is the case with children who have grown up with two languages, we can expect that opportunities to

use or be exposed to the second language would be at least as important to students of that language, if not more so.

Of course, students and their families are partly responsible for seeking out those opportunities, although they may not always seem readily available. At the same time, we teachers should be aware that we need to provide some of those opportunities beyond reading schoolbooks or being exposed to teacher-talk. How can we expose students to a variety of sociolinguistic usages in an EFL situation? Some textbooks make some effort to point out varieties that are appropriate in different situations or with different people, and to offer activities to practice them. Teachers can use material in stories, plays or magazines to help students note aspects of sociolinguistics (as one teacher did to have them discover differences in male and female speech). Role-plays can be used to act out a variety of situations, levels of formality and types of roles. Videos and cassettes can give additional audio or visual cues as to what happens in different kinds of interactions. In conclusion, a combination of good materials and teacher awareness of the importance of sociolinguistics can enhance this aspect of students' L2 competence.

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