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Language acquisition in bilingual adolescent children: Factors affecting proficiency and language development

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Abstract

There are numerous cognitive and socio-cultural advantages associated with bilingualism, a widespread linguistic phenomenon. In this study, we explore the multifaceted nature of bilingual language acquisition among adolescents, when linguistic habits and proficiency are becoming increasingly solidified during this critical phase. This study explores the intricate interplay of factors affecting bilingualism by drawing on 230 students from Gobind Ballabh Pant University of Agriculture and Technology Pantnagar, Soban Singh Jeena University Almora, and Kumaun University Nainital. The survey examined areas ranging from the balance of language usage at home and with peers, the influence of formal education, prevalent linguistic challenges, and the integration of technology into language learning. According to preliminary findings, adolescents are capable of seamlessly navigating between languages, depending on their contextual needs. The majority of individuals have dedicated over five years to their current language of instruction, demonstrating that formal education in one's primary language significantly enhances proficiency. Although the journey is not without challenges, Grammar emerged as a prominent challenge, emphasizing the importance of a robust foundational language education. Further, intrinsic motivation and self-discipline are key components of bilingual language acquisition that cannot be understated. In an era characterized by global interconnectedness, this study underscores the imperativeness of recognizing and addressing the myriad factors influencing bilingual language development in adolescents. In this manner, educational systems can better prepare these young minds, resulting in a generation of proficient bilingual communicators.

Keywords: Language acquisition, SLA, bilingualism, language uses, linguistic challenges, syntax

Introduction

With our increasingly interconnected global society, bilingualism has become increasingly important as a skill. This proficiency, rooted in early exposure and nurtured through continuous practice and education, offers not only cognitive benefits but also academic and socio-cultural benefits, enhancing the ability of an individual to navigate diverse contexts and cultures.

The adolescent stage is characterized by rapid physiological, cognitive, and socio-emotional changes in human development. During this period, linguistic habits, competencies, and identities solidify, making it an essential period for understanding bilingual language acquisition. Furthermore, the adolescent brain, while approaching adulthood, retains a unique plasticity that makes it receptive to language learning. It is important to realize, however, that acquiring proficiency in a second language during adolescence is not merely a matter of neural capabilities; several external factors also play an important role.

This study is conducted as a result of the extensive linguistic diversity observed in the educational institutions of Gobind Ballabh Pant University of Agriculture & Technology Pantnagar, Soban Singh Jeena University Almora, and Kumaun University Nainital. These institutions serve as a microcosm for bilingual or multilingual interactions, creating an environment conducive to exploring the dynamics of bilingual language acquisition.

Due to the conventional wisdom that young children are more adept at learning languages because their brains are malleable, studies of bilingualism have traditionally focused on early childhood.

Recent research suggests that adolescents and adults can attain high proficiency levels in a second language, suggesting that age might not be the sole determinant of bilingual proficiency.

Additionally, formal education has been controversial in relation to language acquisition. While formal instruction provides a structured framework for learning, real-life exposure and informal interactions are equally, if not more, significant. Adolescents spend considerable time interacting with peers in informal settings, which influences their linguistic habits as a consequence. It is not surprising that the advent of technology has added another layer to this intricate puzzle. The digital age, characterized by the proliferation of language learning apps, online courses, and global communication platforms, has revolutionized traditional language acquisition methods. A question arises: How does the digital transformation affect bilingual adolescents' language learning journeys?

A third factor which is indispensable is the socio-cultural environment, as bilingualism is more than a cognitive process; it is deeply rooted in the socio-cultural fabric of the individual. Through interaction with native speakers, cultural immersion, and real-life language application, students often gain nuanced understandings that formal education may not provide.

As a result of this multifaceted landscape, this study examines the many factors influencing bilingual language acquisition among adolescents within the aforementioned institutions. By shedding light on these dynamics, we hope to provide insights that can guide educators, policymakers, and linguists in nurturing and supporting bilingual proficiency among young learners.

