

ASPECTS OF SPEECH DEVELOPMENT AT PRESCHOOLERS IN BILINGUAL COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract: *At pre-school age, children experience an unprecedented development on all personality levels, by widening and complicating the relationship with the environment, based on the requirements of activity and communication. Therefore, children face a rapid development of speech and thinking. The development of speech is determined by the evolution of thinking, which at its turn contributes to the assimilation of different aspects of language and vocabulary. In our study, we try to show to which extent a bilingual environment favours the speech enhancement at preschoolers, contributing to the development of several opportunities such as the development of linguistic creativity, of cognitive processes, facilitation of third language enhancement. In this respect, we have carried out a comparative study between the level of speech development at preschoolers in a bilingual and a monolingual environment.*

Key words: *bilingual, mental lexicon, syntagmatic, paradigmatic, lexical acquisition*

1. Introductory aspects

Language, as system of sounds and symbols is used by people to communicate, to express cultural identities in order to establish social connections. Languages are complex entities which differ by means of phonetics, lexicology, grammar, and vocabulary and of course discourse structure. Therefore, the number of phonemes – vowels and consonants – is different in each language. If we consider only the European languages, their number varies from 22 to 60 phonemes. Some languages are more “phonetic”, others less. On a grammar level, each language has specific means of word formation and sentence building. All languages have a wide vocabulary, which beside the common vocabulary also contains scientific and technical vocabulary, so that the lexis can reach up to several hundreds of thousands of

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words and phrases. The speaker uses only a fraction of the lexis owned by a language. According to the latest research in the field, more than a half of world's population is bilingual. This can be the reason for the high interest in the impact factor upon the quality of language assimilation at population in bilingual environments. We are particularly concerned with the effect of bilingual studies upon the development particularities in the personality of pre-school children. All studies in psychology show that the most proper age to learn two languages is early childhood, namely pre-school period. (Jeanette Vos Ed.D. <http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article>). If a grown-up faces difficulties in acquiring a second language, a preschooler will easily enhance two, even three languages at the same time without a significant effort. Research done in the past few years has proven that those preschoolers who have practiced second language acquisition in early childhood, up to the age of three, have improved their intellectual abilities in all areas. They have good results, a better integration in the environment, a more confident and open attitude toward the others.

After observing the way very small children acquire a language we can notice how easily and naturally they learn languages, if the learning methods are adjusted to their age particularities. Dryden and Vos stated in the volume *The Learning Revolution* that: "Children can learn almost anything if they are dancing, tasting, touching, seeing, and feeling information"⁸¹.

Learning a language contributes to the improvement of all psychical processes and also to their qualities: memory, curiosity, concentration, perseverance, and to the development of emotional and social abilities. The enhancement of a language involves different methods: listening, understanding and speaking, in the family and later on during the activities in the kindergarten. This is how the bases of future reading and writing are set (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & McLaughlin, 2008). The bases of mother tongue are set at home, in the first years of life followed by a lifelong improvement in educational institutions and social environment. If preschooler come from a bilingual environment, the acquisition is carried on simultaneously, starting with the child's birth (Oller and Eilers, 2002). Some authors claim that those children that live in a bilingual environment and learn two languages simultaneously have more creative linguistic competences and develop sooner from a cognitive point of view.⁸²

Children learn a language under all its different aspects:

- *phonetic*. Children have the inborn ability to produce sounds in any language. The rules according to which the sounds of each language

⁸¹ Gordon Dryden, Jeannette Vos, *The Learning Revolution*, 1997

⁸² B. T., Bowman; M. S. Donovan; and M. S. Burns, editors. *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2001.

are connected, in order to turn those into meaningful words are acquired through imitation. In the beginning, certain words are improperly uttered or substituted, but they are gradually improved;

- *morphologically*. Morphology sets the rules according to which words are formed in a language. In the beginning, children will utter easy morphemes, but later on, after the development of phono-articulatory apparatus and a certain life experience, their morphemes will be more developed and complex;
- *syntactic*. Any language has its grammatical rules that must be applied so as to build a sentence out of different words. Children enhance these rules step by step in everyday communication, at home, kindergarten and proper social environment. Sometimes, communication contains certain errors which are later on improved through constant practice;
- *semantic*. Semantic involves understanding the meaning of words and sentences. It is common knowledge that more words can have the same meaning or a different meaning in different contexts. Learning their meaning is a long-term process and proper results are acquired through practice.

