THE SHARED BOOK EXPERIENCE AND ESL

P.R.T. De'Ath
Institute of Education, USP.

INTRODUCTION

This article notes a progressive change of emphasis from an analysis of the structures of language to a study of the ways in which children acquire language as influences upon ESL programmes. The characteristics of successful first language acquisition and the characteristics of successful second language learners are listed. In an account of the shared book experience as a learning procedure these characteristics are explored in order to demonstrate the reliable base upon which the shared book experience method rests. The methodology involved with the shared book approach is detailed for ESL programme designers and substantiated not only on theoretical grounds but also empirically through reference to its application in the Niue Island experiment of 1978.

CHANGING DIRECTIONS

While highly structured teaching programmes for ESL have taught us much about the complexity of the English language they do not teach us about the way children acquire language. Indeed, it is clear that we cannot draw conclusions about the second merely by increasing our knowledge about the first. Consequently, a frequently heard suggestion is that ESL programme designers and teachers should take into consideration the propositions which are coming to light about how languages are acquired. Furthermore, there seems to be an unwritten law which says that second and subsequent languages cannot be acquired in the same way a first language develops. A closer analysis of how children learn language reveals, however, that the two processes may in fact be very similar. Such a proposition gives rise to new possibilities in ESL, one of which is described in this article.

New methods are becoming available to ESL teachers but we must be sure that any new method rests upon a sound theoretical justification, and on empirical evidence of its advantage over existing methods. Before exploring *the shared book experience* as a relatively new approach to learning ESL it is important to explore the premises which should underpin not only the shared book experience but any ESL programme.

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PRINCIPLES FOR PROGRAMME DESIGN

Rubin (1975) suggests that "... there has been too much attention on the input to the learner and too little on what is going on in the learner himself". Her perceptive analysis of second language acquisition gives us a different approach to the considerations which programme designers should constantly have in mind. She asks the question: "What can the good language learner teach us?" In summary, her answer provides us with seven characteristics which have a striking similarity to the characteristics of good first language learners. In Rubin's view, the successful second language learner has these qualities:

(a) He is a willing and accurate guesser.
(b) He has a strong drive to communicate.
(c) He is not inhibited.
(d) He attends to form and desires accuracy.
(e) He practises frequently.
(f) He monitors both his speech and that of others.
(g) He attends to meaning.

A programme which capitalizes on these characteristics and encourages their growth in learners would then have much to commend it.

Rubin's second and seventh characteristics (b and g) touch on a vital issue. Increasingly, communication is being regarded as the conveyance and retrieval of meaning and this must become a major preoccupation in programme design. Carroll (1966) elaborates on this characteristic. "The more meaningful the material to be learned the greater the facility in learning and retention." There is the implication that the learning of ESL, or anything else for that matter, cannot be readily achieved through artificial situations and drilled into permanent use. The programme must involve very genuine needs to communicate in very real situations. Dodson (1979), in describing the development of bilingualism, expresses much the same idea: "It is important to recognize that in a bilingual education programme, language must always be a tool, a vehicle, for communication and not remain an end in itself."

Rubin's first characteristic, guessing, is a very valuable technique which either leads to or confirms language learning. Smith (1971) describes the process of meaning retrieval as the reduction of uncertainty. The guessing process is precisely this and has application both in the receptive (listening and reading) aspects of language as well as in the expressive arts of speaking and writing. The user bases his guess on the available cues. His guess reduces his uncertainty about the nature of the author's or the speaker's message.

In summary, then, the ESL programme designer should:

— recognize the contributions that first language acquisition processes can make;

— develop his programme in such a way that the recipients grow in the characteristics of good learners;

— ensure that the programme is concerned with meaning retrieval;

— involve communication as a functional tool used generally to satisfy needs.

PRINCIPLES OF FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

In the past two decades there have been some startling revelations about the nature of first language acquisition. We now realize that children learn to speak their first language without any organized programme and without the aid of trained teachers. They accomplish this incredibly complex task in their pre-school years with almost 100% accuracy. In a growing awareness of this phenomenon the psycholinguists have begun to sift out the elements of it so that they can replicate them for the development of literacy in the first language. It is appropriate for ESL programme designers to apply these elements also to the acquisition of the second language. If children can learn their first language with such accuracy, why can't they learn a second in like manner?

