Developing in a New Language-Speaking Setting

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This study investigated the effect of English-language acquisition on the learning experiences of a four-year-old Taiwanese immigrant child in a state kindergarten in New Zealand. Data was collected through child observations and parents’ and teachers’ interviews. The child’s learning experience was analysed based on five behaviours—‘taking an interest’, ‘being involved’, ‘persisting with difficulty’, ‘expressing a point of view’ and ‘taking responsibility’—adopted from the child assessment technique of ‘Learning Stories’ utilised in many childcare services in New Zealand. Results suggested that, regardless of his English-language incompetence, the child demonstrated learning dispositions under two circumstances: first, there was little interaction required between him and the English-speaking children; second, there was a teacher participating in what he was doing. It is suggested that the child’s learning outcomes were contingent on the situations in which he found himself.

Introduction

Many children from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB) are attending English-speaking early childhood services in New Zealand. At a time when educational practices with young children are premised on a holistic developmental view, the English-language incompetence of NESB children is likely to constrain these practices.

The aim of this preliminary study is to provide an empirical basis on which to formulate an enquiry into whether NESB young children have difficulties developing holistically in English-speaking childcare settings. The study describes the learning experiences of a four-year-old Taiwanese immigrant boy, through child observations and parents’ and teachers’ interviews. The ‘Learning Stories’ approach introduced by Margaret Carr will be applied to assess his learning experiences (Carr, 2001). This approach is derived from Te Whāriki, the national early childhood curriculum of New Zealand, a document that reflects a focus on children’s holistic development (Ministry of Education, 1996).

The study background

Research tells us that, in English-speaking settings, NESB children encounter a variety of learning barriers when acquiring the English language (Barnard, 2000; Okagaki & Diamond, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000). These authors indicate that, in respect of the children themselves, these barriers are usually generated by their personalities, social skills and communication strategies. An inadequately-structured learning environment poses another challenge. Researchers claim that, unless NESB children are provided with a friendly and enjoyable learning setting, comprehensible learning activities, developmentally appropriate language input and helpful people, learning in a new language environment is very challenging (Arnberg, 1987; Baker & Jones, 1998; Brown, 2000; Rosenberg, 1996; Tabors, 1998). In Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke’s opinion, this is because NESB young children need to deal with dual tasks, ‘to practise language while trying out a range of activities’ (2000, p. 34).

In Tabors’ study (1998), the most identifiable stumbling block in the NESB learning environment was set by NESB children’s interactions with other people. A common phenomenon, as Tabors observed, is that young second-language learners displayed difficulties in interacting with others. The lack of mutual language often ‘results in the [NESB] child being treated as invisible, or like a baby, by other children, leading to frustration or withdrawal’ (p. 22). This phenomenon leads to a ‘double bind of second-language learning’ (p. 22). NESB children, being socially isolated, are obliged to face linguistic constraints. Linguistic inability, in turn, further reinforces their social isolation.

NESB children may also face barriers at certain stages of English-language acquisition. Initially, young NESB learners often demonstrate a ‘continued use of the
home language in the new language context' (Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000, p. 47) because 'they have not yet discovered that there is a new language being used in this new setting' (Tabors, 1998, p. 22). Gradually, some children begin to use nonverbal responses or single words and progressively learn to use new words. Others, however, may go through 'a period of silence' (Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000, p. 47). The silent period occurs after young learners become aware of the impossibility of using the first language to make sense to the second-language speakers. 'During this period, [NESB young] children refuse to speak in English' (Clarke, 2003, p. 193). They silently internalise a second language before attempting to articulate it (Fillmore, 1976, cited in Grosjean, 1982; Quiñones-Eatman, 2001; Mitakidou-Kokonis, 1995). The length of the silent period for young NESB learners varies from a few days to a few months (Quiñones-Eatman, 2001) and they will all gradually speak in English. Given the particular characteristics of young NESB learners, especially at the stage of home language use and the silent period, they are seen as subject to some challenges, particularly in terms of socialisation.

The study
Why this study?

This study was a response to the learning needs of young NESB children. Given that the discourses surrounding this topic in New Zealand have mostly, if not all, focused on children in schools (Barnard, 2000; Brooker, 2000; Thorpe, 1988), it was necessary that this study be based on an early childhood educational context.

The study approach

A case study was used. Following this approach, it was decided to use child observation, and parent and teacher interviews to collect data.