Design and sample population of the study

The purpose of this study is to offer a comprehensive overview of the experiences of bilingual language learning in teenagers, utilising a descriptive cross-sectional research design. A total of 230 students were chosen as participants in this study from three distinct universities, namely GBPUA&T Pantnagar, Soban Singh Jeena University Almora, and Kumaun University Nainital. These institutions exhibit a variety of linguistic environments, which offer a diverse array of multilingual encounters.

In total, there were 78 male participants and 152 female participants. Based on the age distribution of the participants, it is observed that 41.9% fall within the age range of 15-20 years, 50% fall within the age range of 20-25 years, and 8.1% are over the age of 26. Due to the presence of this hierarchical division, adolescents were afforded the chance to encounter a diverse array of experiences during the transitional period spanning from mid-adolescence to early adulthood.

To gather data, a structured questionnaire was employed. The questionnaire was carefully crafted to encompass a range of dimensions pertaining to bilingualism. The survey instrument comprised a combination of closed-ended questions, which enabled quantitative analysis, and open-ended questions, which provided qualitative insights.

An outline of the questionnaire

The survey explored the following topics

Language Usage Patterns: Evaluating the balance between the linguistic practises within the household and those influenced by peer interactions across diverse contexts.

Educational Context: In the educational context, it is essential to gather relevant information pertaining to the language used for instruction, the length of the study programme, and any prior formal language training.

Challenges: Identifying prevalent barriers to language proficiency.

Exposure and Interaction: Measuring the level of engagement with native speakers.

Technological Integration: Analysing the frequency with which digital language tools are used.

Influencing Factors: Identification of factors perceived to have a significant impact on language development.

Emotional Aspects: Assessing feelings of anxiety associated with language.

Cultural and International Exposure: Acknowledging the significance of cultural immersion and international encounters in shaping an individual's development.

Analyses of the data

Following the completion of data collection, the responses were encoded in preparation for statistical analysis. The numeric data underwent analysis utilising descriptive statistics, while the qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis. The integration of many perspectives has yielded a thorough comprehension of bilingual language learning within the selected population.

The research procedure was carried out after obtaining informed consent from all participants. To safeguard the privacy and protect the identity of all participants, strict measures were implemented to uphold anonymity and maintain confidentiality during the entire procedure. This methodological approach was backed by a well-structured survey and a wide participant pool, with the aim of providing a comprehensive depiction of bilingual language learning among teenagers at the chosen institutions.

Results

This study investigated the process of bilingual language learning in adolescents across three different colleges, yielding several significant findings. The following analysis aims to elucidate the findings and situate them within the broader body of scholarly work pertaining to the subject matter.

Language Usage Patterns

A significant proportion of participants indicated that they engaged in social interactions with their friends in an equitable manner, utilising both their native language and the language commonly employed among their peers. This discovery underscores the linguistic versatility and adaptation exhibited by bilingual adolescents in their capacity to seamlessly transition between languages as required. The phenomenon of bilingual individuals employing several languages to achieve various objectives, address different concerns, and navigate diverse situations is consistent with the research conducted by Grosjean, who asserts that. "Bilingualism is found in every country of the

world, in every class of society, in all age groups.” (Grosjean, 1882) ^[8].

In addition, a significant proportion of respondents (43.6%) reported consistent utilisation of both languages beyond their residential settings, while a closely behind majority (44.9%) indicated frequent engagement in such practises. The recognition of the prevalence of bilingual behaviour among individuals outside of their family environment is crucial, since it is a consequence of external pressures and the demands placed upon these students. This observation aligns with the research conducted by Lanza (1992) ^[18], which suggests that the selection of language by bilingual individuals is significantly impacted by external contextual factors.

