

On Some Peculiarities of Bilingual Children's Speech Development

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The knowledge of two or more languages truly gives children so many advantages in life. Bilingual children have the advantage of knowing two cultures, of being able to communicate with a wider variety of people, and have possible economic advantages in their future. Research has even shown advantages in thinking skills among bilingual individuals. But deciding to raise bilingual kids is a decision that should be carefully considered as it affects children for the rest of their lives. "Parents need to consider the child's self identity, self-esteem, schooling options, as well as social factors when planning for bilingualism. Becoming bilingual is a special gift parents can offer their children, but the gift must be planned and presented with care for it to be well used and appreciated" (Rosenberg 1996:6).

Parents who speak more than one language are generally eager to share their languages with their children. As they begin this important undertaking, parents frequently have questions about how second language learning affects reading ability, social skills, and scholastic achievement. Whether or not they speak more than one language themselves, many wonder how best to help their children learn more than one language.

The reasons for choosing to raise children with two or more languages are as varied as the families themselves. Even the word *bilingualism* has different meanings for different families. For some families, having the ability to listen in two languages but speak in just one may constitute bilingualism, while other parents expect their children not only to be bilingual, but also literate in both languages. Whatever the goals for developing bilingualism in each family may be, success appears to depend on whether a "language plan" has been worked out in advance. Families, who take the time to consider how their children will develop two languages, and how to make the necessary commitments to bilingual language development, tend to be more successful in raising bilingual children.

There are two major patterns in bilingual language acquisition: *simultaneous bilingualism* and *sequential bilingualism*. In *simultaneous bilingualism*, the child acquires two languages at the same time before the age of 3. The child may mix words or parts of words from both languages in the first stage. Stage 2 (sequential bilingualism) occurs at 4 years and older when distinction between the two languages takes place, and the child uses each language separately. *Sequential bilingualism* may also occur before the child is 3 years old, but the child can draw on the knowledge and experience of the first language while acquiring the second language.

The term *balanced bilingualism* is used to describe individuals who have the same fluency in two languages, while *semilingualism* refers to those who have deficiencies in both languages compared with monolinguals. These deficiencies could be in a reduced vocabulary, incorrect grammatical patterns, etc. Few people are truly balanced bilinguals in both languages in all situations. One language is usually dominant. This dominance

may be different for listening and speaking or for reading and writing and usually changes over time.

Research suggests that children who learn a second language are more creative and better at solving complex problems than those who do not. Studies have shown that bilinguals outperform similar monolingual peers on both verbal and non-verbal tests of intelligence and tend to achieve higher scores on standardized tests. Individuals who speak more than one language have the ability to communicate with more people, read more literature, and benefit more fully from travel abroad. Knowing a second language also gives people a competitive advantage in the workforce. These are some of the compelling reasons for parents to encourage the development of a second, or a third language with their children.

One can state that learning two languages for a child perhaps is accessible, but more than two may seem too much. “Raising a bilingual or multilingual child in a monolingual country can be challenging, but learning an extra language is easier during childhood when the human brain is absorbing everything like a sponge” (Darseno 1996:4). Considering how much babies have to learn in their first years of life, another language really does not add much to the load. As long as the child is getting regular interactions in the second (or third) language, there will be no problems. Also, even if your child does not end up speaking all the languages, do not underestimate the value of a passive language, i.e. understanding it but not yet speaking it. If you already understand a language, it will be easier to learn it later in school or as an adult, compared to someone who had never heard it before. So, even “just” understanding another language is most definitely not a wasted effort.

Learning a second language is simple for children, relative to adults, but in the beginning they actually need to hear a word thousands of times before it sticks – unless it is a bad word, then miraculously you only have to say it once. If the child picks up a bad word from the street, he is likely to forget it soon if you pay no attention to it, and if you do not scold him. But if you threaten the child to punish him in case he repeats the word once again, he is sure to use it later. There is something in human nature – to do what is forbidden (remember the Bible – Adam, Eve and the apple). In some cases parents smile at it, thus subconsciously (perhaps not deliberately) encouraging the child to repeat it.

