Key Issues in Bilingual Special Education Work Paper #3
*A Second Language Fable**

Office of Vocational and Educational Services for Children with Disabilities
New York State Education Department

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A. A Different Reality

Imagine that you and your family were given the opportunity to move to a foreign country. This is a career move for you and your spouse because of the increased job opportunities in the new destination. You have heard good things about the country because some of your relatives have already relocated.

So, you talk to your family, you talk to your friends and you decide that it is time to be a risk taker!

Your new home is exciting. The possibilities are better than imagined. You have a little difficulty understanding people when they talk too fast, but you are polishing up on the language you learned in high school by taking classes after work at a continuing education program. It is tiring but it is worth it.

B. The General Education Program

Your 12 year-old son, John, seems to be having trouble in his new school. He used to like school before you moved, but his language 'problem' (he only speaks English well) is making it difficult to understand the teacher. John says he looks up and nods his head in agreement when the teacher looks his way so that she knows that he is paying attention. John said that the teacher asked a couple of his classmates to help him in his work because they knew a few words of English. You are concerned for John.

C. The First Note

The school has sent a note and you take it to your language class to help find out what it said. You are amazed to find out that the teacher believes that John will learn the language more quickly if you and your husband stop talking to him in English and only use your new language, no matter how limited that might be! The letter concluded by saying that because John is not doing well, the school will test him to see if they can find out why he doesn't understand his lessons.

On the way home, you and your husband talk about the letter and wonder why the school would need to test John. It is obvious to you that he didn't speak or understand the language used in the school and no one except for a few classmates was asked to help. But, this is a new country and they have a reputation for excellent schools. The school must be right!

D. The Evaluation

A few weeks later another letter comes to the house. This letter informs you that John was given a reading test and some other tests in his new language and he did not score well. As a matter of fact, he did so poorly that the school believes he has a learning disability. The letter says that one of the psychologists (who said he spoke English) is convinced that John had a disability.

E. The School Interview with Translator

You visit the school bringing along one of your nieces who has the day off from middle school to help understand the teacher. John's teacher says that she noticed that John understands more in the classroom now but that the school doesn't have any programs for children who are English speakers. She explains however, that the school has a wonderful program for 'special' students where, although the teachers don't speak English, they have more time for each student because the classes are smaller. The teacher said she knows that John wasn't really 'special', but if you agree, John could receive additional assistance through the 'special' program. You think the psychologist agreed with the teacher but you weren't quite sure what he was saying when he spoke English.

F. Parents' Comments/Social History

You explain to the school staff that John did very well before he came to this new country. You

try to explain that John is quite talkative when he speaks English with his cousins in the neighborhood. You comment that he must only be quiet in school! You ask your niece to tell the teacher that John just finished reading a Hardy Boy novel, but the teacher didn't seem to know who the Hardy Boys were!

You ask your niece to ask the psychologist where he studied about English-speaking students and whether he tested John using tests developed for English-speakers. You don't think your niece really knew how to ask that question. The psychologist replies through your niece that he worked with English-speaking children for years and that even though the tests weren't developed for children like John, he is familiar with them.

You thought that no one was listening to your explanation but your niece said that everyone understood and said that you were invited to come to another meeting to talk about "John and his problem".

H. The Placement

The next meeting is very quick. Your niece was in school so she couldn't help but the school reports that they have hired a translator for the meeting. You are surprised to see that your sister's husband was the translator. He tries to be helpful but he doesn't know what 'special' education is.

There are so many school officials at the meeting, and they all seem to know exactly what they are talking about and what is best for John. At the end of the meeting, they tell you that John can be given help along with other children with 'his problem'. You are surprised that John has a 'problem' that only shows up in school! But, the school must be right!

*Apologies

Sometimes it is necessary to exaggerate to make a point or to highlight a situation.

Of course, no school district would treat newly arriving children in the fashion described above. The student – John – obviously was just adjusting to a new school environment. The school would also have some type of 'introduction to a second language' for John during his first days in the school and would certainly not consider the assignment of a few children to work with him as the heart of his 'second language instruction'. They also would know from research that John would benefit more from talking to his parents in a language he understood and continuing to develop this ability than he would in listening to his parents attempt to model in their new, somewhat faltering, language. We all know that sometimes it appears as if we were talking a foreign language to our children because they don't appear to listen! We shouldn't create additional communication problems.

