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UNDERSTANDING BILINGUALISM AND ITS EFFECT ON CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Brenda Rodriguez, MS, CCC-SLP

The group with the fastest rate of growth in U.S. schools consists of bilingual children. In 1991-1992, 15 percent of teachers worked with children who were learning English as a second language. By 2001-2002, 43 percent of teachers were working with these children (McCardle & Leung, 2006). These figures are only expected to increase and it is predicted that by 2050 approximately 40 percent of school age children will speak a language other than English (International Reading Association, 2001). The significant increase in this population of children warrants an increase in the understanding of their unique qualities and skills.

DISPELLING SOME MYTHS

To better understand bilingualism, it is important to begin by dispelling various myths. One myth is that the skills of a bilingual child are equivalent to those of two monolingual children, each of whom speaks a single language he or she knows well. That is, a bilingual Spanish/English speaker is expected to have the same vocabulary, grammar, etc. as a monolingual English speaker and a monolingual Spanish speaker. In reality, very few bilingual children or adults are considered to be "equal bilinguals". Bilingualism is not a static condition, but rather a dynamic process. Skills in one language may increase during periods of time when there is greater exposure to that language. As a result, skills in the other language may plateau or decrease if the language is not actively used. Additionally, some skills may be stronger in one language while other skills may be stronger in the other language. For instance, a child may display a stronger vocabulary for academic terms in English while the vocabulary for household objects, foods, and other labels from the home environment may be in the home language. This is important to consider when attempting to determine if a child is truly exhibiting a language deficit.

A second myth is that when a bilingual child presents with a language impairment, bilingualism is to blame. Parents are often concerned that the bilingual exposure at home has contributed to their child being behind in language skills. Although bilingual children can have language impairments which require speech-language therapy, parents, as well as the professionals who advise them on their child's development, should understand that bilingualism does not cause language impairments. A language impairment is a problem in acquiring language. It will be present whether there is one or more than one language to be acquired. Being exposed to more than one language does not place children at risk for having language deficits. Furthermore, for a language impairment to truly exist, it must be present in all languages spoken by the child. A child who presents with adequate skills in Spanish but deficient skills in English is not language impaired, but rather in the process of learning a second language.

A third myth is that if these children have a language impairment they will not be able to learn a second language and should thus be exposed to only one language. Although the research on bilingual language development is not as extensive as on monolingual English language development, current findings indicate that bilingual children with language impairments can indeed learn two languages. Compared to children with typical language development, a monolingual child with a language impairment will display deficits in one language while a bilingual child will display deficits in two languages (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago, 2004).

SIMULTANEOUS OR SEQUENTIAL BILINGUAL?

Within the category of bilingualism it is important to determine whether a child is a simultaneous or sequential bilingual. Simultaneous and sequential bilingualism refer to the way in which the second language is acquired. The characteristics of the two groups differ, depending on their language acquisition pattern.

A "simultaneous bilingual" is someone who is

exposed to and has acquired more than one language before 3 years of age. Simultaneous language development follows a pattern similar to monolingual language development. That is, the age at which babbling, first words, two-word phrases and sentences emerge is similar to those of monolingual speakers. Therefore, age of acquisition of these developmental language milestones should not differ in monolingual and simultaneous bilingual children.

Simultaneous bilingual children were initially believed to combine the forms of their two languages to create one language. As their languages developed, they would gradually separate into two separate languages. However, current research indicates that children's languages are separate very early on. A bilingual child learning two languages is expected to develop a separate sound system, vocabulary and grammar for each language. It has also been found that at two years of age bilingual children are able to distinguish the language others speak and to address them in the respective language. There may be some instances in which a bilingual child may borrow grammatical forms from one language and use them in the other language (i.e. "the house blue" – borrowing word order in Spanish). This is not a frequently occurring behavior, however, in typically developing bilingual children (Genesee et al., 2004).

