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Acquisition of Chinese among children in Shanghai

While one of the authors was traveling in Shen Zhen, a large city located in Guang Dong province, where *Guang Dong hua* (Cantonese) is spoken, he became acquainted with a 12 year old girl whose family had relocated from Si Chuan province, where a dialect of Chinese quite close to the national language, *putonghua* (PTH), is spoken, and who had no *Guang Dong hua* when she arrived. Furthermore, all her schooling is conducted in PTH. Most of her classmates also hail from other provinces, so they have no *Guang Dong hua*, either. Nonetheless, she reports, she is attempting to learn the language of Guang Dong, primarily from television, using the subtitles provided as a guide.[1] She is not alone in the situation of learning a second dialect. The question of learning second dialects in China is an important question for both educators and business people, as the economy grows, nationally and internationally.

Shanghai is another area in China where the local language, *Shang Hai hua* (SHH), is unintelligible to speakers of the national language and other dialects of Chinese[2]: speakers of Chinese from other provinces cannot understand or speak the Shanghai language when they arrive or visit there, and native Shanghainese must likewise learn the official national language.[3] This paper focuses on the manner in which this learning is undertaken, and the experience the learners have along the way.

The people of Shanghai refer to the national language as PTH, and their language as SHH (those with some English generally, when using English, refer to the national language as

“Chinese” and the local language as “Shanghai language”). Although SHH and the national standard language are mutually unintelligible, the Shanghai language is traditionally considered by the Chinese to be a dialect of Chinese, out of a sense of national unity, and it does share a historical relation with the other dialects. Certainly the borders between PTH and SHH are not so great as those between, say, Chinese and Japanese, as the two varieties of Chinese speech share many surface features, yet the dialects are mutually unintelligible, a traditional test for separate languages. The question of whether these mutually unintelligible speech varieties should be considered dialects or languages is moot.[4] What is important is that speakers of SHH must learn PTH in order to communicate with speakers of the national language.

For many generations the system of education practiced at any level of learning in China has placed firm emphasis on imitation of correct models, repetition, and memorization, directed toward examination. As education becomes democratized, and methodologies are imported and applied to expanding language education in China, this traditional method, whose core ideology remains essentially similar to the grammar-translation method in nature, continues to underlie all approaches, although there is anecdotal evidence that in Shanghai the situation is changing gradually in the teaching of lower grade children, who are encouraged to use their creativity and imagination. It must be emphasized that this traditional approach to teaching stresses repetition and memorization, and rests upon a foundation of reverence for the ancients.

The subject of our study are children who are learning PTH. A study was designed in which the mothers of children of various ages were interviewed, along with several young adults who were asked about their recollections as children. The subjects each were born in Shanghai to native speakers of SHH, and thus are themselves native speakers as well. Information pertaining to the manner in which their learning PTH occurs, the environments in which it occurs,

and the progress of the learning was elicited. The interviews were conducted in SHH by one of the authors.

The parents of these Shanghai children live in the most rapidly developing and economically most powerful city in China. Furthermore Shanghai is and has long been the hub of China's rapidly expanding international trade, and in this atmosphere the use of PTH is essential. Thus many parents in Shanghai recognize that their children must become competent users of the official national language, PTH, to obtain good jobs. Communicative fluency in the national language is essential to function in the modern workplace, and since PTH is the language of instruction in the schools, access to higher education and specialized skills, such as foreign language training, heavily depends on a student's degree of mastery of the language. The children themselves, at early ages, do not comprehend the changing economic and social realities around them; although personalities vary and not all children are equally motivated to please their parents and teachers, many are highly motivated by the influences in their surroundings to do well in their language learning.

