

## **BILINGUALISM, SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING, AND ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE**

The term bilingual refers to individuals who can function in more than one language. The category of bilinguals is very broad—encompassing individuals who are sophisticated speakers, readers, and writers of two or more languages, as well as those who use a limited knowledge of a second language (L2) for purposes such as work or schooling, and who may be literate in only one language (or even completely illiterate). Because of the consequences of colonization, migration, nation-formation, traditions of exogamy, and modernization, some degree of bilingualism is typical of most people in the world. Bilingualism is a feature not just of individuals, but also of societies. Societies in which two languages are used regularly, or in which more than one language has official status or a recurrent function, can be called bilingual. For example, Canada is a bilingual country because French and English are both official languages, even though many citizens of Canada are monolingual English speakers. Saudi Arabia is also a bilingual society, as most Saudis speak both Arabic and English, though English has no official status. The nature of individual bilingualism is quite different in different communities—there are those where bilingualism is the norm for all educated citizens (as it is, for example, in relatively small language communities like Scandinavia and The Netherlands); those where bilingualism is the norm for the minority language speakers but not those with the greatest political or economic power in the society (e.g., for Quechua speakers in Peru, for Turkish speakers in the Netherlands, for Spanish speakers in the United States); and those where bilingualism is the norm for the upper classes and better educated but not the relatively powerless (e.g., Colombia). It must be noted that the United States and other traditionally English-speaking countries observe a norm of monolingualism (low expectations for second/foreign language proficiency, low value placed on immigrant languages, universal emphasis on the need to speak English) that is possible only for speakers of a ‘language of wider communication’ living in an economy that is globally highly influential.

Bilingualism is often the product of second language (L2) learning after the first language (L1) has been acquired—either through non tutored exposure or through instruction. Individuals can become bilingual at any age, depending on when the need to learn the L2 emerges or when instruction becomes available. In some cases, though, bilingualism is a characteristic of a child’s earliest language system. For example, children growing up in bilingual households—where both parents speak two languages regularly, or where each parent speaks a different language—are typically bilingual from the very beginning of language acquisition. Children growing up with parents who speak a minority language (within the larger societal context) may also be natively bilingual, if visitors, neighbors, television, regular caretakers, and other sources make the majority language available.

English as a second language (ESL) refers to the process of producing bilinguals by teaching English as an L2 to learners in an English-speaking context. ESL is distinguished from English as

a foreign language (EFL), which is instruction delivered in a context where English is not used regularly outside the classroom, using the instructional techniques and the intensity of instruction required to achieve success. The term ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) is meant to encompass both ESL and EFL. Given the importance of English in the modern, globalized economy, ESOL is a large field of practice buttressed by considerable bodies of research and many curricular resources. ESL instruction also needs to be distinguished, in the American schooling context, from instruction referred to as bilingual education, in which some instructional content is delivered in the learner's L1 while English is being acquired. Bilingual programs range from those that use the native language briefly (and primarily for emotional support), to programs that seek to develop L1 literacy as a source of transfer to English literacy, to those that continue to teach L1 oral and literacy skills at least through the elementary grades. Some districts also offer two-way bilingual, or double immersion programs, in which half the students are L1 speakers of English and half are L1 speakers of another language, and instruction is given to all children in both languages, with the goal of producing high-level bilinguals from both English- and other-language backgrounds. Bilingual education programs, which were first supported by federal funding as a result of the Federal Bilingual Education Act of 1968, are offered in districts where sufficient numbers of students from a single L1 background exist; such programs came under attack as ineffective in 1998 in California, where they were severely curtailed as a result of ballot proposition 227. Since then, political action to eliminate the bilingual schooling option has spread to other states. The difficulty of carrying out well designed evaluations of bilingual education has frustrated its supporters because there is, as a result, no unambiguous demonstration that bilingual education generates achievement advantages. Nonetheless, both theory and meta-analyses suggest that bilingual education is the best approach to ensuring educational achievement and reducing the risk of reading failure for many language-minority children. The major challenge of education for language minority children in the U.S. is to ensure adequate literacy development; scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) continue to show serious deficits in literacy for non-native speakers of English, even after several years of U.S. schooling. Thus, focusing on educational treatments that promote literacy is a high priority in research and practice innovations.