Although simultaneous bilingual children and monolingual children should generally follow similar patterns of language development, there are some differences to consider. For instance, a bilingual child's vocabulary size may appear smaller than that of a monolingual child. However, when words from both languages are added, the vocabulary is similar to that of a monolingual child. Another consideration is that bilingual children may be more dominant in one language than the other due to the level of exposure to each language. Therefore, any determination as to the adequacy of language development should take this into consideration.

A "sequential bilingual" is a child who learns a second language after 3 years of age. Second language acquisition for children with sequential bilingualism may involve several different processes.

Transfer

Bilingual children may transfer a feature of their first language to their second language. This is possible in any of the language areas: syntax, morphology, phonology, pragmatics and semantics. For instance, a Spanish speaking child may say in English, "I have eight years". This is a literal translation from the Spanish form, "Yo tengo ocho años". Knowledge of the language form in Spanish

allows one to understand that the child is not using a deviant form of language but rather displaying a typical second language acquisition process.

Silent Period

Children who are in the process of learning a second language may go through a silent period. This refers to a period of time during which the child will remain silent and focus on listening in order to become familiar with understanding the second language. This period may be longer in some children than others. The period tends to be shorter in older children, where it may last for weeks or months. Silent periods can be longer in preschool children, lasting for one year or more. If a bilingual child is observed to be silent for a period of time, it is essential to determine how long the child has been exposed to the second language in order to determine if he or she may be going through a silent period.

Code-switching

Code-switching refers to changing from one language to another within a phrase or sentence. This is a typical process observed not only in children acquiring a second language but also in fluent bilingual speakers. Code-switching may consist of only one word in a sentence ("Mira, I'm leaving." = Look, I'm leaving.). It may also consist of changes in sequential sentences ("Voy a comer. I'm hungry." = I'm going to eat. I'm hungry.) or changes within a sentence ("Cuando llegue a la casa I'm going to watch TV." = When I get home I'm going to watch TV.).

There are many reasons why code-switching may be used. It may serve as a means of emphasizing or clarifying a comment. It can also serve to establish identity with other bilingual speakers. In children who do not yet have a well developed second language, code-switching may be more prevalent.

Language Loss

When a child learns a second language but does not maintain the first language, he or she can experience a language loss in the first language. This is often observed in children who speak a native language at home and begin to learn English in monolingual preschools. Over time, the child may present with developing skills in English while the skills in the native language may decline or plateau. Language loss is less frequently observed in environments where the native language is valued and maintained.

Fossilization

There are some incorrect language forms which may remain in the language of proficient bilingual speakers. These forms may be a transfer from the

native language or may be forms which have been incorporated into the dialect of second language speakers of a specific native language.

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Although learning a second language may appear to occur rapidly in children, becoming a proficient speaker is a lengthy process. A model of language proficiency that explains this process is the differentiation between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (Cummins, 1992).

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills

When children begin to learn a new language they first learn to communicate in situations that require less complex language. For instance, a child may engage in conversations about familiar topics such as favorite games and television shows. A child may also converse about topics where there is some visual support provided, such as art activities. These children may appear to be fluent in English because they can take part in conversations that rely on visual support or involve familiar topics such as daily routines. Such language situations require only Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) – language skills that are supported by context and familiarity.

BICS takes approximately two years to develop. Many language proficiency tests given to children to determine language dominance only assess BICS. As a result, a child may be labeled English dominant and is expected to perform like truly English dominant children in language and academics. This is problematic because the child has only achieved a superficial level of language and will thus appear delayed in comparison to English proficient children. In order to be proficient in English children need to acquire Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency.

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) takes five to seven years to develop. These are the language skills required to perform more abstract and decontextualized language tasks. Most academic subjects, except when there is much visual support, require CALP. Skills such as making inferences and predictions and analyzing information require CALP skills. A child who has been found to be proficient in English based on a test assessing BICS will struggle with situations that require CALP skills. Since they are believed to be proficient in English, their struggles may be mislabeled as a disability in learning.

CONCLUSION

In order to better understand bilingual children and their skills, it is important to be aware of the unique qualities that contribute to learning a second language. It is only through this knowledge that one can make sound decisions regarding children's language development.

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