

Learning a Foreign Language in the Context of Immersion

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Abstract

Keywords:

language development; bilingual children; immersion.

The following thesis aims to discover how the language acquisition process develops in preschoolers when learning two languages, in the immersion context, as early bilinguals. This article applies and combines knowledge and theories from education, linguistics, psycholinguistics, and the study of bilingualism. Throughout the paper, basic notions about bilingualism and the development of early bilingualism in the case of immersion preschoolers and dominant theories were presented. The methods used to discover this thesis's specific responses were a questionnaire and an interview. Those methods were used on three children, born in the country of immersion and learning both the minority and majority language. The respondents were the parents and preschool teachers of these children.

Zusammenfassung

Schlüsselworte:

Sprachentwicklung;
zweisprachige Kinder;
Immersion.

Die folgende Arbeit zielt darauf ab herauszufinden, wie sich der Spracherwerbsprozess bei Vorschulkindern entwickelt, wenn sie zwei Sprachen im Immersionskontext als frühe Zweisprachige lernen. Dieser Artikel wendet Wissen und Theorien aus den Bereichen Pädagogik, Linguistik, Psycholinguistik und der Erforschung der Zweisprachigkeit an und kombiniert sie.

In der gesamten Arbeit wurden grundlegende Vorstellungen über die Zweisprachigkeit und die Entwicklung der frühen Zweisprachigkeit bei immersiven Vorschulkindern sowie vorherrschende Theorien vorgestellt. Die Methoden zur Ermittlung der spezifischen Antworten dieser Arbeit waren ein Fragebogen und ein Interview. Um die spezifischen Antworten für diese Arbeit zu ermitteln, wurden Fragebögen und Interviews verwendet. Sie wurden auf drei Kinder angewendet, die im Land der Immersion geboren wurden und sowohl die Minderheiten- als auch die Mehrheitssprache lernten. Die Befragten waren die Eltern und Vorschullehrer dieser Kinder.

1. Introduction

"If you speak to a man in the language he understands, you will reach his mind. If you speak to him in his language, you will reach his heart," says Nelson Mandela. We live in a world where more than 50% of the global population is bilingual, yet bilingualism is a newly debated subject, with many mysteries still waiting to be unraveled.

In Romania, the need for a better life sent 3,107,300 souls to more developed countries. The same number of people now have to learn a second language and become bilingual. A very large percentage of this number are couples, who are now bringing into the world, in the process of immersion, children who also need to become bilingual. The balance between growing up with the mother tongue of your parents' country, and at the same time learning and integrating into the language and culture of the country you live in is very fragile.

Most families who form abroad live there to work, with very little knowledge and time to document how to raise a bilingual child. Creating a fully and equally

developed bilingual in both languages is the key to its introduction into both societies, as Nelson Mandela argues in the opening quote.

My paper aims to find out the duration and stages of development of bilingual first language acquisition, the right time for the introduction of a second language, and the factors influencing this process.

2. Conceptual delimitations

Communication involves the transmission of information or messages from the sender(s) to the receiver(s) through a communication channel using a specific code. The code is the communication system on which messages are built, e.g. the alphabet of a language. A common code between the participants in the communication are indispensable for successful communication, and the common code requires that the spoken language is also commonly known.

Before we get to defining 'foreign language' it is important to first clarify the concept of 'language' and 'mother tongue'. According to Chomsky's conception



(1959), "language is a mechanism capable of producing an infinite number of sentences".

According to Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1989), mother tongue can mean: "the language learned from the mother; the first language learned (L1), not counting from whom; the dominant language, at any point in life; the language of the country or region in which the subject lives; the language most used by a person or the language to which a person is affectively inclined". These brief definitions have been attacked and debated by Kaplan and Ferguson (1999) because of multiple approaches that do not aim at a general framing.

In this paper, it is best to refer to the "mother tongue" as the language learned from the mother, specifically, the mother tongue (L1) of the mother. Other terms can be: first language (L1), source language, reference language.

When referring to the number of languages spoken, there are three main branches of differentiation: monolingualism, bilingualism, and multilingualism. Etymologically speaking, 'mono', 'bi', and 'multi' refer to knowing and speaking one language, two languages, or several languages.

Bilingualism is the complex notion on which we will rely in this paper. In 1953 Uriel Weinreich explained bilingualism as "the practice of using two languages alternately".

