

Bilingualism – an Exclusive Benefits Package for Children?

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Abstract:

The present paper debates whether bilingualism is an exclusive advantage that children have when it comes to learning languages. After a theoretical overview of bilingualism, we discuss how age impacts language acquisition through the perspective of the critical period hypothesis. Adults and children are inherently different when it comes to acquisition and control of foreign languages. While adults have access to metacognitive resources, it is debatable whether these constitute an advantage in terms of language acquisition.

Keywords: bilingualism, adults, children, language acquisition, metacognition

The present article investigates the extent to which bilingualism can be regarded as an advantage that mainly children can aspire to. In a world in which half of the world population is bilingual (Grosjean, 2013), bilingualism has many forms, which makes it difficult to categorize. Usually defined in dichotomous terms, bilingualism can be natural or primary, in which case it refers to those people whose bilingual competence is the result of a natural learning process, such as growing up in a bilingual family. In this case, neither of the two languages has been perceived as foreign. In contrast, secondary bilingualism refers to formal learning of one of the two languages (Malmkjaer, 1991: 58), which would imply that adults can become bilingual as well.

Looking at bilingualism from a sociopsychological viewpoint, we can distinguish between additive and subtractive bilingualism. In the case of the former, the bilingual person feels socially and cognitively enriched through the new language, while in the second case there is a feeling of loss caused by learning the foreign language (Malmkjaer, 1991: 58). Furthermore, one can also talk about receptive and productive

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bilingualism, depending on the skills that are highlighted in each case (reading and listening in the case of receptive skills, and writing and speaking as productive skills).

The problem with the difficulty of establishing whether someone is truly bilingual or just highly in control of a language other than their native language has resulted in bilingualism being considered to be a continuum rather than a distinct stage of linguistic competency.

At the very permissive end, Haugen (1973) argues that there is a case of bilingualism when the speaker of a certain language can produce meaningful utterances in another language. On the same note, Diebold (1961) gives a minimalistic definition of bilingualism using the term “incipient bilingualism” to describe the first stages of contact between two languages. In this case there needs to be minimal linguistic competence of the two languages so that one can talk about bilingualism. Romaine (1995) believes that some people can be bilingual only in terms of receptive skills, which is a case of receptive bilingualism. Similarly, Hockett uses the term “semi-bilingualism” (in Romaine, 1995).

In stricter terms, Weinrich (1953) distinguishes between compound, coordinated and subordinated bilingualism. He argues that bilingual acquisition of native languages, i.e. compound bilingualism implies two languages being learned in parallel. This is possible because any two languages, however different, have certain particular aspects in common. For example, they can have the same morphological structure, or the same grammatical categories such as gender, number, person, etc. Therefore, it can be argued that the bilingual individual has acquired a system with a variable number of components belonging to two languages that they can juggle. Klein (1986) explains this through an example: the French learner knows that “chair” has two phonological versions, for example [tʃɛə] and [ʃɛzə], and when they speak, they can choose between the two options.

We can talk of coordinated bilingualism when somebody acquires a second language in addition to their native language and first develops a linguistic system to which they later add a second linguistic system that can be operated in parallel with the first. The first linguistic system may not be totally assimilated when contact with the second occurs. When the speaker first uses a language and then another one, they make a switch between the two systems. In the case of compound bilingualism, the switch happens within the same system. With subordinated bilingualism, bilinguals interpret the words of the language they do not know so well through the perspective of the words in the language they know better. Subordinated bilingualism has a primary set of concepts

established in the dominant language and another set attached to the other language.

Paradis (2004) explains the way in which the linguistic systems of a bilingual are stored and related: there is one space in which world-knowledge is stored and two spaces in which the two languages are stored, each of them being connected to the former. The ability of bilinguals to switch and combine the two languages is of interest to psycholinguists, especially since this is an ability that aphasic patients do not have.

Very rarely are two languages learned at the same time and at the same pace, which is called relative dominance. One of the two languages is used more often or in certain circumstances, with certain people (Klein, 1986: 13). The secondary language is mainly used for certain purposes. The rarer the symmetry between learning two languages, the less frequent the situation in which one of the languages is seen as “the second language” or “the foreign language”. It is widely known that English in particular is predominantly spoken as a foreign language throughout the world.