Formal Education

The survey revealed that a notable proportion of respondents (45.2%) reported studying in English, while 26% indicated Hindi as their language of teaching. Additionally, 28.7% of participants reported being educated in bilingual settings when queried about their present language of instruction. A significant majority of students, specifically 75%, have pursued their present language of instruction for a duration beyond five years. The extended duration of being immersed in a structured educational environment focused on a specific language has the potential to significantly influence one's level of proficiency and preference in that language. This notion is supported by Cummins (1981) ^[19], who argues that the ability to effectively use academic language, which is typically acquired through formal education, plays a vital role in cognitive academic achievement.

Challenges

When considering the intricacies involved in acquiring proficiency in the structural elements of a language, it becomes evident that grammar presents itself as the foremost obstacle encountered by a significant number of individuals. As per (Ellis, 1986) ^[4], the acquisition of grammatical structures is notably intricate, particularly in the advanced phases of language development, a perspective that is in accordance with this assertion. One further notable obstacle that hindered progress was a deficiency in oral communication self-assurance, a phenomenon that aligns with Krashen's (1982) ^[11] 'affective filter hypothesis.' "The Affective Filter hypothesis captures the relationship between affective variables and the process of second language acquisition by positing that acquirers vary with respect to the strength or level of their Affective Filters." (Krashen, 1982, p. 31) ^[11] This theory posits that emotional obstacles, such as anxiety, might impair the process of acquiring a second language.

Technology Integration

The utilisation of technology in language learning has brought about significant changes, offering a wide range of resources for learners. However, it is worth noting that a considerable proportion of participants, (46.2%), indicated seldom or non-existent usage of technology-based language aids. It may be symptomatic of a predilection for conventional means of learning or a lack of expertise. (Warschauer, 1996) ^[16], has noted a comparable remark regarding the inconsistent integration of technology in language learning, despite its promise. This integration is

frequently influenced by individual preferences and the availability of resources.

Influential Factors on Language Development

A notable proportion of participants, specifically 25.6%, emphasised the significance of motivation and self-discipline. According to Gardner's (1985) ^[5] proposition, the presence of integrative motivation, which refers to the desire to acquire a language in order to integrate oneself into the corresponding culture, plays a significant role in facilitating language acquisition. Gardner further asserts that intrinsic motivation is a crucial factor in the process of acquiring a language. This discovery highlights the significance of intrinsic motivation in the process of language acquisition.

Experiences and Beliefs

It is worth mentioning that a significant proportion of the participants (60.6%) acknowledged suffering language anxiety. In a study conducted by Horwitz (1986) ^[10], the concept of foreign language anxiety was introduced as a discrete manifestation of anxiety that impacts the process of language acquisition. The findings indicate that a relatively low proportion (7.6%) of individuals had been exposed to international experiences. This outcome, while expected considering the socio-economic circumstances, highlights the need for enhancing language programmes. Most respondents (90.3%) agreed that exposure to diverse cultures was advantageous to language development, which accords with Byram's (1997) ^[1] argument that intercultural competency is strongly interwoven with language ability.

Numerous connections were identified between our research findings and the existing body of linguistic and pedagogical research. The phenomenon of fluid language usage in accordance with contextual factors aligns with previous scholarly investigations on code-switching and the utilisation of language in specific situations (Gumperz, 1977) ^[9]. This study places emphasis on grammar and speaking confidence, as well as the morphosyntactic accuracy and fluency that have been emphasised in the existing work on second language learning.

According to (Dornyei, 1998) ^[2] "since the end of the 1980s more importance has been attached in the L2 motivation literature to motives related to the learning situation." (p. 277) Motivation holds considerable importance in the process of language acquisition, with a particular focus on integrative and instrumental motivations.

Despite the prevalence of the digital era, it appears that participants exhibit a very low frequency of utilising technology resources, which contradicts (Godwin-Jones, 2019) ^[7] claim that contemporary language learners primarily rely on digital tools. The potential causes for this phenomenon include a potential lack of awareness, inadequate local technology infrastructure, or cultural preferences.

In spite of the existence of certain similarities between our study and prior research, our investigation places particular attention on grammatical challenges, as opposed to vocabulary or pronunciation, thereby offering a nuanced perspective that is tailored to our specific population.