Learning, according to Slavin (1986), is "a change in the individual caused by experience". When it comes to language learning, there are a variety of theories, starting with Skinner (1957) who believes that "a child learns language by acquiring verbal behavior skills by relating each sentence to a situation and with the help of approving or negative adult behavior". It was Chomsky in 1959 who rejected these ideas, arguing that language was not a behavioral skill but an abstract intellectual system, adding that for him "the learning of a foreign language was bound up with a set of innate linguistic principles which controlled the form that sentences in another language could take".

Immersion is the process of introducing a subject to a new environment. Immersion can be of several types, ranging from cultural to linguistic immersion. Language immersion is a bilingual teaching technique, that teaches a variety of subjects using two languages.

3. Types of bilingualism

The concept of bilingualism seems simple and easy to understand and explain. Bilingualism is mostly presented in opposition to monolingualism, but languages undergo linguistic influences, not being 'pure', so we cannot put a clear opposition between monolingualism and bilingualism.

If we look at the definition given by Bloomfield (1933) bilingualism is "the knowledge of two languages at the level of the mother tongue", his definition being based on the individual's ability to speak the two languages. In 2000 Hamers and Blanc proposed a delineation of bilingualism paradigms and divided these concepts into 6 different types. The approach is proposed according to (1) competence, (2) cognitive organization, (3) age of acquisition, (4) presence of the second language in the environment, (5) status in society of the two languages, (6) group membership and cultural identity.

Thus, according to the level of knowledge of the two languages, we identify balanced bilinguals, who master the languages at the same level, or dominant bilinguals, who know one language better than the other (Lambert, 1955).

According to the period in which the languages were learned, the division is made according to age, thus we have: childhood or early bilingualism, both languages being learned by the age of 10/11 years; adolescent bilingualism learned between 11 and 17 years and bilingualism learned as an adult or late bilingualism learned after 17 years.

The category of early bilingualism is further divided into two types of bilingualism depending on the delimitation of language acquisition. Thus the concepts of simultaneous or successive bilingualism are found.

The boundary between the two types is arbitrary and intensely debated, being considered either too broad or too strict. For successive bilingualism Vihman and McLaughlin (1982) sets a limit of 3 years which is considered by critics to be far too broad. For a less restrictive approach, the researchers choose to replace the notion of simultaneous bilingualism with the term "bilingual first language acquisition".

4. Stages of bilingualism development

Language and communication are learned spontaneously through contact with others and based on a 'sense of language', Chomsky (1959). According to this psychologist's innatist view, from birth people

possess a mental structure that enables them to acquire language, so that the child will develop a 'generative grammar' according to a programmed pattern.

From a bilingual perspective of language acquisition, children are biologically capable of acquiring, memorizing, and differentiating two or more languages from birth. De Hower (2009) indicates that both monolingual and bilingual children from birth develop language in almost the same way and with the same stages. Bilingual children can make more effort than monolingual children in language learning, adding skills related to language discrimination, perception, or phonetic development.

Up to one year of age, language development is initially achieved through cooing and then lallation. At the lallation stage, most bilingual children tend to express themselves in the dominant language, and for some, they even recognize differences in speech or tone that come from both languages they are exposed to.

Four stages of language and vocabulary development are recognized in the preschool period and are the same for bilingual children. In the one-year period, isolated words appear. For bilingual children, even as early as eight months of age, the first words may appear in both languages to which they are exposed.

In terms of the simultaneous acquisition of two languages, the question is whether children develop two separate vocabularies or just one at first, incorporating words from both languages. If the latter were correct, Deuchar & Quay (2001) argue that bilinguals would not have word equivalents in both languages, but studies have shown that most have a fairly stable balance between the two vocabularies.

Deuchar and Quay (2001) found that a bilingual around the age of two can choose which language to use depending on the context, especially when in a "one language-one parent" learning context. Language and context sensitivity occurs in bilingual children from an early age but depends very much on factors such as the language spoken at home, the interlocutor, etc.

In concluding the stages of language development for bilingual children, Genesee (2002) argues that "it is now generally accepted that bilinguals may use their developing languages differently, starting from the very first word stage".

5. Influencing factors of bilingualism

The complex nature of bilingualism brings with it a selection of issues that influence individual children's variables in the process of simultaneous first language acquisition.

Motivation is the desire to achieve a goal or an ideal. Motivation can be of many kinds, and the source of motivation can determine the quality or level of engagement a child has with language learning.

Age of acquisition is one of the most frequently discussed factors influencing bilingualism. Studies show inconsistencies in results, and opinions are divided when it comes to children's versus adults' second language learning success. The differences are largely due to perceptions of what success means, what success measures look like, and when.

Advantages that early bilinguals may have are: lower inhibition than adult bilinguals (in most cases) and lower feelings of identity towards others who speak the same mother tongue as them (apart from close family members), which helps them in forming a positive view of their second language. Children can receive simplified, more simply explained input from others, which facilitates the learning process.

