Language Acquisition in Bilinguals

Introduction

Bilingualism, the ability to use two languages, often sparks interest in how children develop proficiency in multiple languages. Language acquisition in bilinguals is a complex process influenced by cognitive, social, and biological factors. De Houwer's (2009) book, *An Introduction to Bilingual Development*, provides a comprehensive understanding of how children acquire two languages simultaneously, addressing the stages of language development and the role of critical periods in language learning.

Stages of Language Development

1. Pre-linguistic Stage (0-12 months)

Bilingual children, like monolingual children, pass through a pre-linguistic stage, where they begin to recognize sounds. Exposure to two languages from birth enables infants to differentiate between the sounds of both languages. Research shows that infants can discern the phonological systems of different languages by six months. During this stage, bilingual infants receive crucial input from their environment, which lays the foundation for future language learning. This exposure is vital as it helps develop the auditory mechanisms that enable infants to process and distinguish linguistic sounds, facilitating further language development in both languages.

2. Babbling Stage (6-12 months)

Bilingual children begin to babble in a way that reflects the phonetic characteristics of both languages they are exposed to. Babbling in bilingual children does not show a preference for one language over the other, and the phonemes (sound units)

used in both languages start to appear. For example, a child growing up in a Spanish-English household may produce sounds like "ba" and "pa," present in both languages. While this stage is universal for all language learners, bilingual children start to build a phonetic repertoire from two language systems, rather than one, at this point.

3. One-word Stage (12-18 months)

In this stage, bilingual children begin to produce single words, such as "mama" or "papa," that are drawn from either language. Importantly, bilingual children may exhibit "code-mixing," where they use words from both languages in a single utterance. This phenomenon reflects their simultaneous engagement with two language systems. However, it is not a sign of confusion; rather, it shows that the child has access to both vocabularies and is beginning to understand when and how to use them. Studies show that bilingual children tend to use words from the language that is dominant in their immediate environment, but they are still developing proficiency in both languages.

4. Two-word Stage (18-24 months)

Bilingual children enter the two-word stage where they start combining words to form simple sentences, such as "want milk" or "go home." Code-switching, the practice of alternating between two languages, becomes more frequent during this stage. For example, a bilingual child might say, "Quiero juice" ("I want juice"), blending Spanish and English in one sentence. Bilingual children demonstrate an ability to mix elements from both languages, but this is usually driven by social context and cognitive needs. They are building grammatical structures in both languages, though it might appear slower compared to monolingual peers.

5. Multi-word Stage (24-30 months)

As children move into the multi-word stage, they begin to form more complex sentences and show better mastery of grammatical rules in both languages. At this point, bilingual children may still mix languages within a sentence or conversation, but they are more likely to keep them separate depending on the context or interlocutor. For instance, they may speak one language with their parents and another at daycare. Studies show that, while bilingual children may appear to have a smaller vocabulary in each language compared to monolinguals, their total linguistic capacity across both languages is often comparable or greater.

6. Complex Sentences (30+ months)

By the age of three, bilingual children typically begin forming complex sentences and refining their use of both languages. Their ability to understand and produce language in a context-appropriate manner becomes more sophisticated. Code-switching becomes more strategic and less random, as bilingual children learn to switch languages based on who they are speaking to, the topic of conversation, or the social setting. They also start developing meta-linguistic awareness, which is the ability to reflect on and manipulate language structures. This cognitive skill is heightened in bilingual individuals because of their constant engagement with two language systems.

The Critical Period Hypothesis

The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) is a widely discussed theory in the field of language acquisition. Proposed by Eric Lenneberg in 1967, the CPH suggests that there is a biologically determined window of time during which language acquisition occurs most easily and effectively. This period typically spans from early infancy to puberty. According to the CPH, once this critical period has

passed, acquiring a new language, particularly achieving native-like proficiency, becomes significantly more difficult.

Bilingualism and the Critical Period

For bilingual individuals, the CPH is particularly relevant, as it helps explain why early exposure to two languages leads to better linguistic outcomes. Research supports the idea that children exposed to two languages from birth are more likely to achieve native-like fluency in both languages compared to individuals who learn a second language later in life. Bilingual children are able to pick up the phonological, syntactic, and grammatical features of both languages with greater ease, as their brains are more plastic during the critical period. This plasticity allows for the formation of neural pathways that facilitate the acquisition of multiple languages simultaneously.

