ABORIGINAL MOTHERS’ VIEWS ON LANGUAGE

How Young Children Learn Language in Different Communities:

Perspectives of Aboriginal and Western Mothers

By

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Abstract

Over the past several decades, speech–language pathologists (SLP) assessing Aboriginal children from First Nation (FN) communities have been left with the challenging task of deciphering between language differences vs. language delays. Language and culture are inarguably intertwined. The purpose of this study was to explore the differences in the cultural beliefs and practices of Aboriginal and Western Canadian caregivers relating to language learning. Thirty Aboriginal mothers and thirty urban Western 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 or delays in Aboriginal children may not be solely contributed to culture, but instead to be cognizant of other related factors such socioeconomic status (SES), use of Aboriginal Englishes, and dual language use in the home and community.
How Young Children Learn Language:
Perspectives of Aboriginal and Western Mothers

Over the last several decades, socio-linguistic research has lended support to the literature documenting cross-cultural differences noted in caregivers’ 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).

Literature on this topic, as well as current media statements, make note of a growing concern over language loss in FN communities. FN communities are responding to these concerns by trying to adhere to their native tongue, knowing that language is the heart of what distinguishes one culture from another.

Background

The following literature review will outline some of the differences seen in the perspectives of Western and Aboriginal caregivers. However, in acknowledgement of this, it is understand that a considerable amount of variation can be expected in terms of child rearing practices within any cultural groups (micro-cultural variation).

*Euro-Western, Western, mainstream, and dominant* terms used throughout this paper refer to the culture that is North American but of European descent and speakers of Standard English Dialect. The Indigenous terms *Aboriginal, Native* and *First Nations people* refer to all groups, which include Métis, Status and Non-Status Indians, and Inuit of Canada. In American literature, the word *Indian* or *Native American* is also used.
The 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; Tough, 1977; Schacter, 1979; Snow, Dubber, & De Blauw, 1982) 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; Gutierrez-Clennen, Pena, & Quinn, 1995; Feagans & Farran, 1982; Liles, Duffy, Merritt & Purcell, 1995; Paul & Smith, 1993; Shiro, 2003). These factors include, but are not limited to race, culture, bilingualism, socioeconomic status, socioeducational status, and caregiver-child interactive occurrences.

Recent cross-cultural studies such as Johnston and Wong (2002) and Simmons and Johnston’s (2007), noted differences in language learning that correlated with the cultural group. Similarly, Aboriginal language studies such as Ball, Bernhardt, and Deby, (2006) and Ball and Lewis’s (2005) were significant in documenting how native language is central to how children participate in cultural traditions and explore cultural meanings. S. Peltier and C. 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 learning 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) remarks on the traditional Western ‘Show and Tell’ activities as reflecting interaction organization patterns of the whole classroom. 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, having less emphasizes on individualistic statements and achievements (Westby & Vining, 2002).

Unfortunately, Canada, a bilingual nation, has been slow to respond to the language needs of minority groups (Crago, 1990b). However, after recent announcements from Statistics Canada (2006) on heightened numbers of immigrants, as well as sharp rises Canadian Aboriginal populations, education specialists in Canada are beginning to acknowledge 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 previously failed programs focused on assimilation, a subtractive process of combining two cultures, in place of acculturation, which focuses on blending of cultures.

Purpose of Study

I investigated the cultural influences of caregivers concerning the way language is acquired and the value of talk for a specific Aboriginal community, Lac Brochet, located in
northern Manitoba. Three research questions were addressed: (a) What do caregivers perceive or believe to be child-rearing practices that are influential in promoting language development in their children? 2) What do caregivers report regarding how frequently they use discourse practices believed to be influential in terms of language development? 3) Are there any demographic attributes of caregivers that influence their attitudes and beliefs regarding how language is learned in pre-school years?

**METHOD**

A survey was used to gather caregivers’ responses. The survey took two different forms. The Western caregivers received the written English survey via their children in daycare facilities, while the caregivers in Lac Brochet were administered the survey in a face to face interview format 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, e.g. *When I tell my child a story, it is usually for a purpose (example: teaching).* The final section of the survey focused on frequency of practices reflective of Western based views of language acquisition. This section was left untouched as these items would be relevant and reflective of the Western based literature on language facilitation techniques, e.g. *Read a book to my child at bedtime or naptime.*

Western caregivers were recruited by distributing 100 survey packages (which included a stamped envelope, survey, consent form, and a brief description of study) to city Daycare Centres. The Centre managers assisted in the identification of caregivers and distribution of the surveys. After approximately two months, 30 caregivers had mailed back their surveys. For the Dene group of women, 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 were (a) female, (b) the agreement to participate in the study, (c) self-report that they are of Aboriginal decent, and (d) 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 for the Western mothers were identical, except for self-report of Western origin decent.

