Teaching Languages to Young Learners: Asian Rim Experiences

Diane Johnson
Te Kura Kete Aronui (Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences)
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato (University of Waikato)
[dianej@waikato.ac.nz]

Abstract

A number of Asian countries have recently developed initiatives relating to the teaching of English to young learners in schools. Many of the issues that these countries are currently facing are very similar to the theoretical and practical issues that are being faced in New Zealand where an increasing number of schools are introducing students to international languages at a younger age, and where young learners are being introduced to Maori in a range of different educational settings. Some of the issues, both theoretical and practical, that are common to young learner language initiatives in both New Zealand and in a number of Asian countries are explored here.

Introduction

Over the past ten years, Ministries of Education in a number of Asian, Pacific-rim countries (notably Japan, Korea and Taiwan) have developed initiatives that will give all young learners opportunities to learn English language at school. These initiatives, and the processes involved in implementing them, have prompted a careful re-examination of research relating to young learners and the teaching and learning of second languages. They have also led to a number of new research projects. Not surprisingly, all of this has provoked a considerable amount of discussion and debate, particularly among parents, teachers and other educationalists. Both the initiatives themselves, and the debates surrounding these initiatives, have some relevance to the New Zealand context where the issue of when, and how, young learners should be introduced to second languages, including Maori, is also one of very real significance.

At first sight, it may appear that there are very few parallels between the learning of an international language such as English by young learners in Asia and the learning of a heritage language such as Maori by young learners in New Zealand. In fact, however, as is indicated in this paper, many of the issues relating to both theory and practice are very similar. It may be useful, therefore, for those involved in the Maori language education of young New Zealanders to reconsider some of the issues which are now occupying those involved in the English language education of young learners in Asia.

Young learners of second languages: the Asian context and the New Zealand context

A number of countries in Asia are now making opportunities available for all young learners (often from as young as age five or six) to be introduced to the English language at school. However, because this sometimes involves as little as one hour of tuition each week in the early stages of schooling, many parents are seeking additional opportunities for their children to learn English. The popularity of English-medium kindergartens, English-medium primary and secondary schools, after-school programmes which offer English-language tuition, and English-medium tertiary education is growing. All of this activity relates to the attempt to ensure that Asian

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adults of the future will be adequately prepared to take their place as confident and effective citizens of a global village in which English is likely to continue to play a very important role. Citizens of the global village must also, however, be able to operate confidently and effectively in the language and culture (or languages and cultures) that characterize their place of origin and probable primary location in the future. It is therefore of fundamental importance to the vast majority of Asian parents that their children should not, in the process of acquiring English, suffer any linguistic, cultural or educational losses in other areas. The critical question for many parents, caregivers and family members of young Asian students is: *What is the best way to ensure that our children become as competent and confident as possible in English at the same time as ensuring that they also become as confident and competent as possible in their own language/s and in other areas of the curriculum?*

In New Zealand, tuition in both international and heritage languages is increasingly being provided in primary schools, something that is reflected in recent Ministry of Education curriculum documents and language resources. So far as Maori language and culture are concerned, opportunities for learning are now available in Maori language pre-schools (*Te Kōhanga Reo*), in mainstream schools (including bilingual units), in primary, secondary and area schools where Maori is the primary language of educational instruction (*Kura Kaupapa Maori),* and in tertiary institutions, an increasing number of which now offer tuition through the medium of Maori as well as courses in Maori language and culture. For parents, caregivers and family members of young New Zealanders who wish their children to learn Maori, the critical question is very similar to that faced in Asia: *What is the best way to ensure that our children become as competent and confident as possible in Maori at the same time as ensuring that they also become as confident and competent as possible in English and in other areas of the curriculum?*

My aim here is not to provide simple answers to these questions. There are, in fact, no straightforward answers. However, I do want to draw attention to some of the research literature that is currently occupying many educationalists in Asia and to suggest that that literature could be very helpful to those who are concerned that young New Zealanders should have the best possible opportunity to become confident and proficient in Maori, English and other languages, and should also have the best possible chance of developing to their fullest potential in other curriculum areas.

Setting realistic goals

What expectations we can realistically have in relation to language learning goals and educational achievement goals more generally will depend on many factors, one of which is the extent to which we can draw, in establishing and maintaining our programmes, upon agreed national policy and national strategic planning. Unfortunately, however, there is still no national languages policy in place in any of the countries, including New Zealand, which are the focus of attention here. Consequently, issues relating to resources cannot be approached adequately at a national level. Instead, issues such as the availability of a sufficient number of teachers who have a high level of target language proficiency and cultural awareness as well as adequate training in teaching and learning (including the teaching and learning of languages) have to be approached on what is essentially an ad hoc basis. Nevertheless, in selecting teachers, in deciding on the types of programme that are likely to be the most effective in different contexts, in assessing the value of existing

curriculum documents, and in setting short-term and longer-term achievement objectives for our students, we can be more confident if we take as much account as possible of existing research literature.

