

How Do Young Children Learn Language? Perspectives of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Mothers

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Over the past several decades, speech-language pathologists (SLP) assessing Aboriginal children from First Nation communities have been left with the challenging task of deciphering between language differences vs. language delays. The purpose of this study was to explore the differences in the cultural beliefs and practices of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadian mothers relating to language learning. Thirty reserve-based Aboriginal mothers and thirty urban non-Aboriginal mothers completed a survey concerning childrearing practices and beliefs. Discriminant analyses indicated that there were some cross-cultural differences, but fewer than documented in methodologically similar cross-cultural studies. It is important that SLPs acknowledge that identified language differences/delays in Aboriginal children may not be solely contributed to culture. Instead, SLPs should be cognizant of other related factors such as socioeconomic status (SES), use of Aboriginal English dialects, and dual language use in the home and community.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last several decades, socio-linguistic research has contributed to the literature documenting cross-cultural differences noted in mothers' interaction styles. These types of social occurrences at home and within the child's cultural milieu often dictate how the child's language is learned and used. Schieffelin (1983) noted the cultural influences in predicting communicative competence of children in stating "acquisition of language is embedded in culture, and as the children are learning one, they are also learning the other" (p. 184).

The connection culture has with language cannot be easily dismissed, such as has been noted in the realm of speech-language pathology where

practices in diagnostic and treatment protocols need to be sensitive to minority groups, such as First Nation communities in Canada. Research conducted by Philips (1983), Scollon and Scollon (1981; 1984) and Spielman (1998), provided extensive information on cultural practices potentially related to caregiver's interactions and discourses. Ball, Bernhardt, and Deby (2006) and Ball and Lewis (2005) also provided relevant research that suggested that cultural practices within specific ethnic groups erode over the years; timeliness of this research becomes an important consideration in terms of a group's cultural preservation. Literature on this topic, as well as current media statements, make note of a growing concern over language loss in First Nations communities, who are now responding to these concerns by trying to preserve their traditional language, knowing that language is the heart of what distinguishes one culture from another.

The terms *Euro-Western*, *Western*, *mainstream*, and *dominant* used throughout this article refer to the culture that is North American but of European descent and is associated with speakers of the standard English dialect. The terms *Aboriginal*, *Native* and *First Nations people* refer to all Indigenous groups in Canada and include Métis, Status and Non-Status Indians, and Inuit of Canada. In American literature, the word *Indian* or *Native American* is also used.

BACKGROUND

The following section outlines some of the differences seen in the perspectives of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal mothers. In acknowledgement of these differing perspectives, we need to understand micro-culture variations can be expected in terms of child rearing practices even within specific cultural groups.

There are numerous studies that note the importance of culture as a type of learned behaviour and how language patterns are highly influenced by this behaviour within a culture. Research by Crago (1990a; 1990b) was conducted with Inuit children, Scollon and Scollon (1981) with Athabaskan natives; Philips (1983) with American Indians; Schieffelin (1983) with New Guinea natives; Heath (1983, 1989, 1992) with Black and Anglo mothers in the United States; John-Steiner and Panofsky (1992) with Black, Hispanic, and Native American cultural groups; Johnston and Wong (2002) with Chinese and Euro-Canadian mothers; and Simmons and Johnston (2007) with

Indian and Euro-Canadian mothers. These studies all noted the differing values and beliefs when caring for young children and how social occurrences reflect language development. Ochs (1988) argued that children in any given society learn language and that:

In making sense out of what people are saying and speaking in a sensible fashion themselves, children relate linguistic forms to social situations. Part of their acquired knowledge of a linguistic form is the set of relations they obtain between that form and social situations, just as part of their acquired knowledge of a social situation includes the linguistic forms that define or characterize it. (p.334)

Socio-linguistic interactions first begin in the home. Mother and child interaction in the early years of a child's life plays a very strong role in language acquisition. Western-based language studies (Fewell & Deutscher, 2004; Hart & Risley, 1995; Schacter, 1979; Snow, Dubber, & De Blauw, 1982; Tough, 1977) revealed how participation in dialogue is crucial to attainment of sophisticated language forms or higher functions of language.

