

# **Isolated learners from diverse language backgrounds in the mainstream primary classroom: A sociocultural perspective**

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*ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the linguistic and cultural ('languaculture', Agar, 1994) challenges faced by learners from diverse language backgrounds (DLB) in New Zealand schools. It describes the typical learning context in primary classrooms terms of interactional, instructional, and cognitive dimensions. It then presents vignettes of four DLB learners and explains their relative competence in terms of Cummin's (1981) distinction between BICS and CALP (Basic Interactional Communication Skills and Cognitive-Academic Language Proficiency). It goes on to discuss the extent to which such proficiency is the result of linguistic and cultural distance, and how that distance might be bridged by applying key constructs from sociocultural theory, and the implementation of Individual Languaculture Plans for DLB learners. The paper concludes with discussing the issue of where responsibility lies for coping with the challenges face by DLB learners.*

**KEYWORDS:**     **Languaculture, learning, sociocultural, primary classrooms, Second language.**

## **Introduction**

The New Zealand school population is increasingly diverse in terms of language and culture. Just over 20% of students are Maori, and 6.5% are from Pacific island backgrounds - the same percentage as children from Asian backgrounds (Peddie, 2003). Since 1987, successive governments in New Zealand have encouraged immigrants from Asian countries, and now approximately 250,000 of its residents are of Asian origin (Statistics New Zealand, 2002) Many of these children have limited competence in English and, although they may be provided with a few hours of English language tuition a week in withdrawal classes, are otherwise immersed in the regular mainstream classes. In these classes they have to adjust to both a new language and a new culture of learning; Agar (1994) coined the term 'languaculture' to emphasise the inextricable bond between language and culture, especially in learning contexts. The experience of immersion in the mainstream - or submersion (Haworth, 2003) - is particularly acute where there are only a few, perhaps only one or two, children from the same linguistic and ethnic background in a classroom or school - 'isolated' learners. Such children are officially referred to by the Ministry of Education as NESB (non-English speaking background) learners. However, it may be considered inappropriate to define people negatively, and so the term preferred in this paper is 'learners from diverse language backgrounds' (DLB) - which, it is felt, more positively reflects their status.

This paper is concerned with how teachers and parents of immigrant DLB learners might help them cope with the languaculture challenges they face. It will begin by discussing, with particular reference to Richards and Hurley (1988) the nature of the learning culture in New Zealand primary schools and will then briefly outline the

experience of four eleven-year-old immigrant learners in one upper primary school classroom. It will then briefly outline key factors in the linguistic and cultural distance that may impede the languaculture development of typical Asian learners. This will be followed by a discussion of how the gap between existing languaculture skills and their potential development of individual children might be scaffolded, within what Vygotsky (1978) referred to as a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The notion of a ZPD will then be extended to the learning that might occur among teachers and parents of DLB learners, as they collaborate to produce individual educational plans for the children in their care. The article will conclude with a brief consideration of the interrelationship between empowerment, control and responsibility as regards the education of learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

### **The languaculture in New Zealand primary schools**

Cummins (1981) usefully delineated language competence into two separate categories – Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS is the ability to function in everyday conversations, where a rich interpersonal and ‘here and now’ context facilitates both comprehension and communication. CALP, on the other hand, is the ability to reflect upon and manipulate language in context-reduced circumstances, typically those of formal school learning, for the purposes of conceptual development. It is clear that all school learners need to be encouraged and helped to move from BICS – the language of the home, street and playground – to an awareness of, and proficiency in, the academic discourse assumed by CALP. Much of the language instruction that occurs in withdrawal ESOL classes focuses on content-embedded settings in order to ensure comprehensible input. However, academic achievement in mainstream classes depends on the learner’s ability to function in context-reduced situations.

