

TEACHING CHILDREN A SECOND LANGUAGE

SEGU

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ABSTRAK

Pembelajaran bahasa asing telah menyebabkan semakin banyak orang yang dapat bicara lebih dari satu bahasa. Hal ini juga berdampak pada anak-anak mereka. Tulisan ini berbicara tentang apakah anak yang dibesarkan dengan lebih dari satu bahasa memiliki kemampuan yang lebih baik di satu bahasa saja atau memiliki kemampuan yang sama di dua bahasa yang dikuasainya.

Kata Kunci: Second language, bilingual

Introduction

As English is becoming more and more popular among people in every corner of the world, it has contributed to the increasing number of bilinguals. More and more people now can speak a second language. People learn a second language for different reasons and for different purposes. Some learn it for occupational requirements. Some learn it because they want to have prestige over the others. Also, a good proficiency in a second language, particularly English, has a lot of advantages. Among other things is that an individual who speaks English can travel to every part of the world without experiencing trouble communicating with other people.

Today as more people appreciate cultural differences, many children grow up bilingually. Some become bilinguals because their parents want them to be. Others become bilinguals because of their environment or other socio-cultural aspects such as tradition and religion. Many bilinguals manage to maintain the mastery

of their languages. This means that they are equally fluent in both languages they have acquired. However, some bilinguals fail to keep an equal command of the two languages. One language becomes more dominant than the other. In other words, these bilinguals have greater skills in one language than the other.

We might have a question in mind: why do bilinguals have better skills in one language than the other? There are many factors contributing to this imbalanced proficiency. One of the reasons is that they are exposed to one language more than the other. As a result, they acquire more vocabulary in one of the two languages they know. This can happen to any bilingual especially those who use a certain language more frequently than the other for communication.

Therefore, it is of my interest to learn how early bilinguals acquire their vocabulary. After reading a number of references, I came to my own conclusion that in acquiring vocabulary early bilinguals mix the words of the two languages and

later on, as they grow up, learn to separate the two languages.

I. Factors influencing the acquisition of vocabulary in early bilinguals

A. Environment

One of the most influential aspects of the vocabulary acquisition is the environment where children learn the languages. Children who speak different languages at home and at school will automatically have two sources of input. Parents, who raise their children speaking a particular minority language at home and send these children to a school where the majority language is used as the language of instruction, present a good opportunity of raising their children bilingually. Consequently, the children are learning two languages simultaneously.

Parental input in the vocabulary acquisition plays a very important role as most children trust their parents more than other people. Children often think that what their parents tell them is always right and good. We sometimes hear a child saying, "But my mother says that it's an X; It's not a Y". In fact, young children, especially those who are very close to their parents, seem to believe that their parents are more knowledgeable. Therefore, what their parents say influences the way they learn a language especially in the acquisition of vocabulary.

Since children go to school and interact with other children, they have another influential input, i.e. from their friends. In some cases many children acquire more vocabulary because of their contact with other children. At home, their parents might be too tired of the day's work to teach new words to their children. In addition, many parents are not well educated enough that they do not know many latest terms in the language they speak. Some parents have education to some extent but do not follow the latest development necessary to bring up-to-date

information to their children. De Houwer (1998) argues that young children growing up bilingually are for the most part doing so because there is no way that they can grow up monolingually.

B. Dominance in a particular language

Children who are exposed to two languages at the same time may be more dominant in one language than the other. They also go through some periods of mixing the two languages and borrowing vocabulary to express ideas. This happens because vocabulary may exist in one language but not in the other. Sometimes words from one language can be used more easily to convey a message that is not easy in the other language.

The frequency of using one language more than the other contributes enormously to this dominance. Children who constantly use a particular language are likely to become very fluent in it. In some cases, the frequency of using one language may cause children to favor the language over the other. As a result they tend to have the opinion that the language they frequently speak is their language and the other language is just the one they happen to know how to speak.

Another important aspect that plays a part in the dominance of one language is the fact that children have more input in one language than the other. A Child who seldom goes out to play or associate with his/her peers would have more input in the language his/her parents speak. On the other hand a child who interacts a lot with his/her friends may have more input in the language that is not spoken at home. Of course there are words that a child never uses at home and there also words that s/he never uses outside of the home.

Therefore, dominance in one language over the other is, to some extent, caused by more input of vocabulary in one language than the other. A child who has better command vocabulary in one of the

two languages tends to be dominant in one particular language that s/he is good at.

C. Living in different places for a period of time

As the world is becoming more globalized, there are people who have to live in one country for a period of time and in another for a certain period of time. This can occur to those who have a change of job or a change of place of service. For example a representative of an international firm may be stationed in one country and then in another depending on the needs of the company that sends him/her.

Obviously, living in different places for a certain period of time has an impact on children's acquisition of vocabulary. These children experience interacting with people who speak different languages.

It is often claimed that hearing two or more languages at the same time will confuse the child and lead to problems in acquiring language. Some researchers also claim that the acquisition of the main language of the environment will stand a better chance without competition from the other language.

However De Houwer (1998) argues against this confusion. She believes that there is no scientific evidence to date that hearing two or more languages leads to delays or disorders in language acquisition. She further affirms that many children throughout the world grow up with two or more languages from infancy without showing any signs of language delays or disorders.

There are many cases in which people have to move to a different place because they face economic problems. The results of economic development in a city, for example, lures people from a village to move there to get a job or a better living. Children who come with them will be exposed to different surroundings that provide them with a new input of language features including vocabulary.

