Monolinguals VS. Bilinguals for Teaching English

Niwet Wongsuwan

Faculty of Education, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University
Email: frofern.fair@gmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present monolinguals vs. bilinguals for teaching English. Aside from supporting the view that second learners' first language plays a supportive role in the learning of second language, the findings of this study suggests that more should be done by all the stakeholders to strengthen the learning of bilinguals' first language. The family language policy which weakens the learning and use of first language should be discarded because a weak foundation in their wards' first language will make mastery of L2 skills difficult. Whereas, a strong foundation in the first language enables second language learners to transfer their knowledge and skills across languages especially to the L2. It has been claimed that languages nurture one another when the educational environment permits children access to various languages. It says that when children are learning through a minority language (L1) they are not only learning this language in a narrow sense they are learning concepts and intellectual skills that are equally relevant to their ability to function in the majority language (L2). The advice that parents should establish a strong home language policy and provide ample opportunities for children to expand the function for which they use the L1 is not appropriate but must the seconded by creating an additive bilingualism situation where the first culture continues to be valued while the second language is added; this is contrary to the subtractive bilingualism situation where the second language is added at the expense of the first language culture. An understanding of the distinction between additive and subtractive bilingualism should arm language teachers with methods and measures that will ensure that the learning/acquisition of a second language does not lead to any loss or weakening of the first language. That may demand for programmes/activities that would help learners to recognize, value, develop and use their first language thereby ensuring the development of the second language. This would avert edging out the first language from the classroom and school environments.

Keywords: Monolinguals; Bilinguals

Introduction

I have always been fascinated by the way language is acquired. Whether by children or by adults, native speakers or learners of a new language, it is just remarkable. The effects of a second language on the first can never surpass or overshadow its benefits. The benefits of a second language are tremendous, and I am in no position to criticize its credibility; after all I am currently writing in a second language. Rather, the study focuses on the negative effects that influence the first language and the bilingual child.

During the school setting, the weakness of the Arabic language is somewhat evident among the bilingual students. The lack of reading and writing skills in the students' first language is a problem that is facing both the students and the teachers. As a concerned teacher, I had to ask some of the Arabic teachers at school to elaborate more on such a problem. As I was told, the students were facing difficulties in writing and reading Arabic. Such a problem can primarily be related to their little exposure to the literacy skills of the Arabic language, but I then came to realize that this was not the only obstacle that the students faced, but their spoken Arabic was at jeopardy and presented another challenge for the bilingual students.

As the students spoke Thai with one another, it seemed that they did not have any problems. However, if examined closely, a person would observe the frequent use and insertion of English words throughout the conversation. The use of code switching was evident, and its use was preferred by most of the bilinguals. The bilingual students always preferred to be with one another during break time and lineups, but once they spoke to monolingual students, lots of hand movement, pauses, and discomfort seemed to exist.

This persuaded me even more in pursuing and examining the cause of such a problem. I am fortunate enough to be able to conduct the investigation at the school that I currently teach at. Being familiar with the environment and knowing the students was an added value. Finding a class such as the one that I have selected will allow me to investigate the matter thoroughly. Coincidentally, all of the students in that section were bilinguals and have struggled within the Thai language, but spoke English perfectly well, as they were born and raised abroad in an English speaking environment. The bilingual students, being now in an Arabic country after a long stay abroad, were still exposed to the English language on a daily basis. The medium of education is English, and the amount of Thai language use was restricted to the hours spend in Thai class.

Being fluent in English but speaking and writing Thai with difficulty, the students left me with great confusion, as to whether call them balanced or unbalanced bilinguals. The term bilingual can be quite hard to define. According to Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (1997), a bilingual is someone who is able to use two languages with equal fluency. Moreover, Macmillan’s Dictionary (2007) defines a bilingual as someone who is able to speak two languages extremely well. Furthermore, Cook and Bassetti (2005) explain the term bilingual in much more detail; they relate second language acquisition to monolinguals who are acquiring a

second language, whereas bilinguals grow up using two different languages from their early childhood.

