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What Makes for Successful Second Language Learning

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Paper presented at the NZALT 2000 Conference in Rotorua. Rod Ellis is currently Professor and Director of the Institute of Language Teaching and Learning at the University of Auckland.

Introduction

I take it that the main aim of the New Zealand Association of Language Teaching (NZALT) is to promote successful ‘second’ language learning within the country. As someone who has spent some twenty odd years studying what makes language learning successful and some ten years before that actually teaching a language I can identify with such an aim. So I chose the title of my talk because its topic seemed central to both NZALT and to my own professional work.

I shall use the term ‘second language’ as an umbrella term for ‘community/foreign’ languages, distinguishing these where it seems appropriate. Maori has a very special status in New Zealand, making the label ‘second language’ an inappropriate one. However, as my main concern in this talk is with community and foreign language learning and teaching rather than with Maori, I shall use the term ‘second’.

In order to address the question of what makes for successful language learning, there is a basic question that needs to be addressed first, “Why should New Zealand bother with second languages given the status of English as the international language of the 21st century?” This question is basic because, obviously, one cannot talk of success in second language learning, a matter that ultimately concerns the individual learner, if in fact there is no (or only limited) opportunity to learn second languages. The question of availability of opportunity is, to some extent at least, a matter of policy. Thus, as a prelude to my main question I want to say a few words about language policy in New Zealand, as this concerns second languages.

A Policy for Foreign Language Learning in New Zealand Schools

New Zealand does not have an official language policy. There have been some excellent discussion documents relating to language policy (e.g. Waite 1992) and some strong advocacy of an official policy for schools (Peddie 1998). However, to date, government has preferred to avoid the potential pitfalls of an official policy and has instead opted for supporting specific aspects of language learning in New Zealand (e.g. te reo Maori as a medium of instruction and the Second Language Learner Project in the 37
last two years of primary school). It has offered recommendations (e.g. regarding the teaching of foreign languages in schools) which can be and have been easily ignored. In this way government can be seen to be doing something without really committing itself to a definite position – an approach that, as Benton (1996), points out seeks the benefits of both clarity and opaqueness.

I am not optimistic that government (even the current one) will change its stance, although I think it should. Language is such an important issue in New Zealand that it seems foolhardy not to move towards some definite policy – bearing in mind, of course, that any language policy would need to be implemented gradually.

I am going to limit my own proposals for a language policy to the teaching of languages in schools. Thus I will not address the choice of language as medium of instruction, important as this is nor will I consider the teaching of languages at tertiary level. These limitations in scope are motivated partly by the time available to me here today and partly because I think the whole matter of a language policy might become more tractable if it is dealt with in a modular fashion.

A policy for second language study in New Zealand schools needs to address what languages will be taught, to whom, at what level, and for how long. I will briefly look at these different aspects of policy from the perspective of what the current situation is and what I would see as a desirable policy. A language policy does not usually address the question of how language is to be taught, although perhaps it should as ultimately the success of any language policy for schools will depend as much on how languages are taught as on any government regulated curriculum requirements.

**What languages**

The *New Zealand Curriculum Framework*, released by the Ministry of Education in 1993, addresses both the place of Maori and second languages in the school curriculum. With regard to the latter it invites schools ‘to choose from a range of Pacific, Asian and European languages’. In effect, however, the vast majority of school students study one of just five languages; French, Japanese, German, Spanish and Chinese. Of these, French and Japanese accounted for 71% of all school students studying a language in 1999. An adequate language policy, to my mind, would minimally require students to experience learning at least ONE second language while at school. This is based on the individual, cultural and economic advantages that accrue from language learning and that have been acknowledged in just about every publication that has addressed the issue, including the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework*. Ideally, a language policy would require students to experience learning TWO second languages while at school – one community language and one foreign language.
To whom

According to 1999 MOE statistics, less than one third of the students enrolled in secondary school in 1998 studied a second language [1]. This is a worryingly low proportion that ought to be a matter of major concern to the MOE. The reasons for it are likely to be complicated. They include the lack of availability to study the language of choice at some schools, the lack of teachers to teach community/foreign languages, a lack of motivation to study a second language on the part of students (and parents), and the (quite justified) recognition that learning a second/foreign language is arduous and time consuming.

