

TEACHERS' PERCEPTION OF LANGUAGE FACTORS IN THE ACHIEVEMENT OF WESTERN CANADIAN RURAL SCHOOL PUPILS

B. Y. CARD

During the past two years an attempt has been made to explore two kinds of language factors, *non-English* and *non-standard English*, in relation to pupil achievement in a rural sector of North-eastern Alberta.¹ The non-English factor refers to the situation where some language other than English is spoken by the learner in his home or in his community. The non-standard English factor, derived primarily from the linguistic social learning theory of Bernstein, refers to the situation where a pupil does not use accurate "middle class" English, which presumably the teacher uses, but rather a non-standard English of the "lower class," of unskilled workers or of teen-agers who have their own speech patterns.² In non-standard English it is believed a teacher would have to understand the way things are said more than what is said to communicate fully with his pupils.

These two factors were chosen partly because of the unique characteristics of the area where the research was to be done. Only one ninth of the population was of British background. The majority were Ukrainian, while Polish, French and native Canadian Indians were important minorities. Further, the teachers themselves were predominantly of Ukrainian origin. The majority of the people were second or third generation Canadians living in small villages and towns which were expanding in population, or on mixed farms in the surrounding districts, which were declining in population. The area was well served by schools, most of which were centralized multiroom complexes offering instruction from grades one to twelve. Further, the area as a whole had a school pupil retention rate considerably above the Alberta average. This characteristic was especially marked where the Ukrainian and British populations were concentrated, but not so where other ethnic groups predominated.

The first stage of the research involved determining teachers' views of social factors influencing learning in their classrooms, their schools and their communities. This was followed by a second stage in which a sample of homes of grade IX pupils was surveyed so that social and economic characteristics of the pupils could be compared with their actual achievement in school as determined by performance on the province-wide grade IX final examinations. The findings from these two surveys relative to the two language factors are briefly reported.

When teachers were asked to rank and compare five factors

operating at the classroom level on pupils' learning, they placed family expectations as the most important, level of living next. Ethnic identity they considered least important.³

RANK ORDER OF IMPORTANCE OF FIVE FACTORS INFLUENCING
CLASSROOM LEARNING, BY PERCENTAGE OF TEACHERS
ASSIGNING EACH RANK
(N = 499)

Factor	Rank					
	Most Important			Least Important		
	1	2	3	4	5	
Family Expectations.....	40	29	14	10	7	(100%)
Level of Living.....	29	33	21	13	4	(100%)
Non-standard English.....	15	18	26	27	14	(100%)
Non-English.....	14	10	20	28	28	(100%)
Ethnic Identity.....	3	11	19	21	46	(100%)

The two language factors occupied a position of intermediate importance in the view of teachers, though non-standard English was assigned more importance than non-English. An equally important observation is that teachers varied a great deal in their perception of the importance of social factors influencing classroom learning. Moreover, the degree of variation was greatest for the two language factors.

When teacher sex, age, grade level and local school area were considered as variables in teacher perception of language factors, it was found that for non-standard English there was very little difference by sex or grade level in perception of the relative importance of this factor. Teachers 35 to 39 tended to see the factor as slightly more important than teachers older or younger. Also, teachers in the Lac La Biche area, the area with the greatest school drop-out rate and ethnic diversity, rated non-standard English less important than did teachers from any of the other local areas. The largest proportion of teachers saw the non-English factor as relatively unimportant. In this estimate there were some slight differences for teacher age, grade level and local area, but not for teacher sex. Apparently teachers 40 to 59 see non-English as less important than younger or older teachers, while junior-high and senior-high teachers also see this factor as less important than primary and elementary grade-level teachers. Teachers from three local areas see non-English as less important than teachers from three other local areas, but this difference does not appear related to known characteristics of these local areas. Although the evidence is not strong, it does suggest that teacher perceptions of language factors do vary with age, grade level and local area.

Written comments suggest that while some teachers regard language factors as very important, most took into account other factors such as family expectations and level of living, and some even minimized language. However, one teacher, with the classroom situation clearly in mind, wrote:

Poor English is the main drawback in the schools of this division; it affects even the science and math, since it is difficult to answer a question if one cannot interpret it correctly. There are very few families in which English, non-standard though it may be, is not spoken.

In comparing non-English and non-standard English, a second teacher commented:

Non-English language [is not an important factor] provided it is one the teacher understands. If non-standard English is spoken at home the child continues to be influenced by it much longer than [by] a non-English language.

Another teacher, apparently, felt strongly about non-English:

Watch that non-English language. Nationalities like German, Norwegians and Ukrainians are not affected as much as groups like the French who are pro-French and anti-English in their cultural demands. Religious colouration is also important.

Still another teacher had a differing view:

If a pupil has ability to learn, then it doesn't matter if he speaks some language other than English. However, if a pupil has trouble in learning he seems to become more confused if he is using one language at school and another at home.

Each of these quotations presents an insight into language factors that could well be the subject of further study.

