

The Main Factors Could Affect Bilingualism

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Abstract: English language has become a very dominant language. In this paper, the researcher discusses some of the difficulties that may face children who are brought up in a bilingual environment, and some of the important factors that could affect the process of learning two languages at once “bilingualism”. This paper is conducted through a library based research. The findings show that children may face some difficulties while acquiring two languages at the same time. Also, the factors such as: age, the “quality” and “quantity” of the interaction, the child’s cognitive ability, and motivation could be affected in the process of acquiring the two languages.

Key words: bilingualism, TESL, TESOL, TEFL, factors affecting second language learning

1. Introduction

“Age has often been raised as an important descriptor for bilingualism because of the robust research on the relationship between age and language proficiency at various linguistic levels” (e.g., Johnson & Newport, 1989; Long, 1990; Chin & Wigglesworth, 2007). However, despite the arguments that have been discussed by Birdsong (1992); Bialystok (1997a); Clark (2003) cited in Chin and Wigglesworth (2007) the essential point that we all agree on is that exposing a child to two languages at an early age will help them acquire the languages perfectly just like native speakers.

“Early childhood bilingualism is a reality for millions of children throughout the world. Some children learn multiple languages from earliest childhood; others acquire additional languages when they go to school. The acquisition and maintenance of more than one language can open doors to many personal, social, and economic opportunities” (Ligtdown & Spada, 2006).

The aim of this paper is to discuss some of the difficulties that may face children who are being brought up in bilingual environments, whether it is an educational environment or at one’s home. Also, it will tackle some of the important factors that could affect the process of learning two different languages at the same time “bilingualism”. The researcher will also include real examples of children who are bilingual and of different nationalities.

Firstly, this paper is going to give a number of clear definitions which have been given by famous linguists. In addition, it will interpret some of them and explain the researcher’s own opinion. Secondly, it will identify the five types of bilingualism and give brief definitions for each one of them. Thirdly, it is going to demonstrate the most important factors that influence and decide the success of bilingualism in children. However, further research is needed solely because the findings of the research are inconclusive because the writer of this paper has not

reached to any particular findings in articles or books that mainly discuss these factors. Lastly, it will propose and discuss briefly the language attrition in bilingual children through describing the types of language attrition.

The English language became a very dominant language in the world. Most parents encourage their children to learn and practice it. Accordingly, parents make great efforts and spend a large amount of money just to offer their children the best education, and to place them in highly qualified private schools which are much more expensive than public schools. However, parents can't seem to understand that acquiring two languages at an early age may have some undesirable effects on their children. Children who are being exposed to two languages at the same time at birth often struggle, and they can rarely be 100% fluent in both languages unless it is a special case. This leads to what is called "bilingualism".

2. Terminology

Bilingualism can cause some serious confusion to language learners, particularly children. The topic of children and bilingualism has always been a controversial issue for researchers who are interested in this field of studying. Moreover, many linguists define the term bilingualism differently, and according to many aspects. For example, Beardsmore's (1982) own definition is "bilingualism as a term has open ended semantics". This means that we really cannot define the term "bilingualism" and because of that, people understand the meaning of "bilingualism" differently. Also other famous linguists such as Bloomfield who is known for his passion for the topic of bilingualism defines bilingualism as "native-like control of two languages". In other words, this means the ability to balance between two languages as well as being able to master both of them at the same time perfectly and equally (Chin & Wigglesworth, 2007).

Furthermore, a great deal has already been written on definitions of bilingualism. Some researchers suggest that if a person can only speak the basics of the second language, they consider him a bilingual. However, other researchers broaden the picture and disagree with the latter claiming that someone can be categorized as bilingual only if they master both languages equally. Nevertheless, the researcher of this paper rejects this idea, and actually is going to follow Fishman's (1972) definition for the purpose of this paper. Fishman's definition on the other hand believes that in bilingualism, bilinguals can rarely be fluent in both languages in all kind of topics. The researcher finds Fishman quite logical when he states this fact (Chin & Wigglesworth, 2007).

Before getting deeper and discussing the major factors that affect bilingualism, I would like to highlight that there are five common types of bilingualism which are being categorized according to the competence of the bilingual. The first type is "balanced bilingual". As Lambert et al. (1959) points; this term is used to describe individuals who master both languages equally. The second type is called "dominant bilinguals". In this category, individuals are more competent in one language than the other. The third one is the "passive or recessive bilinguals". This category refers to bilinguals who are lacking the competence of one language because they are not using it anymore. Lastly, "semilinguals or limited bilinguals" is the fifth type of bilingualism. This means that the level of ability to master both languages is quite poor in the bilingual (Chin & Wigglesworth, 2007).

3. The Factors that Might Affect the Success of Bilingualism in Children in Relation to the Second Language Learning

Chin and Wigglesworth (2007) believe that "language is not neutral". In other words, they report that there are some styles which are affecting the child's attitude toward the two languages negatively and/or positively.

Inevitably, there are some factors which seriously affect the success of the process of acquiring both languages in children.