However, as the advantages of language learning are well attested and widely recognized, opportunities to experience learning a language need to be available to ALL students at some stage during their school education. This can only be achieved if all students who cannot demonstrate competency in two languages are required to study a second language. Obviously this would exclude students who were already bilingual and new immigrants learning English as a second language. A language policy with regard to such students would need to address different issues -- L1 maintenance and ESL provision.

The purpose of a policy for second languages would be to ensure a degree of bilingualism in ALL students leaving NZ secondary schools.

Level

A policy for second languages at school will also need to address whether language learning should commence at primary or secondary level. In the 1990s the MOE initiated the introduction of foreign languages in primary schools. Although Peddie and Lewis (1998) published an evaluation of this project they did not address the effect an early start had on students’ second language proficiency. Evaluations of foreign language teaching at primary school level in other countries (e.g. see Singleton (1989) for a review) have failed to show that it results in higher levels of proficiency, although evaluators consistently point out that the early introduction of a foreign language has other educational and cultural advantages.

My own preference would be to restrict second language learning in the primary school to Maori and community languages and to introduce foreign language learning at secondary school. However, in part, the decision as to what level to introduce language learning is related to teaching approach. Younger learners are better suited to an experiential, informal teaching approach while older learners can benefit, to some extent at least, from a more analytic, formal approach although as I shall argue later secondary school students also need to experience the language in use if they are to be successful.
How long?

We have already noted that, worryingly, less than a third of all secondary school students study a community/foreign language. In fact, many of those who do study a language do so for only a short period - in some cases for no longer than one semester [2]. Language learning is essentially skill-learning and, like all skill-learning, requires time. If the purpose of teaching languages in schools is to develop the proficiency needed to communicate, this will require time. Studying a language for a semester or even two years is unlikely to achieve this objective. Even for students who elect to study a language for all 5 years of secondary school there is precious little time to achieve an acceptable level of proficiency, especially if there is no contact with the language outside the classroom.

It is, of course, not possible to state what is the minimum amount of time needed to achieve a given level of communicative competence. This will be highly variable depending on such factors as the language aptitude and motivation of the students, the teaching methodology employed and the skills of individual teachers. Cummins and Swain (1986) suggests that it takes two years for language learners of a majority language like English in a context such a New Zealand to acquire basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and between five and seven to acquire cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). If the goal of language teaching in New Zealand schools were to be limited to BICS, it would require something equivalent to two years of natural exposure to the target language. Even five years of studying a language for 4 hours per week would hardly provide this. It follows that to be successful learners need to spend time out of school. Traditionally, this is thought to be easier in the case of languages that are spoken in the wider community (e.g. Samoan or Cantonese in Auckland) than foreign languages like Japanese or French but this is to a considerable extent mistaken as learners often lack the motivation to avail themselves of the opportunities for contact with these languages outside the classroom. Indeed, as we will see later, it is often the learners of foreign languages who make the effort to seek out learning opportunities outside the classroom.

To ensure adequate exposure for language learning, a language policy for schools should require that students have the opportunity to study a language for at least five years, and, more importantly, should propose that schools seek to use at least one community/foreign language as the medium of instruction for selected school subjects, as has been tried for German in some Melbourne schools. Of course, as I have already pointed out, the implementation of such a policy would have to be gradual.

This discussion of a language policy for schools has been brief and, therefore, necessarily sketchy. I have tried to address a number of key issues, all of which I know to be highly complex. However, the complexity of the issues and the attendant difficulty in arriving at sensible solutions should not preclude the development of a language policy - as it seems to
have done to date. Without such a policy, it is difficult to see that second
language teaching in schools will achieve much more than tokenism for
even those students who elect to learn a language. For the majority of
students there will not be even token learning.

