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Sinking or Swimming in the New Zealand Mainstream: Four Young Asian Learners in a New Languaculture

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Abstract

New Zealand schools are increasingly diverse in terms of language and culture, and many immigrant school children are faced with the ‘languacultural’ (Agar, 1994) challenge of learning not only a new language but a new culture of learning – to learn new classroom interaction skills (Barnard, 2005) as a route from Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills to Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (Cummins 1981, 2000). This paper explores the challenges by referring to four young Asian learners in an upper primary school classroom (Barnard 2002, 2003, 2007). Brief profiles of each of these children are given and then transcript data of their classroom interactions are presented and interpreted. In conclusion, questions are raised about the respective responsibilities of teachers and school and parents and students, to ensure that new immigrant learners swim rather than sink in the mainstream

Introduction

The New Zealand school population is increasingly diverse in terms of language and culture. Since 1987, successive governments in New Zealand have encouraged immigrants from Asian countries, and now approximately 250,000 of its residents are of Asian origin. While 63% of school students are of European descent, just over 20% of students are Maori, 8% are from Pacific island backgrounds – and 6% children from Asian backgrounds (Barnard, in press). Many of these children have limited competence in English and, although they may be provided with a few hours of English language tuition a week in withdrawal classes, they are otherwise immersed in the regular mainstream classes. In these classes they have to adjust to both a new language and a new culture of learning; Agar (1994) coined the term ‘languaculture’ to emphasise the inextricable bond between language and culture, especially in learning contexts. The experience of immersion in the mainstream is particularly acute where there are only a few, perhaps only one or two, children from the same linguistic and ethnic background in a classroom or school. Many swim, but other sink

This paper begins by discussing the languaculture in New Zealand primary schools with particular reference Cummins’ (1981) distinction between BICS and CALP and how they are operationalised in three dimensions of classroom learning described by Richards and Hurley (1990). The major part of the paper explores some of the challenges faced by new immigrant schoolchildren – especially those whose first language is not English - with reference to four young children who all joined a class of 11 year-olds at different times during the school year. Brief profiles of each of the four learners will be followed by interpretations of extracts of their classroom interaction.

This will be followed by a discussion of how the gap between existing languaculture skills and their potential development of individual children might be scaffolded, within what Vygotsky (1978) referred to as a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The notion of a ZPD will then be extended to the learning that might occur among teachers and parents of immigrant learners, as they collaborate to produce individual educational plans for the children in their care. The paper will conclude with a brief consideration of the interrelationship between empowerment, control and responsibility as regards the education of immigrant learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The languaculture in New Zealand primary schools

Cummins (1981) usefully delineated language competence into two separate categories – Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS is the ability to function in everyday conversations, where a rich interpersonal and ‘here and now’ context facilitates both comprehension and communication. CALP, on the other hand, is the ability to reflect upon and manipulate language in context-reduced circumstances, typically those of formal school learning, for the purposes of conceptual development. It is clear that all school learners need to be encouraged and helped to move from BICS – the language of the home, street and playground – to an awareness of, and proficiency in, the academic discourse assumed by CALP. Much of the language instruction that occurs in withdrawal ESOL classes focuses on content-embedded settings in order to ensure comprehensible input. However, academic achievement in mainstream classes depends on the learner’s ability to function in context-reduced situations.

Expanding on the BICS/CALP distinction, and drawing on Tikunoff’s (1985, p.4) notion of ‘student functional efficiency’, Richards & Hurley (1990) discussed the role of learning in mainstream classrooms in New Zealand and elsewhere in terms of three dimensions. The first of these is the interactional dimension, by which is meant conventions about who communicates to whom, when and how. This dimension embraces such issues as initiating, sustaining and terminating interactions, bidding for turns, asking questions, and so on. It is important to note that such conventions apply also to various forms of nonverbal communication, such as eye contact, gesture and movement around the classroom. The second dimension of classroom learning is what Richards and Hurley refer to as ‘instructional task performance’, pointing out that much of the primary school curriculum can be considered as a collection of various tasks through which learning is operationalised. Such tasks include copying, note-taking, symbolic manipulation (such as arithmetical calculation, adding punctuation to texts), information-extraction, comprehension of explicitly stated details, inferring implicit information, making summaries, comments, evaluation, etc. It is very common in New Zealand primary schools – as elsewhere – for such tasks to be carried out by students working together, in pair- or group activities. By following the interactional conventions and carrying out the instructional tasks, primary school students move into the third, cognitive, where learners develop academic competence – they learn technical terminology, comprehend new concepts, acquire new modes of enquiry, and absorb the underlying discourse structures of the school subjects. Throughout this process, language is utilised and central - and CALP is thereby achieved to one degree or another.

