

Language Parents for Second Language Acquisition

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Lonsdale (2006) presents an interesting discussion of an aspect of second language acquisition many of us are familiar with but one that has never, to my knowledge, been discussed in print, the concept of “language parents.”

According to Lonsdale, a “language parent,” like an actual parent, is somebody who will engage you in conversation in the language you are acquiring but who will not try to be your teacher, will try to understand what you say “even though you are miles away from what a native speaker would usually be able to understand” (Lonsdale, 2006, p. 178), is interested in you as a person, and “more often than not, the person will be quite talkative” (Lonsdale, 2006, p. 179). In other words, a language parent is someone who will give you comprehensible input.

Theory predicts that language parents are extremely helpful: They provide comprehensible input that may be hard to find elsewhere, as well as “encouragement and support and understanding” (Lonsdale, 2006, p. 179).

We might also expect that language parents who are the most helpful for less advanced acquirers are those who only discuss a few topics of mutual interest, that is, who provide “narrow input” (Krashen, 1996, 2004; Cho, Ahn and Krashen, 2005), while more advanced acquirers (or those who are more tolerant of incomprehensible input) will profit from “parents” who like to talk about a wide range of topics.

My “parent” in Vienna in 1961-1962 (my landlady, the wonderful Frau Novak) told the same stories again and again, but they were great stories and I understood more each time I heard them, a familiar occurrence with narrow listening (Rodrigo and Krashen, 1996;

Dupuy, 1999). Lonsdale and his “parent” in China, in contrast, “spent many hours talking to each other about every possible subject one could imagine” (Lonsdale, 2006, p. 179).

A reasonable conjecture is that one person, one solid language parent, can supply the bridge that helps low level acquirers acquire enough competence to be able to interact with many native speakers.

Angel Benito (personal communication) has suggested that the concept of language parent is related to the concept of “Joining the Literacy Club.” Smith (1983) has suggested that the development of literacy takes place optimally when the acquirer feels that he or she is the kind of person who reads and writes. The role of parents and teachers (and friends) is to invite others into the literacy club. It may very well be the case that a language parent is someone who invites you into the club of people who speak the second language.

References

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