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Community Expectations and Second Language Acquisition: English as a Second Language in a Swartzentruber Amish School

The Swartzentruber Amish parochial school near Kendrew Corners, outside of Rensselaer Falls, New York, is typical of Old Order Amish parochial schools. A one-room building flanked by outhouses and heated by a wood stove, it is attended by approximately fifteen students in grades one through eight. The teacher sits at the front, and, when the "scholars" come to the front to recite their lessons, they sit on the benches that line the walls on each side of her desk. The students not reciting sit in rows, grouped by grades, facing the teacher and the blackboard behind her (cf. Hostetler and Huntington 1971, 40-42). In any given year not all grades may be represented. Most students have at least one sibling in the school, and, since the Kendrew Corners school serves only five or six families, many have two or three. This particular Amish community, which was founded approximately nineteen years ago by the very conservative Swartzentruber Amish, does not make use of school buses, so there are a number of one-room schools in the area, and new ones are built as the need arises. The Kendrew Corners school was built several years ago on the outskirts of a Swartzentruber farm. Of course, like other Old Order Amish schools, it is not served by electricity, telephone service, and indoor plumbing.

The curriculum of the Kendrew Corners school is also typical of Old Order Amish schools (cf. Hostetler and Huntington 1971, 42-47). Students learn phonics, spelling, reading, and arithmetic from such texts as the *McGuffey* and *Pathway* readers, the *Scott-Foresman New Basic Readers*, the *Lippencott Reading With Phonics* text, and the American Book Company's *Strayer Upton Practical Arithmetic* series. At the same time, like many rural Amish school children, they must also learn English.

Although most of the students know little or no English when they first enter the Kendrew Corners school, studies suggest that by the time they complete their schooling at the end of the eighth grade, they will perform as well as, if not better than, their non-Amish counterparts at rural public schools on tests of spelling, word usage, and arithmetic (Hostetler 1969; Hostetler and Huntington 1971).¹ They will certainly be able to engage in social conversations and business with their non-Amish neighbors, read novels and newspapers in English, and carry on an extensive correspondence in English with members of other Amish communities in the United States and Canada. In short, in eight years of schooling, the children attending the Kendrew Corners school will acquire English well enough to interact and compete successfully with native speakers in an "English" environment. They will have done so with little formal language instruction, limited opportunity to use the language either in school or outside, no special language texts, and with the assistance of a teacher with only an eighth grade education, who, herself, learned English in an Amish school.

That Swartzentruber Amish children successfully acquire English under circumstances that any trained linguist or language teacher would describe as, at the very least, less than ideal can be better understood through a study of the roles of English and formal education in the Amish community. Both are viewed as necessary to prepare Amish children to function in the outside, "English" world, yet, at the same time, both work to preserve and strengthen the community and its values and, thus, to keep the "English" world at bay.

Littlewood (1984) distinguishes between second language learning and foreign language learning, the first term indicating that the language has communicative functions within the community and the latter meaning the language will be used primarily for communication with outsiders (54). In the Swartzentruber community, as in other Old Order Amish communities, learning English serves both purposes. Like most Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonite groups, the Swartzentruber Amish use a variety of Pennsylvania German (called *Deitsch*) within the home and with other Amish and use English for interaction with outsiders (cf. Huffines 1980; Johnson-Weiner 1989; Loudon 1992; Hostetler 1993, 242). For the Amish, English is, as one Old Order Amishman has written, the language associated "with the business world, society and worldliness . . . everything outside our church and community, the forces that have become dangerous because they make inroads into our churches and lure people from the faith" (Stoll 1960, 208). Pennsylvania German, on the other hand, defines the community, and the use of Pennsylvania German within the community and that of English outside the community serve as ever-present reminders of the differences separating the Amish from the "English" neighbors. Keim (1975) asserts that Pennsylvania

German is "the single most effective element in the continuity of the Amish community." Certainly, in choosing to maintain German in the face of pressure to shift, the Amish demonstrate a commitment to living as a "separate and peculiar people" (see Johnson-Weiner 1992).

Ironically, however, since Pennsylvania German is not written, an Amish person who knew only Pennsylvania German would be hindered in all but face-to-face interaction with other Amish and, thus, could play only a limited role in the community; for all written communication within the Amish community and with Amish elsewhere, the Amish use English. Thus, among the Amish, spoken English is identified with the outside world from which the Amish separate themselves, whereas written English plays a vital role in intra-group communication.