But is bilingualism an advantage that only children have? It is almost common knowledge that children learn foreign languages very easily. The critical period hypothesis, which was formulated by Lenneberg in 1967, maintains that there is a tendency for children between 2 and 12 to learn a foreign language more easily (Lenneberg, 1967). Before Lenneberg, researchers such as Penfield and Roberts (1959) argued that the best period for learning a foreign language is in the first ten years of life, stating that in this period the brain has a certain plasticity which it then loses after puberty. This is due to the lateralization of language in the left hemisphere of the brain. The difficulty that adults have in learning languages is caused by this neurological change.

Basing his argument on neurological evidence supporting that adults do not regain the language function after left side brain surgery, while children recovered more easily, Lenneberg reaches the conclusion that adults find it more difficult to learn a language. Ellis (1985) rejects Lenneberg’s argument as he starts from the premise that language acquisition is easier for children. In Ellis’s view, the only aspect of language learning that becomes more difficult as we age is pronunciation. Newport (1993: 545) also rejects Lenneberg’s theory as it does not present proof of the effects of age on learning the native language, this type of evidence being more difficult to gather.

Other researchers believe that there are several critical periods in learning a foreign language, thus explaining why teenagers excel at

grammar, while children do not. Halliday (1978), for example, argues that metacognition is a key factor and since it is present mainly in teenagers and adults, these groups are at an advantage when learning a foreign language, as they can learn *about* the language, while learning the language. This would imply that children do not have an exclusive advantage when it comes to becoming bilingual.

On the other hand, Rosansky (1975) believes that it is precisely the lack of metacognition that helps children in learning foreign languages, as they are not so aware of the learning process. Therefore, children are more cognitively open when it comes to learning a foreign language. Abstract thinking, which becomes present around the age of 12, facilitates the recognition of similarities and differences, thus making learners more cognitively flexible. Moreover, as learners age, they become culturally and socially attached to the native or the foreign language, which makes the learning process more difficult, argues Rosansky.

This stance does not explain however why teenagers are better speakers of a foreign language than children or adults and it does not prove that metacognition is an impediment and not a tool in foreign language learning.

Newport (1993) also studied the effects of age on language learning, her conclusions partly supporting the critical period hypothesis, even though the researcher does not agree with Lenneberg's methodology. Newport studied the relationship between foreign language competency and the age when learning started, testing subjects whose native language is Chinese or Korean (both languages being structurally different from English). The study was done on 46 subjects who each arrived in the US at different ages, plus 23 native English speakers. The test consisted of 276 simple sentences in English, half of them being grammatically incorrect (12 rules were tested, both morphology and syntax). The correct sentences were randomly alternated with the incorrect ones. The subjects were required to say whether each sentence was acceptable or not. The subjects' performance in English was inversely proportional to the age when they were first exposed to it.

Moreover, Newport tried to explain the fact that children learn a foreign language more easily, even though they are less cognitively advanced than adults, thus supporting Rosansky's argument and opposing Ellis's.

If the relation between cognition and linguistic performance was considered arbitrary by Chomsky, Newport's "less is more" hypothesis maintains that it is precisely the increase of cognitive ability that comes

with age that leads to the loss of one's ability to learn a foreign language.

Newport starts her analysis by looking at the errors that adults make when learning English as a foreign language and the ones that American children make when they learn English as a native language. The adults' mistakes are either frozen structures, in which morphemes are used incorrectly (which proves that they were acquired as a whole), or very variable structures that are used inconsistently. These types of mistakes show either that adults have not analyzed the complex structures of languages, or that they have processed more than one analysis for the same structure.

The mistakes of children learning English as a native language are quite different from those of adults. Whole morphemes are omitted, and structures are only partly uttered. In time, children learn and add more morphemes, while adults keep their holistic models and generalize them even when new structures are necessary.

Newport argues that these differences come from the way in which the linguistic input is perceived and stored and not from the different abilities to make linguistic analyses once the input has been stored.