Many parents worry that raising children in a multilingual environment may delay their speech or lead to learning difficulties at school. Although parents often report that their multilingual children start talking 3 to 6 months later than their monolingual peers, research shows that they reach major language developmental milestones at similar times. It is important to differentiate between the popular use of the term *language delay* in reference to a child who is perceived to take longer than average to begin to speak but who is well within the normal range of productive vocabulary development, and the clinical use of the term to refer to significant delays in the development of language, which can be either primary (not associated with another disorder) or secondary (associated with conditions such as autism). A lack of understanding of the different uses of the term may result in unjustified concern for some parents interested in raising their children with

two languages. “You can always ask if they think Einstein’s intellect suffered growing up with both German and Italian. And, he didn’t start talking until he was three years old either, but he certainly seemed to make up for lost time!” (Bosemark 2003:16).

Some people believe that children will be confused by learning more than one language. It is true that some mixing will occur, but that is both harmless and temporary. Children often use the grammatical structures of the language which is dominant. It may be the language of the country they live in, which may prevail over the one spoken only in the family. However, our observations have revealed that in bilingual families children more often use the grammatical structures of the language the bearer of which is the mother. This is due to the fact that mothers spend more time with their children, thus taking more active part in the process of upbringing. Let us view two cases: (1) examples taken from the speech of a child with an Armenian-speaking mother and a Russian-speaking father, and (2) a child with a Russian-speaking mother and an Armenian-speaking father.

1. Here are some examples of lexico-grammatical hybrids made up by a child belonging to the first group:

Папа, я рисуем / я кушаем.

The misuse of the verbal ending is the influence of the Armenian auxiliary verb – եմ (նկարում եմ, ուտում եմ). It might also be interpreted as the plural form of the Russian verb, but it is less probable.

Мы приехали автобусом, а они машиной.

Here we see the influence of the Armenian ending – ու (աւտոբուսով, մեքենայով).

Мама в кухне.

The misuse of the preposition is the influence of Armenian – խոհանոցում).

Папа, тот мальчик берет меня за руку.

In this case we see a misused idiomatic expression (the child is complaining that he is being teased – in Armenian ձեռք առնել).

In the examples above the influence of Armenian grammatical structures is noticeable.

We may also observe language interference (mixture) in the child’s speech.

Знаешь, папа, завтра мы с мамой пойдем в газананоц!

Татуля мне подарила красивый шалварик.

2. Now let us view the speech of a child belonging to the second group.

Քույրիկս ինձ չի տալիս քնեմ: (Сестра не дает спать.)

Ինձ մոտ նոր խաղալիք Կա: (У меня новая игрушка.)

Ինձ ցուրտ է: (Мне холодно.)

In the following examples we see misused prepositions:

տարիի վրա եկանք (приехали на такси)

քույրիկս դուրս եկավ փողոցի վրա (вышла на улицу)

կրակել բռչունի մեջ (стрелять в птичку)

պապան աշխատանքի վրա է (папа на работе)

նվագում եմ ջութակի վրա (играю на скрипке)

In the examples below we have both lexical and grammatical mixture.

Ես չեմ ճրտում, ես պալտոյի մեջ եմ: (Я в пальто.)

ժիլետի / շուրթայի մեջ եմ: (Я в жилете / в губе.)

In some cases we may notice word for word translation of idiomatic expressions:

- Որտեղի՞ց: - Ուղտից: (Откуда? – От верблюда.)

- Իմ բերանը կողպեքի վրա է: (У меня рот на замке.)

As we see, in the first case (with an Armenian-speaking mother) Armenian grammatical structures prevail over Russian ones, whereas in the second case (with a Russian-speaking mother) we observe the opposite phenomenon.

As the child builds his vocabulary in each language, this phenomenon automatically disappears. How many monolingual children mechanically make mistakes after correct usage has been learned? Eventually, the multilingual child learns correct usage in the same way as any other child. If parents do not mix languages in their own conversation, it will be much simpler for the child to remain consistent as well.

To sum up, arming the child with more than one language can lead to more job opportunities down the road, as well as the ability to connect to more people, both socially and professionally. Studies even show that being bilingual can help people keep a sharp mind through old age.

References:

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Երկլեզվակիր երեխաների խոսքի զարգացման որոշ առանձնահատկությունների շուրջ

Հոդվածը քննարկում է երկլեզվակիր երեխաների խոսքի զարգացման փուլերը և դրանց առնչվող որոշ առանձնահատկություններ: Երկլեզվակիր երեխաների խոսքի զարգացման ընթացքում դիտարկվում են այնպիսի երևույթներ, ինչպիսիք են ուշացած խոսքը և լեզուների միախառնումը: Բերված օրինակները ցույց են տալիս ընտանիքի կարևոր դերը երկլեզվակիր երեխաների խոսքի զարգացման գործընթացում: