

A Case Study of Third-Language Acquisition: Analyzing the Transition from Bilingualism to Trilingualism

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Third-language acquisition (TLA) and its direct product, trilingualism, is a relatively new discipline that has roots in second language acquisition (SLA) and bilingualism. Although there are areas in which these two disciplines share many common factors and processes, TLA is a field with unique linguistic and cognitive differences which make it distinctive from SLA. In this paper, I write about my observations of my own daughter's experiences with acquiring two languages simultaneously, English and Japanese, and her shift from bilingualism to trilingualism in her attempt to acquire German. Based on my observations, I discuss the impact that factors of SLA and TLA had on my daughter's acquisition of English and German.

Differences Between TLA and SLA

SLA scholars commonly refer to the acquisition of multiple languages in the same way they explain the processes and effects produced by learning a second language which implies that learning a second language is the same as learning a third or fourth language (Jessner, 2006). This general view of language acquisition is challenged by some scholars who reason that TLA encompasses different and more complex skills not encountered at the same level by second-language learners and that the processes of acquiring a third language should thus be analyzed with these differences in mind. For example, the addition of a third language presents another source of cross-linguistic influences and provides the learner with more multilingual compensatory strategies than the knowledge of two languages would. Due to the influence of language transfer, the role of the L2 plays a much more significant role in TLA than in SLA. This is particularly evident when the learner is very proficient in the L2 (Hammarberg, 2001).

The order of language acquisition for TLA differs from SLA as well. In SLA there are only two orders, the L2 can either be learned after the L1 or two languages can be learned simultaneously. In TLA the addition of a third language adds to these orders of acquisition. According to Cenoz (2000), TLA encompasses four orders: three languages can be learned simultaneously, three languages can be learned consecutively, two languages can be learned simultaneously after the L1 has been learned, or two languages can be learned simultaneously before they learn the L1. The acquisition of additional languages makes TLA even more complex than SLA but the acquisition order of a third language or more further adds to these complexities (Cenoz and Genessee, 1998).

Becoming Bilingual

As a family of multiple linguistic and cultural backgrounds with roots in the U.S., Germany and Japan, it was important for my wife and me that our daughter, Erika, become proficient in at least two languages. We decided to immerse her in a bilingual home environment where Japanese and English would be used equally through the one-parent, one-language principle. I did not consider including German as an additional language into the household, because I believed I did not have the time to adequately speak both English and German to her while she also used Japanese. The reason for selecting English over German was simply because I thought fluency in English would be more beneficial for my daughter than fluency in German. I spoke to her in English, while my wife communicated with her in Japanese. She accepted this linguistic arrangement very naturally, speaking only in English with me and Japanese with her mother, and made equal progress in both languages the first three years until she entered *yochien*.

After a few months in *yochien*, I noticed Erika was beginning to use new Japanese words and more complex conversation patterns but was not advancing in English. This development was not unexpected as she interacted with her classmates and playground friends all in Japanese. I decided to change my interactional strategy in English in order to develop her English-language skills as much as possible. I accomplished this in two ways. First, I engaged her in longer conversations by telling her, for example, long stories from my childhood and also by reading and discussing English storybooks. She was very eager to listen and converse with me in the talks and readings. My second change was in providing her

with more active experiences through which she could learn and use English with other people. At the age of five, she took part in a once-a-week English-language children's school which centered its classes around plays and games. The teacher was a native-speaker of English and her classmates had substantial exposure to English. She attended this school for two years.

When Erika was five years of age, we took her on an extended trip to the United States where we enrolled her in day-care school. She attended a three-hour class with about 10 native English-speaking children five times a week. Erika also played and interacted with the children living in her grandparents' neighborhood almost everyday. Although she was eager to interact with the children and appeared to comprehend what they were telling her, her verbal communication with them was very minimal. It was only when we returned to Japan that I noticed she used new vocabulary and more complicated sentence patterns. She made definite progress in her English, but her level still lagged behind that of native English-speaking children her age.

