

Example of essay on language contact and bilingualism

[Technology](#), [Development](#)



Introduction

Language is a channel through which people communicate with each other. It is of utmost importance for a child's development as it enables a child to gather information, process it and create conceptual images in his or her mind. Verbal communication enables a child to comprehend the world around and learn from it. Thus, language is an integral part of both, the formal and informal education systems. There is an increasing focus on enabling children to learn more than one language in the United States (King and Fogle 1). Bilingualism is the capability to communicate in two languages with almost equal proficiency. The rise in importance of raising bilingual child can be attributed to various reasons like maintaining family heritage of both the parents, enabling cross border opportunities and facilitating effective communication with peers. However, the most important reason for encouraging bilingualism in children is the relationship of cognition and proficiency between first (L1) and second language (L2).

The paper attempts to understand the process of attaining bilingualism, and the relationship of cognition and proficiency between the first and second language in a bilingual child. The paper is divided into five parts. The first part mentions the path through which a child becomes bilingual. The second part discusses the relationship of cognition and proficiency between L1 and L2 in bilingual children. The third part enlists the limitations of bilingualism. The fourth part describes the application of this relationship in practical context. The fifth part concludes the paper.

Paths to Bilingualism

According to Alvarez, bilingualism can take two paths, sequential bilingualism and simultaneous bilingualism. In sequential bilingualism, a child acquires L2 training after his or her L1 training. In simultaneous bilingualism, a child learns both L1 and L2 simultaneously, since infancy. There can be two situations leading to simultaneous bilingualism. First, the child's mother tongue is different from the language and culture of the larger community. For example, a Chinese child in the United States will need to develop proficiency in English to become a part of the community. Second, the child's mother tongue is the same as that of the larger community, but acquisition of L2 is perceived to have an incremental value to the child's development. For example, a child in the United States learns a foreign language.

Understanding the paths of bilingualism is important from two aspects. First, the concept assumes importance as the treatment of children is different in different scenarios. While children with English as L1 are encouraged in the United States to pick up a foreign language and be conversant in it, the children with English as L2 are usually prohibited from speaking in their respective L1s. Historical review suggests that bilingualism has been treated differently at different points in the history. In pre-colonial and colonial times, bilingualism was accepted but not overtly appreciated (Fitzgerald 49). Later, rise in immigration led to a change in behaviour and rejection of bilingual minorities.

However, today the concept of bilingualism is gradually changing and increasing acceptable of simultaneous bilingualism in dominant ethnicity. Thus, there has been a resistance in the United States in accepting bilingualism as a whole, which is changing slowly. But, this differential treatment impacts the early development of a child. Second, in simultaneous learning, children learn to separate between L1 and L2 since infancy. A child develops understanding of vocabulary and grammar in both the languages simultaneously, which is advantageous for the child. It is, thus, beneficial to expose the child to both the languages from birth and also pre-birth (Alvarez). It assists in development of language in a child at a very early stage.

The process of acquisition of L2 can be described through two dimensions of proficiency, attribute-based and input-based (Writework). The attribute-based proficiency includes aspects of personality factors, and the input-based dimension includes quality and quantity aspects of the second language inputs.

Relationship of Cognition and Proficiency between L1 and L2

The aim of this section is to understand the relationship of cognitive development and linguistic proficiency between L1 and L2 in bilingual children. But, to discuss the influence of a second language on cognition and proficiency, it is necessary to understand the relationship

between L1 and L2 in storing and processing of information in a child's memory.

The Hierarchical Bilingual Model explains that a bilingual's memory consists of two structures, one representing the more dominant lexicon or language and the other representing the less dominant lexicon (Heredia). The two lexicons are linked with each other and to a store of general concepts. The processing of information and its comprehension depends upon the interrelated links between the lexicons and the conceptual store. The conversion of information is faster from less dominant to more dominant lexicon. This is because there is a high probability that a child will try to translate the information received in less dominant lexicon to a more dominant lexicon for better comprehension. Thus, learners more often associate with their more dominant lexicon to comprehend the less dominant lexicon and the underlying general concepts. The store of general concepts is where the learning and knowledge achieved in a child's life is stored and it is usually utilised through the link of more dominant lexicon.

The relationship of cognition and linguistic proficiency between L1 and L2 in bilingual children is being explained here.

