

Bilingualism in Children: What Factors Influence Bilingual Acquisition?

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Abstract

This paper looks at the current literature surrounding bilingualism, its types, acquisition, and factors that might affect this. The author puts forward several questions including whether birth order, location, or parental language competence affect bilingualism, and attempts to answer them with the help of literature and autobiographical accounts.

Keywords: bilingualism, birth order, children, minority language, mother tongue

Introduction

There are many questions surrounding bilingualism. It is often the holy grail of parents for whom the language of the home and the outside world, or the two parents, is different. It can sometimes also be the goal of monolingual parents who see mastery of a second/another language as necessary for their children to thrive in the world.

As a non-Japanese mother bringing up two children in Japan, I hope that my children will grow up to be bilingual. This being said I see considerable differences in my children, their proficiency in their two languages, and even their attitudes towards these languages, the minority language in particular ('minority language' in this paper I take to mean the language not of the country of residence, in this case English). This has raised many questions for me as I am sure it does for many parents of bilingual and potentially bilingual children. The first and most basic of these being exactly what is bilingualism? Following this then is what affects bilingualism and how can we perhaps help with the language acquisition of bilingual children? Other questions I am interested in are:

1. We have the phrase "mother tongue" does the mother's language make a difference? If you are living in the father's or mother's country does this make a difference to the language acquisition of the language not from the

country of current residence?

2. What effect, if any, does birth order have on children?

3. What effect does the language ability of the non-native speaking parent have on bilingualism?

4. What effect does peer pressure have on children's interest in a language?

5. What effect does the language used in the home have?

In an effort to answer these questions I have done an extensive literature review which, combined with my own autobiographical accounts, constitute the basis of this paper.

What is bilingual?

First let us consider the term "bilingual". What exactly does it mean? How wide a range of abilities does it cover? Or is there at least a minimum level of proficiency one must reach before being classed as bilingual? It would seem that it covers a very wide range indeed and can mean different things to different people. At the beginning of this research I, like many, when I hear the word bilingual, thought of someone who is equally competent (and by that, I mean native level) in two languages. Kornakov (1997, p. 3) as quoted from Uriel Weinreich defines bilingualism as "the practice of alternately using two languages". Weinreich originated the terms 'bilingual' and 'bilingualism'. With further research, however, this seems very basic and an oversimplification of a complex concept. There are many kinds, or forms, of bilingualism. The rarest of these forms is probably what we most often think of when we hear the term 'bilingual'—that is having native level in both languages, which is called ambilingual. Similar to this term is "balanced bilingualism" (Baker and Jones, 1998) which is defined as "the notion of having equal proficiency in two languages across a range of contexts". It is in fact unrealistic to suggest that bilingual speakers achieve 100% mastery of two languages (Welsh Language Board, 2008, p. 4). It would indeed be almost impossible to maintain an equal ability in two languages given the effect difference in use and continued exposure would have on maintenance. This frequently leads to "imbalanced bilingualism" which is the dominance of one of the languages (Schonpflug, 2001, p. 1172).

Bilingual can in fact refer to a range of abilities in a language from purely receptive skills, or passive bilingualism, to a strong ability in both

languages. Passive bilingualism is where the language may be understood in one, or both, of the written or spoken forms but not produced. In rare cases there is linguistic deficiency in both languages and neither achieves native level. This is called semilingualism. (Baker and Jones, 1998; Kornakov, 1997, p. 4; Rosenberg, 1996, p. 1). These states can vary over time and depending on the circumstances of the speaker and can be affected by social factors such as wanting to fit in, or the perceived desirability of the language in the culture/location the speaker finds themselves. This can take the form of having something special that others value (Childs, January 8, 2001, p. 1). People often make comment about how wonderful my son's bilingual ability is. The ability is valued and therefore so is he. The opposite can also be true where children do not wish to use the minority language because they are made fun of or singled out in a negative way (Bertrand, 2008, p. 2). Physical circumstances, such as moving from one language community to another, can also affect language ability. (Rosenberg, 1996, p. 2; Verplaetse and Schmitt, 2010, p 335). This effect of physical circumstances (with a move from the majority language country to minority language country for just over 4 months) was evident in my own older child. He stayed in almost daily contact with his father via skype calls, using his father's language. However, when he returned, he was very quiet and not confident in his language skills. He took longer to answer questions, or couldn't find the words he wanted to express himself fully. This lasted only a matter of weeks, and before long he was as confident as ever.