A number of researchers have suggested that a major factor in the success or failure of second language learning is the extent to which the learner is motivated by communicative needs that are functional in nature (e.g., the need to carry out business transactions or relay messages) as opposed to social (e.g., the desire to become involved with the second language community) (cf. Littlewood 1984, 70-71; see also Gardner 1985). Thus, one would expect the dual role of English and the conflicting way in which it is perceived to influence the teaching and learning of English in Swartzentruber and other Amish schools, favoring written English over spoken English (cf. Littlewood 1984, 70). Among the Swartzentruber Amish, however, the two are not separated; the teacher does not think in terms of "oral" versus "written" language exercises, and it is generally assumed that acquisition of the one will be reflected in the acquisition of the other. As one Swartzentruber girl told me, "in some schools they don't have to talk English as much and they don't learn it as much. You can see it in their writing. It's so terrible you almost can't read it" (M. Y. 6/88).

Few Swartzentruber first graders have any knowledge of English when they begin school, and their instructions in both oral and written English begins the first day. The teacher not only uses English with the older students or "scholars," but also addresses remarks in English to the new first graders. In teaching the first grade, the teacher will give a command in English and then repeat it in Pennsylvania German. When first graders ask questions in German, these are repeated by the teacher in English. It is, according to one Amish teacher, a "word by word" process (M. W. 8/93). The greatest portion of the first graders' time is not, however, spent in oral interaction with the teacher but in individual tasks, for the teacher has seven additional grades to teach. Nevertheless, since these lessons will all be in English, the first graders have the opportunity to listen to numerous, highly structured exchanges in English. The Amish teacher does not appear to see herself as a language teacher, and, indeed, the approach to teaching English is similar to that taken in

teaching arithmetic or geography. As one teacher describes it, it is just a matter of "giving the first graders the words. I say it in English to them [the first graders]. I talk English to the rest [of the students] and they [the first graders] pick it up that way too." Her worst problem, she noted, was just "to keep them straightened out" (L. M. 6/88). Another teacher has said she aims at three new English words a day in the beginning. Calling it a game, she says that "We look at the pages for tomorrow, and I wonder out loud if anyone will know the words for tomorrow. So they all go home and ask and then they learn it. Nobody wants to be the last to get the word!" (M. W. 8/93). If a student makes a mistake, either in writing or in speaking, he or she is corrected. There is no drill work, although if the error is repeated on assignments, the student may have to rewrite.

In the Swartzentruber classroom, the first clearly stated linguistic goals are not oral fluency, increased ability to comprehend spoken English, writing proficiency or even vocabulary expansion, but rather the "ABCs" and "1-2-3s"; these the first graders memorize and practice writing individually and in pairs until they are called to recite them at the teacher's desk or write them on the blackboard. The teacher is always anxious to have these learned; for then students are able to go on to arithmetic and phonics. "English" lessons, which focus on grammar or what, in the public schools, would be called "language arts," begin in the third grade, by which time all student-teacher interaction is in English.

Although the Swartzentruber children receive no formal language instruction and have fewer opportunities to use English in the classroom than their counterparts in the average second language class at the public school, they may actually be learning in a more natural environment. For example, the Amish children are exposed, from the beginning, to language that is relevant to their immediate needs and interests. Furthermore, although first graders are addressed in language that is simple and repetitive, at the same time they are able to listen to exchanges of varying degrees of fluency, yet focusing on familiar subjects, as the teacher instructs the other grades. First graders are, thus, able to put what they learn to immediate use. In short, the situation is similar to that of first language learning, natural rather than formal, and, therefore, perhaps most conducive to learning (cf. Carroll 1981; Krashen and Terrell 1983; Littlewood 1984).

Just as the approach to language instruction favors learning, so does the emotional climate of the classroom. Amish children work towards clearly defined goals in a non-competitive atmosphere. In the Amish community, English is the language of education and the language in which all other subjects (including *Hochdeitsch* or "church German") are taught. Rather than an obstacle that must be overcome so that the children can get on with their education, it is part of this education, and

the teacher expects that students will learn both oral and written English. It is also expected that some students will have a harder time doing so than others, just as some have a harder time with arithmetic. As one Amish woman told me, after commenting on how she like English better than arithmetic but her brother felt the opposite, "it's just how they like to learn" (F. S. 6/88). This sentiment was echoed by a former schoolteacher, who noted matter-of-factly that "some are harder to get it [English] into, and some just don't try if you don't press them to work on it harder" (L.M. 6/88). Students are simply encouraged to do their best. As Hostetler and Huntington (1971, 57) note, what competition there is in the Amish school is structured to support the group and "the children encourage one another's good performance in order that their whole class or their whole school may do well."