Parents of Chinese children often participate very actively in their children's second language learning. (See Erbaugh 1992 for a report on parental involvement in first language acquisition among Chinese children in Taiwan and the United States and a review of literature). On buses in Shanghai one may see a father bouncing his young son on his knee, clearly and slowly using PTH to pronounce the names of the streets the bus passes for the child to repeat, correcting, and asking for more repetitions. In a shopping district one can observe a grandmother walking along with her granddaughter in hand, counting steps with exaggerated PTH tone realization and clarity. A popular day-time radio station offers children's programming in PTH during the afternoons; during program hiatus, a female voice slowly and

clearly pronounces number words in PTH in random order. These examples demonstrate not mere parental involvement in speech development, which is common in many societies, but a high degree of parental involvement in the second dialect learning process.[5]

The parents of Yu Lu, 4, use PTH at home with her, even though they report their own is “not very standard,” and have done so since the moment she could speak. The parents of Li Yi, 7, use it at home as much as possible. Zhang Lin, 9, uses PTH at home with her parents. These parents are very motivated to have their children learn and master PTH. This motivation, among their parents, for children to be able speak PTH, given the economic realities of modern Shanghai, constitutes what Gardner and Lambert call an “instrumental orientation” (see Beebe 1988:69f). These parents recognize that acquiring PTH is of great importance in their children’s future.

Children between three and five years of age attend *yòu ér yuán* (a kindergarten, but one where directed play is strongly supplemented with focused and systematic instruction in language). Sun Yi Chao, 4, attends *yòu ér yuán* six hour a day, Monday through Friday. His teachers use PTH as the language of instruction. Zhang Jie, 4, also spends five to six hours a day in a PTH environment, as does Yu Lu. We may remind readers that SHH is the *majority language* in Shanghai. This language learning environment constitutes what Cummins characterizes as “*immersion*” (1988:149), and Dulay, Burt, and Krashen refers to as “full immersion,” a model in which majority language students are taught with L2 (or, in this case, *dialect 2*) as the language of instruction (1988:16).

We can also see that the degree of “affective filtering” experienced by these children is very low (see Dulay, Burt, and Krashen 1988:46-7). Their parents are highly motivated for them to learn, and the use of PTH by their parents supports their favorable affective attitude. In

Shanghai virtually all television broadcasts use PTH. Sun Yi Chao watches television daily, with the encouragement and support of his parents, who use television as a good model of standard PTH.[6] Zhang Jie also watches television regularly, and is motivated to learn and use PTH phrases by the texts he hears in advertisements for children's foods and toys, as is Yu Lu. Lu imitates phrases he learns from television advertisements, such as *Jīn tiān nǐ chī le méi yǒu?* 'have you eaten today'?, and *tián de* 'something sweet'. Likewise Zhang Jie imitates and recites phrases from television advertisements, *Jīn tiān hé guò le ma?* 'have you drunk anything today'? The incorporation of television watching in language learning provides stimulation, interest, and enjoyment, further aiding a favorable affective attitude.

We must point out another factor in the affective attitudes of these learners in their environment. In Shanghai, the local language is not only the majority language, it is the prestige dialect. Use of SHH indexes status distinctions between natives and outsiders (Angus 2001, forthcoming). Not only can these students please their parents and teachers and enjoy television and the products it brings to their attention, but they experience no loss of prestige by adding PTH to their stock of language capability.[7]

Learners of PTH at the *yòu ér yuán* level receive structured lessons. They are taught to recite riddles and retell stories, and they practice these during their lessons and at home. In Shanghai PTH learning environments there is no *silent period*, as advocated in "natural" approaches (See Krashen and Terrell 1983). Sun Yi Chao recites riddles he learns from his teachers to his parents. Zhang Jie's parents taught her basic kinship words, such as *bā ba* 'father', *mā ma* 'mother', *yé ye* 'grandfather, paternal', and *wài pó* 'grandmother, maternal'. She originates discourse in PTH, such as *Wǒ yào chī fàn*, 'I want to eat', and *Wǒ yào niào niao* 'I want to go potty', and her parents respond to her in PTH when she uses the language to

originate. Yu Lu's parents also taught her basic kinship words, and they report she uses such phrases as *Wǒ yào chī fàn* 'I want to eat' and *hé shuǐ* 'drink water'. All these children can listen to age-appropriate stories read to them and pronounce basic words and phrases. This evidence of elementary acquisition reveals the early stages of what Mary Erbaugh describes as a "gradually increasing but still incomplete mastery of complex sentences and narratives" (393), a feature, also, of Chinese first language acquisition.[8]

Teachers focus on concrete things which children see and hear in daily life, such as desks and tables, chickens and ducks. In the texts reported we see evidence that these children select "subjects and events that can be seen, heard, or felt while the language is being used" (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen 26). This evidence of acquisition of PTH demonstrates the principle that "here and now topics" provide the reference for texts produced by these very young language learners (see Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1988, for discussion of parent and caretaker use of such language).

