

The Development of Coordinate Bilingualism and an Investigation into Its System

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Abstract: Four coordinate bilinguals were interviewed. The researcher asked them eight questions and tape-recorded their answers. Later, their answers were carefully interpreted to clarify their bilingual system and its developmental process. The findings suggest crucial information on the paths to developing listening comprehension and oral production.

Keywords: second language acquisition, bilingualism, English as a second language, coordinate bilingual, bilingual education, English education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Abe (2000) conducted a study with near-native speakers of English on the achievement of high oral proficiency levels. In his study, he concluded the following [1]:

1. The reason children master languages more easily than adults is because of the difference in the way in which children and adults deal with oral information. While children absorb new information, adults use information that has already been absorbed.
2. Although it was not established that it is necessary for ESL learners to learn grammar to achieve high oral proficiency levels, if it is learned, it must be practical and have few details.
3. One key to achieving a high level of oral proficiency is to carefully imitate what native English speakers say and to do so continuously even after being able to communicate in English without difficulty.
4. The meaning of language arises in the situation in which it is used. By listening to a sound repeatedly in similar situations, a learner understands what the sound means.
5. Although it was not confirmed, some participants stated that it might be helpful for beginners to intentionally try to reply using a small number of words, such as short phrases, to avoid pressure in real-time communication.
6. Although it was not established that only one communication system controls two languages, it seemed that the two systems come closer to each other once learners know the true English system.

These conclusions were obtained by conducting interviews with those who have achieved near-native proficiency levels by being exposed to English after the age of 17. One reason why Abe conducted interviews with these subjects was that it was considered difficult to obtain suitable answers about the language learning process from native English speakers because they learned English without being aware of the process. He thought that only those who made a conscious effort to reach proficient levels might know the secrets of mastering a language.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

If so, it may be possible to obtain such information from those who became “bilingual” at relatively older ages, compared to their first language. This type of bilingualism is called “coordinate bilingualism.” According to D’Acierno (1990), “a coordinate bilingual is a person who acquires the two languages in different contexts, for instance one at home and the other

at school, so that the words of the two languages belong to two separate systems which are independent... Initially, the child develops one system, then he builds up a second system, and at last he operates the two in parallel” [2]. According to Matthews (1997), coordinate bilingualism is “bilingualism in which mastery of one language is hypothetically separate in the bilingual’s mind from mastery of the other” [3]. Because this type of bilingualism is normally established by developing a second system after developing one system, it is also possible that these people remember the developmental process of their system, although it may not be as clear as what near-native speakers remember.

Additionally, Felix (1977) states that unlike L1 learners, who must gradually discover the syntactic rules of the L1, L2 learners already know that words may not be randomly combined at the beginning of the acquisition process and that in early L2 speech, only those utterances will occur, which in some way reflect the syntactic rules of the second language [4]. As a result, L2 learners speak using a relatively small number of different structure types during the initial stages, and new structures emerge in an ordered sequence because of this L2-specific language acquisition. Thus, in this study, in addition to checking the validity of the coordinate bilinguals found in Abe’s study, the researcher asked them about the developmental process of syntax [1].

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Four coordinate bilinguals were interviewed. The researcher asked them eight questions and tape-recorded their answers. Their answers were then carefully interpreted to clarify their bilingual system and its developmental process. The following eight questions were asked:

1. What do you think of the differences between children and adults in terms of learning a language? Do you agree with the idea that children absorb new information and that adults use information that has already been absorbed?
2. Do you think that it is necessary to learn grammar to be bilingual? If so, what type of grammar do you think is the most effective?
3. What do you think is the key to establishing bilingualism? Did you have something that you paid special attention to while you were still in the process of establishing bilingualism? Do you agree with the idea that careful imitation of what native English speakers say and its continuation are the keys to achieving bilingualism?
4. How do you think you learned the meaning of English? Do you agree with the idea that the meaning of language is found in the situation in which it is used?
5. Do you remember intentionally using shorter utterances at the beginning of the English-learning process? How do you think you came to be able to make your utterances longer?
6. How do you think you mastered syntax? Do you remember gradually mastering syntactic structures one by one? Or do you remember making utterances that did not make sense because the word order was wrong?
7. How do you describe the path you took to reach your current speaking system?
8. How do you describe the path you took to reach your current listening system?
9. How do you describe your bilingual system? How many communication systems do you think you have inside yourself?

