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Learning Yet Another Language - the Benefits for English Literacy Development

Margaret Hardiman, International Languages Facilitator, Team Solutions

An investigation of three Tongan students learning French and the benefits they gain in the development of their English language literacy, with particular reference to writing.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this investigation was to explore to what extent ESOL learners studying another language between insights gained in learning that language and the development of their literacy in English, with particular reference to writing.

BACKGROUND

Observations during years teaching German, French and English to ESOL learners in South Auckland have led to the belief there are benefits to be gained in development in English language literacy for ESOL students who are learning an additional language.

Research in Australia and elsewhere supports this notion, but similar New Zealand research findings are not so readily available. It is ten years since Geoffery Waite put forward the idea that:

bilingualism in Maori and English, in Samoan and English, in English and French, or in any other combination, confers upon the speaker intellectual benefits in the form of an enhanced ability to manipulate language. These general linguistic skills can be transferred from one language to another, whatever the language. (Waite, 1992, pp .9-10)

and

Learning another language could profitably begin as part of the common curriculum from S2 and continue through to F5. (Waite,1992, p.19)

Little progress has been made on this issue in the intervening years. Indeed, in the name of "literacy", there is a tendency to deny access to learning another language to those students deemed to be at risk in their English language development. While this study is of ESOL students, there are wider implications for equitable access to learning another language for all students, including Maori and New Zealand Pakeha students.

Mason Durie, in his opening address, at the Hui Taumata Mataurang in February 2001, when naming the three goals highlighted as relevant to Maori, spoke of *facilitating participation as citizens of the world.*

If there are such cognitive, linguistic and social advantages to be gained from learning another language, in addition to the benefits of learning that language itself, then all students should be given the opportunity to participate.

WHAT DOES THE LITERATURE SAY?

Researchers write about the benefits from learning additional languages beyond the obvious benefit of knowing the additional language.

The general notion of language development is more important than any discussion of a particular language or its place in the acquisitional process (L1, L2, L3). Such a perspective leads itself to the notion of there being benefits for literacy in general from a study of a second language that are simply not available within the interpretation of language and literacy as a monolingual construct, (Simpson Norris International, 2001, p. 37).

International education without languages lacks any context for applying the knowledge

and

Language Arts without a comparative perspective is incomplete because it lacks learning about the nature of language, (Liddicoat, NZALT Conference Napier 2002).

Enhanced metalinguistic awareness

Jessner (1999) says that the development of competence in two or more languages can result in higher levels of metalinguistic awareness. These facilitate the acquisition of language by exploiting the cognitive mechanisms underlying these processes of transfer and enhancement.

"Cummins believes that in the course of learning one language a child acquires a set of skills and implicit metalinguistic knowledge that can be drawn upon when working in another language. He calls this "common underlying language proficiency" CULP. Any expansion of CULP that takes place in one language will have a beneficial effect on other languages." ([Shoebottom, 2001](#)).

"Successful language learners transfer their knowledge about language from one language to another." (Simpson Norris International, 2001, p. 10)

"Having a second language can provide a perspective on language structure which grows from being able to compare and contrast two possible sets of structures." (Liddicoat, 2002, p.14)

"Learning a third language... also provides these [ESL] students with further opportunities to consider English as a system." (Simpson Norris International, 2001, p. 10)

Enhanced metacognition

"Metacognition can be defined simply as thinking about thinking... understanding and controlling cognitive processes may be one of the most essential skills that classroom teachers can help second language learners develop." ([Anderson](#))

"Thinking as a transferable skill is also now receiving much attention..." Findings of studies in this area are typified by Thomas 1988 (cited in Simpson Norris International, 2001, p. 28) who suggests that "learning more than one language helps develop sensitivity to language as a system ... and that this is advantageous for learners."

"Second language learners are actively involved in metacognition when they attempt to evaluate whether what they are doing is effective." ([Anderson, 2002](#))

"Language learning can transfer to further language learning and to the development of literacy." (Simpson Norris, 2001, p. 29).