This "full immersion" in PTH continues throughout public education in Shanghai. As learners advance through primary grades, reading and writing is added to the curriculum, and at the same time communicative opportunities expand. The mother of Zhang Jie Lu, 6 (not the same Zhang Jie mentioned before), asks her to read elementary texts from school, and she and her husband "train" Jie Lu to use more PTH at home. Mrs. Zhang reports that when the parents use PTH to speak to Jie Lu, she uses it to answer. Her parents report that she can use the language to express her self "up to her level of development as a person."

The parents of Li Yi, 8, use PTH as much as possible. Li Yi watches television and movies in PTH and he uses it to tell stories to his parents. His parents report that he can use complex sentences, and they feel that he can use the language to express himself "up to his level

of development.” As Dell Hymes notes, “a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate” (1979:15). These children demonstrate an increasing degree of complexity in their utterances, and appropriateness in using the language in situations.

The parents of Zhao Rong, 9, report they “always” use PTH to communicate with him, because they want to create a “good linguistic environment” for him. His mother says also that when he asks a question about an item that interests him, they use PTH to respond. Zhao Rong is asked by his parents to recite poems and prose passages to them, and to read aloud age-appropriate books. He often uses PTH to communicate with his classmates in recess breaks and at lunch at school, which the teachers encourage. The parents encourage him to listen to children’s radio and television broadcasts because the broadcasters’ PTH is “very standard,” both in pronunciation and grammar, providing an excellent model. The importance of such models can be seen in the report by Li Yi’s mother of the universal observation that many Shanghai natives often do not distinguish between “front nasal” *n* and “back nasal” *ng*, or between retroflex *zh*, *sh*, *ch* and “flat tongue” (apical) *z*, *s*, *c*. [9] Let us point out that this degree of “knowledge about language” (Lyons 1996:29) is common among adult speakers who have learned PTH in school (see Lyons 1996:29f for multi-faceted discussion of the supposed distinction between “propositional and performative knowledge”).

As children progress through the primary grades, we see an increasing emphasis on repetition and drill, and a clear focus on correctness. In these PTH classrooms repetition and memorization force the pupils to “consciously attend” to the object of learning, to “pay attention to some feature of the input,” and the focus on repetition with accuracy and correctness in pronunciation, grammaticality, and appropriateness shows a manipulation of explicit and implicit

knowledge (see Ellis 1997:116-24). Ellis observes that “intensive communicative ESL programs...do not appear to result in accurate language use” (1997b:52), an observation that seems to be supported by the experience of these young learners, in which, in addition to the general communicative environment of the classroom and often the home, strong emphasis is placed on the accuracy and correctness of utterances.

As students progress into the upper grades of primary school, their “full immersion” experience continues, as does the emphasis on repetition and memorization, and correctness and accuracy. Zhang Lin, 10, is asked by her parents to read newspapers and books geared to children outside school. They require her to listen to tapes which “train her to speak standard PTH.” Zhang Lin also participates in *lǎng sòng*, a traditional form of poem recitation before a large group. The focus on accuracy and correctness in this exercise is intense. In Chinese class, she and the other children regularly stand to read their lessons. Her parents say that she can read children’s newspapers with articles of 1,000 to 1,200 words, and read them aloud fluently and correctly; her parents believe her PTH is quite standard.

