

Young Learners' Ability to Produce Yes-No Questions*

Ma. Virginia Mercau
Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana de Iztapalapa

Abstract

This paper reports on the results of a transversal study designed to observe young learners' ability to produce yes-no questions while playing a game which elicits these kinds of questions. The study was carried out at a bilingual English-Spanish primary school in Mexico City. Secondly, this paper relates the study results to the issue of bilingual primary school students' oral skills.

En este artículo se reportan los resultados de un estudio transversal, lo cual fue diseñado para observar la capacidad de los aprendices jóvenes para producir preguntas de respuesta "sí-no" mientras participaban en un juego que solicita esta clase de preguntas. El estudio se realizó en un primaria bilingüe inglés-español en la ciudad de México DF. Posteriormente, se relacionan los resultados del estudio con la cuestión del desarrollo de las habilidades orales de los alumnos de educación básica.

Introduction

Nowadays there are an increasing number of bilingual schools that follow the International Baccalaureate "Primary Years Program" (PYP). In Mexico alone, at the moment there are 30 of them (IBO, 2009). These schools offer, besides the Mexican SEP curricula, an English program in which certain subjects are taught in English by English native speaker teachers. The PYP program goes from kindergarten to sixth grade (3 to 12 year-olds). Students are immersed in the second language for about 15 hours a week.

In 2009, a transversal study designed to observe primary students' ability to produce yes-no questions was carried out in a bilingual school of Mexico City which is applying the PYP program. Yes-no questions were selected by the school ESL specialist and the Academic Coordinator as one of the problematic aspects of students' oral production.

After many hours of class observation at a bilingual school one can realize that students' ability to understand spoken language seems more developed than their ability to produce well-formed utterances. Lynne Cameron's (2001) explanation of "meaning in listening and speaking" and James Lee and Van Patten (1995) language processing model can shed some light on this fact.

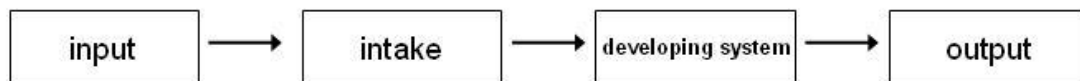
Cameron states that "listening and speaking are both active uses of language, but differ in the mental activity involved and demands that they make on learners of language in terms of finding and sharing meanings" (p. 40). She explains that to construct meaning from what the learner hears (instructions, a story, etc.) they rely on their language resources, built up from previous experience of language use. "For example, children listening to a story told in a foreign lan-

* This is a refereed article.

guage from a book with pictures will understand and construct the gist or outline the meaning of the story in their minds. Although the story may be told in the foreign language the mental processing does not need to use the foreign language and may be carried out in the first language or in some language-independent way using what psychologists call "mentalese". (p. 40) But it is very unlikely that these children would be able to retell the story in the foreign language because their attention was not on language form but on meaning (Cameron, 2001, p. 41).

According to Lee and Van Patten's (1995) processing language model language, to acquire a language one needs to build the right form-meaning relationships. In this process learners build an internal system or a representation of the foreign language from the language input they get. This internal system is different from the one an adult native speaker may have. When beginner language learners produce utterances (output), they use the information they have in their internal system and consequently, their utterances usually are not well-formed phrases (Mercau and Hooper, 2006, p. 11).

Lee and Van Patten propose the following diagram and two hypotheses about input processing:



Hypothesis 1: Learners process input for meaning before they process it for form.

- a) Learners process content words in the input before anything else.
- b) Learners prefer to process lexical items to grammatical items (e.g., morphology) for semantic information.
- c) Learners prefer processing more meaningful morphology before less or non-meaningful morphology.

Hypothesis 2: In order to process form that is not meaningful, they must be able to process informational or communicative content at no or little cost to attention.

Figure 1: Lee & Van Patten, 1995, p. 96-97.

Transversal Study

In an independent study sponsored by Investigación y Desarrollo Anglo-Mexicano, 18 students, who have been at the school since KI or KII, were selected randomly from first, third and fifth grade (6 students from each group). The students were invited to play the game "Guess Who" which elicits only yes-no questions with the verb "be" or other verbs (mainly "have") about personal appearance. This game is played by two players. Each player gets a secret card in which there is one of the many characters that appear on each player's board. The player who guesses first the other player's secret card by asking yes-no questions (such as, "Does your character have brown hair?" or, "Is your character a man?") is the winner. The research session was filmed and then transcribed to be analyzed.

Data analysis and Results

To analyze student's utterances, the different types of yes-no questions they produced were classified in types and then, the percentage of use of each type was calculated (See tables 1 and 2).