While language is certainly learned behaviour, the prime element in its acquisition appears to be motivation. Young children learn to use language to control their environment, satisfy their needs, achieve acceptance, etc. The child gets a payoff when he's right and nothing — not even a sense of failure — when he is wrong.

The only frustration in the process is when adults won't attend to his use of language. He is motivated by need and he uses language functionally.

The acquisition is highly complex. Some authorities (Smith, 1978; Holdaway, 1979) describe it as a process leading to smoothly operating systems. The many alternatives for word use and structural form occur as the child proceeds through his early years. He uses what words he can, experiments with others and ignores the most confusing until he has had sufficient experience with them. He tries out many things he has heard, but he does this primarily to satisfy some need of his own.

In his listening activity he quickly forms the generalization that what he hears around him makes sense. People do not waste time uttering nonsense and so

he specializes in meaning retrieval. In the same way in his attempts at speech he strives to make sense. He is not uttering words for their own sake but rather because he wants to communicate.

Children have an amazing capacity for learning language. Smith (1978) describes their ability to add daily to the words they can comprehend and use, the structures they make sense of, the thousands of objects, people, places, events, etc., they can name. Because of this enormous learning capacity and providing the other desirable conditions are met, it can be assumed that restrictions on learning need not be as strict as has been previously assumed. The careful grading and sequencing of words and structures in ESL programmes may have been overdone.

Thus these few elements of first language acquisition begin to expose the ways in which ESL programmes could be influenced. Motivation to use language as a functional tool must be high. The environment should foster success. There must be a wide range of language activity where receiving and conveying meaning is more important than oral drills although, as Rubin points out, there should be frequent practice too. Finally, we should not insult the child's capacity for learning. If all the other conditions are satisfied we would indeed inhibit him by attempting to teach him his second language just one structure at a time. Such a procedure also has the effect of denying the child opportunity to practise the skill of guessing meaning, a skill which it has already been emphasized has some place of importance in language acquisition.

What we need is a teaching method which will satisfy all these criteria. The 'immersion method', where the whole of school activity is thrown over to the second language, has not proved to be the best answer elsewhere and for a variety of reasons would not be acceptable in the South Pacific. Territorial policy at the elementary school level generally favours the retention and development of vernacular oracy and literacy. Moreover, the English language performance of many teachers is not adequate for them to facilitate language development with any degree of accuracy by this method. The village life of many children is entirely vernacular and the events at school would not carry over into the other events of the day.

THE SHARED BOOK EXPERIENCE

A language environment where there are non-corruptible models, where there is a high degree of motivation and genuine communication, where verbal interaction is possible is the environment of literature. Children (indeed most human beings) have a love of and desire for stories.

A procedure, commonly known as *the shared book experience,* which was developed in New Zealand has proved to be a method which satisfied the criteria that have been outlined. Judging by its success with Polynesian children in Auckland and the primary school children on Niue Island, it has much to offer in second language learning.

Shared book experience in English can be introduced to children when they have a minimum of oral English. In the South Pacific territories this stage could be reached after one year of a structured oral programme. It is a method which rests heavily upon the characteristics of the bedtime story enjoyed by many first language English pre-school children. Bedtime stories are conducted in a tension-free environment where there is a great deal of interaction between the child and the reader. It is not simply a time when a story is read 'at' the child but is more a time when the child becomes involved in the story. There is 'guessing' at the outcome or the next statement, the drawing of conclusions, there is comment related to the child's experience and, in fact, all the elements of good comprehension. Not only does the bedtime story contain these elements but another feature is that the child often demands the same story night after night. Through this he learns that printed language is consistent:

— the words always come in the same order,
— the story always has the same sequence, and
— the plot and outcomes are unchanging.

Furthermore, the repetition of the story allows for the frequent practice which Rubin claims is important.

The child learns, too, that he can participate in the reading. Reading is not simply a case of reading *to* the child but it develops into a situation where the story is read *with* the child. He completes sentences and recites parts he remembers. Still later the child may be found on his own 'reading' *by* himself; i.e., adopting reading-like behaviour with the book, 'reading' the parts he remembers and filling in the other parts with near approximations to the text but with accuracy of meaning in his reading. He displays his awareness of the author's intention. There is in this a sequence of development — reading *to*; reading *with*; reading *by* — which we may make use of in our ESL classroom programmes.