The hypothesis maintains that the children's advantage consists of their capacity to perceive and store only some components of the complex linguistic stimuli they come in contact with, while adults, having a better working memory than children, perceive and remember the entire complex stimulus. For example, in the case of morphology, learning involves storing the words, the morphemes that the words are made up of, plus the meaning which can vary depending on the morphemes. Thus, if the adult stores the word plus the number of formal components plus the number of semantic components attributed to each component, their task becomes quite complex. A more limited speaker, such as a child, will perceive and store a restricted number of associations between form and meaning, which leads to a more focused type of learning.

Another theoretical perspective worth investigating is the acculturation model, developed by Schumann in 1978. This theoretical model distinguishes between foreign languages and second languages. The foreign language, by definition, is not so relevant from the point of view of the speaker's community, because it is not used in parallel with the native language as often as the second language, which implies the idea of acculturation, of belonging to a culture.

Schumann believes that learning a second language is just a matter of cultural belonging. The more a speaker becomes culturally attached to a language, the better they will learn it. Children are more likely to

become culturally attached to languages, as they learn them without any prejudices about the culture or the country that they live in.

The factors that influence acculturation, and therefore language learning, can be social or psychological. The greater the social and psychological distance, the lower the feeling of belonging to the respective culture. Social factors are of utmost importance in Schumann's view, while psychological factors are important only when social distance cannot be clearly defined.

Social factors that are perceived as positive lead to situations in which learning the second language is encouraged. Schumann presents some such situations: when the two groups (the one that speaks the language and the one that learns it) view each other as socially equal; when both groups are willing to cooperate so that the second group learns the language; when the learning group is very small and united; when the two cultures are congruent; when both groups have positive attitudes towards each other; when the learning group is willing to stay in contact with the group for a longer period of time. Conversely, negative social factors would lead to the opposite scenarios.

A further model based on Schumann's acculturation theory is the nativization model, proposed by Andersen (1983). The foundation of this model is that language learning is subject to two phenomena: nativization and denativization. Nativization appears in the first stages of learning a language and it consists of assimilating input to the learner's own vision of the language. The speaker simplifies the learning task by creating hypotheses based on the knowledge they already have. Denativization, conversely, applies mainly to the higher stages of language learning, whereby the speaker adapts their own linguistic system to the data they encounter. Both the acculturation and the nativization model only explain the learning situations that arise in natural settings, not in formal instruction.

Finally, we look at the accommodation theory proposed by Giles (1991). This theory aims to investigate the way in which using the foreign language in an inter-group setting mirrors social and psychological attitudes in inter-group communication. This theory, like Schumann's acculturation model, sets out to determine the circumstances in which successful language learning takes place. If Schumann connected language learning with social distance, Giles refers to perceived social distance. In his view, the subjective way in which the learning group defines the relationships with the native group influences the learning process. If Schumann viewed social distance as static, absolute, Giles sees it as dynamic and relative and it clearly places children at an advantage, as the younger they are, they less likely

it is for them to perceive social distance as a negative factor that might affect language learning.

Motivation plays a key role in Giles's theory, as it impacts the level of linguistic competence in the foreign language. Motivation results from how individuals define themselves in terms of ethnicity, and it is influenced by several factors, such as the degree to which the learner identifies themselves with the ethnic group that they are part of. When motivation is low due to any of these factors, it is necessary to compensate learning with other skills. At this level, it is highly likely for children to inherit their parents' assets and liabilities in terms of language learning. The more motivated parents are to learn a new language in order to integrate into a group, the more likely it is that children will share their motivation. Again, this direct correlation is expected to be highest in the case of children of young ages.

One of the merits of this theory is that it offers an explanation of the learner's variable competence. Giles distinguishes two situations in which linguistic characteristics that mark the learner's belonging to their ethnic group. Low use of these characteristics happens when the speaker is motivated to integrate into the new community, while frequent use shows low motivation. These characteristics may fluctuate, according to the way in which the learner defines their relationships with the community. Progress in learning a language is directly proportional to the learner's infrequent use of the characteristics that mark their belonging to their ethnic group.

In sum, adults and children have different advantages and often interdependent when approaching a foreign language and therefore when attempting to become bilingual. Bilingualism is not exclusively attainable in childhood. Without continuously learning and using a foreign language, even a primary bilingual individual may lose control of one of the two languages they speak.

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