

## **LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN BILINGUAL CHILDREN**

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Abstract. Becoming bilingual, whether in infancy or in later childhood, is a formidable task for children. Like monolingual first-language development, the acquisition of two languages essentially evolves out of trying to carry on a conversation with someone, an adult caretaker or another child. These efforts at social interaction strike at the heart of language development from the beginning. Developing the communicative competence to achieve success in conveying and understanding meaning in its many aspects is a time-consuming, highly complex process that reaches far beyond surface assessments of sounds, words and sentences.

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Becoming bilingual, whether in infancy or in later childhood, is a formidable task for children. Like monolingual first-language development, the acquisition of two languages essentially evolves out of trying to carry on a conversation with someone, an adult caretaker or another child. These efforts at social interaction strike at the heart of language development from the beginning. Developing the communicative competence to achieve success in conveying and understanding meaning in its many aspects is a time-consuming, highly complex process that reaches far beyond surface assessments of sounds, words and sentences. The process of becoming bilingual is a dynamic one, engaging and challenging children's ability to use two language systems for communication with speakers of differing languages and cultures. Becoming bilingual is further compounded for children by the timing for the acquisition of two languages. For some children the process begins at or nearly at the onset of language, in infancy, as

a result of dual language input from parents or other caretakers. The result is first-language bilingualism (Swain, 1972), a process of simultaneously acquiring two languages. This type of developmental bilingualism is described for the acquisition of two languages before age 3, a somewhat arbitrary point which takes into account that children normally by this age have much of the first language (L1) system. When the process of acquiring another language begins after this point, sequential or successive bilingualism occurs in which one language follows, or is second to, the first in the acquisition order. This defines second-language acquisition for both children and adults. In addressing the issue of second-language (L2) acquisition for children, however, it is helpful to distinguish L2 acquisition in the preschool years from that in the school years when the child is at higher maturational levels and when literacy, reading and writing tasks also become part of the total process of becoming bilingual. In discussing language development processes in bilingual children, these three types of child bilingualism will be considered: (1) simultaneous bilingualism in very young children; (2) sequential bilingualism in preschool children; (3) sequential bilingualism in school-age children below the age of puberty. The development of bilingualism is a social process that is, unlike monolingualism, a non-universal achievement and, as such, may develop along a continuum ranging from full proficiency in two languages to a minimal degree of competency in one of the languages. In any case, bilingualism results from efforts to communicate, to take part in that interpersonal, interactive process defined by the social situations in which it occurs. Communication, more precisely, may be viewed as the exchange and negotiation of information between at least two persons through verbal and non-verbal symbols, oral and written or visual modalities as well as production and comprehension processes (Canale, 1983). Information is taken here in its broad sense of consisting of conceptual, sociocultural, affective and other content. Communication as a form of social interaction, following Morrow (1977), necessarily involves a high degree of unpredictability and creativity in both the form and content of the message. It takes place in sociocultural contexts through various types of discourse that place

constraints on appropriate language use. Additionally, it occurs under limiting conditions such as those imposed by normal maturational processes in children as well as other psychological or environmental constraints such as fatigue, anxiety, background noise or memory. Of critical importance to understanding the process of becoming bilingual, communication always has a purpose, or function, as that of informing, expressing oneself, persuading, entertaining, establishing social relations. It uses authentic, not contrived language, and is judged successful on the basis of its outcomes.

**Communicative Competence** It is against this outline of the nature of communication that we can look more closely at the notion of communicative competence to put the various dimensions of bilingual language acquisition in perspective. Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) stress that communicative competence is an essential part of actual communication. It refers both to knowledge, what one knows consciously or unconsciously about the language and other aspects of communicative language use, as well as to the skill in how well one can use this knowledge in actual communication. This competence includes, then, both the knowledge and the skill which underlie actual communication in a systematic and necessary way. To start a discussion regarding second language acquisition, the term “bilingualism” must be defined. Bilingualism is a complex term that, “. . . is influenced by multiple factors, such as the age of acquisition of the second language, continued exposure to the first language, relative skill in each language, and the circumstances under which each language is learned” (Gottardo & Grant, 2008). Regardless of this complexity, for the purposes of this paper, a simple definition of bilingualism has been selected. “In its simplest form, bilingualism is defined as ‘knowing’ two languages” (Valdez & Figueora, 1994, as cited in Gottardo & Grant, 2012). A child can become bilingual by simultaneous acquisition or successive acquisition of the second language. “A child under the age of 3 who is exposed to two languages usually experiences simultaneous acquisition. If the child is exposed to the second language at an older age, successive acquisition usually occurs” (National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, 1995). For the

acquisition of a second language, earlier is better (Petitto, 2009). Researchers have “consistently found that proficiency in the later-exposed bilingual and/or second language learners declined dramatically if learned after puberty (Johnson & Newport, 1989; McDonald 2000, as cited in Pettito & Dunbar, 2004). However, “children arriving late to a bilingual context can and do achieve language competence in their new language” (Pettito & Dunbar, 2004 ). True balanced bilingualism, also called equilingualism, occurs when individuals are equally fluent in two languages. There are different levels of bilingualism and “native-like proficiency in both languages, referred to as ‘true’ bilingualism, is rare” (Cutler, Mehler, Norris, & Segui, as cited by Gottardo & Grant, 2008). Most multilingual people have a dominant language. Bilingualism is common in many parts of the world. For example, in Spain, many children learn Spanish and Catalan; in the Andes, children speak Quichua or Quechua, as well as Spanish; and in India (whose official language is Hindi), its “subsidiary official language” is English. Many children are multilingual. Sadly, “research indicates that success in raising children to be bilingual remains the exception in the U.S., as most children eventually become English-dominant or even monolingual in English” (Fillmore, 2000, as cited in King & Fogle, 2006). Among the reasons for this trend are the negative attitudes toward diversity from those who are meant to provide support for families and the inability (or unwillingness) of certain programs and providers to deliver services in the native language of immigrant families. This could be due to financial constraints or lack of bilingual personnel. Another factor that influences this societal tendency for monolingualism is the high status of English in the U.S. The political climate toward immigrants can impact a family’s decision to retain the mother tongue or to select English as the only language for their child. Another reason for the monolingual trend in the U.S. is that American parents may not have many opportunities for providing foreign language exposure for their children. In the past, some teachers and service providers (including early interventionists) in the U.S. advised immigrant parents against raising their child to be bilingual, stating that it diminished the ability to learn

English. In this chapter, the issues of bilingualism in the U.S. and parental concerns regarding raising a bilingual child have been addressed. Current evidence shows no indication of clinical delays or language confusion for children learning two languages. The research is clear, “language development can be typical or atypical regardless of the number of languages in a child’s repertoire. Speech-language and developmental clinical conditions affect multilinguals and monolinguals alike, which means that there is no correlation between multilingualism or monolingualism and disorder” (Ferrira, 2011).

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