

Foreign Language Instruction : The Great Equalizer

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As I perused my many professional subscriptions this summer, I was most attracted by the spring 2003 issue of **American Educator**, published by the American Federation of Teachers. This particular issue is totally dedicated to the exploration of one very “hot” topic in American education: the discrepancy in reading comprehension levels (grades 4 and beyond) between our nation’s poorest students and our nation’s richest students. The article, written by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., begins as follows:

“In fourth grade, poor children’s reading comprehension starts a drastic decline and rarely recovers. **The cause:** They hear millions fewer words at home than do their advantaged peers, and since words represent knowledge, they don’t gain the knowledge that underpins reading comprehension. **The cure:** Immerse these children, and the many others whose comprehension is low, in words and the knowledge the words represent as early as possible.” (1)

This, of course, started me thinking: “Foreign Languages! Foreign Languages! If what we are suffering from as a society is a discrepancy in the number of words to which our students are exposed on a daily basis at home, then let ALL students at ALL levels of instruction experience a proficiency-based foreign language program which would serve to expose ALL of them to more “words” and by doing so would increase their knowledge of words in their own language and therefore increase their performance in reading comprehension!”

Let me explain: **recent reviews of foreign language research results indicate one thing very clearly. Foreign language instruction at the elementary school level has never been shown to take away from students’ English language skills. In fact, only the opposite has ever been shown: that foreign language study among children increases their knowledge of words (word power) and consequently increases their performance scores across all areas of the curriculum: not only in language arts, but in math, science, and social studies as well.** (2)

Monique Bournot-Trites, in a report commissioned by the Atlantic Provinces Educational Foundation in Canada (2002) states the following: “The effect of learning a second language ... on first language skills has been virtually positive in all studies... The loss of instructional time in English in favor of the second language has never been shown to have negative effects on the achievement of the first language... **One can confidently assume that cognitive abilities acquired in the learning of one language can be put to use in the acquisition and proficiency of the other language. In many**

studies, first language skills were shown to be enhanced, even if instruction time in L1 was reduced in favor of L2 instruction.” (3)

Let’s revisit the situation: if the problem lies in the fact that our less advantaged and disadvantaged students have less access to words and word knowledge through their exposure at home, why not try to equalize the situation by providing them all with more words? Why, might one ask, is it necessary to use a foreign language to provide students with more English words? Why not just increase opportunities for listening comprehension in English through oral reading activities? The fact remains that the English language is 60% Germanic in origin, and 40% Latin in origin. If we can provide all students with continued exposure to Germanic- or Latin-based languages, we can assuredly provide them with avenues for greater proficiency in the English language. Does this mean that other language families will not increase their English skills as well? Certainly not...but learning a language from the same linguistic “tree” will more directly impact their comprehension on English in tangible ways.

Rereading the Bournot-Trites quote, we see that research studies have shown that “cognitive abilities acquired in the learning of one language can be put to use in the acquisition and proficiency of the other language.” (4) This means that learning a language or multiple languages is like filling one bucket with water from various sources. **Language is language is language, and what a child knows in one language is transferable to other languages.** Cognitive gains made in one language will be transferable to other languages. A colleague of mine once noted that he had discovered quite by surprise that in perusing newspapers written in many different languages, most with Latin roots but some Germanic, he was able to read and comprehend in at least six different languages. He was actually surprised by how much he understood. What he did not take into immediate account was how much his knowledge of the reading process (skimming, scanning, looking for details, reading picture clues, finding context clues, etc.) must have helped him as well. Learning to read in English as a child had provided him with the tools for later reading comprehension in Spanish, and his fluency in these two languages provided him with much of the cognitive “stuff” necessary to the comprehension of texts written in other languages. Can you see the progressive pattern here? Foreign languages provide access to new “words” which, in turn, provide more in-depth access to one’s native language. It is, in fact, all about “words.”

Steven Pinker, in his book **Words and Rules: The Basic Ingredients of Language**, explains that everything we know as language boils down to two elements: **Words** (units of automaticity used to interpret and convey knowledge) and **rules** (learned systems used to analyze and reflect upon “words”.) If we think of a child’s developing language in this way we see that whether it is a question of native language or foreign language, once a unit of meaning becomes a Pinkerian “word”, it becomes part of an automatic linguistic repertoire at the disposal of the child for comprehension and communication. This is exactly why we in the foreign language profession need to focus upon communicative competency instead of grammar-translation methodology. If given the option of an outcome for our students, would we want them to be more proficient in

their use of words, or in their use of rules? The answer is obvious...without words, rules have no application or value.

Returning to the issue of American Educator, let us synopsise the findings therein and make some further connections to the study of foreign languages. In the first article, **“The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap”**. Authors Betty Hart and Todd Risley state that “By age three, children from privileged families have heard 30 million more words than children from poor families. By kindergarten, the gap is even greater. The consequences are catastrophic.” The author goes on to state the following: “In four years, an average child in a professional family would accumulate experience with almost 45 million words, an average child in a working-class family 26 million words, and an average child in a welfare family 13 million words.” (6) The authors also found that children’s language experience did not differ just in terms of the number and quality of words heard by the child. Interesting to note was the fact that children’s language is also influenced by the number of encouragements (positive parental feedback) and prohibitions (negative feedback) received by children at home. Authors noted that children from advantaged families receive on average a ration of 6 encouragements to 1 discouragement, whereas children from welfare families averaged only 1 encouragement to 2 discouragements. While advantaged children enjoy a 6-1 ration on the positive side, disadvantaged children experience a 2-1 ration more heavily negative! I mention this aspect of the study in that good foreign language instruction can provide children with very positive feedback about their measurable gains as learners, and perhaps help to balance out this situation.

