

# A Study on the Consequences of Being Bilingual for Non-balanced Bilinguals

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**Abstract:** With the acceleration of globalization, being bilingual or multilingual has become a necessity in international communication. On the utilitarian benefits of being bilingual, a large number of studies have been carried out. Based on previous studies, this paper investigates the consequences of being bilingual, especially for those non-balanced bilinguals who are very much in the majority in China.

**Key words:** bilingualism, bilingual, non-balanced bilingual, consequences

## 1. Introduction

In this information-explosion era, cross-cultural communication occurs ever increasingly. Language, the basic communication tool of human beings, is always a critical factor in communication at all levels. With the popularity of international communication, mastering more than one language has become necessary in social interaction. In consequence, the number of bilingual studies increases correspondingly. In 1933, Bloomfield claimed that bilingualism means “native-like control of two languages” (1933, p. 56). Much later, Thiéry (1976) expressed a similar view. Saunders, distinguishing different levels of bilingualism, wrote of the highest level: “a person at this level of bilingualism would in effect be able to function as if he or she were two monolinguals” (1988, p. 7). Bloomfield’s definition of “native-like control” corresponds to the term “balanced bilingual”. In contrast, if one’s skill in one language is relatively higher than in another language, the term non-balanced bilingual would have to be employed.

Weinreich gives us the simplest definition of bilingualism: “The practice of alternately using two languages will be called bilingualism, and the person involved, bilingual.” (1968; cited in Hoffmann, 1997, p. 15) This definition allows us to incorporate the most numerous and widespread group, namely, the non-balanced bilinguals, whereas that of Bloomfield necessarily excludes them.

A very large number of bilingual studies take balanced bilinguals as their research subjects, while very few scholars have focused on the non-balanced variety. The reason is clear as balanced bilinguals are the ideal state of being bilingual and studies on them are relatively more verifiable. As we have mentioned, however, they are relatively rare and more attention needs to be given to the ubiquitous, non-balanced variety. In China, in particular, they are in the vast majority.

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## 2. Consequences of Being Bilingual

Baker (1988) discusses three types of consequences or effects of being bilingual: detrimental, neutral and additive. The traditional view was that bilingualism at any level would have negative effects. He quotes Laurie(1980; cited in Baker, 1988, p. 10): "People's intellectual and spiritual growth would be halved if being immersed in an environment where two languages are used". Furthermore, according to Laurie, a person's character and mind would be split easily if they lived in such circumstances for a long time. However, Jones (1958) disputed this view, arguing that there would be no major discrepancy between monolinguals and bilinguals if parental occupation was taken into consideration. In other words, the difference perceived in previous studies comparing the two groups could mainly be attributed to social and economic reasons rather than language. With the development of experimental technology, more and more factors came to be considered in investigating the consequences of being bilingual.

The finding that bilingualism may have a positive outcome has been widely supported by more recent bilingual studies, and has led to bilingual policies being adopted in a variety of institutional and geographical settings (Saunders, 1988). The positive effects of being bilingual that have been identified can be summarized as follows:

(1) Being bilingual enables a person to have an earlier and greater awareness of the arbitrariness of language: as they have a more flexible mentality, it should also make it easier for them to master other languages.

(2) Bilinguals are better at both divergent and creative thinking, which can give them greater potential in their own profession. For example, the fact of being bilingual is itself an advantage in cross-cultural communication if the company is an overseas-funded one (Carringer, 1974; cited in Saunders, 1988, p. 19).

(3) Possessing two languages can have positive effects on the personality, especially cultivating a greater tolerance towards unfamiliar circumstances and practices, thus the individual then has a broader horizon and a greater flexibility in the frequent and alternative use of two languages (Saunders, 1988).

## 3. Investigation

### 3.1 Aim

The aim of this study was to analyze the possible influences of being bilingual for non-balanced bilinguals when they go on to tackle another language. On the basis of the research that has been carried out, we first hypothesized that being bilingual, whether balanced or unbalanced, would have a positive effect on one's academic studies, especially on the study of a second foreign language. We further hypothesized that the degree of proficiency in two languages would affect the learning of the second foreign language; the higher the degree of proficiency, the more rapid the learning of the second foreign language.

