

Early Childhood Bilingualism: The Myths, Truths, and Implications in English Language Learning in Pontianak

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article History</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Article Received 21st August 2019• Article Accepted 26th April 2020 <p>Keywords language acquisition bilingualism monolingual brain language impairment</p>	<p>The paper explicates the immediate concern of gaining a deeper insight of language acquisition in the early childhood bilingualism in the setting of Pontianak city, a multi-ethnic city located in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. It is written through descriptive method or library research to provide the readers, especially the parents and teachers with better insights into a basis for decision making about raising and educating children bilingually. The first part elaborates on four myths, namely the myth of the monolingual brain, the myth of time investment, the myth of bilingualism and language impairment; and the myth of minority language children. It is followed by the argumentative support by the experts in the fields based on the literature review. Next, discussions are presented as a whole, pointing out some of significant implications for parents and teachers. Finally, an overall conclusion of the paper coverage is provided.</p>

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, it has widely been acclaimed that in many communities around the world, competence in two, or more, languages are an issue of considerable personal, socio-cultural, economic, and political significance. For some, the issues surrounding bilingualism are viewed as problems to be overcome; for others, they seem to be challenges that, once mastered, benefit the individual, the community, and even the nation in which they live[1].

The need to know two or more languages is not a new discussion in the society, specifically in the English language learning classrooms. Quay and Montanari[2] argue that the value of learning additional languages has grown during the past 20 years as a result of globalisation in many aspects of our lives. For example, the development of the Internet and electronic communication devices has made global communication easy and commonplace.

Those who know multiple languages are rewarded by enhanced access to the enormous resources offered by the Internet. Ofelia and Wei[3] assert that globalisation of the world's economies and businesses has called attention to interdependencies and interconnectedness among the world's nations and enhanced opportunities for international travel, work, and interaction.

Ofelia and Wei[3] also add that English is undoubtedly the dominant global language of business, science, and tourism and, as a result, those who speak English can benefit from globalisation. However, English is not alone. Other languages are emerging as global languages along with English (e.g., Chinese and Arabic), and it is estimated that there are more second language speakers of English than native speakers[3]. This means that while monolingual native speakers of English are advantaged, they are not as advantaged as those who speak other languages along with English. Arguably, responsible and responsive education in any schools, and other English-speaking regions of the world, should include early, sustained, and high quality opportunities for students to acquire competence in other languages if graduates in these countries are to be competitive in the global market place and benefit personally from other opportunities afforded by globalisation.

Notwithstanding the personal, professional, and social advantages of bilingualism in the long run, fear and pessimism are often expressed about raising or educating children bilingually. These fear and pessimism are often founded on four myths as follows.

- (1) the myth of the monolingual brain;
- (2) the myth of time investment;
- (3) the myth of bilingualism and language impairment; and
- (4) the myth of minority language children.

These myths are important because they provide a basis for decision making about raising and educating children bilingually and, thus, it is important to elaborate these views scientifically.

The current paper will explicate each of these myths in the setting of Pontianak city, a multi-ethnic city located in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. The present paper is written to provide the readers, especially the parents and teachers with better insights into a basis for decision making about raising and educating children bilingually. It is systematically organised as follows. In the next paragraphs, The researcher discusses each of the myths with the argumentative support by the experts in the fields based on the literature review. Next, discussions are presented as a whole, pointing out some of significant implications for parents and teachers. Finally, an overall conclusion of the paper coverage is provided.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

a. The Myth of the Monolingual Brain

According to Romanowski[4], it is girls and women who tend to be monolingual in most traditional societies. This results from a fact that they are less exposed either through schooling, salaried labour, or migration to the national language, than their sons, brothers or husbands. In the context of Pontianak city, some children start out as monolingual, and begin to acquire a second language sometime in early childhood, for example, through interactions outside the home, and thus can be said to be acquiring a second language. Wiseheart[5] and Carrillo[6] point out that monolingualism results from an impoverished environment in which an opportunity to exhaust the potential of the language faculty is not fully developed. The most frequently discussed concern is

that the child is exposed to more than one language during early developmental phases might be confused linguistically, cognitively, emotionally, and possibly even morally.