For many families in the United States and elsewhere, television offers transient entertainment and electronic babysitting, but in Shang Hai the medium is emphasized as a source of modeling of standard PTH (readers may be reminded that virtually all broadcasting in Shang Hai uses PTH). Huang Ling, 11, watches television and listens to radio regularly. Her parents believe children need a “good PTH environment,” which they use television to provide, to learn it well, revealing their focus on correctness and accuracy through imitation of models. Her parents also encourage her to use PTH, and to speak to classmates who “have good PTH,” in order that she may avoid the influence of less proficient speakers and reflect the influence of more standard ones, in improving the accuracy of her own PTH.[10] They report that when

others use PTH with Ling, she can communicate with them fluently, even though she is not exposed to the language outside the classroom regularly except for television and radio. Zhang Lu, 11, also listens to radio and watches television to improve his PTH, and his parents urge him to use PTH and to improve his proficiency. His mother reports that, under his parents' guidance, his capacity for expression in the language has greatly improved. At this point he can understand nearly everything on radio and on television, and he can express his ideas well in PTH.

These experiences seem to support the idea, as Lyons puts it, "that the acquisition of linguistic competence depends at least partly on its being exercised and corrected in performance" (1996:16). Thus they mitigate the claims that "Language acquisition does not require extensive use of grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill" (Krashen 1982:6-7), that "improvement comes...not from forcing and correcting production" (10), and that emphasis on "error correction" leads to an "effect on the affective filter" [that is deleterious to language acquisition] (74); they also seem to contradict the claim that "error correction does not influence acquisition to any great extent" (11). These learners learn in highly competitive environments with a very concentrated focus on correctness and accuracy. Their performance mistakes are made publicly, very visibly, and correction is immediate and strong. We see in the learning outcomes of these pupils consistency with the conclusion that the "only way to maintain the comprehensible input position would be to assume that comprehensible input is only a necessary but not a sufficient condition of L2 acquisition" (Pienemann 1998:30). Learning in the manner described, these learners are clearly on their way to the "high levels of competence in a second language" (or dialect) predicted by a "full immersion" model (see Bruck, Lambert, and Tucker 1974:203).

Middle school students are increasingly exposed to communicative situations as they gain in fluency. Wang Hai, 12, is encouraged by his parents to use PTH at home and while traveling, and to use SHH less at home. In addition, he reads texts aloud to his parents at home. His parents say that now his ability to describe “observed phenomena” has improved, he can speak fluently, he can understand news and talk show programs on television and radio, and he can enjoy humorous language in PTH. His parents report that he and other children use PTH together outside school. The parents of Liu Yan, 14, use PTH to create a “good environment” for gaining PTH proficiency at home. She listens to radio and watches television to improve her proficiency, and she can express her ideas in the language. Her mother reports that through communication with her parents and classmates, her “general linguistic ability” improves; she asks questions and answers them fluently.

Fourteen-year-old Zhang Peng’s mother reports that one aspect of his language improvement is that “he can use different languages with different people” (i.e., shift between PTH and SHH, depending on the audience) and that he can change his *style* of speaking in PTH depending on the audience and situation, demonstrating a growing degree of communicative competence in the language. He can understand talk shows, news, and documentaries on television (the vocabulary necessary to comprehend the evening news or talk shows is extensive), and he can watch videos and films with accurate comprehension. These middle school pupils are advancing toward adult fluency in PTH, and on their way to adult literacy as well.

Zang Qing, a young adult, recalls that she learned her PTH at *yòu ér yuán*. When she was a child, she reports, “most” teachers in primary school and middle school used PTH as the language of instruction (Today, use of PTH in schools is universal in Shanghai). Hu Wen Ya also learned PTH in school, with support for using it at home from her family. Later she

attended the Bei Jing Broadcast University, where she learned standard PTH; especially important for her as a broadcaster is pronunciation and clarity. She always uses the language in her work. Wang Yan Ping has an uncle who enjoyed drama and theater. When he was a child, he often recited poems and readings from dramas at home for his uncle, using PTH. His uncle told him stories and legends in PTH, and “required” him to use the language in his life. His uncle also corrected his mistakes. Through that influence Wang generally became more interested in the language, and now whenever he speaks to his uncle he uses PTH. The experience of these young adults, and of all the learners we studied, does not reflect the idea that ‘intake’ informal environments are sufficient” for language learning (see Krashen 1982:49 for this view). From *yòu ér yuán* through high school, learners experience a concerted focus on formal correctness in an environment of memorization, repetition, and drill with strong correction, and these learners do arrive at an adult level of fluency and literacy, achieving adult competence in the language, in both Chomskyan and Hymesian terms.[11]