A language can be easily learnt by using it in different social contexts of verbal communication. Preschoolers learn to use language in different contexts. Due to kindergarten activities and to their growing up they will learn to use their mother tongue properly and to use the second language in different social contexts: to ask for something, to perform something, to set rules, to follow them and to identify the subtleties of each language. When a child will be able to utter an intention in an intelligible language, s/he will prove that he/she possesses communication competences in that language. The interaction between child and adult is important in order to improve the language, to practice, correct, activate and enrich the active speech. The speech development can differ at bilingual children according to their preschool age, the ethno – demographic context, frequency and the multitude of practice ways.

Ways of stimulating speech at children from a bilingual environment:

- involving children in debates where they can practice their ideas;
- active listening of children involved in a conversation;
- quick answer the children's questions;
- encouraging children to take part in role plays that promote language learning in different contexts;
- training children to express their own feelings
- simulation of different jobs and linguistic structures used in this context;

- presentation of proper utterances by an adult;
- using games and toys as an intuitional basis;
- linking the objects under discussion to the children`s life experience.

The role of the adult, either parent or educator is extremely important in stimulating and practicing speech by pre-schoolers. Adults provide them an example of proper speaking, by correcting them and giving them the emotional support they need.⁸³

1.1. Aspects under research

Simultaneous acquisition of two languages is common practice in several countries, especially in multicultural communities. It is stated that for a child it is easier to learn two even three languages in early childhood, without consistent effort (Dryden & Vos, 1997). There are also opinions which state that learning two languages simultaneously is not such a positive thing, because they could face language learning difficulties, confusion and late speech development. The question that arises is whether it is necessary for a child to learn one language properly and later on to start learning another one, or if it is more effective to learn them at the same time. In our study we would like to prove that bilingual speakers acquire cross – curricular competences (*cross-language transfer*)⁸⁴:

- *they acquire metalinguistic abilities;*
- *they have a more powerful cognitive development;*
- *they acquire a richer vocabulary;*
- *they are more self-confident;*
- *they acquire more easily a third language.*

Bilingual preschoolers that use both languages frequently in current speech, at home, exposed to numerous opportunities to use both languages, acquire the same level of grammatical correctness and language knowledge in both languages. We would like to observe the extent to which active vocabulary, correct formation of grammatical structures are developed at preschoolers from bilingual groups in comparison to pre-schoolers from monolingual groups

Studies have shown that a bilingual person does not have equal linguistic knowledge in both languages, being more fluent in one of them.⁸⁵ In

⁸³ Cummins, *Language, Power and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*, apud Horváth 2008, *O evaluare a politicilor de producere a bilingvismului minoritar din România. Către o nouă problematizare*, 2000, p.53.

⁸⁴ Ellen Bialystok, *Bilingualism in Development: Language, Literacy, and Cognition*, York University, Toronto.

⁸⁵ E., Thordardottir, A., Rothenberg, M.E., Rivard, R. Naves, (2006). Bilingual assessment: Can overall proficiency be estimated from separate measurement of two languages? *Journal of Multilingual Communication Disorders*, 4, 1-21.

order to acquire language knowledge in both languages, preschoolers have to practice them regularly, at home, with their friends and at home. Children are distinctive personalities, with specific development and behavioural particularities, who even if exposed to the same educational influences, the way they acquire them differ.

2. Method

In our research we have carried out a comparative study between the level of speech development at preschoolers from a bilingual environment (speakers of Romanian and Hungarian) and those from a monolingual environment that learn intensively a second language in the kindergarten. Our aim was to highlight the extent, to which the vocabulary of bilingual children is richer, the utterances clearer and more expressive than that of monolingual children. We have applied a study in some kindergartens which have groups where Hungarian is taught, but also groups with intensive English teaching. We have compared an equal number of children, of the same age, same level of psycho-physical development and who have constantly attended kindergarten. We have chosen preschoolers whose level of Romanian is equal. In order to discover the speech development particularities of preschoolers we have done a comparative study based on the following coordinates: origin (family component), the level of linguistic dualism, the level of speech development compared to monolinguals.⁸⁶

We have identified a number of 85 children that use both languages: Romanian and Hungarian. Regarding their family component we have observed the following:

- 50% of the children come from families with both parents Hungarian speakers;
- in 30 % of the cases only the father was of Hungarian origin, the mother being Romanian;
- in 20 % of the cases only the mother was of Hungarian origin and in the family, Hungarian is only occasionally spoken;
- 10 % of the children do not speak frequently Hungarian at home.

In this case, we have based our study on those 50% who frequently use Hungarian at home. We have studied the denominational and communicative function of the language, the levels of development for the linguistic means used in verbal communication at bilingual and monolingual preschoolers of late preschool age.