Defining Successful Language Learning

I would now like to turn to a consideration of what makes for successful
language learning. The starting point is to define what 'successful' means.
This is necessarily a relative concept both with regard to the context of
learning and the individual learner. We might define 'success' in a number
of different ways:

1. Success in public examinations
   This is probably how many students, parents and schools define
   success. However, given that only a relatively small proportion of
   secondary school students sit public examinations in languages, this
   measure of success would point to a relative failure to learn a second
   language in the school population overall.

2. Ability to communicate in a second language
   Current approaches to teaching a second language emphasize the
development of communicative abilities – in particular oral
interpersonal communication skills. In Europe, this has been reflected
in the 'threshold level for modern language learning in schools, defined
with reference to lists of language functions and notions (see Van Ek
1976) and, more recently, in task-based approaches to language
teaching (Willis 1996). However, attempts to revise curricula to make
them more 'communicative' do not necessarily result in more
communicative language teaching (see Nunan 1987) or in the
development of BICS. The traditional format of examinations can also
militate against the development of oral communicative skills.

3. Learner autonomy
   Another way of measuring 'success' might be in terms of whether
students develop the skills they need to become autonomous language
learners, capable of the life-long learning of language. The
development of learner autonomy, even at the school level, has become
a major theme in current discussions about language pedagogy,
motivated by the belief that 'instruction is a provisional state that has
its object to make the learner or problem solver self-sufficient ...
Otherwise the result of instruction is to create a form of mastery that is
contingent upon the perpetual presence of the teacher,' as Bruner
(1966) so eloquently put it. In the context of school education, learner
autonomy would seem to be essential as schools themselves simply
cannot provide sufficient instruction to guarantee anything but a
rudimentary skill in a language. It must ultimately be up to the student.
The key question, then, is 'To what extent do schools foster learner
autonomy?' Success in this direction is arguably more important than

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actual success in developing proficiency in a language while at school.

4. The motivation to learn a second language
Irrespective of whether students take and pass an examination, whether they develop much in the way of communicative skills and even whether they learn to become autonomous, they might develop a ‘taste’ for learning a language as a result of instruction they receive at school. This might also be seen as a sign of success. In this case, the motivation that accrues from the experience of learning a language at school provides the impetus to experiment more seriously with language learning later on – for example, when the student enters university. In English-speaking countries such as New Zealand, there is no deeply rooted tradition of learning a second language as a ‘hobby’, as there is, for instance, in adults in Japan. Learners who leave school with the motivation to learn a language can justifiably be called ‘successful’.

It should be clear that the notion of ‘success’ in school language learning is not an easy one. Schools are driven by the need to demonstrate that the instruction they offer results in measurable learning outcomes and it is for this reason that ‘success’ is generally measured in terms of students’ performance in public examinations. Yet this is unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. First, success in examinations may correlate only weakly with communicative ability in a language. Second, it excludes from consideration the many students who study a language at school but do not take a public examination in it or worse still, it implicitly brands such students as unsuccessful. Third, it ignores what must be one of the main goals in teaching languages at school – the development of the capacity for autonomous learning and the arousal of interest in learning languages. In part we might assume that learners who score highly in a public examination have achieved autonomy and are motivated – indeed, such an assumption may be necessary to claim validity for the examination – but it does not follow that learners who never aspire to take a public examination have failed in these respects. The question arises, of course, as to how we might measure success in our students using learner autonomy and student motivation as criteria – an important question but one I will try to address today.

Making Language Learning Successful

I shall now finally turn to my principal question: What makes for successful language learning? I am going to take as my criterion of success that which underlies most studies of second language acquisition – the ability to use the target language in oral communication in the conviction that such ability is basic to the development of proficiency in a second language.