Specifically, parents who raise their children bilingually or think about raising them bilingually are often concerned that children exposed to parents who use both languages will be confused and be unable to separate the two languages. The underlying concern is that this could, in turn, entail delays in development and possibly even incomplete development. Underlying these concerns is the belief that dual language learning in infancy places additional burdens on language development in comparison to the acquisition of a single language. Indeed, the one-parent one-language rule which advocates that each parent should use only their native language with the child is predicated on the belief that this will provide the child with explicit markers of separate languages, thereby reducing the burden of dual language learning and the possibility of confusion[4][7].

Viewed from a neuro-cognitive point of view, these fears can be interpreted to reflect a belief that infants' brains are essentially monolingual and that they treat early input in two languages as if it were a single language[4][5]. In fact, parents often cite code-mixing by their children as evidence that they may be confused. Wiseheart[5] asserts that Bilingual code-mixing is the use of features of both languages in the same utterance or stretch of conversation. The mixed features could be phonological (sounds), lexical (words), morpho-syntactic (word endings, word order, or function words), or pragmatic (conversational). Under the assumption that the brain is monolingual, it follows that children will mix up their languages when they talk.

Shortly, parents are not alone in these fears and beliefs about the monolingual brain. Bahra[8] and Verbeke[9] argue that it is common for professionals who work with bilingual children who are experiencing language or school-related problems to express similar concerns. Recent research on simultaneous bilingual acquisition paints quite a different picture. There is evidence from research indicating that bilingual acquisition is as natural as monolingual acquisition and that it is not an additional burden for children in comparison to the challenges that children learning one language face[4][10][11][12] [13].

b. The Myth of Time Investment

Another common belief about language learning (as observed in Pontianak city) is that the more time spent learning something, the greater one's competence. Mishra[1] claims that students who have spent more time in their current school have higher test scores, whereas disadvantaged students. This belief is fundamental to much of our educational system. The amount of time devoted to teaching specific subjects is a reflection of how important we think they are under the belief that more time spent teaching those subjects will result in higher levels of achievement. Starting early is another manifestation of the importance we attach to time investment. Mishra [1] adds that time is clearly important for L2 learning, and it is often the case, although not always, that students learn more when they have more exposure.

Quay and Montanari[2] note that time-on-task (a term which is manipulated to the use of the term 'time investment' in this paper) hypothesis assumes that success in L2 is positively related to the amount of contact with L2. However, Mishra[1] claims that while children clearly need some exposure to a language to learn it, research does not support a 'time-on-task' hypothesis predicting a correlation between the amount of exposure and degree of proficiency in L2. They[11] further says that it is important to consider critical factors such as quality of instruction, socioeconomic resources, and the amount of exposure to the majority language in everyday life. The length of time and eventual outcomes of L2 learning and L1 maintenance depend on many factors, particularly children's motivation to fit in and to communicate with peers who speak either language.

Additionally, Mishra[1] writes that research findings with respect to first and second language learning reveal that the relationship between time and learning outcomes is quite complex. Moreover, this view is supported by Carrillo[6] who points out that research shows that simultaneous bilinguals, despite the fact that they have approximately half as much exposure to each language as monolinguals, exhibit the same basic developmental patterns and at approximately the same age as monolingual children.

However, it has also been argued on logical grounds that bilingual first language learners will not acquire full functional competence in both languages if their exposure to one of them is below some

lower limit. Supporting this view, Javor[13] explains that native competence cannot be attained by mere exposure if the onset of acquisition happens after a certain age.

These results are important because they indicate that it is not simply amount of exposure but also quality of exposure that can influence children's language development. However, and at the same time, researchers have found little or no relationship between amount of exposure to English in immersion programs and participating students' levels of achievement in all aspects of English in the long run [2][8][9][12].

