

COMMUNICATING WITH SECOND-LANGUAGE-LEARNING CHILDREN

By collecting the kind of information that is requested in the sample questionnaire, teachers will have a better idea of the backgrounds of the children who are coming into or are already in their classrooms. But this information will be only a starting point when it comes to actually communicating with a child who knows little or no English. This section discusses ideas about how to communicate with second-language-learning children in ways that will help them understand and begin to use English.

Starting with What the Children Know

A common practice for the teachers I interviewed was for them to ask parents of children whose home language was not English to provide a few important words in their home language, so that the teachers could do some low-level communicating with the children in the first few weeks in the classroom. Words for *listen*, *bathroom*, and *eat* were very useful in this early period in the classrooms and helped the teach-

ers and children feel connected. At the same time, by asking the parents to provide these phrases, teachers also deliver the message that they value the home language and are open to finding out more about how the home language sounds and is used.

A handy technique for collecting these words is to have parents tape-record them so that teachers can listen to them and practice them by playing them over and over. These tapes can also be played for the children in the classroom so that everyone can learn words in another language. Furthermore, these tapes could also contain comforting messages from home that could be played for children with separation difficulties.

Starting Slowly

One of the features of the English-language classroom that I observed was that the teachers did not make immediate efforts to communicate with the second-language learners beyond a welcoming smile and greeting. In fact, they gave the second-language learners a lot of time to become familiar with the classroom situation before approaching them with questions or directives in English. Several times in the first few weeks of school, Marion even referred to Byong-sun in the third person (e.g., "Let's give Byong-sun a chance," "Let's show Byong-sun how to pick this up"), including him by using his name without actually directing her speech to him. This approach established the fact that Byong-sun was being considered part of the group but that specific responses would not be required of him. By setting up such a low-demand situation, the teachers gave the second-language learners time to start the adjustment process in this new cultural and linguistic setting.

In fact, the language that the teachers used around the second-language learners in the first month of school was probably too complicated for them to understand anyway, because only 30% of the teachers' communications involved simplified language. This language use was probably similar to, if not the same as, that which they used to address all of the children, including the English speakers, in the classroom. After all, in the first few weeks of school, the teachers did not know very much about many of the children in the classroom. So, their choice was to use talk appropriate for young children generally when addressing any of the children. For the second-language learners, this early exposure probably made it possible for them to begin at least to tune in to the sounds of the new language, even though they probably did not understand what was actually being said.

After the first month, however, the teachers switched to less-complicated language in an attempt to help the children begin to under-

stand English. This reminded me of how adults in American culture speak to infants as though infants can comprehend sophisticated speech until the infants are old enough to actually start acquiring receptive abilities, at which time adults begin to simplify their speech to get their messages across.

This is not to say, however, that teachers should not be responsive to communicative efforts made by the second-language learners. In fact, the rule in the study classroom seemed to be to always respond, even if the message from the child was not understandable. Just like the teacher mentioned previously who engaged in bilingual discourse with the Chinese brothers in Saville-Troike's (1987) study (see Chapter 3), the adults in the study classroom tried to guess the topic of the message and responded accordingly. For example, one day at the drawing table, Poram showed her completed project to Marion and said something to Marion that was unintelligible (i.e., her utterance sounded like a sentence, but it was not possible to understand what she had said). Marion replied anyway, "Oh, are you making that?"

Buttressing Communication

When the teachers in the study classroom started the process of communicating with the second-language learners in their classroom, they frequently "doubled the message" by using words along with some type of gesture, action, or directed gaze. For example, one morning two Japanese sisters, Kumiko and Kaori, arrived with a paper bag full of vegetables. They approached Rosa, who *pointed to the bag* and asked, "What's in there?" Kumiko opened the bag and showed Rosa what was inside. Rosa said, "How about feeding Ponytails [the guinea pig]?" and she walked to the guinea pig cage, *gesturing for the sisters to follow*. At the guinea pig cage, Kumiko began taking the vegetables out of the bag and handing them to Kaori to put in the cage. Rosa *named each vegetable as it was put in the cage*, "Another carrot, and lettuce."

On another occasion, after watching Leandro wander around the room for a while with a painting he had made, I said to him, "Do you want to put it in your cubby?" He started to go to the cubby area, then he stopped and *touched the paint* on the picture. It was still wet. He *showed me this*, so I said, "Shall I hang it up?" *indicating the line* strung up to dry paintings. He brought the picture to me, I hung it up, and he went to the block area. In this example, Leandro used nonverbal communication to indicate what the problem was with my first suggestion. My response about hanging the picture on the line was reinforced by indicating the location that I was talking about, because this was a special arrangement for hanging up pictures and I was not sure that Leandro would understand what I was saying.



One of the teachers I interviewed referred to this as using “body language” to help a second-language-learning child understand. I call this technique buttressing communication, because the additional information delivered by a gesture, an action, or a directed gaze adds another dimension that helps the child tune in to exactly what is being talked about, making it easier to get the message.

Repetition

Another technique that is used successfully when communicating with second-language-learning children involves using repetition. Saying the same thing more than once gives a child more than one opportunity to catch on to what is being said. If the repetition involves a single item, it may also provide an opportunity for the child to actually learn the word. For example, one morning at the drawing table, the following sequence occurred in rapid succession:

Marion to Jennifer: See how Sook-whan did her *hand*?

Rosa to Poram: Are you going to cut out your *hand*?

Marion to Jennifer: Look at that *hand*, Myong’s right *hand*.

Marion to Miguel: Do you want to trace your *hand*, too?

Frequently, the teachers also emphasized the words as they said them and put them at or near the end of the sentence for better comprehension.