The research completed on external factors known to attribute to language acquisition in children of minority groups has been comprehensive (Connor & Craig, 2006; Curenton & Justice, 2004; Dart, 1992; Diehl, Bennetto, & Young, 2006; Fazio, Naremore, & Connell, 1996; Feagans & Farran, 1982; Gutierrez-Clennen, Pena, & Quinn, 1995; Liles, Duffy, Merritt & Purcell, 1995; Paul & Smith, 1993; Shiro, 2003) and includes, but is not limited to, race, culture, bilingualism, SES, socio-educational status, and caregiver-child interactive occurrences.

Recent cross-cultural studies such as those conducted by Johnston and Wong (2002) and Simmons and Johnston (2007) noted differences in language learning that correlated with a specific cultural group. Aboriginal language studies such as Ball, Bernhardt, and Deby (2006) and Ball and Lewis (2005) were significant in documenting how Aboriginal native languages was central to how children participate in cultural traditions and explore cultural meanings. Peltier and Wawrykow, two SLPs of Aboriginal decent, made valuable contributions to this knowledge in the Ball et al. (2006) study, regarding how life-style differences in terms of parenting style, community demographics and context result in variances related to how children display language ability. These differences may be displayed through body language, eye-contact, whole-to-part learning style, visual-kinesthetic learn-

ing style, verbal response time lags, speaking volume and frequency, and spirituality. Scollon and Scollon (1981) noted substantial differences in the discourse patterns between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginals, often resulting in communicative breakdowns between the two cultural groups. In general, Aboriginal children speak less and are quieter than non-Aboriginal children (Crago, 1990a; Philips, 1983; Scollon & Scollon, 1984). The differences in discourse patterns become more obvious at the time of school entry, as Aboriginal children try to acculturate into the mainstream discourse patterns of the classroom. Philips (1983) remarked that mainstream 'Show and Tell' activities reflect interaction organization patterns of the whole classroom because the teacher chooses who will speak, when they will speak, and what they will speak about. This pattern is incongruent with the collectivist culture of Aboriginals, who seek comfort in group work and have less emphasis on individualistic statements and achievements (Westby & Vining, 2002).

Canada, as a bilingual nation, has been slow to respond to the language needs of minority groups (Crago, 1990b). However, in response to recent announcements by Statistics Canada (2006) about the increase in immigration and the sharp rise in Canadian Aboriginal populations, education specialists in Canada are acknowledging this expansion of dual languages by providing educators with English as an additional language (EAL) support programs to help children of minority groups with Standard English dialect. The EAL support programs were introduced after the failure of earlier programs that focused on assimilation – a subtractive process of combining two cultures - in place of acculturation, which focuses on blending of cultures.

METHODS

I investigated the cultural influences of mothers in the way language is acquired for their children in a specific Aboriginal community, Lac Brochet, Manitoba. Three research questions were addressed:

- 1) What do mothers perceive or believe to be child-rearing practices that are influential in promoting language development in their children?
- 2) What do mothers report regarding how frequently they use discourse practices believed to be influential in terms of language development?
- 3) Are there any demographic attributes of mothers that influence their attitudes and beliefs regarding how language is learned in pre-school years?

A survey was used to gather mothers' responses, and was designed in two different versions. The non-Aboriginal mothers received the written English survey through their children's daycare facility (sent home with their child); the mothers in Lac Brochet received the survey in a face to face interview format administered by a community member. The 36 item survey was adapted with permission from Johnston and Wong (2002). The first 24 items were developed according to documentation of Aboriginal cultural practices, beliefs and attitudes relating to children's communicative competence found in the literature. The final 12 items of the survey focused on frequency of language facilitation practices. This section was deemed relevant, by the authors of the original survey, for comparison purposes and reflective of Western-based language acquisition patterns, such as *Read a book to my child at bedtime or naptime*. See appendix A for a list of the survey items used.

Non-Aboriginal mothers were identified by the Daycare Centre managers who distributed 100 survey packages (which included a stamped envelope, survey, consent form, and a brief description of study) to non-Aboriginal mothers. After approximately two months, 30 mothers mailed back their surveys. For the Aboriginal mothers, recruitment took the form of an information meeting, which I chaired with the research assistant present. Any additional recruitment after this meeting was done by the research assistant by means of purposeful sampling methods.

