

## **The influence of teacher and classmate variation on language acquisition in dual-language immersion classrooms**

Rebecca Starr (*Stanford University*)

In the dual-language immersion model, students dominant in different languages interact in the same classroom, and spend time learning in each language. The reasoning behind these programs is that students will learn from both classmates and teachers (Lindholm-Leary 2001). In dual-language immersion classrooms where teachers and students also speak a range of dialects, participants must learn to negotiate between varieties as well as between languages (Rubenstein-Avila 2002). This scenario raises the following questions: how much are students picking up from teachers versus classmates? Secondly, to what degree are students acquiring varieties used by the speakers around them, as opposed to acquiring the prescriptive standard targeted in the program?

This research draws on data from a year-long participant-observation study of two first-grade classes (ages 5-7) at a Chinese-English dual-language immersion program in the United States. Each class was comprised of 13 students, equally divided between Chinese- and English-dominant speakers. The two classes shared the same set of teachers for Mandarin Chinese, all of whom were speakers of varieties that differed significantly from Standard Mandarin. Crucially, Class 2 contained a higher proportion of Chinese-dominant students who spoke non-standard varieties than Class 1, thus providing an ideal setting in which to examine issues of teacher versus classmate influence on acquisition. Focusing on the stigmatized merger of retroflex and dental sibilant initials in Mandarin (c.f. Li 2004), an analysis of the primary Chinese teacher and two subject teachers indicates that all three used more standard variants in “curricular” classroom contexts (i.e., reading and lecturing) than in “non-curricular” classroom contexts (i.e., organizing and scolding). This pattern of variation potentially allows students to target standard pronunciations within their teachers' speech, thereby acquiring a more standard variety. Indeed, analysis of English-dominant students' Mandarin use reveals that students produced the standard dental-retroflex distinction almost exclusively, in all contexts. Students' acquisition of the standard distinction is particularly notable given that the non-standard merger was never explicitly discussed or corrected by teachers or students in either classroom.

Comparing the two first-grade classes reveals that students were significantly affected by patterns of classmate language use. English-dominant students in Class 2, in which Chinese-dominant classmates frequently used the non-standard merger, produced significantly more of the merger than their counterparts in Class 1. In both classrooms, however, English-dominant students used the standard dental-retroflex distinction far more frequently than their Chinese-dominant classmates.

These findings suggest that classmate language use plays a significant but limited role in students' acquisition of linguistic variation in dual-language immersion programs. They also indicate that students in early primary education are sensitive to sociolinguistic information present in stylistic variation, to the extent that, even in the absence of explicit correction, students can acquire a more standard variety than those of their classmates or teachers. In addition to its practical ramifications in the realm of language pedagogy, further work on the role of variation in dual-language immersion classrooms can provide more insight into how children acquire and make use of sociolinguistic knowledge as they enter school settings.