

# The Simultaneous Bilingual Child: A Language Acquisition Study

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**Abstract:** *This research paper is based on the researcher's assumption that a bilingual child acquires languages simultaneously as influenced by some factors such as the child's social environment. This includes the family, the media (particularly the television), and significant others (like relatives and friends). With the factors mentioned, this would result to the development of language and cognition. This paper attempts to (1) present the profile of the simultaneous bilingual child; (2) Identify the factors affecting the bilingual child's acquisition of languages; and (3) Determine the implication of simultaneous bilingualism to the development of language and cognition.*

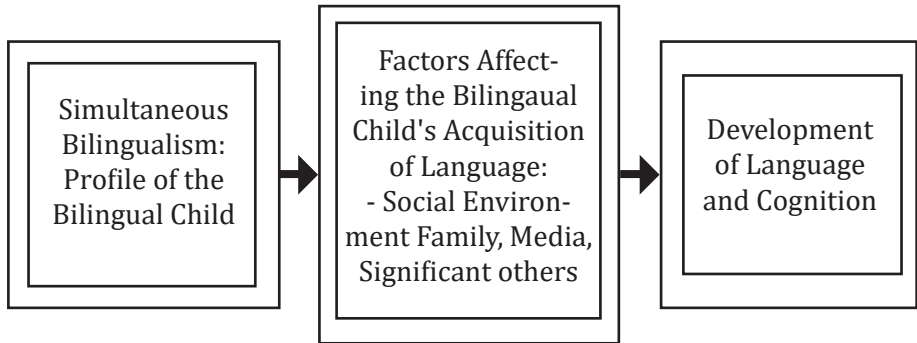
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## Introduction

Most people believed that children's cognitive development is manifested through language. It is believed that language is a display of wit or knowledge. For most children, ages 18 months - 24 months, it is expected that their language is intelligible or comprehensible. However, there are cases wherein at 36 months or 3 years – 5 years old, some children cannot express themselves in an intelligible language. Like in the case of my daughter, Ravine who was two (2) years and 11 months old but can only speak few *essential* words and phrases and mostly unintelligible *lengthy sentences*.

With this, the research aimed to find out how a child who grows up in a bilingual environment simultaneously acquires languages. Specifically, this sought answers to the following: How does a bilingual child acquire languages; what are the factors affecting the bilingual child's acquisition of languages; and what is the implication of simultaneous bilingualism to language and cognitive development?

The researcher's assumption that a bilingual child acquires languages simultaneously as influenced by some factors such as the child's social environment that includes family, media (particularly the television), and significant others (like relatives and friends) would result to the development of language and cognition. (See illustration below)



Lev S. Vygotsky's Social Development Theory states that cognitive development is limited to a certain range at any given age (the area of current development surrounded by another area of future development= ZPD); that full cognitive development requires social interaction; that mediation occurs through the use of tools or signs of a culture. Language and symbolism are usually initially to mediate contact with social environment then within ourselves. (Rozycki & Goldfarb, 2000)



*Full development of the ZPD depends upon full social interaction*

The potential for cognitive development depends upon the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD): A level of development attained when children engage in social interaction. "The range of skill that can be developed with adult guidance or peer collaboration exceeds what can be attained alone." (Rozycki & Goldfarb, 2000)

One essential tenet in Vygotsky's theory is the notion of the existence of what he called the zone of proximal development.

Zone of Proximal development or ZPD refers to the gap or difference between what the child can learn unaided and what he

or she can learn with the help of an adult or a more capable peer. The idea of assisting the learner is known as *scaffolding*.

The distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers.

## Discussion

In an increasingly diversified and multilingual world, more and more young children find themselves in an environment where more than one language is used. However, people everywhere have strong ideas about children growing up with a second or third language. These ideas influenced how people interact with their children and how they look at other people's children.

There are some common myths about children growing up bilingually; first, it is often claimed that hearing two or more languages will confuse the child and lead to grave problems in acquiring language. Second, it is claimed that the acquisition of the main language of the environment will stand a better chance without competition from other language (De Houwer, 1999).

It is in this context that the researcher aims to support the earlier assumption that the development of cognition and language of a bilingual child is affected by factors such as the social environment; thus, cannot be associated with the difficulty in acquiring a language.

### A. The Bilingual Child

Children may learn more than one language from the time they are born, or a second language may be introduced when they begin preschool, or a kindergarten program. Some children grow up in homes where two or more languages are used. Studies of the language development of such "native bilinguals" suggest that they behave much like monolingual children (Saunders, 1988). They manage to learn two language systems in about the same time and to about the same degree of skill as monolingual children take to learn one.

