

Bilingualism: Asset Or Handicap

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Abstract: Since the early 1930s, the researchers have been investigating bilingualism. In this regard, they are divided into two groups, the one that considers that bilingualism has negative effects on bilinguals, while the other direction appears in favor of bilingualism. This paper discusses the nature of bilingualism in terms of its positive and negative effects on intellectual development. Furthermore, it tries to draw conclusion about the effects of bilingualism on educational development.

Key words: genuine bilingualism, pseudo-bilingualism, monolingualism, concept formation, cognitive abilities, intellectual development

Around many linguistic debates on bilingualism, some linguists consider it as an asset that improves cognitive functions of the brain while some other scholars consider it to be a factor that hinders language development. According to Thompson (1952), any child that is raised in a bilingual environment is handicapped in language development. Contrastingly, Peal and Lambert (1962) gives an example of a French-English bilingual youngster in Montreal enjoying advantages of which a monolingual is deprived. Intellectually, his language experience in two languages gave him a mental flexibility, a more superior conceptualization and more diverse set of mental abilities. Unlikely, a monolingual has a unified structure that he must use for different mental activities. On one hand, a number of linguistic case studies embrace advantages of learning two or more languages simultaneously in infancy. Commenting on his two bilingual daughters, Werner Leopold (1949) stated that both of the girls were aware of two languages and by the age of three these two languages developed as two different systems in the daughters. Leopold considered his daughters' bilingualism as an asset that supported their mental development noticing no sign of language interference. Leopold's conclusion on bilingualism stating children focus on "content rather than on form" supported claims by a Russian psychologist, Vygotsky (1932/1962) who suggested that bilingualism accelerates abstract thinking by freeing child's mind from concreteness.

On the other hand, a large body of psychological and educational studies contradicted these linguistic case studies promoting "language handicap" in bilingual children. In comparison with monolinguals, bilingual children demonstrated poorer linguistic abilities among which poorer vocabulary, deficient articulation, lower writing standards and more grammatical mistakes. For a long time, early childhood bilingualism was regarded as disadvantage since they performed lower than monolinguals on test such as mathematical competence. However, some researchers such as Cummins (1973) and Diaz (1976) regarded these findings totally unreliable because of weak empirical methodology.

In the early 1960s, studies on bilingualism took another turn with Peal and Lambert (1962) realizing possible advantages of bilingualism. They associated negative findings of studies with researchers' failure to distinguish "pseudo-bilinguals" from truly bilinguals. "The pseudo-bilingual knows one language much better than the other, and does not use his second language in communication. The true bilingual masters both at an early age and has facility with both as means of communication". Peal and Lambert believed that pseudo-bilingualism may hinder intellectual development, while genuine bilingualism is a real advantage for child's intellectual development.

A study by Peal and Lambert (1962) composing 164 children in the final sample, out of which 75 monolinguals and 89 (genuine) bilinguals administered three different tests to participants:

Lavoie-Larendau (1960) Group Test of General Intelligence with modifications;

the Raven's Colored Progressive Matrices (intelligence test for nonverbal abilities);

and a French version of selected subtests of the Thurstone and Thurstone (1954) Primary Mental Abilities test.

In contrary to the findings of psychological studies, the study by Peal and Lambert showed that bilingual children performed significantly better in cognitive tests showing higher levels both in verbal and non-verbal abilities. The test results showed that bilinguals were more advanced in concept formation or flexibility requiring cognitive tasks. The most striking effect of their study was that positive findings on bilingualism were replicated in the last two decades of the research.

Following Peal and Lambert, a number of researches came up with conclusions about positive effects of bilingualism. They concluded that bilingual children acquire superior cognitive abilities to their monolingual peers. The most important ones are listed below. Anita Ianco-Worrall (1972) in Saunders (1988) conducted a study with 4-9 year-old Afrikaans-English bilinguals in South Africa which proved that bilingual children are better in analyzing the language as an abstract system. Scott (1973) in Romaine (1989) discovered that English-Canadian learners who were learning French were much better than in creative thinking than monolinguals. A wide range of research found that bilinguals were superior in divergent thinking, creative imagination and concept formation.

As for educational development, a number of studies show that bilingual education has positive effects in all subjects including first and second language skills. Furthermore, bilingual education promotes academic achievement. However, it has not been supported with empirical findings.

Recently, researchers have tried to understand underlying reasons behind two opposing beliefs about positive and negative effects of bilingualism. McLaughlin (1978) argues that the main reason for difficulty is not associated with bilingualism, but with the fact that they are forced to acquire a second language. He further argues that other factors such as poor home environment, low socio-economic background of children, social parental status, conflicts in culture should also be taken into consideration while conducting a study. Even though recent studies are taking into consideration other preliminary factors such as age, status, degree of bilingualism, they are still failing to pay attention to educational background of bilingual and monolingual children.

In conclusion, it is still difficult to answer to the question "Is bilingualism advantage or disadvantage?" especially when it is connected with complex mental and psychological aspects.

Therefore, long-term studies with firm research methodologies are still needed to answer to this question.

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