From the above brief description, it may be seen that the performance of instructional tasks is the pivot between the other two dimensions of interaction and cognitive-academic proficiency. Collaborative tasks are essentially communicative in nature: they require learners to

comprehend, negotiate and express meaning in order to achieve a pedagogic goal, and involve the use of metalanguage needed to manage the task. The language used thus differs from the BICS used for ordinary communication in the street or playground, much of which is employed for phatic, social and leisure purposes, rather than for focussed negotiation of conceptual understanding. It may, therefore, be useful to adopt the acronym CICS - Classroom Interpersonal Communication Skills - to indicate the specific languacultural ways that, through collaborative task performance, school children are implicitly or explicitly socialised into being 'good' learners (Barnard, 2005). Many of the interactional conventions required for task performance in this classroom were implicitly built upon by the teacher, based on her assumptions of students' previous experience in local primary schools. Others, such as the '5 Cs' (care, courtesy, cooperation, challenge, consideration) were explicitly explained here in the first few weeks of the school year. The CICS that applied in this classroom were largely unfamiliar to the immigrant learners in focus in this study because they had been inducted into somewhat different interactional conventions in schools in their home countries. It is important to note that they arrived at the school at various times during the academic year – and thus after the teacher had provided specific explanation of some of these the other class members. In short, they had to pick up the interactional conventions ad hoc.

Four young Asian immigrant learners

'Jack' was an eleven-year-old Korean boy who arrived in school towards the middle of March - that is, some six weeks after the start of the school year. Immediately after enrolment, he was assessed by the English language teacher and was deemed to have 'minimal English'; he knew the alphabet, some basic words and could count up to 20 (after 16, only with some prompting). It was decided that he should receive the maximum available amount of tuition in ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages), some four or five hours of withdrawal classes each week. For the rest of the time, he was placed in the mainstream class, where he sat among a group of boys who, although friendly towards him, were unable to communicate with him verbally, or effectively assist him in his schoolwork. There were no other Korean students in the class, or in the year group.

'Jean', from Taiwan, arrived in May and although her command of English was considerably greater than Jack's, she too was allocated four or five hours in withdrawal ESOL lessons. In the mainstream classroom, she sat among a group of very able and friendly girls who greatly helped her to understand what was required of her in both interactional and task performance terms. At first, she was very unsure of herself but with the help of these girls her confidence, and communicative competence, grew over the year.

'Alina' arrived from Taiwan in August, and could not speak, or understand, any English at all. Like Jean and Jack, she was allocated 4-5 hours of ESOL withdrawal tuition a week. In the mainstream class, she was seated beside Jean, who was asked by the teacher to help her. Over the next few months, Jean greatly assisted her to settle into the class routine. They invariably spoke in Mandarin, and only very rarely was Alina seen to interact with other students, and only then when Jean was absent – for example, when the latter was attending her own ESOL lessons.

'John', also from Taiwan, arrived in mid-July. Although both the ESOL specialist and the mainstream

teacher had been led to believe, and acted upon the assumption, that his English was ‘minimal, in fact his conversational English was very fluent. He was, however, totally unfamiliar with the social conventions underlying class work in New Zealand primary schools, and his pragmatic awkwardness led him into verbal conflict with both peers and teacher. He was never seen to interact with the only two other Taiwanese students (both girls) in the classroom.