Type	Level	%
"Is your character a man?" (A) Inverted question	First	0
	Third	62
	Fifth	30
"Your character is Rodolfo?" (B) Uninverted question	First	100
	Third	37
	Fifth	29
"Is girl?" (C) Subject (and article) omission	First	0
	Third	0
	Fifth	37

Table 1: Interrogative utterances with "be."

Type	Level	%
"Does your character have a hat?" "Has he got his hair like this?" (1) Well-formed inverted question.	First	0
	Third	38
	Fifth	18
"Does your person has glasses?" (2) Inverted questions that keep unnecessary subject-main verb agreement.	First	0
	Third	15
	Fifth	0
"Do your character have glasses?" "Do your character has red hair?" (3) Ill-formed inverted questions.	First	0
	Third	0
	Fifth	13
"Your character has hat?" "Your person have glasses."* "Your has a ear big?"** (4) Uninverted questions.	First	100
	Third	30
	Fifth	63
"Does her hair of color is orange?" (5) Mixed types: ill-formed inverted questions that mix "be" and "other verb" or "have" rules.	First	0
	Third	0
	Fifth	4

*Lack of subject-verb agreement.

** Spanish interference/transfer.

Table 2: Interrogatives with other verbs (mainly "have").

Discussion

In this section, each group's performance will be analyzed separately and afterwards I will try to describe briefly the whole picture from a language acquisition point of view.

First graders

It is worth mentioning that the first graders needed some help when playing the game because it is still hard for them to apply the logical reasoning the game requires. This means that they had to concentrate on both playing and speaking English, which were difficult tasks for them. It was observed that most first graders needed help with English vocabulary and that they often transferred language information from Spanish. It seems that phrases which could be quite

easy for them to understand if they hear them are very difficult for them to produce (1).

Let's see some examples of first graders' yes-no questions:

- Tiene...your has a ears big?
- Your person has the eyes blue?
- Your person is boy?
- Have a hat?

None of the phrases present the subject-object inversion required in these questions. First graders did not add the auxiliary (*do* or *does*) in the interrogatives with *have* or other verbs different from *be*. In (a) and (b) the position of the adjective in the noun phrase corresponds to Spanish and not to English. In (e) the subject was omitted which again, it is a very usual procedure in Spanish which is a pro-drop language.

Following Lee-Van Patten's model we could say that these young learners are not able yet to cope both with conveying meaning and choosing the right structures. On one hand, their attention is on meaning (recalling the right vocabulary) which is the one thing that would allow them to play the game. On the other hand, it seems their long term memory has not stored yet the right form-meaning relationships and that is why they cannot produce questions accurately.

Third Graders

Their performance was very different from first graders. Mainly because they applied the subject-object operation in 62% of *be* interrogatives and produced 38% of well-formed questions with *have* and other verbs. Let's see some examples:

- a. Is your character boy?
- b. Is it a man?
- c. It is a girl?
- d. Does your character has a hat?
- e. Does have it black hair?
- f. Does he have orange hair?

Although they still have trouble with producing correct yes-no questions, they seem to start managing some of the right construction hypothesis.

Fifth graders

This group shows (Table 3) the broadest set of interrogative types which seem to show that they have several working hypothesis and that they have not mastered the right ones yet. They are still working on the construction of the form-meaning relationships.

Interrogatives with "be"	Interrogatives with "have" and "other verbs"
a. Is girl? / Is Jesus? / Is a man?	a. It has white hair?
b. It is woman?	b. Does he use glasses? /does your character have black hair?
c. Is it a man?	c. Does he has hair here?
d. Is your character boy?	d. It has a hat?
e. Is his hair yellow?	e. Does her hair of color is orange?
	f. Do it has glasses?
	g. He use glasses?
	h. She have brown hair?

Table 3: Fifth graders' questions.

It is curious that they produced such a variety of interrogative phrases and that their performance was poorer than third graders' if considered from a grammatical point of view.

One explanation could be that in their language acquisition process they have even more working or temporary hypotheses in mind than third graders and therefore, since some students apply one or more, there is a broader variety of phrases. There is even the case of a student who applies many different ways of constructing interrogative phrases when playing the Guess Who:

He have a hat? vs. Does it have white hair?

Is a woman? vs. Is it a man?

Overall Comments

Although in a bilingual school students get many hours of English input, the quantity and quality of it is very different from both the input they would receive if they were studying in an English speaking country and from the input native speakers get when they are acquiring English as a first language. In the first case, children would be surrounded by a "whole" English environment: English speaking classmates, teachers, neighbors, and peers in playgrounds. But in the bilingual school, due to the fact that students share the same mother tongue, they only speak Spanish among themselves during school hours. This means that they are not immersed in an English language environment and that their brains keep switching from their mother tongue to the second language back and forth.

