



DEVELOPING BILINGUALISM IN TODDLERS THROUGH SPEAKING DRILLS (LISTENING, IMITATION AND REPETITION)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores different types of bilingualism and examines how bilingualism can be fostered in children through listening, imitation and repetition. In today's globalized world, bilingualism has gained such professional significance that there is an increasing need to introduce it to even children from an early age. However, for toddlers who have not yet developed speaking skills, this process can be challenging. Nevertheless, with the implementation of appropriate methods and approaches, it is attainable. Among these methods, speaking drills—incorporating listening, imitation, and repetition—are the most effective for toddlers. Engaging parents and other adults in this process enhances the effectiveness of dual language acquisition in young children.

Throughout the last century, bilingualism has gained more popularity and recognition, although it has existed for thousands of years since early human societies. From the very beginning of early civilizations like Egypt, Greece and Rome, where people could speak another language besides their own one because of trade, migration and conquest, bilingualism existed. During that period, though, the importance of bilingualism has been neglected because there has been more focus on practical necessities of life of humans. However in the late XX and XXI centuries, bilingualism gained more popularity due to globalization, international commerce and the increasing importance of English as a global language. Today, bilingualism is a commonly observed phenomenon throughout the world, in particular, in multilingual countries, and widely acknowledged for cognitive and professional benefits. Additionally, not only adults but also young people are being encouraged to be bilingual from the early childhood. Even some research suggests that cognitive flexibility and problem-solving skills are better developed in toddlers who are exposed to bilingual environments from an early age rather than later in life.

There are several various types of bilinguals. First of all, for this reason, we need to clarify the basis for ascertaining bilingualism and what exactly the term stands for. The generally accepted term of bilingualism describes a psychological state in which an individual has competence in two languages. To be precise, this refers to the ability to use two languages proficiently in both spoken and written communication. The next important aspect to consider is the types of bilingualism based on the timing of language acquisition. According to acquisition timing, bilinguals are generally divided into two main groups: simultaneous and

sequential. Simultaneous bilingualism occurs when a child learns two languages from birth in a natural environment where both languages are regularly spoken. The two languages usually have the same function. In this type of bilingualism, the child is exposed to both languages from birth or from a few months after the birth. According to McLaughlin (1995), simultaneous bilingualism can occur at any age less than a cut-off age of three years. The infants' parents, siblings or some adults in the surrounding environment of the infants speak the languages interactively during the day. As a result of participation in bilingual interaction, the infant acquires the primary aspects of the two languages. Furthermore from a linguistic perspective, the concept of simultaneous bilingualism presupposes that a speaker has acquired two different languages as a native mother tongue. In other words, this category of bilingualism begins before the child's first language is fully established.

In contrast to this, successive acquisition occurs when the first language is already established, and then another language is acquired. Because of this sequential process, successive acquisition is also called sequential bilingualism in some linguistic studies. In this case, the first and second languages can be clearly differentiated and the added language is learned as a second language. Furthermore, compared to simultaneous bilingualism that occurs within the first year of life, the sequential acquisition of the second language can occur at any age. However in this instance, since the native language of bilingual speakers is their dominant language and used more frequently, the second language that is acquired later usually becomes weaker.

Liddicoat (1991) criticizes simultaneous bilingualism in his article, stating: "Simultaneous acquisition of two languages is not necessarily superior to successive acquisition and both patterns of acquisition can lead to bilingual competence. A child's bilingual ability does not so much depend on how early a language is introduced as on other factors such as the relative prestige of the languages, cultural factors and opportunities for use. For example, a child who acquires two languages simultaneously may lose one of those languages when contact with that language is lost whereas a child who has acquired two languages successively but has continued contact with both languages may become a balanced bilingual". However I do not concur with this perspective due to several substantiated reasons. As I am of the view that teaching children two languages earlier, in particular, in their toddler years is more feasible and more effective for the later life.

