

Bilingualism/Multilingualism and Language Acquisition Theories

by Evienia Papadaki-D'Onofrio

In an increasingly diversified and multilingual world, more and more young children find themselves in an environment where more than one language is used. Similarly, with job changes that involve moving to different parts of the world, parents can feel overwhelmed by the linguistic demands on them and their children. What can parents expect of their children? Do parents have anything to contribute to the process of early language development? What does it mean for children to learn two or more languages at the same time? Do children need to possess special skills to be able to cope with more than one language?

Despite the strength of the data (Grimes, 1992) which clearly demonstrates that today there are many more bilingual or multilingual individuals in the world than there are monolingual, and many more children who have been and continued to be educated through a second or a later-acquired language and, despite the wealth of studies and research carried out in the last 40 years or so on the field of bilingualism, there is still considerable lack of awareness of how children acquire language and whether bi-multilingualism can be an asset or not.

The purpose of this article is to elicit some of the prominent theories on first and second language acquisition and to look at some of the main features of early bi-multilingual development. In conclusion I will refer to recent research findings and studies that report on the experiences and outcomes of bi-multilingual programs.



I am of Greek origin and married to an Italian. After living, studying, and working for 20 years in the UK we moved to Italy where we have lived since 1992 with our two daughters. We decided to bring up our daughters trilingually (Greek, Italian, and English) which has been an extremely rewarding experience. I received a BA honours in Modern Languages, a Masters Degree in Bilingualism and Second Language teaching and learning, and a Post Graduate Certificate in Education. I have taught extensively in primary, secondary, adult, and community education settings. I believe that learning languages from early on is the best way to prepare tomorrow's world citizens who will be facing the demands of an ever changing society. In 1995 I started a non-profit bilingual school for children aged 1-11. The school has been flourishing and today offers an enriched model of bilingual education for 120 children of different nationalities. We use the High/Scope approach by which I was inspired two years ago when I participated in the World Forum held in Athens. I train newly qualified teachers in academic research and in community work supporting bilingual families.

First and second language acquisition

There are different theories of how humans acquire language; most scholars tend to agree though, that "normal" humans who are exposed to a language environment will acquire at least one language within the first five years of life. Language acquisition is the most complex accomplishment of early childhood. A language system is a puzzle with a variety of interlocking pieces: phonology (the sounds of the language); vocabulary (the words of the language); grammar (the way the words are ordered and put together); discourse (the way the sentences are put together); and pragmatics (the rules of how to use the language) [Tabors, 1997]. Young children are considered to be competent in using the language when they have mastered all these pieces.

How is language acquired? Early language acquisition is a phenomenon which has gained increasing research interest over the last 50 years or so; and although our understanding of this area is still far from complete, enormous progress has been made in this field. Initially research findings seemed to have been polarised around two distinct theories:

1) **The environmentalist /behaviourist theories.** (Skinner, 1957) sustained that language is learned through a process of stimulus-response-reinforcement. The child was seen as a "tabula rasa" to be filled in with information and knowledge. Adult language is the model, and depending on the positive or negative reinforcement received, the child's language learning process will be shaped and extended accordingly. Although adult reinforcement certainly seems to play a role in some aspects of the early child language development, as a general explanation of how language actually is being learned, it proved to be rather inadequate.

2) This led to the development of another theory promoted in particular by the American linguist Noam Chomsky (1965), the **innatist theory** and later refined by the **Natural Approach theory** (Krashen, 1982). Chomsky sustained that children are born with the ability to learn language (Language Acquisition

Device) which could explain why children around the world learn language at approximately the same age and seem to learn it in a similar manner. According to Chomsky and later, to other researchers, there are universal principles built into the brain which allow the child to analyse the language he/she hears, and to sort out the bits and pieces of language. In other words the child is pre-programmed to learn language and, therefore, the basic principles for forming grammar (universal grammar hypothesis) exist in the brain, waiting to unfold as the child grows older.

More recent researchers (Wells, 1987; Halliday, 1973) seem to hold the view that early language acquisition is based on a complex interaction between the above two factors — **the interactionist theories**. According to the above scholars, language learning does not occur in a social vacuum, as Chomsky seemed to suggest. Language depends on cognition, and the child uses language as a means of communication with his/her environment. These more recent theories seem to consider the child as an “active learner” with a strong inner drive to learn to understand and make sense of the environment in which he/she exists. Language learning is seen to be acquired in a similar way to other types of knowledge.

