

BILINGUAL ACQUISITION

Childhood

Part 1

The history of childhood bilingualism study: [Bialystok, 1991.CUP]

- Initial studies were motivated by educational needs and policy.
- This was heavily biased against bilingualism in particular and against immigration in general
- Bilingualism was considered a disorder that should be treated by ruthless instruction in a majority language, eradicating the ‘invading language’
- Often this invading language was the language of home, heritage, culture of the child
- But the evidence was clear and loud. Immigrant children in North American schools were less successful than their monolingual peers
- Easy explanation was that bilingualism was to blame

- there was a change in perception in the early 1970s
- When the Anglophone Canadian children had been ‘sentenced’ to French immersion program
- These children were educated entirely or partially in French
- But they did not display the ‘bilingual pathology’, so bilingualism was not the culprit.

- Some recent developments in the field of language research has contributed to direct exploration of the linguistic and cognitive developments in bilingual children.

- Second language studies became 'mainstream': for a rather long time second language acquisition was considered a secondary issue. The more important problem to be solved was first language acquisition among children. Now that we know a great deal about that aspect, its perhaps time to focus on the L2.

- Shift in emphasis in psycholinguistic research from product description to processes:
- with a shift in psychological research from behaviorism to cognitive aspects,
- second language acquisition among children was increasingly seen as co-developing with their intellectual development.
- Children's developments understood in terms of them developing schemas as a function of specific experiences. As they grow, these schemas are elaborated and restructured.
- The critical aspect of this theory is that children's experience determines important aspects of cognitive organization which, in turn, influences their intellectual achievement. Here comes the importance of bilingualism as an experience.

- There are three main approaches historically, to studying bilingualism among children. Though education remained a constant focus, it was more or less inferred from findings from these approaches.

Applied Linguistics

A.

Focus on 'contrastive analysis'. Linguistic comparison between two languages reveals the sources of difficulty for the learner. This depends on findings where the two languages differ from each other. The underlying theory was that learners learnt second language by substituting target language forms etc into the language they already know, i.e. their first language. So second language learning was explained through transfer.

B.

Transfer theory was replaced by 'creative construction' hypothesis in the mid 1970s. This says that one learns a second language by using the same processes they used for first language, all over again.

C.

Perhaps the most popular account of this process was given by Chomsky where it is believed that we learn language by setting principles and parameters on the Language Acquisition Device as per the language.

So second language learning involves resetting some of the parameters. This resulted in a deluge of articles describing “how speakers of language X mastered the Y (negation, question formation, past tense etc) of language Z”.

Sociolinguistic

- studies in this domain focused on the critical contextual facts that distinguished one bilingual from another: low Vs high status language, additive Vs subtractive bilingualism, full Vs. partial control of language etc.

Psycholinguistic

- this type of research focused on why some people learned a second language way better than others. Variables like aptitude, motivation, form of instruction etc. were assessed. Most importantly, second language learning was understood to be complex in ways that were thought irrelevant to first language acquisition.

- The problem with these lines of research was that:
- Correct description of similarities and differences of second language learning by children and adults did not emerge
- More importantly, the ‘effect’ of second language on the children was not investigated.

E. consequences of bilingualism:

- Early studies on childhood bilingualism argues for cognitive deficits as a result of bilingualism
- Later on, many studies find significant advantages of bilingualism. Many of these studies might have a little extra enthusiastic, but it helped to bring out bilingualism from the shackles of stigma in the following decades.