Participant inclusion criteria for the Aboriginal group specified that they were (a) female, (b) had agreed to participate in the study, (c) self-reported Aboriginal ancestry, and (d) were presently caring for children in the age range of 2-6 years, or have cared for children in this range within the last two years. Participant inclusion criteria were the same for the non-Aboriginal mothers except for the self-reporting of Aboriginal ancestry.

Participant demographic information was collected by the interviewer at the time of survey administration. These descriptives included age, income range, level of education as well as other environmental variables which assisted in group confirmation and comparison, as well as in the interpretation of the results.

Two translators in the community were recruited to translate the English version of the survey to Dene and then back-translated to English. At the time of the survey administration, the Aboriginal participants had the choice of (a) listening to the translated version, which was audio-taped (as the Dene

language is used almost exclusively in oral form in the community), (b) listening to the research assistant read the question verbatim in its English form, or (c) listening to the research assistant translate the survey only as required from its original form. All participants chose to have the research assistant read the survey question to them in Dene.

RESULTS

This study's main purpose was to explore the cultural influences and practices of mothers regarding the way language is acquired for their children in a specific Aboriginal community and how frequently they incorporate these practices. Two types of statistical analysis were used to analyze the data.

TABLE 1

Percentage of Dene and non-Aboriginal mothers agreeing (4) or strongly agreeing (5) with each of the 24 belief statements.

Question	non-Aboriginal	Dene	Question	non-Aboriginal	Dene
1	30.00	30.00	13	73.33	76.67
2	63.33	43.33	14	76.67	66.67
3	66.67	76.67	15	83.33	93.33
4	93.33	93.33	16	96.67	90.00
5	53.33	43.33	17	80.00	90.00
6	100.00	80.00	18	66.67	26.67*
7	13.33	33.33	19	26.67	50.00
8	36.67	70.00	20	90.00	93.33*
9	56.67	76.67	21	86.67	80.00
10	53.33	96.67*	22	96.67	90.00
11	90.00	93.33	23	70.00	56.67
12	86.67	93.33			

* $p < 0.005$, See appendix for full survey item.

Univariate Analysis

Univariate analysis was completed on the 36 survey items, looking at levels of agreement and frequencies of practice for the survey questions individually. Table 1 displays the percentage of Dene and non-Aboriginal mothers agreeing (4) or strongly agreeing (5) with each of the 24 belief statements. Each test uses a 0.005 level of significance, resulting in an experiment-wise level of significance of 0.12. Statistically reliable group differences were found for four of the 24 belief questions (10, 18, 20 and 24).

An analogous type of analysis was conducted for the remaining twelve frequency of practice statements. Table 2 indicates the percentage of mothers in each group who reported using each practice "almost always" (4). Three items of the 12 practice items showed significant group differences (28, 32 and 35) at $\alpha = 0.01$.

TABLE 2

Percentage of non-Aboriginal and Dene mothers reporting using a practice 'almost always (4)'.

Question	non-Aboriginal	Dene
25	33.33	60.00
26	46.67	36.67
27	3.33	10.00
28	50.00	90.00*
29	30.00	70.00
30	33.33	70.00
31	26.67	63.33
32	40.00	90.00*
33	50.00	86.67
34	33.33	73.33
35	23.33	80.00*
36	43.33	73.33

* $p < .01$ See appendix for full survey item

Multivariate analysis

Multivariate analysis of the data was necessary to examine all independent variables simultaneously. Discriminant analysis allows for a discriminant rule to be created, which is then used to predict group membership based only on a participant's responses on the independent variables. The discriminant analysis indicated that the belief items taken as a set could reliably differentiate members of the groups (Wilks' lambda = 0.221, P-value < 0.0001, multiple $R^2 = 0.773$).

The correlation R values between the most important independent variables and the discriminant function, is listed in the following, decreasing order: Q. 24, R= -0.505, Q.10, R= -0.327, Q. 18, R= 0.221, and Q. 20, R= -0.216.