Before turning to the relation between these language factors and actual school achievement, two queries might well be raised. First, is it possible that non-English seems relatively unimportant in this area because so many teachers are Ukrainian and share a non-English background with their pupils? This query has important implications for the selection of teachers to work with non-English pupils if proof could be offered that a shared background does in fact reduce the negative importance of this factor in learning. Second, is it possible to perceive non-standard English the way these teachers do because they have not yet come into contact with the impact of Bernstein's and other linguistic theories of learning in their professional preparation? Is it possible teachers don't yet know what to look for in the language of a classroom situation? Or are the teachers quite right in their perception regardless of the theories and lack of familiarity with them? Further evidence is needed in order to say whether the teachers are professionally correct in their view.

The queries raised require more elaborate answers than this paper can provide. However, home interview data with a representative sample of parents of grade IX pupils from the same area as the teachers give some indication of whether or not the two language factors are associated with school achievement. The sample was selected in such a way that it included statistically the area's high, medium and low achievement pupils on the Alberta Department of Education grade IX final examinations.

With respect to non-English it was found that there was a statistically significant association ($P < .05$) between the language spoken between husband and wife in the home and school achievement, but none for language used by father to children, mother to children or children among themselves. (It was found that in many cases children talked English among themselves in the home rather than non-English even in homes classified as non-English speaking). An analysis of homes in which either English or Ukrainian or both were spoken showed that the proportion of students coming from English and English-Ukrainian speaking homes who received high and medium school marks was greater than the proportion which came from Ukrainian-speaking homes ($P < .01$). There was no significant association between language and achievement when English and English-Ukrainian speaking homes were compared. It appears that non-English is, therefore, a factor in school achievement. When non-English is spoken between parents or when it is the only language of the home, it tends to be associated with low achievement.

In order to obtain an index of non-standard English, parents were asked to describe the kind of English spoken in the community and in their home with reference to the English spoken by locally known types of people — teachers, business men, farmers, unskilled workers and teen-agers. Interviewers were trained in placing parent assessments on a scale in which formal or school-teacher English was at one extreme, public or "worker" language at the other. This was an admittedly crude way of determining the extent of non-standard English in a community or home, though it is unquestionably valid in disclosing parent perception of these standards, which in itself may be crucially related to the home language environment. It was found that there was a marked tendency for parents of high-achieving pupils to view their community's English as "teacher-business" in contrast to "farmer" or "worker" ($P < .05$). Also there was a strong association between homes reporting "teacher-business" English and high pupil achievement ($P < .025$). There was little association for medium achievers. The evidence, as here derived, strongly suggests that formal language is associated with high achievement, while public language is associated with low achievement. Again, it is emphasized that the qualitative measure of language used here is crude, but the strength of association is undeniable. On the other hand, it would

be naïve to assume that strictly language factors were measured in this way. Occupational backgrounds and perspectives were involved in this procedure, and they were shown to be also strongly associated with school achievement.⁴

In summary, the survey of teacher perceptions of social factors influencing classroom learning reported here shows that teachers see non-English and non-standard English as factors of less importance than family expectations and level of living but more important than ethnic identity of pupils. However, there is wider variation in teacher perception of language factors than of the three other factors. A survey of grade IX pupil homes disclosed that non-English was significantly associated with low achievement. Also, it was found that high achievement was associated with homes with the highest standards of English, and that non-standard English was associated with low achievement. From these findings it may be inferred that some teachers are not fully aware of the role of language factors in the learning of pupils from their own area. On the other hand, language factors operate in the learning process in connection with numerous other social and psychological factors. More precise knowledge of all factors is needed before it is possible to say that the teachers in this study have not perceived the language factors in their classrooms as they really are. However, greater sensitivity to and appreciation of language factors might well be one outcome for those who participated in the research and for those who read this report.

NOTES

1. The research project from which data for this article were derived is reported further in B. Y. Card, W. B. Dockrell, W. D. Knill and J. O. Regan, *School Achievement in Rural Alberta — A Report on Project 614 of the Alberta Advisory Committee in Educational Research*, Edmonton: University of Alberta Bookstore, 1966.
2. Basil Bernstein, "Social Class and Linguistic Development: A Theory of Social Learning," in A. H. Halsey, Jean Floud, and C. Arnold Anderson, *Education, Economy and Society*, New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, Inc., 1961, pp. 288-314. Bernstein has extended his theory in his article "A Socio-linguistic Approach to Social Learning," in Julius Gould (ed.), *Penguin Survey of the Social Sciences*, London: Penguin Books, 1965, pp. 144-168.
3. The definition of "ethnic identity" supplied to teachers at the time of the survey was as follows: "Identification of the learner with an ethnic group or with the way of life of a group which is set apart for reasons of distinctive national origins, religion, language, customs, or race. In the classroom the learner identifies himself with such a group, or other students may identify him as belonging to an ethnic group." "Level of Living" refers to economic level, to affluence or poverty of a pupil's family. "Family expectations" refer to what parents and siblings expect of the child.
4. Card et al., *op. cit.*