I shall begin here by providing an overview of some current research as it relates to a number of commonly held beliefs about young learners and second languages. I shall then look in more detail at some of the issues raised in that overview.

Young learners and second languages: an overview of research indicators

Is earlier necessarily better?
There is a widespread belief that the earlier a child begins to learn a language, the better they will be, ultimately, at speaking, reading, writing and understanding that language. This is absolutely true if what we are talking about is a situation in which a very young child is introduced into a context in which the target language is used by community members for all, or most, transactions on a daily basis. If this *is* the case, then we can expect the child to acquire the ability to use the language naturally (without any of the type of instruction that generally characterises second language learning contexts) so long as he or she is approximately three years old or younger at the point of introduction to the new community. Under such circumstances, a child can achieve, within a relatively short period of time, a level and type of proficiency that is the same, or similar, to that of children of the same age who were born and raised in that community. Furthermore, so long as the child remains within that community, he or she will continue to progress linguistically in a ways that are very similar indeed to those who were born and raised in the community. However, as a child gets older, the chances that he or she will achieve native-speaker-like competence simply as a result of this type of immersion diminish. Furthermore, this type of situation (early community immersion) is not readily available to most children. Nor is it possible to replicate it in the context of schooling: schools, including pre-schools, can accommodate children for only part of the day and cannot, however hard they try, provide the whole range of linguistic contexts and encounters that are naturally available within a community whose members use a particular language in all, or most, contexts.

In other situations, in particular, in situations where children are introduced to a language in a school setting, research suggests that it is not *necessarily* the case that an earlier introduction to the target language is always better. Nor is it necessarily the case that children will learn languages quickly and easily, or that they will be free from anxiety when they are confronted with a language-learning situation.

One clear advantage of starting to learn a language at an early age relates to pronunciation. There appears to be a clear correlation between an early start in language learning and good overall approximations of native-speaker-like pronunciation, stress and intonation. Students who begin to learn a second language at an early age, provided they are exposed to appropriate models of the language, are likely to more closely approximate the pronunciation of first language speakers than are those who begin their language learning at a later age. Furthermore, research has indicated that *greater length of exposure* to language learning may give learners a greater ability to develop a high level of communicative control. However, given that, in tutored language learning situations, teenagers may cope better than younger

children, we need to balance possible learning difficulties against length of exposure in deciding what is best in terms of the stage at which a new language is introduced. We also need to remember that there is a fundamental difference between achieving competence in day-to-day spoken interaction in a target language and achieving sufficient competence to operate effectively through the medium of a target language in an educational environment. Although many young learners appear to achieve a relatively high level of competence in using a target language in day-to-day spoken interaction relatively quickly, it is likely to take many years before they can operate effectively in the target language in educational contexts.

Should grammar be taught to young learners?

Most teachers agree that all language learners need to be introduced to vocabulary. With younger learners, most also prefer to emphasise speaking and listening rather than reading and writing. There is, however, less agreement about the introduction of grammar into programmes designed for young learners.

Some teachers are convinced that grammar should *not* be taught to young learners. They generally believe that teaching grammar turns language learning into an unpleasant experience, that it is unnecessary because young learners will acquire a new language naturally, and that it is pointless because learners do not necessarily learn what they are taught. All of these things may be true in situations where very young children can acquire a new language naturally in a community where the new language is the language spoken within that community. However, they are by no means necessarily true where young learners learn a language in a classroom context, especially when they do so for only a few hours each week. Quite simply, they do not have the exposure time or the communicative opportunities to make natural acquisition a realistic possibility. Furthermore, even where the target language is also the language of academic instruction for all, or most, of the time, and even where the children have had some exposure to the language in pre-school contexts, it would be unrealistic to assume that they will develop a native-speaker-like competence. They *are* likely to achieve 'surface fluency' relatively quickly. However, 'surface fluency' can be deceptive. The fact that children can understand, and make themselves understood with little difficulty in predictable, day-to-day contexts does not mean that their language is necessarily accurate or that it is adequate to support their academic goals. It would appear to follow from this that we need to provide language learners, including those in immersion or semi-immersion contexts, with some form of instruction in the forms/ grammatical structures of the target language.

