

Raising Children Bilingual from Birth

Joel HENSLEY

Abstract

This paper presents an argument for raising children bilingually from birth based on recent studies. After a definition of bilingualism is established, the paper will go on to explore the research on child bilingualism and the age at which children are first exposed to multiple input languages. From the perspective of the bilingual paradox, it is then argued that raising a child bilingually does not, in fact, hinder language development. To the contrary, research is presented which indicates there exists a window of opportunity within which children can be exposed to more than one language and successfully begin developing them in parallel. Lastly, the paper argues in support of raising children bilingually from birth, with attention given to the roles of motivation and learners' individual situations.

Key Words: bilingualism, acquisition, bilingual paradox

In the past decades, advances in technology have come to allow not only for worldwide travel, but for instant global communication and interaction. Thus, even in countries which have perceived themselves traditionally as monolingual, like the United States, people are becoming more aware of bilingualism, which coincides with an increasing attention to the rights of bilingual residents. Particularly, there has been growth in the field of bilingual education in the United States. This has led parents and educators to ask the question of when is the best time to introduce a second language to children. Some would say that children should be exposed to a second (or additional) language from birth, while others would disagree, saying that doing so could cause a child to become confused or even slower in his or her cognitive development. This opposition of ideas is what has come to be known as the bilingual paradox (Petitto et al., 2001). This paper deals with the issue of raising children bilingually. Bilingualism will first be discussed in its many facets, followed by support for denying that raising children bilingually is a hindrance. Evidence will then be presented which shows the benefits of raising children bilingually from an early age. Finally, further evidence as to the advantages of raising children bilingually not only from an early age, but from birth, will be given.

Bilingualism

In order to discuss bilingualism, a working definition of what bilingualism entails must first be pursued. Simply looking at the morphology of ‘bilingualism’ lends the idea of an ability to understand two languages. O’Grady, Archibald, Aronoff, and Rees-Miller (2005) wrote that bilingualism is “the state of possessing knowledge of two languages” (p. 630). Likewise, Spolsky (1998) defines a bilingual as “a person who has some functional ability in a second language” (p. 45). Neither of these definitions state at what point knowing something about a second language becomes bilingualism; indeed, they are purposefully vague. This is because the reasons for speaking more than one language are highly situational and differ for every speaker. “Since the bilingual uses the two languages for different purposes in different circumstances, s/he is rarely competent in both languages” (Shin, 2005, p. 17-18) in any given condition. Some bilinguals may be more proficient in technical terms relating to their careers and the like, and others in relaxed social situations with friends. For the sake of this paper, the definition of bilingualism will be the working knowledge of two languages in certain situations. Thus, a bilingual is a person who has the ability to use two different languages depending on the situation and social environment.

In the literature on bilingualism there are many sub-types of bilingualism that have been posited dealing mostly with how and when the second language (L2) is acquired. In her study of additive bilinguals, Oketani (1997) defines three such subtypes: subtractive, additive, and dominant. She wrote that linguistic-minority students have traditionally been labeled subtractive bilinguals, but contends that such a label “may conceal a great deal of heterogeneity” (p. 335). Instead, she employs the terms additive and dominant bilinguals. Additive bilinguals are those who achieve a high level of proficiency in both their L1 and L2, whereas dominant bilinguals are those who see less achievement in their L2 because of self-imposed limited exposure to their L2.

Similarly, in a study of Greek and English bilingual children, Haritos and Nelson (2001) also define two kinds of bilingualism, specifically in children. The first is coordinate bilingualism, where L2 is acquired later than L1. The second is simultaneous bilingualism—which was later changed to compound-simultaneous by Haritos (2003) in a follow-up study—in which both L1 and L2 are acquired before the age of three years. Tokuhama-Espinosa (2001) states the idea of compound-simultaneous bilingualism in a simplified way, calling it infant bilingualism, where infant bilinguals are “those who learn two languages simultaneously from birth” (p. 22).

In this paper, the terms compound-simultaneous bilingual and infant bilingual will be considered interchangeable. To simplify, the abbreviation 2L1 (Francis, 2003, p. 6) will be employed when referring to children who acquire both L1 and L2 simultaneously, according to the approach that “multiple languages learned at birth are all treated as the ‘first’ language” (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2001, p. 23).

