

EARLY BILINGUALISM: CHALLENGE FOR EDUCATORS AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS (KINDERGARTENS AND SCHOOLS)¹⁵

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Abstract

Bilingualism is a phenomenon that is associated with the normal development of language, most often there are children of members of national minorities, children of linguistically mixed marriages or children of parents who leave to live in foreign countries or children of workers who temporary work abroad. At the time of speech development, these children begin more or less, simultaneously and equally adopting the two different languages and make difference between these languages practically from the beginning of their speaking. One of these two languages, both in the order of time and in the place of the "hierarchy", i.e. emotional border, remains the first language - that is, the language in which the child addresses the mother (or a person who had a first emotional relationship with the child), is in the true sense of the word mother language.

If parents and educators are working enough with the child and if it does not have any additional problems for early introduction of another language, bilingualism does not have to create more difficulties. Such a situation for children acts stimulatingly on the ability to learn a foreign language, but it is certainly not known how this will affect the overall psychological development of the child.

But despite this, we summarize that the advantages of bilingualism in bilingual children are: children are better in keeping their attention on relevant information and ignore the distraction; they are more creative and better in planning and solving the complex problems than monolinguals. This work, apart from the early bilingualism in the family, will talk about the early bilingualism in the kindergarten, as well as the approaches of the educator to the development of this type of bilingualism.

Keywords: bilingualism, bilingual children, parents, educators

Introduction

In the past, and in present day, the views on the term bilingual (using, involving two languages) differ from one another. Bilingualism was associated with the more negative side of society, presenting the weak, miserable, helpless, subordinate language minority, which was forced to live with no social power. It was considered that the language of the minority is underestimated, with little value, and with a low status, whereas the language of the majority is esteemed, with a high status.

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With its development, bilingualism started being used as a tool with which a member of the minority could in some way get involved in the power of the majority, and shed light on their own culture and their own language forms.

Bilingualism is a process that goes along with the normal development of the language, most often involved in that process are the children that are members of minority groups, children of marriages that are linguistically mixed, children of people that go to work abroad either for a full-time, or a part-time job, and they have to live there. During their speech development, these children more or less begin to adopt the two languages equally and at the same time, distinguishing the differences between those two languages practically from the beginning of their development.

According to the time sequence and the place it holds in the “hierarchy” i.e. emotional connection, one of the two languages will always come first, or the language that the child speaks with its mother (or the person which they first connect on an emotional level), the language also known as mother tongue.

If the parents pay enough attention to their child and if that child does not have any other problems for implementing a new language early, this shouldn't cause any major difficulties. That kind of situation stimulates the children in their capability for learning a foreign language, but it can't be known for sure how it will affect the overall psychological development of the child.

Bilingualism – definition and differences

The origin of the term bilingualism comes from the Latin words “bi” – two and “lingua” – language. Bilingualism is connected with “learner who uses two or more languages to communicate.”(Francon, 2009). There are two different approaches when it comes to defining this term.

While some think bilingualism. is an ability to communicate in two languages equally, others consider this as the ability (individual, group) to communicate in two languages, but with the possibility for having impeccable skills in one of the two languages.

The first approach indicates that a person is bilingual if they regularly speak two languages with a high degree of mastering them, for a longer period of their life. Whereas the criteria in the second approach is mainly focused on the claims that people who have lack of knowledge in the second language are monolingual.

Bilingualism is on the rise in many parts of the world, it's believed that more than half of the world's population is bilingual. In the US and Canada, around 20 % of the population speaks their mother tongue, aside from the English language. These numbers are higher in the urban environments, rising up to 60% in Los Angeles and 50% in Toronto. The presence of bilingualism is even greater in Europe: A recent study shows that 56% of the population in all the countries in the EU is bilingual, and in some countries the rate is even higher, such as Luxemburg with 99%. According to this, the human population is mostly made up of people who can speak two languages. For example in California, until the year 2035 it's expected that over 50% of the children in kindergarten will speak different language other than English.

Early development of bilingualism

Researching the multidimensional aspect of bilingualism, researchers suggest different classifications determined by different dimensions that they have focused on in bilingualism.

- Early / late bilingualism
- Simulative (concurrent) / consecutive
- Formal / informal
- Balanced / dominant
- Gained / learned
- Natural / artificial
- Vertical / horizontal
- Active / passive
- Individual / grouped
- Productive / reproductive etc.