The fable describes the school's attempts to communicate with parents through support from relatives recruited by the school to translate private information about the student. Can you imagine the privacy issues? Can you believe that the sister's husband, who knew nothing about special education, could provide a good translation for the committee proceedings?

Apologies must certainly be extended in regard to the testing practices in this unknown non-English speaking country. No country would allow a psychologist with a limited ability in the child's language to undertake a high stakes evaluation of a student to determine if s/he would be placed in special education. This evaluator would never defend himself by saying he had no training but that he "worked with English-speaking children for years" and least of all would he excuse his use of tests which were not standardized for English-speakers because of his familiarity with the tests!

It is kind of frightening however, when you think that somewhere, somebody might be living this fable!

Resources

A Framework for Serving English Language Learners with Disabilities. Ortiz, Alba A. and James R. Yates pp. 72-80 in *Journal of Special Education Leadership 14 (2) November 2001.*

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The Role of Styles and Strategies in Second Language Learning. ERIC Digest.

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Consider the very different behaviors or strategies that individual students use to learn a new language. Shy, introverted, analytically-oriented Marianne learns Spanish through grammar drills and sentence analysis. Uncomfortable with spontaneous speech in Spanish, she rehearses as much as she can in private. In contrast, sociable, extroverted, globally-oriented Jose from Mexico avoids grammar drills but seeks out social conversation in English, his new language; he is content to get the general meaning without knowing every word.

When intuitive Bill studies Russian, he constantly tries to build a mental model or big picture of the language. He avoids step-by-step language learning. Noriko, attuned more to the senses (movement, sound, sight, and touch) than to intuition, looks for English texts that proceed one step at a time. She uses flashcards, and with her classmates, she initiates "total physical response" exercises that involve all the senses.

Serious Sarah outlines every French lesson, plans her study sessions, does all the exercises in her textbook religiously, and is not happy unless she is on time or ahead of schedule. Playful Michael tells jokes in German and has fun with the language, but has trouble organizing his work, coming to closure, and submitting his assignments on time.

These learners are using different kinds of language learning strategies, or specific actions and behaviors to help them learn. Their strategies differ greatly, at least in part because their general learning styles (overall approaches to learning and the environment) are so varied. Recent research (Ehrman & Oxford, 1988, 1989; Oxford & Ehrman, 1988) suggests that learning style has a significant influence on students' choice of learning strategies, and that both styles and strategies affect learning outcomes.

This Digest briefly summarizes existing research on learning styles and strategies in foreign and second language learning. Readers are urged to go further by consulting the references provided at the end of the Digest.

WHAT IS MEANT BY LEARNING STYLE?

The term learning style is used to encompass four aspects of the person: cognitive style, i.e., preferred or habitual patterns of mental functioning; patterns of attitudes and interests that affect what an individual will pay most attention to in a learning situation; a tendency to seek situations compatible with one's own learning patterns; and a tendency to use certain learning strategies and avoid others (Lawrence, 1984). Learning style is inherent and pervasive (Willing, 1988) and is a blend of cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements (Oxford & Ehrman, 1988). At least twenty dimensions of learning style have been identified (Parry, 1984; Shipman & Shipman, 1985).

"Field independence vs. dependence." One of the most widely researched dimensions of learning style is field independence vs. dependence. Field independent learners easily separate key details from a complex or confusing background, while their field dependent peers have trouble doing this. Field independent learners show significant advantages over field dependent learners in analytical tasks (Hansen & Stansfield, 1981; Chapelle & Roberts, 1986).

"Analytic vs. global processing" seems to be closely allied with field independence vs. dependence, and indeed may be a more fundamental and more explanatory dimension of learning style. However, little foreign or second language learning research exists concerning the analytic-global dimension except in the context of brain hemisphericity. The left hemisphere of the brain deals with language through analysis and abstraction, while the right hemisphere recognizes language as more global auditory or visual patterns (Willing, 1988). Leaver (1986) speculates that right-brain learners--those who prefer the kinds of processing done by the right side of the brain--are more facile at learning intonation and rhythms of the target language, whereas left-brain learners deal more easily with analytic aspects of target language grammar.

