

Resumo: Ser bilíngue é algo que tem intrigado pessoas atualmente. As pessoas têm se preocupado em falar uma segunda língua e ainda querem que seus filhos aprendam uma outra língua de forma natural. Assim, expor as crianças a mais de uma língua cedo em sua infância poderia ser mais eficiente. A partir desse ponto de vista, este artigo tem como objetivo pesquisar um pouco mais sobre bilinguismo e crianças que se tornam bilíngues muito cedo. Primeiramente, será apresentada uma revisão de literatura sobre bilinguismo. Em seguida, algumas vantagens em aprender uma segunda língua enquanto criança e ainda alguns mitos sobre o aprendizado de uma segunda língua. Foi concluído que crianças que aprendem duas ou mais línguas ao mesmo tempo, aprendem como se todas fossem sua primeira língua e elas também são capazes de alterná-las sempre que julguem adequado. Também se percebeu que pessoas bilíngues adquirem a mesma competência gramatical que monolíngues em seu desenvolvimento.

Palavras-chave: Bilinguismo; crianças; aprendizado de línguas.

Abstract: Being bilingual is something that has intrigued people nowadays. People have been worried about speaking a second language and want their children to learn another language in a more natural way. Therefore, exposing them to more than one language on early childhood might be more efficient. From this point of view, this article aims at researching a little more about bilingualism and children who become bilingual very early. First of all, it will present a review of the literature on bilingualism itself. Then, it will present some advantages of the acquisition of a second language while being a child and also some myths about second language learning. The conclusion is that children that learn two or even more languages, at the same time, learn as if they were all their first languages and they are also able to alternate languages whenever they think it's adequate. Moreover, bilingual acquisition leads to the same kind of grammatical competence of monolingual first language development.

Key words: Bilingualism; children; language learning.

1 Introduction

After studying a little deeper about language acquisition and bilingualism I got even more interested in this area, it was really something I wanted to read more and understand better. Besides, I work in a school where they have this “bilingual curriculum” – Portuguese and English – in which children start having this every-day English contact when they are four years old.

The study on bilingualism and young bilinguals will make people think about the fact that it can be easier to learn another language when you are a child, when you are ready to get lots of input and are not worried about speaking wrong or understanding everything one says. After I started to work in this school I got even more motivated and reading about this issue was really a pleasure to me.

I was also intrigued about how a child grows when he/she is exposed to two or more languages. I knew there were myths, so I wanted to understand how this process works and how children deal with that. Once we know parents sometimes get really worried when exposing their children to two or more languages, thinking that they might get confused or that this might delay their speaking, studying deeper about

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bilingualism helps us explain to parents in our school, for instance, when they come up with this kind of questions.

Nowadays being bilingual is not just a matter of speaking two languages, it is necessary for almost all fields. The simultaneous acquisition of two or more languages is not uncommon anymore. In Brazil, besides speaking Portuguese, you must speak another language, like English or Spanish, so that you are able to get a better job. People have more opportunities to travel nowadays, and speaking the language from the country you are going to will definitely help a lot. Today the world's necessities also require that people around the world speak each other languages.

Making children bilingual just helps them a lot, because learning a language when you are an adult can be much more difficult and take a lot more time and effort. Children who are exposed to a second language early learn in a more natural way, when the language can become part of their routine. Depending on how early, they might learn to speak as if they were learning their first language. Exposing them to more than one language makes their work easier and they would not have to worry about this later.

So, this article aims at researching a little more about bilingualism and children who become bilingual very early. First of all, it will present a review of the literature on bilingualism itself. After that, it will present some advantages of the acquisition of a second language while being a child and also some myths about second language learning. This way, it will talk about acquiring bilingual competence early, that is, when you are still a child.

2 Bilingualism, a review of literature

Bilingualism is not something new. People have talked about this for a long time, but still when we hear the term we are not sure about who can be considered bilingual. Actually, there are different points of view, different authors that have researched about the issue and think differently.