Second Language Acquisition after the Critical Period

While the CPH is most often discussed in relation to first language acquisition, it also applies to second language acquisition (SLA). Adults who attempt to learn a second language often face greater challenges in achieving native-like pronunciation and fluency. However, they are still capable of becoming highly proficient in the language, especially if they are motivated and receive adequate exposure and practice. Studies suggest that while younger learners have an advantage in acquiring a second language due to the critical period, older learners may excel in learning vocabulary and applying explicit learning strategies that younger learners do not yet possess.

Evidence Supporting the Critical Period Hypothesis

Multiple studies have provided evidence in support of the CPH, particularly regarding phonological development. Bilingual children exposed to two languages

before the age of five generally develop native-like pronunciation in both languages. In contrast, individuals who begin learning a second language after the critical period often retain a foreign accent, even if they are able to master other aspects of the language. This suggests that phonological development may be particularly sensitive to age-related effects, while other components of language, such as grammar and vocabulary, may be less constrained by the critical period.

Challenges to the Critical Period Hypothesis

Despite its widespread acceptance, the CPH is not without its critics. Some researchers argue that language acquisition is not strictly limited to a critical period and that with sufficient exposure, motivation, and practice, individuals can learn languages at any age. Others point to cases of late bilingualism, where individuals achieve near-native proficiency despite learning a second language later in life. These exceptions suggest that while the CPH may hold true for certain aspects of language acquisition, it is not an absolute rule. Moreover, the role of social and environmental factors in language learning should not be overlooked.

Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Bilingualism

Sociolinguistics examines the role of social factors, such as culture, identity, and social interaction, in language use and development. Bilingualism is a sociolinguistic phenomenon, as it often arises in response to specific social and cultural contexts. Understanding how bilingual individuals navigate different social environments is crucial to understanding their language development.

Code-switching and Social Identity

One of the most studied sociolinguistic aspects of bilingualism is code-switching, the practice of alternating between two languages within a conversation. Code-switching is not merely a sign of linguistic confusion but is often used strategically

to reflect social identity and group membership. Bilingual individuals may switch languages to signal solidarity with a particular group, assert their cultural identity, or adapt to the social norms of their environment. For example, a bilingual speaker may use one language with family members and another in professional settings, depending on the social expectations of each context.

Diglossia

Diglossia is another sociolinguistic phenomenon relevant to bilingualism. It refers to a situation where two languages or language varieties are used in different social domains within the same community. One language (the "high" variety) is typically associated with formal, official, or prestigious contexts, while the other (the "low" variety) is used in informal or everyday settings. For example, in Arabic-speaking countries, Modern Standard Arabic is used in formal writing and media, while local dialects are spoken in daily conversation. Bilingual individuals often navigate diglossic environments by adjusting their language use depending on the social situation.

Conclusion

Language acquisition in bilinguals is a dynamic process that involves multiple stages of development and is influenced by both cognitive and social factors. From early infancy through the critical period, bilingual children build proficiency in two languages, often using code-switching and other strategies to navigate their social environments. The Critical Period Hypothesis provides valuable insights into the timing and mechanisms of language learning, while sociolinguistic perspectives help explain how bilingual individuals use language to construct social identity and maintain cultural connections. De Houwer's (2009) *An Introduction to Bilingual*

Development serves as an essential resource for understanding these complex processes.

Questions

1. What are the key stages of language development in bilingual children, and how do they compare to monolingual children?
2. How does code-switching reflect a bilingual child's cognitive and linguistic development?
3. What role does the pre-linguistic stage play in the development of bilingualism?
4. How does the Critical Period Hypothesis apply to bilingual language acquisition?
5. Why do bilingual children sometimes mix languages within a single sentence or conversation?
6. How does early exposure to two languages influence a child's phonological development?
7. In what ways does sociolinguistic context influence bilingual language development?
8. What evidence supports the Critical Period Hypothesis in the context of bilingualism?
9. How does diglossia affect language use among bilingual individuals?
10. What challenges exist in applying the Critical Period Hypothesis to second language acquisition in adults?

Main Reference:

- De Houwer, A. (2009). An introduction to bilingual development. Multilingual Matters.