Evidence Against 2L1 as Negative

In order to be able to fully accept the idea of 2L1, the negative ideas embodied within the bilingual paradox must be addressed. Are bilingual children sponges of language, capable of absorbing any number of different linguistic structures? Or, on the other hand, are they overwhelmed with trying to ingest two separate grammars with differing sound systems? To answer questions such as these, researchers have taken into account regularly used testing methods for bilingualism in children, resulting in some interesting findings.

Shin (2005) wrote that the majority of tests used for determining the proficiency of 2L1 children have been traditionally based on adult coordinate bilinguals. These tests, she continues, when applied to children, not only fail to take into account *how* and *when* an L2 is acquired, but also do not consider the 2L1 child's language background and patterns of use in bilingual settings, focusing more on quantitative measures rather than qualitative. Because bilinguals, especially young 2L1 children, "will rarely have balanced competence in their two languages" (p. 16), an effective test for such a child would be required to consider all different situations and domains. This is why Haritos (2003) writes that currently there is no universally accepted method of assessing bilingual proficiency.

Further corroboration as to why 2L1 may not be thought of as a hindrance may be found in considering the bi- and multilingual societies around the world. In countries like the Philippines, Singapore, and Nigeria, the norm is for people to be bi- or multilingual. According to Shin (2005), the "argument that bilingual input confuses children is not substantiated since most children growing up in bilingual or multilingual societies learn to use two or more languages with no apparent negative consequences to their cognitive development" (p. 17). This holds true in the results of a study of 2L1 eight- and nine-year-olds, in which Haritos and Nelson (2001) found that subjects were not only successfully bilingual, but were even "quite cognizant of the respective structural and semantic rules of both their languages" (p. 429).

This not only holds true in spoken bilingualism, but also in biliteracy (being literate in two languages). In a study of first and second grade 2L1 students, Hernández (2001) found that "the writing skills of strong second-language children writers are virtually indistinguishable from those of strong first-language children" (p. 251). Furthermore, the writing skills of those students who were "weak second-language writers" in Hernández's study, "did not lag significantly behind the first-language writers" (p. 251), which led her to conclude that 2L1 children perform as well as monolingual children.

Similar results were discovered in a study of two groups of bilingual children who were 2L1 in either French and English, or French and Langues des Signes Québécoise (Quebec Sign Language) (Petitto et al., 2001). This study found that early bilingual exposure did not cause significant delay of the milestones of normal language acquisition; the 2L1 students' lexical growth rate was equivalent to monolingual children over an identical time period (p. 473). The study further concluded that not only were the 2L1 children unhindered in their language acquisition, but also that "all children's language choice was systematically related to the language of the interlocutor" (p.

478). It can be seen through the results of these tests of 2L1 children, as well as observed in 2L1 speakers from bilingual (or multilingual) countries, that the myth of 2L1 acquisition as an impediment to young language learners as voiced in the bilingual paradox is simply not accurate.

Effects of 2L1 from Early Ages

Most people who have attempted acquiring a second language later in life can attest to the difficulties of such a feat. This is particularly obvious in the area of accent and the language-specific difficulties of any given language, such as the articles of English (a/an and the). Most of these difficulties can, over time, be overcome, but most would agree that an adult acquiring a second language does not do so with the speed and seeming effortlessness seen in children. Whether children are capable of learning a language “better” than an adult is still a topic under much debate; however, much of modern research seems to agree that few adults who acquire a second language later in life are able to completely rid themselves of the accent carried over from their L1 (Brown, 2006, p. 63).

Yet children who acquire an L2 do not seem to have as much of a problem with accent. It is believed that the brain of a child is more “plastic” than that of an adult, which means waiting to acquire an L2 makes it harder to obtain (Petitto et al., 2001). In her book, Tokuhama-Espinosa (2001) wrote of “Windows of Opportunity” (p. 14) in which a child may be introduced to an L2 with the highest potential for acquisition. She states that between the ages of four and seven years is the best time to introduce a monolingual child to an L2. However, just because this is the best time to introduce a monolingual child to an L2 does not make it the ideal. Li (1999) cautions against postponed or interrupted development in a child’s communicative proficiency, particularly in the area of academics, stating that it can take up to five to seven years for a child to catch up if such a situation were to occur.

