

Development of the First Language is not a Barrier to Second-Language Acquisition: Evidence from Vietnamese Immigrants to the United States

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Elementary and middle school children in California who speak Vietnamese as a first language reported high levels of oral competence in Vietnamese and a desire to maintain Vietnamese language and culture. There was no evidence, however, that the development of the first language was a barrier to second-language acquisition.

Introduction

According to public opinion, immigrants are clinging to their first languages and cultures, and resisting second-language acquisition and acculturation. These tendencies, according to common wisdom, are related: second-language development is poor because immigrants insist on using their first language. Newt Gingrich, former Speaker of the House, advised immigrants to 'make a sharp break with the past' to insure acquisition of English (Gingrich, 1995), and former US presidential candidate Robert Dole discouraged bilingualism, asserting that the US needs 'the glue of language to help hold us together' (*LA Times*, October 31, 1995). *New York Times* writer James Traub claimed that developing the first language only leads to a 'bilingual barrier' that prevents children from acquiring the second language (Traub, 1999).

Academic research presents a different picture. Immigrants to the United States are not clinging to their first languages, but are losing them rapidly, in favour of English. In a review, Krashen (1996) reported decreasing use of the primary language over generations and, among individuals, with age. For example, Lopez (1978) reported that 84% of first-generation married Hispanic women in Los Angeles said that they used only Spanish in their daily life, but this figure dropped to 15% for the second generation and 4% for the third generation. Garcia and Diaz (1992) found that 85% of mostly first-generation Hispanic pre-school children in Miami were monolingual speakers of Spanish, but by junior high school only 37% spoke Spanish either exclusively or mostly. This figure dropped to 18% by senior high school. Rumbaut (1997) adds more confirming data in his study of language minority students in the San Diego area. In grades 8 and 9, 66% said they preferred to speak English instead of their parents' language. Three years later, 82% preferred English. There were differences among the various subgroups, but Rumbaut points out that 'even among the most

mother-tongue-retentive group, the Mexican-born young living in a city adjacent to the Mexican border, the force of assimilation was incontrovertible' (p. 497): in grade 8, only 32% preferred English, but this figure jumped to 61% three years later.

Census data is consistent with these generalisations. According to the 1993 Census, only 8% of speakers of English as a second language in the US said they spoke no English, and about 74% said they spoke English 'well' or 'very well' (Krashen & McQuillan, 1995). One does, of course, occasionally run into immigrants who do not speak English. These are usually new arrivals, or those who have not been able to find the time or opportunity to acquire English.

There is no evidence that use of the first language impairs second-language development. In fact, there is clear evidence that home use of the language of the country of origin can actually accelerate second-language acquisition. Dolson (1985) examined school performance among fifth and sixth graders in one Los Angeles school who came from families that spoke only Spanish at home when the child entered elementary school. Children from families that kept using Spanish at home significantly outperformed children from families that switched to English at home on tests of mathematics and had higher grade point averages. There was also a tendency for those who kept using Spanish at home to excel in English reading. A plausible explanation for this effect is that use of the first language at home encourages more and higher quality parent-child interaction, which has positive consequences for cognitive and affective development.

In addition, there is evidence that higher development of literacy in the primary language is causally related to literacy development in the second language. The evidence for this includes consistent positive correlations between first- and second-language literacy development in younger students as well as the success of bilingual education programmes that include the development of literacy in the primary language (Krashen, 1996).

The goal of this study is to examine these issues with a group of Vietnamese-speaking students in elementary and middle school in California. This group is of special interest, as they have made a strong effort to maintain the first language at home (Henkin & Nguyen, 1981). The questions investigated are these:

- (1) Are these students indeed holding onto their first language and culture?
- (2) If so, are there signs of language shift? Is there, in other words, a tendency for the use of the first language to decrease? Previous studies have shown that use of the primary language is greatest in the 'intimate' domain (Garcia and Diaz, 1992), with the greatest use with parents, less with siblings, and least among friends (Gal, 1979; Garcia and Diaz, 1992). Substantial use of the second language among siblings is a sign that language shift has begun ('diglossic leak'; Garcia and Diaz, 1992).
- (3) Are these students proficient in English?
- (4) Is there evidence that use of the primary language is detrimental to English-language development?

Procedure

Subjects for the study were 588 first- to eighth-grade students of Vietnamese

origin from the northern section of the Central Valley of California, 304 boys and 284 girls. These students comprised approximately 12% of the total student population of the area. Students were identified as Vietnamese through a Master List that each school maintained that contained information about students' home language, English proficiency levels and test score data. Approximately 85% of the Vietnamese students were included in the study. Specific socioeconomic data on this group were not collected, but most of the schools in the area were eligible for special funding for high poverty schools (Title 1). Seventy-one per cent of the subjects were born in the United States, 29% were not. Of the 173 immigrants, 40 (23%) had been in the US less than five years. The subjects were fairly evenly spread among the eight grade levels, the fewest (47 or 8%) in grade one, and the most (18%) in grade 8.

A Likert scale questionnaire in English containing 16 questions was administered to the Vietnamese students. The first three questions covered demographics, while the rest investigated perceptions of Vietnamese and English competence, language preference, and attitudes towards maintaining Vietnamese language and culture. The following section contains the actual questions and the results.

The questionnaire was first distributed as a pilot study to an unrelated group of Vietnamese students age six to sixteen who were participating in a summer institute, in order to ensure clarity, comprehensibility, and accuracy. Letters were sent to parents and teachers explaining the purpose of the study. The letters to parents were translated into Vietnamese and were sent in both English and Vietnamese. In addition, we also had access to students' scores on the 1998 Stanford Achievement Test (SAT), administered at the end of the 1998 school year. This test is now required in all California schools.