Linguistic Proficiency

Researches have been conducted to understand relationship of linguistic proficiency between L1 and L2. One such study indicates that there is a strong correlation between L1 and L2 in terms of performance of oral fluidity or fluency in spoken language and better oral fluidity is associated with better lexicon categorisation (Ring). One of the reasons for this correlation is the possibility that oral fluidity may be affected by same set of factors in L1

and L2. Thus, it is important to take into account fluency in L1 to assess the expected fluency in L2.

It has been observed that a second language or L2 also enhances a child's comprehension of his or her first language (WriteWork contributors). This means that there is a positive correlation between learning L2 and the understanding of L1. This observation is important as it re-establishes the need for a second language. Not only this, the influence of L2 enables better performance in L1 in children irrespective of their ethnicity, gender and education. A study conducted by Dumas in 1999 on third and fifth grade children in Louisiana suggests that children enrolled for foreign languages performed better in English, regardless of race, gender and academic level (NEA Research 3). This is because study of second language improves reading and assimilation in children. By providing them with a different dimension of language, they encourage children to improve sentence structuring, organisation and use of vocabulary. A study conducted by Garfinkel & Tabor in 1991 also asserts that L2 improves reading ability in L1 (NEA Research 3). It, thus, reinstates the positive correlation of exposure to second language and performance of the first language.

According to Sheng, McGregor and Marian, bilingualism enhances paradigmatic organisation of the semantic lexicon. Development of a child can be explained in terms of syntagmatic and paradigmatic shifts.

Syntagmatic responses are responses that match a word stimulus with a different class of words. Paradigmatic responses are responses to a word stimulus with words of same class. As children mature, a shift is observed

from syntagmatic to paradigmatic response (Sheng, McGregor and Marian). However, a second language enhances paradigmatic organisation of responses in children, thereby enabling their development.

The behavioural and imaging studies conducted on bilingual studies show that age of L2 exposure significantly impacts dual language mastery (Petitto and Dunbar 7). The study also concludes that early and systematic exposure enables a child to better understand the fundamental concepts of both L1 and L2. If the exposure is given early, the children develop into adults who can process each language with the same efficiency as a monolingual adult processes one language. In addition to this, it also improves reading skills and phonetics.

Summing it up, researchers conclude that bilingualism improves oral fluidity, comprehension, language organisation, paradigmatic responses, reading skills, phonetics and understanding of fundamental concepts.

Cognitive Development

Cognition refers to mental processes like memorising, comprehending, categorizing and evaluation. Subsequently, it also improves intellectual capability, creative ability and self-esteem of a person. There are numerous evidences that acquiring L2 influences the cognitive development in children, in terms of both L1 and L2.

The first aspect of cognitive development is memorising. A second language improves the memorising skills of a child. Science daily refers to a research in this regard that shows low risk of memory problems in people who speak

more than two languages. The study also concluded that as the number of languages spoken increases (up to an extent), memory issues reduce. According to Lapkin et al, learning a second language helps improve listening and memory skills (NEA Research 3).

The second aspect of cognitive development is comprehension. CBC News reports a study conducted by researchers from York University that included a comparison of English monolinguals and bilinguals in six year old kids. The outcome of the research revealed that bilinguals show a deeper comprehension of language, effectively shift their focus from one task to another (when required), and exhibit better executive controls. CBC also reported that another study on similar subject conducted by Bialystok concluded that bilingualism defers the contraction of Alzheimer's disease.

Categorisation is the third aspect of cognitive development. Categorisation is the process of classifying into groups. Bilinguals have better classification skills (Brain Connection). They also have better developed categorisation of phonetics.

Evaluation is the highest order of cognitive development. Based on a study conducted in 1989, Foster and Reeves concluded that bilingual children score better on tasks involving evaluation (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language). In addition, bilingualism also improves a child's potential to solve complex problems. Bamford & Mizokawa indicate that exposure to second language makes a child more creative and facilitates problem solving behaviour in them (NEA Research 4). A better score on

planning and evaluation makes bilingual children better suited for management roles in their future. It also boosts their confidence and independence.

Bilingualism improves intellectual capability of a child by facilitating mental growth and stimulating the thinking process in children. It also improves the self-image and satisfaction level in children. It motivates them to achieve more and set higher targets in life. Thus, it boosts one's aspiration levels.

Masciantonio 1977, Saunders 1998, Andrade, et al. 1989 show that language students have a higher self-concept than the non-language students (NEA Research 4). This is because of their varied experiences and better performances. Landry concludes that early exposure to second language improves creativity and divergent thinking (NEA Research 4). The improvement in creative thinking measures also emanates from a stress free mind and a higher concept of self.