Magnitudes of correlations for all other independent variables are less than 0.2. Using the "cross-validation" classification method, each individual is deleted from the data set and a discriminant rule is constructed to predict group membership. Using this method, 26 of the non-Aboriginal mothers and 21 of the Aboriginal mothers were correctly classified, for an accuracy rate of 78.33%.

A stepwise procedure recommends using only the four independent variables in Table 2 in the discriminant analysis. The belief items taken as a set could reliably differentiate members of the groups (Wilks' lambda = 0.311, P-value < 0.0001, multiple $R^2 = 0.689$).

The correlation R values between each *included* independent variables and the discriminant function, is listed in the following, decreasing order: Q. 24, R= 0.625, Q.10, R= 0.404, Q. 18, R= -.273, and Q. 20, R= 0.267

Using this discriminant function, the cross-validation method correctly classified 26 of the City mothers and 27 of the Dene mothers, for an accuracy rate of 88.33%.

Using the same multivariate test procedures as with the belief items, a discriminant function was derived for the practice items. The discriminant function taken as a set, could reliably differentiate members of the groups (Wilks' lambda = 0.645, P-value 0.029, multiple $R^2 = 0.355$). Table 3 shows the correlation R between the most important independent variables and the discriminant function, in decreasing order:

TABLE 3

Correlation R for the Survey Practice Items

Question	R
28	0.640
32	0.539
35	0.520
29	0.398
33	0.328
26	0.313
34	0.292
25	0.266
31	0.221

Magnitudes of correlations for all other independent variables were less than 0.2. The cross-validation classification method correctly classified 20 of the non-Aboriginal mothers and 20 of the Aboriginal mothers, for an accuracy rate of 66.67%. A stepwise procedure recommends using only Questions 28 and 35 in our discriminant analysis. The discriminant analysis indicated that the practice items taken as a set could reliably differentiate members of the groups (Wilks' lambda = 0.742, P-value < 0.0001, multiple R² = 0.258).

The correlation R values between each *included* independent variables and the discriminant function, is listed in the following, decreasing order: Q. 28, R= 0.815, and Q.35, R= 0.653.

The high correlation of 0.805 between Question 28 and the discriminant function indicated why only two variables were taken into consideration. Question 28 discriminates between the two groups almost as well as does all twelve variables together. Using this discriminant function, the cross-validation method correctly classifies 19 of the non-Aboriginal mothers and 22 of the Aboriginal mothers, for an accuracy rate of 68.33%.

A group of six cultural informants were recruited to aide in the interpretation of results. Four were 35 years of age and older, permanent residents, and in professional positions. In addition to this, two young mothers (between the ages of 20-25 years) were also recruited. Hearing the interpretations from the younger generation broadened the discussion in terms of possible mi-

cro-level variables (bilingualism, maternal age, child care settings, parental control, television) that have shown to have a role in language development (Hoff, 2006). Information was faxed to the participants for review before they were contacted by phone to discuss the results. Individual phone calls were then made to the informants and proved to be an efficient way of affirming my interpretations of the results.

As stated earlier, I administered five surveys to five of the Dene mothers, and my research assistant conducted follow-up interviews with the same participants one month later. Again, the purpose of this process was to assure accuracy and internal reliability of the survey tool, as well as acknowledge the cross-cultural aspects of conducting a study of this kind. In comparing the responses of the five surveys, significant differences appeared. The Aboriginal mothers showed an overall stronger agreement to the items when the research assistant administered the survey, especially those responses relating to the 12 practice items, indicating they practiced language facilitation techniques more often than what was recorded within the surveys that I had administered. After discussing these differences with the research assistant and the group of cultural informants, explanations surrounding these apparent differences noted the importance of having a research assistant involved. The explanations referred to issues of dissimilar cultural presence at the time of the interview, which may have resulted in low participant comfort level, lack of rapport, and/or misinterpretation of the question.

In addition to the insights provided by the cultural informants, the comment section of the survey provided another data source. The two participant groups appeared to deliver two separate messages. The message that emerged from the Aboriginal group highlighted a sense of struggle in order to keep their native tongue and culture vibrant in the home, school and community. Almost all comments made by the Aboriginal mothers were brief and related to culture and language preservation. As one mother mentioned "It is important for children to learn the English language but even more important that they keep their Dene language (to understand and speak the language). It is getting more difficult though cause of technology (influences)".