⁸⁶ V.M. Gathercole, & E.M. Thomas, *Minority language survival: input factors influencing the acquisition of Welsh*. In J. Cohen, K.T. McAlister, K. Rolstad, and J. MacSwan (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism* Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press (2005), (pp. 852-874).

3. Results

In order to carry out our study we have used a questionnaire based on the following aspects: lexical level, accuracy, pronunciation errors, accent specific to the mother tongue, the frequency of grammar errors in sentence building, regularity of speaking pace.

The lexis was submitted to quantity analysis and grammar correctness to quality analysis.

The level comparison, the tempo and the dynamics of development of the above mentioned parameters in mono and bilingual subjects, allowed us to state the following: *the results registered by bilingual preschoolers, by administrating them the whole set of techniques oriented towards the identification of speech development level in the mother tongue and the second language (its aspects, pattern and functions) have revealed a difference between monolingual and bilingual preschoolers.* The differences are statistically significant according to U test (Mann-Whitney) for $p = 0,05$.

We have analysed the tempo and the dynamics of bilingual development at preparatory group preschoolers. Simultaneous usage of both languages in everyday communication determines the development of tempo and the dynamics of bilingual characteristics. The level of second language acquisition is higher at children coming from bilingual families as compared to preschoolers that acquire second language only in the kindergarten on all researched levels. The differences in both groups are statistically significant after performing the U test (Mann-Whitney) for $p = 0,05$. The quantity analysis of the development process concerning the communicative function and the active lexis of both languages: Romanian and Hungarian, namely Romanian and English acknowledges our assumption that verbal evolution of preschoolers is determined by the usage of language in different contexts. A child's bilingual abilities are intensely developed also due to training and education within preschool institution.

Children from the monolingual test specimen are characterized by organized assimilation of lexical material in the mother tongue.⁸⁷ The study of the bilingual characteristics emergence at preschool age has proven that the subjects that use the languages in different contexts, at home and in the kindergarten, register a positive dynamics and a quantity growth of their linguistic results.

Therewith, it has been proven that at bilingual children the tempo of language acquisition is similar in the mother tongue and the second language.

⁸⁷ Cronin, V. S., *The syntagmatic-paradigmatic shift and reading development*, 2002, apud Wimmer, M. C. Howe, M.L. , *The Development of Automatic Associative Processes and Children's False Memories*, 2009, p. 12.

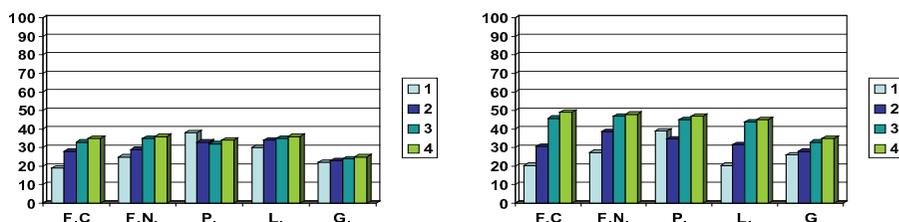
This fact is streamlined by the fact that in certain families, parents use both languages in everyday speech. Comparing the tempo of speech development in the second language in the Romanian – English test specimen, we notice that it is slower. A slight growth in speech development has been registered at subject from the second test specimen, corresponding to +0,29, as compared to +0,38 at the Romanian-Hungarian test specimen. The result is caused by discrimination in the communication means used by preschoolers from the second test specimen in using bilingual contexts. In our opinion, the pointed pattern of speech development at preschoolers facilitates a faster tempo of language assimilation, if used in the family – kindergarten environment, in relationship to adults and other fellow beings. The analysis of results revealed by the experiment identified significant individual differences in preschoolers’ bilingual development in the Romanian – Hungarian test specimen, as compared to the Romanian – English one. We have identified groups of subjects with a high, medium and poor level of speech development in the mother tongue and the second language within these two test specimens. The correlation of these levels in both languages is of high interest for us. Statistic data registered during the process of research highlight a variation in the level of speech development in both languages.