I began instructing Erika in how to read English several months after she entered the first grade of Japanese public elementary school. I was amazed at how quickly she excelled in her reading. She was soon reading words and short sentences effortlessly. We held our daily reading lessons for about 10-15 minutes and continued this pattern of instruction for one year after which I changed the frequency and length of the lessons due to schedule conflicts. I ordered a variety of graded reader books for Erika and included her in the ordering process by asking her for her book preferences. She also made a record of each lesson's reading by noting the book's title and page numbers in a notebook and separated them by levels. When she completed reading a book, she put a sticky star next to the entry. It was my intention that the ordering of her own books and making her responsible for her own reading record would give her a sense of accomplishment and empowerment. I observed that she soon became very particular about what books she wanted to order and took pride in the number of stars that she had accumulated and the levels that she had covered.

The summer vacations provided us with the time to further Erika's English language development. She attended English-language summer camps two consecutive summers each for a duration of two weeks. Her classmates were either native or near-native English-language speakers. In addition, I had arranged for Erika's cousin to stay with us for two consecutive summers after the conclusion of

each summer camp. Melinda is four years older than Erika and loves to talk. It helped that Erika adores her cousin and that Melinda enjoys taking care of her younger cousin. I realized this was probably the best English-language learning opportunity for my daughter. She quickly improved her oral English skills and her English was now native level. She switched languages without hesitation.

The only English skill area in which Erika lagged behind her peers was writing. Her lack of English writing skills became evident to me when I observed her in one of her summer camp classes. As an extension of a treasure hunt activity, the instructor had the students write a group article about their observations. Several of the students, including my daughter, had difficulty composing basic sentences compared with some of the other children in the class. I decided then to focus on improving her English writing skills. At first, I attempted to instruct writing by incorporating it in her reading lessons. I did this by having her write simple sentences about what she had read. My daughter was not enthusiastic about adding writing to her reading. Another approach was necessary. I decided to use writing textbooks for beginning-level second-language speakers. Although her oral English skills were more advanced than the skill level of the content in the textbooks, she was more motivated by completing the materials than in the previous writing lessons. Her writing saw considerable improvement over the next two years as she gradually progressed to higher-level textbooks. She was well on her way to becoming a balanced bilingual.

Bilingualism to Trilingualism

By the time my daughter had reached the age of seven, she was very proficient in her English and Japanese language skills. The path to bilingualism had involved much time and effort. Therefore, I was surprised when my daughter came to me one day and asked me if I would teach her how to speak German. When I asked her “why,” she responded with, “Well, I’m German, so I should know how to speak it.” A very logical response I thought. Although I had refrained from using German with my daughter at home, she often overheard me speaking German to relatives and friends, saw me reading German language magazines and watching German news on TV. We celebrated most of the big German holidays, along with the Japanese and American ones so there was a strong German cultural presence at home. She was also proud of the fact that she possessed a German passport. In her mind, the only

thing she lacked in the way of becoming German was the ability to communicate in German. Based on our experiences with our daughter in achieving fluency in both Japanese and English, we thought we could be as successful with German.

After the talk with my daughter, I made it a point to speak some German everyday. I thought it best to keep my utterances short and simple at first and to incorporate German into our English conversations. English would provide the context and there would be enough cross-linguistic influence which would help unlock the German for her. I made regular conversations with my daughter in German and instructed her to keep a list of the basic vocabulary we covered to which she could refer. After several months, this approach appeared unsuccessful. My daughter did not seem to improve and tired of my attempt to speak German to her. Although she was very capable in reproducing German sounds in almost accent-free pronunciation, she seemed frustrated with her low comprehension. I came to the conclusion that I would need to provide her with input in a different way.

I decided to use a more formal learning approach. Instead of speaking to my daughter now and then in German, I would teach her using German textbooks for second-language learning children. I intended for these materials to provide her with knowledge of basic structures and vocabulary in a slow but manageable manner. She easily acquired the vocabulary used in the texts. I continued to speak in German to my daughter but limited the talks to conversations related to topics in the texts we used in order to reinforce what she was learning. She had difficulty understanding me beyond anything unrelated to the texts we were using and was reluctant to speak German with me.

When Erika became 8 years of age, I arranged for her to attend a German language summer camp in Germany for three weeks. Her classmates were children from around the world who had come to the language camp to learn German. They attended streamed classes three hours a day. There were also German children there who attended English classes. Foreign and German children shared dorm rooms and engaged in activities such as games, hikes, day trips, and parties with one another. Although Erika enjoyed her time there immensely, I did not observe any increase in her knowledge of German upon her return. With our busy schedules, we just could not focus on adhering to such a strict language policy. A few months after her return from Germany, my daughter enrolled in a once-a-week German language class at a German language school in Tokyo. The class is taught by a native-German speaker and her classmates were children who had all lived in Germany for some

time and wished to maintain the language. She has been attending this school for four years now and I continue to see her make progress. We also continued our home lessons in the same way for another year until she returned to Germany for another summer session at the same school. After her return from her second trip, however, I noticed an increase in her knowledge and use of German. When I switched to German, she switched to German as well. She was no longer reluctant to converse in German.