The comments written by the non-Aboriginal group seemed more explanatory in nature and pertained to specific survey items. As a group, they were more verbose and often commented on specific speech-language difficulties their children had encountered and how they facilitated language

development. For example, one non-Aboriginal mother wrote “[Item] #25 We never tell her “its wrong”, instead we gently say the correct sentence back to her. [Item] #31 as [Item] #25, we don’t want to make her feel bad or embarrassed so we just lead by example”.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate cultural differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal caregiver-child interactions as related to language acquisition. Univariate and multivariate analysis of the survey data revealed differences in the beliefs and practices between the two cultural groups. The extent of the differences was not as pronounced as would have been expected, based on research findings about Aboriginal cultural practices and beliefs. The findings in this study highlight the micro-cultural differences seen within First Nations communities in Canada, as well as the need for research on current Aboriginal cultural discourse practices. In the following discussion, the three research questions associated with this project are reviewed and summarized. Specific items in the survey suggesting cultural differences will be identified and discussed in relation to language acquisition practices and beliefs. In terms of external reliability, similarities in the results of this study and the studies conducted by Johnston and Wong (2002), and Simmons and Johnston (2007) will be noted.

What do mothers perceive or believe to be child-rearing practices that are influential in promoting language development in their children?

The Aboriginal mothers, for the most part, answered the belief questions similarly to the non-Aboriginal mothers. This indicates that their belief, knowledge and attitudes surrounding language acquisition are quite similar. However, there were four questions, items 10, 18, 20, and 24, for which the null hypothesis of each of these four tests would have been rejected in terms of how they differed in response between groups. These four questions are as follows:

10. My child’s connection to spirituality is important to me.

The fact that the Aboriginal respondents strongly agreed with this statement should not be surprising to the reader. Fitznor (1998) spoke of one of the key aspects of traditional knowledge is that there is spirit in everything that is alive. As with other remote communities in Canada’s north, the Jesuit

priests instilled a strong Christian faith when they first entered the community over half a century ago and most residents have blended these beliefs with their strong relationship with nature (Westby & Vining, 2002) and their respect towards the land and animals.

18. If parents use 'baby talk' (like wawa for water, or 'jammies' for pajamas) their child won't learn to speak well.

Aboriginal mothers in general were less in agreement to this statement than the non-Aboriginal mothers. Although, there is no evidence found in the literature supporting the notion that a child's speech is hindered by being exposed to 'baby-like' talk, mainstream literature on language development does not support the use of baby talk to a child (Wasserman, 2007). It is believed that Aboriginal mothers tend to use more 'nicknames' and humorous childlike expressions in their native language than perhaps non-Aboriginal mothers.

20. Young children learn best when they are given instructions.

There was strong agreement to this question from both sides; however, the Dene mothers responses reflect greater agreement. In discussion with the cultural informants, most informants felt that the strong support of this question was due to their belief that children are taught through explanations, oral teachings, and through stories, but also, or in combination, with showing them how to do something. However, it should be mentioned that if the question read similarly in terms of children learning best when they are shown visually, the Aboriginal mothers would have strongly agreed with this statement as well.

24. Grandparents or older family members give good advice about the way that young children grow up.

There was a strong difference in agreement regarding this item for the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups. Aboriginal women felt the Elders or grandparents give very good advice, especially through their teachings. Whereas non-Aboriginal children tend to have a history of receiving cultural knowledge from formal school settings, Aboriginal children have learned their language, culture, and traditional ways from the Elders and will continue to do so. The cultural informants agreed that the community still value the Elders' input and the knowledge they bring to the community.

Although few differences in cultural values and beliefs were identified through the use of the survey tool, assistance from the cultural informants and research assistant was necessary to affirm why these differences exist.

What do mothers report regarding how frequently they use discourse practices believed to be influential in terms of language development?

