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Cultural Diversity and Language Socialization in the Early Years

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Children become linguistically and culturally competent members of their community through interactions with caregivers and other more competent members of their community (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Through this language socialization, children learn the behaviors that are culturally appropriate in their community (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986).

As a culturally and linguistically diverse student population is, or will soon be, the norm in most U.S. schools, developing an understanding of the ways that children are socialized at home is increasingly important. Many children bring to school not only a new language, but also cultural ways of using language that differ from those of mainstream school culture (Heath, 1983; Zentella, 1997). These differences can lead teachers to underestimate or misinterpret the competence of students. In order for all students to have equal opportunities for educational success, teachers must be aware not only of what children need to learn, but also of the knowledge and skills that they bring from their linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Cummins, 1986; Fillmore & Snow, 2002; Genesee, 1994; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

This digest summarizes research on language socialization; outlines some of the ways that children are socialized into their home culture, such as caregiver speech and concepts of the self, illustrated with social practices in East Asian cultures; and suggests educational implications of this research.

Language Socialization Research

Language socialization research provides important insight into young children's linguistic and cultural development and helps us understand the relationships between the cultural context and the use of language with and around children (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Cultural context includes what community members believe about language and its use—values and ideas concerning language and its speakers, as well as ideas about language teaching and learning. Language socialization studies focus on naturally occurring interactions with and around children and analyze the ways that the community's norms are expressed.

Language socialization research sheds light not only on what children learn in their communities, but also on how they learn: in particular, how children acquire ways of learning in their communities before they enter school. Historically, when linguistic minority children have behaved at school according to their own cultural values and norms, they have been regarded as deficient rather than as different by educators (Ochs, 1997; Zentella, 1997). A Korean-American child, for example, who behaves politely according to Korean standards might be regarded as dependent and insecure. Teachers may perceive ethnic and linguistic minority children as having difficulties in learning, when in fact the children are learning in ways that are culturally appropriate in their own communities (see, e.g., Fillmore & Snow, 2002; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Philips, 1983).

Language Socialization at Home

How is it that even very young students come to school with well-established communication patterns, such as ways of expressing politeness? Studies of children's interaction with their caregivers suggest how these interactions foster behaviors that contribute to their emerging identities.

Caregiver speech. Adults interact with children differently across cultures and communities. In some communities, for example, caregivers use simplified, child-directed speech: baby-talk. In others, adults make no or few adjustments when they speak to young children. They do not view young children as appropriate or competent conversational partners (Kulick, 1992; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Caregivers also interpret and clarify children's babbling or unintelligible speech according to their community's beliefs. These and other differences in interaction patterns have been categorized into two general styles of child-raising: child-centered and situation-centered.

In child-centered contexts, mothers and other caretakers view children as potential conversational partners and engage them in conversations in routines such as greetings and question-answer from birth. Adults adjust their speech to children by using two strategies: self-lowering through baby-talk and child-raising by interpreting unintelligible utterances (Heath, 1983; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). In these contexts, children are socialized through simplified language and are gradually introduced to the language of adults.

In situation-centered contexts, adults tend not to simplify their speech for young children. Children are expected to learn to understand and produce adult-like language by observing it. Children are responsible for their own language acquisition, and they must learn on their own to make themselves understood and to interpret others' responses to them. The interpretation skills that children acquire are considered essential to being competent language users in families and communities (Heath, 1983).

Although most adults generally engage in both types of practices—child-centered and situation-centered—the important point is that family and community members tend to hold different sets of beliefs about children's language acquisition and development. These beliefs influence their speech with and around children and contribute to the ways that children develop their concept of self.

Concept of self. Through social interactions with others, children gradually construct their ideas of who they are (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Thus, their concept of self is interwoven with the society and culture to which they belong. In some communities, children are socialized to construct a relational, interpersonal, or collective self, whereas in others they are socialized to construct an individualistic and autonomous self (Brown, 1996, p. 39). The former notion of the self has often been attributed to Asian cultures, and the latter has been found more commonly in North America. These contrasting patterns of the self are revealed linguistically. There are clear relationships between the relational self and linguistic forms in Asian languages such as Javanese, Japanese, and Korean. For instance, relationships such as kinship, status, age, gender, and degree of intimacy are marked linguistically in these languages. Thus, information about the relationship between speakers and others is critical not only when speaking to someone, but when speaking about someone or something. In Korean, the relative sociocultural status of the speaker, the person being spoken to, and the person being talked about is marked with honorifics. Korean has six levels of honorifics—words or word parts that encode relationship—each with its own distinct verb endings. In many everyday utterances, Korean speakers express their social

identity and position in relation to others. Indicating relative sociocultural status with specific linguistic features is obligatory in East Asian cultures such as those of China, Japan, and Korea (Kasper, 1990).

Politeness in East Asian cultures. Politeness generally is more highly valued and widely observed in everyday practice in East Asian cultures. For Koreans, for example, politeness includes expressions of deference, respect, and social hierarchy, which are marked by honorifics. A speaker must choose the appropriate expressions and verb endings to reflect the social relationships among speakers (Koo, 1996). An individual who fails to do this is subject to disapproval. For example, if a child does not use the appropriate verb endings to express respect to an adult, the adult will be offended, and the child will be reprimanded for rudeness.

In general, parents are responsible for teaching their children the proper use of polite expressions and behaviors. Among Khmer families in Cambodia, a child's polite behavior is considered a sign of the family's high social status and the child's good moral upbringing. Thus Khmer parents raise their children to display behaviors such as greeting elders in polite ways or addressing others with proper terms that mark relative social status (Smith-Hefner, 1999).

Children internalize such beliefs and ideas, including the concept of politeness and its appropriate expressions, in daily interaction in their homes and communities. Through these naturally-occurring language socialization experiences, children construct their identity in relation to others. As children acquire their mother tongue at home, they also learn who they are and how they should behave.

Implications for Educators and Parents

What children learn through interactions with caregivers and community members may not correspond to the ways of talking and behaving that are valued in school. Many children who bring culturally different practices to school are misunderstood, academically underestimated, and devalued (Ballenger, 1999; Heath, 1983; Philips, 1983; Smitherman, 1977; Walker-Moffat, 1995; Zentella, 1997). These children, in turn, may feel less confident about their ability to succeed at school and to convey their knowledge to others (Cummins, 1986).

In order to minimize children's stress and maximize their opportunities in school, it is important for educators to understand what their students bring to school. Respecting the knowledge of students' families and encouraging parents to get involved in school activities can be the first step in this process (Faltis, 1993; Moll et al., 1992). Understanding that there are different ways of interacting and using language is crucial for successful communication with students (Ballenger, 1999; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Philips, 1983; Wolfram, Adger, & Christian, 1999).

Beyond understanding that linguistic systems and cultures differ, educators need to use them as resources for learning (Ruiz, 1984; Valdés, 1996; Walker-Moffat, 1995). Examples of efforts to do so include teachers incorporating a community's storytelling styles into class discussion activities (Au, 1980) and involving students in research projects that draw on the knowledge and expertise in the community and use that as the basis for literacy instruction and formal school learning (Moll et al., 1992). Efforts such as these, which recognize and embrace children's linguistic and cultural backgrounds and skills, can help to ensure that all children have the opportunity to be valued members of the classroom community and experience academic success.

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