

Bilingual acquisition: A case study of a Japanese-English bilingual

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Introduction

Societies have now become more globalized, and a significant number of people have moved across borders. Castles and Miller (2009) called this phenomenon as "the age of migration". However, numerous children have been made to move along with their parents regardless of their intentions. Most of these children spend their early days in a multilingual environment, and thus grow up to be bilingual or multilingual speakers. This research will examine how they acquire multiple languages and what kinds of factors affect their second language acquisition from the perspectives of bilingualism.

Literature Review

Concepts of bilingualism can be classified by various parameters such as learners' age, and the relation between L1 and L2. From an individual perspective, acquiring two or more languages from birth or infancy is called simultaneous bilingualism, whereas, acquiring high proficiency of L2 after L1 is established is called consecutive or sequential bilingualism (Baker 1997, p. 88). According to Baker (1993), children below three years of age can naturally acquire two languages through communicating with parents and people in the regional community; however, after that age, L2 is mostly learned through school education.

Another parameter is the relation between learners' mother tongue (L1) and the majority language of the society (L2). The situation changes depending on

whether the child has a majority or minority language. If there is a student in a classroom who has the minority language as his/her L1, as is often the case with immigrants, then he/she requires special help or consideration. Although teaching the majority language to such children is important, their L1 should be simultaneously supported for the sake of language maintenance (McCarty 2010, p. 3). Vaipae (2001) conducted interviews with immigrant children in Japanese public schools and found that a number of students find it difficult to catch up with the L2 lessons in their grade levels; in addition, they do not get any support for their L1. They are thus in danger of subtractive bilingualism, where their L2 replaces their L1, which leads to a gradual erosion of not only their L1 competency but also their cultural identity (Ellis 2008, p. 955; Baker 1993, p. 119; McCarty 2010, p. 4). On the contrary, children who speak the majority language generally enjoy the benefits of L2 learning without losing their L1 competency and self-esteem, which is called additive bilingualism, which leads to balanced bilingualism (Ellis 2008, p. 955). Therefore, expanding linguistic repertoires and cultural identities enable one to make more choices and to raise possibilities in life (McCarty 2010, p. 6).

Based on the abovementioned previous studies, I posit the following research questions for this study:

1. How does a child learn multiple languages?
2. What does he/she think about his/her L1 and L2?
3. How are the consciousness of bilingualism and identity related to his/her way of life?

Method

This preliminary qualitative study is based on a face-to-face interview with a bilingual student brought up in a multilingual environment. The participant was a 20-year-old male student enrolled at Macquarie University in Australia. In the interview, the participant was given an opportunity to use his preferred language in the hope that he would feel comfortable sharing his problems and deeper hopes and fears. The interview was loosely based on a series of prepared questions (see Appendix A) consisting of two parts. The first part includes brief questions on background information such as language usage, family, and linguistic environment. The second part includes questions on the experiences and awareness of the languages. The interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. It was recorded and then transcribed using the Jeffersonian transcription system (Jefferson 2004, pp. 13-31), which highlights features of the delivery of talk such as intonation, volume, overlap, pauses and their duration.

Data Analysis

1. The process of acquiring multiple languages

I >would have to admit< that um (.) that it has been /very /mixed? (.) A::nd so I was born /States (.) Michigan (1.0) and of course >I would< there would be /English and /Japanese >but< /you know >I was mostly home and I the< get more a:h (1.0) JAPANESE exposure; >however, I think that< when I pick the most my English (.) and ah (1.0) right before I was /FIVE, I moved to BEIJING with my FAMILY, and there (.) I went to an international school? I:n which /they taught Chinese >as second language< so (.) English was the main (.) language used, ↓ and therefore ↑ English? was easy to learn? but ah (.) I /started to learn Chinese? A:nd ah <ONE POINT> I / think >I was starting to learn< more Chinese than Japanese. (.)