Of the 12 practice questions, three (Q. 28, 32, and 35) were identified as showing significance difference between the groups, with Q. 28, *Follow along with my child's topic of conversation*, accounting for a large proportion of the variation in discourse practice responses. The 12 discourse practice items listed in the survey are frequently referred to in the communication disorders literature as language facilitation techniques. Talking out-loud, modeling correct sound production, reading books and labeling pictures are just some of the techniques SLPs have historically encouraged mothers to use to enhance speech and language production for their children.

When interpreting these results, it is important to note that when the Aboriginal mothers answered these items, the research assistant felt that they were referring mainly to their native tongue. Specific directions in terms of how to interpret these questions (in terms of dual language learning or practices) was not given to the respondents at the time of survey administration. However, since the majority of Aboriginal mothers' received the survey in their native tongue, it is suspected that the mothers were reflecting back to the Dene language interactions when answering these questions.

Item 28 referred to the practice of following along with your child's topic of conversation. Aboriginal mothers responded by stating that they practiced this technique very often, but non-Aboriginal mothers responded neutrally to this question. There is little in the literature on Aboriginal culture that pertains directly with this discourse pattern. However, knowing Aboriginal culture is often described as collectivist and extremely oral in nature, the idea of sharing ideas and experiences and putting others ahead of one's self continue to be viewed as important virtues in Aboriginal culture (Westby & Vining, 2002).

The lack of cultural differences seen in the frequency of practice questions would suggest that the Aboriginal mothers use language facilitation-based practices that were often viewed as non-Aboriginal in origin. As suggested by Genesse, Paradis, and Crago (2004), various cultures are evolving

and language socialization patterns are changing within their homes. The responses of the Aboriginal mothers may be reflective of raising children in a dual language home, where learning two different languages may require a more structured approach to language facilitation (Northwest Territories Learning Council, 2007), thus requiring a more concerted effort in its acquisition of both languages equally. In summary, Aboriginal mothers demonstrating knowledge of how to promote language was encouraging for SLPs and represents an important finding in this study.

Are there any demographic attributes of mothers that influence their attitudes and beliefs regarding how language is learned in pre-school years?

Thirteen questions were believed to have a connection with mothers' demographic characteristics. Of these 13 questions, only the survey item Q. 24, discussed previously under the first research question, was reported to be significant at the .05 alpha level. As the Aboriginal responses indicated, the practice of having grandparents being involved in the care of young children is much more prevalent in Lac Brochet than in Winnipeg; the more a grandparent is around the children, the more influence they will have on the child and the parental styles of the mother.

Although cultural differences were not revealed to a large extent in this study, the demographic profiles of these mothers may have influenced the findings. External factors such as maternal age, income, level of education, number of children, and extended family members in the home, are documented as affecting language acquisition patterns in children (Feagans & Farran, 1982; Fewell & Deutscher, 2004; Hart & Risely, 1995; Hoff, 2006; Rush, 1999; Schacter, 1979; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Tough, 1977). The demographic data recorded on the mothers at the time of survey administration becomes insightful in the discussion portion of this article in terms of how these factors may have influenced mothers' responses, regardless of their cultural background. Aboriginal mothers and non-Aboriginal mothers were matched as best as possible according to the external factors mentioned below.

Level of Education.

The Aboriginal mothers were shown to be less educated as a group. Education proves to be a strong predictor of mothers' influence on various areas of language acquisition, such as vocabulary (Fewell & Deutscher, 2004; Hart & Risley, 1995.) However, the Aboriginal mothers' discourse practices

proved to be very similar to those of the non-Aboriginal mothers, often surpassing non-Aboriginal mothers' frequency of use. The cultural informants addressed these responses with the idea that the Aboriginal women were interpreting the question as it related to Dene language learning. In a dual language home, language facilitation practices would likely occur with higher frequency. These mothers would have a heightened awareness of language acquisition in both languages as their children become bilingual.

Range of Income.

Low income was an inclusion criteria requirement, and all participating mothers fit this requirement. Hart and Risely (1995), Oller and Eilers (2002) and Hoff's (2006) findings support the notion that low income has a negative impact on speech and language production of children. This survey had two items (26, 34) relating to SES, in reference of using books and flashcards with their children, and therefore I cannot make widespread comments on SES in terms of its contribution to my findings. Responses to these two questions did not result in identifying group differences, indicating both groups had access to these items, which if used, would assist in language facilitation.