Expanding on the BICS/CALP distinction, and drawing on Tikunoff’s (1985, p.4) notion of ‘student functional efficiency’, Richards & Hurley (1988; 1990) discussed the role of learning in mainstream classrooms in New Zealand and elsewhere in terms of three dimensions. The first of these is the interactional dimension, by which is meant conventions about who communicates to whom, when and how. This dimension embraces such issues as initiating, sustaining and terminating interactions, bidding for turns, asking questions, and so on. It is important to note that such conventions apply also to various forms of nonverbal communication, such as eye contact, gesture and movement around the classroom. (This is a specific form of Cummins’ BICs: it might, indeed, be termed *CICS* – Classroom Interaction Communication Skills.) The point of the interactional dimension is that it is the social basis upon which all classroom learning occurs; unless the conventions are adhered to, at least in large part, then the other dimensions of classroom learning will not be effective. Teachers all over the world establish and reinforce these interactional norms in their classrooms based upon the prevailing pedagogical values, beliefs and practices. They achieve this hegemony by engaging in a continuous dialogue with their students in which these languaculture norms are explicitly or implicitly inculcated.

The second dimension of classroom learning is what Richards and Hurley refer to as ‘instructional task performance’; this can be seen as the crucial link, the pivot,

between CICS and CALP. Richards and Hurley point out that much of the primary school curriculum can be considered as a collection of various tasks through which learning is operationalised. Such tasks include copying, note-taking, symbolic manipulation (such as arithmetical calculation, adding punctuation to texts), information-extraction, comprehension of explicitly stated details, inferring implicit information, making summaries, comments, evaluation, etc. These tasks have widely different operational procedures (for example, whether they are to be performed individually, in pairs, or in groups), available resources (such as print, visual, electronic) and specified outcomes, which may be represented orally, visually or in writing. Usually, the teacher explains to the class the particular features of set tasks – especially those that are new – but in doing so makes assumptions about the learners’ previous classroom experiences. Thus, s/he might allude to, rather than directly state, features of a task with which s/he considers the learners are already familiar – either from lessons they have shared together, or in the learners’ previous school experience in the educational system

By following the interactional conventions and carrying out the instructional tasks, primary school students make cognitive gains – they learn technical terminology, comprehend new concepts, acquire new modes of enquiry, absorb the underlying discourse structures of the school subjects, and develop new learning strategies. Throughout this process, language is utilised and central – and CALP is thereby achieved to one degree or another. The learners are also encouraged to develop metacognitive skills – they learn how to become good learners: once again, language is central to this thinking process. Moreover, they are also socialised, in and through language (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986, p.2), into what it means to be good citizens of the society in which they will one day play an adult part – the implicit languaculture curriculum of schools everywhere.

#### **Four learners from diverse language backgrounds**

Among the many DLB learners who arrived in New Zealand at different times during one academic year, the four described below were enrolled in an intermediate (upper primary) school, and were placed in the same mainstream classroom.

‘Jack’ was an eleven-year-old Korean boy who arrived in school towards the middle of March – that is, some six weeks after the start of the school year. Immediately after enrolment, he was assessed by the English language teacher and was deemed to have ‘minimal English’; he knew the alphabet, some basic words and could count up to 20 (after 16, only with some prompting). It was decided that he should receive the maximum available amount of tuition in ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages), some four or five hours of withdrawal classes each week. For the rest of the time, he was placed in the mainstream class, where he sat among a group of boys who, although friendly towards him, were unable to communicate with him verbally, or effectively assist him in his schoolwork. There were no other Korean students in the class, or in the year group.

‘Jean’, from Taiwan, arrived in May and although her command of English was considerably greater than Jack’s, she too was allocated four or five hours in withdrawal ESOL lessons. In the mainstream classroom, she sat among a group of very able and friendly girls who greatly helped her to understand what was required

of her in both interactional and task performance terms. At first, she was very unsure of herself but with the help of these girls her confidence, and communicative competence, grew over the year.

‘John’, also from Taiwan, arrived in mid-July. Although both the ESOL specialist and the mainstream teacher had been led to believe, and acted upon the assumption, that his English was ‘minimal, in fact his conversational English was very fluent. He was, however, totally unfamiliar with the social conventions underlying class work in New Zealand primary schools, and his pragmatic awkwardness led him into verbal conflict with both peers and teacher. He was never seen to interact with the only two other Taiwanese students (both girls) in the classroom.

