The Irish Journal of Education, 1974 *viii*, 2 *pp* 77 88

BILINGUALISM AND LEARNING TO READ

John Downing*
University of Victoria, Canada

A recent cross-cultural study of reading in fourteen countries indicates that cultural factors are important variables in the child's experiences of learning to read An important hazard for the child's development of cognitive clarity regarding the nature of the learning task is mismatch between the language and culture of the child and the language and culture of reference in his instruction in reading Several studies show that language mismatch causes retardation in the development of reading skill When language mismatch involves cultural values, emotional disturbance may accompany the cognitive set back Sometimes the perceived rejection of a 'minority' culture and language destroys its dignity for its own members and speakers Then it may be judged unworthy of a literary form as seems to be the case with black dialects in the United States and the West Indies The improvement of reading standards requires that the child s own culture language, and dialect should be accorded higher value in school

A CROSS–CULTURAL APPROACH

Ramirez (13) states 'Mental health institutions and personnel in general have been insensitive to cultural differences Cultural differences have been given little consideration in development of personality theories, psychotherapeutic strategies, and psychological tests ' Instead of recognising that differences in behaviour may be culturally determined and quite normal for their culture, such behaviour 'has often been interpreted as the product of poverty or disadvantage Thus, value differences which should be respected are not given adequate consideration by the institution in theory or in practice '

Ramirez's criticism certainly applies to educational institutions Schools in many countries have ignored the legitimate cultural differences of their students, particularly their different languages or dialects For years Spanish speaking children in California, for example, were diagnosed as intellectually inferior because they failed to acquire literacy in English – a language which they did not speak or understand'

* Requests for off prints should be sent to John Downing, University of Victoria Victoria, British Columbia Canada V8W 2Y2

The problem of bilingualism in primary education is found in many countries and it may be instructive to compare their experiences As has been noted by Husén and Postlethwaite (5)

> The school systems of the world represent a series of environments in which human beings learn, and, as a group, are much more varied and contain far greater differences than can be found or created in any one system Thus educational laboratory situations exist in which many of the profound questions concerning human growth can be studied objectively

These considerations apply with even greater force in primary literacy learning where cross national research often implies *cross-language* comparisons also

Jahoda (6) and Goody (4) have studied the effects of the growth of literacy on society, but clearly the relationship between literacy development and social institutions must be a two way process The approach in the Comparative Reading investigations (1) focussed more on the influence of culture on literacy learning, and the interacting relationship was recognised This study's chief goal was to develop hypotheses about the universals and idiosyncracies of the literacy learner's experience in different cultures A long term aim was the hope that this comparative method may throw light on the essential psycholinguistic processes of learning to read and write A more immediate goal was to remove the ethnocentric blinkers which narrow the educator's view of the processes of reading and of learning to read

Fourteen countries were chosen as examples of important cultural and linguistic differences in literacy learning For example, India and Germany provided contrasts in economic as well as cultural background The USSR, Great Britain and Israel supplied different alphabets The USA and Finland exemplified the contrast between irregular and regular grapheme phoneme relations in language coded with the Roman alphabet Japan and Hong Kong gave examples of syllabic and logographic writing systems for comparison with the alphabetic systems France and Denmark allowed a marked contrast in educational patterns Argentina, Norway, and Sweden extended these comparisons into other aspects of culture and language

For each of these countries one or two specialists in the study of literacy learning in that culture were commissioned to write a descriptive account These specialists were given some general headings for their report in an attempt to ensure that certain factors known to be of common concern would be comparable across the fourteen countries But, this guidance was

deliberately minimal because a large degree of openendedness was desirable to allow each national specialist to stress spontaneously what he considered to be the important aspects of literacy learning behaviour in the country he described

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURE

The Comparative Reading project produced evidence that culture is indeed an important factor in the child's experiences in literacy learning It was found that cultures differ in the value which they place on literacy There was marked contrast between more relaxed attitudes towards the teaching of reading in Germany, Finland and Norway and the much greater anxiety about attainments in reading in the United States, for example All facets of the American child's educational environment display the tangible results of the deepest and most extensive national concern for the improvement of reading, whereas these attitudes were not present in several other countries in the study Consideration of reality factors (such as language differences) did not seem to explain this difference