Expecting every child to learn English, yet acknowledging that some will learn it more easily than others and like English better than other subjects, reflects the Amish belief that "an individual's talents are God-given," and "therefore, no one should be praised if he is an easy learner nor condemned if he is a slow learner" (Hostetler and Huntington 1971, 57). Grades are based on the percentage of correct responses, not on how well a student does in relation to others; there is no class curve. Swartzentruber Amish schools demonstrate this lack of individual competitiveness more than other Old Order Amish schools. In contrast to the brightly decorated walls of the Old Order Amish school in the neighboring Amish community in Norfolk, New York, Swartzentruber school walls are bare of individual artwork. Certainly Swartzentruber students do bright coloring and decorated charts, but these are usually kept in the teacher's desk.²

The Swartzentruber Amish attitude towards success and failure in academic pursuits, including the acquisition of English, also reflects the emphasis placed by the community on the learning of discipline, community values, and the ability to work with others for the good of the community rather than on the successful achievement of individual goals. Indeed, prominently displayed in one school is the motto: "Those who want to be heard, speak up. Those who want to be seen stand up. those who want to be appreciated, shut up."³ As Keim (1975) notes:

The Amish view education as a way to encourage the child to follow instructions, respect authority, and master basic information. They are skeptical of education which stresses engagement, critical thinking, or asking questions. They favor rote learning. The community can survive only if authority and tradition are respected and upheld. (14)

In short, for the Amish, formal education is not to prepare a child for a successful career or to make that child a good citizen, but rather to prepare the child "to live for others, to use his talents in service to God and man, to live an upright and obedient life, and to prepare for the life to come" (Stoll 1975, 31; cf. Hostetler 1993; Hostetler and Huntington 1971).⁴ Children are expected to do the best they can on the subjects that will enable them to function in the outside world, because to do so reflects the internalization of values necessary to the maintenance of their own. In such a supportive setting, in which the tasks and goals are clearly defined, students are far less likely to experience the anxiety and insecurity that will inhibit communication and hinder language learning (cf. Littlewood 1984, 58-59).

Ironically, although the attitudes of Swartzentruber Amish parents and the community as a whole towards learning and achievement may provide for an atmosphere conducive to learning English (cf. Gardner 1985, especially ch. 6), their attitudes towards the English community seem to work against it. Indeed, given Schumann's assertion that second language acquisition "is just one aspect of acculturation and the degree to which a learner acculturates to the TL [target language] group will control the degree to which he acquires the second language," (1978, 34; cf. Gardner 1985, 135-37; Lambert 1967, 1974; Littlewood 1984; McLaughlin 1985, ch. 5), Swartzentruber children ought not to learn English at all, for Swartzentruber parents—indeed, Amish parents in general—actively discourage their children from identifying with the English world and, to the best of their ability, limit their contact with it. The Amish parochial school is a demonstration of this determination to keep the community in general, and the children in particular, separate.

By establishing parochial schools, the Amish have ensured that the school is another field on which the spiritual battle is waged. As Ervin N. Hershberger, an Amishman from Myersdale, Pennsylvania, writing in *The Blackboard Bulletin*, a journal for Amish teachers, acknowledges, "the public schools are better equipped to teach the '3 R's' than the Amish ones," yet, he asserts, "The Amish schools must do more" (1958, 68-69). The Amish believe that religious training should take place in the home and at church and not in school; nevertheless, as another Amishman put it, in an anonymous 1959 editorial in *The Blackboard Bulletin*, in the parochial schools the Amish "have the privilege of teaching the regular branches, and at the same time we can interweave the doctrine of God, Christ, and the Church in all our studies, even in arithmetic."⁵