An effective way of answering this question is to identify the conditions that make for successful language learning. Spolsky (1989) considers a
number of conditions that affect learning outcomes. These relate to the language being learned such as the Language Distance Condition (i.e. 'The closer two languages are to each other genetically and typologically, the quicker the speaker of one will learn the other'), individual learners factors such as 'age' (e.g. 'The younger one starts to learn a second language, the better the chance one has to develop a native-like pronunciation'), social context factors such as the 'Linguistic Convergence Condition' (i.e. 'Prefer to learn a language when you see strong value in being able to communicate with its speakers'), attitudinal and motivational factors such as the Motivation Condition (i.e. 'The more motivation a learner has, the more time he or she will spend on learning an aspect of a second language') and learning opportunities such as the 'Opportunity for Practice Condition' (i.e. 'Learning a new language involves an opportunity for the new skills to be practised'). Spolsky lists a total of 72 such conditions - the most comprehensive attempt ever to specify what makes learning a language successful.

Such lists of conditions of success are doubtlessly very useful but they suffer from several problems. One is that many of the conditions are open to challenge or, at least, in need of modification. The state of second language acquisition research is such that there are few uncontestable 'facts', despite Long's (1990) assertion to the contrary. For example, the claim that the younger one starts to learn a second language the better the chance of acquiring a native-like pronunciation needs to be qualified by the rider 'providing that the learner receives sufficient exposure to the target language' (see Singleton 1989). Another problem with Spolsky's list is that it provides no indication of how the various conditions are to be weighted or how they interact. Some conditions (e.g. the Motivation Condition) are almost certainly more central than others (e.g. the Practice Condition). Also, the weighting of the conditions is likely to vary enormously from one situation to another and from one learner to another. Spolsky acknowledges this by distinguishing conditions that are 'necessary', 'typical' and 'graded', but the problem of arriving at a specification of the conditions as they affect specific groups of learners or individual learners remains. Like Spolsky, I instinctively incline towards the typological approach to determining the factors involved in successful language learning but I am also wary of it. In particular, I can see that a more holistic approach - one based, for example, on case studies of specific learners in specific contexts - may be more revealing and more meaningful for teachers. I would like to offer, then, an account of a qualitative study of foreign language learning success and draw from it a number of lessons for the New Zealand school context.

A Qualitative Study of Successful Foreign Language Learning

The study I am going to report is an unpublished dissertation by one of my ex doctoral students in Tokyo – Jaqueline Beebe. Beebe was concerned with understanding how some (rather unusual) Japanese high school students managed to achieve high levels of communicative ability in
English. The question is an interesting one because, as I have already noted, foreign language instruction in schools does not typically result in high levels of communicative ability, and this is especially so in Japan because traditional methods of instruction involving extensive use of Japanese in the classroom predominate (Kaneko 1990).

Beebe approached a number of high schools in metropolitan Tokyo with the request that they identify students with high and low oral proficiency in English. 43 students were identified. They filled out a questionnaire (choosing whether to do so in English or Japanese) and completed an interview and a story retelling task in English. These were used to select 13 students who were successful English conversationalists - the 'High' Group. In addition, 5 students with minimal English speaking abilities were chosen - the 'Low' group.

The interview that Beebe conducted with each of the students lasted between 40 minutes and 2 hours. She deliberately began by speaking to each student in a mixture of Japanese and English, thus allowing the participant to choose which language to settle into. Each interview began with a discussion of the student's answers to the written questionnaire, which asked for background information regarding such matters as travel to English speaking countries and extra-curricular English lessons. Subsequent questions were designed to probe their early experiences with English, their high school English lessons, their opinions of their teachers, their use of English outside school with both Japanese and foreigners, their school grades in English and other subjects, their motivation to learn English, their plans for the future, their views about how English should be taught, their aptitude for learning languages, the activities they engaged in that had helped them become good conversationalists, and the specific learning strategies they employed.