In the feature article, **“Reading Comprehension Requires Knowledge – of Words and the World”**, author E.D. Hirsch states the following: “With a scientific consensus established on how to best teach decoding, we’ve reached the next reading frontier: increasing reading comprehension. Among poor children, low comprehension is ruining their chances for academic success. Among all children, comprehension scores are stagnant. **Convincing research tells us that the key to both problems is to systematically build children’s vocabulary, fluency, and domain knowledge.**” (7)

My own D.E.A. thesis, written twenty-five years ago in Besançon, France, starts with the following quotation: “What does your newspaper say?” “I can’t tell you what is says; I’m too busy reading it.” (“Qu’est-ce qu’il dit, ton journal? Je ne peux pas te dire; je suis en train de le lire!”) This, in essence, describes the stage a child passes through when trying to decode takes up so much of his/her energy that there is literally none left over with which to try to comprehend the actual message being communicated by the text. Hirsch cites three principles which have been commonly agreed upon by educators in regard to the reading process: **1) Fluency allows the mind to concentrate on comprehension** (once decoding becomes automatic, one can move on to the comprehension phase); **2) Breadth of vocabulary increases comprehension and facilitates further learning;** and **3) Domain knowledge, the most recently understood principle, increases fluency, broadens vocabulary, and enables deeper comprehension.** The second and third principles stated here are particularly germane to the study of foreign languages. As previously stated, foreign language study is known to

increase a student's native language vocabulary. This in itself will help to increase students' comprehension levels. The author states: 'Vocabulary knowledge correlates strongly with reading (and oral) comprehension...In vocabulary acquisition, a small early advantage grows into a much bigger one unless we intervene very intelligently to help the disadvantaged student learn words at an accelerated rate,' (8) Again, foreign language study has been shown to improve students' test scores on measures of native language proficiency. This is a fact that we can no longer ignore! One of the studies described in a new research bibliography published by Elizabeth Webb, Consultant at the Georgia Department of Education, cites that the largest measurable gains in English language proficiency of students studying a foreign language in the elementary school were experienced by average to below average students! (9) This correlates exactly to the need on the part of these students to develop more word knowledge as described by E.D. Hirsch. The study of foreign languages by ALL students at ALL levels is critical to increasing the verbal comprehension of ALL students in our nation's schools!

Hirsch's Principle #3 is very interesting as well. Domain knowledge is general knowledge of a topic area, known as "prior knowledge". Good reading teachers access prior knowledge in order to use this knowledge to lead students into the acquisition of new knowledge. This is similar to the processes of "assimilation" and "accommodation" as put forth by Jean Piaget, and not unlike the phenomenon of "Zone of Proximal Development" as theorized by Lev Vygotsky (10) Foreign language teaching also uses the accessing of prior knowledge to build new knowledge, albeit often linguistic knowledge. But, again, knowledge is knowledge, and, as previously stated, cognitive abilities have been shown to be transferable from one language to another.

Another particularly insightful article included in this issue is "**How Words Are Learned Incrementally Over Multiple Exposures**" by Steven A. Stahl. In this article, the author states, "We live in a sea of words...When a word is encountered for the first time, information about its orthography is connected to information from the context, so that after one exposure, a person may have a general sense of the context in which it appeared ("It has something to do with ..."), or a memory of the specific context ("I remember seeing it in an automobile manual..."), but not a generalizable sense of the meaning of the word," (11) (Pinker would probably say that at this stage, we can try to apply rules to it to try to learn it, but that it has not yet become a Pinkerian "word.") He goes on to state, "In ordinary encounters with a word in context, some of the information that is remembered will be reinforced. The information that overlaps between encounters is what is important about the word. Other information will be forgotten. The forgotten information is more incidental. With repeated exposures, some connections become strengthened as that information is found in repeated contexts and become the way the word is defined... "When a person "knows" a word, he knows more than the word's definition; he also knows how that word functions in different contexts." (12) (Again, Pinker might again define this process as that of a group of letters becoming a word,..) Stahl concludes with this thought; "Children exposed to words in multiple contexts, even without instruction, can be presumed to learn more about those words than students who see a word in a single context. " (13) Again, the connections to good foreign language instruction are clear...foreign language instruction provides students with access to words

across multiple contexts (languages) with multiple transferable connections to the words of their own language.

In conclusion, I suggest that the nation's reading experts and state departments of education take a long, hard look at the recent research results pertaining to foreign language programs, beginning with the wonderful bibliography published by the Georgia Department of Education. **Time after time, in study after recent study, researchers found that children studying a foreign language outperformed their monolingual peers and that the study of another language benefited all students in relation to all content areas, with the most significant gains in English experienced by average to below average students.** (14)

Ezra Pound, in **The ABC of Reading**, once wrote: "The sum of human wisdom is not contained in any one language." (15) Eva Hoffman, Editor of the New York Times Book Review, once wrote the following: "When I speak Polish now, it is infiltrated, permeated, and inflected with English in my head. Each language modifies the other, crossbreeds with it, fertilizes, it. Each language makes the other relative. Like everybody, I am the sum of my languages." (16)

Time spent in foreign language learning is time spent better learning our own language. Foreign language IS the Great Equalizer! Spread the word!

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