‘Alina’ arrived from Taiwan in August, and could not speak, or understand, any English at all. Like Jean and Jack, she was allocated 4-5 hours of ESOL withdrawal tuition a week. In the mainstream class, she was seated beside Jean, who was asked by the teacher to help her. Over the next few months, Jean greatly assisted her to settle into the class routine. They invariably spoke in Mandarin, and only very rarely was Alina seen to interact with other students, and only then when Jean was absent – for example, when the latter was attending her own ESOL lessons.

John’s BICs were sound, but he lacked awareness of the specific requirements of the specific CICS that were expected of learners in a New Zealand primary classroom. Even towards the end of the year, for example, he would interrupt the teacher and consistently fail to raise his hand before volunteering an answer to a question. Also, unused to and unable to grasp the point of groupwork, he viewed these occasions as a time for socialising with his classmates, who increasingly looked upon his interruption of their work in progress as an annoyance. For him, ‘project work’ was a time for relaxing and reading comics. Not only did he fail to make academic progress – and develop his CALP – but he also became socially isolated and, in fact, disliked. Only in the last two weeks of the year when, along with his classmates, he was required to complete a criteria-referenced self-evaluation task, did he come to understand some of the interactional conventions of the class around academic practices.

Jean’s English speaking peers helped her to understand the interactional rules and the requirements of the instructional tasks, and so she steadily gained in both BICS and CALP, and was able to be a fully participating member of the learning community in the classroom. By the end of the year was able to move from the role of tutee (with these girls) to peer tutor vis-à-vis Alina – even in the space of one lesson. It may have been the case, however, that the constant demands placed on her time and attention by Alina (and encouraged by the teacher) may have hindered her development.

Alina made very little progress in either BICS or CALP; she was still considered to be at the stage of ‘minimal English’ at the end of the year, and much of the ambient classroom discourse remained incomprehensible to her. With Jean’s help, though, she came to understand some of the interactional ground rules and the requirements of the instructional tasks; she completed many of these with a great deal of help from Jean; others she left undone. On the whole, she remained entirely instructionally dependent on Jean. However, she was inducted into the social group that formed around Jean,

and thereby became a participating member of the classroom social group, if not of the learning community (Barnard, 2002).

Like Alina, Jack remained at the level of 'minimal English' even at the end of the year and was unable to verbally communicate his basic wants and needs in English - let alone at an academic level. Moreover, unlike Alina, he had no one to communicate with or help him understand what was required; some of the boys tried hard to work and play with him, but to little avail. With no one to help him, at times he was very miserable, lonely and frustrated (Barnard, 2003).

### **Linguaculture distance**

What is evident is that these four learners, and others like them, need help to bridge the considerable linguaculture distance between them and their classmates if they wish to develop their existing cognitive and conceptual abilities to a higher potential level. A sociocultural perspective on education requires due consideration of the key social and historical influences that have shaped each individual learner. As a starting point, one may consider the extent of the general linguistic and cultural distance between Taiwanese and Korean children on the one hand, and their English-speaking classmates on the other.

#### ***Linguistic distance***

This is often considered in terms of the extent to which two languages are considered formally cognate – for example, in orthography, morphology, phonology, syntax, and discourse organisation. While the constructs applied in the identification of linguistic distance tend to vary, it is generally considered that English is more remote from Mandarin and Korean in these respects than it is, for example, from Indo-European languages, such as French or German. In pedagogic terms, the extent of linguistic distance (or proximity) gave rise many years ago to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis which posited that learning difficulty could be predicted by systematically comparing and contrasting the formal properties of the first and target languages (Lado, 1957, p.vii). More recently, it has been acknowledged that linguistic distance conceived in terms of non-verbal communication also affects second language learning (Kellerman, 1992; McCafferty, 1998). Different language communities develop specific pragmatic conventions regarding kinetic factors such as gesture and body movement, paralinguistic qualities such as volume, aspiration and backchannelling, optemic features which involve the use of eyes, especially eye-contact, and proxemic conventions regarding matters such as posture and physical distance between speakers. Given that much communication falls within these nonverbal categories, the relatively wide distance between conventions in New Zealand English and those in Chinese and Korean will tend to hinder DLB learners' linguaculture development. Recent research (for example, Elder & Davies, 1998) suggests that, although language distance is an important factor, it is difficult to separate it from other variables to permit firm pedagogical principles to be implied.