Beebe found that both what went on inside the classroom and what learners did outside played a role in helping the High group of learners develop communicative skills. Inside the classroom what seemed to matter most was the opportunity to hear and or speak spontaneous English. Students benefited from such events because they helped them locate potential future speaking partners and because they demonstrated that it was possible to use English without the support of written text. However, engagement with English outside the classroom emerged as more important than what went on inside. The successful students made efforts to find speaking partners, reporting that success in this direction contributed to confidence and motivation. However, interacting in English was not the only way these students learned outside the classroom. Many of them undertook solitary listening practice, using taped or broadcast materials and songs. A characteristic of the successful students was persistence in such activities. As reported in the literature on learning strategies (e.g. Oxford 1990), the good conversationalists reported using a much greater variety of learning strategies than the poor conversationalists, including those that balanced out the focus on written texts and accuracy.
that characterized the instruction they received at school with a focus on message and social interaction. The successful students were risk-takers, motivated by a desire to learn English conversation skills for future work or just for fun. Whereas the unsuccessful students stated that they had put off learning to speak in favour of passing tests, the successful ones indicated that they had consciously made speaking an immediate priority.

But the factor that Beebe identifies as the most important in helping students become good oral communicators is autonomy. Beebe writes:

*Many of the Highs are autonomously shaping their own lives to include time devoted to English practice that shows no direct or obvious payoff in the academic success for which they are being groomed. The success that educators and parents expect these students to demonstrate is the ability to manipulate discrete formal items of English on written tests, not the ability to communicate with English users. The informants have been authoring a world for themselves that includes an identity as 'an English speaker' knowledgeable about and comfortable in a world wider than Japan ...* (p. 315)

Beebe emphasizes that this autonomy comes from within the students not from without – i.e. they were not trained to behave autonomously. They studied English in their own time, in their own ways, and for their own purposes. In short, they made an investment and it was this investment that enabled them to become effective conversationalists in English.

Beebe’s study, I think, enlightens what it takes for a language learner to acquire the proficiency needed to converse effectively in an L2 in a context that does not favour success. Three factors seem to emerge from her study as essential:

- **A Personal Agenda**
  The successful communicators had their own, personal reasons for learning English. In some cases these were instrumental (Beebe talks of their ‘fabulous career dreams’) but in others they were simply pleasure – learning to speak English was an end in itself. Even though they were learning a foreign (rather than community) language, many of the students in the High Group appeared to be involved in evaluating and reconstituting their social identities through learning and using English. They had a commitment to learning English that went beyond the language itself; it involved their sense of their own identities [3].

- **Contact With English**
  Learning to speak a language requires access to input and interaction. These were not available to the students in their English classes at school, which many of the successful students said they hated. They responded by searching out input and opportunities for interaction for themselves. In so doing, they focussed primarily on meaning (understanding and making themselves understood) while also recognizing the need for more analytic strategies (such as memorizing).
• Persistence

All the successful learners recognized that learning to communicate in English was an arduous and time-consuming activity. They spoke of their determination to succeed and their confidence in their ability to do so.

In Beebe’s study what mattered for success was not the instruction the students received, which was seen as a debilitating rather than a facilitating factor, but the students’ own efforts. That they were successful points to a simple truism: success in language learning occurs when learners take charge of their own learning.

Conclusion

This talk has ranged far and wide – from the need for an official language policy for schools in New Zealand to the success of a handful of Japanese high school students learning to communicate in English. I would now like to try to bring these disparate threads together.

There is an obvious question that arises out of what I have covered. If successful language learning is primarily the product of an individual learner’s effort, why is there a need for an official language policy for schools? Won’t learners be successful or unsuccessful irrespective of whether there is or is not a policy? It seems to me that we do need to acknowledge quite openly that a language policy in itself cannot guarantee success and that language learning is in the final analysis an individual enterprise. However, this cannot excuse the failure to develop an official language policy.