Cognitive skills are also enhanced by the way students are taught to use language learning strategies

"Successful language learners often use strategies in an orchestrated fashion." "For example, L2 writing, like L1 writing benefits from learning strategies of planning, self monitoring, deduction, substitution." ([Oxford, 1994](#))

"Students should have plenty of opportunities for strategy training during language classes." ([Oxford, 1994](#))

"Learners develop flexibility in learning and dealing with linguistic concepts." (Simpson Norris International, 2001, page 9)

Learning another language can provide another chance to succeed for ESL learners

"A second language can provide a new language beginning for learners who have struggled with English. This has been shown to be beneficial, both in terms of English language development and for the self-esteem of learners." (Simpson Norris International, 2001 page 9)

"For ESL learners learning a third language can be an extremely positive experience in that their developing English is not a disadvantage." (Simpson Norris International 2001, page 10)

"Educators who aspire to challenge the operation of coercive relations of power in the school system must attempt to create conditions of collaborative empowerment... This involves becoming aware of, and actively wanting to change the ways in which particular educational structures limit the opportunities that culturally diverse students may have for educational and social advancement." (Cummins, J, 1999, page 9)

"... the fact that trilingualism can be developed at no cost to the student's achievement in the dominant language of society and the school." (Cummins, J, 1999, page 6)

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Three Tongan girls learning French in Year 11 at a Decile 1 state-integrated Catholic school were interviewed. The students' assessed written work in English and in

French was examined, the students were observed and taught in the French classes by the researcher and the girls were interviewed on three different occasions during the year. The questions asked aimed to elicit information about attitudes and self-evaluation:

- Which part of learning French do you like best ? Why?
- Which part of learning English do you like best? Why?
- Which skills do you think you are best at in French? How do you know?
- Which skills do you think you are best at in English? How do you know?

and to elicit information about strategies:

- Tell me about what you did in the lessons which led up to this writing assessment in French.
- The same question for English.

These strategy questions were repeated for all assessed and important pieces of work. The students were encouraged to reflect on the strategies they used for writing in each language and to compare these.

The first interview also included background in Tongan language and the students' evaluations of their abilities in Tongan.

- How good is your Tongan? What kind of language do you use and understand?
- When do you use your Tongan?
- When do you write in Tongan?

THE STUDENTS' LINGUISTIC BACKGROUNDS

T is the student with the greatest skills in Tongan language. She attended school in Tonga from the age of 5 until she was 8. She reports that she can understand formal and colloquial Tongan and feels very able to communicate in colloquial Tongan. She talks Tongan to some of her family and in phone calls to Tonga. She reads Tongan newspapers and writes letters to her aunt in Tongan. When she has the opportunity she teaches the small children in her family to speak Tongan.

E feels least confident in Tongan. She cannot understand or communicate formally in Tongan, she speaks colloquially with her friends and if she has to say anything in Tongan to a group, she believes she has to practise first.

K knows that her skills in Tongan language are colloquial only but she likes talking Tongan and takes part in skits and presentations at church. When she has to present anything formally she has to have a good Tongan speaker to help her.

WHAT DO THE TEACHERS REPORT? NCEA RESULTS

(End of Year 11 reports in English and in French.)

All three students have gained all the internally assessed credits they entered for writing at NCEA Level 1 in English and in French.

T

English

She gained 12/12 available internal credits. "T has worked hard in all areas of the English course this year. Her effort levels and the quality of her work have been outstanding."

French

9 out of 9 available internal credits gained. T is "an able French student with good listening skills. On the mock exam she scored below the standard in reading..."

E

English

9 out of 12 internal credits gained. "Her work on a static image task was of outstanding quality."

French 6 out of 9 available internal credits gained.

K

English 9 out of 12 credits

"Her effort to recover early weeks lost to sickness has been outstanding and her recent work on a research project was particularly pleasing"

French 9 out of 9 credits.

WHAT DO THE STUDENTS SAY?

They feel confident in language use

There is a feeling that they are special and reasonably good with language because they know French and their peers do not. It has helped them feel confident about their linguistic ability and about their ability to be successful learners.

The students have well developed metalinguistic awareness

*In their learning of French the students employ **listening strategies** accurately and mimic pronunciation and speech patterns. They feel confident about their speaking and listening abilities. They recognise the relationship between written and spoken language.*

T

"Speaking and listening are easy. The teacher can repeat things... I learned a lot in speaking. Speaking in French makes my English improve."

"My best skill in French is speaking. The teacher goes over the vocabulary. In reading the vocabulary is harder but you can sound it out. The sound of it sounds right. I enjoy listening... the close explaining helps me."

K

"I find it a nuisance to check accuracy. I prefer speaking because the mistakes are not so important. I like the accents."

"I keep Tongan separate for home but sometimes when I get French words and I compare with Tongan. Knowing Tongan gives me speaking confidence. I listen to lots of Tongan... skits at church I speak a Tongan part."

"I really like English. I really just like talking about stories, film. In French I'm best at speaking. I know because the teacher tells me but I know - it comes out correct... I'm best in English in speeches. I win competitions, I enjoy talking, and acting. I know I'm good. I enjoy speaking."