It has long been assumed that bilingual children are at a disadvantage when learning language and that their progress in

one or both languages is delayed (Owens, 1996). These children who grow up with two or more languages from infancy do not show any signs of language delays or disorders. Moreover, these children provide visible proof that there is no causal relationship between a bilingual environment and language learning problems.

It is further claimed that small children who are learning to speak two languages go through a stage of mixing and confusing the two. The use of words from both languages in a single sentence is cited as evidence that the child cannot distinguish between the two languages. According to Romaine (1995), the use of two languages in one sentence by mature bilinguals reveals a great deal of linguistic skill. It is also true that, while young bilingual children sometime use words from two languages in the same sentence, they produce far more sentences using only one language. This clearly shows that they are able to keep their language separate.

Baker (1993) as cited by Chipongian (2000) mentioned that bilingual individuals, by knowing two or more words for one object or idea, may possess an added cognitive flexibility. Bilingual children have also demonstrated superior story-telling skills, because they are less bound by words, more elastic in thinking due to owning two languages. Moreover, they have the advantage of knowing two cultures, of being able to communicate with a wider variety of people, and of thinking skills. (Rosenberg, 1996)

## Simultaneous Bilingual Acquisition

Simultaneous bilingualism is learning two languages at once. The communication skills of children learning two or more languages from birth typically develop in the same way as children learning only one language. That is:

***One-year-old*** children should be able to understand a variety of words and should be using a few single words.

***By age two***, children should have 50 words and be combining words into two word phrases.

***Between the ages of three and five***, children talk in sentences, ask and answer questions, follow longer directions, and can tell stories and talk about how they feel.

Simultaneous Acquisition is the development of two languages prior to age three (McLaughlin, 1978 & Grosjean, 1982 cited by Owens, 1996). Simultaneous bilingual acquisition can be characterized as follows:

1. Initial language mixing, followed by a slow separation and increasing awareness of the differences.
2. Influence of one on the other when one is favored by the environment.
3. Avoidance of difficult words and constructions in the weaker language.
4. Rapid shifts in the dominance of either language with environmental shifts.
5. Final separation of the phonological and grammatical systems but enduring influence of the dominant system in vocabulary and idioms

The rate and manner of development appear to be the same whether the child is monolingual or bilingual. In all essential respects early simultaneous bilingualism does not differ from the acquisition of a single language. In spite of the bilingual linguistic load, the child acquires both languages at a rate comparable to that of monolingual children.

There are three stages in the simultaneous acquisition of two languages in young children. During the first stage, the child has two separate lexical systems. It has been argued that in the initial stage of simultaneous bilingual development, children actually have two different language systems that they are able to use in different contexts or in functionally different ways (Genesee, 1989). The child uses whatever vocabulary he has available. Mixing of grammatical elements may reflect lack of development of structures in one of the languages, possibly because these structures are too difficult at present.

Phonological differentiation is also occurring. The earliest phonology is usually a combination of the two different inputs into a single system, although the least interference seems to occur in this aspect of language. Differentiation of the phonological systems begins between twenty-four to thirty months. "By age 2, children have acquired a conception of their native phonology that specifies

certain contrasts as relevant and others... as irrelevant to the language's meaning system" (Oller & Eilers, 1983).

In the second stage, the child has two distinct lexicons but applies the same syntactic rules to both. The child learns structures common to both languages first, the simpler constructions before the more complex. Thus, if a construction is more complex in one language, it will be learned first in the other language in its simpler form. Finally, in the third stage, the child correctly produces lexical and syntactic structures from each language. Although there is still a great deal of interference, it is mostly confined to the syntactic level. To decrease interference, the child may try to keep the two languages as separate as possible, associating each with a particular person. "The act of labeling a person with one of the two languages makes the choice of the words and rules a kind of automatic process" (Volterra & Taeshner, 1978). As the child becomes more familiar with the syntactic differences, the tendency to label people with a certain language decreases. The child becomes truly bilingual and can manage two separate languages at about age seven. (*Language Development*, Owens, R.E., 1996, p420)

## **B. Factors affecting the simultaneous learning of two languages (Rosenberg, 1996)**

1. The parents' ability in one or more languages. Some parents speak only one language, the language of the home, and are unable to speak the language of the school and possibly of the community.
2. The parents' actual use of language with the child. The parents may have language ability in two or more languages but have made a decision about which language they speak with the child.
3. The language or languages other family members speak with the child, such as the language spoken between siblings or between children and grandparents.
4. The last factor is the language the child uses in the community.

