Bilingual Language Acquisition

In the same way as children learn their first language, sequential bilingual learners must also learn how to use their newly acquired language accurately and appropriately. Although the process of language learning may be similar, there are also differences. For example, bilingual learners address the process of learning another language already possessing knowledge of a linguistic system, its structures and rules. In addition, sequential bilingual learners start learning their second language at different ages, rather than from birth, and will be able to use different learning strategies.

Second language development would appear to proceed in an orderly fashion. Researchers have discovered that there is a fairly common sequence of acquisition for second language learners across a range of languages and contexts. What is not known is exactly what aspects of the second language are learned in what sequence. However it is known that some aspects are learned when there is a perceived need by the learner and some items can be learned in no particular sequence. Other research has suggested that there is a developmental sequence which precludes the early learning of certain items. Second language learners will demonstrate some of the stages of first language development. For example, they may go through a period when a rule is generalised to all instances. However, the rate of acquisition and the level of proficiency achieved in second language learning will depend upon the individual learner.

The popular belief that younger children have an advantage over adults in developing bilingually is not necessarily true. Early acquisition of the speech sound system of a language may result in a native-like pronunciation and the impression of fluency, but older learners may have an advantage in terms of increased metalinguistic awareness that enables them to learn the new language more quickly. For the young child, bilingual development is taking place alongside conceptual development and learning about the world. For older learners who have greater knowledge and understanding, it is the learning of new labels for objects, ideas and concepts already known.

As they learn the new language, second language learners incorporate the new linguistic input into their existing model of the language. There are many aspects of language that are common. For example all languages have ways of denoting time, of indicating actions and actors. Languages do this with different vocabularies and often with different grammars, but all languages are rule-governed. Part of the process of language acquisition involves the discovery and application of these rules. 'Interlanguage' is the term used to describe the language that learners produce as they learn the second language. It is also used to describe the evolving development of the learner's knowledge and use of the second language as they become increasingly proficient. It will change as the learner learns more and incorporates new linguistic knowledge into existing knowledge. Error analysis appears to suggest that the majority of interlingual errors are developmental and a sign of progress.

Learners and their learning strategies will change over time. A five year old will have a different language learning profile and language learning strategies than a fifteen year old. For bilingual learners, their first language knowledge will be helpful in the acquisition of the second language. The extent of this help will be dependent upon their proficiency in their first language, their age and other factors.

BICS and CALP

These terms are commonly used in discussion of bilingual education. They arise from the early work of Cummins (1984) in which he demonstrated his ideas about second
language development in a simple matrix. BICS describes the development of conversational fluency (Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills) in the second language, whereas CALP describes the use of language in decontextualized academic situations (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency).

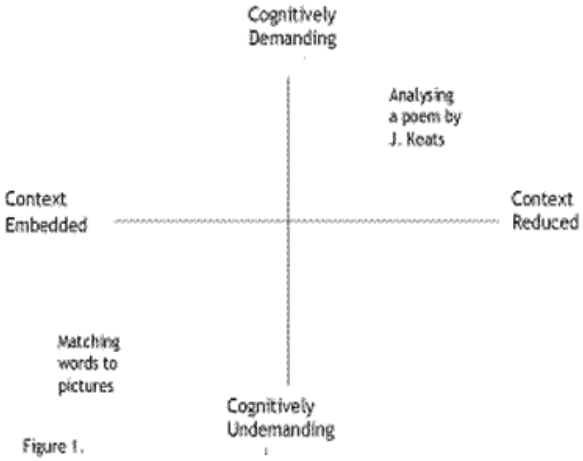


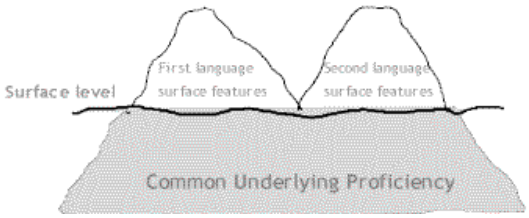
Figure 1.

The horizontal axis of the BICS/CALP matrix represents a continuum from 'context-embedded' to 'context-reduced', ranging from the situation in which the learner uses external clues and information, such as facial gestures, real objects and pictorial representation to enable understanding, to the other extreme where the learner must rely on linguistic cues, and knowledge about language and text to understand meanings. The vertical axis relates to the degree of cognitive involvement in a task, and moves from tasks that are not very demanding to increasing challenging activities. So, an activity in the lower left corner (cognitively undemanding and context-embedded) such as matching words to a picture might be appropriate for a beginner, but tasks in the upper right corner (more cognitively demanding and context-reduced) such as a poem by Keats, would be a task for advanced learners. Cummins' model has proved helpful in identifying and developing appropriate tasks for bilingual pupils. For example, in preparing tasks for a newly arrived second language learner, teachers might start with contextualized tasks and practical activities that are of low cognitive demand, such as naming items or a simple matching exercise. More proficient learners would require contextual support, but would need more cognitively demanding tasks. This approach to planning and assessing EAL learners was developed and reported in Cline and Frederickson (1996).