Talking About the Here and Now

One major feature of successful communication with second-language learners is that it is grounded in the here and now. Talking about what is right there gives the second-language learner a chance to narrow the field of what the conversation is about and focus on a more restricted number of options for response as well. As second-language learners begin to use their productive abilities, the context in which the conversation is held also helps the teacher understand what the child is talking about.

For example, one day, outside on the playground, I was sitting on a large rubber tire when Poram came to sit down next to me. Quickly, Poram discovered that the tire had writing all around it (Firestone and so forth). She and I started to name the letters and numbers. Poram had little difficulty with any of the letters, except the ones that were upside down, because of where we were sitting on the tire. Noticing that there was a problem, Poram gestured to me that the letters were in a strange position. I told her “upside down,” and she repeated it. The next time she had the same problem, she said, “Upside down.” She also stumbled over the number 8. After I told her what it was, Poram was able to identify it correctly later.

In this example, the fact that we were sharing the same physical space and could refer to the same information on the tire helped to make this a successful communicative experience for both of us, including my being able to provide some missing vocabulary items for Poram.

Expanding and Extending

Once children begin to demonstrate their developing capabilities with their new language, teachers can use communicative opportunities as ways of helping children expand and extend their language skills. In this technique, it is necessary to start with what a child already knows and work from there. For example, one morning when I sat down at a table where children were working with playdough, Sook-whan held up a round piece of playdough to me and said, “Cookie.” I replied, “Is this a chocolate-chip cookie? May I eat it?” Sook-whan nodded, and I pretended to eat the cookie. I then told Sook-whan, “That’s a good cookie.” Later, Sook-whan held up a cube-shaped piece of playdough and said, “Chocolate.” We followed the same procedure as before as I pretended to eat the piece of chocolate and commented on how good it was. This play routine used Sook-whan’s original utterance as a starting point and then developed parallel verbal constructions to extend and expand her linguistic knowledge. This turned out to be successful both as communication and as play.

Upping the Ante

One of the difficult judgment calls that teachers have to make when communicating with second-language learners is when to be more insistent that the children get beyond the nonverbal techniques that they have developed and actually use language to get their point across. To push the process along, it is often necessary for a teacher to up the ante, insisting on verbal communication, for example, before complying with a request.

This was demonstrated one day when Miguel approached Marion with a suspender that had come loose. The following interaction occurred:

Marion: You're trying to tell me something.

Miguel: [No reply.]

Marion: Do you want me to do something?

Miguel: [No reply.]

Marion: Do you want me to do something with your suspender? Put it on my nose? [Starts to do so.]

Miguel: Red. [Showing her his pants.]

Marion: Yes, red . . . red what?

Miguel: Red pants.

Marion: Do you want me to attach this to your red pants?

Miguel: Yes.

Marion: Okay. I'll do that for you.

I found myself in just this same situation one day with Leandro. As I was leaving the art table, Leandro walked by, stopped in front of me, and pointed to his untied shoelace. I said, "What do you need?" He paused for a moment and said, "Please do my shoes." I said enthusiastically, "All right!" letting him know how pleased I was at his linguistic accomplishment.

Fine-Tuning

When communicating with second-language-learning children, teachers must always estimate what level of proficiency a child has achieved so that their language can be calibrated to that level. Of course, this task is very difficult, and many mistakes can be made along the way

to successful communication. Fortunately, most communicative situations allow for a process of fine-tuning in which it is possible to reiterate a message in a form that might be more understandable. Not surprisingly, successful communication with second-language learners requires a lot of fine-tuning on the part of teachers.

For example, after lunch one day in early November, I found Leandro alone in the block area looking at a book. He had a pair of plastic glasses with him that he had been wearing off and on all day. I picked them up and said, "I like your glasses. Are they yours or do they belong here at school?" This complicated question did not get a reply. Then I said, "Do these come from school?" and Leandro shook his head and said, "House." Then I said, "Are they from Halloween?" And he said, "Yes." Slightly later, Leandro spotted a piece of candy in my pocket. He asked, "What's this?" I replied, "Candy," and he repeated, "Candy." I said, "Sally gave it to me." He said, "Halloween?" I answered, "Yes."

By realizing that my first question was perhaps too complicated for Leandro to answer and by rephrasing it to make it simpler, I made it possible for Leandro to understand what I was asking. I then took a chance that he would know the term *Halloween*, as there had been a lot of talk about Halloween in the classroom. He not only knew what I was talking about but demonstrated how much he knew by turning the conversation around later and using the term to ask me a question. By fine-tuning my initiation, I was able to prolong a conversation that turned out to be very successful.

Combining Techniques for Communicating with Second-Language Learners

Although these techniques for communicating with second-language learners have been presented individually, they rarely appear separately from each other. In any attempt to communicate with second-language learners, teachers combine techniques and keep trying until they find out what works in any given situation. The transcript of my discussion with Leandro at the end of Chapter 4 shows a variety of these techniques used simultaneously in my efforts to keep the conversation going.

Furthermore, although these techniques have been presented as relevant for communication with young second-language learners, they are, in fact, very similar to techniques used to communicate with first-language learners of a slightly younger age group. Marion, for example, talked about how similar the second-language children were to prelinguistic toddlers:

When I first started here I had a lot of children who really had no English at all, and then—since I'm comfortable with toddlers, toddler was one of my favorite periods with my own children and the use of preverbal communication—that was sort of the level on which I began things.

Intuitively, Marion discovered that she could use the same communicative techniques with her second-language learners that she had previously used with 18-month- to 2½-year-old first-language learners. Teachers who have worked with a younger age group will certainly recognize many of these techniques as being those that are needed to communicate successfully with toddlers. Imported into the second-language-learning early childhood classroom, they make it possible for teachers and second-language learners to communicate more quickly and with less frustration right from the beginning.

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