IV. SUBJECTS

P1 — 24-year-old male. He can speak three languages: Vietnamese, English, and Spanish. Vietnamese is his native language. He began to learn English when he was in the first grade. Spanish is his last language; he can use it to communicate only about daily matters.

P2 — 40-year-old female. She is Korean. She was in Korea until kindergarten. Then, she moved to the U.S., where she remained until she finished elementary school. She then went back to Korea and then returned to the U.S. for graduate school.

P3 — 41-year-old female. She is a Latina who lives in the U.S. Her native language is Spanish, and she was exposed to English in elementary school. She received all her education in English and uses Spanish in her private life.

P4 — 18-year-old female. Her native language is Vietnamese. She now lives in the U.S. She was exposed to English in elementary school. She has been receiving her education in English since then.

V. FINDINGS

A. *Flexibility in Learning a New Thing and the Direct Absorption of Oral Input*

Three participants pointed out children's flexibility in regard to learning a language as a reason they learn it more easily than adults. Additionally, two emphasized that children absorb oral input without filtering it. Interestingly, one participant pointed out that adults must learn more at the same time compared to children.

P1 — A child's brain is somewhat like a sponge that sucks up all knowledge with no comparison and relation. Children don't question; they just accept it all without even thinking. They also take language as a whole, unlike adults, who take bits and pieces of language. I believe that everything is exciting when you are a kid.

P2 — Children don't worry about making mistakes. They don't even know that they made mistakes. Because of social factors, adults are embarrassed by their mistakes. Also, adults filter the oral information provided to them.

P3 — Children don't have behavioral patterns, are not inhibited, and hurt.

P4 — For children, it's like a film is running on and on, while the tape goes much slower for adults. Kids are like puppies; they can learn things more easily. Also, when I learned English, my aunt taught me one word at a time by repeating it over and over and picturing it out for me. But when I learned Spanish in class, the teacher gave us 15 new words a day without us even getting it.

Regarding the necessity of grammar, two participants stated that it is not necessary for oral communication, while the other two stated that it is. One participant who was in support of the necessity of grammar seemed to be speaking only about the aspects of morpheme, not of syntax.

P1 — I still have trouble with grammar, especially in writing, such as run-on sentences. So, when I write academic papers, first, I brainstorm and then have to sort it out. But in the case of mastering oral communication, there is no need for grammar. You just look at the language.

P2 — Although exposure to the language plays an important part, learning grammar makes it faster to learn the language.

P3 — I didn't learn grammar rules, except for the grammar in oral information, but I can speak in grammatically correct sentences. It seems that if the grammatical base of your first language is firmer, it is easier to learn L2 grammar.

P4 — Grammar is necessary; for example, without learning grammar, you can't tell the difference between a dog and dogs.

B. *The Keys to Establishing Coordinate Bilingualism*

The factors that were important in establishing bilingualism varied depending on the participants. One stated that what was important was being in both arenas, another said positive support from the people around you, and another said the intention to communicate with other children. However, three of the four interviewees agreed on the importance of providing some kind of visual information in the process of establishing bilingualism.

P1 — It is important to be in both arenas. It seems to me that each language has different roles. When I speak Vietnamese, I usually talk about food and trips; when I speak English, though I am not interested, I normally talk about sports and women. It's a guy thing, you know. Spanish, being Mom's mother tongue, seems to have to do with my identity...ties between Mom and myself. Also, in speaking English, I feel I have to be more reserved. Don't want to let you know too much, because of the power structure. It takes a while to go back to Spanish mode.

P2 — It took only from January to June for me to be able to keep up with oral communication pretty much. I had to depend on my senses to understand what was going on. I wasn't sure whether I understood the message based on [oral] language or body language. Language was only one form of communication.

P3 — Positive support around me was very important. People around me always encouraged me to learn English by saying, "You can do it." It was something like when I learned to ride a bike. My aunt gave me English lessons in the afternoon, reading out loud for me and helping me with homework in English. Pictures and gestures played an important part too. I also remember trying hard to communicate with other children at a playground without knowing the words. I believe that the intention to communicate was always there.