In Processability Theory (see Piennemann 1998 for full discussion), second language acquisition is seen to involve “an acquisition of [a hierarchy of] processing procedures,” (6f). These learners of Chinese, functioning in both explicit and implicit environments, learn the vocabulary and forms of the language and acquire the “processing procedures” necessary to use them as mature adult speakers, and so satisfy their needs in a language community that is adjusting to the requirements of expanding education and a national and international economy.

The developing economic realities of modern Shanghai require that executives, managers, and skilled employees possess communicative fluency in PTH. Shanghai schools universally use PTH as the language of instruction, for the most part utilizing the methods of education that are traditional throughout China. Many Shanghai families support their children’s PTH learning

environment by sending their children to *yòu ér yuán* for PTH immersion and by reinforcing school instruction with focused instruction of their own involving books, tapes, and recitation, with emphasis on correctness, accurate use, and modeling. These forces of social policy, institutional focus, and family participation and support create a multi-faceted learning environment, one that reflects the traditional approach to learning, in which Shanghai children grow up fluent in PTH, which is for them a second language.

The authors, and others with whom they discussed this question informally, initially believed that the development of mass communication, specifically television, might serve as a most powerful influence in the process of learning PTH among young Shanghai children. But this proves not to be the case. Television and radio serve as incidental, ancillary devices, which provide potentially comprehensible input and a model of correctness and which serve as an affective aid. Our study shows, instead, that children in Shanghai acquire Chinese the old fashioned way — they learn it.

NOTES

[1] Most television programming in the People's Republic of China is subtitled, using the nationally shared writing system, and the voice track is dubbed in the appropriate dialect for the broadcast area.

[2] The Shanghai and neighboring area dialects derive from the Wu dialect (Erbaugh 1992:394 N.1; Li and Thompson, 1990:811-12). Speakers from adjacent Zhe Jiang Province and eastern Jiang Su Province can understand perhaps 40% of the SHH they hear. One hears anecdotally that the dialect is moving further from the speech of the neighboring areas.

[3] The national standard is the variety of Chinese taught in schools and represented in dictionaries, grammars, and lesson books. In every area where Chinese is spoken as a native language, dialectical differences of some magnitude may be observed. Thus it may be said that, strictly speaking, there are no native speakers of *putonghua*. The situation of the native speech of Shanghai, however, is not a case of minor differences from the dialects from which *putonghua* is drawn, but, as in the case of the native speech of Guang Dong, Fu Jian, and Tai Wan, one of a dialect which is unintelligible to speakers of other dialects of Chinese.

[4] Readers are reminded that whether to consider distinct speech varieties 'languages' or 'dialects' often has to do with issues that are more political or social than linguistic. Cases abound in which speakers of quite similar varieties, such as Serbian and Croatian, insist the varieties are distinct languages, and in which speakers of mutually unintelligible varieties, such as Cantonese and Chinese, insist the varieties constitute dialects. We will reflect the national attitude in China that considers the varieties dialects.

[5] This leads to the ethnographic observation that Shanghai parents, like many traditional Chinese parents, exercise a high degree of direction of their children's educational development.

[6] We will note in passing that another important reason for acquiring competence in PTH is that it is necessary to receive public information available from broadcast media.

[7] See Swain and Lapkin 1990 for discussion of 125,000 English speaking students in Canada learning French in an immersion program.

[8] We do not suggest that the acquisition patterns relevant to Chinese as a first and second dialect are parallel or identical.

[9] This phenomena is popularly attributed to the "local accent" (interference from SHH), but whether this is the result of interference or being trained by models who themselves do not so distinguish is not clear.

[10] This influence suggests social distinctions being formed among primary grade pupils, indexed by PTH proficiency.

[11] A socially appropriate utterance produced by a native speaker or one with native-like competence, is nonetheless well-formed. The two aspects of competence are complementary.

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