Quality of care.

Vernon-Feagans, Hurley, Yont, Wamboldt, and Kolak (2007) noted quality of care as an important contributor to language development. These authors reported that the ratio of children to caregiver was a strong predictor of language development in children 3 years of age and younger. All Aboriginal mothers reported having their children in Headstart or Nursery, while some non-Aboriginal mothers did not. In this study, the child/caregiver ratio was higher in the Aboriginal homes, with the number of children in the mother's care averaging 2.8 for Aboriginal mothers and 2.2 for non-Aboriginal mothers.

Dual Language.

The affects of dual language exposure on children continues to gain attention within our nation as immigration influxes continue to rise (Statistics Canada, 2006). This article does not have the capacity for a full review of this topic, and instead the reader is encouraged to refer to Genesee, et al., (2004) for a review of second language acquisition patterns in children. However, it should be noted that the variability related to bilingual children is directly

related to the quality of interactions within their learning environment and therefore bilingualism may have a positive, negative, or neutral affect, depending on the level of proficiency of that child. Oller and Eilers' (2002) position on bilingualism is slightly different in that the main predictor for language proficiency was the exposure to the language in question. If this is true, then children in Lac Brochet would be at a disadvantage compared to their southern neighbors. Oller and Eilers conducted a study which compared monolingual and bilingual children in English, and found that monolingual English children, learning only English at home and studying only English in school, outperformed bilingual children of all different backgrounds, regardless of SES. This was found to be true especially for oral language, and less for literacy. In terms of the current study, one may begin to propose that regardless of the lack of large cultural differences shown between the two groups, the children of these mothers will not necessarily acquire language similarly. For the children who speak both Dene and English in a northern community, their language acquisition patterns may be much different than those of monolingual children of non-Aboriginal mothers, with these differences being attributed to more than just dissimilar discourse practices and traditional ways.

In summary, it is important to note that statements made in past ethnographic studies on Aboriginal cultural traditions are, for the most part, inconsistent with the responses of this particular study. After servicing many First Nations communities, my initial hypothesis was that Indigenous knowledge and culture of this group was the large contributing factor towards the apparent language differences or delays seen in children. I wanted to investigate this further by gathering the mothers' perspectives on how their children learn language. Knowing that this survey did little to reveal strong cultural differences, I needed to re-visit the external factors, other than culture, which may have influenced mothers' responses to the survey, and acknowledge the clinical implications that relate to the interpretations.

CONCLUSION

Through the use of a survey, I gathered the perspectives of Aboriginal mothers in terms of how their beliefs, practices, and discourse patterns influenced language learning in their children. Their responses indicated that although some cultural differences appeared to be present between non-Aboriginal mothers and the Aboriginals in Lac Brochet, the paucity of these

differences was surprising. Being one of the most remote First Nations communities in Manitoba, I would have suspected traditional practices specific to the Dene culture to have surfaced in the mothers' responses.

As a Speech-Language Pathologist who has serviced many Manitoba First Nations communities, I have evidenced greater language differences/delays in First Nations children in comparison to their southern peers. In extending these results to speech-language pathology theories and practices, the question becomes: Why do these language differences persist? Similar questions have arisen by other researchers in education and developmental psychology. Studies by Long (1998a; 1998b) showed Cherokee children who played, interacted, and were educated among non-Aboriginal children demonstrated language skills below that of their non-Aboriginal peers, and similarly I believe this point and the findings of my study are best interpreted within the context of dual language learning and English dialectical differences.

Past socio-linguistic studies have suggested culture playing a strong role in children's communicative competence; however, as mainstream influences continue to erode many First Nations traditional practices and teachings, we need to be aware of additional factors affecting language learning of young Aboriginal children. One such factor is bilingualism or dual language learning. The children of Lac Brochet are dual language learners. Their first language is Dene and they are immersed in their native language until approximately age of 3 years, when they attend Nursery school. Although the research on bilingualism and Aboriginal English learners is scant, researchers have begun dispelling some myths and have contributed to our knowledge on how children acquire more than one language.