After my daughter's second trip to Germany, I thought to promote the usage of German in our household. I conversed with my daughter in one-on-one conversations in German, conversed with her in English in the presence of my wife, while my wife and daughter continued to communicate in Japanese with each other. It was quite a mix! We managed this linguistic arrangement for three or four weeks but gradually reverted to speaking mostly in Japanese and English again. I still continue to instruct Erika in German with the use of textbooks for 15 minutes each time or so several times a week. She is conversant in German although not on the same level as native-German speaking children her age. She attends middle school now which follows a bilingual English-Japanese curriculum and is academically adept in both languages.

Discussion

Although SLA and TLA are very common in some parts of the world, there are still many misconceptions surrounding these two fields. What constitutes "balanced bilingualism"? If confusion exists about bilingualism, then there is bound to be vagueness concerning multilingualism too. "A bilingual or multilingual person may have a perfect command of one or two languages, a limited mastery of some, and a passing knowledge of even more" (Aronin & O Laoire: 2004 22). The proficiency levels, then, which characterize TLA are as varied as the languages that they include. Although there is much overlap in the research between SLA and TLA, the command of languages is viewed differently. These different views are due to the distinctive backgrounds of these two fields. SLA emphasizes pedagogy, while TLA, particularly through its model of multilinguality, focuses on the sociolinguistic factors which motivate people to learn additional languages (Aronin & O Laoire, 2004). To be more precise, TLA looks less at the actual learning of languages and more at the social and cultural environments which influence learners.

My daughter's own German and English language learning experiences

encompassed both SLA and TLA factors. Her acquisition of English was very much like that of a native English-speaking child in the first few years. We spoke it at home on a daily basis. It was only later that I instructed her in reading and writing in much the same way as SLA teachers teach their students. Although my daughter's oral skills were relatively advanced, she still needed support similar to the instruction that SLA students receive. The linguistic goals which I had set were clear and reasonable with the aim to give her the English language skills to prepare her for her studies at her bilingual middle school. She was very successful in reaching these goals.

Although I started using German at home much later than I did with English, I approached it in a similar way. I attempted to use it naturally by speaking it on a daily basis. When I realized my daughter was only making minimal progress, I changed my approach more in line with how languages are taught formally in SLA. I used textbooks and concentrated on grammar and vocabulary. My daughter improved but the improvement was much slower than I had anticipated. TLA occurred when she spent time at the summer camps in Germany interacting with German-speaking children.

In contrast to my daughter's experiences with learning English, the obvious differences in her acquisition of German was that her language exposure was much more limited, it started at a later stage in her life, and the language input was more oriented to SLA than to TLA . Up to this point, she has achieved partial fluency in German.

I do not suggest that her partial achievement was a failure or that the before-mentioned differences contributed to her less than complete fluency. It is easy to package language acquisition, both SLA and TLA, in ways that would invite notions of predictability. Language learning is not predictable and the factors (language crossing, parental input, emotions, attitude, notions of prestige, identity, amount of education, etc.) that influence the learning of it are different from person to person. In my daughter's case, the linguistic goal was not very linguistic at all, but had to do more with her view of herself as a person of German heritage who needed to develop some knowledge of the language in order to substantiate her identity as German. She is also comfortable with her Japanese and English language skills in that her skill levels meet her social and educational needs. Now she proudly says she is trilingual which she is.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to relate my daughter's experiences in the acquisition of three languages, Japanese, English and German, to highlight how the aspects of SLA and TLA share both similarities and differences. SLA processes can and should be used in tandem with those of TLA multilinguality to promote language acquisition. However, the goals should be clearly defined and the end result should clearly belong to one approach or the other. Any mixing of the final goals of one language tends only to confuse the language learner, but these goals may differ among the same learner in the acquisition of multiple languages. As in my daughter's case, her goals of English acquisition were in line with SLA while the aims of her German acquisition were related to the sociolinguistic underpinnings of TLA.

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