

BEING BILINGUAL IN EARLY AGES: IS IT ADVANTAGEOUS?

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ABSTRACT

Age as a factor to succeed in children's second language acquisition (SLA) has been a controversial issue for over a period of time. Some studies analyzing the issue found that age is the main factor to determine children's success in SLA. Responding to the issue, this paper aims at exploring the notion of early bilingualism compared to monolingual children. In addition, this paper mainly focuses on the advantages of being bilingual in a earlier ages. The discussion reveals that bilingual children get more benefits in their language performance than monolingual children. As conclusion, it is suggested that "additive bilingualism" could be applied in Indonesia which English as the foreign language is used at school, while using Indonesian is still maintained at home.

Key Words: early bilingual, advantage, SLA

INTRODUCTION

Recently, the UNESCO mandate to introduce early childhood education has been spreaded worldwide. Learning a foreign language in early ages is seen as a milestone to encourage children's lifelong learning. In responding to this mandate, many schools in Indonesia introduced "immersion program" in which the school tried to build a foreign language-speaking environment.

As a foreign language learned in many countries including Indonesia, the need to learn English has been a demanding aspect in facing this issue. Learning English as a foreign language becomes a compulsory in Junior High School and Senior High School. Even, English is included in the National Examinatin which

judges students' graduation. Therefore, some schools prefer to have "immersion program" earlier, when the students enter kindergarten or before. This condition of learning is known as "early bilingualism".

The decision of being bilingual in early ages is also supported by recent theory which underlines that age is a main predictor of SLA. However, this issue has been controversial among researchers which age is not the main predictor of learning a second language. Therefore, this paper tries to analyze in both sides in responding to the issue.

THE NOTION OF EARLY BILINGUALISM

Some children learn more than one language in earlier ages. Others prefer to be bilingual when they enter schools. This

different condition might be based on personal need as children who have different background of parents. Marriage with people from other nationalities is common in this era, which would provide the opportunity to have two languages at home. This mixed nationality marriage could be the reason why some children prefer to be bilingual in earlier ages at the same time.

In addition, many parents get their children engaged in early bilingualism since they are aware in a theory which early childhood is considered as a critical period or sensitive period for acquiring a second language based on Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) addressed by Eric Lenneberg (1967), in which brain plasticity was only conducive to language learning until puberty. It more concerns with the ability of very young children to grasp the language and be more conciliated to the phonological system of the new language. This is an evidence that children are more sensitive to the sounds and the rhythm of the new language by imitating new sounds and intonation from adults.

Moreover, Pinter (2006) pointed out that language learning in earlier years is considered beneficial for children in terms of having ample inputs and being exposed to the language use environment, which can lead them to native like levels in the process of English language acquisition. In this case, age is considered very crucial that supports language learning to guide them for native level of proficiency. In

addition, children in earlier years do not seem to have an accent compared to those who start learning language later than this period. They are potential to reach the native-like level when they produce the language.

When compared to adults who start to learn the language later, children have a longer period to be exposed to learning the language (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). By being exposed to the language earlier, there is a possibility for children to receive input more than adults do from what they hear. Furthermore, children are less anxious to use the language. They seem to enjoy the language more instead of considering the language learning as a pressure. They have no worries about making mistakes compared to adults, which are sometimes not quite confident to deal with mistakes. In addition, children use the language whenever it comes to their minds without much attention to grammatical rules and the appropriateness of their utterances. This kind of positive feeling leads them to use the language more frequently and spontaneously. That is why it is assumed that learning a second language in early ages would be better than adults.

EARLY BILINGUALISM: A CONTROVERSY?

Early bilingualism has become a controversial issue in the world whether it provides positive or negative impact for children's learning. Being bilingual from

earlier ages is referred to “simultaneous bilinguals” (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). For many years, bilingualism has been seen as a condition, which has negative impacts for children’s learning since they are too young to learn different kinds of language at the same time. Even, being bilingual in early ages would be a problem for children (Genesee et al, 2004). Children are considered to be confused when they learn two languages at the same time. They might have difficulties in expressing either language well.

Research in bilingualism (Schwartz et al, 2009) suggested that there was a delayed acquisition in irregular forms of inflectional morphology for bilingual children due to the lack of frequency in using languages. In other words, when children are engaged in being bilinguals, they could not perform both languages well since they do not maximize the use of the first or the second language.