The students recognise and analyse patterns and structures and apply them to new situations

T

"Writing is harder [than speaking] - accents and you have to agree. I like imagining and so on ... writing... we were given an example of the poem in French... the example... it helped me to see and what it was like- the poem helped me with spelling and structure - understand the past [tense]- I looked at the example and did my own. Resources - the teacher gives you resources and it helps your writing ... information on French restaurants, a brochure - just to help with your structures. I didn't think they were hard - the rules of the verbs, you watch where it comes and in English ..the position of "toujours" "always" ... comparing with Tongan sometimes... French is a different language. Tongan is easier than French because there are no rules. All this is going on in my head."

E

" I have to be really precise in French. It is important which structures to use and which words to choose."

"formal writing in French 1.5 [an externally assessed French writing achievement standard for NCEA Level 1]. The French family and my family ... past tense I memorised some ... I used what I knew was right and used some out of my head. ... one language helps the other because we learn formally ... skills"

"The part of English I'm best at is creative writing - I know the marks are - seems good to me. I'm not confident in Tongan - I only half know formal Tongan- I can understand the words and structures. When I speak formal Tongan I prepare it like I do French."

K

"Any writing in French, I compare French and English."

K (speaking for herself and E)

"French - it's hardest to get the verbs in the right place and make the endings agree. It's hard but to get it right we just put the words in categories and just compare with other words and match endings. The easiest is thinking about the topic -the words and structures to use - we brainstorm like this in English too"

The students have the opportunity to gain enhanced cognitive and metacognitive skills when they learn French

The students are aware of the strategies they use when writing in English or in French. They have learnt these strategies in English instruction and the French teachers have put particular emphasis on thinking strategies. They recognise that there is more than one way to express something, they work out strategies for

themselves to memorise pieces of language and use strategies to reassemble familiar pieces of language in less familiar contexts.

The students recognise that this specific training in communication and in thinking skills has transferred from the writing they do in French to the writing they do in English and from their English writing to their French writing.

The students formally plan their written work in both English and French and use the skills they have learnt to check their written work for accuracy and coherence.

T

"Assessment - I enjoy assessment - research ... formal writing with pictures. It worries me in French and English... when I have to do formal... because I don't do formal in my going round. I look up examples - I like examples in English and French. The teacher tells us this is formal language... French is all reasonably formal. I think of questions I could answer, narrow down, collect data, write the answers."

"I have to be really precise in French. I learnt some skills to do with paragraphs ... helps me to do English research in order."

"Creative writing in English with resources I like best - you can take your time and draft it. In French I don't revise enough to improve... brainstorm. I don't enjoy writing in French. I write chatty Tongan... I don't know formal Tongan... don't know formal constructions."

E

"The poem in French... we thought ourselves into the situation brainstorm... I wrote what came into my head. In English I like creative writing best. I like thinking... the imagination part ..English comes better and French comes better when you think yourself in. The formal writing in the English exam, I passed that ... I didn't plan, I just wrote, practice from before ... I knew about paragraphs ... I did it in my head at the same time. I reread it to see if the style was formal. The teacher told us in French what the marker is looking for ... they are the same in English and French... one helps the other because we learn skills .. similar things... the way it's set out ... look closely at sentences. ... I'm more confident in formal English than formal Tongan... in tests and that... "

K

"In French I like learning how to write paragraphs... expressing myself. I find it a nuisance to check accuracy ... I really like English. I don't like essay writing, it's hard ... creative writing is hard. When I write French, I started comparing French and English ... I looked up... I write one sentence at a time in French checked that then the next ... I never write a whole paragraph at once ... I worked that out for myself. Formal writing in English... brainstorm, put down step by step plan how the plan will go along. I don't use plain words... I do a paragraph and read it over "

K for her and E

"We think of a topic then brainstorm then think about experiences we have had in the past. We start writing to get correct each sentence we go over the proper way of

spelling or try to think of what it looks like on the page. Linking words... I reread to see if the ideas do link ... checking. "

E

"I'm best at imagination and I'm best at planning and linking . The easiest bit in writing French is thinking about the topic - brainstorm. You have to be stricter on yourself in French and look at small bits of language."

In both English and French lessons the students learn skills to evaluate their work according to criteria that they know is being looked for. These skills learnt in both English and French transfer from one language to the other

E

"Learning French makes us hard on ourselves."