#### ***Cultural distance***

Other important variables include personal factors (such as age, intelligence and motivation) and cultural distance. A summary of attitudes towards education may illustrate the possible extent of cultural distance in the present context. Chinese and Korean students have clear, if implicit perceptions about the nature of learning and teaching. These include ways by which knowledge is constructed, of the proper

relationship between teacher and learners, and indeed the entire gamut of social and cultural attitudes inculcated through schooling. For example, the typical Chinese learner has been characterised as having a great respect for the teacher (Mezger, 1992). In large part, this derives from the importance attached to harmonious relationships in the Confucian tradition, and in particular from the transfer to the teacher of the filial piety due to parents (Zhu, 1992). From this has emerged a distinct style of teacher-centred instruction (Gao, 1988) in which the learner is largely passive and non-critical (Biggs, 1992). To question a teacher would seem impertinence and an implied criticism that the teacher has not made matters clear (Chu, 1997). Chu (1997, p.30) also points to the emphasis in Confucian culture on a conserving attitude to knowledge, which in turn leads to a great respect for books (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991; Mezger, 1992) as the repository, even the embodiment, of knowledge, wisdom and truth. From this derives the traditional importance attached to memorisation and a reproductive, rather than interpretive or interactive, style of learning. The pursuit of individual knowledge, even less knowledge for its own sake, is seen to be inappropriate: education in China has always had a utilitarian nature, with an explicit focus on social engineering (Zhu, 1992). Formal examinations have played an important role in Chinese education for over 2000 years (Chu, 1997) and today they are seen as the only gateway for academic progress and hence social esteem. This is particularly acute for entrance to higher education, but the effects percolate through the entire system and teaching methods in all schools are closely geared to the competitive needs of examinations (Lin and Chen, 1995). These authors report that parents are willing to spend large amounts of money and time to ensure that their children realise their own high aspirations, and this pressure on children adds to the 'examination hell' frequently experienced: daily tests are common even in primary schools. According to Lin and Chen (1995), Chinese society holds that parents are justified in the use of physical and psychological punishment if their children fail to achieve their academic ambitions. Harrington (1998) reports that typical Chinese parents retain these attitudes after they have immigrated to New Zealand.

### ***Bridging the distance***

While it is reasonable to assume that, on their arrival in this country, the four learners introduced above were fairly typical of their compatriots, the extent to which individual children conform to these linguistic and cultural stereotypes will, of course, vary considerably. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to understand, literally, where the particular children are coming from – and equally for parents to understand the direction their children are now heading. Sociocultural theory assumes that conceptual and cultural learning occurs through the mutual co-construction of meaning in dialogue. In his 'general genetic law of social development,' Vygotsky (1981, p.163) posited that any function in cultural development occurs twice: first, it occurs on the social plane through dialogue and then – only secondly – does it enter the individual's mental repertoire, when the individual internalises and *appropriates* (Bakhtin, 1981) the meaning reached on the external plane and invests it with his or her own voice. The most appropriate form of educational dialogue is that which occurs in a Zone of Proximal Development, which Vygotsky defined as:

the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

Clearly, the notion of the ZPD can well be applied to the classroom context of children from diverse language backgrounds. In order for a ZPD to be created, three things are needed: first, the identification of the learner's current level of linguistic, cognitive and cultural development; secondly, an estimate of the potential levels of development in these three areas; thirdly, the provision of appropriate assistance to enable the learner to close the gap between the actual and potential levels. The overall aim of the ZPD should be "what the child can do with assistance today, she will be able to do by herself tomorrow" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 87). In this process of ascertaining the potential development, it is important to remember that the learner not only has needs to be met through the learning process, but also strengths and *resources* to bring to bear. If these positive factors are not harnessed, the learner will remain in a deficit state of instructional dependency.