	Testing – mother tongue					Testing – second language				
	F. C	F.N.	P.	L.	G.	F.C	F. N.	P.	L.	G.
small gr	0,61	0,42	0,56	0,51	0,45	0,53	0,44	0,43	0,45	0,28
middle gr	0,69	0,49	0,61	0,59	0,53	0,54	0,46	0,49	0,48	0,32
higher gr	0,77	0,54	0,69	0,62	0,59	0,60	0,50	0,52	0,51	0,34
preparatory gr.	0,78	0,56	0,71	0,67	0,62	0,61	0,51	0,53	0,52	0,35

The number of highly bilingual children is growing: from 7,9% in early preschool age to 35,7% in higher preschool age. A similar dynamics is characteristic for subjects that have registered a medium level of bilingual development; their percentage increased from 19% to 38,2%. Among preschoolers from the first test specimen we have identified a number of 8 preschoolers that outrun the others both in speech and in intellectual development. These children speak both languages with a proper accent,

communicate actively, have a permanent epistemic curiosity, and are confident and sociable. In the second test specimen we have also identified preschoolers with a high level of speech development, but only in their mother tongue (10% of preschoolers). The number of preschoolers with medium development is 59% and with a low level is 31%. Approximately 69% of the children from the second test specimen registered medium and low indexes in the second language. The results of this experiment prove that incidental bilingual development cannot assure success and spectacular achievements in the evolution of second language acquisition.

NIVEL DE DEZVOLTARE A LIMBAJULUI BILINGV PE PARCURSUL PREȘCOLARITĂȚII



The quantitative analysis of data obtained after performing each test by all experimental subjects has proven that the most difficult part was the conversation, the description and the retelling in the second language. Most children could perform the tasks only after receiving help and suggestive questions. Major difficulties faced preschoolers from the Romanian – English test specimen in the following instances:

- in conversation, at finding the proper answer, they mostly repeat the words they hear at the adult they talk to;
- in using the vocabulary properly, they made several interferences and confusions;
- in elaborating grammar structures, which have no correspondence in the mother tongue

Preschoolers have to make connections between different words, in different contexts and they have to use the words in correct grammar structures in order to use properly the second language.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Paul Nation, *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2001.

Conclusions

We have reached some conclusions in our research which prove us that coherent speaking in the second language is not that coherent because the second language is in a process of assimilation and consolidation. It is a process that requires constant practice in order to assimilate all its components. The experimental investigation revealed certain resemblance but also divergence in language usage at bilingual children: both languages have communicative function, are included in a group of homogeneous languages and cultural valences. Languages spoken in bilingual cultural environments function as means of correlation between personalities and the objective reality, but also as stimulation of the cognitive interest. They are also used to satisfy cognitive and communicative needs, as a fundamental means of “SELF” awareness.⁸⁹ After researching the evolution of language in heterogeneous environments we have noticed a positive dynamics from early to late preschool age. This dynamics consists of proper usage of vocabulary and grammar of the second language. Analysing the active vocabulary used by the subjects we have noticed that in early stages children know more words in their mother tongue, but as they grow up, they improved their vocabulary in the second language too. The most important influence in this process has the preschool institution and the activities within (De However, 2005). Bilingual preschoolers experience the so called *interference*, namely the influence of the mother tongue on the foreign language and vice versa. The accent characteristic to the mother tongue is kept in the second language, but also strong stress on phonemes. Preschoolers mistake the words and pronounce more frequently those from the mother tongue. In Romanian-Hungarian test specimen the interference is stronger in early years of bilingual development, later on it diminishes thanks to the difference between the communication environments. For the second test specimen we have identified two types of verbal and behavioural reactions. They are caused by age and character differences and by the amount of mother tongue knowledge. The efficient adjustment to the language spoken in a particular environment, other than the mother tongue, is influenced by a series of character-related qualities: sociability, tolerance, curiosity, adaptability, etc. For an early preschooler it is important to adjust to the new environment and to the educational situations where shyness, unsociability, unsecureness are factors that lead to a poor adjustment to the communicational environment. The teacher’s attitude toward the new comer is very important. Family, the relationship with the group mates are also of high importance. In our study, we have identified certain evolution

⁸⁹ higher cognitive abilities (Carter-Aldridge, 2009).

particularities of the bilingual dualism at preschool age. Early preschoolers (3-4 years) show initiative in communication by starting up dialogues with an adult in both languages. Their verbal reactions are answers to adults' questions in a certain language. Due to their young age, the answers are simple, with no complicated situational content and sometimes it takes a while to respond. In early stages, preschoolers use elementary grammar constructions in the second language. We observe that bilingual preschoolers do not have the necessary means to be fluent in certain communication situations, therefore their answers are chaotic, their speech is sometimes meaningless and oriented towards drawing the adult's attention. When they are under the impact of emotional reactions, preschoolers act in their mother tongue, irrespective of the language used in the communicational environment. Bilingual preschoolers use in their games, when the adult does not interfere, the linguistic system which is more common to them, that's why contextual elements are faster assimilated in the mother tongue. Therefore, we notice that the higher level of speaking in the mother tongue, but using a coherent, correct and properly structured vocabulary influences the acquisition of the second language. Contextual speech does not overlap the situational and it certainly does not eliminate it.

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