According to Edwards (2006), everybody is bilingual. He says that everyone who can speak at least some words in a language that is not his/her first language, or can only understand a sentence or two in this language can be considered bilingual. On the other hand, there are authors who say the opposite, like Steiner (apud Edwards (2006)), who claims equal fluency in both languages. So, what really intrigues people and researchers is the degree, that is, how good one has to speak a second language to be considered bilingual.

It is also important to know other points of view to understand what bilingualism is about and how it is being held in the past years. Weinreich (apud Edwards (2006)), says that bilingualism is the alternate use of two languages, while Haugen (apud Edwards (2006)), defines it as an ability to produce complete and meaningful utterances in the second language. These definitions from the 50's tended to prove that bilingualism was the mastery of two languages, while the latest ones, as mentioned before, allowed greater variation in competence.

Bialystok (2001) states that bilingual individuals are those who are able to speak two (or more) languages, to some level of proficiency, but identifying what counts as a language is not a straightforward

judgment. The same author also points out that children can become bilingual by learning only one spoken language, that is, a spoken language and a sign language. It is normal to find deaf children who learn these two languages simultaneously in childhood, acquiring both in a normal and natural environment.

Actually, it is all a matter of thinking what abilities one considers important when thinking of a bilingual person. First of all, it is necessary to remember that there are four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Some people might be able to read perfectly in English as their second language, for instance, while others are not able to read anything or even write a word in the language, but can speak it fluently and communicate perfectly. Therefore, Edwards (2006) also mentions a term, which he named “balanced bilingual”, that is reserved to the ones whose abilities are mastered more roughly equivalent.

Edwards (2006), explains a little more about competence. He talks about the different tests people have applied to have better definitions and find out who is bilingual or not. But he also says that those tests are not very good to measure, once we know that there are factors like attitude, age, sex, intelligence, memory, linguistic distance between the two languages, and context of testing are all confounding.

So, to be bilingual is to be in the process of learning. Maybe it is not mastering two languages, but it is living in two languages, in two worlds. It is having broader views, other perspectives of the world and getting to know at least a little about other cultures.

Next, I will write about acquiring a second language right after learning the first language and also about the simultaneous acquisition of two languages.

3 The acquisition of two or more languages, while being a child

3.1 Some myths

When people think of learning a second language or offering children exposition to two or more languages at the same time, there are myths and worries, considering the fact that they could get confused and also about what is the best age they should start being exposed to the languages.

Some common myths about second language learning, according to King and Mackey (2007,p 18) are:

- Only bilingual parents can raise bilingual children;
- You have to start very early for second language learning;
- Only native speakers and teachers can teach children second languages;
- Children who are raised in the same family will have the same language skills as one another;
- You have to correct errors as soon as they appear in grammar and vocabulary;
- Exposing a child to two languages means she will be a late talker;
- Mixing languages is a sign of confusion and languages must stay separate;
- Television, DVDs and edutainment are great ways to pick up some languages;
- Bilingual education programs are for non-English speakers;

- Two languages are the most to which a very young child should be exposed.

Bialystok (2001) also talks about these worries parents usually have. She says that people usually assume that languages interact, and that learning one language has implications for learning another.

So researchers have discussed about this and they have found that many of these myths are not true. King and Mackey (2007) talk about these myths and misconceptions showing that nowadays we know there are many advantages of learning a second language and being bilingual and that most of what people believe about language learning has been scientifically tested in recent years. This way, people can take the right paths, making the most effective decisions for their families.

3.2 Types of second-language acquisition

Learning another language while you are a child could be even easier and have a better result. If a child starts her learning early, she would probably be able to develop a better linguistic competence.

Edwards (2006), mentions two nomenclatures: simultaneous second-language acquisition, which is the exposure to more than one language very early, at a very young age (ages of 3 or 4) and successive second-language acquisition, which is the exposition at a later age. He says that it is still hard to know when exactly in early life, bilingualism is best. He claims that even if we don't have an answer for that, the thing is that early childhood is better than any time later. He explains that the young brain is more "flexible" and "plastic" than the older one, which would help the learning.