Proficiency is based on the assumption that there is a talent that is specific to learning a language. Carroll (1965) proposes the following "four components of this talent, which form the basis of countless aptitude tests: phonetic encoding ability; inductive language learning ability; grammatical sensitivity; associative memory ability".

The context of acquisition and the context of use are among the external factors that influence individual variations in bilingualism. The difference between natural context and educationally is felt in the way children learn/acquire and the interest and mode of expression they choose in using that language.

Also, even factors such as the child's gender, cognitive style, personality, etc. can influence language acquisition. In the case of gender differences, results are mixed, but female subjects tend to perform better than males in the educational environment and have more positive attitudes. Males, however, tend to perform better in oral tests.

In conclusion, we note that bilingualism can be influenced by both internal and what can be considered external factors, as the development of bilingualism is a process with individual variations and different outcomes.

6. Communication strategies

Communication strategies used in bilingual families are a new research interest in linguistics. Family language policy or family communication strategies are defined as: “ideas about language and language use; and any specific efforts to modify or influence language through any intervention, plan, or management” (Spolsky, 2004).

Romaine (2004) describes six types of communication strategies in bilingual families:

The "One Language-One Parent" strategy is one of the most popular strategies today and is a classic approach pioneered by Ronjat (1913). This strategy consists of the rule that each parent addresses the child in a different language.

The "One Language-One Environment" strategy requires parents to speak the minority language at home, whether it is their mother tongue or not, and to speak the majority language in the community. Under this strategy, however, exposure to the majority language may occur much later and have a significantly low impact.

The "Minority language at home without community support" strategy works on the same principle as the previous strategy, but the parents do not speak the majority language. This strategy can also be developed into 'Dual minority language at home without community support' for families where parents have different mother tongues.

The 'Non-native parent' strategy applies when the parents' mother tongue is also the majority language, but a parent speaks to the child using the non-native language they want to be introduced to.

The latest strategy is the "Mixed Language Policy". In this strategy both parents are bilingual and use the language that best suits the situation or topic of conversation, alternating as needed. Children are thus encouraged to respond in the language in which the speaker has addressed them. In this strategy, there is a lot of code-mixing and it is not recommended because this strategy leaves very little room for the minority language and often leads to the exclusive use of the community language.

Imposing these strategies also requires the use of quite strict rules in communication and methods such as: minimal understanding, trying to intuit, continuing the speech, asking for translations, or changing code. Minimal understanding requires the parent to indicate that they have not understood the child's statement.

Attempting intuition rephrases the response given by the child to the parent. Continuation of speech requires continuing the conversation without pointing out code-switching. Asking for translations requires the parent to ask the child to translate into the other language. Code-switching requires changing the speech into the language introduced by the code-switching. Using these rules shows positive results in bilingual language development.

7. Dominant theories

Among the countless paradigms that dominate the study of early bilingualism, the following concepts are the ones I have encountered most in this research: the principle of complementarity; the logical problem of bilingual acquisition; linguistic modality; language code-switching.

7.1 Principle of complementarity

The principle of complementarity refers to what has been called for many years the functions of language and explains several interesting phenomena in bilingual linguistics and psycholinguistics. Grosjean (2013) defines the principle of complementarity as follows: “Bilinguals usually acquire and use their languages for different purposes, in different areas of life, with different people. Different aspects of life normally need different languages”.

The first phenomenon explained is the level of fluency and use of a language. When a language is used in a very limited range, it is likely to be used less frequently and with less fluency. The opposite is also true: the more domains the language is spoken, the more common it is and the better the language skills are generally.

In addition, if a domain is not used and never spoken about in a language, then the bilingual will not have the vocabulary needed for that domain. Behaviors, such as praying or offering a phone number, may be instances where they are used in one language and can cause the bilingual great problems in expressing themselves in the other language.

7.2. Mixing language code

"Language code-mixing" is the presence of code-switching or language borrowing in the context of simultaneous first language acquisition. Code-mixing involves the introduction of elements from the other language into the conversation in the first language. Code-switching occurs when the bilingual operates in bilingual mode, i.e. interacts with someone who

speaks both languages, and the need to use the inactive language arises.

There are two ways to use, to bring the other language into the conversation: code-switching or borrowing. Code-switching is the alternating use of two languages, with the speaker making a complete switch from one language to the other, using a word, a sentence, or several phrases, then returning to the base language. Borrowing is achieved by integrating one language into the other using syntactic, morphological, or phonological elements or structures.

