

Kids Learn and Forget Quickly  
July 16, 2004

Especially in the first half-dozen years of life, forgetting plays a big part in language learning. More useful and expressive forms replace old forms. Upgrading is a significant part of children's learning, and as a result much unused material cannot be activated.

As I wrote in the June 18 issue, in the mental shift from about age 5 to age 7, children develop a new grasp of reality that includes currently spoken languages, but greatly weakens the recall of unused language forms. I gave the example of Haruki, studied by Emiko Yukawa of Kyoto Notre Dame University. Haruki was bilingual in Japanese and English. At age 5, Haruki moved to Hawaii, into a situation in which very little Japanese was spoken. After less than a year, he lost much of his ability to hear or speak Japanese, but when he returned to Japan and his former kindergarten, he regained his former fluency.

After about age 7, the loss of language, like the learning of it, is less rapid. Yukawa also studied a second episode in Haruki's travels. Beginning at age 7, Haruki lived in Sweden for 16 months, again in a situation in which not much Japanese was spoken. He communicated mostly in English and began to learn Swedish. This time, however, his Japanese remained strong: He lost only a bit of ready fluency and some of the written kanji he had learned in first grade.

After a child completes the 5-to-7 shift, an unused language seems to take longer to go underground. Given enough time and the right circumstances, however, it can still do so. One of my research subjects, "B," was raised as a monolingual Japanese speaker until age 7½. Then, before he had completed second grade, B was suddenly moved to New York and thrust into an English-speaking second grade. It was a shock, like falling into a black hole.

After a period of depression, he strove to communicate his way out of it. He concentrated mightily on schoolwork and on friends. He spoke English with his family at home. He coped, and in three years he was at the top of his class in reading and writing English.

When B was in the fifth grade in New York, a young friend of the family, fresh from Japan, was introduced and everybody expected B to play with him and speak Japanese. But it did not work. To everyone's surprise, B could no longer speak Japanese.

After 6½ years in New York, B returned to Japan, 14 years old and automatically a member of the ongoing second year at a public middle school. His memory of learning English from scratch encouraged him to believe he could do it again in Japanese. At first, his Japanese was very rusty, and he began by reading primary school texts. Spurred also by merciless bullying by teachers and fellow students, he rebuilt his Japanese.

By the time he graduated from middle school, B was nearly indistinguishable from a regular Japanese student, although he still had slight differences in pronunciation and slight problems in hearing Japanese. He retained his native speaker skill in English. That his speaking and hearing in Japanese had not quite returned to his second-grade level means that he could no longer call into play some mental processes that had once worked well for him.

### **Drawing Conclusions**

In the presence of such remarkable facts as those above, it is better to contemplate what we really know than to leap to explanations based on preconceptions.

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No one can do a controlled research experiment on language loss and recovery. Our only evidence comes from more or less careful observations of individual cases in which languages go fallow for natural reasons. Of course, no two cases are alike; we human beings are individuals. But there are general patterns. We can exclude some interpretations and tentatively embrace others.

It is wrong to conclude that one language can kill another. Although that is a widely held prejudice, there is no evidence for it. What kills a language is not the presence of other languages, but lack of use of the language itself.

Some Japanese scholars read the evidence differently. They observe that Japanese returnees from overseas fall below their grade level in Japanese ability. Instead of concluding that the problem stems from lack of Japanese practice (which is correct), they conclude that another language, usually English, wickedly inserted itself where Japanese would otherwise be.

It is a fallacy to imagine that the brain has such limited capacity that one language can push another out. It is a further fallacy, and a cruel one, to conclude that because of limited capacity in the brain, foreign languages should not be studied in schools until Japanese has thoroughly taken hold (this is conveniently assumed to be when the student enters middle school).

Doing our best to eliminate preconceptions and prejudices, what can we conclude about learning and forgetting language? Three conclusions seem justified:

- ✓ The rapid language learning for which children are famous is associated with a rapid forgetting of unused forms.
- ✓ Both learning and forgetting happen quickly in the beginning and decrease (somewhat irregularly) with age.
- ✓ If you want a child to develop skill in a language, you must make sure he or she does not undergo long periods of not using it.

### **Messages for Parents and Teachers**

Whether languages are learned, and how many are learned, depends on the consistency with which the different languages are kept in front of the child as he or she progresses through the many phases of growing up. In general, prevention of language loss occurs naturally if a language is used occasionally and the memory refreshed.

Parents are usually surprised when language disappears from their children's minds. As children develop bigger bodies, greater command of their time, and minds of their own, parents assume that languages, like teeth, are permanent. It is often difficult for parents to recognize that continual reinforcement is needed.

If parents understand that maintenance and growth of languages require continued exposure (not necessarily equal exposure to all languages), they can take action. The advantage of periodic reinforcement is that the child who continues to upgrade several languages develops good proficiency and pronunciation in each.

Our conclusions apply also to curriculum planning. We hear the slogan, "seamless curriculum" for English, implying some sort of continuity from primary school to middle school to high school. Policy-makers sometimes wonder what "seamless" means in practical terms. I propose that it

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should mean a curriculum that systematically adds words, expressions and forms, and sometimes repeats them, but never drops previous ones. It would be a growing, antiforgetting curriculum.

In this and previous columns, I have discussed evidence on children's learning and forgetting languages, and I have examined the results of English immersion in a Japanese setting. There appear to be no negative consequences of students' exposure to English in Japanese primary schools. Instead, there are advantages that have to do with eventual mastery, including pronunciation, automatic production of correct forms and a feeling of ease with the language.

If early English training offers advantages and does no harm, then decisions as to whether to introduce such training must be based on practical considerations such as cost, the availability of teachers, the availability of texts and teaching methods, and the need for class time that might be spent on other subjects.

In this column, I hope I have demonstrated that an understanding of age-related facts of language loss and development can help us make decisions as parents and as policy-makers.

*This column aims to harmonize views of language teachers, theorists, parents and bureaucrats. Send e-mail to [childs@tj.ac.jp](mailto:childs@tj.ac.jp) or letters to The Daily Yomiuri. The column will return on Aug. 13. Childs, Ed.D., teaches TESOL (teaching English as a second language) and psychology at Temple University Japan, Tokyo.*