According to Meisel (2001), there is another nomenclature we could use, that is the simultaneous acquisition of two first languages. These individuals would be exposed to two languages at the same time and frequency and, consequently, would have simultaneous acquisition of both languages.

This author has written about this topic and is able to explain what happens to children who are learning two languages at the same time. It is known that children do make mistakes and often alternate the use of the languages. However, Meisel (2001) says that language mixing does not indicate deficiencies of linguistic knowledge or of the bilingual's abilities to use the languages, it is just a matter of choice, when children are able to alternate languages according to who they are talking to or simply to what language they feel like using in each specific moment. This is called "mental juggling", when bilinguals mentally negotiate between the languages. When bilinguals speak with each other, they can easily slip in and out of both languages, selecting the word or phrase from the language that most clearly expresses their thoughts. And the researcher also says that bilinguals rarely make the mistake of slipping into another language when speaking to someone who understands only one language. This also proves that it is a myth that bilingual children could get confused when speaking.

According to Bialystok (2001), in a bilingual mode language mixing and switching is normal and comprehensible. Bilinguals move freely along this dimension in response to social and linguistic circumstances.

Cruz-Ferreira (2006) states that it is impossible not to mix in a multilingual environment, whether constituted by a native and a foreign language or by two parents that speak two different languages. She agrees that the interplay between the languages used is not random. So, bilingual children will alternate languages in order to communicate effectively with interlocutors that are identified with each of the languages, because bilingualism necessarily involves more than one language.

However, Meisel (2006), talks about these “possible mistakes”. He explains that the linguistic knowledge of a bilingual person does not consist of two perfectly equal parts that would behave just like a monolingual of the two languages. Grosjean (apud Meisel (2006)), says that a bilingual person is not two monolinguals in one person. He claims that a bilingual rarely uses his/her languages equally frequently in every domain of his/her social environment. They use each of them for different purposes, in different contexts, and in communicating with different partners. So, their knowledge of each of their languages is activated more or less strongly.

Cruz-Ferreira (2006) also mentions that a bilingual is not the sum of two monolinguals, hence bilingualism does not consist in a cumulative repertoire of different languages. So, bilingualism and monolingualism are two distinct uses of language each in its own right, and monolingual uses of language cannot be compared to bilingual uses of language, nor *vice versa*. The same author explains that people often take bilinguals as dual monolinguals, as users of one single language twice over, not as users of two languages, with the purpose of assessing bilingual proficiency against monolingual proficiency.

Cruz-Ferreira (2006) also says that bilingualism is no different from monolingualism as far as the acquisition and command of language use is concerned. Differences arise with uses *of* different languages and *in* different languages.

Bialystok (2001) says that we should not expect language acquisition in each of the bilingual child’s two languages to replicate exactly the pattern experienced by a monolingual child learning only one language because the representational system for both languages are different.

4 Some advantages of becoming bilingual in early childhood

Cruz-Ferreira (2006) states that the implicit assumption that exposure to one single language is a guarantee of excellence in linguistic competence also goes unchallenged. She found out in her study that monolinguals and bilinguals use different strategies to achieve the same communicative efficiency.

Meisel (2001) said that bilingual language use might reflect a more complex interaction of pragmatic and grammatical knowledge sources, when compared to monolingual performance. Some evidences are showed by Meisel (2001): one is that bilingual children arrive at the same type of grammatical knowledge as the respective monolinguals and also that bilingual acquisition is not different qualitatively from monolingual first language development and leads to the same kind of grammatical competence.

Bialystok (2001) writes about this different level of competence, saying that children who experience different kinds of interactions with each language interact in different types of social situations with each,

find different opportunities for formal study, and could develop different kinds of attitudes to each language. This way, the many configurations that lead to bilingualism leave children with different levels of competence in each of the languages. So, we could not think that bilingual children would function equally in two languages.