There are also some very important environmental conditions involved with the bedtime story. The learning situation must be relaxed, comfortable, enjoyable and not in any way a threat to the child's security. Stories must be lively and in themselves a motivational force. A great deal of verbal interaction about the story is characteristic of storytime and this has the effect of strengthening the child's oral fluency.

Bedtime stories at home involve only one or two children as a rule, but at school the same atmosphere can be created for a classroom group providing the book, its text and illustrations can be clearly seen by all. The term 'blown-up book' has become fashionable. Any story can be reproduced on pages 25 cm by 30 cm, so that a group of 8-10 children seated around a teacher can see and follow the text clearly.

In the classroom a sequence develops where a story is introduced at first simply as a 'reading *to*' the children. The children are seated around their teacher and as the story unfolds there is a wide range of discussion about it. There is a preoccupation in the discussion with prediction — or guessing what will happen — and with simple character analysis. Difficult structures, concepts, or words can be dealt with either by simplifying them for comprehension or by discussing them in the vernacular and then returning to English. There is no embargo on using the vernacular language in this way, providing the discussion returns to English before moving further into the story.

In a second session, usually on another day, the children are again seated around their teacher with the same story. Now they are ready to begin reading *with* the teacher. They are invited and encouraged to join in the reading — at times in unison and at other times as individuals. They can volunteer or they can be asked. When they strike problems the teacher joins in the reading, thereby removing the threat of failure or embarrassment.

This process is repeated numerous times with the children taking on the responsibility for the reading more and more until each child can read the story *'by'* himself without the aid of the teacher. There is not just one story at a time in use in the classroom. After the second session has been conducted another story can be introduced, and the group may be working with five or six stories at a time and have available even more which are used as recreational reading when the teacher is working with other groups.

Progessively the children, because of the many readings, acquire a reading sight vocabulary. At the same time, because of the consistency of print and because of their extensive discussion, facility with English grows. The models of print are incorruptible and they can be used by the children in their discussions. The models also help the teacher to avoid conveying her own speech errors to the children. Rather than learning being restricted to a step-by-step programme the acquisition of the second language approaches similarity with the acquisition of the first.

As the shared book experience develops in the classroom the teacher becomes a facilitator of learning by intervening in the learning activity to expose the strategies of word decoding and meaning retrieval. She shows the

children how to re-run a phrase, or how to read on when a strange word is encountered. As a central method children learn to use the meaning around their problem to discover what the new word might be.

In this development of strategies the teacher encourages the children progressively to employ three sets of cues in a problem-solving situation which involves meaning retrieval. The first and most obvious is the orthographic set. These are the cues provided by the printed symbols (the orthography) themselves. The letters and word shapes may trigger the memory or induce recognition because of similarities with known words or common elements in words. For example, "workers" has some resemblance to "work"; "bridge" has the same beginning as "bread".

The second set of cues are the syntactic set. Syntactic cues are the cues derived from the grammatical form of our language. Familiarity with grammatical form leads children to anticipate certain classes of words in certain places. Thus when an unknown word is encountered in the sentence, "The children like playing s.... after school", the syntax reveals that the unfamiliar word must be a noun. No other part of speech would be appropriate in that position in the sentence.

Thirdly, there is the semantic set of cues and these are the cues derived from the meaning contained in the sentence which surrounds the unfamiliar word. To refer again to the example, the syntactic cue is that a noun is required. The semantics indicate that the noun represents some activity or game that is playable. The 's' as an orthographic cue limits the range of choices the child can take.

Furthermore, the cues interact and limit one another. Orthographically and syntactically "swimming" might be a choice but the semantics rule this out because one doesn't "play" at swimming. Using guessing then as a step in the process of reducing uncertainty (meaning retrieval), the guess possibilities might be "sports", "soccer", "softball", or "squash", and each of these can be subjected to checking against other orthographic cues or semantic cues revealed by reading on into the material.

We may assume that the mental processes involved in both listening and reading comprehension are similar. From the point of view of ESL development with the shared book experience, as the teacher leads the children towards responding to cues, the children, in fact, get both the speech and orthographic cues at the same time. This multisensory approach with speech and orthography is advantageous for second language acquisition because both reading and listening comprehension can occur virtually simultaneously and the language models of the story are more likely to be adopted for the learner's future use in expression.