1. Monolinguals VS. Bilinguals

There has been a prolong debate over the acquisition of a second language, yet little has been documented on the effects of the acquisition process. Most research on second language acquisition has focused primarily on a comparison of monolinguals and bilinguals whether measuring the linguistic competence and cognitive development of the bilingual, trying to prove that bilinguals are equivalent to monolinguals, or showing that bilinguals suffer from mental confusion and cannot be compared to monolinguals. Little has been written on the effects of the second language on the first, and most research has mainly focused on the acquisition process itself.

The first section of this review sheds some light on how the first language can diminish and be replaced by the second language, as it is looked at by some of the most prominent linguists in the field of second language acquisition. The first section also tackles the issue of the cognitive development of bilinguals.

1.1 The diminishing of L1: L2 replacing L1

Cook (2003) referred to the effects of the second language on the first as reverse or backward transfer. He also states that the effects of the second language on the first can only happen at advanced stages of second language acquisition. “As a person gains the ability to use a second language, so he or she may to some extent lose the ability to use the first language. In circumstances where one language becomes less and less used, people do lose their command of it, whether as a group or as individuals.” (Cook, 2003: 12).

However, Hamers and Blanc (2000) refer to Lambert’s (1974) ‘additivity’ and ‘subtractivity’ theory. In the additive form, bilinguals develop the acquisition process of the second language with out diminishing the first language. “This situation is found when both the community and the family attribute positive values to the two languages; the learning of an L2 will in no case threaten to replace L1.” (Hamers & Blanc, 2000: 99)

On the other hand, the subtractive form will develop when the first language and the second language are working against each other rather than completing one another. An example of the subtractive form is the way that some migrating families start looking down on their native language by persuading, if not forcing, their children to use the second language. This could be rather harmful to the child; after all, a loss of language is a loss of identity. This type of effect is what Lambert refers to as a subtractive form of bilinguality. “This form will evolve when an ethnolinguistic minority rejects its values in favor of those of an economically and culturally more prestigious group. This subtraction will manifest itself at several levels and

will influence intellectual development and personality; language competence which first developed via the mother tongue will be affected." (Hamers & Blanc, 2000: 100)

In a study conducted by Fillmore (2005), 609 families of different background from the United States were questioned on whether or not there had been any kind of change in language use at home. In simple terms, whether the home language was used less or more at home. The 609 families were mostly non English speakers, and were monolinguals of another language and not bilinguals. Fillmore found that 30.9% of the families found no noticeable change, while 16.1% found positive changes with more home language in use. However, 50.6% reported negative changes with less home language and more English use at home.

On the other hand, the distinction between spoken and written language is clearly stated and acknowledged by Schmid (2005) particularly when it concerns migrant communities and linguistic minorities. "As far as speech is concerned, some people acquire language A as their mother tongue and then learn language B as a second language at school, but the spoken second language may turn out to be the first language through which literacy is achieved." (Schmid, 2005: 185)

Schmid provides some examples of how bilinguals can acquire literacy through the second language, and how bilingual children learn to write in language {B} before learning how to write in language {A}. As a result, the spoken first language becomes the second language in writing. To support his idea, Schmid refers to the 40 million Hispanics in the U.S.A and how they are literate in English and not in Spanish, their first language. He also speaks of the 12 million Kurds who acquire literacy in the Turkish language.

With a similar study to that of Schmid, Brisk (2000) looked at a study by Trix-Haddad (1981) on two Arabic students who had been born and raised in the U.S.A. The two students, that the study was conducted on, spoke English fluently, but had difficulties in their English literacy skills 'such as reading and writing'. Like most bilinguals raised in the U.S., they never had the opportunity to be literate in their native language. The students never had the chance to be educated in their mother tongue language, and they did not acquire appropriate education in their English literacy skills.

