
LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND LATE-TALKERS

Eliza Claudia Filimon, Assist. Prof., Phd, West University of Timișoara

Abstract: The object of the current study is a theoretical and practical approach to the study of speech development and language acquisition in preschool years. The questions this paper answers relate to the importance of bilingualism to the cognitive development of infants, as well as the key role it plays in manifestations of late-talking. The practical advice put forward is meant to clarify various stages parents and teachers need to follow in order to assist young children in their baby steps to speech improvement and a successful bilingual development.

Keywords: cognitive development, language acquisition, language learning, late-talkers.

In the first five years of life, children develop their communication skills enormously, from crying to first syllables, then to first words, eventually progressing to full, grammatically correct sentences. Parents and educators are well aware of the importance of providing careful guidance throughout this complex process of the child's social and linguistic evolution throughout day-to-day interactions. The greater challenges arise if a child has a special need, and this study focuses on language delay and bilingualism as major factor.

No two children are alike in the way they develop their language skills and all the persons involved in early education can bring arguments for or against second language acquisition at young ages. If a child learns a new language before the age of three, along with his/her native language, the process is called **simultaneous bilingualism**, while any new language introduced after the age of three exposes the child to a different learning process, called **sequential bilingualism**. The major benefits of early exposure to a second language, such as native-like pronunciation and ease of self-expression, are visible later on, whereas possible drawbacks include 'expressive language delay' (Kessler, 1984:32).

The two common ways of exposure to a second language before the child is three, i.e. simultaneous bilingualism, relate to the parents' use of the two languages, with either a "one-to-one" situation, where one parent addresses the child in one language only, or a "two-to-two" case, where both parents use both languages, or they use one language, while an early care-giver of the child uses the other language. The first situation is recommended, as it helps the child separate the two languages faster throughout the process of language acquisition during its three stages: mixing of languages, separation of languages and prevalent use of one language.

1. If infants are exposed to two languages, they tend to mix them into one system, sometimes using syllables from a certain word in one language and adding them to the same word in the other language. In other cases, they use words from both languages in the same sentence, choosing the word that is easier to pronounce or shorter to refer to an object.
2. The child starts to differentiate between the words belonging to the same language around two and a half years old, and addresses people in the language they usually

speak. The notable difference between bilingual children and those who only speak one language before the age of three is the former's acquisition of language chunks and full sentences in the second language, compared to the latter's imitation and learning of one word denotatives at a time.

3. One language becomes dominant if it is used more often than the other, as it usually happens, but the child will express him/herself fluently in both languages by the age of seven.

Turning to the situation of sequential bilingualism, it should be noted that by the age of three, children are already familiar with the basic rules of their mother tongue, and are cognitively more mature than a child under the age of three who is learning two languages at the same time. In about three months the child will be able to understand the second language, two year later s/he will be able to have a conversation, and in about six years of exposure to the second language the child will think in the second language.

At the beginning of sequential bilingualism some children will insist on using their first language while others stop using it upon realizing it does not cover all communicative necessities they have. The period of silence may last longer in some cases, up to six months, and is necessary for the child to build up knowledge of the new language before attempting to use it. The use of non-verbal communication will compensate for the lack of speech especially in game-like situations, making requests or getting attention. However, when these do not prove sufficient, the child will start using key words or whole memorized phrases in order to survive social situations. Once the child becomes confident in his/her ability to make him/herself understood in the second language, new sentences emerge, combining newly assimilated words and ready-made phrases, grammatically incorrect at first.

Parents and care-givers must be highly sensitive to the child's personality. Sociable children look for company and will be more motivated to learn the new language in order to be fully engaged in social interactions, whereas children who prefer to play alone will take more time before they express themselves confidently in the second language.

The major drawbacks of over-correction at this stage will impact on the child's level of confidence and ease of using the second language. Risk-takers will venture and communicate despite numerous mistakes at this stage, but still fell frustrated upon being corrected at every language mistake they make. The rule followed in speech-language pathology is to correct the language mistake every three times, so if a child make the same grammar mistake it is wise to use indirect correction methods, such as repeating the correct phrase yourself in a communicative situation, two times before interrupting the social interaction and drawing the child's attention to the mistake itself.

Positive interaction is essential for the child's development and it includes a thorough consideration of the child's personality along with creative environment that supports language learning and underlies internal motivation (Honig, 2002). A child will find it frustrating to simply imitate a new word just because he/she is asked to do so by an adult; it is best to introduce the new word in a playful manner in an interactive situation and show the child how much fun learning a word in a second language can be.

Over time, children develop their own style of interaction and conversation, in relation to important adults in their life at first and later during communication with peers. If parents and educators understand the child's conversational style, they will be able to help him/her become a better communicator. In order to reflect on the conversational style of a child, one has to pay attention to how easily a child initiates interaction and how readily a child responds.