It was found that sometimes a more over riding aim puts literacy in a position of less importance In three countries in the Comparative Reading project the teaching of reading was put in the perspective of the total mental health of the child For example, in Norway, great importance is attached to the child's 'school readiness' (not 'reading readiness') Children who are not ready for school may not begin until eight years of age Even the normal age for admission is late compared with other countries (in Great Britain, five is the legal age of entry and there are no school readiness provisions) Norwegian educators emphasise also that school must give the child 'a relaxed and cautious start' in reading Similar attitudes seem to prevail in Denmark where grade 1 begins at age seven, and the principle applied at all levels is that the central concern must be the learner as a whole person, not some limited segment of his development, such as reading ability School readiness is an important feature of education in Sweden also Seven is the normal starting age, but, if school readiness tests show the child to be too immature for school, entry can be postponed until he is eight The weight given to the basic motive underlying these practices in Norway, Denmark and Sweden is indicated by the following comment from Sweden

> The risk that an 'underaged' child will fail in his first contact with school work is otherwise considered to be too great It is extremely important for the personality development and mental health of the child that the contact with the school be positive from the very beginning

While it is true that many psychologists and educators in other countries may agree with this Swedish recommendation, their views more often represent a minority opinion

Another interesting manifestation of the influence of cultural values on the child's experience of literacy education is the divergent findings on sex differences in achievements from one country to another In North America girls are superior to boys in reading achievement In Germany the position is reversed In England there seem to be no statistically reliable differences between boys' and girls' reading scores The research evidence on sex differences in reading attainments has been reviewed in a recent article by Downing and Thomson (2) which reports a survey of the attitudes towards reading of adults and children in a North American city It was found that reading was perceived as a more appropriate activity for young females than for young males

In summary, despite individual differences in the attitudes of people within each nation, the fact remains that cultural pressures on the child to learn literacy skills are different from one country to another The psychological experiences of the tasks of learning the skills of reading and writing are likely to vary considerably from one culture to another Boys' and girls' cognitive and affective development are likely to be influenced accordingly

CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC MISMATCH

Literacy development is a problem-solving process The child begins in an initial state of cognitive confusion regarding the nature and purpose of the tasks of reading and writing He gropes his way out of this confusion mainly by solving a series of conceptual learning problems which yield increasing cognitive clarity For example, he must develop concepts for such categories as work, phoneme, syllable, letter, character, etc according to the language and its coding units in the writing system He must understand the concept of a code in which one symbol can represent another, as well as the concepts of the units of language used in the particular code he is required to learn Although the child's language and the writing system to be learned varied widely in the countries represented in the Comparative Reading project, the same basic problem prevailed — the child's progress is essentially related to his improvement in understanding such linguistic concepts Of prime importance is his need to learn the communicative and expressive purposes of literacy This is a universal starting point across cultures and languages

But, as has been shown in the previous section, cultures vary in the demands they make upon the child to learn to read and write Also languages differ in the complexity and nature of their writing systems Thus the problem solving task must differ from one language to another and one's perception of the significance of the task must vary from one culture to another

However, the child's situation in first approaching the task of learning to read is essentially the same in all cultures and all languages He comes to the task with a background experience of producing and hearing spoken language This is one side of the basic formula of learning to read The other side is the representation of language *in print* or writing which is provided by the teacher Of course, there are numerous other variables which affect the formula But essentially the child's task is to match his knowledge of speech with what the teacher tells him about print or writing It is normal for the child to begin in a state of cognitive confusion in this task (19) The mental acts of reading are not observable and the child's attempts to learn by imitation are futile

The situation described contains many potential hazards for the child The specific concern in this article is with those hazards that arise from cultural or linguistic mismatch, and the effect these may have on cognitive and emotional development The growth of cognitive clarity in the child as regards the task of learning the logical relationships between spoken and written language may be impeded by overloading his capacity for handling confusing data through several types of mismatch between the child's preschool experience of language and what the teacher tells him about language The most important type of mismatch is that which arises when the language of reference in the teacher's instruction is different from the child's experience of speech Most of the published research evidence shows convincingly that such mismatch is an important cause of reading retardation

In the case of the gross discrepancy between child's language and the language of literacy instruction, three investigations may be cited as examples Macnamara (9) compared Irish children whose first language was English but who had to learn initial literacy in Irish, with English children whose first language also was English but who were taught to read in English, and with Irish speaking children taught to read in Irish Macnamara found