"Cooperation vs. competition" has been only lightly studied as a dimension of style in the language learning field. Reid (1987) found that in the language classroom, learners rarely report using cooperative behaviors (behaviors that one would infer to reflect a cooperative style); however, this finding might well be related to instructional methodologies that often preclude cooperation and foster competition. In studies where students were taught specifically to be cooperative, results revealed vast improvement in language skills as well as increased self-esteem, motivation, altruism, and positive attitudes toward others (Gunderson & Johnson, 1980; Sharan et al., 1985; Jacob & Mattson, 1987).

"Tolerance for ambiguity" is another style dimension of language learning. Learning a language can be a difficult and at times ambiguous endeavor, and students who can more readily tolerate ambiguity often show the best language learning performance (see Chapelle & Roberts; 1986, Naiman, Frohlich & Todesco, 1975).

The Myers-Briggs Type indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985) contributes four more dimensions to learning style: extraversion vs. introversion, sensing vs. intuition, thinking vs. feeling, and judging vs. perceiving (the last dimension referring to the immediateness of the need for closure). Several of these dimensions appear to significantly influence how students choose to learn languages, according to recent research (Ehrman & Oxford, 1988, 1989; Oxford & Ehrman, 1988).

Other important style aspects that may relate to language learning performance are leveling-sharpening of detail, reflectivity-impulsivity, and constricted-flexible thinking (Parry, 1984). Additional research needs to be conducted on all style dimensions in order for teachers to understand more about the basic stylistic preferences of their students.

WHAT ARE LEARNING STRATEGIES?

Language learning strategies are the often-conscious steps or behaviors used by language learners to enhance the acquisition, storage, retention, recall, and use of new information (Rigney, 1978; Oxford, 1990). Strategies can be assessed in a variety of ways, such as diaries, think-aloud procedures, observations, and surveys. Research both outside the language field (e.g., Brown, Bransford, Ferrara, & Campione, 1983) and investigations with language learners (see reviews by Skehan, 1989; Oxford 1989; Oxford & Crookall, 1989) frequently show that the most successful learners tend to use learning strategies that are appropriate to the material, to the task, and to their own goals, needs, and stage of learning. More proficient learners appear to use a wider range of strategies in a greater number of situations than do less proficient learners, but the relationship between strategy use and proficiency is complex. Research indicates that language learners at all levels use strategies (Chamot & Kupper, 1989), but that some or most learners are not fully aware of the strategies they use or the strategies that might be most beneficial to employ.

Many different strategies can be used by language learners: metacognitive techniques for organizing, focusing, and evaluating one's own learning; affective strategies for handling emotions or attitudes; social strategies for cooperating with others in the learning process; cognitive strategies for linking new information with existing schemata and for analyzing and classifying it; memory strategies for entering new information into memory storage and for retrieving it when needed; and compensation strategies (such as guessing or using gestures) to overcome deficiencies and gaps in one's current language knowledge (see Oxford, 1990).

Language learning strategy research has suffered from an overemphasis on metacognitive and cognitive strategies, which are admittedly very important, at the expense of other strategy types that are also very useful.

Some preliminary research suggests the existence of sex differences in strategy use (see review by Oxford, Nyikos, & Ehrman, 1988). Choice of language strategies also relates strongly to ethnicity, language learning purpose, the nature of the task, and other factors (see Politzer, 1983; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985; Oxford, 1989). As noted earlier, one of these related factors is, no doubt, learning style.

Important effects of training in the use of language learning strategies have been discovered by a number of researchers (see Atkinson, 1985; Bejarano, 1987; Chamot & Kupper, 1989; Cohen & Hosenfeld, 1981; Oxford, Crookall, Lavine, Cohen, Nyikos & Sutter, forthcoming). It is clear that students can be taught to use better strategies, and research suggests that better strategies improve language performance. Just how language learning strategies should be taught is open to question, but so far it has been confirmed that strategy training is generally more effective when woven into regular classroom activities than when presented as a separate strategy course.

Language learning styles and strategies appear to be among the most important variables influencing performance in a second language. Much more investigation is necessary to determine the precise role of styles and strategies, but even at this stage in our understanding we can state that teachers need to become more aware of both learning styles and learning strategies through appropriate teacher training. Teachers can help their students by designing instruction that meets the needs of individuals with different stylistic preferences and by teaching students how to improve their learning strategies.

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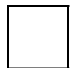[Return to ERIC Digest Search Page]