According to Meisel (2006), following the critical period hypothesis, the addition of one or more languages after the optimal age, as in adult second language, implies that the human language-making faculty is no longer available to the learner, at least not in the same way as early childhood. But he also says that this does not mean that older people are not able to learn another language, it is just that older learners have to resort to other cognitive capacities, so they can develop a knowledge system about that language.

Meisel (2006) admits that much more research about exposing children to two or more languages from birth is needed. But what he says is that, so far, due to brain maturation, significant changes happen around the age of five; consequently, both child and adult second language acquisition differ in important respects from the acquisition during the earlier age ranges.

According to Bialystok (2001), there are some potential consequences of being a bilingual child. She says that there is a possibility that an essential cognitive process, which is part of our intellectual life, called control over attention and inhibition, could develop differently and more advantageously in bilingual children.

Therefore, some advantages of being bilingual have been found by researchers like Bialystok (2001), what makes us think that this must be good for people in general. The author mentions that bilingual speakers can outperform monolinguals in certain mental abilities, such as editing out irrelevant information and focusing on important information.

Bialystok (2001) says that knowing and speaking more languages may protect the brain against the effects of aging. A person who speaks other languages is likely to be more clear-minded at an older age, because she has exercised her brain more than those who are monolingual. Languages may create new links in the brain, contributing to this strengthening effect.

After being able to read more about the topic and write about it, I could find that even though bilingualism is an area that still needs a lot more research, there are many findings that are interesting for us to know. Actually, I could say that being bilingual can only do good things for people. Researchers haven't found any disadvantages for that. I think other languages are good for people at any age. They allow for a flexibility of thought and a channel for understanding another culture better.

5 Conclusion

Studies on bilingual children have called the attention of many people nowadays. There have been many research studies on this topic over the last 20 or 25 years. Meisel (2006) has said that these investigations have established that children acquiring two or more languages from birth are able to differentiate the grammatical systems of their languages from very early on and without much effort.

Bilingual acquisition even leads to the same kind of grammatical competence of monolingual first language development.

This is very nice to know for getting to the conclusion that children learn the languages naturally, and people do not have to worry about them being confused or mixing grammatical rules. Cruz-Ferreira (2006) explains that bilingual children, when choosing a word to say in any of his/her languages, are attempting to keep a dialogue going. And these strategies are not different from the ones apparent from monolingual children, who address their father as “mummy” or *vice versa*, or who use “you” for “me” at the stage of acquisition of personal pronouns.

Meisel (2006) explains that children that learn two or even more languages at the same time, learn as if they were all their first languages and they are also able to alternate languages whenever they think it is adequate. But this does not mean that they are “two monolinguals in one person”, as written before. They can acquire different abilities and skills for their languages.

But when we talk about successive acquisition of bilingualism, we can realize that there are still many questions. What Meisel (2006) says is that the simultaneous acquisition of two or more languages from birth qualifies as an instance of multiple first language acquisition in that the bilingual child attains the same type of grammatical knowledge as the respective monolinguals.

And when we think of acquisition of a second language during the first three or four years of life, researchers know even less. But what was interesting to understand better with this paper, is that researchers are nowadays pretty much sure that very young children that are exposed to two or more languages are able to learn them easier, without great effort, which is great. Bialystok (2001) mentions that one certainty people hold about language acquisition is that children can definitely learn a second language better than adults can. Cruz-Ferreira (2006) says that bilingual children are at freedom to explore language not only from within each of their languages, but across them and, more importantly, beyond them.

Cruz-Ferreira (2006) also wrote something that really called my attention. She says that there is no hour or day when we can say that a person has finished learning to speak, but, rather, to the end of his/her life. And children do with their language(s) what they do with their toys: they take them apart to see how they work.

With this research , it was possible to comprehend even better that bilingualism is an area in which people still have a lot to discover, to find answers and to be able to say things more precisely. Researches about early and also late bilingualism still have a lot more to find and explain, but so far, it is important to know that learning more than one language can help children’s development and it is definitely easier than learning a language any time later when people are already adults.

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