Researchers such as Ervin-Tripp (1974), Garcia (2005), Krashen (1985), McLaughlin (1985), and Tokuhama-Espinosa (2003) have supported the notion that a bilingual child has advantages compared to monolingual children in terms of their meta-linguistic and cognitive abilities. These researchers feel that for the most part, when a bilingual child is learning a second language, they will make grammatical and semantic errors as they are using the rules of their core language to implement words and sentences in their target language. However, these differences are not viewed as subtractive or negative correlations on their intellectual abilities. In fact, Tokuhama-Espinosa refers to foreign language learning to be a sub-heading under linguistic intelligence, to which bilingualists have an advantage.

As educators, we need to closely examine a child's verbal repertoire before comments on communicative competence, verbal intelligence, or receptive and expressive language abilities can be made. Literature is forthcoming regarding the dialectical differences in First Nations communities, such as revealed by Ball, et al. (2006). In addition, some standardized language assessment tools have been translated in Aboriginal languages in the United States (Westby & Vining, 2002), although these tests do nothing in terms of fair assessment of communicative competence of Aboriginal students in Standard English use, stressing the need for further research on Aboriginal English language use.

The present study revealed childrearing practices of Aboriginal mothers who practice dual language learning within the home. The Aboriginal mothers reported a higher use of 'language facilitation practices' as well as voiced their opinions on the importance of teaching their children both Dene and English, and that their children's language learning in the early years was almost exclusively in Dene. We need to continue to do language-based studies in order to document the norms of English language use in First Nations communities. It is hoped that findings from this exploratory study has contributed to the literature in terms of providing educators and language specialists some background in respect to the extent cultural discourse practices and beliefs play a role in how Aboriginal children acquire language.

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APPENDIX A - SURVEY ITEMS

Items 1-24 were attitudinal items requiring the use of a standard 5-point response scale where 1 represents a response of *strongly disagree* and 5 represents a response of *strongly agree*. Items 25-36 were intended to measure activity frequencies and required the use of a 4-point response scale where 1 represented a response of *hardly ever*, 2 represented a response of *sometimes*, 3 represented a response of *very often*, and 4 represented a response of *almost always*.

1. My child spends much of the day playing outside.
2. My child spends much of the day inside with books and toys.

3. I would like to be taught how to help my child to understand and say more words.
4. I would be concerned if my 4-year old child was not speaking in Nursery/Head-start.
5. A lot of ear infections may change how a child speaks.
6. I feel comfortable copying my child's play on the floor.
7. It is ok for my child to not respond to me right after I ask a question.
8. My child can easily sit and listen to a story without picture books.
9. My child's brothers and sisters teach him/her new language as much as I do.
10. My child's connection to spirituality is important to me.
11. My child will easily talk to an older person (who they know) if given a chance.
12. My 4-5 year old should attend Nursery/Kindergarten 3-5 days a week.
13. When I tell my child a story, it is usually for a purpose (example: teaching).
14. Children learn best by doing (provided they are out of danger).
15. Parents should ask young children to repeat new words in order to help them learn to talk.
16. Children understand some words even before they can speak.
17. Speech is especially important because it helps young children to make friends.
18. If parents use 'baby talk' (like wawa for water, or 'jamies' for pajamas) their child won't learn to speak well.
19. Three year olds are too young to help with household chores.
20. Young children learn best when they are given instructions.
21. Young children should always be encouraged to communicate with words rather than gestures.
22. Young children learn important things while playing.
23. Young children should be allowed to take a turn in conversations that include adults who are not family members.
24. Grandparents or older family members give good advice about the way that young children grow up.
25. Tell my child if s/he uses the wrong word.
26. Read a book to my child at bedtime or naptime.
27. Ignore the fact that I do not understand something my child says.
28. Follow along with my child's topic of conversation.
29. Repeat what my child says, adding new words.

30. Talk about what is going on when my child and I are playing or doing things together? (Example: When playing tea party, "Now, I'm pouring my tea. You're eating a tea cake. Is it good?")
31. Tell my child if s/he leaves some words out of a sentence.
32. Change my words or sentence when my child does not understand me.
33. Talk with my child about what happened that day when I wasn't there.
34. Use picture books or flash cards to teach my child new words

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