8. Research on language learning in the context of immersion

This research is a case study. This research project was conducted as part of my academic studies at the University of Bucharest. Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study, and their confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. The data collected and analyzed were used solely for the purpose of this research project.

The research aims to discover how preschool students develop language and communication in the context of language learning and language immersion.

The tools used in this case study are a questionnaire and an interview.

The questionnaire is a closed-ended questionnaire that facilitates the collection of information about the communication and social behavior of the targeted preschoolers from the subjects' preschool teachers. The questions are closed-ended because this avoids possible bottlenecks imposed by the different languages spoken by the respondents and the researcher. The degree of control is greater using this method, thus increasing the quantitative nature of obtaining confirmations or checking frequencies. The questions include both communication and behavioral items to create a holistic picture of the child and the factors that influence them.

The interview is an open-ended interview that focuses on communication and communication issues. The interview is the method applied to gathering information from the subjects' parents. We have chosen the open-ended version because the looser the structure of the interview, the more likely it is to gather qualitative data with a high degree of novelty.

8.1. Research sample

The sample consists of 3 preschool subjects with the acronyms D.A, G.D.A and P.A, developing in both linguistic and cultural immersion contexts. The chosen

subjects are children with both Romanian parents, who aim to raise children with Romanian mother tongue and Romanian principles, but live in other countries and attend kindergarten there, in the language of the immersion country.

The major similarities between the chosen subjects are: both parents are Romanian: they were born in the country where they attend kindergarten; the languages they learn are Romance languages, as well as Roman, which come from Latin *vulgara*, having a common root of vocabulary, grammar and even pronunciation.

The major differences between the chosen subjects are: frequency of attendance at kindergarten; contact with language 2 within the home; proximity to family friends who speak the foreign language: proximity to relatives who speak Romanian; time spent exclusively in Romania.

8.2. Data analysis, processing, and interpretation

The proposed questionnaire has a total of 16 closed-ended questions answered by the three teachers of the three preschool subjects. This questionnaire presents the language, communication, and behavior of the strict preschoolers in the kindergarten environment.

We can understand the answers that we received as below:

We note that acquisition and development are judged to be fairly rapid, showing that bilinguals show fairly steady and upward development, but that it does not appear to be as rapid as that of monolinguals, not receiving the maximum response.

Questions 2 and 3 aim at an answer based on the quality of language and communication, breaking this down into two major components, vocabulary, and grammar (grammar representing fluency of expression). The evolution of quality is given by the following two questions, which follow the quality of the aspects followed, at the time of the research, i.e. after at least 2 years of kindergarten.

At an individual level, we observe that initially, the qualitative performance of D.A. is lower than that of the other bilinguals, which we attribute to the lower input received in Italian, the majority language studied in kindergarten.

By completing the next two questions we observe that there is a presence of development during kindergarten, but also with the possibility of stagnation, the period being probably too short to notice a significant evolution of the major evolution

taking place before the beginning of the preschool cycle.

Again, at the individual level, D.A.'s worst results remain, with her expression level stagnating and vocabulary increasing one unit from 2 to 3, due to her low input of Italian before starting kindergarten, as well as the low frequency of present tense which affects her linguistic development in Italian.

In kindergarten, grammatical errors do not seem to tend to recur, if the misspelling is corrected by the preschool teacher.

Openness to the majority language seems to be positive for bilingual preschoolers who are in immersion.

The greatest motivation for second language acquisition/learning varies from individual to individual. Among the most popular are: communication with peers, which designates the need for inclusion; the need for communication to satisfy primary needs, which shows an instrumental purpose; and satisfying parents or teachers, which shows that the influences of people in the immediate environment are extremely strong.

The only subject who shows moments of isolation for communication reasons is D.A., most likely feeling the lack or very low presence of interaction with native Italian speakers, both children, and adults, outside the kindergarten and the much lower familiarity with the interaction specific to the preschool environment due to the reduced presence.

The same reasons also influence the same subject in the easy communication with other students and bring frustration because of these problems of expression. However, even if there are in some cases communication problems, none of the subjects refuses to communicate.

The code mixture is also present in kindergarten but in a rather small percentage. Code-mixing is much more present in D.A., most likely due to the lack of vocabulary variation or the weight it encounters in Italian communication. However, the low presence of code-mixing in kindergarten is due to the strict communication in Italian/Spanish and the active correction of mistakes or code-mixing by the preschool teachers.

8.3. Interview with parents

The parent interview aims to find out details about the development of bilingual children's language and communication skills at home, in society, and with

close family members and friends. The interview was conducted orally, recorded, and the transcription of responses was done qualitatively.