Children (or adults) acquiring an L2 later in life, as opposed to an early age, may experience problems in other areas of life as well. You (2005) wrote of the case of Korean American children from a junior high school who were attempting to learn Korean as a heritage language. These children did not acquire Korean early, and were struggling to not only learn their heritage language, but also with feelings of ambivalence and negativity concerning their ethnic identity as Korean Americans. Many of the students in the study reported regretting not having put more effort into learning Korean earlier in life. Granted, not every L2 learner’s goal is the acquisition of a heritage language, but for anyone, acquiring an L2 nearly always consists of more than just learning the language itself.

2L1 from Birth

At the core of the bilingual paradox is a fear that exposing a child to two languages from birth will somehow cause him or her to lag behind other, monolingual children in language acquisition. However, current research and study would seem to suggest otherwise.

Tokuhama-Espinosa (2001) wrote “sometime between seven and nine months old, say present-day neurologists, enough neuro-connections are formed to separate the location of first and second languages in the brain” (p. 22). From their study of 2L1 children, Petitto et al. (2001) found that the capacity to differentiate between two languages is well in place *prior* to a child’s first words. In the same study, it was also found that “the capacity to differentiate between languages was evident even in the youngest bilinguals’ earliest instances of language production” (p. 493). Thus, the researchers concluded that “young infants are fully capable of different but parallel acquisition of two languages from the very first onset of language production” (p. 493).

This phenomenon of 2L1 acquisition does not slow or stop with a child’s beginning of production. Francis (2003) wrote that by the age of two years, 2L1 children show a strong tendency to separate languages grammatically at the multi-word stage. He goes on to write that 2L1 may be acquired at the same rate or with the same ease as that of L1 acquisition in monolingual children’s development due to the “settings” (p. 6) for each language in the 2L1 child appearing secure with the same level of automaticity and amount of input that is sufficient for monolingual children. This is why Tokuhama-Espinosa (2001) wrote that the first “Window of Opportunity” (p. 25-26) for bilingual (or multilingual) development in children is between birth and nine months of age. She also warns that if children are not exposed to an L2 during this first Window, it may take until the age of four years before they begin progressing in the L2.

Additional studies (Patterson, 2000; Petitto et al., 2001) have found that as 2L1 children continue to mature beyond the first words stage, their rate of acquisition in both languages does not abate. The results of Patterson’s study of 2L1 toddlers show that the level of vocabulary reported by the parents and observed by the researcher in the children’s two languages was similar to correlations among monolingual children of similar ages. This is sustained in the study performed by Petitto et al. which found the timetable of linguistic milestones in 2L1 children to be essentially similar to that of monolingual children, even for children whose second language was signed. It is further stated that differences in the timetable of linguistic milestones can be attributed to sociolinguistic environment, wherein a child may not have been presented with the need to acquire the same structure in both languages.

As 2L1 children enter the preschool years between two and five, it appears that proficiency does not wane. Francis (2003) wrote that as 2L1 children continue to progress in their bilingual acquisition, “findings point to an early convergence with adult codeswitching norms” (p. 9). Tokuhama-Espinosa (2001) as well as Haritos and Nelson (2001) wrote that it is during this period that 2L1 children become able to identify which language corresponds to which interlocutor and to switch accordingly. Hence, Petitto et al. (2001) were able to conclude that “being exposed to two languages from birth, by itself, does not cause delay and confusion to the normal processes of human

language acquisition” (p. 494).

It is apparent that all of the above studies demonstrate the advantages of exposing a child to two languages from birth. Still, raising a 2L1 child is not a given just because the parents are bilingual themselves or desire their child to be so. Motivation plays a large part in language acquisition, especially in that of 2L1 children’s development (Tokuhama-Espinosa 2001). Children’s attitudes towards one or both of their languages are affected by their parents’ views of the language(s), which need be taken into account (Li 1999).

Also, it cannot be forgotten that bilingualism does not equal perfect fluency in both languages, as proficiency is situational and need-based. “Even bilingual children who appear fluent in the two languages show differences in performance across language tasks, contexts, and conditions” (Gutiérrez-Clellen & Kreiter, 2003, p. 268), and there is no real way to measure 2L1 proficiency as it varies from child to child.