> Native speakers of English in Ireland who have spent 42 per cent of their school time learning Irish do not achieve the same standard in written English as British children who have not learned a second language (estimated difference in standard, 17 months of English age) Neither

> do they achieve the same standard in written Irish as native speakers of Irish (estimated difference, 16 months of Irish age)

Modiano's (10) research in Mexico was concerned with children whose first language was Tzeltal or Tzotzil who attended schools in the Chiapas area She compared 13 schools where the reading instruction was given only in Spanish with 13 schools where the teaching of reading was in the mother tongue first, with a transfer later to the official Spanish language of Mexico The latter group scored significantly higher in reading Spanish These results led Modiano to conclude that

> The youngsters of linguistic minorities learn to read with greater comprehension in the national language when they first learn to read in their mother tongue than when they receive all their reading instruction in the national language

Modiano's finding pin-points the stage at which mismatch may be critical It seems most important to avoid increasing cognitive confusion in the first experiences of problem solving involved in understanding the nature of the task of learning to read If the level of cognitive confusion becomes too high for the beginner he receives a setback in developing the initial sub skills of reading

At first sight, it may seem strange that attaining literacy in two languages is easier than attaining literacy in only one Surely, it might be argued, there is more to learn in two languages than in one! What is overlooked in this agrument is the fact that literacy skills can be considered in their own right quite apart from their application in any specific language When one has learned to speak the mother tongue, one does not have to learn how to speak all over again in learning a foreign language One simply transfers the speaking skills to the second language Similarly, once one is literate in the first language of literacy one does not have to acquire literacy over again when one learns to read a second language One need only extend one's existing literacy 'Literacy is acquired once for all like linguacy itself', as Mountford (11) has shown

That the problem of mismatch exists also at the level of dialect has been suggested by Wolfram and Fasold (18) who claim 'When the child who speaks Black English is required to learn to read using Standard English materials, he is given two tasks at once learning to read and learning a new dialect The Standard English speaking child, by contrast, is only required to learn to read '

Empirical evidence of the retarding effects of dialect mismatch has

been obtained by Osterberg (12) He studied a group of Swedish children who spoke the Piteå dialect An experimental group had their first reading materials translated into the Pitea dialect, while a control group had to use the same materials printed in Standard Swedish The experimental group surpassed the control group not only during the initial stage but afterwards when they were transferred to reading Standard Swedish Osterberg's finding that instruction in the Piteå dialect was superior in transfer to reading in Standard Swedish again shows that mismatch has its retarding effects in the initial introductory phase of literacy teaching

The bilingual experiments of Lambert and Tucker (8) in Quebec might be thought to be contrary evidence to the mismatch hypothesis They reported a longitudinal study of English speaking children who received all their schooling including reading instruction, in the French language Lambert and Tucker compared two experimental classes of this type with control classes of French speaking children receiving their instruction in French, and with classes of English speaking children receiving their instruction in English The generally favourable conclusions of the experiments are much better known than the details of the test results For example, Lambert's (7) conclusion that the experimental bilingual group 'are doing just as well as the controls, showing no symptoms of retardation or negative transfer' is often quoted in support of such second language immersion programmes However, the test data tell a more complex story The tests of readmg in English administered at the end of grade I showed that the bilingual class had significantly lower scores than the English instruction control classes The retardation of the bilingual group continued into grade II in one of the experimental classes, but in the other the degree of retardation did not reach statistical significance These results do seem to indicate that the mismatch between the English language at home and the French language at school caused retardation in the development of cognitive clarity regarding the reading task But tests of reading in French showed no significant differences between the English speaking experimental group and their French speaking controls in grades I and II In grade III, one of the experimental classes had significantly lower French reading scores than the native French control group, but the research method of comparison was different in the other class and it is difficult to treat the results in the same way

The French reading test results appear to be contradictory evidence to the mismatch hypothesis, but the lack of a significant difference between the experimental bilingual and French speaking control classes in grades I and II may have been due to the insensitivity of the criterion tests The teaching methods and the children's behaviour in the classrooms seem to

have been rather rigid and restrictive in all cases with little opportunity for exploratory behaviour The French reading tests were rather mechanical and required stereotyped rather than thoughtful reading responses Possibly the differences were small because neither the experimental nor the control classes were much extended either in their reading instruction or reading tests