Results

Results are presented for all subjects combined. There were some slight developmental trends, some reaching statistical significance, but in no case were they large. In addition, any developmental changes could be strongly influenced by length of residence; those who arrived in the United States more recently would be expected to report higher levels of competence in Vietnamese, and lower levels of competence in English.

Competence in Vietnamese

Most subjects reported that Vietnamese was their first language or both English and Vietnamese were first languages, and that they spoke Vietnamese quite well, but few reported that they had high levels of competence in literacy in their first language (Table 1).

Competence in English

Subjects rated themselves high in spoken (informal) English competence (Table 2).

Language Use

Subjects reported no overall preference for either language (Table 3), but

Table 1 Self-report of competence in Vietnamese

What is your first language?	<i>Vietnamese</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Both</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
	352 (60%)	39 (7%)	152 (26%)	45 (8%)
Do you speak Vietnamese?	<i>Very well or well</i>	<i>Okay</i>	<i>Little or none</i>	
	376 (67%)	141 (25%)	12 (7%)	
Do you read and write Vietnamese?	<i>Very well or well</i>	<i>Okay</i>	<i>Little or none</i>	
	130 (23%)	104 (19%)	327 (58%)	

Table 2 Self-report of competence in English

How well do you speak English?	<i>Very well or well</i>	<i>Okay</i>	<i>Little or none</i>
	473 (84%)	67 (12%)	25 (4%)

Table 3 Language preferences

	<i>Vietnamese or mostly Vietnamese</i>	<i>Both</i>	<i>English or mostly English</i>
Prefer overall	102 (17%)	372 (64%)	112 (19%)
Speak with parents	402 (69%)	162 (28%)	21 (4%)
Speak with siblings	87 (15%)	244 (42%)	253 (43%)
Speak with friends	49 (8%)	163 (28%)	373 (64%)

clearly spoke a great deal of Vietnamese with their parents, somewhat less with brothers and sisters, and very little with friends. The difference between the use of Vietnamese with parents, siblings, and friends was highly significant (for the total of all ages, parents vs. siblings, $chi\ square = 415.93, p < 0.001$; siblings vs. friends, $chi\ square = 39.616, p < 0.001$; parents vs. friends, $chi\ square = 560.743, p < 0.001$).

Attitude toward the first languages

Most respondents felt it was important to speak, read and write Vietnamese, said they would like to learn Vietnamese in school, and felt it was important to maintain Vietnamese language and culture (Table 4).

Table 4 Attitudes towards Vietnamese language and culture

Is it important to speak, read and write Vietnamese?		
<i>Very important or important</i>	<i>OK</i>	<i>Little or no importance</i>
467 (80%)	75 (13%)	39 (7%)
Would you like to learn Vietnamese in school?		
<i>Yes</i>	<i>Not sure</i>	<i>No</i>
392 (67%)	63 (11%)	130 (22%)
<i>Very much, very important</i>	<i>OK</i>	<i>Little or no importance</i>
430 (91%)	34 (6%)	20 (3%)

Relationship of competence in English and competence in Vietnamese

To determine the relationship between use and competence in Vietnamese and English competence, a rank order correlation was performed between performance on the Stanford Achievement Test (reading and language test combined) and self-report of competence in Vietnamese literacy. To control for age, only subjects in grades 5–8 were used, and to control for exposure to the two languages, only those subjects born in the US were considered. For the 170 subjects considered, the correlation was near zero, $r_{ho} = 0.06$.

Because of the near universality of the use of Vietnamese at home for families in this area, and the high levels of competence reported for spoken Vietnamese and spoken English, correlations were not performed with this data.

Discussion

To return to our research questions:

- (1) Are these students holding on to their first language and culture? This was partially confirmed. Self-reported competence in speaking Vietnamese was high, but much lower in written Vietnamese. Most subjects felt it was important to speak, read and write Vietnamese, felt it was important to maintain the Vietnamese culture and language, and most said they would like to learn Vietnamese in school.
- (2) Are there signs of language shift? Subjects spoke mostly Vietnamese with their parents, mostly English with their friends, and tended to prefer English with siblings. They thus appear to be conforming to the pattern previously found in the research literature. But the finding that only 15% used only Vietnamese with siblings is a clear sign that language shift has begun.
- (3) Are these students proficient in English? Subjects reported a high level of competence in speaking English.
- (4) Is there evidence that use of the primary language is detrimental to second-language development? The finding of high levels of reported competence in spoken Vietnamese and English, as well as high levels of the use of Vietnamese with parents' suggests that first-language use is not detrimental to the development of spoken English. In addition, the correlation between English literacy and self-reported competence in Vietnamese was close to zero. There is thus no evidence that competence in Vietnamese is holding back English-language literacy development.

The subjects in this study professed strong support for their first language and culture, but it must be kept in mind that all subjects were elementary and middle school students. As Tse (1998) has noted, ambivalence towards and avoidance of the first language occurs in many adolescents during the teenage years. During this time, the press for the language of the country and assimilation are so strong that some members of ethnic minorities may be ambivalent to or even reject the heritage language and culture.

Subjects' high competence in oral English, and the low correlations found between English literacy and reported competence in Vietnamese literacy are consistent with other reports in the research literature. In early stages of

second-language literacy development, correlations between first- and second-language literacy are consistently high, but the correlations are much lower for older children, because other factors, such as reading in the second language, become stronger (Krashen, in press). What is clear from our results, as well as the result of other studies, is that the development of the first language is not a barrier to second-language acquisition, oral or written.

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