The Amish parochial school is a relatively recent phenomenon. The first Amish or Mennonite private school was the Apple Grove Mennonite Private School, later called Apple Grove Amish Parochial, in Dover, Delaware, which opened its doors in January 1925. Prior to the movement towards school consolidation, most Amish children attended

local one-room schools, which, although public, had allowed parents a measure of control over the classroom they would be denied in the larger, centralized schools. For the Amish, letting the children leave the watchful eyes of the community would be inimical to their survival. In a 1965 article in *The Blackboard Bulletin*, for example, Effie Mast Troyer and Joseph Stoll noted that Apple Grove was not started,

. . . as some historians have deduced, because of the flag salute law which was passed in 1925. Nor was it because of any particular disagreement with the public schools as they had existed up to that time. Instead, the problem seems to have been one of consolidation of the school districts . . . The fact that the Delaware schools would now teach only grades one through six instead of the former eight grades is probably the foremost reason the Amish established a private school. Grades seven and eight would be transported to larger schools in town. This the Amish definitely did not want.⁶

As one Amishman put it, "How can we parents expect our children to grow up untainted by the world, if we voluntarily send them into a worldly environment, where they associate with worldly companions, and are taught by men and women not of our faith six hours a day, five days a week, for the greater part of the year?" (Stoll 1975, 28).⁷

Nevertheless, as Hostetler and Redekop (1962) note, "while the school experience is a normal part of life, it remains a part of the domain of the outside world" (198). Like the English language in which it is conducted, the school is an outside institution that plays a necessary role within the community. The Amish parochial school must meet the requirements of the state and, at the same time, further the often opposing interests of the Amish community (cf. Hostetler and Redekop 1962). It is in the school, taught by a member of the community and watched over by a school board chosen from the community, that Swartzentruber and other Amish children are introduced to the non-Amish, sinful world outside their community (Hostetler 1983, 254). Symbolic of this introduction to the outside world is that children entering school are addressed in English by the teacher, who is, in most cases, a neighbor they know well, or even a sibling, who has never before spoken English to them. Another German-speaking, Anabaptist separatist group, the Hutterites, counteracts the negative influence of the English school by sending their children to "German school" at the same time (Deets 1939, rpt. 1975, 43).⁸ The Amish try to limit the effects of English school by keeping the boundaries between the school and the community intact. In Swartzentruber schools, for example, as in the schools of many of the more conservative Amish sects, English ceases to be spoken when lessons end and school is no

longer in session, even if the break is only for recess.⁹ Parents expect their children to learn English, but, at the same time, to learn that it has its place. As one mother put it, noting that, although she would not mind if her children used some English around the house and with other children and family members, she would not want them to use it too much, "sometimes they do it [speak English] just for fun, but, if they do it regularly, we make them quit" (M. Y. 4/88).

The teaching of English and the rules governing its use demonstrate clearly the goals of Amish education, namely the perpetuation of the values of the Swartzentruber Amish community and the protection of Swartzentruber children from the values of the outside. Central to these goals is the concept of separation. As Huntington (1975) points out: "In studying both the negative and positive acculturation of the Amish, it must be remembered that the Amish separated from the North European culture in which they had originated. This is quite a different situation from that of two historically different cultures coming into contact for the first time" (7). Swartzentruber children do not learn English to learn more about English culture; in the eyes of the community, the less they know of that the better. They must, however, deal with that culture for the good of the community. To the extent that these restrictions are clear, and English is learned and used accordingly, Amish education succeeds and the community prospers.

The success of Amish language education may present a dilemma for second language researchers. First, the Amish do not fit easily into any category of second language learner. English is a language learned in school, but it is not a school subject; it plays a necessary role in intracommunity interaction, yet it is not the language of the community. Secondly, the Swartzentruber Amish appear to have conflicting attitudes towards English and its use. Swartzentruber children learn English, but are taught not to use it too often, except at school, where its use is necessarily constrained. They learn English and at the same time learn that the "English" world is undesirable and they must remain separate from it. Finally, it may be impossible to evaluate Amish language acquisition by the same standards as are used to evaluate second language acquisition in mainstream American schools. Gardner (1985), for example, includes in a definition of factors relating to second language achievement "a desire on the part of the students to further their knowledge of the second language and an interest in making use of any opportunity which arises to improve proficiency" (13). Clearly, given this definition, Amish second language achievement is limited and likely to remain so.