In conceptualizing bilingual proficiency in this way, Cummins and other researchers suggest that it takes learners, on average, approximately two years to achieve a functional, social use of a second language but that it may take five to seven years or longer, for some bilingual learners to achieve a level of academic linguistic proficiency comparable to monolingual English speaking peers.

Common Underlying Proficiency

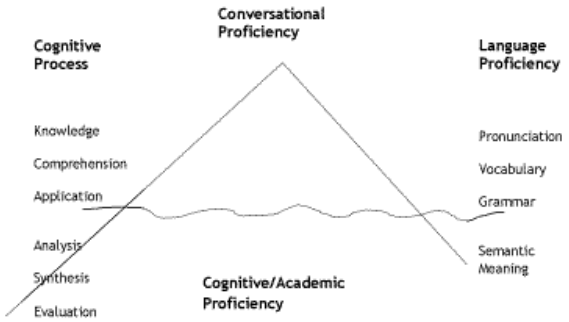
Cummins (1984 and 2000) also argues for a common underlying proficiency or interdependence hypothesis, in which cross-lingual proficiencies can promote the development of cognitive, academic skills. Common underlying proficiency refers to the interdependence of concepts, skills and linguistic knowledge found in a central processing system. Cummins states that cognitive and literacy skills established in the mother tongue or L1 will transfer across languages. This is often presented visually as two icebergs representing the two languages which overlap and share, underneath the water line, a common underlying proficiency or operating system. Both languages are outwardly distinct but are supported by shared concepts and knowledge derived from learning and experience and the cognitive and linguistic abilities of the learner.



This representation also demonstrates one view of how linguistic knowledge is stored in the brain. One way of thinking of this is to consider bilingual speakers as having separately stored proficiencies in each language, and this may include pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar in the working memory, which in turn, have access to long-

term memory storage that is not language specific. In other words, the use of the first or second language is informed by the working memory, but the concepts are stored as underlying proficiency.

Cummins also describes language proficiency in terms of surface and deeper levels of thinking skills. He argues that the deeper levels of cognitive processing such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation are necessary to academic progress. He distinguishes these aspects of proficiency from what he describes as more explicit or superficial realisations of linguistic and cognitive processing. Cummins proposes a minimum threshold of first language cognitive/academic development necessary for success in second language learning. Cummins also suggests that if the threshold of cognitive proficiency is not achieved, the learner may have difficulties achieving bilingual proficiency.



BICS/CALP (Cummins, 1984:138

This representation of bilingual proficiency would also suggest that continued conceptual and linguistic development in the first language would help second language learners in their learning of the second language. So the continued support of the first language whilst learning the second language would be beneficial for cognitive development as well as for other socio-cultural reasons. In his later work, Cummins (2000) presents the work of many other researchers which support this hypothesis and the claim that bilingualism and continued development in the first language enhances metalinguistic skills and development in proficiency in the second language.

Threshold Hypothesis

The threshold hypothesis assumes that a child needs to achieve a certain level of proficiency or competence in the first or second language to take advantage of the benefits of bilingualism. A minimum threshold needs to be achieved if there are to be any benefits from bilingualism, and this hypothesis posits that if there is a low level of competence in both languages there may be negative consequences. Sometimes this has been referred to as semi-lingualism, but this term and description is not often used nowadays. It would seem that there needs to be a minimum level of linguistic and conceptual knowledge in the first language to successfully add a second and develop bilingually. At the upper threshold, 'additive bilingualism' occurs when 'balanced bilinguals' have age appropriate competence in both languages. This conceptualization of bilingualism is often depicted as a steps in a ladder or floors in a house. This threshold hypothesis cannot be defined in absolute terms, rather it is a theoretical description, but it can help in explaining the development of bilingual learners. It also supports the arguments for the benefits of additive bilingualism and bilingual education.

There are several implications and benefits of additive bilingualism for teaching and learning. For example, bilingual education may provide the greatest support for bilingual learners in the development of their second or additional language. It is important that new input is connected to the learner's previous knowledge, including linguistic, conceptual and learned knowledge. It would seem that additive bilingualism has positive consequences for learners' metalinguistic development, learning of additional languages and more generally, for learners' verbal cognitive operations. The threshold hypothesis also suggests that both languages must be given an opportunity to develop if there is to be a long-term positive impact. Additive bilingualism brings with it many positive attributes that can enable learners' linguistic and academic development.

Author
Charlotte Franson

Last updated
2 May 2009

References

Bialystok, E. (2001) *Bilingualism in Development: Language, Literacy and Cognition.* Cambridge : Cambridge University Press

Cline, T. & Frederickson, N. (Eds.) (1996) *Curriculum Related Assessment, Cummins and Bilingual Children.* Clevedon : Multilingual Matters

Cummins, J. (1984) *Bilingualism and special education.* Clevedon : Multilingual Matters

Cummins, J. (2000) *Language, Power and Pegagogy*. Clevedon : Multimlingual Matters