Early bilingualism is connected with “young children who are acquiring two or more languages simultaneously, or are learning a second language while continuing to master their first language are considered dual language learners (DLLs)”.(Espinosa, 2015). It is defined as, acquisition of more than one language until the age of 8. Late bilingualism is defined as, acquiring one language before and more than one language after the age of 8. The early and late bilingualism differ based on achievement of language competence. Children with early bilingualism are considered to have two mother tongues, while the ones with late bilingualism have only their first learned language as their mother tongue. Late bilingualism refers to those who have learned a second language after their critical period, especially if they learned the second language during their maturity or adolescence.

We can classify early bilingualism in two types:

- **Simulative early bilingualism** – appears when a child is learning two languages from it’s very birth, this type is also known as strong bilingualism;

- **Consecutive early bilingualism** – it often appears when a child partly acquires the first language, and it learns the second language in its early childhood (for example: The child moved to a different place where the dominant language is not its mother tongue).

Informal bilingualism happens when an individual speaks the first language on higher level than the second one. Whereas formal bilingualism happens when the individual is more or less equally competent and successful in both languages. Also, there can be a period when the children will speak one language more than the other, even if they better understand the other language, in other words, in one language they’ll be active speakers and in the other passive.

Dominant bilingualism happens when the child gives the advantage to one of the two languages. For example: when the child goes to kindergarten or school, the dominant language is the national language which is accepted by the country where the child lives.

Balanced bilingualism happens when the child uses the two gained and learned languages at the same time without any difficulties.

In some cases the early development of bilingualism is necessary, because the parents of the child can’t speak the dominant language that’s spoken in the community, so the child can learn one language at home, and another at school. But, sometimes bilingualism is a choice of

the parents that may want to introduce their child to a different language, even if they don't speak a second language. This may be due to the many benefits of bilingualism.

The benefits of bilingualism to bilingual children are: they are more capable of keeping their attention to more relevant information and ignoring the distractions, bilingual children are more creative and better at planning and solving complex problems than monolingual children. The effects caused by ageing of the brain are decreased with bilingual adults. Bilingual adults have higher access to resources and people; their employment rate is far greater.

When it comes to the early development of bilingualism, it's expected there to be a period of confusion and mixing of the two languages. It often happens to children to take "loans" of words or phrases from the two languages, in order to express their opinions or wishes, in a same sentence. Also, if the child speaks one language at home and another in kindergarten or school, than s/he considers one of the languages to be official and often uses words or phrases, which come from the environment that s/he is talking about. For example: "I want you to help me со домашната (with my homework)".

It's possible that the children won't be able to use the two languages equally. The phenomenon where the child can understand one language better, but not be able to use it for communication is very common. The best approach for this is if the child addresses both his parents for the same thing, in both languages ("Mom, give me this" and "Тато дај ми го ова"). If the child grows up speaking the two languages simultaneously the possibility of speech impediment is very low, rather than learning a second language later in their childhood.

Some consider that if the second language is being used before the first language, in other words, to be mastered completely, the speech development can be delayed, even stop altogether. The parents that consider their children to have problems in their speech, which problems arise from early bilingualism, should turn to a speech therapist. The therapist will later make tests and determine the level of development of the two languages. The delayed speech development may be a result of the phase in which the child is in during his/hers development.

Bilingual children understand the written language faster than monolingual children. It's proven that children register letters even before they learn how to read. By teaching them using pictures and text, children learn faster how to recognize the letters. Association is much better developed with bilingual children, because they know that one picture can be described with more words/sounds/letters. Because the child already learned how to associate one picture with more words (for example: for mom it's "маче", and for dad it's "cat") for him/her it's not a problem to recognize different letters and alphabets (Latin and Cyrillic).

Accepting the early development of bilingualism by the parents and the educational institutions (kindergartens and schools)

Researchers found solid evidence that the effect of bilingualism in the households is positive; there are very few disadvantages which can be easily overcome.

Educational institutions also are concerned when it comes to accepting the early development of bilingualism. The most asked question is whether or not the children can gain the literary skills if they are bilingual or are learning a second language, especially if their mother tongue is not the language that's being used in that educational institution. When it comes to the

language, the children that are exposed to two different languages show the same achievements as the monolingual children, taking in consideration that every child is an individual that can learn the language faster or slower than the other children.

The most important things that the parents and the tutor should bear in mind are:

- Mixing of the languages is very common appearance;
- All children can learn two languages at early age;
- Knowing the language of the parents is very important element for the personality of the child, their cultural development and the feeling of belonging to a certain culture;
- Having a good understanding of the two languages can be best achieved at home if the child is exposed to the language that's not spoken in the society where s/he lives. The child will be exposed to the other language outside of home, which will help him/her to develop that language as well;
- The parents can help the child if they speak to him/her in the language that they know best, with all of its variations.