The findings offer a detailed examination of the patterns, obstacles, and beliefs surrounding the learning of bilingual language among adolescents enrolled in the three colleges. In contrast to the extant body of literature, the present findings elucidate both areas of convergence and

divergence, thereby enhancing our comprehension of bilingualism within this particular group.

Discussion

The complex domain of bilingual language acquisition, specifically in the context of adolescents, remains a subject of great interest for linguists, educators, and psychologists alike. This study unveils a diverse exploration of bilingualism, encompassing a comprehensive investigation undertaken at three unique colleges. The results of the study demonstrate a diverse range of experiences, practises, and obstacles encountered by bilingual teenagers. In order to provide appropriate context, it is crucial to situate the results within the existing theoretical frameworks and research.

1. Navigating Dual Linguistic Realms: A significant number of participants demonstrated linguistic fluidity, effortlessly shifting between their mother tongue and the language they employ when communicating with their peers. The findings of this study provide support for the concept of "translanguaging," which refers to the practise of individuals utilising different linguistic features or modes from several languages to enhance their communication abilities (Ofelia García, 2014) ^[13]. As a result of the inherent inclination towards code-switching and translanguaging, individuals who are bilingual possess the ability to effectively utilise their language repertoire in accordance with the specific situational demands they encounter.

2. The Role of Formal Education

Although formal education is widely seen as a crucial factor in developing linguistic competency, particularly in areas such as grammar and core structure, there is ongoing debate on the effectiveness of structured educational settings compared to real-world language experience. Undoubtedly, the significance of formal training cannot be overstated, since our research has revealed that a considerable number of students derive substantial advantages from an extended immersion in a structured educational environment focused on a certain language. According to (Genesee, 1994) ^[6], it has been suggested that informal linguistic contexts, such as exchanges among peers, provide opportunities for spontaneous language experiences that contribute to the development of fluency and conversational skills. To foster comprehensive language development, it is recommended to employ a well-rounded approach that incorporates both structured pedagogical instruction and casual communicative interactions.

3. Unravelling Challenges

The issue of grammar posed a persistent barrier for the participants. According to the Critical Period Hypothesis, it is posited that individuals in their early years are more adept at acquiring phonetics and pronunciation, whereas the acquisition of intricate syntactic structures, or grammar, frequently necessitates a more concentrated and mature learning process that may extend into adolescence (Lenneberg, 1967) ^[12]. The phenomenon of lacking confidence in speaking aligns with R. Clement & Kruidenier's (1985) ^[15] socio-educational model, which posits that learners' self-confidence and anxiety play a significant role in shaping their second language learning.

4. Digital Age and Language Learning

Notwithstanding the integration of technology in the realm of language acquisition, our research reveals a limited adoption of digital resources among the individuals involved. This phenomenon bears resemblance to Prensky's (2001) ^[14] notion of "digital natives," which posits that although modern students may possess advanced technology skills, they may exhibit a preference for conventional, face-to-face interactions as opposed to digital platforms when engaging in the learning process. The choice may also underscore the significance of physical contact, interpersonal communication, and socio-cultural subtleties in the process of language acquisition, aspects that digital platforms may not comprehensively encompass.

5. Motivation as a Driving Force

Deci and Ryan (1985) ^[3] put forth the Self-Determination Theory, which posits that intrinsic motivation is a crucial factor in determining learning outcomes. This theory asserts that drive and self-discipline are of utmost importance in the process of language development. The inherent motivation, driven by a sincere curiosity and perceived significance, frequently leads to prolonged dedication and enhanced language proficiency.

6. Socio-cultural Influence and International Exposure

The study highlights that cultural exposure has a beneficial influence, drawing on the constructivist theory of learning. This theory posits that genuine experiences in the real world and immersion in different cultures significantly impact cognition and the process of acquiring knowledge. The socio-cultural dimension of language acquisition places significant emphasis on the significance of "lived experiences" and interactions within genuine linguistic environments.