T

"I really enjoy assessment ... I know how to improve my French ... I need to draft it more... "

E

"I think about what the marker would do and just change stuff - what's the marker looking for? The teacher told us in French what the marker's looking for. They are the same French and English. One helps the other because we learn formally ... Translation French to English... I'm good at that... reading comprehension ... I know what I have to do."

K

"Checking writing over and over is annoying in English and in French... It is the same when I check in English and French... close correctness... in Science I just connected up... I know if something comes out correct... I work hard during assessments."

K (for her and E)

"We learnt most from [French teacher]... taught us how to get it right, we made really good progress."

Learning a third language gives another chance to succeed

T

"I am good at French and good at English but I have had to work very hard."

E

"In French I like learning vocab and reading because I'm learning new things. It's different from the other languages Tongan and English."

"I chose French because it's a new language. Different and new."

"I don't do homework and I'm still good. I think about it. I'm quite a fast thinker. I do it in my head."

K

"I assess myself. For Year 11 I'm good but not really good. I've had to work hard."

K for herself and E

"We see French as an advantage... a secret... self-esteem ... confidence... it's something the others can't do ... we can learn ... we are confident learners ... it has made us hard on ourselves... we talk about the others in French... it's a secret."

DISCUSSION

The three students who took part in the investigation are reflective learners who recognise how they themselves learn and who value language learning. They see themselves first as Tongan students who would like to progress further in their formal acquisition of Tongan language.

It is interesting to note that the student who has the greatest skills in Tongan language also performs the best in formal assessments of her language skills in English and in French. T is very aware of the benefits she gains from knowing more than one language and strongly believes in teaching Tongan to the small children in her extended family.

In their French lessons, the students have been taught to consider and analyse very small pieces of language. In addition, the communicative language teaching methodologies used in the French lessons have meant that listening and speaking skills have been valued. As learners with contact with more than one language, these students have enhanced listening skills and thus are successful in this area. This experience of success has then been transferred to their writing skills in both English and French.

The students are used to self assessment and peer assessment and the feedback they receive enables them to look critically at their own work and to compare their work with the models. Learning to write from models of writing has been evident in both French and English lessons. In both English and French the students have been taught to manipulate language using models of good writing. In French this use of models has been more for grammar and syntax and in English more for style. The students report that they are able to transfer the strategies learnt to manipulate each language, from one language to the other.

This awareness has led to a deeper understanding of the difference between formal and informal language. While many students at this level in their English language development find it difficult to write formally, these students are aware of the difference and where their strengths and weaknesses lie.

A consequence of this close attention to style and syntax, is that all three students say that they are aware of what the "marker" is looking for. They are more likely to succeed in formal written assessments, because they are more likely to reflect on their learning so that they can look at their writing "with the marker's eyes." It is as if they gain double the skills to reflect on their learning. This learning how to learn, this cultivation of thinking skills and meta-cognitive awareness is exactly the skill that

modern learners need to succeed and these students are able to practise these skills in both English and French. They are aware of the transfer.

As reflective, aware learners, these students have become successful learners. They know that they are successful learners. The fact that they also know French makes the students feel special. They know they have to work hard but they feel they can accomplish whatever they want in learning any language. They know they have the skills to do so.

IMPLICATIONS

Give ESOL students all possible opportunities to learn yet another language

- The students in the study are convinced themselves that they have gained many linguistic and thinking skills from learning French. Their voices are clear on this.
- There are demonstrable, wide-ranging benefits to be gained from learning another language. These benefits must be available to all students - also to those whose development in English language literacy is deemed to be at risk. School Managers have the obligation to acknowledge the benefits and to make these learning opportunities available to all. Lack of awareness on the part of school managers can sometimes unnecessarily restrict students' learning opportunities.
- Languages teachers must make explicit to their students the connections and bridges to other English literacy areas of the curriculum. The thinking skills and the linguistic skills to be gained from learning another language should be taught and stressed so that the students gain maximum advantage from their language learning. This may mean that some languages teachers need to move from an almost exclusive emphasis on the code.
- There is opportunity for much closer collaboration between teachers of International Languages, Community Languages, ESOL and English in mainstream classrooms. The tendency to compartmentalise is unnecessarily hindering students' learning. There needs to be greater awareness among teachers of the benefits for English literacy development from further language learning. This is a difficult shift when the teacher has had little or no experience of learning another language.
- In recognising the development of skills beyond the target language itself, International Languages teachers should begin to develop more sophisticated relationships with other learning areas, thus enhancing the language acquisition skills of their students. The onus is on the languages experts to make the connections. Not to make these shifts is a lost opportunity for everyone.

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