It must be noted also that the small confined experiment of Lambert and Tucker in Quebec differs in a very important way from the natural situations studied by Macnamara (9), Modiano (10), and Osterberg (12) The parents in the Quebec experiment were enthusiastic supporters of bilingualism, whereas this was not generally the case in the samples studied in the Irish, Mexican, and Swedish investigations If French reading instruction were to be imposed on all English speaking families in Quebec – the unwilling as well as the willing – there might be a quite different result

CULTURAL CONFLICT IN BILINGUALISM

The volunteer parents in the two Quebec bilingual education classes were not representative of the more emotionally charged situation of the imposition of language or dialect on an unwilling population In real life it is very difficult to separate affective and cognitive behaviour into distinct categories There is evidence that cognitive confusion arising from linguistic mismatches is accompanied by emotional disturbance In the Swedish dialect experiment, for example Osterberg reported that the control group of Pitea dialect speakers who had to learn to read in Standard Swedish became 'generally unsure and their uncertainty affects their performance in lettering, articulation and reading tempo' Furthermore, their cognitive confusion gradually polluted their total school experience, as Osterberg's description of their behaviour shows

> Pupils have difficulty in grasping the links between extramural life and intramural work Experiences derived in the previous environment are consciously or unconsciously pushed into the background as unfavoured phenomena What is learned at school obtains no natural anchorage in the children's experiences and spontaneous observations The school's study content then becomes a separate phenomenon Progress does not proceed from the concrete, the already known The matter assimilated becomes associated with theoretical constructions and psychic contents, which in structure and function have no roots in practical life outside the school What is assimilated becomes the 'barely learnt', and as a result processes of forgetting set in more readily In the same way subjective tiredness, for instance, acquires fairly wide scope and the

> results of schoolwork suffer generally The school is constructing a system of study and contributing to a basis of personality development which lacks two fundamental qualities – continuity and personal integration

But there is a more complex and subtle way in which these mismatches affect the child's personality This arises from the intimate connection between the individual's language, culture and personality Here the focus is more properly on *culture* rather than on language as such Spolsky (15) remarks that, 'When reading and writing is an alien thing and associated with alien elements of the culture, it is not surprising to find reluctance to associate them with one's most precious possession language ' This cultural mismatch is aggravated when teachers regard their own dialect 'as the correct and pure version of the language, and treat any variation as corrupt or debased, or careless (16) '

The emotional reaction to such rejection is predictable Language is the holy of holies of culture Therefore, to attack an individual's language is to commit an act of sacrilege on the innermost cultural sanctum of the personality The intensely hostile resistance is only to be expected As Tax (17) puts it, when divergent speakers are required to correct their language, 'they often cannot do what the teacher asks, things which seem to them, consciously or unconsciously to denigrate their homes, their people and their culture ' Or, in Goodman's (3) words 'But if the teacher 'corrects' the dialect based divergent language, this is at cross purposes with the direction of growth of the child All his past and present language experience contradicts what the teacher tells him School becomes a place where people talk funny and teachers tell you things about your language that aren't true '

Sometimes the destructive influence of cultural conflict has become so chronic that restoring the status of a dialect by making it the language of initial literacy as Osterberg did in his Swedish dialect experiment may be ineffective For instance, Wolfram and Fasold note that, 'Sociolinguistic research has shown that speakers who use socially stigmatized speech forms sometimes have the same low opinion of such forms as do speakers who do not use them As a result, even though the Black English materials might be clearer and more natural to some – they may not be acceptable because of the presence of these stigmatized forms '

Thus in the case of Black English, its association with generations of degradation may prevent its speakers from trying the solution of giving it the dignity of a printed form The Black English dialects which these people developed seem to be still tainted by their origins in slavery Searle (14)

brings out a similar problem in Tobago

> But as these new, separate nations find their independent political identities, their people still speak in a language that takes them back to the past and their subjection and exploitation through centuries of slavery and colonialism