Brisk acknowledges the dilemma and relates it to two facts. "Their parents do not teach them reading and writing in the native language because they deem it unnecessary. Teachers ignore the fact that these students are bilingual because they speak English and do not work with them as bilingual individuals." (Brisk, 2000: 81). Hamers and Blanc (2000) add to what Brisk has said by stating that negative consequences can exist if the parents do not have excellent command of the host language. As a result, "The child is no longer exposed to an adequate linguistic model in the home. A strong support of the mother tongue in the home and in the community typically benefits the child's academic results." (Hamers & Blanc, 2000: 86)

1.2 The Cognitive Development of Bilinguals

Bialystok (2001) argued that fluent bilingualism increased metalinguistic abilities and led to higher levels of academic achievement. Brown (2000) refers to Lambert's (1972) results which state that bilingual children are more facile at concept formation and have a greater mental flexibility. However, Hamers and Blanc (2000) looked at studies undertaken by Pintner and Keller (1922) who reported a linguistic handicap in bilingual children. They also referred to another study by Saer (1923) whose results were somewhat similar to that of Pintner and Keller. Saer considered the bilingual cognitive functioning as a mental confusion.

Hamers and Blanc, when speaking of cognitive consequences of bilinguality, divided such development and consequences into two periods. The first period can be named the PrePeal and Lambert era, the period before the 1960's in which negative effects were more repeatedly reported than the positive ones. "Early studies on the relationship between bilinguality and cognitive development, sometimes undertaken in order to demonstrate the negative consequences of bilingual development, supported the idea that bilingual children suffered from academic retardation, had a lower IQ and were socially-maladjusted as compared with monolingual children. Bilinguality was viewed as the cause of an inferior intelligence." (Hamers & Blanc, 2000: 86) The second period can be named the Peal & Lambert era which changed the perception of many critics, scholars, and skeptics that once doubted the possible benefit of a second language; as a result more positive results were reported than the negative ones.

Hamers and Blanc (2000) refer to a finding by Peal and Lambert (1962) to support their review. The study, carried out by Peal and Lambert, compared ten-year-old bilinguals in Montreal to English and French monolinguals. According to the study, bilinguals had to achieve higher scores in both languages, whereas monolinguals had to have low scores on one of the languages. The groups were matched for age, sex and socio-economic level. The study found that bilinguals received higher results than the monolinguals on tests of verbal and nonverbal intelligences. Hamers & Blanc (2000) focused on the explanation put forth by Peal and Lambert, that the higher results of the bilingual subjects on the intelligence measures could be related to mental flexibility and to how bilinguals can adjust themselves to two symbolic systems.

On the other hand, Genesee (2006) Refers to a study by Pearson (1993) on a group of 27 children raised in Spanish and English in Miami, Florida, that found that bilingual children scored lower on standardized test of vocabulary than monolingual children when examining the two languages separately. Genesee, however, comments on the finding of Pearson and relates the results to three main reasons: (1) "they, like monolinguals, have limited long-term memory in the early stages of development but must retain full vocabulary from two languages in contrast to monolinguals': (2) bilingual children's exposure to each language is less than that of monolinguals', and (3) the context for learning each of two languages is likely to be less than the total context for learning one language and, thus, bilingual children's vocabulary repertoire

in each language is likely to be less than that of monolingual. It is likely that vocabulary knowledge in each language would expand as the context for using each language expands." (Genesee, 2006: 49)

Genesee refers to another study by Fennel (2002) that reported "while 17-month old monolingual children were able to attend to fine phonetic detail in minimal word pairs, bilingual children exhibited the same discrimination only later, at 20 months of age." (Genesee, 2006: 50). Like Fennel (2002), Pearson (1993), and Genesee (2006), Bialystok (2005) recognizes the fact that the bilingual mind is different than that of a monolingual. "Bilingual minds cannot resemble the more homogeneous mental landscape of a monolingual. It is uncontroversial that the configuration is more complex than that of a monolingual, for whom concepts and languages ultimately converge in unambiguous and predictable manners." (Bialystok, 2005: 417).

Likewise, Kecskes (2000) believes that bilinguals perceive their language differently than monolinguals. "People with more than one language have different knowledge of their first language than do monolingual people, and this difference can mainly be due to the effect of subsequent languages on the development and use of L1 skills." (Kecskes, 2000: 2) Moreover, Cook (1995) believes that bilinguals are not two monolinguals in the same head.