When and How a Bilingual Learns

Another factor affecting bilinguals is whether they are early or late bilinguals. Early bilinguals are bilinguals who learned the L2 in childhood usually naturally through play and social interaction rather than late bilinguals who learn through instruction.

The two languages can also be learned in different orders. Simultaneous learning is where L2 is learned alongside the L1, at the same time and sequential, or successive, learning is when the L2 is learned after the L1 is already well established (Kornakov, 1997, p. 12).

Children have an amazing capacity to learn and distinguish the sounds of a language, any language. Not surprising when you consider that they have twice as many synapses as an adult. However, they have a very

limited ability to distinguish sounds outside the normal range of what they hear by the age of 1 or 2 (Kornakov, 1997). This can be seen in Boris Nikitin's theory "Irreversible Extinction of the Possibilities for the Effective Development of Abilities", or IEPEDA as discussed in Kornakov (1997, p. 3).

This theory says that language ability can disappear when we isolate a child from society and do not allow them to hear any language. Kornakov sites wolf children as an example of this as they could not learn to speak or even understand speech. Moreover, the earlier the L2 is acquired the more compact is its cerebral organization. Research has also shown common or partially overlapped cortical areas associated with the languages of bilinguals, in early bilinguals in particular (Kornakov, 1997, p. 8). These stronger brain connections mean that it is more difficult for early bilinguals to lose a language, though it is by no means impossible. Thus, bilingualism, while it is more stable for early bilinguals than late, is not fixed and will need continued effort if it is to be maintained. If a language is not maintained it will be lost – a process known as language attrition (Childs, 2005, p. 10). Childs goes on to explain that language attrition is not necessarily permanent and language can be recovered. The best way to do this, Childs suggests, is not through textbook study but by getting into the "speech feeling" for a language which can be done by interacting in the language and "getting into the swing of second language experiences" (p 13).

Mother Tongue

I have not been able to find any research to show if the language of the mother and the location of the family's residence has any effect on acquisition of the mother's language. I can, however, address the matter anecdotally with data on myself and friends with whom I have discussed this topic. It would seem that, since children spend more time on average with the mother rather than the father, children pick up the minority language more quickly and are more comfortable in it, if it is the language of the mother. It seems that fathers whose language is the minority language must make a conscious effort to set aside time to practice language with their children. If they simply don't have the time, then their children can grow up with very little ability in the minority language. This causes frustration, due to a lack of an ability to communicate, on both sides if the father is not proficient in the first language. I have seen this first

hand with a colleague whose son could not speak English or French (his father's two languages) well enough to communicate his feelings. He is now in a pre-college ESL programme in Canada. In my own case I feel that if the situation had been reversed, living in my country of the UK with my Japanese husband, I am sure that my children's grasp of the minority language, Japanese in that case, would be much poorer than their grasp of English living here in Japan. My female friends agree. Not only do they spend more time with their children than their husbands do, they also watch English language DVDs together, read English stories and set up play-dates with their English-speaking friends. This of course is in addition to the natural discourse that takes place in the minority language in the course of daily activities (Ford, 2000, p. 4). It is through these daily activities and discourses that the L1 is naturally learned and how a second language is also best learned (Childs, 2002, p. 2). As I said I have found no hard evidence in the literature to support my ideas about 'mother tongue' but since exposure is important for language development and as children tend to spend more time with the mother, this could well affect, if not the eventual level of proficiency, at least the rate of acquisition. In addition, it could also be suggested that since the ability to distinguish sounds is set by 1 or 2 years of age (Kornakov, 1997), then hearing the minority language on a regular basis from early in life would be essential for listening and pronunciation later. My younger son had the advantage of four and a half months spent immersed in the minority language from when he was almost 4 months of age until he was 7 months old. I feel that this should be an advantage in his listening and pronunciation, but need a larger sample group to be able to draw any conclusions. Comparing him to only his older brother does not account for individual differences. For example, his older brother is extremely musical, and while my younger son is certainly not tone deaf, he does not hear the nuances that his older brother does. My older son also has a much more outgoing personality than his younger brother and this may also make his language ability seem lower than it actually is because he is not putting it 'on show'. Further research is needed to prove my theory that the language of the mother plays an important role. I think I am in a unique and ripe situation for doing this as there are many bicultural and bilingual families in Japan. This would make an ideal future research project.