Experts stress separating the languages to make language acquisition easier for children. When kids are learning two languages at the same time parents need to work out language strategies that emphasize boundaries between the languages. For example:

1. One parent, one language. Each parent consistently speaks one language while the other parent speaks another language (usually each on speaking his or her native language to the child and possibly the common language to each other).
2. Both parents speak one language in the home and a second language is used at school.
3. One language is used at home and at school and the second language is used in the community.
4. Both parents speak both languages to the child but separate the languages according to speaking situations or alternate days.

Consistency is the key in early language learning. If languages are mix in the same conversation, young children experience difficulty separating vocabulary and grammar into the appropriate language. The child may learn the “mixed” language as one hybrid language.

Most research shows that the environment fosters language development. It relates to the early period (ages 1 to 3) and to children’s interactions with their mothers at home. For young children, one helpful style of interaction is a highly responsive one, in which the adult lets the child decide what to talk about, expands on that topic, works hard to figure out what the child means, suggests new activities, and pays more attention to what the child wants to say than about whether it is being said correctly.

One study has shown that the quality of the language environment has a large impact on the language development of the children (Mc Cartney, 1984). The amount of expressive verbal interaction with caregivers has a specific effect on the children’s language development. Children’s language level is related to opportunities to initiate conversations with caregivers and is negatively related to the number of conversations initiated with peers. For example, observational studies that compare children’s talk at home and at school consistently find that homes are the richer environment.

While initial language acquisition relies mainly on neurological development over time, subsequent language acquisition relies on other factors such as motivation, opportunity, environment, and personality.

Opportunity and motivation work together to affect language acquisition. Stephen Krashen explains that acquisition takes place if a child is exposed to comprehensible input. Varied and frequent comprehensible input is the key to acquisition. It would make sense that the number of opportunities the brain has to store and reinforce patterns, accents, concepts, and meanings of a language the better the information would be stored and processed.

While language acquisition is ultimately completed and stored in the brain, emotional and environmental factors greatly affect the process by which it is acquired. *Retrieved from (<http://serendip.bryanmawr.edu.biology>)*

The quality of the setting has an important effect on cognitive as well as language development. During the preschool years language and cognition are very closely related. Stimulating children's language involves enriching their vocabulary, their understanding of how things work, their knowledge about numbers, about weather, about how things grow, about how people live in other parts of the world, and dozens more such topics.

Family members are superb conversational partners for young children not only because of a powerful affective relationship but also because they know the child's world- and therefore what the child is likely to be talking about- so well. When children in their second year of life can utter only a few meaningful words, a family member is most likely to understand the child's intent and make a meaningful response. Later, when children's pronunciation has become intelligible, their highly individual choice of words can continue to make communication difficult with strangers.

Children's language development is also nurtured by talk with other children. According to Vygotsky (1978), human learning presupposes a specific social nature and is part of a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them. An essential feature of learning is that it awakens a variety of intentional developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is in the action of interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. (Thomas, 1993) Interaction



between children and caretakers seems to play an important role in language acquisition. The discourse of “scaffolding” provided by adults in their conversation with children might help these children acquire the syntactic structures of full grammatical sentences. Interaction with other speakers of the language seems to play a crucial role in the acquisition of syntactic and lexical structures by language learners.

Each child learns language at his or her own speed. This is related to a variety of factors such as:

- Stability and mobility. A family that remains in the second language community for a longer period of time will increase the chances of the child retaining the second language.
- Relationships within the family affect bilingual language development. For example, if the father speaks a different language than the mother, but frequent trips take him away from home, the child will not learn his language as easily as the mother’s.
- Attitudes toward each language expressed by the parents, other family members, the school, the community and especially the child, will affect the development or one or both of the languages. Both languages must be given importance and a sense of worth in all aspects of the child’s life. All kids have a need and a desire to communicate when language experiences are positive and meaningful. (Retrieved from <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Rosenberg-Bilingual.html>, 2006)

Individual differences in syntax acquisition are heavily influenced by the language environment a child experiences. In a paper published by Huttenlocher (2002), cited by Harms, found out that a dramatic differences among three- and four-year-olds’ speech and comprehension depend upon how parents and teachers spoke to them. (Retrieved from <http://www-news.uchicago.edu>) The environment plays an important role in learning to speak. Children learn to speak only when they hear people talk to them in many different circumstances. Language development in the early stages depends crucially on vocabulary knowledge. The more words

children know, the better they will learn to speak and the better their chances of doing well in school. (De Houwer, 1999)