A distinction is also made here by Walters (2005) between bilinguals and monolinguals as he characterized the articulatory aspects of bilingual production as: (1) "Bilinguals produce language at a slower rate than monolinguals. (2) Bilinguals show more evidence of speech dysfluency, which takes the form of hesitation false starts, and lexical repetitions. (3) Bilinguals have smaller vocabularies than monolinguals in each of their languages, but taken together have a larger overall lexicon." (Walters, 2005: 218)

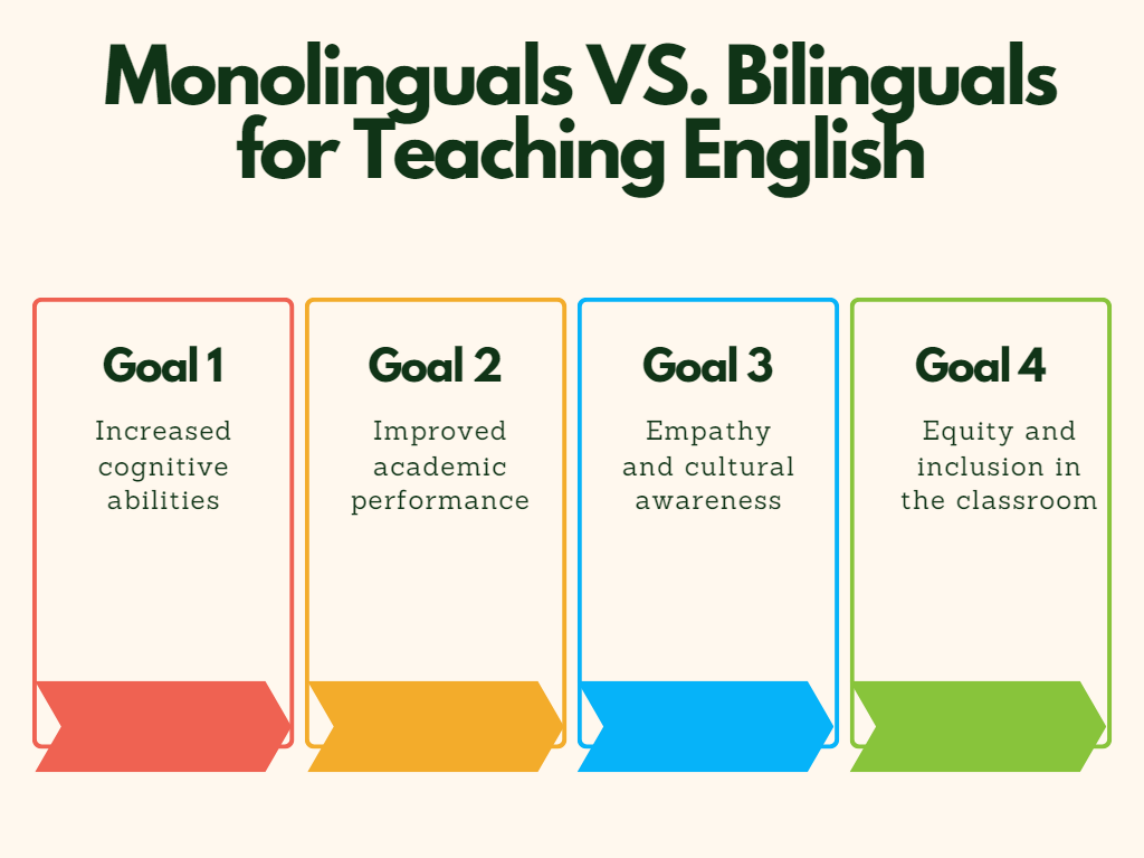
However, De Houwer (2005) examines bilingual children, under the age of 6, who are exposed to two spoken languages from birth. She makes no distinction between monolinguals and bilinguals, except for the fact that bilinguals can make themselves understood in two different languages, while the monolingual can only handle one. As far as morphosyntactic development is concerned, De Houwer sees that a bilingual who has been exposed to two languages from birth is no different than his/her monolingual counterpart, and views that there are no differences between them in the acquirement of basic language skills. Furthermore, she states that there is no empirical evidence that bilingual children develop both languages at a rate that is slower than monolinguals. "There is no evidence that hearing two languages from birth leads to language delay." (De Houwer, 2005: 43)

De Houwer, based on a corpus of English utterances of a 3 year old child, found that it is virtually impossible to determine whether the utterances were produced by a bilingual or a monolingual child. She even proposed what she has called the Separate Development Hypothesis, claiming that bilinguals develop two distinct morphosyntactic systems, in which the morphosyntactic development of one language does not harm or effect the morphosyntactic development of the other language.