P4 — What I remember about the process of learning English was flash cards, the happy and boring feelings of learning a new language, and gestures. Also, one-on-one communication was easier than one-way communication, such as watching TV, when a bunch of broken phrases were used, rather than sentences. When difficult words were used, I had difficulty understanding as well.

C. The Meaning of Language Is the Situation

All four participants agreed that the meaning of language comes from the situation in which it is used.

P1 — Yeah, I agree. You know how to learn a language? You engulf yourself in that country. First, you must embarrass yourself a little. Then, you start to pick up some words. You joke with that. Gradually, vocabulary increases, and the people around you correct what you say wrong. I also remember when I thought I mastered Spanish, and I met with different types of people, I didn't understand what they said. I understood the people I was used to, but I didn't understand those I met on a trip.

P2 — Yes, I agree. I had to figure it out within the context.

D. Short Phrases to Longer Phrases

In terms of speaking, three participants agreed that it would be better for learners to start with short phrases and gradually make them longer. Interestingly, one of them maintained that there were no short or long phrases per se—only the whole expression that represented the situation.

P1 — As time passes, the way you think changes. You think more, and that's why utterances become longer.

P2 — When I was in the first grade, I heard my classmates say, "I had to go to the bathroom." For me to go to the bathroom, I had to be able to say the whole sentence. So, it was something like one long string...one long word itself. I didn't even know whether it was a sentence or a word. So, I try to do the same thing with my daughter. I say the whole sentence to her: "Did you call me?" She may not know the meaning of each word, but she understands what [the question] means.

P3 — Yes, I agree. I learned that way.

P4 — At first, I used short phrases. But as time passed, the number of words increased, and more words fit all in one utterance. It's like when your vocabulary is not large, you say "a dog," but as your vocabulary increases, you say, "A dog is walking."

E. Learning Syntax

All four participants expressed agreement with the idea of syntax coming naturally by imitating what was heard.

P1 — Syntax for writing came from reading. But syntax for informal speech came naturally. I just let it out.

P2 — Syntax came by imitating a lot of things. There was a time when I wasn't sure whether I was communicating or not. When I went to a summer camp in the first grade, I met a lot of new people, and I remember it was more difficult to communicate with them. I tried to figure it out by the teacher's facial reactions and body language. I was not sure whether I was able to understand it if the teacher turned around and I wasn't able to see her face.

P3 — At school, I used only English. I was motivated to build relationships with other kids, and the complexity of what I wanted to communicate made it necessary to use more complex syntax. I do remember that after eight months, I was confident communicating in English. So, I must have been unsure before that.

P4 — You have words, and you try to communicate. That's when syntax comes.

F. Multiple Separate Systems

All four participants answered that there are the same number of separate communication systems as the number of languages they can speak. One pointed out that different languages have different roles. Another pointed out that although she is a complete bilingual, there is still a difference in terms of how natural these two languages are.

P1 — Like I said, each language that I can speak has a different role to play. I use Vietnamese when I talk about metaphysical things, such as love and beauty. I use English for physical things, such as what I want. I use Spanish mainly for success. I read, watched movies, talked to people, sang to myself in the shower, and tried not to be intimidated to improve my speech. Caring and respecting the other are important in listening.

P2 — Since Korean is my first language, although it is easier for me to read and write in English, Korean is more instinctive and automatic. I know [what is] right or wrong without thinking. English is relatively automatic as well, but sometimes, I have to think it through. There are both cases in which I intentionally switch languages and in which I subconsciously switch languages. When I am speaking Korean and can't come up with a certain word, I switch to English from there. I sometimes conjugate Korean in English ways. I also sometimes put Korean words in English syntax, and vice versa. When I was asked to translate an English passage into Korean, I was able to understand it in English without translation. When I translated it, I had to flip over my system. So, I think I have two independent systems. Korean is my core natural language. I can feel [what is] right or wrong. English, I learned and reason with.

P3 — Although they cross over each other, I think I have two separate systems. When I do translations, I sometimes forget which language it was. Also, although I did all my schooling in English, I somehow know the Spanish equivalent of intelligent expressions I learned in English. It is like my Spanish is keeping up with my English.