### **C. Implication to Language and Cognitive Development**

The claim that bilingualism would have any effect on cognitive ability is based on the assumption that language is a central part of cognitive activity. Lev S. Vygotsky emphasized the importance of language in guiding thought processes, viewing it as a process of social shaping through linguistic mediation, so according to this theory, bilingualism can have profound effects on cognitive processes depending on society's attitudes and actions towards the phenomenon. (Hakuta, 1990)

Vygotsky believed that all fundamental cognitive activities take shape in a matrix of social history and form the products of socio-historical development. That is, cognitive skills, and pattern of thinking are not primarily determined by innate factors, but are the products of the activities practiced in the social institutions of the culture in which the individual grows up. Consequently, the history of the society in which the child is reared and the child's personal history are crucial determinants of the way in which that individual will think (Schutz, 2004). In this process of cognitive development, language is a crucial tool for determining how the child will learn how to think because advanced modes of thought are transmitted to the child by means of words. The intellectual development of children is a function of human communities, rather than of individuals.

Culture makes two sorts of contributions to the child's intellectual development. First, children acquire much of their thinking (knowledge) from it. Second, children acquire the process or means of their thinking or tools of intellectual adaptation from the surrounding culture. Therefore, culture provides the children with the means to, what to think and how to think.(Kristindottir, 2001)

Moreover, Vygotsky viewed cognitive developments as a result of a dialectical process, where the child learns through shared problem solving experiences with someone else, such as parents, teachers, siblings, or a peer.

Society provides the interaction that plays fundamental roles in

the development of cognition. Vygotsky saw cognitive development as rooted in social interaction. “Every function in the child’s cultural developmental appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals. (Rozycki & Goldfarb, 2000) Human learning presupposes a special social nature and is part of a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them.

Interactions can take many forms, Vygotsky stresses language dialogue. It is primarily through their speech that adults assumed to transmit to children the rich body of knowledge that exists in their culture. As learning processes, the child’s own language comes to help as his or her primary tool of intellectual transformation.

According to Vygotsky, an essential feature of learning is that it awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is in the action of interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers.

## Conclusion

The study attempted to explicate how a child who grows up in a bilingual environment simultaneously acquires languages. The following questions guided the researcher in drawing answers for the conclusions; (1) How does a bilingual child acquire languages?, (2) What are the factors affecting the bilingual child’s acquisition of languages?, and (3) What is the implication of simultaneous bilingualism to language and cognitive development?

Simultaneous bilingualism is learning two languages at once. The communication skills of children learning two or more languages from birth typically develop in the same way as children learning only one language. Studies of the language development of such “native bilinguals” suggest that they behave much like monolingual children. They manage to learn two language systems in about the same time and to about the same degree of skill as monolingual children take to learn one.

Simultaneous acquisition of two languages in young children has three stages: the first stage, the child has two separate lexical

systems; children actually have two different language systems that they are able to use in different contexts or in functionally different ways and phonological differentiation is also occurring. In the second stage, the child has two distinct lexicons but applies the same syntactic rules to both. The child learns structures common to both languages first, the simpler constructions before the more complex; and in the third stage, the child correctly produces lexical and syntactic structures from each language. The child becomes truly bilingual and can manage two separate languages at about age seven.

While language acquisition is ultimately completed and stored in the brain, emotional and environmental factors greatly affect the process by which it is acquired. The quality of the language environment has a large impact on the language development of the children. The amount of expressive verbal interaction with caregivers has a specific effect on the children's language development. While initial language acquisition relies mainly on neurological development over time, subsequent language acquisition relies on other factors such as motivation, opportunity, environment, and personality.

Family members are superb conversational partners for young children not only because of a powerful affective relationship but also because they know the child's world- and therefore what the child is likely to be talking about so well. Moreover, children's language development is also nurtured by talk with other children.

Bilingualism can have profound effects on cognitive processes depending on society's attitudes and actions towards the phenomenon. Society provides the interaction that plays fundamental roles in the development of cognition which Vygotsky, apparently posited that cognitive development is rooted in social interaction. It is primarily through their speech that adults assumed to transmit to children the rich body of knowledge that exists in their culture. As learning processes, the child's own language comes to help as his or her primary tool of intellectual transformation.

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