This preliminary study did not aim at a definitive conclusion but was intended to discover specific issues to provide some insights into similar future studies. Since a case study approach helps researchers understand the particular, but not what is generally true of many (Merriam, 1988), I believe it is appropriate for this study.

In an attempt to substantiate the descriptive nature of the case, I gathered data by directly observing the child and requesting information from his parents and teachers. The considerations which led to the adoption of observations were based on their usefulness to generate ideas, to answer specific questions, to provide realistic pictures of behaviour or events, and to more profoundly understand children's development (Irwin & Bushnell, 1980). The use of interviews was intended to clarify any uncertainty and to alert me to any other important factors which had not been considered (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). By using these two data collection techniques, an overall description of the learning experiences of the studied child was expected to be achieved.

The participants

This study, conducted in a state kindergarten in New Zealand, involved the participation of a four-year-old Taiwanese boy, Sam, his parents and his teacher. When the study commenced, Sam had been in New Zealand for six months and in the kindergarten for three months. Sam spoke fluent Mandarin.

The reason for the selection of a child of this age is that his first language was already established. Since the study subject is a NESB child, only one who has some linguistic foundations in their first language can be classified into this group. My choice of studying a Taiwanese child was based on consideration of our common first language. Knowing the child's language would be likely to facilitate the research work.

Sam's parents came to New Zealand with him. They were both educated professionals in Taiwan, and were looking for jobs when I was doing the study.

The teacher involved in this study was the head teacher of the kindergarten. She had a degree in early childhood education and had been working in this field for 30 years at the time I conducted the study.

The procedure

Observations in the study were made over four weeks, three days a week and three hours a day, during Sam's entire kindergarten stay. Field notes were taken in the form of running records, using pen and paper. Sam and all the things that affected him in his environment were noted, including other people, objects, language, events and activities. I aimed to see how Sam managed individual learning activities and how he played with others. The time taken for different episodes was also recorded.

Semi-structured interviews with the teachers and Sam's parents were held at the beginning and conclusion of the study and were supplemented by informal interviews throughout the data collection period. Each interview lasted for about one hour. The parent
The interview was conducted in Mandarin. The aim of these interviews was to obtain relevant information about Sam, Sam’s learning experience at the centre, and his learning experiences at home. Upon completion of the data collection, there were further interviews to have the data cross-checked.

### Table 1. The semi-structured interview questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview questions for the parent</th>
<th>Interview questions for the teachers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Can you describe your child, such as his interests, personality?</td>
<td>1. Can you tell me about the child’s personality and interests?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. How many members are in your family?</td>
<td>2. Do you know anything about how children learn a second language?</td>
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<td>3. Does he have any friends here or out of centre?</td>
<td>3. Have you ever worked with NESB young children before?</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. In what way does he tend to make friends?</td>
<td>a. What is your general impression of NESB young children’s learning?</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. How do you know he keeps friendships?</td>
<td>b. Do you have any special techniques in place for these children?</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. How important do you know friends are for him?</td>
<td>4. In what areas did you see the child had progressed the most after coming here?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Did he know any English before coming here? Has he learnt some English after coming here?</td>
<td>5. Does he have any friends here?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What language do you use at home?</td>
<td>6. How does he play?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What was his first week like here?</td>
<td>a. Mostly alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. In what areas did he progress the most after coming here?</td>
<td>b. With a peer (cooperatively, in parallel, or otherwise)</td>
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<td>8. Have you ever communicated with the teachers about what you wanted?</td>
<td>c. With teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. What particular needs do you think that your child has at this time?</td>
<td>d. In groups (cooperatively, in parallel, or otherwise)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Have you ever attempted to request his parent’s expectations and needs? How?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. What particular needs do you think he has now?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Data Analysis

Observational notes about Sam’s learning experiences were transcribed into three categories: ‘playing alone’, ‘playing with other children’, and ‘playing with teachers’. Interview transcripts were collated on information about Sam’s personality, social experiences, and learning needs. The information gained through the interviews provided a background picture of Sam and were utilised to support the interpretation of the observed data.

Once the data was organised, it was further analysed using ‘Learning Stories’, an assessment framework based on the learning dispositions introduced in Te Whariki.

Te Whariki sets out the principles, strands, goals and learning outcomes for children’s holistic learning and development in the early childhood years (Ministry of Education, 1996). In this document, learning outcomes are developed for each goal in each strand. But, unlike the strands and goals, learning outcomes are not definitive but described as the combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes. According to Te Whariki, learning dispositions—‘habits of mind’ or ‘patterns of learning’—are one of the ways these three factors combine (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 44). Carr (1998) explains learning dispositions as learners’ response to an activity by taking action and implementing their knowledge and strategies.