There are also cases in which people have to move to another country for political reasons. The result of communist repression in Vietnam, for example, has caused many of its citizens to seek refuge in the United States and many other countries. Consequently, refugee children will learn a new language or at least slowly acquire vocabulary of the language spoken in the new country.

II. Mixed Output

Since children are exposed to two languages at the same time, they can be expected to go through some periods of mixing the two languages to express ideas. Sometimes they even mix words within the same sentence. One of the main reasons for this mixing to occur is because vocabulary may exist in one language but not in the other. Some children may find it easier to convey a message in one language but not the other.

Because of this mixing phenomenon, some researchers like Deuchar and Quay (1998) believe in the single linguistic system. Children may also experiment with the two languages to create special effects or to express themselves in specific settings.

In addition, because of this phenomenon children may not be equally skilled in both languages. One language seems to be more dominant than the other. The frequency of use of a particular language may be the reason for this language control. In general, language problems are less likely to occur when both languages are introduced early and simultaneously. Children are more likely to have mixing problems if they are introduced to a second language during the preschool years after another language was used exclusively. Some people believe that if a second language is introduced before the first language is fully developed, the development of the first language may be slowed or even regress. Others believe that

the skill level of the second language will develop only to that of the first (Garau and Vidal, 2001)

We have learnt above that some researchers believe that bilingual children who are learning to speak two languages go through a stage confusing the two languages. However, Romaine (1995) believes that the use of words from both languages in a single sentence which is often cited as evidence that the child cannot distinguish between the two languages, is not a sign of confusion. In reality, the fact that children mix words from the two languages does not show that they are unable to distinguish between the two languages. Also, it has been shown that the use of two languages in one sentence by mature bilinguals reveals a great deal of linguistic skill.

Other researchers like Garau and Vidal (2001) believes that it is also true that, while young bilingual children sometimes use words from two languages in the same sentence, they produce more sentences using only one language. This clearly shows that they are able to keep their languages separate.

Sometimes children use words from both languages in the same sentence when talking to people that they know can understand both of the languages. These children know that the people they are talking to will not get upset with them for using such sentences. In other words, the social context in which children find themselves determines to what extent they use more than one language in a single sentence.

III. Separation of two languages

A. Factors contributing to the separation

De Houwer (1998) says that many ideas that people have about children growing up with a second or third language in childhood are not of any benefit to these children and may in fact have adverse effects. She dismisses this common myth

about children growing up bilingually. She even suggests that children can become fluent users of two or more languages.

Therefore, the separation of two languages is likely to occur as children become more and more skilful in the languages. Let us take a look at some factors contributing to the separation below.

One of the most important factors that contributes to the separation of the two languages in a child is the age. As children grow up, they become more aware of the languages they use. This awareness, according to researchers, is likely to occur between the ages of 4 to 7. It varies from one child to another. Some children may grow above seven years old and still do not realize that they can speak a second language.

Despite the ability to use more than one language, many children between the ages of 3 to 5 have not been able to keep the languages separate. This claim, according to some researchers, is based on the mixing lexicons in their utterances.

Another factor that adds to this separation is the features of the language. Each language has distinct features which distinguish it from the other. Children who speak two languages may somehow realize that grammatical structures in those languages are different and that they are able to differentiate the structures based on their language skills. Let us take French and Italian as examples. Despite the fact that the two languages belong to the same language family, they have different inflections and other grammatical rules.

Education also contributes to ability to separate the two languages. A child goes to school and learns one of the languages s/he speaks and becomes conscious what language s/he is using at school and what language s/he is using at home.

B. Socio-cultural aspects

Arnberg (1987) says that with greater recognition of cultural differences

today, people are more likely to maintain and share their primary language with their children and to promote bilingualism as a reflection of ethnic pride and identity. As more and more people are learning a second language, they have changed their view of bilingualism, not as sign of lack of proficiency in one of the languages anymore but as a prestige.

Children whose parents are proud to be bilingual become more aware of the languages they master. They realize that they know more languages than the other children. This helps them a lot to distinguish the two languages. They no longer feel ashamed of speaking another “foreign” language since it gives them the advantage over other children. For example they can show off that they are able to communicate with someone without other children knowing what they are talking about.

Family tradition also plays a role in the separation of the two languages in a bilingual child. Families who maintain traditional way of life usually use the language of their ancestors'. Thus the children raised in these families have a better understanding of the difference between the language they use with members of the family and the one they use with other people. Let us take Hispanic Americans who still maintain Spanish as the language spoken at home. The children will realize that the family language is Spanish, while English is another language that they use when they away from home.

The choice of language by parents plays a significant part in the development of a child's language. Garau and Vidal (2001) argue that it appears that parents' pragmatic choices may have an impact on the development of productive family bilingualism.

People who are very religious often preserve the language of their religion or at least use it in religious ceremonies. Children raised in this sort of family are

likely to be able to differentiate between the language used for communication and the one used in religious activities.

IV. Conclusion

One of the most important information that I learnt from reading about early bilingual issues is that mixing of words from the two languages does not always indicate that a child does not know the difference between the two languages. I personally assumed that children probably have a single language system in their brain. However, it is interesting to learn that researchers have different perspectives concerning single and dual system of language in bilingual children.

In my opinion, this issue deserves further research as more and more children are becoming bilinguals.

I also believe that people can be equally fluent in both languages as long as they have balanced exposure to the two languages simultaneously. Also, the equivalent frequency of using both languages can be a factor that contributes to the equal mastery of the languages.

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