Additionally, there is growing research evidence that certain kinds of language skills are transferable from one language to the other in second language learners, evidence which can be perceived as the proof of the amount of time to be invested[5][10][13]. The best examples of this are skills related to reading and reading itself. A great deal of recent research on the acquisition of reading skills in a second language has shown that students who have well developed decoding skills in one language can transfer those skills to the other language. Similarly, students with well-developed skills for reading longer material, like stories and academic textbooks, can transfer those skills to another language, provided they know the oral form of that language.

c. The Myth of Bilingualism and Language Impairment

According to Mishra[1], scholars agree broadly that children have the capacity to learn more than one language. This view can also be applied to most children with specific learning impairments or low general intelligence. Researchers have found few differences between bilingual children with specific language impairment and their monolingual counterparts[4][5]. Bilingual children with speech-language impairment do not acquire language more slowly than monolingual children with speech-language impairment. Rather, they will show the same patterns of impairment in both languages.

In Pontianak city, children with language learning difficulties are often thought to be poor candidates for dual language learning on the assumption that learning two languages at the same time will put them at greater risk of language impairment than

learning one. Mishra[1] further explains that children with specific language impairment (SLI) have typical intelligence, sensory processing, and social-emotional behaviour, and no obvious neurological impairment. Children with SLI exhibit language that is delayed and below that of age-matched peers, but they are typical in other aspects of their development. It is thought that there is a genetic component to SLI because affected children are much more likely to have a close family relative who is also language impaired than unaffected children.

The available evidence concerning simultaneous dual language acquisition by children with language impairment indicates that they exhibit the same language-specific morpho-syntactic difficulties in each of their two languages as monolinguals and, as well, that their language impairment is of the same magnitude as that exhibited by monolingual children with SLI learning the same languages[4][5]. That is to say, the language learning difficulties of bilingual children do not appear to put them at greater risk of impairment than children with SLI who learn only one language. At the same time, these SLI bilingual children are bilingual within the limits of their learning ability.

A similar myth concerning children with language learning difficulties surrounds the inclusion of children with SLI in school programs. In this case, the myth is associated with the expectation that the language abilities that children acquire prior to coming to school are important foundations for success in school. This follows from the fact that much learning in school is mediated through language, and much of schooling focuses on language learning. Thus, students with well-developed first language skills, especially those related to literacy, are expected to be advantaged while students with poor first language skills are expected to face challenges that will result in their experiencing even more impoverished language skills than they would were they in a monolingual English program[4][5].

Ethically speaking, it could be considered unethical to include at-risk or impaired students if they are not likely to benefit from schools or, worse, if their learning difficulties are likely to be made worse. Conversely, it could be considered unethical to exclude at-risk or impaired students since to do so would arguably prevent them from having the

opportunity to acquire valuable language and cultural skills that could be of benefit in their future personal and professional lives. There are also legal and professional obligations associated with the inclusion in school programs of students who would be considered clinically impaired in language[11].

d. The Myth of Minority Language Students

Mishra[1] asserts that when minority and indigenous language children begin preschool or primary school, they must learn the language of the majority group in their region to fit in socially and succeed academically. He[1] additionally says that most important to this discussion, it is critical to distinguish among children who are members of a minority ethnolinguistic group (minority language children) versus a majority ethnolinguistic group (majority language children); and among those within each group who are learning bilingually from infancy versus those who have learned a single mother tongue and are learning a second or additional language later in childhood. Supporting this view, a linguistics phenomenon in Pontianak city shows that most minority language parents are eager to see their children succeed in school and the broader society. Most minority parents also want their children to learn L1 and to be proud of their cultural heritage.

In Pontianak city, it is widely believed that children who speak a minority language at home should begin to learn and use the majority language as quickly as possible in order to succeed in school and to integrate into mainstream culture. This belief is linked, in part, to the time investment myth, discussed earlier, which would argue that the sooner minority language children begin learning English, the better their English language skills will be. This belief is also linked to the notion that younger is better when it comes to learning second languages, or the critical period hypothesis. This point of view is often widely held not only by speakers of the majority language, but also by minority language parents who, as a result, feel that they have no options, except to discontinue or restrict use of the heritage language in the home in favour of English, though they may lack full competence in the majority language[4].

Like the myth of time investment, the link between success in majority language schools and minority language students' knowledge of a minority

language is more complex than commonly realised. On the one hand, competence in English upon school entry is likely to be an advantage for students who grow up in minority language homes, especially if they acquire advanced levels of competence in English, since they will have already acquired some proficiency in the language of instruction[1]. On the other hand, many minority language parents, especially recent immigrants, do not know English well and certainly are probably not able to read and write in English easily. This raises the possibility that the levels and kinds of English language skills that minority language children can acquire from parents who are not proficient speakers of English may not be sufficient to really prepare them for in school.