Considering their benefits for children’s learning, a framework of learning dispositions is developed in connection with the five strands of Te Whariki in the form of ‘Learning Stories’ (Carr, 2001). ‘Learning Stories’ translates these strands into five corresponding learning dispositions which then are converted to five observable behaviours. Learning dispositions as ‘worthwhile outcomes for early childhood education’ (Carr, 2001, p. 47) are thus crystallised in application to assessing children’s learning experiences. The following table frames the ‘Learning Stories’.

In Table 2, a learning behaviour is defined in each strand to reflect a learning disposition. Unlike dispositions, which are descriptive and complex, these behaviours can be observed, noted, and further used to assess the learner’s learning dispositions in each strand. According to Carr (2001), the behaviours within a particular activity often appear in sequence: taking an interest—being involved—persisting with difficulty, challenge and uncertainty—expressing a point of view or feeling—taking responsibility. My observations on Sam’s particular activities follow this sequence (see Table 3).
In New Zealand early childhood settings, 'Learning Stories' is regularly used in recognition of its nature as a credit assessment model (Carr, 2001) and its emphasis on the learners feeling comfortable with their learning environments (Reid, 2002).

My use of this framework to assess Sam’s learning experiences was similarly premised on its focus on the relationship between learners and their learning environment. There was a degree of congruence between this focus and the emphasis placed on NESB children’s learning. Using this approach, the purpose of this study—to see whether the English-language incompetence impacted upon Sam’s display of the behaviours that other children learned to display in New Zealand and, if so, under what circumstances it happened—would be accomplished.

Findings and discussion
The study found that in some cases Sam followed his interests with persistence but rarely took on responsibilities or communicated with others. How he behaved, to a large extent, was influenced by whether he could get involved in what he did or wanted to do.

**Succeeding in displaying the learning behaviors**
At single play, Sam could follow his interests in the areas which were usually played in by few children. At popular play areas, he waited until a place was vacated. To a certain extent, Sam’s attempts to get involved in an activity were determined by the nature of that activity. It seemed that the less demanding the activity, the more easily Sam could show his interest in it (McClothlin, 1997).

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**Table 2. Framework of ‘Learning Stories’ technique**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The strands of curriculum</th>
<th>Key dispositions</th>
<th>Key dispositions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>Courage and curiosity</td>
<td>Taking an interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wellbeing</td>
<td>Trust and playfulness</td>
<td>Being involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>Perseverance</td>
<td>Persisting with difficulty, challenge and uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>Expressing a point of view or feeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Taking responsibility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Table 3. Data analysis based on the five learning behaviours (Carr, 1998)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The behaviour</th>
<th>An activity (Individual/peer/in groups)</th>
<th>An activity (Individual/peer/in groups)</th>
<th>An activity (Individual/peer/in groups)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I look for</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking an interest (take an interest in an activity)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being involved (become involved in it over a sustained period)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persisting with difficulty (use a range of strategies to solve problems associated with the activity)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Communicating with others (express ideas and feeling with others in a range of ways)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking responsibility (help others and contribute to the program)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Once he became involved in an activity, Sam demonstrated persistence with the difficulties associated with it. Getting involved in some activities was the most crucial point at which Sam substantiated his interests and took responsibility for his own learning, even if most of the time he ended up completing a task himself without communicating with others. The following example illustrates this.
Example of playing alone
Sam saw three children building a block bridge. He watched for six minutes until these children left. Sam went to the area. He first sorted out some blocks. Then he placed some big square blocks on the bottom and continued to pile. Sam used up all the squares and had to use some triangle blocks to carry on. His first attempt to pile some triangle blocks on top of other triangle blocks failed. The new piles fell. Sam changed these blocks to many different angles and finally made them stay firmly. 'Da Lou' (meaning 'a big house'), Sam said to himself. He smiled at his 'Da Lou'.

On nearly all occasions, a teacher’s purposeful participation in an activity involving Sam enabled him to develop the five learning behaviours. Sam responded to the teachers’ queries and acted enthusiastically in teacher-organised activities. Every time a teacher made an attempt to interact with Sam, he responded in some form of language. Sam seemed much more reactive to the teachers than to his English-speaking peers. This supports Freeman and Freeman’s notion (1994, cited in Quifiones-Eatman, 2001) that preschoolers are multifaceted individuals who need knowledgeable and sensitive teachers to usher them into the new language of the school.