Birth Order, Home Language, and Language Ability of Non-native Parent

Here again I have found no research to show if birth order has any effect on bilingualism. In my own situation my first son has a much greater and indeed I would say balanced grasp of the minority language. On comparison my second son is very poor in his productive skill though he has no problem understanding what I, or other native English speakers, say. Could it just be a difference in acquisition speed? As Kornakov (1997) points out, the amount of exposure can have an effect on the rate of acquisition, though the stages they go through, and final result, will be the same.

There are some differences in our family balance of language between my first and second child. For example, my husband spoke English at home to help my older son learn English, but now feels he needs to speak Japanese to ensure that his Japanese is correct. Also, my own ability in Japanese is greater now than when my first child was born. Now when my younger son says something in Japanese I usually understand what he is trying to say. My dilemma then was: do I ignore his Japanese and pretend I didn't hear, tell him the English and ask him to try again (hardly conducive to keeping up the flow of conversation), or just answer in English. The third option is the one I find myself most often using. However, if I allow my son to communicate in Japanese only, he is losing a chance to practice and, as Mueller Guthercole (2007) says, reducing his overall exposure to the language will delay his language acquisition. I am more encouraged than I was before starting this project as according to Mueller Guthercole (2007), though the acquisition of the minority language may be slower due to less exposure it will happen and eventually he will achieve fluency – just at a slower pace than in his first language. This is echoed by Deucher (2007) who talks of a 'critical mass' of data that, once reached, allows a child to abstract the patterns relevant to the structure concerned and to acquire it successfully. The rate at which this data is acquired can, however, vary. It seems then that birth order may be important not just for the position in the family that a child occupies but also for the changes in dynamics that occur in a family over time. This can include the balance of language use in the home, or even the physical location of the family (Rosenberg, 1996, p. 2).

Perceived Advantages and Disadvantages of Bilingualism

When talking about bilingualism you often come up against disadvantages put forward by those who fear bilingualism will in some way negatively affect a child. I will now discuss some of these and what the literature has to say about them and then go on to show some other, perhaps less well-known, advantages.

The main disadvantage that is talked about and often scares parents is that bilingual children are slower to speak than monolingual children, and are, indeed, slower academically all round. Parents seem to think that the added burden of learning a second language slows down their other learning, occupying brain space which is needed for the L1 (Chipongian, 2000, p. 1), and lowering their IQ (Childs, 2000, p. 1; Yong, February 10, 2016). This then suggests that there is no transfer of skills or information between the two languages – that they are totally isolated. This has been shown not to be the case at all (Childs, November 12, 2004, p. 1), and Chipongian, (p.2), quoting Baker, goes on to say “Language attributes are not apart in the cognitive system, but transfer readily and are interactive”.