The process of acquiring dual language proficiency is influenced by a complex interplay of several elements, as elucidated in this discourse. This study offers an examination of the bilingual adolescent experience, serving as a microcosm that encompasses various aspects. These include the flexible ability of bilingual individuals to adapt, the significance of structured educational guidance, the complex array of obstacles encountered by bilingual adolescents, and their undeniable influence on motivation. By juxtaposing these findings with existing research, a more nuanced comprehension of the significance of fostering bilingualism among teenagers in a well-rounded and holistic approach is attained.

Conclusion

Language continues to be a fundamental component of human communication and comprehension, notwithstanding its inherent intricacy and aesthetic appeal. Bilingualism, the capacity to navigate many linguistic landscapes, provides individuals with a distinct perspective that facilitates the bridging of cultures, perspectives, and experiences. The present study investigated the various dimensions of bilingual language learning in the adolescent population, a developmental stage characterised by significant personal growth, exploration, and identity building. An examination of the findings derived from a study conducted across three distinct colleges offers a

microcosmic perspective on the underlying dynamics inherent in bilingualism. The kids demonstrated a high level of proficiency in transitioning between languages depending on the situation, thus supporting the idea that bilingualism encompasses not only cognitive abilities, but also socio-linguistic skills that are developed through exposure to the environment and interpersonal communication. The concept of fluidity in language usage aligns with the current interpretation of bilingualism as a flexible and adaptable ability (Grosjean, 1882)^[8].

Despite these hurdles, the process of acquiring bilingualism is not devoid of its own set of challenges. Bilingual pupils have a range of language problems, encompassing aspects such as grammatical complexity, subtle subtleties of pronunciation, and the crucial element of self-assurance in verbal communication. The prominence of grammatical problems is highlighted, reflecting previous research that underscores the inherent complexity involved in acquiring the structural elements of a language, particularly at the advanced stages of language acquisition (Ellis, 1986)^[4].

One of the key findings of the study was to the overwhelming importance of intrinsic motivation and self-discipline. Based on Drörnyei's (1998)^[2] empirical findings, it may be argued that the most profound type of learning is grounded in individual interest and self-directed endeavour. This suggests that the intrinsic incentive to acquire and excel in a language frequently surpasses extrinsic factors.

The study emphasises the limited utilisation of digital language tools among individuals in the current era of digitization, which presents a chance for contemplation. The inquiry emerges as to whether conventional learning approaches are more efficacious, or if there exists an underlying reluctance or insufficient understanding regarding the incorporation of digital technology in language acquisition. These observations underscore the importance of adopting a well-rounded strategy that integrates traditional approaches with the advantages offered by contemporary technologies.

When examining the socio-cultural components, it becomes evident that there is a prevailing belief in the beneficial impact of cultural exposure, highlighting the interconnectedness of language and culture within a substantial portion of the population. Whorf (1956)^[17] posits that language serves not only as a means of communication, but also as a cognitive framework that shapes an individual's perception and comprehension of the surrounding reality.

Given the aforementioned factors, what is the projected outcome for bilingual education in the future? To begin with, it is evident that there exists a distinct necessity for an integrated methodology that amalgamates academic pedagogy with practical application. Furthermore, it is important to consider the sensible integration of digital tools, as they have the potential to enhance efficiency. However, it is crucial to ensure that these technologies are used in a manner that complements, rather than replaces, traditional approaches. Furthermore, it is crucial to establish a conducive environment that nurtures intrinsic drive, hence promoting the development of bilingual proficiency.

In its entirety, the study suggests that bilingualism is a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing cognitive, socio-cultural, and motivational elements. This study provides interesting insights; nonetheless, it is important to note that it represents only a fraction of the extensive body of

research on bilingualism, which covers a diverse array of themes. Nevertheless, it functions as a poignant reminder of the aesthetic and intricate nature of the bilingual encounter, underscoring the imperative for ongoing investigation, comprehension, and assistance for individuals who are acquiring proficiency in several languages.

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