Nevertheless, observing the Swartzentruber Amish suggests the importance in second language learning of both community attitudes towards the target language and community expectations of what will be

achieved. As Wong Fillmore (1985) has argued, learners must realize that they need to learn the second language and must be motivated to do so. Research of the Amish suggests that motivation may be to preserve a way of life (cf. Johnson-Weiner 1992). In direct contrast to Schumann's (1978) view of the relationship between acculturation and language acquisition, languages may be acquired as barriers to acculturation are raised.

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Notes

¹ There is no data on the English acquisition of the Swartzentruber attending the Kendrew Corners school because I was not permitted to test the children. In the words of the teachers and the several parents with whom I spoke, "it's not our way." Other researchers have had similar problems when working with the Old Order Amish; for example, Enninger (1987) notes that: "In this culture, the choice the field worker has is to work on the basis of the obtainable data, or to gain no insights at all" (149-50). Like Enninger, I have opted for the former alternative. Assessments of Amish achievement are based on my own observations of classroom activity, recitations, and written work, as well as on conversations with students in all grades. Predictions of Amish achievement are based on the results of studies reported by Hostetler (1969), Hostetler and Huntington (1971), and Erickson (1975). An earlier version of this article appeared in *The Fifteenth LACUS Forum* (Lake Bluff, IL: LACUS, 1989), 567-76. Revisions were undertaken with the support of a 1993 NEH Summer Stipend and Travel Fellowship.

² Even the games the pupils play stress group cooperation rather than individual success. Rounder, for example, is a baseball-like game played without teams. One can be tagged out or one can be put out for not rounding the bases in the time it takes the next two batters to hit.

³ The teacher told me that the motto had been put up by the previous teacher, but that she agreed with it and so had decided to leave it up (L. M. 5/93).

⁴ As attorney William Ball has noted, "The purpose of Amish Education is not to get ahead in the world, but to get to heaven" (Arons 1972, 55; Keim 1975, 3). As Keim further notes, "The Amish response to the high school was that for the Amish child it was it was irrelevant; it did not enhance the prospects of salvation. In fact, worldly knowledge, represented by the high school, could impair salvation" (1975, 13).

⁵ Rpt. in *The Challenge of the Child: Selections from "The Blackboard Bulletin" 1957-1966*. Aylmer, Ontario: Pathway Publishing Corporation, 1967, p. 69. An advertisement for the Pathway readers, a series of reading texts published by the Amish-owned Pathway Publishing Corporation, assures potential users that these books "designed to be used in Amish classrooms . . . are solidly wholesome, with none of the fantasy that is commonplace in both Christian and secular readers . . . Here [in the readers] the children are expected to obey their parents, respect their teachers, ask forgiveness when they do what is wrong, and humbly submit to the discipline of those in authority! . . . Because the Amish don't use electricity, you won't find stories dealing with the latest in videos, computers or TV's. Instead the stories are centered around farm life, with horse auctions, harvests, and LARGE families." See also "Is It Worth the Effort," an editorial published in *The Blackboard Bulletin* (January 1961), rpt. in *The Challenge of the Child*, pp. 75-77. The editorial argues that, to make the church "blight-resistant" "we must wage a spiritual battle on three fields: 1. the church,

represented by the ministry; 2. the home, represented by the parents; 3. and the church school, represented by Christian teachers" (76).

⁶ Rpt. in *The Challenge of the Child: Selections from "The Blackboard Bulletin" 1957-1966*. Aylmer, Ontario: Pathway Publishing Corporation, 1967 pp. 94-98. For an interesting discussion of the parochial school movement, from an Old Order Perspective, see Isaac Z. Lapp and the Lapp Family, *Pennsylvania School History 1690-1990* (Gordonville, PA: Christ S. Lapp, 1991.)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ As Deets put it: "the contemporary German school is like a blanket of counter-indoctrination thrown around the English school session. It is usually held a half hour before and a half hour after each session of the standard school" (43).

⁹ Amish communities vary in the extent to which English is used during recess. As Hostetler and Huntington (1971) note, "the majority of schools encourage the use of English during recess, for the teachers believe it helps the children become fluent in English" (48); in the Plumbrook Parochial School, which serves the Old Order Amish community in Norfolk, New York, approximately 40 miles away from the Swartzentruber community, children are required to speak English on the playground for this reason. As Hostetler and Huntington note, however, some parents worry that the children will become too used to using English and begin to use it among themselves in preference to German; this has, indeed, become a concern for the Norfolk Amish (cf. Johnson-Weiner 1989).

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