

# Tracking the language development of international children

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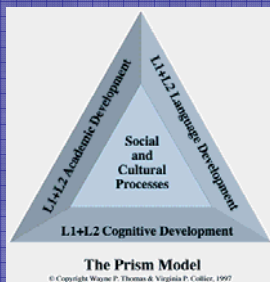
## Introduction

I was awarded a URSS scholarship to assist in on-going research undertaken by the Centre for English Language Teacher Education. The team there were trying to better understand how children whose mother tongue was not English learned and developed English whilst living in this country. We observed five children from Pakistan, South Korea and Taiwan.

## Language Acquisition for School

The diagram here is drawn from the theoretical work of Wayne Thomas and Virginia Collier who are professors at George Mason University, USA. Their prism model consists of a central area, social and cultural processes, surrounded by three sides:

- 1) first and second language development
- 2) first and second language academic development
- 3) first and second language cognitive development.



This model summarises some of our main questions, such as:

- How do the children maintain their first language at home?
- How do they learn English as a new language?
- How do they learn new academic content in English?
- What strategies do they use to cope at school both academically and socially?



Hassan AbdulWahid

## Overview of Approach

We conducted interviews with the parents and interviews and tasks with the children. In the interviews we asked the children's mothers questions about their children's language and educational progress both at home and at school. The tasks included finding the differences in two similar pictures, narrating a story orally and in writing, and memory games. Our aim was to get regular snapshots of their English competence through different types of task that bring in different types of language.

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## Results

With something like language development, the results and trends are only visible after a long period of time, and as such the research is continuing into this academic year.

Just in this academic year I was able to perceive marked improvements in the children's language, and through talking to each of them, discovered that the desire to communicate with friends was among one of the most significant motivating factors in learning new words, and that the longer they had been in the country, the more they came to like it here, and even used English to communicate with siblings and parents at home. In some cases, children learned almost as much from English friends as they did from their lessons, and even knew words and phrases their parents didn't!

Another finding is that children often have a rather difficult time adjusting at the beginning but this is overlooked because they have excellent coping strategies which they develop to fit in with what goes on at school.

Often there is a turning point at school such as participating in something successful such as an assembly performance that gives them a special boost, or doing well in the class football team.

## Conclusion

The aim of this research is ultimately to improve the experiences of international children living in a foreign country, and to see whether there is anything more the University can do to help international students who are parents. Moving overseas can be a stressful and daunting prospect, especially for a young child. It is important that in the formative stages of childhood everything possible is done to ensure the child's happiness and to safeguard their educational development.

## Suggestions for future research

- Extending study to include English mother-tongue speakers as points of comparison.
- Developing extra support services for these children and their parents.
- Investigating effectiveness of teaching methods.
- Examine results to see if the linguistic distance affects early years learning.

## Quotes

**A parent commenting on their child's confidence in using English in a new environment after just 6 months:**

*"If somebody asks me a question in English and I don't understand, I get embarrassed, I try really hard to understand... [My Children] can still carry on without being embarrassed."*

**Another parent comments on her child's initial difficulties which are often overlooked:**

*"he likes the country, and I think in fact the school teacher has helped him a lot over here, but at times he is quite homesick. He misses his friends and his grandparents."*

**A parent comments on their child's achievement after one year:**

*"he is happy because all the time he is telling me what he does at school, and what his friends do, and what the teacher is doing, and he loves sharing things about what new things he learnt."*

*"I think it's quite amazing, at the very beginning, actually almost nothing, and now he can speak quite a lot!"*

**A parent comments on coping strategies:**

*"Outside the house, they are all from other countries – he has to speak English."*

## My Experience of the Scheme

I have greatly enjoyed the URSS scheme. It has encouraged me to expand my thinking beyond the immediate subject matter of my degree course, and improved my ability to assimilate new information quickly. I had the opportunity to meet people from different countries and cultures, and to learn a little of how Early Years education is handled not only in England, but in Pakistan, South Korea and Taiwan.

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