Classroom interactions

Extract 1 – Jack

The following extract occurred during a lesson in late June – several weeks after Jack’s arrival. The teacher told the class that they had two minutes to finish their work, an instruction that Jack appeared to understand. He sighed, perhaps with exasperation, and continued checking in his dictionary, muttering occasionally and unintelligibly in Korean (indicated below in *italics*), and humming to himself. He then turned to his neighbour and wrote with his finger on the desk:

01. Jack: [writing with his finger on desk] Today?
02. Mike: Tell?
03. Jack: Today
04. Mike: Today. Do you want me to spell it?
05. Jack: Er - yes. Uhh
06. Mike: OK, erm. Here [writes ‘today’ for Jack]
07. Jack: Wah?
08. Mike: What do you want?
09. Jack: Want? What xxx
10. Mike: Yeah
11. Jack: Waa
12. Mike: What - do - you - want, from me? Do you want me to tell you something?
13. Jack: xxx
14. Mike: Tell.
15. Jack: Aaa
16. Mike: Tell.
17. Jack: [sighs, apparently in exasperation] *itaekaji* (Up to now / so far) ... [starts to write with his finger]
18. Mike: When... Tell... How>
19. Jack: *Ah, ahu.* (Ah) [as he writes with his finger on the desk]
20. Mike: Ah, get it finished! Get it - You’ve got to get it finished today, or you’ve probably got to go home and do it for homework.
21. Jack: *xxxx* [appears to understand]

Extract 2. Jean

The following interaction occurred between Jean and two English-speaking classmates one week after her arrival in class. The students were given the task of re-writing an unpunctuated text from an overhead transparency. The teacher spent about ten minutes explaining the task, and eliciting example and rules of punctuation, and then set the class to work:

01. Tilly: (To Jean) You have to write this down. You have to write it down, OK?
02. Jean: Uh?
03. Tilly: And punctuate it
04. Jean: Punctu?
05. Tilly: And punctuate it
06. Jean: I have to punctuate?
07. Sally: You have to go through it and put punctuation and put capital letters, full stops, where you think they should be
08. Tilly: Like that
09. Jean: So we have to copy that down?
10. Sally: You write it down, and erm, you put all the full stops in and>
11. Jean: And the capital letters>
12. Sally: Yea>

13. Jean: OK (starts to do so) Is that called punctual, punct-tuation?
 14. Sally: Yes. Punctuation
- Jean gets on with the task – no further interaction for several minutes

Extract 3. John

One day, the teacher initiated a Social Studies unit on New Zealand disasters, which occupied the class for most afternoons for two weeks. After doing pre-tasks and tests, the pupils were told each to choose an individual topic, carry out library research, make notes, discuss their work in groups and eventually prepare and give oral and written presentations. Ms Wilkins did not require John to do a project, although he had performed reasonably well on the associated pre-tasks; instead, she gave him some simple - and unrelated - vocabulary worksheets, which he did quite easily, quickly – and accurately. With little else but time on his hands, he spent the class hours devoted to the project either reading his atlas, or drifting from group to group. On occasion, he was asked for his help; for example, at the start of the second week a Somali girl, Amah, sought his help:

01. Amah: xxx?
02. John: Draw a map of New Zealand? This one? Sure!
03. Amah: Like that one, please - cos I don't know>
04. John: Did you need more little?
05. Amah: I need a big one
06. John: A big one?
07. Amah: Just like that one.
08. John: OK
09. Amah : Can you draw?
10. John: Yep I can... I can. I have drawed with, with yeah this pen, with this one ... and it's easy>
11. Amah: It's not easy>
12. John: It's easy - for me!
13. Amah: No. (a few minutes later, Amah was able to reciprocate his help)
14. John: (to Amah) What's that? Do you need to do work like that? ... (to self) I got to do thing xxx busy... making their own things... Oh! (singing as he writes the locations of certain disasters on Amah's map of NZ). Wellington flewd.
15. Amah: Flood (pronouncing it correctly).
16. John: Oh, flood! (laughs) What's flood?
17. Amah: Flood's where xxx (explains inaudibly) ... F L O O D. Flood
18. John: dee ddee (singing as he draws. The teacher approaches)
19. T: What are you doing John?
20. John: Oh, I'm helping Amah.
21. T: How 'bout you do your spelling?
22. John: OK
23. T: Be a good idea? (moves away)
24. John: Na-haha (quietly – to himself?)
25. Amah: xxx spelling xxx
26. John : xxx (mutters inaudibly to self, as he reads through his spelling list).