Second language acquisition and bilingualism

Within the same time frame as it takes monolingual children to learn one language, bilingual children learn two (or more) languages and become adept at using them in socially diverse and appropriate ways. Bilingualism is a far more common phenomenon than many monolingual native speakers imagine. Over 70 percent of the world’s population speaks more than one language (Siraj-Blatchford, 1994a). Thus, it is just as natural to grow up speaking more than one language as it is to grow up speaking only one. However, the study of bilingualism has not been exempted from the scholarly tendency to create dichotomies. Popular ones include coordinate versus compound bilingualism (Weinreich, 1953), early versus late bilingualism (Lambert, 1985), simultaneous versus successive bilingualism (McLaughlin, 1984), additive versus subtractive bilingualism (Lambert, 1975), and elite versus folk bilingualism (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981).

While such distinctions have served a purpose in drawing attention to certain aspects of bilingualism, perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from these distinctions is that some of them refer to characteristics of individuals (the first three mentioned), and others to characteristics of social groups

(the last two). No single definition of individual bilingualism is broad enough to cover all instances of individuals who are called “bilingual.” Many bilingual people are more proficient in one of their two (or more) languages, although the language involved may not be dominant in the same contexts.

Similarly, for the societal bilingualism, there is a range of possibilities. Fewer than 25% of the world’s approximately 200 countries recognise two or more official languages, with a mere handful recognising more than two (e.g. India, Luxemburg, Nigeria). However, despite these conservative government policies, available data indicate that there are many more bilingual or multilingual societies in the world than there are monolingual. In many parts of the world, bilingualism or multilingualism and innovative approaches to education that involve the use of two or more languages constitute the normal everyday experience (Dutcher, 1994; World Bank, 1995). The results from published, longitudinal, and critical research undertaken in varied settings throughout the world indicate clearly that the development of multiple language proficiency is possible, and indeed that it is viewed as desirable by educators, policy makers, and parents in many countries.

Let us now shift our attention to how a second language is acquired in the early years of life. Two types of second language acquisition may occur: “simultaneous acquisition” and “successive or sequential acquisition.” “Simultaneous acquisition” occurs when children are exposed to a second or third language from birth (e.g. one parent speaks in one language, the other in another, and in the case of a third language, this could be the language of the environment the child lives in). “Sequential or successive acquisition” occurs when children begin to learn a second language after the first language is partially established (e.g. when a child starts pre-school or school and the school’s language is different from the one at home). In the first instance of bilingual acquisition, the process of acquisition is considered to be similar to the first language acquisition. Research has shown that infant bilinguals tend to store their second language in the same part of the brain, normally the left hemisphere, which is where one’s first language is stored (Genesee et al, 1979). This confirms that a second or multiple languages learned at birth are all treated as the “first” language.

In the second instance however, second language acquisition seems to be influenced by the following important factors (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2001):

- timing / age
- aptitude

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- attitude
- motivation
- strategy (e.g. language input separation by context or by person)
- consistency
- learning style
- opportunity and support (e.g. the role of the family, the role of the school, the role of the community)
- personality
- characteristics of the home/family environment (interactions with siblings, access to the target language, L1/L2 literacy, etc.).

While second language acquisition is influenced by some or by all of the above mentioned factors, it is also important to note some of the main **milestones** of second language development in young children:

■ **The silent period stage.** Some children need time before they feel confident to use their second language, and there are no minimum or maximum time limits.

■ **The mixing languages and code-switching stage.** Most bilingual children, at some stage, will use sounds and words from both languages in the same utterances or conversations (mixing) or may switch languages for at least a phrase or a sentence (code-switching), even though the person they are talking with may be using only one language. This may happen because they still lack sufficient vocabulary in one or both languages to express themselves entirely in each language. Bilingual children will naturally stop doing this as their languages continue to develop. Experts in the field, however, consider this as an effective communication strategy and, by no means should it create concerns about the child getting confused (Romaine, 1995). Other interpretations of such a phenomenon are that language mixing and code-switching are natural features of adult bilinguals and bilingual societies' speech and, that the sociolinguistic context often dictates whether the use of two languages in discourse is appropriate or not.

■ **The separation languages stage.** Most bilingual children tend to associate a language with a particular person or place and this helps them to separate the two languages and start using them more systematically. Consistent rich language exposure and clearly distinct language contexts will further enhance language separation.

■ **The dominance of one language over the other stage.** Many bilingual children, when they start school, do not want to appear different from their monolingual peers (majority

group), and may go through a stage where they are reluctant to speak the home language. Parents often report that gradually the use of the host country language becomes more dominant and children answer their parents in the dominant language. This reluctance to continue to use the home language may be affected by the attitudes shown by the community and the child's school setting in particular.

■ **The stage of rapid shift in balance when input in the environment changes.** This may happen when bilingual children visit relatives at their or their parents' country of origin, or have a relative visiting over an extended period of time.

