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Second Language/Bilingualism at An Early Age with Emphasis on Its Impact on Early Socio-Cognitive and Socio-Emotional Development

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Introduction

Many children grow up hearing and using more than one language. Some researchers have estimated that the majority of the world's population use more than one language on a regular basis.[1] Parents, educators and legislators alike take an interest in research findings on child bilingualism in a concerted effort to ensure that bilingualism does not put children at any intellectual or emotional risk.

One of the earliest concerns that researchers tackled was the idea that bilingualism confused children.[2] However, research has shown that bilingualism does not trigger confusion, has no

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inherent negative impact on development and, more importantly, has some significant socio-cognitive advantages.[3]

Subject

Here, we focus on the impact of bilingualism on socio-cognitive and socio-emotional development. Socio-cognitive development refers to how children change with age in terms of their abilities to think about social and communicative issues. Socio-emotional development refers to how children change with age in terms of their processing of emotions in a social and communicative setting.

We review recent research and its importance for children who hear and/or use two languages at some point in childhood. In our review, we do not distinguish between children who learn two languages sequentially versus simultaneously, although there is some evidence that the later a person starts learning a second language, the lower the ultimate achievement level in at least some domains of language.[4] Most of our review focuses on children's development in the preschool or early school years. This age range is below the range most often considered critical in learning a second language.

Problems

Bilingual children form a heterogeneous group.[5] They may speak any combination of languages (or dialects), and community support for the languages may differ by geographical location and/or socio-political context.6 Developmental outcomes of French-English bilinguals in Canada may not predict those of Hindi-Swahili bilinguals in India. Similarly, developmental outcomes for bilingual children learning two languages in school might not be the same as those for bilingual children learning one language in school and another at home.7 Also, the degree of proficiency in either language can change over time, usually with greater or lesser exposure to a language.[8]

Research Context

While bilingualism does not have inherent negative effects on development, there are a number of variables that can affect the outcome of bilingual development, including the context in which the languages are learned, parental attitudes toward bilingualism, the status of the language(s) in the community, and the socio-cultural context in which children grow up.6 The general respect and encouragement for the languages a bilingual child is learning play an important role in the

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child’s development, fostering positive outcomes.

Key Research Questions

1. Are there differences between monolinguals and bilinguals in their understanding of the communicative needs of their conversational partners?
2. Are there differences between monolinguals and bilinguals in cognitive development?
3. When there are differences between monolinguals and bilinguals in socio-cognitive development, why do these differences exist?
4. Are there differences between monolinguals and bilinguals in emotional language development?

Recent Research Results

Research has examined socio-cognitive development rather than socio-emotional development. Socio-cognitive development is of interest to researchers because the knowledge of two languages can affect how words and thoughts are processed and represented. Researchers have been less interested in how knowledge of two languages might affect socio-emotional development because there is no clear reason why it should. However, there is some intriguing research with bilingual adults’ use of language and understanding of emotions. This research suggests that a greater focus on bilingual socio-emotional development is necessary.

Studies have shown that bilingual children have advantages in terms of understanding the communication needs of their conversational partners.[8,9,10] Young bilingual children are sensitive to the fact that they cannot understand someone who speaks a foreign language earlier than monolingual children.[11] Also, bilingual children show an earlier understanding that other people can have false beliefs than monolingual children.[12]

Studies have also shown that bilingual children achieve higher scores than monolinguals on a number of tests of cognitive ability, including mental flexibility,[13] non-verbal problem-solving tasks,[14] understanding the conventional origin of names,[15,16] distinguishing between semantic similarity and phonetic similarity[17] and capacity to judge the grammaticality of sentences.[18]

One possible reason for the bilingual advantage is that bilingual children must learn to reduce the interferences between their two languages in order to speak only one.[16,19] Another possibility

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is that bilingualism trains children to focus their attention on the relevant variables in the context, particularly information that is ambiguous or contradictory.[14] Increased cognitive abilities may help children to develop the representational abilities that are thought to be involved in effective communication. For example, knowing two words that name the same concept could help children develop the understanding that an object or event can be represented in more than one way, which could bolster children's understanding of other people's perspectives.

Research investigating how bilinguals use their languages to express emotions has been conducted mostly in adults (mostly autobiographical memory studies)[20] and has shown that a particular language is an effective retrieval cue if it matches the language in which an event or experience was originally encoded.[21] Memories encoded in the mother tongue are typically richer in terms of emotional significance than memories encoded in the second language.[22] Bond and Lai[23] argue that this is because the second language is typically acquired in a more emotionally neutral setting than the first language.

Conclusion

In conclusion, research has shown that bilingualism does not lead to confusion, nor does it have any inherent negative impact on development. In the early stages of the acquisition of a second language, children hearing two languages can show some developmental lags relative to children who speak only one.[24] However, bilinguals are not globally behind monolingual children in all areas of language acquisition, and the observed lags are typically small and do not last for long periods of time.

Bilingual children show some advantages in socio-cognitive development when compared to monolinguals, particularly in understanding the beliefs of others, picking out the important variables to solve a problem, and entertaining two possible interpretations of the same stimulus at once.

There has been no research on bilingual children's use of emotion language. However, research with bilingual adults suggests that the language in which events occur could be strongly linked to the emotional overtone of the memory of those events. It is possible, then, that the context in which a language is learned can have an impact on bilingual children's ability to express themselves and their accuracy in expression.

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In sum, there are no overall disadvantages to bilingualism. On the contrary, there can be significant disadvantages regarding children's loss of a home/heritage language, which is often deeply intertwined with family, emotions and identity.6

Implications for the Policy and Services Perspective

For policy-makers and service-providers, concern gravitates around two issues: (1) the language of school instruction; and (2) the language of public service. Because there is no evidence for bilingualism having a negative impact on children's intellectual and socio-emotional development, parents can be encouraged to speak their native language at home, and allow their children to learn the majority language in school. To the extent that bilingualism can be encouraged over the loss of a home/heritage language, children are more likely to retain strong ties with their culture and develop strong ties with the majority culture.

Because language can function as a cue for retrieval of personal experiences that may play a key role in the diagnosis and/or treatment of various mental health conditions, service-providers should be making efforts to promote policies that encourage bilingual health services.

Finally, it is important to note that it can be difficult to identify bilingual children who are at risk of learning disabilities and speech-language pathology. In some cases, typically developing bilingual children produce the same kind of language as children with language impairment.[25] While researchers hope eventually to identify differences between typically developing bilinguals and language-impaired children, the lack of known differences at the moment poses a challenge for service-providers. Is it better to wait and hope children will outgrow apparent difficulties or intervene at the earliest possible moment? One piece of information that can help in reaching a decision is information about how the child behaves in his or her other language. Language impairment typically affects both languages.

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