Extract 4: Alina

The following interactions occurred very shortly afterwards during a vocabulary task in a lesson in August. Jean had been helped to do the task, as usual, by Tilly, when Alina came from a withdrawal English language class, and the teacher approached the girls. (Utterances in *italics* were spoken in Mandarin.)

- 01 T : Alina, do you know what to do?
- 02 Alina: xxx (inaudible response)
- 03 T: Yes, you do. Good girl. How are you finding those words Alina, er I mean, Jean?
- 04 Jean: Erm - not too good.

- 05 T: : Not too hard? Not too easy? OK Good! (moves away to talk to another pupil)
- 06 Alina: *What's this about?*
- 07 Jean: *It's on the second page. You have to write down all the nouns on the list*
- 08 Alina: *What?*
- 09 Jean: *The nouns. You look at that and write down all the nouns. There are eight nouns on that. And you have to find out>*
- 10 Alina: *Eight?*
- 11 Jean: *Yes, eight. You have to find out and write down. (Two minute spass...)*
- 12 Alina: *What's this?*
- 13 Jean: *You don't know the meaning of (spelling aloud in English) A T E?*
- 14 Alina : *Is it a noun or verb?*
- 15 Jean: *It's grammar*
- 16 Alina: *Did you find out?*
- 17 Jean: *Do you think it's a noun or a verb .. I really don't know... (quietly, to herself?) probably it's a noun, or probably it's a verb. (pitch + volume up) You should find out from the translator (Alina's electronic dictionary). They have some examples and you can figure it out. ... If you check the translator it will tell you if it is a verb or not. I think we could check the noun first. "Noun" means ming-su. If you look at the word "n", that means noun.*

The above interactions are merely vignettes - 'snapshots' - of student-to-student interactions. Fuller descriptions and interpretations have been published elsewhere: of the classroom context (Barnard & McLellan, 2008), of Jean and Alina (Barnard, 2002), of Jack (Barnard, 2003) and John (Barnard, in press). What is evident from these short extracts is that there was a tendency for classmates to try to help the newcomers to adjust to the new learning culture. Jean was assisted to perform a task by two willing and, as it happens, bright and intelligent girls. Mike tried, with some difficulty, to help Jack understand what was required of him as regards task completion. John reciprocated the help Amah gave him until the teacher interrupted the interaction, and Jean, having immediately previously been helped to do a vocabulary task by Tilly, was able to co-construct Alina's understanding through the use of their shared first language. Such interactions may be considered as at least partial zones of proximal development, which Vygotsky (1978) defined as follows:

the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

The newcomers' classmates were acting as more capable peers although, as indicated by the interactions between John and Amah and Jean and Alina, there was also an element of give-and-take, as each partner in the dialogue worked with language to co-construct mutual understanding.

Of course, the extent to which these children were assisted varied considerably. As has been shown, even towards the end of the year Jean remained fairly dependent on Tilly and other girls to facilitate her learning, but was nevertheless willing and - at least to some extent - able to help Alina. The following year, Jean won a prize for English composition. Even at the end of the year, Jack's level of communicative competence never enabled him to speak more than a single English sentence and he and his family returned to Korea. John's communicative competence was far in excess of the other three, but he failed to come to terms with the pragmatic conventions of classroom discourse and his maladroitness less him to be considered 'naughty' and 'disruptive'; he, too, returned to his homeland at the end of the year. Alina remained

instructionally dependent on Jean for the rest of the school year but became much more autonomous subsequently, as her languacultural competence and confidence developed.