P4 — I have three communication boxes. I always intentionally switch my three languages.

VI. INTERPRETATION

A. The Reason Children Can Master a Language More Easily

The answers obtained seem to affirm what Abe found with regard to near-native speakers. Children seem able to absorb information they are exposed to. They take it all without even thinking, while adults filter it. In addition, embarrassment plays a negative role in adults who are learning a language, while children do not even know that they have made a mistake. Further studies need to be undertaken to determine whether the difference between children and adults in terms of the number of new items introduced at a time plays a negative role in adults who are learning a language.

B. The Necessity of Grammar

The fact that two subjects answered that they mastered English without grammar rules at all seems to indicate that it is possible to master oral communication without knowing grammar rules. Considering that the rules themselves are not necessary and that one participant maintained that learning grammar accelerates language learning, it seems possible that practical rules are better than prescriptive rules in regard to helping learners master oral communication.

C. Imitation of Oral Input and Its Continuation

Based on the answers obtained, it seems that the imitation of oral input is not done intentionally, especially when the language is learned in childhood, for although none of the four study participants denied it, they did not emphasize it either. Rather, the key issues in their mastery of oral communication were visual cues, such as body language and facial expressions, and a strong desire to communicate and establish relationships with other children without even knowing proper words. It was sometimes difficult to decide whether the understanding of communication was dependent on visual cues or linguistic cues, indicating the multidimensional nature of oral communication, especially in the initial stages. It was also interesting to note that three of the participants received positive support from the people around them—such as private lessons given by their relatives outside of school—to establish their bilingualism.

D. The Meaning of Language Is the Situation

All four participants agreed with the idea that they must figure out the meaning of the language within the context. This supports Abe's stance that the meaning of language is to be found in the situation in which it is used. The situation plays an important role in understanding language; one subject pointed out that when she was in a new environment, it was more difficult to understand what was happening.

E. Short Phrases in the Initial Stages

Most of the participants seemed to agree that using short phrases in the initial stages was better. One participant pointed out that when the number of words increased, it was instantly possible to put more words into one utterance. However, another participant emphasized the importance of being accustomed to whole expressions—as opposed to bits and pieces—being used in natural settings. Because this is such a critical issue in SLA, it should be further examined to determine whether the use of shorter phrases is more effective in the initial stages.

F. New Structures in an Ordered Sequence

It was difficult to identify the concrete steps in mastering syntax, as it is a subconscious process. However, two subjects affirmed that there was possibly a time when they were not sure whether they were able to communicate. Based on this, it seems unlikely that only those utterances will occur, which in some way reflect syntactic rules of the second language. For if only those utterances had occurred, they would have been sure of their ability to communicate. Thus, the results do not seem to support Felix (1977). This issue must be further examined to obtain more detailed information [4].

G. Separate Communication Systems

It is maintained that bilinguals feel that there are multiple separate communication systems. While there are some aspects indicating that each system crosses over unconsciously, there are occasions when the participants intentionally switch language systems. Thus, the study results refute the part of Abe's hypothesis that indicates the unification of two language systems and affirms the part of his hypothesis that maintains that the two systems merge. Most of the study participants accepted the idea that different languages have different roles. One participant implied that he also changes his personality when he changes the language he speaks. Another stated that although they can feel what is right or wrong in their mother tongue, they sometimes need to think this through in their second language, indicating that there is a difference between the two languages in terms of how natural they are.

VII. CONCLUSION

Children develop bilingualism unintentionally and without learning grammar rules, as their method entails absorbing information to which they are exposed. In terms of developing listening comprehension skills, the meaning of language is found in the situation in which it is used. Thus, visual cues, such as a speaker's body language and facial expressions, play a crucial role in understanding oral information. In terms of speech development, a strong desire to communicate and establish relationships with other children, without knowing proper words, is considered to be key.

Once they develop a bilingual system, it is believed that they have two separate communication systems. Although the two occasionally cross over, they usually intentionally choose which language they are going to communicate in. Each language has a different role to play in their lives. While they can feel what is right or wrong in their native language, they occasionally need to reason this out in their second language despite its relative automatism.

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