According to the study reported by Tomasello, (Cameron-Faulkner, Lieven, and Tomasello, 2003), in which they analyzed the interaction between English speaking mothers and their 2-to 3-year-old children:

1. Children heard an estimated of 5,000 to 7,000 utterances per day.
2. Between one-quarter and one-third of these were questions.
3. More than 20% of these were not full adult sentences, but instead were some kind of fragment (most often a noun phrase or prepositional phrase).
4. About one-quarter of these were imperatives and utterances structured by the copula.
5. Only about 15% of these had the canonical English SVO form (i.e., transitive utterances of various kinds) supposedly characteristic of the English language; and over 80% of the SVOs had a pronoun subject.

As we can see, very young children acquiring their mother tongue hear an average of 7,000 utterances a day (and about 1,500 questions). Children in bilingual schools hear a fewer phrases in comparison to native speakers and only a minimal proportion of those phrases are addressed to them individually.

In the following description we mention some of the issues students will need to have learned to acquire yes-no questions so we can see the multiple tasks they have to cope with:

1. They need to have stored the vocabulary they want to use in the long term memory to be able to retrieve it easily.
2. They should be aware of the fact that the structure of a question is different from the structure of a statement.

3. They should be aware of the fact that *be* in questions behave differently from other verbs.
4. They should know how to apply the subject-verb inversion.
5. They should be aware of what auxiliary to add in each different question.
6. They also need to know which auxiliary belongs to each tense.
7. They also need to be aware of the fact that when you add an auxiliary, subject-verb agreement does not apply because it is the auxiliary which must be conjugated and not the main verb.

As we can see learning to make *yes-no questions* is not a simple task. This kind of analysis could also be done about other language patterns children in bilingual school do not master easily. For example, the simple present tense conjugation in free speech and writing.

Some Pedagogical Suggestions

The ideas presented above can give us food for thought about what a multifold, complex task learning a second language at school is. A hopeful known fact is that most students who stay at bilingual schools for 12 or 15 years end up speaking English fluently and quite accurately. Therefore the idea for us, as teachers, is to try to be aware of how to support students' second acquisition process. The following are a few suggestions that we can consider:

1. Give each student frequent occasions to speak and write in the second language both about academic and non-academic issues.
2. Organize meaningful activities in which students work in pairs or in small groups so each one have several chances to communicate in the second language.
3. Recycle interesting activities and subjects as often as possible in order for the students to internalize structures, vocabulary, intonation patterns, etc. without noticing it. These kinds of routines help them store language information in the long term memory.
4. Present language matters in many different ways along the school year so students with different learning styles can take advantage of them.
5. Remember that games (for example, "Guess who", "Hide and seek", "Simon says", "Go fish", etc.) are excellent tools for having students speak in a self-confident manner.
6. Work and have them work towards a happy, secure, and challenging classroom atmosphere. Having a high motivation, feeling we are accepted by others the way we are, helps us learn and be creative and loving.
7. Take advantage of different school times and places to give students a variety of lively experiences: break time, lunch time, festivals preparation, tests, routines, class rules. Every thing we do together can be a new support for learning.
8. Try to assess each student as often as possible in his/her oral abilities so you can help them develop from the language level they have.

Notes

1. In 60 hours of English class observation at the kindergarten and primary levels, I could see most students have no problem following school instructions or participating in class activities.

References

- Cameron-Faulkner, T., Lieven, E., & Tomasello, M. (2003). A construction based analysis of child directed speech. *Cognitive Science*, 27, 843–873.
- Cameron, L. (2001) *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- International Baccalaureate Organization (2009). Primary Years Program. Available on-line at <http://www.ibo.org/pyp>. Search results for Mexico at http://www.ibo.org/school/search/index.cfm?programmes=PYP&country=MX®ion=&find_schools=Find. Accessed Aug. 19, 2009.
- Lee, J. & Van Patten, L. (1995) *Making Communicative Language Teaching Happen*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc.
- Mercau, V. & Hooper, C. (2006) Análisis de oraciones interrogativas absolutas producidas por sujetos que aprenden inglés como segunda lengua en un contexto de inmersión. *Lenguas en Contexto* 3, otoño. Puebla: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla.

About the Author

María Virginia Mercau has been an UAMI teacher-researcher since 1996. Her research interests are in young learners' second/foreign language acquisition and distance education. She has participated as a designer and instructor of the CELE-UNAM *Diplomado de Formación de Asesores de Centros de Autoacceso* since 1999 and is currently working on the design of a distance learning course for teacher preparation on how to teach English to young learners.