Does teaching grammar turn language learning into an unpleasant experience? Certainly, this is likely to be the case where grammar is taught explicitly and where young learners are expected to learn grammatical rules. However, a good teacher of young learners will teach grammar implicitly and in such a way that the learners do not even realise that they are learning grammatical rules.

What about the argument that young learners will acquire language naturally so long as they understand what is being communicated? Of course, this is true in situations where young children live in communities where they are surrounded by the new language. Such children are likely to become fluent in day-to-day communication in the new language relatively quickly. However, as indicated above, research suggests that children, unless they are very young indeed when they are exposed to the new

language, are likely to have enduring problems relating to accuracy unless they are specifically helped to overcome them.

What about the argument that it is pointless to teach grammar because learners do not necessarily learn what they are taught? Certainly, this is true where teachers try to teach too much too quickly. It will also be true in situations where teachers attempt to teach something that is simple at the same time as allowing all sorts of complexities – complexities of which they may even be unaware – to obscure the teaching focus.

Imagine this scenario. A relatively inexperienced teacher of English is attempting to encourage a group of young learners whose first language is Mandarin to use the present progressive for ongoing activities relating to movement (*He's jumping/ skipping/ hopping etc.).* This is the first occasion on which these learners have been introduced to the present progressive in English and yet the teacher constantly alters the question form (*What is he doing?/ What's he doing? What are they doing? What is it doing? What are you doing? etc.),* expecting the children to move, at the stage of initial presentation, between full forms and contracted forms (*What's . . ?/ What is . . . ?*), and between names (*John*) and pronouns. Even worse, the children are expected to change the auxiliary verb form to match the selected pronoun (*He is . . . ; We are . . . etc.*). To expect learners to be able to cope with all of these complexities at the initial stage of the presentation of a new structure makes no sense. Teaching of this kind is unlikely to be of any value at all. In fact, it is this type of grammar instruction that has given grammar a bad name.

Should we, then, teach grammar to young learners in our classes? The answer is certainly NO - if what we mean by teaching grammar is teaching grammatical rules explicitly and expecting learners to memorise them. However, if teaching grammar means teaching about language forms implicitly, then the answer must be YES. An important aspect of a good language teacher's repertoire is knowing how to get learners to focus on forms, knowing how to make them aware of language forms in ways that are interesting and effective. Even so, in the very early stages of language learning, it makes sense to focus on the presentation of formulaic language, that is, language that can be used meaningfully in a specific context without reference to how it might be adapted for use in another context.

Young learners and second languages: research indicators in more detail

Beginning to learn a second language: what age is best?

Many people appear to believe that the earlier a child begins to learn a language, the better they will be at speaking, writing and understanding that language (Krashen, Long & Scarcella, 1979). Much of the evidence for this belief appears to be anecdotal or based largely on observations of children who are in true language immersion situations, such as, for example, children who have moved with their parents to live in a country where the target language is spoken. While some early research in the area (Lennenberg, 1967; Penfield & Roberts, 1959) suggested that the success of children as early language learners was the result of the flexibility of their brain, more recent research (Genesee, 1981; Harley, 1989; Newport, 1990) has led to a questioning of this notion. Currently, most language research supports the view that:

> [The] rate of second language acquisition may reflect psychological and social factors, rather then biological ones that favor child learners. For example, children may be more motivated than adults to learn the second language. There is probably more incentive for the child on the playground and in school to communicate in the second language than there is for the adult on the job (where they often can get by with routine phrases and expressions) or with friends (who may speak the individual's first language anyway). It frequently happens that children are placed in more situations where they are forced to speak the second language than are adults (McLaughlin, 1992, p. 2).

A number of research projects have compared the relative rates of progress in language learning of early beginners and those who began their studies at a later age. These studies indicate that older students are generally more efficient and effective language learners because they bring to the process more world experience and more highly-developed language strategies and cognitive skills (Gorosch and Axelsson, 1964; Florander & Jansen, 1968; Buehler, 1972; Stern, Burstall & Harley, 1975; Snow & Hoefnagel-Hoehle, 1978; Genesee, 1981, 1987). Even so, because greater *length of exposure* can to lead to greater communicative control (Ekstrand, 1975; Hatch, 1983), an earlier start can offer advantages so long as the language learning continues over a longer period than would otherwise have been the case.

What about the widespread belief that children are fearless language learners who approach the task with equanimity and are never, like adults, constrained by fear and anxiety? Mclaughlin (1992) points to a number of research projects (see, for example, Asher & Price, 1967; Snow & Hoefnagel-Hoehle, 1978) that clearly indicate that young children can find language learning both difficult and stressful.