It should be evident that the levels of actual and potential development cannot be ascertained merely by assessing bilingual learners' language competence (which is virtually all that is done when most DLB learners are enrolled in New Zealand schools). Rather, there is also a need to take into account the learner's cognitive and affective receptivity (Kaviani, 2003) to the culture of learning prevalent in New Zealand schools – as discussed above. This requires interpolating future progress in the specific classroom context in which the learner is to be placed on the basis of that learner's previous and current experience of learning in his or her own cultural contexts. This can only be achieved by those centrally involved in the education process - the teachers and, equally if not more important, parents. They need to share their respective knowledge, experience and understandings.

### ***Individual Languaculture Plans***

In New Zealand, as elsewhere, it is recommended that learners with 'special needs' - by which is usually meant those who are physically, intellectually or psychologically challenged - should be provided with Individual Educational Plans (IEPs). These plans are collaboratively devised by teachers and other experts with relevant knowledge and skills. By sharing their knowledge about the child's sociocultural background and learning context, the IEP team can jointly construct viable objectives, and scaffold and monitor the learner's progress towards the achievement of these objectives. The basic IEP approach can be adapted for the languaculture development of DLB learners, who do of course have special, and identifiable, needs.

The essential point that meaning is co-constructed is true of all forms of conceptual and cultural learning – whether by children or adults. By entering into a constructive dialogue, teachers and parents can supply separate pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, based upon respective knowledge and experience, and thereby mutually construct appropriate ILPs (Individual Languaculture Plans) for the children in their charge. In a structured environment, parents can provide direct or indirect information and advice about their child's existing levels of ability: direct information may be derived from their own knowledge of their child; indirect data can be obtained from (translations of) school reports and transcripts. The mainstream teacher can advise parents in general about the three dimensions of classroom learning which operate in New Zealand, and which particular ground rules apply in their own classrooms – for example, in terms of codes of social behaviour, performance standards, homework, etc. Differences between New Zealand and Taiwanese or Korean educational values and practices can be explored to mutual benefit. An ESOL specialist can make a

useful contribution by identifying the learner's linguistic (and, to some extent, cultural) needs and resources, and could provide an informed prognosis in these areas. Teachers and parents can call upon other resource people from within and outside the school - for example, community interpreters can facilitate the process.

This dialogic process might initially appear time-consuming and relatively expensive, both in terms of direct costs (e.g. of interpreters) and the opportunity costs of teacher-time spent in this way rather than in actually teaching. However, these costs are outweighed by a deeper understanding by teachers of key sociocultural factors influencing the DLB learner, and a better knowledge by parents (and hence their children) of the new culture of learning. This interaction might then lead to a more active involvement by the parents in their children's schooling and languaculture development.

### **Conclusion - Empowerment, control and responsibility**

The process of devising an ILP is itself a ZPD - one in which parents and teachers scaffold each other's learning, and move from their existing levels of knowledge and awareness to higher potential levels. By co-constructing understanding about the child, they promote not merely the child's development, but also their own. As a result of this collaboration, both teachers and parents gain in knowledge and are thereby empowered to make better, more effective decisions on behalf of the learner. Of course, they can only go so far in leading the proverbial horse to water: it needs to be recognised that, ultimately, the learner must take control of the learning by converting the educational input of the classroom discourse into intake - appropriation. However, it is too much to expect young DLB learners such as the four illustrated above to take full *responsibility* for the process. Teachers can exercise control over, and assume due responsibility for, the specific environment of learning in order to provide educational opportunities for the child. But they have to plan and manage the learning of about thirty individual children, and this means that parents must take a large measure of responsibility - even greater than the teachers - for their children's development. It is, I believe, the responsibility of immigrant parents to obtain information about the way that educational values in New Zealand are conceptualised and realised, and take an active part in the education of their children. The onus is on them to understand the extent to which these values, and the ensuing policies and practices, differ from those in the educational system with which they and their children are familiar. It is also their responsibility to keep informed about the school's activities, and then actively monitor, encourage and promote their children's languaculture development.

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