As complex as bilingualism and second language acquisition may seem, there is no doubt that bi-multilingual individuals today have an advantage over monolingual individuals. Research continues to confirm that children who learn a second language are more creative and better at solving complex problems than those who do not. Studies have shown that bilinguals outperform similar monolingual peers on both verbal and non verbal tests of intelligence and tend to achieve higher scores on standardised tests. Individuals who speak more than one language have the ability to communicate with more people, read more literature, and benefit more from travel or work abroad. Knowing a second language also gives people a competitive advantage in the workforce. These are some of the compelling reasons for parents and educators to encourage the development of a second (or third) language with young children.

Bilingualism or multilingualism in education

The use of multiple languages in education may be attributed to numerous factors, such as the linguistic heterogeneity of a country or a region, specific social or religious attitudes, or the desire to promote national or community identity. In addition, innovative language education programs are often implemented to promote proficiency in international language(s) or wider communication together with proficiency in national and regional languages. In many countries of the world where multilingualism predominates, children are exposed to numerous languages as they move from their homes out to the surrounding communities and eventually through the formal education system. A comprehensive review of research on the use of first and second languages in education, carried out for the World Bank (Dutcher, 1994), examined three different types of countries:

- those with no (or few) mother tongue speakers of the language of wider communication (e.g. Haiti, Nigeria, the Philippines);
- those with some mother tongue speakers of the language of wider communication (e.g. Guatemala); and
- those with many mother tongue speakers of the language of wider communication (e.g. Canada, New Zealand, United States).

Several conclusions can be drawn from this study:

- Success in school depends upon the child's mastery of cognition/academic language, which is very different from social language used at home. (A worthwhile reference here is the work of Jim Cummins [1979, 1981a, 1984], an authority in bilingualism and bilingual education, where he draws a distinction between the different time periods required by second language learners to acquire conversational fluency [BICS] in their second language as compared to grade-appropriate academic proficiency [CALP] in that language.
- The development of cognitive/academic language requires time (four to seven years of formal instruction. [Collier, 1987; Thomas & Collier, 1997; Klesmer, 1994; Cummins, 1981a].)
- Individuals most easily develop cognitive skills and master content material when they are taught in a familiar language.
- Cognitive/academic language skills, once developed, and content subject material, once acquired, transfer readily from one language to another (Hakuta, 1986).
- The best predictor of cognitive/academic language development in a second language is the level of development of cognitive/academic language proficiency in the first language.
- Children learn a second language in different ways depending upon their culture and their individual personality.
- If the goal is to help the student ultimately develop the highest possible degree of academic performance and second language proficiency, time spent instructing the child in a familiar language is a wise investment.

Some common characteristics of successful programs

According to the most recent research findings, the following common characteristics identified those programs that aimed to provide students with multiple language proficiency and foster academic success.

- Development of the mother tongue is encouraged to promote cognitive development and as a basis for learning the second language.
- Parental and community support and involvement are essential.
- Teachers are able to understand, speak, and use with a high level of proficiency the language of instruction, whether it is their first or second language.
- Teachers are well trained, have cultural competence and subject-matter knowledge, and continually upgrade their training.
- Recurrent costs for innovative programs are approximately the same as they are for traditional programs, although there may be additional one-time start-up costs.
- Cost benefit calculations can typically be estimated in terms of the cost savings to the education system, improvements in years of schooling, and enhanced earning potential for students with multiple language proficiency.

Although most of the educational research regarding bilingual learners tends to focus on the years of formal education, well organised early childhood bi-multilingual programs can make an enormous contribution towards preparing bilingual children for academic success and bilingual proficiency in the years to come. Early childhood bilingual programs should not be seen as early assimilation programs which only aim at the transition of bilingual learners to the mainstream monolingual program. Bilingual programs should be available for all children, be it bilingual or monolingual. Bilingual programs value linguistic and cultural diversity and promote a strong self-concept with positive feelings about ethnic identity.

In conclusion, although a considerable amount of studies exist on the topics of bi-multilingualism and bi-multilingual education, and although the majority of the world's population is bilingual or even multilingual, public awareness of the subject is still scarce. Many people — some of whom are in key professional positions — still follow their "natural instinct" when expressing opinions or judgements, often misleading and misinforming parents of children growing up bilingually with the risk of causing adverse effects.

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Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

What's your natural instinct?: This author points to the reality that many teachers misunderstand the potential benefits of multilingualism for the academic success of children. Are your staff among those in the know? Create a simple true/false pretest to give to teachers from the information in this article to administer before a staff meeting to talk about the topic. Consider the conclusions about multiculturalism listed in the article and facilitate a discussion among staff about their thoughts, ideas, and points of view. Repeat the process as a posttest to see what teachers learned.

Consider the possibilities: Convinced that all children should have their home languages validated in their care and early education classrooms? If so, work with teachers and families to design a program that introduces children to second or third languages while they are most able to learn them.

Exploring cultural issues: The author points out the cultural issues related to second language acquisition, particularly in monolingual countries. Explore the cultural points of view of your families and staff to better understand this aspect of culture on your program.