In most areas, research does not indicate that there are any *necessary* advantages in introducing the learning of second languages in tutored language learning contexts in the pre-teen rather than teenage years. An exception, however, is in the area of pronunciation. Asher and Garcia (1969) and Oyama (1976) both found a clear correlation between an early start in language learning and overall approximations of native-speaker-like pronunciation, stress and intonation. It appears that students who begin to learn a language at an early age will ultimately more closely approximate the pronunciation of first language speakers than those who begin their language learning at a later age.

What is bilingualism and can language learners become bilingual?

The word ‘bilingual’ does *not necessarily* mean ‘equally competent in all areas of use of more than one language’. There are different levels and types of bilingualism. *Absolute bilingualism* (having the same level of competence in all areas of use of more than one language) is extremely rare. Something very close to it is, however, achievable, particularly where we have what can be referred to as *simultaneous bilingual development*, that is, where there is exposure to, and development of, two languages at the same time in a context where there is approximately equal opportunity to interact in the two languages. This sort of bilingualism would generally be initiated before a child has reached 3 years of age. *Successive bilingual development* involves exposure to a second language after the first language has already been established, that is, after around the age of three (McLaughlin, 1995). In

the case of successive bilingualism, the learning of the second language may happen quickly (*rapid successive bilingual development*) if there are many opportunities to interact in both languages, or more slowly (*gradual successive bilingual development*) if there are more limited opportunities to use the second language. In the case, in particular, of *gradual successive bilingual development*, which characterizes almost all classroom-centred language learning, learners are unlikely to achieve anything approaching absolute bilingualism.

Learning a first language and a second language: is it the same thing?

A large number of research projects (see, for example, Nemser, 1971; Dulay & Burt, 1973; Corder, 1981; Cazden, 1972; George, 1972; Richards, 1974; Cook, 1973; Hatch, 1978; Ellis, 1984; Wong-Fillmore, 1985) have been undertaken in an attempt to investigate whether learning a first language and learning a second language occur in the same way. Indications are that the second language learning process, although drawing on first language learning strategies, is a unique process. What is also indicated in the research findings is that the second language learning process may be strongly affected by a number of critical factors, including the age of the learner and, most particularly, the environment in which the learning takes place. It follows, then, that if the cognitive process is different, the approach to teaching and learning should also be different. Teaching a second language in a school context is not something that can be approached successfully without skills and understanding that are specific to tutored language learning contexts.

Is it possible to learn a second language and learn other curriculum areas through the medium of that language simultaneously?

Multiple experiences in the USA of children who are learning a second language and simultaneously learning curriculum areas through the medium of that language (e.g., learning English and learning mathematics through the medium of English simultaneously) indicate that there are likely to be developmental problems, particularly in the early stages (see, for example, Collier, 1989; Cummins, 1981). Children in language immersion contexts are likely to take up to 7 years before they develop sufficient proficiency in the target language to cope adequately with the academic demands of other curriculum areas such as mathematics, science or social studies. This period of mastery is likely to take even longer in gradual, successive, bilingual settings. The fact that a child is able to cope adequately in oral contexts in day-to-day situations does not mean that he or she will be able to cope adequately in a context where he or she is expected to learn other curriculum areas through the medium of that language (see Cummins, 1980).

Aren't all approaches to language teaching 'communicative' by definition?

Currently, the most widely accepted approaches to language teaching are collectively referred to as 'communicative approaches'. Communicative approaches encourage learners to engage in meaningful communication in the target language, thus giving a purpose to the language learning that extends beyond the actual language learning itself. The primary purpose of this approach is to encourage learners to communicate real information for authentic reasons:

> Communicative language teaching is teaching that encourages learners to engage in meaningful communication in the target language, communication that has a function over and above that of language learning itself. Any

> approach that encourages learners to communicate real information for authentic reasons is, therefore, a communicative approach. This would include various types of information gap activities, that is, activities that require students to seek information that they genuinely require in order to complete some task. Classroom-based language tuition will inevitably be artificial in some respects. However, those who subscribe to the ideals of communicative language teaching aim to keep such artificiality to a minimum and avoid language exercises that are out of context and essentially meaning-free (Ministry of Education, 2002: Introduction).