Early development of bilingualism within the family

The expectations and the knowledge of the parents for the development of a language can be very useful for raising a bilingual child. The parents attitude towards “their roles and language choices”, also play a big role in the language development of the child. It has been showed that the attitude of the larger family circle and friends of the child affect the success of mastering two languages.

- **Start off early** – the best time to maintain the balance of the bilingual abilities of the child is from birth until the age of 6 to 7, for two reasons:
 1. This is the period when the children are most accessible for acquiring new language
 2. If the child attends kindergarten or elementary school where the majority language is spoken, it will be harder to “rebalance” the two languages.

- Priorities

Growing up, if the minority language isn't a big priority in the family, then the majority language will quickly become the dominant language for your child.

- Set a goal

Set a clear goal for the ability of your child regarding the language of the minority. Will you be satisfied only with oral communication or will you also teach him/her how to read and write. Quality reading and writing is an ability that can be achieved, but for this kind of goal, mutual commitment is required, both from the parents and their child.

- Ignore the nuances

Some people, even well educated people, may warn you that your child will get “Confused” or will suffer difficulties if s/he learns two languages at once. Don't allow those kinds of comments to discourage you.

- Keep in mind the “basic conditions”

The two “basic conditions” for effective encouragement in learning a language and its active usage are:

1. The child has to be exposed to the target language

2. The child has to feel the need to use it.

- **Coming up with a strategy**

How are you going to use the two languages in your family?

One strategy is “one parent one language” (where every parent speaks their mother tongue) and the strategy of “minority language at home” (where both parents speak the minority language and the majority language is gained by the society).

- **Make the learning of the two languages fun;**

- **Dedicate yourself to reading.**

Tutor’s approach in encouraging the further development of the early bilingualism in kindergarten

The development of early bilingualism refers to a number of models for studying in the early years which are offered to children of the age between two and five or six. For a long time now pre-school education is recognized as a promoter of the social and intellectual development of children, and in many countries children are being offered a chance to attend pre-school establishments where the educational process is being held in a different language.

In every corner of the world, young children learn languages at home, which differ from the dominant language that is used in the social environment. That way children go to kindergarten and to school with a precious resource:

- Their mother tongue (here it’s named as the first language). Typically, when the children of the minority language or native tongue begin to attend pre-school or elementary school, they must learn the language of the majority group in their region.

- Most of these children are educated exclusively in the second language (named as a dominant language in the region). The programs in the majority language don’t take any action to support the children of the minority languages in order to develop a language competence in their mother tongue.

The language policies of these programs devalue the cultural origins and the knowledge related to the mother tongue of the children from the minority groups.

The constant early dropouts from schools and the poor academic performances from the children of the minorities arise partly from these language policies in the educational systems.

But, there are some initiatives across the globe that provide a formal support for the children to develop a language competence for the first language and self-confidence as students, and at the same time to learn additional language or languages.

The most common appearance of bilingualism in the educational system today is by implementing the English language for all the children in kindergarten and in school.

There are many approaches that, with the help of the tutors, can encourage bilingualism in kindergartens:

- Equal access to a quality education for the minorities;
- Educating the tutors (through different types of training, informing over the internet, through various educational books);

- Introducing various cultures and customs of the minorities by the tutors during some significant events and holidays (Through different educational materials whether that would be some drawings or books etc.);
- Constructing projects over which the children in the kindergarten and the tutors will get involved in speaking minority languages.

Conclusion

More children grow up to become bilinguals rather than monolinguals. Some children become bilinguals almost from birth and the others learn a language in school or later as adults. There is a distinction between simultaneous and sequential childhood bilingualism because the first one refers to a child acquiring two languages at the same time from the birth. Sequential bilingualism is when child learns one language in the home, and the second language in nursery or elementary school. There are no exact boundaries between simultaneous and sequential bilingualism, although the age of acquisition is often used as a marker.

Studies revealed that if each parent speaks a different language, dual language competence can occur, although the balance shifts throughout an individual's language history. OPOL (one parent one language) approach is a well-documented and often successful route to bilingualism, although many other routes are equally successful, including when both parents speak both languages to the child.

Despite the difficulties that may occur due to family, kindergarten and school bilingualism we can conclude that there are many benefits for children and adults from bilingualism:

- they are more capable of keeping their attention to more relevant information and ignoring the distractions;

- bilingual children are more creative and better at planning and solving complex problems than monolingual children;

- the effects caused by ageing of the brain are decreased with bilingual adults;

- bilingual adults have higher access to resources and people, their employment rate is far greater

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