The most important factor that will absolutely affect the success of the process of bilingualism is the age factor. "Age is considered an important factor because there is a strong association between age of acquisition and ultimate attainment of proficiency" (Chin & Wigglesworth, 2007). This factor in particular has always been a controversial issue among researchers and linguists such as Lennenberg (1967), Birdsong (1992), Birdsong and Molis (2001) cited in Chin and Wigglesworth (2007). Lennenberg's critical period hypothesis about age factor suggests that it is hard for adults to acquire a new language and therefore become bilinguals, because when people get older, learning a new language would not be as easy as it is to children. In contrast, it has been discussed by Birdsong (1992) that age is not causing any problem in the process of acquiring the new language. Birdsong provides some valid evidence and supports his idea with an example of speakers who speak French fluently but were first introduced to the language after the age of fifteen. Similarly, Birdsong went further and discussed with Molis (2001) that we in fact cannot tell the exact age in which a person can acquire the language and master it with native-like proficiency. Birdsong and Molis carried out their findings from a research they have conducted about people mastering the English language after the age of 17 in the United States of America (Chin & Wigglesworth, 2007).

Secondly, the two most important factors which definitely affect bilingualism in children are "quality" and "quantity" of the "interaction" (Chin & Wigglesworth, 2007). These factors interest parents who mainly speak one language at home more than the other. Their children are often not quite dealing with the less-used language at home, so it slows the success of bilingualism. However, to avoid the failure of bilingualism at this stage, parents must learn to encourage their children to engage with the less commonly used language at home (Chin & Wigglesworth, 2007). In contrast, Lambert (1987) "the father of research on bilingualism" disagrees with what other researchers believe and names this kind of "language-loss" "subtractive bilingualism". He explains the case of a child who is speaking one language at school, and a completely different language at home. He asserts that this may cause the child to forget the language that is spoken at home among the family members. When the child forgets the language, it affects them in a negative way. The child might even feel less-confident about himself. However, Lambert (1987) cited in Lightbown and Spada (2006) gives one way to avoid the lack of confidence in children and a way to overcome this problem. The solution is that the family should switch their language to the language the child speaks at school.

Furthermore, through looking back again to previous definitions; it seems that most linguists define bilingualism according to language competence only, ignoring the soci-cultural, psychology, and cognitive ability factors which are as important and related when discussing the performance of bilinguals (Chin & Wigglesworth, 2007). Clearly, it is certain that linguists who understand bilingualism from only one perspective should undoubtedly bear in mind that it's not only about how competent a child is, but also what factors have made him reach this level of perfection in both two languages.

Thirdly, so far, I have not found some evidence which shows that a child's personality might be affected if he is brought up in a bilingual environment. However, in second language learning, there is some valid evidence which tackles the issue of a child's personality relating it to second language learning, and believes that the child's personality might be an important factor that could affect the success of the learning process (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). They give example comparing two persons with completely different personalities. On the one hand, the social person "extroverted" is more likely to acquire a new language easily. On the other hand, any person who is

“introverted”, in other words, a person who is shy around people and afraid of making mistakes while using the new acquired language might actually face some problems in acquiring the new language, or it could slow the learning process of a new language. However, according to Lilly Wong-Fillmore (1979), cited in Lightbown and Spada (2006), she disagrees with the latter points, and asserts that “in certain language learning situations, the quiet observant learner may have greater success”. So, in this paragraph, we draw our attention to the fact that the child’s personality is the third factor that might affect excelling in the process of bilingualism.

Moreover, because of the influence that bilingualism and second language acquisition might have on children and their cognitive ability, much researches have been conducted on this particular issue in the mid of the twentieth century. This issue really matters parents whose children are bilinguals, and any linguist who is interested in the field of bilingualism (Bialystok, 2006). We can conclude from the previous point that the fourth factor that could be affected in the process of learning the language is that the child’s cognitive ability. The child might feel anxious which could lead to a negative impact on the child’s academic life in school (Bialystok, 2006).

In addition, as I presented earlier in the research paper, despite a fairly widespread discussion about the factors that could affect second language learning, the researcher has not found enough and convincing evidence that discuss bilingualism and motivation in general, and it is very little known in the literature about this particular factor that might affect bilingualism. However, in second language learning, motivation is an important factor with a great value of notability among famous linguists, such as Gardner and his colleagues (Lightbown & Spada, 2007).

4. Conclusion

As widely known, the English language has become a very dominant language and therefore parents encourage their children to learn and practice English. However, when the child is exposed to a new language at an early age, he/she grows to be bilingual. Accordingly, he or she might be affected by the process positively and/or negatively. I have presented some definitions for the term bilingualism. The writer of this paper follows Fishman’s way of defining bilingualism. Fishman’s way of defining the term bilingualism is quite logical because he believes that bilinguals can rarely be fluent in both of the languages. Then I have identified the five types of bilingualism giving brief definitions for each one of the five types. I then started to point out some of the factors that might affect the process of raising a child in a bilingual environment such as, age, quality and quantity of the interaction, the child’s personality, cognitive ability, and motivation. I have argued that children who are brought up in a bilingual environment are more likely to face some difficulty, and also they might not be fluent in both of the languages.

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