Mishra[1] then claims that numerous studies have found that there are positive correlations between certain components and aspects of reading English as a second language and minority language students' competence in the home language: phonological awareness, word and pseudo-word decoding, higher order vocabulary, reading comprehension, and certain oral language skills. Some studies indicate further that minority language students often draw on skills and knowledge linked to the home language to perform literacy tasks in English, arguably as a way to fill in gaps in their English competence prior to full mastery of the language[7][8][10].

In short, minority language students use the home language to walk into English literacy. This is particularly evident during the early stages of English acquisition, but is evident even at advanced stages when task demands are complex and challenging. However, not all minority language students capitalise on the home language in the service of reading and writing in English. Bahra[8] writes that good ELL readers apply the same skills and strategies when reading the home language and English and they see the home language as a tool for reading and writing in English, whereas poor ELL readers see the home language as a source of interference when reading and writing in English.

By implication, instruction that draws minority language students' attention to links between the home language and English could benefit all second language learners. While explanation for these findings are undoubtedly numerous and complex, there is one that seems plausible and straightforward. Minority language students who

receive initial instruction in school, in part at least, in the home language are more easily able to acquire literacy skills and academic knowledge than similar students in all-English programs because they are being instructed in a language they know. Students in English programs deal with the challenging issues of mastering English, namely acquiring new literacy and academic skills and integrating socially into a new environment. Arguably, as well, instruction in minority language students' home language is able to capitalise on the cross-linguistic transfer effects noted previously to expedite the acquisition of critical literacy skills in English[3].

III. METHODOLOGY

In this research, descriptive method or library research is applied to the problems of the research. This research is conducted by expressing the information from the available documents which is useful in the field of bilingualism.

The major aim of this research is to provide current information in the field of bilingualism in early childhood that will lead to promoting English language learning in Pontianak.

Within the timeframe of this library research, a complete descriptive study is not possibly conducted. Therefore, this research only concentrates on specific relevant issues. Based upon the aim of this research and the review of relevant literature, the following research questions are established to provide guidance for collecting applicable evidence.

1. What are the myths as well as the truths related to bilingualism in early childhood?
2. What are the implications in English language learning for parents and teachers when dealing with early childhood bilingualism?

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The current paper has significant implications for parents and teachers, especially those living in Pontianak city. The considerable body of research on simultaneous dual language acquisition indicates that learning two languages is as natural as learning one and that most children can acquire two languages simultaneously at the same rate and in the same way as monolingual children if they are given the right learning environment. In the next paragraphs, the discussion points are directed by the

concerns of language impairment, language exposure, minority language, and linguistic confusion.

According to Mishra[1], evidence on children with specific language impairment suggests that even these children can acquire functional competence in two languages at the same time, within the limits of their impairment. Therefore, children with specific language impairment living in families where knowing two, or more, languages is useful and important should be given every opportunity to acquire two languages. This would include children of immigrant parents and children in families in Pontianak city that speak an indigenous language. Whether or not parents decide to raise a child bilingually, whether the child has typical abilities for learning language or has impaired capacity for language learning, even though there is no immediate context for using one of the languages is a matter of personal choice.

At the same time, parents and others who care for children who are being raised bilingually should take active responsibility to ensure that they get adequate exposure to both languages to ensure that both are fully acquired. At present, there is relatively little research on the precise impact of different learning environments on simultaneous dual language learning, including how much exposure is required to ensure full acquisition. Ofelia and Wei[3] argue that although the research evidence indicates quite clearly that the reduced input that results from exposure to two languages during the preschool years does not impact certain aspects of language development in simultaneous bilinguals, the learning environment is critical. First, despite the lack of empirical evidence, it is necessarily the case that exposure below some minimum level will result in incomplete acquisition and, thus, incomplete functional competence. Lastly, it also seems likely that bilingual children need continuous and regular exposure to both languages to ensure their complete acquisition. In the light of the statement above, it can be wisely concluded that discontinues, abrupt changes, and irregular exposure should consciously be avoided.