1. The **sociable children** constantly initiate and respond mainly to draw attention to themselves, some showing preference for adults, others being more sociable around children of their age. A child may be sociable even if language-delayed, and show interest in communication, despite being less socially mature.
2. The **reluctant children** are mostly outside the group and rarely initiate. It takes longer for such a child to feel comfortable with second language use, and usually interaction with adults is preferred to playing with peers. If other children make an effort to communicate with a reluctant child he/she will respond most of the time.
3. The **independent children** will often play alone and appear uninterested in interacting with adults or peers. Initiation occurs more often than response to group activities, because this is a stage during which children want to do everything on their own and be the boss.
4. The **passive children** show little interest in what is going on around them, rarely responding or initiating. If there is no associated developmental delay, constant patience and insistence will help them engage more.

As educators or teachers, it is important to take a moment and realize that we interact differently with children depending not only on the teaching situation but also on the conversational style of the child. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the children who get most of our attention are the sociable ones, because they demand our attention in an interactive and engaging way. Children who are passive or reluctant to communicate will benefit less from our attention unless we help them change their role as communicators. Some teacher roles we may identify in our teaching activity have a stronger impact on children's behavior as language learners, other roles may simply bring no benefits. But being a teacher is all about adapting ourselves to the teaching environment in view of promoting successful learning.

1. The teacher as **director**

Such a teacher maintains tight control over the children's activities, from asking questions to giving game directions. The activities run smoothly, but children have no initiative and do not feel they are expected to take on the leading role at all, just to respond as instructed. Learners need the teacher to take control of activities, but we should not stay in this role most of the time.

2. The teacher as **entertainer**

In this case, the teacher has a playful attitude and talks to engage the children as much as possible. There is nothing wrong with keeping the learners entertained, especially if they belong to the passive or reluctant categories, as the main purpose is to get a reaction from

them. However, in the long term, they have little chance of initiating, not to mention room for adequate response.

3. The teacher as **timekeeper**

Busy as school schedules are nowadays, this role teachers often play is somewhat understandable. We rush through teaching activities in order to keep up with the national curriculum, and pay little attention to learners' individual rhythm of language acquisition. The result of such behaviour is limited interaction and artificial response.

4. The **passive** teacher

In such a role, teachers keep silent throughout most of the activities, allowing learners to initiate and cooperate. Independent learners feel comfortable with the freedom of expression such teachers allow, but the other categories of communicators need teacher response to strengthen their feeling of reassurance.

5. The teacher as **cheerleader**

Praise and verbal appreciation are the aces up this teacher's sleeve. Every time a child accomplishes a task, large or small, positive reinforcement follows, and passive or reluctant communicators feel encouraged to initiate and respond. The disadvantages of overusing praise are the learner's growing dependence on it, on the one hand, and the difficulty of the learner to carry on the communicative activity after the teacher's appreciation is expressed, because the learner feels that as a signal of having successfully completed the activity.

6. The teacher as **partner**

Attentive to the needs of each child and tuned in to each learner's abilities, such a teacher takes part in interactions and allows children to respond to her/him and to the other children. Given enough time to respond and sufficiently encouraged, all learners progress easily to being better communicators.

By far the best role a teacher can adopt in promoting communication in a second language is that of responsive partner. Some teachers, however, find it difficult to let go of the lead and give up control of the activity to build up on the children's interests. Teaching is no longer understood as filling learner's brains with information, but as flexible support for individual learners, according to their conversational styles and personalities.

Children with language delay need **sustained encouragement** as they express themselves verbally, and, given the opportunity to initiate and respond, they will gain self-confidence in their ability to talk (Tomlinson, 1985). It is our task, as teachers, to stimulate their desire to participate in verbal exchanges through activities which do not create pressure on them. Firing questions at late-talkers or asking them to say something will not work. Children will differentiate between real interaction and pseudo-interaction, and will talk even less and refuse to engage in our word-imitation game.

Close observation is another tool that creates opportunities for verbal expression. Children who do not talk much, either due to language delay, bilingualism or passive conversation style, will definitely use non-verbal language, so our task is to take the focus off listening to them and start watching them during play, picking up cues from their behaviour.

Waiting is also necessary as it gives the child the chance to both respond and initiate. We, adults often ask a question and give the answer ourselves, sometimes even unaware of the effect this has on the late-talker or reluctant communicator. Even if we may feel helpful upon supplying the answer one second after popping a question, as studies of adult-child interaction patterns show, we in fact suppress any desire to respond on the part of the child. A child definitely needs more than one second to process the question and provide a response. The only behaviour we thus encourage in children is that of quick responses, which is not typical of reflective or analytical children. Teachers should allow at least five seconds of silence and adopt an expectant look, eye-level with the child, in order to encourage verbal expression.

In early childhood settings, teachers and parents are responsible for creating communicative environments to promote language learning. The complexity of child-adult interaction cannot be fully covered with reference to language acquisition solely, but the foundation of any fruitful communication includes the adults' realistic assessment of their style as educators, before and along close observation of each child's personality and mode of self-expression. This is the first step towards enjoyment of second language learning!

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Honig, A. 2002. *Secure Relationships: Nurturing Infant Attachment in Early Care Settings*. Washington:NAEYC.
- Kessler, C. 1984. *Language Acquisition in Bilingual Children*. In N. Miller. (Ed.). *Bilingualism and Language Disability: Assessment and Remediation*. (pp. 26-54). San Diego: College Hill Press.
- Tomlinson-Keasy, C. 1985. *Child Development. Psychological, Sociocultural and Biological Factors*. Homewood:The Dorsey Press.