Some researchers (see, for example, Krashen, 1981), have suggested that if the attitude and atmosphere are appropriate, language can be 'acquired' in classroom contexts so long as teachers use the target language meaningfully, making sure to challenge the students by using language that is a little in advance of their current level of competence. In fact, however, in order to use language in the classroom that is challenging without being too demanding, teachers will need to understand a great deal about what is involved in tutored language learning contexts. As McLaughlin (1985) and Gregg (1984) have observed, learning a second or foreign language in a classroom setting, especially if it is just for a few hours each week, is most certainly not the same thing as learning a first language. In such a context, teachers must have an understanding of the cognitive processes involved in second language learning and must have expertise in second language teaching. Simply using a second language and hoping that children will understand what is said and begin to use the language themselves is not what is meant by 'communicative language teaching'. Nor is it accurate to refer to language teaching that does not attempt to involve the learners in realistic communication as 'communicative language teaching'.

Are native speakers of a language likely to be better language teachers of the language than non-native speakers?

There are problems associated with the wide range of expertise of those who are expected to implement language initiatives both in Asia and New Zealand. While some primary school teachers have a high degree of proficiency in the target language and use it with confidence, others have more limited ability in the language and/or lack confidence in their language skills. Teachers who do not have a high level of proficiency in the target language, who lack an in-depth understanding of the target culture and who have little, if any, training in language teaching pedagogy will have serious difficulties in attempting to create an appropriate context for communicative language learning. However, the fact that someone has a very high level of proficiency in a language does not necessarily mean that he or she will be an effective teacher of that language. As Crombie (2002) observes:

> [The] most severe problems are often associated with the lack of appropriate training in language teaching pedagogy. The fact that someone is a fluent speaker of a language most certainly does not mean that they have the type of understanding of how that language works that is useful in the second language classroom. Often, first language speakers without appropriate linguistic training are wholly unaware of the complexities of the language or of the difficulties that learners of the language face. They may, therefore, actually confuse learners by, for example, communicating the same type of information in an array of

> different forms without even realizing what they are doing. Furthermore, since teaching a language in a classroom setting requires very specific skills and training, both native and non-native speakers of the target language who lack the necessary skills and training may do more harm than good. The problem is that some of the more extreme interpretations of the communicative language teaching movement appear to have been based on the assumption that learning a language in a classroom for a few hours a week is essentially the same thing as learning a first language from infancy. Some educationalists appear to have believed – perhaps some still believe – that all that is necessary is to go into a classroom and talk meaningfully about interesting things in ways that learners can understand. Even if this were the case, it is something that only a highly trained language professional could hope to achieve, something that would require very considerable training and experience.

Finding sufficient numbers of well trained teachers with a sufficiently high level of competence in English is a real problem in Asia (see, for example, Wang, 1999). Judging from the number of advertisements in the *New Zealand Educational Gazette*, the same is true in the case of teachers of Maori. Even when teachers can be found, there may be no relevant curriculum documents available to them (as in parts of Asia), or the curriculum documents that *are* available may be less than wholly useful. Even highly trained professional language educators will have difficulty in establishing benchmarks for their programmes if there are no clear guidelines about what can reasonably be expected of their students.

Second language-learning initiatives relating to young learners in both Asia and New Zealand appear to be driven by the very best of intentions and by a passionate belief by some policy makers, parents and teachers that young learners will gain future economic, social, cultural and educational advantages from having language-learning opportunities at a young age. However, there often appears to be an uncomfortable fit between the programmes themselves and what is currently known about best practice in second language teaching and learning. There are a number of inter-related aspects of programme design and delivery that need to be considered if such initiatives are to be given a better chance of success. These relate to the need for:

- national languages policies;
- national language institutes which take responsibility for commissioning research and disseminating research findings;
- coherent pre-service and in-service training programmes for language teachers (including language proficiency development as well as training in language teaching);
- curriculum and syllabus documents which include clearly specified achievement objectives and which can be directly related to language proficiency benchmarks;
- appropriate teaching resources;
- the articulation of mechanisms to deal with multiple entry points (e.g., students who begin their language learning later than others).

Children learn best when they have a genuine reason for learning – a reason that they can understand – and when learning is fun and they experience success. In fact, so far as children are concerned, the best possible reason for learning a language is that they have fun in the process and that they succeed. Making language-learning fun and ensuring success is something that requires the synthesis of great number different elements, both within and beyond the classroom.

If language-learning initiatives are to be successful, young learners need to be turned on to language learning. They need to be in classrooms with competent, well-trained teachers who challenge and stimulate their students, but who also understand the constraints and limitations of language learning programmes. Inevitably, a child who has had regular, enjoyable and success-filled periods of exposure to a target language from an early age *will* have an advantage if he or she has enjoyed the experience, experienced success and become a keen language learner.

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