Next, when it comes to planning children's language learning environment, special consideration should be given to minority languages. Romanowski[4] suggests that it is advisable to

provide more exposure to minority than majority languages in the home to balance the lack of exposure to these languages in the community in large. For example, parents raising children in Indonesian and English or Indonesian and Mandarin Chinese language in communities where English and Mandarin Chinese language are not spoken widely outside the home should bias exposure toward these languages in the home during the preschool years to ensure adequate exposure for these languages to be acquired completely. This, indeed as a matter of urgency, should be taken into consideration by parents when thinking about raising a child bilingually.

Then, there is growing evidence on children who speak a minority language at home and are schooled in a majority language that high levels of competence in the home language, especially in domains related to literacy and schooling, put these learners at an advantage in school in comparison to similar children who have not developed their home languages in these ways[2][4]. Regarding the discussion above, a crucial question emerges: As parents raising a child bilingually, what should be immediately done? This can be confidently answered as follows. Parents who do not speak the majority language should be encouraged to continue to use the home language with their children and, in particular, they should be encouraged to use the home language to help their children develop foundation skills related to literacy and academic language competence. In some cases, parents may require direct and detailed guidance on how to do this.

Furthermore, teachers and other professionals who work with minority language students in majority language schools should be encouraged and shown how to help these students draw on competencies and knowledge linked to the home language to acquire literacy and academic language skills in school. It could even be argued that public schools should provide bilingual education for students from large linguistic minority groups in order to enhance their bilingual competence. In the context of education programme in Pontianak city, there are some schools that offer bilingual classes in which English language is used along with Indonesian language in delivering the lessons. These programs would not only benefit minority language students personally and professionally but the country itself, Indonesia, by

preparing bilingual, bicultural students who can compete in the global marketplace[9].

Additionally, Verbeke[9] asserts that the development of majority language proficiency is critical in facilitating social contacts and in enhancing employment and educational opportunities for minority language groups. At the same time, minority language students should have access to learning in mainstream courses as well. This requires that the local authorities integrate their policies directed at bilingual pupils' schooling with their general policies for all children and youth in the schools and that the education authorities clarify the link between the official learning goals of the language of instruction and the learning goals in other subjects in school. When bringing this concern to the context of Pontianak education, it is, as a matter of fact, a challenge that Pontianak Education and Culture Department (*Dinas Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Kota Pontianak*) needs to cope with.

At last, when coming to the discussion about code-mixing as a reflection of a child's linguistic confusion, the research evidence indicates quite clearly that child bilingual code-mixing is not a sign of confusion or difficulty learning two languages. Wiseheart[5] writes that code-mixing is a resource that children use to fill gaps in their developing languages and, moreover, when young bilinguals code-mix they exhibit grammatical competence rather than confusion. Parents and teachers, therefore, need not worry when children code mix and they need not attempt to stop bilingual children from code-mixing. Bilingual children growing up in communities where their two languages tend to be used separately will learn to use their two languages separately or to code-mix when socially appropriate. It should be expected that bilingual children, like bilingual adults, will codemix when conversing with other bilinguals.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has significant implications beyond the immediate concern of gaining a better understanding of language acquisition in the bilingual child. It appears that concerns about possible problems of bilingual children have been shown to be unwarranted. In the light of this statement, the discussions provided in the current paper are viewed to be able to eliminate reasons for concerns by parents and teachers.

In many families and communities in Pontianak city, young children grow up in bilingual or even multilingual environments. The challenge for the education system is to adapt to the complexities of bilingual children, families and communities, and to provide quality education that is responsive to children's needs, while balancing individual needs with the family's goals for children's development. Schools have an important role to play in providing the bilingual skills that are becoming increasingly necessary in the era of globalisation of the modern world.

Nonetheless, there are still many unanswered questions concerning early childhood bilingualism. There is sufficient research and literature evidence to demolish fears based on extreme versions of the four myths identified and deeply discussed in this paper. Moreover, we have sufficient evidence to expand efforts to create opportunities for many younger children to become bilingual.

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