The sharing need not stop at books and stories. A feature of the successful classroom programme as is in evidence on Niue Island is the extent to which a large range of reading/discussion material can be built up and used very quickly. Song charts, poems and news sheets in English may all receive the same approach and the children make a wide range of wall stories and caption books as a part of their language activity when the teacher is occupied with other groups. Progressively the classroom increases its English environmental qualities and more and more books, stories, charts, etc., are introduced. There develops an urgency to communicate. Because the 'pay-off' is in English, the communication follows naturally in the second language. It is a human characteristic that we want to talk about vivid experiences.

THE PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE

To return to the elements of sound programme design, it is clear that most of the characteristics of first language acquisition can be seen in the shared book approach and that they are applicable to ESL programmes in this procedure.

Learning takes place because the children are eager to experience the story. They meet models which can be imitated and, more than this, they meet language in an unstructured and natural way. Just as pre-schoolers learning their first language do, so the second language learners employ the models they have heard in order to express their ideas. Because they have both sight and sound cues, they are more likely to achieve a higher degree of accuracy when they come to expression. The 'pay-off' in meaning gained from the stories and the achievement of successful communication around them provide a growing sense of success. The teacher, by keeping the atmosphere tension-free, provides for positive feelings toward the language learning task and any sense of failure is minimized.

The heavy emphasis on meaning retrieval is another important feature. The children read the stories because they want to find out what is going to happen. Literature provides for this feature in a way that structured readers do not. Some programmes for teaching reading rest heavily upon the view that reading is a matter of mastering more and more words and structures, like building blocks. Such programmes provide little in the way of story and consequently children are not encouraged to comprehend. They feel successful only if they are getting the words right; yet, one thing we do know of reading is that word accuracy is not the goal; rather, meaning retrieval is the essence of the reading process. Because good literature motivates the child towards meaning retrieval he will happily read and re-read that same story, savouring the experience again and again. It is through this process that pupils gradually become independent. They use the story many times and each time

they understand it a little better they read it a little more accurately and they feel a little more successful.

The procedure described shows no particular concern for the ratio of new words to known words which has been a 'hang-up' of ESL reading programme designers for several decades. Even if the ratio rises to as high as 10% or 12%, at least half of the newness is diminished in the first reading and the balance recedes with each reading until in the final stages no word difficulties exist.

To what extent the child's total language facility is influenced by the shared book method is a matter of speculation. Earlier, the idea of language acquisition as a complex process and the child's capacity for learning were considered. The more language he has experience with — and he has this abundantly through literature — the more he can move, through his natural capacity and his natural processes of acquisition, towards the development of those "...smoothly operating systems".

It seems that the shared book experience and the procedures involved with it broaden language experience and use tremendously. Step by step programmes in contrast restrict opportunity and leave children with an unnecessary minimum of language for communication.

This could well be the fault line of a great many structured programmes. As children grow in ESL through such programmes they are found to develop certain inaccuracies in their expression. The inaccuracies may well be the result of too little experience with language rather than influence from the first language or from any other cause. It may be difficult to gauge the extent to which an unstructured approach will influence children's language development but we do know that there is a powerful influence. Teachers are not always in control of learning — if they were then children would acquire only a fraction of the skills and knowledge they do acquire. In ESL programmes we should not be concerned when learning gets out of control!

There is good evidence that the shared book procedure not only satisfies many of the principles set out initially but it is also likely to generate the characteristics of good language learners set out by Rubin (1975) for all children. Because of the tension-free situation and the high motivation level, the children are more willing to communicate, to guess, to attend, to practise and progressively to lose inhibition, to desire accuracy and to monitor their own speech in terms of the models they are presented with.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

In an attempt to use these principles, the Education Department on Niue Island implemented a shared book type of programme with their Class 3 children (aged 7-8 years) in 1978. These children had experienced one year of a structured oral English programme in 1977 and from this platform were launched into a set of stories about their island life — The Fiafia Stories — which were written (by the present author) in a generally unstructured style but each with an engaging story line. In 1979 the effect of this programme was evaluated by Elley (1979) who measured performance after one year in terms of word knowledge, comprehension and oral language fluency. Very substantial gains were made by children who had had shared book experiences when compared with children who had been taught with only the structured approach. A full account of this experiment is reported by De'Ath (1979).

In conclusion then, not only is there a sound theoretical base for the role of shared book experiences in ESL programmes, there is also empirical evidence supporting their value. The South Pacific territories, at least, could benefit from this approach and incorporate it progressively into the ESL programmes being used in the primary schools.

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