Summing it up, researchers conclude that bilingualism facilitates cognitive development by improving memorising, comprehending, categorizing, conceptual processing and evaluation skills in a child. It also improves the intellectual capability, creative ability, divergent thinking and self-esteem of a person.

Limitations

In spite of the positive effects of second language in children, there are a few limitations of bilingualism. First, prejudices exist in the society and bilingual children from lower class are not embraced as a part of the society. This

adversely impacts child's overall development in early stages of life. Second, bilingualism may lead to chances of mix up of the two languages. For example, an English and French speaking bilingual in the United States may end up speaking a mixture of two. Third, it becomes difficult for children if education is imparted in the second language and if the child is less proficient in it. If formal education is not provided in the child's mother tongue, the comprehension and assimilation percentage reduces drastically. Fourth, learning a second language is an extra load for children and it may impact the L2 learning time. It is an extra load for teachers as well.

Implications of Bilingualism for Education

The study of relationship of cognition and proficiency between L1 and L2 has lot of implications for the present education system, especially for younger children. First, there is no need to force prohibit the use of native language (other than the local language of the larger community) in schools. For example, a child who speaks Korean at home should not be prohibited to speak even a word of Spanish in school. This is because research has established that there is no fear of reduced the learning capability of one language with exposure to another language. In fact, bilingualism facilitates the process of cognitive and proficiency development.

Second, it is required to learn the neural aspects of language processing in a bilingual child. This will help understand if the early language learning is initiated by language specific aspects or perception specific aspects (Petitto and Dunbar 9). A thorough understanding of the mental process of language learning will help in designing appropriate learning methods and teaching

aids for younger children. This will enhance the effectiveness of education for children and make it context specific.

Third, it is important to understand proficiency of a student with a particular language before designing curriculums. Imparting education in a language in which the child is proficient ensures an effective learning process. It will increase the relevance of the course for children and enable them to build a strong foundation of the core concepts.

Fourth, there is a need to sensitise the teachers about differences in languages, cultures and customs, and how they impact a child. This will help teachers to aware of the varying needs of students from different backgrounds. This will also ensure effective learning environment for children and enable development of a feeling of security, rather than insecurity.

Last but not the least, there is a need to bring in more acceptability of the minority bilinguals, at least in schools. Embracing such students will motivate them and ensure their effective development. It is to be kept in mind that such students are likely to perform at par with other students, or even better, given a fair chance.

Conclusion

Language is an integral part of both a nation's education system. In recent years, parents in the United States are displaying a focus on enabling children to learn more than one language. The rise in importance of bilingualism can be attributed to maintaining family heritage of both the

parents, enabling cross border opportunities and facilitating effective communication with peers. However, the improvement in cognition and linguistic proficiencies is the most important aspect of encouraging bilingualism. The two paths that bilingualism can take are sequential bilingualism and simultaneous bilingualism. The differential treatment to a bilingual minority child affects his or her mental development.

The relationship between L1 and L2 in storing and processing of information in a child's memory is such that L1 and L2 are two lexicon structures linked to each other and linked to the conceptual storage. Information processing and accessing the conceptual store is usually done through the more dominant lexicon. Researchers conclude that bilingualism improves linguistic proficiencies by improving oral fluidity, comprehension, language organisation, paradigmatic responses, reading skills, phonetics and understanding of fundamental concepts. Thus, a second language helps in building linguistic proficiencies of the first language. Researchers also conclude that bilingualism facilitates cognitive development by improving memorising, comprehending, categorizing, conceptual processing and evaluation skills in a child. It also improves the intellectual capability, creative ability, divergent thinking and self-esteem of a person. The limitations of bilingualism are prejudices, word mix ups, and extra load on teachers and students in bilingual education.

There are a few implications of bilingualism for formal education system. First, there is a need to eliminate fear of native language use in schools. Second, it is required to learn the neural aspects of language processing in a

bilingual child. Third, it is important to understand proficiency of a student with a particular language before designing curriculums. Fourth, there is a need to sensitise the teachers.

There are different contexts in which the term bilingualism is used. While bilingualism of English speaking children is encouraged in the United States, children speaking native language other than English are discouraged. On one hand, bilingualism is considered enabling and on the other hand, it is stereotyped as disabling. There is a need to change this perception in people's mind. This change will be revolutionary as it will bring about equality in the nation's education system. Promoting such bilinguals will help in nourishing talent in the country. A simple change in attitude in teacher, policies and the society as a whole will create an enabling environment for such bilinguals. Thus, the most important implication is the need to bring in acceptability of the minority bilinguals in schools.

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