Searle's experience as a white teacher in black Tobago is a realisation of two linguistic ambivalences in these people The more obvious and immediate problem is their ambivalence toward their own dialect In their homes and on the street it is spontaneously and positively accepted, but most of the same people reject their homely language for written prose or poetry Standard English only deserves such dignity Thus, education becomes 'a process of self betrayal and alienation, in which the child assumes that the word that gave her life and sensation is beneath poetical expression, and so she must turn to another which is not hers ' But Searle's book is a testimony to the fact that a new ambivalence toward Standard English is becoming increasingly conscious More and more the realisation is growing that this 'proper' language is the invisible chain which still fetters the black Tobagan to England Thus Searle sees 'Trinidad and Tobago, with a black prime minister and a predominantly black government, but the real governor of the culture – the language – is still in control The black man still speaks out his experience in words and symbols belonging to the white man '

These words and symbols speak against them and tell them 'that 'black' is a bad word, a word of guilt and doubt and evil, but that 'white' has its association with purity, goodness and innocence '

CONCLUSION

In many countries the awareness that cultural and linguistic mismatch causes educational failure is quite faint Often the official actions of school systems appear to reflect an attitude of rejection of the child's language or dialect For example, the Comparative Reading report from Britain led to the conclusion that 'where action is taken to assist immigrants in this difficulty it most often seems to take the form of teaching spoken standard English first, after which literacy is taught in relation to the acquired English as a second language This seems to ignore the consensus of research that literacy is best taught in the first language or first dialect of the child ' This attitude reflects a one way model of the educational process, a model in which the child is deficient and the child must change On the simple

grounds of efficiency and effectiveness in literacy development at least this model ought to be replaced by a two-way one The educator and the school need to be more ready to find themselves wrong and to adapt themselves to the reality of the child's world as the child perceives it through the child's culture and the child's own language

REFERENCES

1 DOWNING, J *Comparative reading* London Collier-Macmillan, 1973

2 DOWNING, J and THOMSON D Sex role stereotypes in learning to read *Research in the Teaching of English* in press

3 GOODMAN, K S Dialect barriers to reading comprehension In Baratz J C and Shuy, R W (Eds) *Teaching black children to read* Washington, DC Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969, 14 28

4 GOODY, J (Ed) *Literacy in traditional societies* London Cambridge University Press 1968

5 HUSÉN T and POSTLETHWAITE N Intentions and background of the project In Husén, T (Ed), *International study of achievment in mathematics* Stockholm Almquist and Wiksell 1967

6 JAHODA, G Supernatural beliefs and changing cognitive structures among Ghanaian university students *Journal of Cross Cultural Psychology* 1970 *1*, 115 130

7 LAMBERT W E *Language psychology, and culture* Stanford, California Stanford University Press, 1972

8 LAMBERT W E, and TUCKER G R *Bilingual education of children* Rowley Massachusetts Newbury House 1972

9 MACNAMARA J *Bilingualism and primary education* Edinburgh Edinburgh University Press 1966

10 MODIANO N National or mother language in beginning reading A comparative study *Research in the Teaching of English*, 1968 *2* 32-43

11 MOUNTFORD J Some psycholinguistic components of initial standard literacy *Journal of Typographic Research*, 1970 *4* 295 306

12 OSTERBERG T *Bilingualism and the first school language – an educational problem illustrated by results from a Swedish dialect area* Umeå Sweden Vasterbottens Tryckeri A B, 1961

13 RAMIREZ III, M Towards cultural democracy in mental health The case of the Mexican American *Interamerican Journal of Psychology*, 1972, *6*, 45-50

14 SEARLE, C *The forsaken lover* London Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972

15 SPOLSKY, B *Literacy in the vernacular The Navajo reading study* Paper presented at the 69th Annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, San Diego, California, November 19, 1970

16 SPOLSKY, B Linguistics and the language barrier to education In Sebeok, T A *et al* (Eds), *Current trends in linguistics Vol XII* The Hague Mouton, 1972

17 TAX, S Group identity and educating the disadvantaged In Corbin, R, and Crosby M (Eds), *Language programs for the disadvantaged* Champaign, Illinois National Council of Teachers of English, 1965

18 WORFRAM, W, and FASOLD, R W Toward reading materials for speakers of Black English Three linguistically appropriate passages In Baratz J C, and Shuy,

R W (Eds) *Teaching black children to read* Washington DC Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969

19 VERNON M D *Backwardness in reading* London Cambridge University Press, 1957