The main counterpoint to this stance is the notion that early years of life serve as a foundational stage for the child's intellectual, emotional and social growth. Masaru Ibuka, in his book (1971), emphasizes the profound significance of the first three years in shaping the child's overall development. He refers to this phase as a "Critical period" and points out that during this time, the child's brain is exceptionally adaptable and highly responsive to learning. To be precise, the "Critical period" is a phase of rapid neural development, during which the acquisition of fundamental skills significantly shapes a child's lifelong trajectory. Consequently, this period presents an optimal opportunity for targeted educational interventions that lay the foundation for long-term success.

Ibuka underscores the development of the brain structure until the age of three stating that the brain of a newborn baby is like a blank sheet of paper. It is because the human brain consists of around 1.4 billion cells, but in newborns, most of these cells are not yet fully developed. As time passes, special neuronal networks (bridge-like connections) form between brain cells. When comparing the brain of a newborn with that of an adult, it becomes evident that the formation of connections between brain cells plays a significant role in brain development. These bridges help neurons connect with one another. The period when neural connections form most actively is from birth to three years old. During this time, 70-80% of these connections are established. As these connections form, the brain's capabilities expand. To be more exact, in the first six months after birth, a child's brain potential reaches 50% of its full capacity. By the age of three, it reaches 80% of its potential. Furthermore, after the age of

four, other parts of the brain begin to activate and form new connections. Therefore, the “Critical period” serves as a fundamental stage in shaping child’s overall development.

Another significant counterargument to the aforementioned claim is the real example from Ibuka’s personal life. In one of the chapters of his book, he writes that if skills are not acquired in childhood, it is impossible to master them later. He says that he speaks English well, though with some errors. In contrast, his neighbor’s child, who is only one year and two months old, demonstrates even better fluency in English. He connects this disparity to the fact that he acquired English at the secondary school level (sequential bilingualism). Meanwhile, the child whose native language was Japanese acquired English, initially through listening and later by communicating with an English-speaking woman (simultaneous bilingualism).

Teaching two languages to a child who is between the ages of one and three can be successfully accomplished in real life today. There are diverse methods for developing dual language acquisition in children. However, since they are still toddler-aged, speaking-based learning is the most effective method. This is because children are more likely to develop early speech and communication skills during these years. A more in-depth analysis shows that babies up to 12 months old recognize familiar voices and respond to them with babbling or cooing sounds. Between 10 and 12 months, their first words begin to emerge. When they become a toddler, approximately 12-18 months old, they start using five to twenty words meaningfully. At this stage, it is the optimal period for parents to teach them the languages intended for bilingual acquisition. Parents or other adults around the toddler speak the multiple languages both to the child and in their interactions with each other. Consequently, the child receives their first input about languages from their parents through listening. Between 18 and 24 months, when children begin combining two words, they imitate what they hear from adults. Furthermore, by this time, their vocabulary has already expanded to fifty or more words.

The next stage occurs in the final years of toddlerhood. When the child reaches two to three years old, their language skills become more advanced. At this point, they are able to form short sentences of three to five words and understand simple questions. Additionally, their vocabulary capacity has increased to 200 or more words. Until this point if the child has developed linguistic skills in the brain primarily through listening, from now on, they will continue this process through repetition and imitation. While imitation enables toddlers to acquire the languages by mimicking words or expressions used by adults, repetition helps them with speech development by allowing them to hear and practise the words multiple times. Since parents and other adults often switch between two languages, children naturally begin to learn both.

In conclusion, bilingualism offers numerous advantages in today's world, ranging from better career opportunities to improved communication skills and a broader worldview. It has become so significant that even young children are being introduced to multiple languages from an early age. Given that a child is still in the early stages of development, teaching two languages before they begin speaking can be highly effective. Various examples are provided above to support this argument. Moreover, one of the most effective methods for fostering bilingualism in toddlers who have not yet developed speech is the use of speaking drills which include listening, imitation and repetition. As encouraging language development from early childhood, with the support of parents and other adults, plays a crucial role in shaping a child’s linguistic abilities. Additionally, children exposed to simultaneous bilingualism from an early age are more likely to attain native-like proficiency in both languages, providing them with long-term cognitive and professional benefits. This is also one of the benefits for a child to integrate successfully into society in adulthood.

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