The demographic information on the participants was collected by the interviewer but was not part of the inclusion criteria. These descriptives included: (a) age, (b) identity (parent/grandparent/other), (c) caregiver’s first language, (d) children’s first language, (e) primary language spoken with children in the home, (f) income range, (g) level of education, (h) number of times moved out of community, (i) number of children in the home, (j) number of hours child attends Headstart/Nursery/Kindergarten, and (k) number of extended family members in the home. The goal of the study was not to test how these demographic attributes or environmental factors affect language acquisition (as the children of the caregivers’ were not assessed for communicative competence). Instead, this information assisted me in the interpretation of the results, confirming group membership, as well as allowing me to make a comparison of participants.

The Aboriginal participants had the choice of either listening to the translated audio-taped version, or asking the research assistant to read out the question in Dene or English in its original form.

RESULTS

Two types of statistical analysis were used to analyze the data.
**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 Western caregivers 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).

**Table 1**

**Percentage of Dene and Western caregivers agreeing (4) or strongly agreeing (5) with each of the 24 belief statements.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Western</th>
<th>Dene</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Western</th>
<th>Dene</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>30.00</td>
<td>30.00</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>73.33</td>
<td>76.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>63.33</td>
<td>43.33</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>76.67</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
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<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>93.33</td>
<td>93.33</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>96.67</td>
<td>90.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>53.33</td>
<td>43.33</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>80.00</td>
<td>90.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>80.00</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>66.67</td>
<td>26.67 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>13.33</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26.67</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>36.67</td>
<td>70.00</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>90.00</td>
<td>93.33 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>56.67</td>
<td>76.67</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>86.67</td>
<td>80.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>53.33</td>
<td>96.67*</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>96.67</td>
<td>90.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>90.00</td>
<td>93.33</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>70.00</td>
<td>56.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>86.67</td>
<td>93.33</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>43.33</td>
<td>96.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<0.005
See appendix for full survey item.

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.
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 Western caregivers and 21 of the Aboriginal caregivers were correctly classified, for an accuracy rate of 78.33%.
A stepwise procedure recommends using only the four independent variables in the table above in our 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, $R= -0.273$, 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 6 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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>$R$</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>$R$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>0.640</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0.292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>0.539</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>0.520</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0.221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>0.313</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Magnitudes of correlations for all other independent variables are less than 0.2.

The cross-validation classification method correctly classified 20 of the Western caregivers and 20 of the Aboriginal caregivers, 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 $R^2 = 0.258$).

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 Western caregivers and 22 of the Aboriginal caregivers, for an accuracy rate of 68.33%.

A group of cultural informants were recruited to aide in the interpretations of results. Six individuals were identified. Four were 35 years of age and older, permanent residents, and in professional positions. In addition to this, two young mothers were also recruited. Hearing the interpretations from the younger generation broadened the discussion in terms of possible micro-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 gathering information.

As stated earlier, there were five surveys that were administered twice to five of the Dene caregivers, with myself first administering the surveys and subsequently the research assistant interviewing 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 acknowledging the cross-
cultural aspects of conducting a study of this kind. In comparing the responses of the five surveys, significant differences appeared. 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 avenue to interpret the results. The two groups seemed to deliver two separate messages. The message sent from the Aboriginal group was one 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 caregivers were brief and related to culture and language preservation. As one caregiver 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) etc”

The comments written by the Western group seemed more explanatory in nature and pertained to specific survey items. For example, one Western caregiver wrote:

“#25 We never tell her “its wrong”, instead we gently say the correct sentence back to her. #31 as #25, we don’t want to make her feel bad or embarrassed so we just lead by example”.

**DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this paper was to investigate differences between Aboriginal and Western 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 great as would have been expected, based on the research documenting Aboriginal cultural practices and beliefs. The findings in this study highlight the micro-cultural differences seen within our FN communities in Canada, as well as the need for research on current Aboriginal cultural discourse practices. In the following discussion, the three research questions that inspired this project will be 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 also be discussed.

**Research Question 1: What do caregivers 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 Western mothers. This would indicate that their belief, knowledge and attitudes surrounding language acquisition are quite similar. However, there were four questions 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.

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 ‘jamies’ for pajamas) their child won’t learn to speak well.*

Aboriginal mothers in general were less in agreement to this statement than the Western 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, Western 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 Western mothers would.

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

There was strong agreement to this question from both sides; however, the Dene caregivers were in more 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.

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

There was a strong difference in opinion in the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups. Aboriginal women felt the Elders or grandparents give very good advice, especially through their teachings. Whereas Westerners tend to have a history of receiving cultural knowledge from formal school settings, Aboriginals children have learnt 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.
Question 2: What do caregivers 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 accounting for a great proportion of the variation in discourse practice responses. The 12 discourse practices items listed in the survey are frequently referred to in the communication disorders literature as language facilitation techniques (Muir, Gerylo, Gompf, Burke, Lumsden, & McCaig, 2000). SLPs have encouraged mothers to use these techniques to enhance speech and language production for their children.