...after (.) u:m my stay Beijing ↑ so I (1.0) when turned 10, I moved to JAPAN (.) and (.) I went to /another international school there? When (.) <ah THERE um> they taught AGAIN English as a main language but >as a second language they taught< JAPANESE< and so THAT'S (.) the first time I actually got, you know, <proper Japanese education>. (.) Though, (.) you know, ° it was very difficult (.)° especially considering that (.) >you know< never HAD any schooling before? (.) and so I was there for/ THREE YEARS (.) and ah after I finished (.) grade /7, I <moved BACK to> CHINA?, () Tsu-chou (1.0) but I (.) >sit the circumstance what I think< in my first year there (.) I (.) was taught >Chinese as a second language< (.) but the YEAR after and rest of my grade school I (.) >took Japanese as a second language< = and I have to admit that was when most of my development in Japanese occurred.

As Landry and Allard (1991) point out, three environmental factors – society, school, and home – significantly affect the language acquisition of a child. Especially for school-age children, the language used at school tends to become the dominant language. In the participant's case, he has received an English education since the start, and therefore English is classified as the first language within his consciousness, and Japanese, which is his mother tongue, as the second language, and Chinese is ranked as the third language despite the fact that he spent approximately half of his life in China. However, it was found that another factor influences language acquisition.

.../during my time /Beijing, however ↑ (.), my parents /did make an effort? to teach me Japanese and form of /sending me /back to Japan (.) and every holiday ↓ (.) so, every summer vacation every winter vacation ↑ (.) I would go to my a:h

(.) mother's relatives? (.), place ↑ and a:h (.) /I would try to ABSORB (.) as /much Japanese there ↓ (.); although, I HAVE TO admit it / WASN'T that useful? (.) looking at it (.) from NOW it wasn't any <formal education> (.) and I ONE point they WANTED me to speak ENGLISH more than Japanese? >even in JAPAN<; therefore (.), it wasn't (.) a <great learning environment> ↓.

When the opportunities to use Japanese decreased, his parents attempted various approaches to improve and maintain his Japanese abilities. However, other people's reaction and his own demotivation made this difficult. This shows that language acquisition is deeply connected with learners' affective factors such as motivation and attitude (Gardner 1985).

During his stay in Japan, he gained a chance to study Japanese at school, and thus became conscious of Japanese and developed an interest in learning it. After returning to China, he therefore chose Japanese as a second language at school. He thus succeeded in improving his Japanese abilities not in Japan but in China. This suggests that learners' awareness or motivation can sometimes play a more important role than their educational environment. He talked about this in Japanese.

nihon (.) ni (2.0) u::n ma (2.0) /CHUUGOKU ni nikaime /soshuuni ittekarano /houga nobitatu omoimasune?. Nihonni itakoroha mada kisowo oboeteite ↑ . Demo chuugokuni kayotte itatokiniha /esseitoka kakuyouni \natte, (.) SOREDE, (.) u::n /monosugoku° seichou shitakiga° surunndesune? (I think my Japanese ability has rather improved since I went to Tsu-chou, China. During my stay in Japan, I learnt basic Japanese. However, after I transferred to the school in China, I tried to write essays, etc., and hence I feel I have significantly improved.)

He answered this part in Japanese because he realized that the interviewer was having trouble asking in English. He spoke completely in Japanese, without any code-switching in between. This shows that he has achieved balanced bilingualism. In other words, he can switch languages to suit the situation and/or the listener. However, he is aware that reading and writing in Japanese is still difficult.

2. The consciousness of L1, L2, and L3

I would (.) say (.) that >it was< JUST very /apparent that the WORDS came into my ears were /VERY DIFFERENT ° you know ° (.) based on the SETTING in my /house (.) >somebody here< / mostly Japanese and >little bit mixed< ENGLISH (.) >at school I was just< English and some Chinese >and when I was on a street< was just CHINESE and (.) >when I was my mother's friends< just JAPANESE and SO I /would (.) say (.) /that how was (FOR) it has just been /OBVIOUS to \me.

... Ah I (.) DON'T >think there was much distinguishing< it is just (.) /whatever came in (.) to my /head (.) and I just process /it <I /COULD I /COULD> I couldn't I couldn't.

This part of his answer suggests that a child who grows up in a multilingual environment tends to naturally gain the ability to switch languages depending on the situation and/or the listener. Additionally, in terms of opportunities for using a certain language, he said the following:

... /what I (.) always thought that with <JAPANESE> is BETTER in expressing emotions (.) as any ° you can ° (1.0) I.. (.) >if you want to express< /who you \are (.) >in English you can only say< "I AM" but in Japanese you can go <FURTHER> like could say /WATASHIHA and more /formal studying and /casual studying like say OREHA and go on >ah and so on so far<.