### 3.2 Subjects

Thirty English majors of their first year postgraduate study from China Three Gorges University were asked to complete a questionnaire anonymously. They had all studied English for eleven years or fourteen years and had thus a relatively mature attitude towards English. They began to study French as their second foreign language in the second year of college. The thirty subjects are all female students.

### 3.3 Method

The questionnaire contained fourteen multiple-choice questions which covered three areas: their degree of proficiency in their three languages, the starting age of learning these languages and the relevance of the use of three languages. Some questions were based on Lasagabaster-Huguet's questionnaire (2007) and that used by Wang Yaofen (2008). Other questions were specifically designed for this study.

### 3.4 Results and Discussion

The results regarding the students' proficiency level in Chinese, English and their second foreign language are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1 The Proficiency Level of Three Languages**

| Question                                       | A. very good (%) | B. good (%) | C. fair (%) | D. poor (%) |
|--|------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 6. How do you rate your L1 proficiency level?  | 44.8             | 40.1        | 14.8        | 0.3         |
| 7. How do you rate your L2 proficiency level?  | 32.3             | 58.6        | 8.1         | 1.0         |
| 8. How do you rate your English performance?   | 52.5             | 36          | 10.4        | 1.1         |
| 10. How do you rate your L3 proficiency level? | 0                | 8           | 58          | 34          |

For Question 6, 44.8% subjects claim to possess a very good proficiency in their first language, namely, Chinese. This figure drops to 32.3% for English in Question 7. However, from Question 10 we can see that nobody claims to be very proficient in L3. This is to be expected as they have studied it for three years at most and there is very little opportunity to practice or use it in China.

Regarding Question 7, 58.6% subjects admit to a good command of English while for Chinese, the number drops to 40.1%, but only 8% students admit that they have a good mastery of their second foreign language. 58% of the subjects affirm that their proficiency level in their L3 is fair. The majority admit to having a good command of both Chinese and English.

**Table 2 The Starting Age of L1, L2 and L3 Learning**

| Question              | A. from birth (%) | B. after entering kindergarten (%) | C. after entering primary school (%) | D. after entering middle school (%) | E. about 20 years old (%) |
|-----------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 4. Starting age of L1 | 20                | 80                                 |                                      |                                     |                           |
| 5. Starting age of L2 |                   |                                    | 40                                   | 60                                  |                           |
| 9. Starting age of L3 |                   |                                    |                                      |                                     | 100                       |

Questions regarding their starting age of learning the three languages are Number 4, 5 and 9. Their beginning ages of L3 learning are roughly the same for the time is regulated by the teaching syllabus of China. 20% of students began to learn Chinese when they were born, for those students are from northern China, where the dialect is very similar to mandarin. The rest of the subjects began to learn Chinese formally after they entered kindergarten. The percentage of those learning English at the time of Grade Three of primary school is 40%. These students are mainly from urban areas where English learning is popularized earlier than in rural areas. 60% of the students started English learning after entering middle school.

**Table 3 The Difficulty Level of L3**

| number  | A. very difficult | B. fair | C. not difficult | D. easy |
|---|-------------------|---------|------------------|---------|
| 11. Generally speaking, how difficult is your L3 (French) | 23.9              | 37.2    | 29.6             | 9.3     |

From this table we can see that only 23.9% subjects claim that their L3 French is very difficult, which may partly due to the similarity existing between written English and French. 38.9% subjects hold that French is not difficult or even easy. Therefore, very possibly, the similarities that English and French share would bring a positive transfer in their L3 learning.

**Table 4 The Effects of Bilingualism on L3 Learning**

| Question                                  | A. very positively (%) | B. positively (%) | C. to a little extent (%) | D. to no extent (%) |
|---|------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|
| 12. How much does the L1 affect L3 study? | 5.7                    | 31.3              | 56.2                      | 6.8                 |
| 13. How much does the L2 affect L3 study? | 8.4                    | 44.4              | 39.7                      | 7.5                 |

As all the subjects are non-balanced bilinguals, they have some experience in learning a third language. In Question 13, 8.4% of subjects claim that English is very effective in L3 learning; while in Question 12, the percentage for Chinese is 5.7%. Regarding whether English is more helpful than Chinese in L3 learning, a greater number think it is. The Column C indicates that a majority of students admit that Chinese can help a little in L3 learning and only 39.7% of students share the same opinion concerning English. Less than 10% of subjects claim there is no positive effect on L3 learning from Chinese or English. Generally speaking, subjects admit L1 and L2 have a positive effect on L3 learning. In the following table, we can see what they consider this effect to be.