In fact, research has shown that bilingual children say their first word at 11.2 months in comparison to 12 months for monolingual children (Metzler, 1997, p. 1). In addition, though bilingualism does not lower the IQ, neither does it markedly increase it as has also sometimes been claimed. It can, however, make for more creative thinking (Welsh Language Board, 2008, p.1) and this skill can carry over and help in other areas of study fostering classification skills, concept formation, analogical reasoning, visual-spatial skills, creativity and other cognitive gains (Barbieri, 2006, p.2; Childs, December 4, 2000, p. 1; Chipongian, 2000, p. 1). As mentioned previously children may be slower to speak their L2 due to lack of exposure (Mueller Gathercole, 2007, p. 229, 238) and taking longer to reach the ‘critical mass’, (Deucher, 2007, p.2) as discussed earlier.

Another perceived disadvantage that is often brought up is that of language mixing. Language mixing is the term used to “describe communication through the use of two languages as if they were one language” (Ford, 2000, p. 1). It is said to be a sign that the child is confused and cannot differentiate between his/her two languages. There is some language mixing by bilingual children, but they do not confuse the languages nor mix them with any lasting ill effects. Children do mix languages but it is only a stage in the process of becoming bilingual (Ford,

2000; Metzler, 1997, p.2) – see Taeshners 1983 model of bilingual development on page 2 of Ford’s (2000) paper. Here I finally find something that relates to my questions and is in fact something that I see my own younger child doing. Perhaps this is not a problem but just the natural differences between learners. My older son almost never mixed languages whereas my younger son does it frequently. Perhaps he is using his L1 to fill the gaps in his L2 where he has not progressed so far with that language yet. In reference to Taeschner’s model I would estimate my younger child to be in stage 1 and my older child to be in stage 3.

Another concern that is often brought up is that people believe that learning a second language will rob a child of their national identity (Childs, October 30, 2000, p.1). The implication being that here in Japan, where belonging is emphasised, children would somehow feel, and indeed be, less Japanese. It has been shown however, that far from robbing them of their identity they become even more aware of it and at the same time develop an appreciation and tolerance for other cultures (Childs, January 8, 2001, p. 1; Childs, October 15, 2004, p. 2; Childs, November 12, 2004, p. 1). I see this effect in my own son. I have tried very hard not to push the two very different cultures of his parents on him. I am particularly aware that I will have a natural bias towards my own culture, if for no reason other than I know more about it and am more comfortable with it than I am with his father’s culture, but I have noticed how enthusiastic he is for traditions from both, without favouring one over the other. The social benefit of having two languages should not be overlooked. It is a definite advantage to be able to carry on relationships with people from different linguistic backgrounds.

There are many other advantages to bilingualism that have come up in the literature I reviewed. These include an economic advantage. Those with second language ability are more employable and higher earners than monolingual candidates (Welsh Language Board, 2008, p. 1, 12). Being bilingual can also make it easier to learn a third language (Welsh Language Board, 2008, p 1, 12; Childs, October 30, 2000, p. 3). Childs (November 12, 2004, p. 4), remarks that “once they [children] get the knack of switching they somehow retain the ability to adapt to new languages”. According to Yong (February 10, 2000), Bilingualism also improves executive function “a catch-all term for advanced mental abilities that allow us to control our thoughts and behaviour such as focusing on a goal, ignoring distractions, switching attention, and planning for the future”. Yong adds that bilinguals

have a lot of practice in this due to making language choices, and this in turn strengthens the areas of the brain that make these decisions.

Finally, the most far-reaching benefit of bilingualism may be that being bilingual can delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease by as much as 4 years (Welsh Government, 2004, p. 1).

Conclusion

In conclusion it is clear that bilingualism is a complex concept that varies with each child, with the precise balance of L1 and L2 being unique to each. However, it seems that early exposure to the second language is important to gain the best balance between the languages. In addition, persistence on the part of the parent with the minority language is needed to ensure that exposure happens. Creating an environment where the minority language is valued also helps to encourage the child to use the minority language and help maintain a better balance between the two languages.

I have failed to find definite answers to all of my questions but this does not necessarily mean a failure in my research. Rather it means I now know where I should direct my own research in this field. I have many ideas as to what I could do next and hope to provide others with the answers I could not find in the literature for myself.

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