Knowledge from the Study

The term 'Bilingualism' refers to the use of two languages throughout the course of a students' education. A bilingual education course syllabus helps students master a second language throughout their academic studies, enabling comprehensive abilities in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, while ensuring complete fluency in their first language. Bilingual education has been proven as a secret weapon in supercharging children's learning and even changing the structure of the human brain. We explore some of the advantages that a bilingual language curriculum can provide your child.

The main benefits of a bilingual education are:



1. Increased cognitive abilities

Research suggests that the brains of children who begin learning multiple languages early on in life — from birth to around age seven — might actually develop differently. Young minds are incredibly receptive and capable of absorbing, storing and sorting through massive amounts of nuanced information. Kids who are doing all of this in multiple languages have even more opportunities to make connections, identify patterns and learn through trial and error. Studies have shown that bilingual children are more creative and have more executive function (the ability to pay attention) than their monolingual peers.

While more long-term research is needed, there is good evidence that speaking more than one language offers benefits that last a lifetime. One Canadian study of English/French-speaking Alzheimer's patients showed that bilingual adults performed better on cognitive function tests than monolingual adults, even though they had more advanced brain atrophy. Scientists suspect that this might be a result of changes in brain structure.

2. Improved academic performance

Studies have shown that all children benefit from bilingual education, regardless of their native tongue. One example comes from a study at a school district in Illinois. Researchers found that not only did minority Spanish-native students in a two-way immersion program outperform their Spanish-speaking peers in other programs on both reading and math — but majority English-native students enrolled in the immersion program also outperformed their English-native peers in mainstream classrooms.

A different study of public schools in Portland, Oregon, showed similarly positive results. In that school district, 10 percent of students were randomly selected by a lottery to join dual language classrooms that offer Spanish, Japanese or Mandarin Chinese. A four-year randomized trial concluded that these bilingual students outperformed their peers in English-reading skills by a full school year's worth of learning by the end of middle school.

3. Empathy and cultural awareness

Bilingual education programs are multicultural by default, as it's impossible to separate language from culture and vice versa. Dual language classrooms are rich in diverse experiences and backgrounds, as they are typically comprised of both native English speakers and recent immigrants from other countries.

Children learn empathy (the ability to understand other people and perspectives) through repeated interaction. Dr. Torres-Rimbau recalls that in the elementary classes she taught in Texas, "All the five- and six-year-olds are paired up with bilingual buddies — one Spanish speaker and one English speaker — and they help each other learn."

In her experience, she's seen these kids have an advantage over students who did not attend a bilingual program. "They are aware that people are different around the world and that there are many cultures and languages," she explains. "They grow up more accepting and tolerant."

4. Equity and inclusion in the classroom

No matter how much support and guidance you have, learning to speak in a foreign language will be frustrating at times. And it's even more isolating and discouraging if you're one of a small group who can't connect with the rest of the community. In education settings, it's

not just the students who suffer from this disconnect. Communication and cultural barriers make it difficult for parents and families to fully engage in school activities.

Dual language classrooms place equal emphasis on both the native and target languages. Both are treated as valuable, unique and worth studying. This creates an environment where students and their families can communicate comfortably not only with other students, but with teachers and staff. Students who feel like they belong are much more likely to be engaged with their coursework, stay in school and graduate from high school.

Conclusion

There does seem to be sufficient evidence to conclude that as dementia advances with age, patients who speak two or more languages have a tendency to revert to their primary language. It does also appear that bilingual and multilingual immigrants from various geographical backgrounds appear to be protected from the onset of dementia for about 4 years. In terms of the National Dementia Strategy referred to above, these linguistic issues are important in the treatment of aphasic bilingual or multilingual patients. If we are to provide information and make people aware of the implications of their illness, further research is necessary which could lead to improved communication and care for these patients suffering from dementia who belong to ethnic minorities.

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