From the interview, it appears that none of the families used a specific early bilingual communication strategy. The communication environment they created thus allowed both parents to speak both languages and outside the kindergarten, where the majority language was spoken, the language used was chosen according to need, thus the minority language was also used in the majority environment and vice versa.

Parents claim that bilinguals show signs of recognizing the language they speak from an early age.

All the children started speaking, saying their first words, around the age of one, with no delay compared to monolingual children. The first words appeared in both languages, where the bilingual input was strong. "I don't even remember what he first said in Italian. I had gone over the 'magic' of the first words and didn't notice when he spoke in Italian." The low input of Italian received by D.A. is also felt in the appearance of the first words, which were mostly in Romanian.

"It never seemed to me that he had any problems, neither in Italian nor in Romanian, I think he learned just like an Italian child" is the opinion of G.D.A.'s mother, which is similar to the statement of P.A.'s mother. Unlike the two, D.A. seems to have had a slightly different development, "In Romanian, he speaks a lot and has always been like that. And if I don't understand her because she still gets the pronunciation wrong she continues the idea. She also talks to Luna (the family dog) alone. In Italian, I think she understands since she started to hear it in restaurants and shops, but she speaks much less, to nothing".

On the frequency of language use, the answers are varied. "At G.D.A. it depends a lot, he uses both, if he comes from kindergarten or games are played, he speaks more Italian. If he talks to me and his dad he surprises you and what language he chooses, he doesn't have any rules". "P.A. with me speaks a lot in Romanian. With his father he goes to speak Spanish because he also understands Catalan"; "D.A. rarely starts speaking Italian. Maybe only if we speak it, but even then not really".

Also, D.A. is the only one who has big gaps in Italian after her holidays in Romania. The other two children find ways to keep the conversation going in

the other language, either through play or with the help of a parent.

None of the children showed actions to reject the languages proposed according to their parents. "G.D.A. if he had homework in Italian he did it, if we showed him any book in Romanian he was interested. That he wanted to use another language to answer sometimes, it didn't seem to be because he couldn't stand the other language, but that he simply wanted to use the other".

For D.A. and G.D.A. advancing in age did not change their language preferences, but for P.A. it did; "A few months after he started kindergarten he started talking more to his dad in Spanish. I think she realized that he knew Spanish better, he explained himself better, and he also helped her with dialects, because only he knew it". This statement draws a lot of attention to the importance of the quality of input and output.

When children need help they turn to their bilingual parents, but parents being the first choice of any child, do not give us a great deal of knowledge about the choice between bilingual or monolingual. However, the following statements help us: "If we don't stay with G.D.A. and he is somewhere with Nona or Nonu (n.r. bilingual grandparents) and the nanny or a monolingual friend, he runs to the grandparents for help"; "When we are in the country (n.r. Romania) he gets annoyed if he doesn't get along with the children at play because he drops words in Spanish and the children don't understand it".

9. Conclusions

From the preschool teacher questionnaire, based strictly on the kindergarten environment, the major conclusion we draw is that late and low quantitative input observably influences early bilingual development in the context of immersion.

From the parent interviews, where we gathered information from outside the controlled environment of the kindergarten, we can see how the quality and quantity of the input affects the output, choice of languages, and interlocutors. An early bilingual who does not receive a balanced input between the two languages will end up preferring only one language, favoring conversation with bilinguals or speakers of the preferred language, and there will also be a decrease in the quality of the other, less preferred languages compared to bilinguals who receive a balanced input.

A comparative analysis of the two instruments targeting different communication environments shows the strong presence of code-mixing in the company of parents, compared to the frequency of its occurrence in the classroom environment. This may be mainly due to the lack of application of early bilingual-specific communication strategies by parents in informal settings.

Introducing a second language from birth has some advantages. Late or insufficient input can produce inconsistencies in expected development and is at a disadvantage to early input, the main reason being the critical period of first language acquisition and the 'brain fluidity' that early age offers. Much more important, I believe, is the manner of introduction of the second language, rather than the timing of the introduction.

The major influencing factors found in the context of immersion are: approaching or not approaching a communication strategy, the age of exposure to the input and its quality and quantity, and the interlocutor's ability to communicate in the two languages, especially in an uncontrolled/informal environment.

This work supports the awareness of the high needs that children who are simultaneously acquiring their first language have for normal development, integration into society, and a steady rise in learning both languages. It is important to educate both teachers and parents about the communication strategies recommended in raising a bilingual child and to be open to refining or discovering new communication strategies and their influence on bilingual first language acquisition.

Authors note:

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