Nevertheless, in a study involving hearing children of parents who have hearing impairments, the subjects were able to develop age-appropriate English skills by spending ten hours a week with hearing, English-speaking adults (Petitto et al., 2001). Gutiérrez-Clellen and Kreiter (2003) also support this finding by stating quantity of input may not relate to rate of cross-language grammatical development. Children, while not attaining perfect fluency in both languages, appear to be perfectly capable of acquiring two languages from birth and using them affectively in the social contexts for which they are called, even if parents are not bilinguals themselves. The maxim of quality over quantity seems to ring true.

Conclusion

In this paper, a working definition of bilingualism was pursued and found to be that of a working knowledge of two languages in certain situations, with a bilingual being a person with the characteristic of bilingualism. The abbreviation “2L1” (Francis, 2003, p. 6) was used to refer to compound-simultaneous bilinguals (Haritos, 2003) and infant bilinguals (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2001) who acquire two languages simultaneously from birth. Some of the negative ideas embodied by the bilingual paradox concerning possible hindrances to 2L1 children were discussed and, through the evidence of multiple studies (Haritos, 2003; Haritos & Nelson, 2001; Hernández, 2001; Petitto et al., 2001), it is clear that the notion of such impediments is unfounded. The benefits of 2L1 acquisition from an early age were also discussed, particularly that of accent (or the lack thereof). In addition, several areas of possible complication in 2L1 acquisition from an early age, including Tokuhama-Espinosa’s (2001) “Windows of Opportunity” (p. 14), Li’s (1999) warning against postponement or interruption of 2L1 development, and the situation of Korean American children’s ethnic identity (You, 2005), were presented. Finally, the benefits of 2L1 acquisition from birth were discussed according to the results of studies involving the proficiency of 2L1 children (Francis,

2003; Haritos & Nelson, 2001; Patterson, 2000; Petitto et al., 2001). The roles of motivation and situational necessity as well as adult input were also introduced.

It would be irrational to assume that all children who grow up in bilingual environments acquire both languages fluently, or even at all. However, based on the studies reported in this paper, it is evident that 2L1 acquisition does not necessitate delayed or impeded acquisition of either language in children. This seems to depend highly on the environment and manner in which a 2L1 child is raised, but further comparative studies need to be analyzed in order to better understand this specific, but increasingly common occurrence.

References

- Brown, H. D. (2006). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. White Plains, NY: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Francis, N. (2003, April-May). Cross-linguistic influence, transfer and other kinds of language interaction: evidence for modularity from the study of bilingualism. Paper presented at the *Annual International Symposium on Bilingualism*, Tempe, AZ.
- Gutiérrez-Clellen, V. F., & Kreiter, J. (2003). Understanding child bilingual acquisition using parent and teacher reports. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 24, 267-288.
- Haritos, C. (2003). Listening, remembering, and speaking in two languages: how did you do that? *Bilingual Research Journal*, 27, 73-99.
- Haritos, C., & Nelson, K. (2001). Bilingual memory: the interaction of language and thought. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 25, 417-438.
- Hernández, A. C. (2001). The expected and unexpected literacy outcomes of bilingual students. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 25, 251-276.
- Li, X. (1999). How can language minority parents help their children become bilingual in familial context? A case study of a language minority mother and her daughter. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 23, 113-125.
- O, Grady, W., Archibald, J., Aronoff, M., & Rees-Miller, J. (2005) *Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction*. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Oketani, H. (1997). Additive bilinguals: the case of post-war second generation Japanese Canadian youths. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 21, 334-354.
- Patterson, J. L. (2000). Observed and reported expressive vocabulary and word combinations in bilingual toddlers. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 43, 121-128.
- Petitto, L. A., Katerelos, K., Levy, B. G., Gauna, K., Tétreault, K., & Ferraro, V. (2001). Bilingual signed and spoken language acquisition from birth: implications for the mechanisms underlying early bilingual language acquisition. *Journal of Child Language*, 28, 453-496.
- Shin, Sarah J. (2005). *Developing in Two Languages: Korean Children in America*. Tonawanda,

NY: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Spolsky, B. (1998). *Sociolinguistics*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Tokuhama-Espinosa, T. (2001). *Raising Multilingual Children: foreign language acquisition and children*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

You, B. (2005). Children negotiating Korean American ethnic identity through their their heritage language. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 29, 711-721.