He interestingly admits that English is definitely a stronger language than Japanese, but he feels that Japanese is more suitable for expressing emotions. This shows that language is closely related to children's consciousness, and also that the participant has a Japanese cultural identity.

3. The relationship between consciousness of bilingualism and identity and way of lives

IN the STATES (.) >when I was in San Francisco< (.) /I would say >that you know< BECAUSE although I'm an /American, I >hadn't really< lived /there (.) so I would say that even if you /know (.) the language, you /don't / know the CULTURE (.) and ah I guess it /just a SUBTLE things (.) and like for example >one of biggest thing I had< a PROBLEM with^o was a^o the whole concept of TIPPING (.), leaving tips (.) and /so I HAD TO in rely on my /sister^o oh that ah and you know^o /leaving tips interacting with (.) waiters and waitresses^o because^o you know they TALK to you (.) and that very DIFFERENT from my CHINESE and JAPANESE (.) in HOSPITALITY.

Although he was born in the United States and has a US citizenship (he also has a Japanese one), he lived there in his early years, and hence scarcely remembers the time. Therefore, he faces a problem of contradiction: even though he is unfamiliar with the American culture and its way of life, he can speak fluent American English. The resultant anxiety is deeply connected with the development of a sense of belonging and identity. However, through such turmoil, he has gained the consciousness of languages, resulting in his mental and linguistic development. The following excerpt from his interview shows his development.

/instead of (..) my language capabilities, >I was more< thankful for the FACT that >I was able to

gain< such /experiences (.) because on... (.) because /I /THINK the /language reflects one's culture <very very well>, >for example<, ah as I said (.) earlier (.)^o that in^o >I could express myself< more in Japanese BECAUSE there are more /words (.) to express a certain thing (.) like (.) ITSELF and /therefore (.) I think that BY KNOWING >that you can understand< in /Japan (.) <YOUR status> is very important^o (.) and >I think that is less important in< ENGLISH >for you know< LESS^o than cultures^o and I I (.) THINK that >I I am just /thankful< that >I can I was able to< GRASP that understanding.

Additionally, in terms of identity, it seems that his consciousness has always been changing. The emphasis on "that", which refers to identity, shows his consciousness of it.

.../about the /second part of question IDENTITY (.) that < THAT IS a > < question when I am asking myself> (.) for /I would say (.) at /least a HALF of my life (.) ESPECIALLY >when I< moved to Tsu-chou (.)^o after I left Japan^o .
...>it is more the feelings< that (.) /I would start to feel more /CONFUSED (.) in in /might >relate back< the fact >that you know< (.) HOW (.) >when I answer in English when I answer in< Japanese >my answer would change< and then I feel (.) that by using /different languages, (.) my /identity ↑ /changes as /well ↑ I would say >that you know of course it's< everyone / DOES it ↓ you wouldn't talk the same way as you know (.) to /parents, as to /teacher (.) as your colleagues as your friends (.) you SPEAK /differently THAT I understand >but I have a /feeling< that (.) those DISTINCTION inside of me are VERY distinct.
...it is /NOT exactly (.) a multiple personality disorder but (.) I don't know >it's just seen like /different face almost a different identity

sometimes< and /I think that it is real ah >what is the language as well<.

He thought that his different identities have been produced because of his use of different languages. However, he took a long time to reach this consciousness: he felt a significant anxiety and faced a conflict with his own multilingualism and multiculturalism since he was a child.

Result and Discussion

This interview analysis shows that a child in the early stages of life can acquire multiple languages through various social relationships and use them with others without being aware of his multilingual environment. As the participant grew up, he gained the consciousness of multilingualism that changed through environmental variations and his relationship with others. This consciousness persisted and became strongly related to his sense of belonging and identity. Additionally, it was found that anxiety about language abilities and identity depends on the situation.