Japan has a very clear language policy for schools. All secondary students must study at least one foreign language for six years and the stated curriculum goal is communicative proficiency (including oral proficiency). The problem in Japan is not at the level of policy but at the level of implementation (i.e. the lack of teachers with the ability to communicate fluently in English and the pervasive view that teaching is a process of transmitting knowledge). But the fact that there is a policy can be seen as a contributing factor to the success of Beebe’s High group. How many of these would never have formed the idea that learning English could be important to them if English had not existed in the school curriculum? Governmental policies send messages that permeate through the classroom to the individual learner. Japan is, I think, making an attempt to send the right message to its students.

What of New Zealand? The message that New Zealand’s current policy sends is that learning a second language is ‘optional’, something that may be desirable but is not essential for the well-being of the nation or the education of the individual student. As a result, many students fail to experience what learning a language is like or undergo only a minimal, desultory learning experience. Students must surely be aware of the lack of
status of languages in the school curriculum and doubtless this has an effect on the choices they make as they shape their social and personal identities. How many students in New Zealand see Maori, French or Japanese not just as exam subjects but as tools of personal construction and how many view the process of learning to use these tools as pleasurable? How many are like Beebe’s Japanese high school students? I would like to suggest that the number would be considerably greater if government would bite the bullet and enshrine in policy the need for ALL students to learn a language for at least the FIVE YEARS of secondary school.

Finally, a few words about instructional method. The dislike of English classes that Beebe’s Japanese students expressed derived directly from the type of instruction they experienced. The successful learners all expressed a desire for more spontaneous use of English in the classroom. These learners were successful despite the instruction not because of it. But instruction obviously can assist learners – a point that Beebe’s students were well aware of. If the definition of ‘success’ is to be in terms of communicative ability (and I have argued that it should be), then there is a need to ensure that both the method of instruction and the examinations emphasise these abilities. This can only be achieved if language is treated as a ‘tool’ not as an ‘object’ and the emphasis is placed on experiencing language in use not on the correct display of bits and pieces of language. However, as we all know, this constitutes a considerable challenge in the context of a classroom. There is also the question of learner autonomy, which as we have seen can also be used as a criterion of success and was a characteristic of Beebe’s High group. Clearly, instruction can assist learners to become autonomous, although, as Beebe points out, autonomy is more a matter of the personal construction individual learners place on language learning rather than techniques that can be trained. Perhaps, in the final analysis, the primary role of language instruction at school should be to inspire students to see that learning language has a real place in their lives.

Notes

1. According to MOE figures 80, 093 students out of a total roll of 245,315 studied a community/foreign language at secondary school in 1998.

2. Many schools offer ‘taster’ courses in Year Nine which include one or more languages. A significant number of Year Nine students who are recorded as studying a language do so only in the context of such taster courses.

3. There is a common misconception in educators that foreign language learning is inherently different from second language learning because it does not involve social and personal investment. This misconception is reflect in the following quotation from Corson (1990): Consider the several clear advantages that the SL situation has over the FL: a second language has more significance for the learner since it can be used immediately outside the classroom;

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it can be learned more quickly because as the native language of the country there is constant and abundant exposure to its physical manifestations; and the extrinsic motivations to learn the language are ever-present and urgent ones. In contrast the FL context is almost exclusively fabricated by the FL teacher; reinforcement and revision will not be incidental, nor will they take place at all unless the teacher plans for them; tests will focus necessarily on aspects of "correctness" rather than on wider communicative competence; and, assuming that the students are willing candidates, responsibility for motivating their performance or failing to do so lies almost exclusively with the teacher. (p. 207)

Beebe's study demonstrates the simplistic nature of such a contrast.

References


Parr, R. 1998. Second Languages in Education: Where to Now when though they were learning a foreign (rather than second) language.