**Table 5 The Effect of L1 and L2 on Specific Areas of L3 Learning**

| Question 14      | A. pronunciation (%) | B. grammar (%) | C. reading comprehension (%) | D. writing (%) |
|------------------|----------------------|----------------|------------------------------|----------------|
| The effect of L1 | 14.7                 | 32.4           | 23.5                         | 29.4           |
| The effect of L2 | 34.8                 | 20.5           | 19.3                         | 25.4           |

As to the L1, the figure indicates that grammar and writing are much affected by Chinese while regarding the L2, it is the pronunciation that is much influenced by English in French learning. Regarding the last area it can be seen that students feel they benefit a lot from knowing English.

### 3.5 Summary

Our findings show that being bilingual does have a positive effect on the study of a second foreign language. In addition, we can find that the proportion of subjects who claim to have a good proficiency level of Chinese and English is roughly the same as the proportion of subjects who admit the positive effects of English and Chinese on French; thus we can see that the hypothesis we put forward earlier in the paper is in accordance with our research result.

## 4. Conclusion

Bilingualism is a natural development. From our investigation as well as previous studies we can see that being bilingual does have a positive effect on the second foreign language. Furthermore, the better our command of the two languages is, the better the third language learning outcome will be.

There is one major implication of being a non-balanced bilingual in language teaching. On the whole, for Chinese-English bilinguals, the degree of proficiency in the two languages does have a correlation with their L3 proficiency. Therefore, language teachers can make the most of what is common to the two languages in their teaching so as to facilitate L3 teaching. Sometimes, if a contrastive analysis is made between the different languages, it can reduce some negative transfer.

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## Appendix

### The Effect of Bilingualism on the Learning of a Third Language

This questionnaire is an important part of this paper. Thanks for answering these questions. All questionnaires will be treated anonymously. Please answer these questions according to your real situation.

I appreciate your cooperation very much.

In the questions below, L1 refers to Chinese and L2 is English, L3 is your second foreign language French, please tick your answer.

1. Which language would you prefer to choose if you have the freedom to choose the language in a situation in which L1, L2 and L3 are all available?  
A. L1    B. L2    C. L3
2. Is there any help to your L3 learning if you have a good command of both L1 and L3?  
A. Yes    B. No
3. If the answer to the last question is Yes, how much help would it be to your L3 learning?  
A. very great    B. moderate    C. of little help
4. When did you begin to learn your L1?  
A. from birth    B. after entering kindergarten    C. after entering primary school    D. after entering middle school.    E. about 20 years old.
5. When did you begin to learn your L2?  
A. from birth    B. after entering kindergarten    C. after entering primary school    D. after entering middle school.    E. about 20 years old.
6. How do you rate your L1 proficiency level?  
A. very good    B. good    C. fair    D. poor
7. How do you rate your L2 proficiency level?  
A. very good    B. good    C. fair    D. poor
8. How do you rate your English performance?  
A. very good    B. good    C. fair    D. poor
9. When did you begin to learn your L3?  
A. from birth    B. after entering kindergarten    C. after entering primary school    D. after entering middle school.    E. about 20 years old.
10. How do you rate your L3 proficiency level?  
A. very good    B. good    C. fair    D. poor
11. Generally speaking, how difficult is your L3?  
A. very difficult    B. fair    C. not difficult    D. easy

12. How much does the L1 affect L3 study?  
A. very positively B. positively C. to a little extent D. to no extent
13. How much does the L2 affect L3 study?  
A. very positively B. positively C. to a little extent D. to no extent
14. The effect of L1 and L2 is mainly indicated in respect of  
A. pronunciation B. grammar C. reading comprehension D. writing