The participant in this study, from the perspective of bilingualism (Baker 1993), is a simultaneous bilingual who gained both L1 and L2 from birth through contact with various languages in various countries. Additionally, he is an additive bilingual because he received consistent formal education in English and studied his mother tongue as a second language. He admits having trouble with reading and writing Japanese; it is difficult to equally develop his abilities in multiple languages. Cummins (2006) indicates that Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), such as conversation with friends and informal interaction, can be developed in two years, whereas it takes a longer time to reach the same level as native speakers in Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), which deals with more complex language structure, including reading and writing.

However, a common area of language proficiency provides the foundation for the use of both languages. The stronger the child's CALP is in L1, as this participant, the easier it will be to acquire CALP in L2.

In terms of their consciousness of bilingualism and identity related to their way of lives, it was found that bilingual or multilingual children live with anxiety. A number of scholars in the field of SLA have researched the factors that influence learners and their language learning. Affective factors such as motivation and attitude significantly influence second language acquisition. For example, Krashen (1992) advocates "affective filter hypothesis". According to this hypothesis, in language learning, the student with anxiety, low self-esteem, and demotivation tends not to understand input because "affective filter will block it out" (Krashen 1992, p. 6). Furthermore, Oxford (1990) points out that using affective strategies — methods that reduce anxiety or provide encouragement — can help students study effectively. The participant in this study once experienced demotivation for studying Japanese. Although he stayed in Japan and among Japanese people, his Japanese ability did not improve during this time. However, once he had a motive, he was able to significantly develop his Japanese ability even in China. He can now efficiently deal with both English and Japanese, even though he is still anxious about his Japanese ability. Moreover, he experiences anxiety regarding being unfamiliar with the way of life in the US despite having a US citizenship, evident through his experience of the tipping system in the US. In addition, he experienced an "identity crisis"; he was unsure of himself in a multicultural environment. After entering university in Australia, "the third country" for him, and leaving his parents behind, he finally managed to gain the positive consciousness that he can flexibly change his multiple identities depending on the context. However, when he talks

about his concern for his future, it is evident that he is still anxious about his identity. In other words, the subjective consciousness of multilingualism, including the anxiety that these multicultural or multilingual children face, persists for life and is deeply connected with their lives.

However, this study involved only one student, and he was successful in acquiring multilingual ability. Therefore, it is difficult to generalize these findings to other individuals who have grown up in a multilingual environment. Additionally, the process of forming identity along with acquiring L1 and L2 should be further examined. Future research should clarify the relationship between SLA and multilingualism from various perspectives.

Conclusion

This research attempted to examine how multilingual child acquires multiple languages and his/her consciousness about languages and identity. It was found that language acquisition is significantly related to not only his/her social factors, such as home, school, and local community, but also his/her affective factors such as motivation and attitude. Moreover, even after achieving multilingualism, such child is still anxious about his/her abilities and identity.

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APPENDIX A

Questions - Part 1

1. How long have you been in each country?
2. At what age did you begin to speak English?
3. Do you consider yourself a complete bilingual?
4. What language do you usually speak with your family? Are they bilingual?

5. What or how has your parents' experience with English been like?
 6. With whom do you usually speak English?
 7. With whom do you usually speak Japanese?
 8. With whom can you speak a mixture of both languages?
 9. Which language or mix of language do you feel most comfortable speaking?
 10. In what kind of situations do you feel most comfortable speaking English?
 11. In what kind of situations do you feel most comfortable speaking Japanese?
 12. Are there any situations where you would feel uncomfortable if someone spoke to you in Japanese when you know they can speak English? Why?
 13. Have you ever wanted to express an idea that sounds better in Japanese than it does in English? Can you think of any examples?
 14. Is it easier for you to write in Japanese or English?
 15. What problems do you encounter when you are writing in Japanese that you do not face when you are writing in English?
 16. Do you need to make any special efforts to acquire and maintain your Japanese?
6. Are you aware of the changes in your consciousness?
 7. What do you think about your present multilingual ability?

Questions - Part 2

1. What has your linguistic environment (place, duration of stay, school, family, etc.) been like since you were born? How did you use language and how would you evaluate your language ability at each stage?
2. As a child, were you aware of your multilingual environment? How did you distinguish them?
3. Whenever and wherever you moved, were you aware of your language usage and activities?
4. How did your parents and teachers at schools support your language learning?
5. When you moved, what did you think about your multilingualism?