Moreover, bilingualism is believed that it only will cause “mental confusion” if two languages are learned at the same time. Furthermore, it is argued that monolingual children will perform better due to much amount of time in using one language for any settings. In other words, monolingual children have more exposure of the language learned, in which they have more time to practice and communicate the language as well.

ADVANTAGES OF BEING “EARLY BILINGUALS”

Instead of the negative aspect of bilingualism, recent research promotes the opposite view of having bilingualism in early ages. Bilingualism can have positive effects in children’s learning. It is assumed that due to the exposure of two languages, they tend to have better self-consciousness of language system than monolingual children (Pinter, 2006). This reflects that bilingual children would be more aware of the structures and patterns of both languages. They would tend to realize if the language is not well structured when they use the language to communicate. A study in the positive effect of early bilingualism identified that metalinguistic awareness is considered as the central component in academic success of being bilingual, learning two languages enable them to be more aware in language shift (Bialystock and Barac, 2011). Bilingual children would be more aware in cross-language transfer in both languages. Another study by Quiroz et al (2010) promotes the evidence in which bilingual children tend to have metalinguistic awareness, which is the ability to consciously reflect on the nature and use of the language such as cross-language transfer, which enables them to easily develop their cognitive academic aspect of language. Vocabulary acquisition in both languages is considered as the reason why they have a good sense in code switching. The exposure of vocabulary acquisition in both languages

could provide the opportunity for them to be better in cognitive development.

Beyond cross language transfer, bilingualism also provides positive impact in phonological awareness, the ability to manipulate and reflect upon soundunits in the study by Kuo and Anderson(2010). They examined phonological awareness between bilingual and monolingual children by identifying onset, rime, and tone awareness through some tasks. Onset is the initial phonological unit of word. Rime refers to the string of letters that follow, usually a vowel and final consonants. Whereas, tone deals with any sounds which underlines rising, sustain, and falling tone. The finding showed that “bilingual children take advantage in segmenting and comparing syllables with onsets that exists in both of their languages because they had experienced the onsets in more variable phonological contexts” (Kuo and Anderson, 2010: 381). Moreover, they consistently performed better than their monolingual peers on the tasks, which required them to segment and compare onsets and rimes or to attend to tones in novel syllables. Based on this study, it can be concluded that bilingual children would be advantageous in phonological awareness due to the exposure of two languages at the same time, which enables them to outperform in segmenting and comparing parts of phonological awareness including onset, rime, and tone awareness.

Another study, which focused on phonological awareness by Laurent and Martinot (2009) suggested that bilingual children would perform better than monolingual children based on the tasks dealing with phonological awareness, such as syllable deletion, phoneme deletion, and permutation. Laurent and Martinot (2009: 442) added that “permutation more deals with the ability to identify syllables and phonemes, where the initial and final segmental units of an item have to be removed and the remaining medial part retained in memory”. This task is considered as the most difficult task than another two tasks given. A finding showed that bilingual children developed more ease in solving phonological tasks than monolingual peers. In other words, a group of bilingual children performed the phonological tasks more successfully than the monolingual group. This better performance is the influence of early exposure in the second language in bilingualism environment. Therefore, it can be concluded that early bilingualism would affect the development of phonological awareness as an aspect of language acquisition. In other words, age also could be the aspect to consider which influences phonological awareness. The earlier children learn a language, the better they have in phonological awareness development.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion, it comes to a conclusion that children who start learning two or more languages in earlier years would be more beneficial than monolingual children. They perform the second language well since they are engaged in ample input of interaction in using the language. Instead of only concerning with the language aspects, we should also concern with the way to manage the use of home and new language being learned to be implemented in children's learning when they spend more time in learning language at home. It is more in line with how to maintain two languages to be used without neglecting the first language as the family language. As educators, it is important to respect the existence of the students' native languages. It would have negative impacts of subtracting their first languages in order to learn the second language that they would lose their native languages.

Some educators concern with "additive bilingualism" as a solution for parents in early bilingualism. In this kind of bilingualism, the home language should be maintained when children are learning second language. In other words, although children learn the second language, they do not neglect their first language as their heritage. Parents play the important role to create an environment at home to support the second language learning without neglecting the first language. In this case, parents would be better if they also learn

the second language, which their children are learning. Therefore, they could help their children when they face difficulties. When they are in the family settings, it is better for children to use their own language as well to communicate with other family members. This could help children to respect their native languages and have a good relationship with other family members. In conclusion, as educators, we should help parents to manage the environment by realizing the existence of the first language and the second language being learned at home.

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