Example of playing with teachers
Sam was standing by a table, watching two children digging in the sandpit. A teacher went over to him. ‘Come on, Sam,’ she gestured. Sam moved to the teacher. They walked to the sandpit. The teacher picked up a water hose from the sandpit and handed it to Sam. ‘Sam, hold it.’ Sam took it. The teacher turned the water on and said to Sam, ‘Let’s give them some water.’ ‘Yes, water,’ answered Sam. The teacher picked up a spade and dug a hole with other children. She pointed to the hole. ‘Sam, this is a hole.’ ‘A hole,’ Sam repeated. He continued to fill the hole with water and later went to adjust the tap when seeing the water flow too quickly. Sam dropped the hose and picked up a spade, joining the others to dig the hole. The hole got deeper. Sam turned up the water. ‘Water,’ he said to the teacher. ‘Yes, Sam. Good boy,’ Sam smiled.

Example of playing with other children
Sam walked to the water tank. He found a space and picked up a plastic cup from the tank. He first filled the cup with water. Sam then tipped the water into a bottle and poured the bottle water into a funnel. After that Sam picked up another cup, a plate, a spoon and a bucket, filled each of them with water and tipped all the water into the tank. A few minutes later, an English-speaking girl came. Then a boy joined her. Sam dropped his playing toys and watched them. The boy said to the girl, ‘You hold the funnel. I tip the water.’ The girl nodded. They did it and later picked up other toys. Sam silently took off his apron and left the tank.

Sam’s difficulty in socialising with other children may also indicate that he was going through a period of silence. Given that the silent period is characterised by young second-language learners’ silent preparation for producing new language items (Tabors, 1998), Sam’s unengaged and silent behaviour in many social activities suggests that he might be at this stage. Without actively communicating with others, Sam’s contribution in group situations could undoubtedly be restricted.

Teaching implications
The teachers played a crucial role in supporting Sam. This finding supports the conclusions of many previous researchers, who state that early childhood teachers can provide young NESB children with the language
learning sources that enable them to interact with people and with expressive learning materials (Okagaki & Diamond, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000; Tabors, 1998). The teaching implications, as drawn from Sam's case and some literature, fall into the following categories.

1. **Teacher attention**

It is seen from this study that Sam appears to be a shy child, who lacks strategies for making friends. NESB children like Sam, as suggested by Quifiones-Eatman (2001), cannot be left alone for long periods, nor be left to initiate contact on their own. They need to participate in language exchanges with friends in playful contexts. To this end, teachers are advised to 'intervene' by arranging for them to play with other children (Fraser & Wakefield, 1986, cited in Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000, p. 80). Some social activities with friendly children should be purposefully set up for NESB children. Teachers need to make other children aware that NESB children want to be their friend but, because they are learning English, they need some assistance. Tabors' (1998) suggestions of engineering the seating arrangement at big group activities for NESB children and other children are valuable here.

2. **Learning setting**

The fact that Sam could follow his interests in quiet places points out a need to provide him with some activities which demand little or no verbal communication from him (Quifiones-Eatman, 2001). It is not so much the nature of the activities that is important, but the setting of the learning environment.

3. **Working with NESB parents**

An important aspect of young NESB children's learning is NESB parents' involvement in their experiences in English-speaking childcare settings. In Sam's case, his parents stayed with him as much as they could. Their presence, according to his mother, although not looking like making much difference to Sam's development, would have eased some of the difficulties he encountered. His mother said Sam was frightened of the new place in a secure way (Dalli, 2001).

**Conclusion**

Despite the fact that the small scale of this study generated the findings which reflected only what happened to Sam during my observations, it provided some interesting insights that might inform further studies. The study shows that English-language acquisition has an effect on the learning experiences of NESB children. Although the English-language incompetence appears to be the most visible cause of Sam's inability to follow his interests, the insights gained from this study point to his difficulty in being a group member as the major problem.

As my study progressed, Sam displayed more confidence in socialising with other children, although his language ability was still limited. He played alongside those children who were happy to use nonverbal language with him. Although I never recorded an example of Sam cooperating with other children, his integration into the group germinated through his familiarity with the environment. This should help ease parents' and teachers' worries about whether NESB children's English limitation will cause a substantial delay in their development as a social member. Even if NESB young children cannot quickly become an active social member of the new group and use the English language competently, it is likely that they will develop confidence and competence in English-language settings if they know there are people who can be their friends.

**References**