Bridging the distance

While it is reasonable to assume that, on their arrival in this country, the four learners introduced above were fairly typical of their compatriots, the extent to which individual children conform to these linguistic and cultural stereotypes will, of course, vary considerably. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to understand, literally, where the particular children are coming from – and equally for parents to understand the new direction their children are now heading. Clearly, the notion of the ZPD can well be applied to the classroom context of children from diverse language backgrounds. In order for a ZPD to be created, three things are needed: first, the identification of the learner's current level of linguistic, cognitive and cultural development; secondly, an estimate of the potential levels of development in these three areas; thirdly, the provision of appropriate assistance to enable the learner to close the gap between the actual and potential levels. The overall aim of the ZPD should be “what the child can do with assistance today, she will be able to do by herself tomorrow” (Vygotsky, 1978 p. 87). In this process of ascertaining the potential development, it is important to remember that the learner not only has needs to be met through the learning process, but also strengths and *resources* to bring to bear. If these positive factors are not harnessed, the learner will remain in a deficit state of instructional dependency. It should be evident that the levels of actual and potential development cannot be ascertained merely by assessing bilingual learners' language competence (which is virtually all that is done when most immigrant learners are enrolled in New Zealand schools). Rather, there is also a need to take into account the learner's cognitive and affective receptivity (Kaviani, 2003) to the culture of learning prevalent in New Zealand schools – as discussed above. This requires interpolating future progress in the specific classroom context in which the learner is to be placed on the basis of that learner's previous and current experience of learning in his or her own cultural contexts. This can only be achieved by those centrally involved in the education process - the teachers and, equally if not more important, parents. They need to share their respective knowledge, experience and understandings.

Individual Languaculture Plans

In New Zealand, as elsewhere, it is recommended that learners with ‘special needs’ - by which is usually meant those who are physically, intellectually or psychologically challenged - should be provided with Individual Educational Plans (IEPs). These plans are collaboratively devised by teachers and other experts with relevant knowledge and skills. By sharing their knowledge about the child's sociocultural background and learning context, the IEP team can jointly construct viable objectives, and scaffold and monitor the learner's progress towards the achievement of these objectives. The basic IEP approach can be adapted for the languaculture development of immigrant learners, who do of course have special, and identifiable, needs. The essential point that meaning is co-constructed is true of all forms of conceptual and cultural learning – whether by children or adults. By entering into a constructive dialogue, teachers and parents can supply separate pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, based upon respective knowledge and experience, and thereby mutually construct appropriate ILPs (Individual Languaculture Plans) for the children in their charge. In a structured environment, parents can provide direct or indirect information and advice about their child's existing levels of ability: direct information may be derived from their own knowledge of their child; indirect data can be obtained from (translations of) school reports and transcripts. The mainstream teacher can advise parents in

general about the three dimensions of classroom learning which operate in New Zealand, and which particular ground rules apply in their own classrooms – for example, in terms of codes of social behaviour, performance standards, homework, etc. Differences between New Zealand and Taiwanese or Korean educational values and practices can be explored to mutual benefit. An ESOL specialist can make a useful contribution by identifying the learner's linguistic (and, to some extent, cultural) needs and resources, and could provide an informed prognosis in these areas. Teachers and parents can call upon other resource people from within and outside the school - for example, community interpreters can facilitate the process. This dialogic process might initially appear time-consuming and relatively expensive, both in terms of direct costs (e.g. of interpreters) and the opportunity costs of teacher-time spent in this way rather than in actually teaching. However, these costs are outweighed by a deeper understanding by teachers of key sociocultural factors influencing the immigrant learner, and a better knowledge by parents (and hence their children) of the new culture of learning. This interaction might then lead to a more active involvement by the parents in their children's schooling and languaculture development.

Conclusion - Empowerment, control and responsibility

The process of devising an ILP is itself a ZPD - one in which parents and teachers scaffold each other's learning, and move from their existing levels of knowledge and awareness to higher potential levels. By co-constructing understanding about the child, they promote not merely the child's development, but also their own. As a result of this collaboration, both teachers and parents gain and are thereby empowered to make better, more effective decisions on behalf of the learner. Of course, they can only go so far in leading the proverbial horse to water: it needs to be recognised that, ultimately, the learner must take control of the learning by converting the educational input of the classroom discourse into intake – appropriation. However, it is too much to expect young immigrant learners such as the four illustrated in this paper to take full *responsibility* for the process. Teachers can exercise control over, and assume due responsibility for, the specific environment of learning in order to provide educational opportunities for the child. But they have to plan and manage the learning of about thirty individual children, and this means that parents must take a large measure of responsibility – perhaps even greater than the teachers - for their children's development. It is, I believe, the responsibility of immigrant parents to obtain information about the way that educational values in New Zealand are conceptualised and realised, and take an active part in the education of their children. The onus is on them to understand the extent to which these values, and the ensuing policies and practices, differ from those in the educational system with which they and their children are familiar. It is also their responsibility to keep informed about the school's activities, and then actively monitor, encourage and promote their children's languaculture development.

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