When interpreting these results, it is important to note that when the Aboriginal caregivers 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 caregivers’ received the survey in their native tongue, it is suspected that the caregivers 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 caregivers responded by stating that they practiced this very often. Western caregivers responded neutrally to this question. There is little in the literature on Aboriginal culture that pertains directly with this topic. However, knowing this culture is often described as collectivist and extremely oral in nature, the idea of sharing ideas and experiences and putting others ahead of yourself continue to be viewed as important virtues in the Aboriginal culture (Westby & Vining, 2002).
The lack of cultural differences seen in the frequency of practice questions would suggest that the Aboriginal caregivers use language facilitation based practices that often viewed as Western in origin. As suggested in Genesse, Paradis, and Crago (2004) various cultures are evolving and language socialization patterns are changing within their homes. The responses of the Aboriginal caregivers 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 (NWT Learning Council, 2007)

**Question 3: Are there any demographic attributes of caregivers that influence their attitudes and beliefs regarding how language is learned in pre-school years?**

Thirteen questions were believed to have a connection with caregivers’ demographic characteristics. Of these 13 questions, only the test item Q. 24, discussed above, 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. Naturally then, the more a grandparent is around the children, the more influence they will have on the child and the parental styles of the mother.

Because cultural differences were not revealed to a large extent in this study, it is worthwhile to review how the demographic profiles of these caregivers may have influenced the findings. Factors discussed will include maternal age, income, level of education, number of children, and extended family members in the home, all of which have shown to affect 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).

I can only speak of these attributes in a very general sense, as no language testing was completed on the children. However, since demographic data was recorded on the mothers, it is
important to discuss how these factors, as cited throughout the literature, may have influenced caregivers’ responses, regardless of their cultural background. The two groups were matched as best as possible according to the 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, vocabulary being one (Fewell & Deutscher, 2004; Hart & Risley, 1995.) However, the Aboriginal mothers’ discourse practices proved to be very similar to those of the Western mothers, often surpassing their 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 moms participating fit this requirement. Hart and Risely (1995), Oller and Eilers (2002) and Hoff’s (2006) studies cites many other sources which support the notion of low income having a negative impact on speech and language production of children. Within my survey, there were only two items (26, 34) which relate to SES in terms of using books and flashcards with their children, and therefore I cannot make comments on SES that are substantial in terms of contributing 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 et al., (2007) noted 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 and younger. All Aboriginal caregivers reported having their children in Headstart or Nursery, while some Westerners 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 Western mothers.

*Dual Language.*

The effects 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 reader is encouraged to refer to Genesee, et al., (2004) for an excellent review. However, it is of significant to note that the variability seen in 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) take 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 irregardless of the lack of large cultural differences shown between the two groups, the children of these caregivers 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 Western mothers, with these differences being attributed to more than just dissimilar discourse practices and traditional ways.

Finally, 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 survey. After servicing many FN 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 caregivers’ 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 caregivers in terms of how their beliefs, practices, and discourse patterns influenced language learning in their children. Their responses indicated that although some cultural differences seemed imminent between Western caregivers and the Aboriginals in Lac Brochet, the paucity of these differences was surprising. Being one of the most remote FN communities in Manitoba, I would have suspected traditional practices specific to the Dene culture to have surfaced in the caregivers’ responses.

As a Speech-Language Pathologist who has serviced many Manitoba FN communities, I have evidenced language differences/delays in FN children in comparison to their southern peers. In extending these results to speech-language pathology theories and practices, the
question now becomes: Why do these language differences persist? Similar questions have arisen by other researchers in education and developmental psychology. Studies by Long (1998 a;b) showed Cherokee children who played, interacted, and were educated among Western children having demonstrated language skills below that of their Western peers. 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 FN 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. They are immersed in their native language until approximately the age of 3, when they attend Nursery school. Although the research on bilingualism is still fairly scant, especially concerning Aboriginal English learners, 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 (1983); Kessler & Quinn (1987); Krashen (1985); McLaughin (1985); Tokuhama-Espinosa (2003) all support the notion of a bilingual child having advantages over 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 notable 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. Increasing literature is forthcoming regarding the dialectical differences in FN communities, such as work by Ball, et al. (2006) has shown. In addition, some standardized language assessment tools have been translated in Aboriginal languages in the United States (Westby & Vining, 2002), yet these tests do not do justice in fairly assessing communicative competence of Aboriginal students in Standard English use.

The present study exposed childrearing practices of Aboriginal caregivers suggestive of dual language learning within the home. The Aboriginal mothers reported a higher use of ‘language facilitation practices’ as well as voicing their opinions on the importance of teaching their children both Dene and English, with the early years being almost exclusively in Dene. We need to continue to do language based studies in order to document the norms of English language use in FN communities. It is hoped that this exploratory study has contributed to the literature in terms of providing educators and language specialists some background in regards to the extent cultural discourse practices and beliefs play a role in how Aboriginal children acquire language.
REFERENCES