### **Early Literacy Development of English Language Learners (ELLs)**

The central role of language in the emergence of key literacy-related skills raises important questions about the nature of literacy development among bilingual children, and, about the impact of bilingual or second language instructional settings on children's emerging literacy-related abilities. There is surprisingly little systematic research on these issues. It is known, however, that Spanish-speaking children (the most widely studied group) just beginning kindergarten in the United States show wide variation in both their Spanish literacy skills and in their level of oral English proficiency. Since children's abilities in both of these areas have been shown to independently predict English reading performance in middle school, both must be considered critical to children's future academic success. There is also considerable evidence that many key literacy-related skills, including phonological awareness, print concepts, decoding skills,

and extended discourse, are transferable from an L1 to an L2. Low-income ELLs, like other children of low socioeconomic status, tend to begin school with relatively few literacy-related skills in general, and they may have vocabularies in each of their two languages that are more restricted even than those of their low-income, monolingual peers—possibly because they have had fewer resources and opportunities to acquire at home the language and literacy skills that have been linked to school success.

### **Language-of-Instruction Studies**

One critical question is how effective literacy instruction is linguistically organized in bilingual or second language (ESL) classroom settings—and with what effect. Non-English-speaking or bilingual preschool children in the United States typically find themselves in one of three types of classroom language settings: first-language classrooms in which all interaction occurs in the children’s primary language; bilingual classrooms in which interaction is split between the primary language and English; and English-language classrooms in which English is the exclusive language of communication. Studies of the education offered to L2 learners tend to focus on language use, rather than on the quality of children’s learning opportunities. These studies, nevertheless, converge on two important sets of findings. First, studies that have compared preschool program types by language have found certain academic and linguistic advantages for children in bilingual, as opposed to English-only, classrooms at both the pre-school and the K–6 level. One longitudinal evaluation of the Carpinteria Preschool Program in California found Spanish-language classrooms to be associated with higher levels of language and early literacy attainment in both Spanish and English through grade five. Unfortunately, these studies have not examined what, specifically, goes on in pre-school classrooms to produce such results. Second, studies that have explored the language proficiencies of Spanish-speaking children who attended preschool versus those who stayed home have found that the main effect of preschool attendance, even in bilingual programs, is improved English proficiency. There is contradictory evidence, however, as to whether acquiring English in pre-school necessarily endangers children’s home language development. Systematic studies focused on investigating the predictors of English literacy development for ELLs were launched in 2000, when the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) initiated collaborative funding focused on bilingual reading. Questions about both the design and quality of schooling for ELLs are of practical as well as theoretical importance, especially since the majority of ELL preschoolers and school-age children in the United States find themselves in predominantly English language classroom settings. Expressing concern for the additional risk that such settings may pose, the National Research Council Report *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* recommended the need for additional research to examine “whether high-quality preschool experiences are equally beneficial to Spanish-speaking children when offered in English as when offered in Spanish” (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, p. 157).

## **Consequences of Bilingualism**

There has been much discussion of the consequences of early bilingualism. Historically, early bilingualism was seen as dangerous, leading to confusion and exacerbating language disorders and language delay. Research has made clear that early bilingualism may well bring cognitive advantages, particularly in domains such as helping children understand the arbitrary nature of language systems and literacy systems. Nonetheless, such advantages are also small—few months' precocity on tasks that monolingual children also typically come to accomplish without difficulty. Obviously, the major positive consequence of bilingualism is knowing two languages—and thus being able to converse with a larger array of individuals, as well as having access to two cultures, two bodies of literature, and two worldviews. For children in language-minority communities, maintaining their ancestral language preserves ties to their grand-parents and keeps open the option of experiences that build ethnic identification and pride, as well as cultural continuity. Speaking other languages also has economic advantages, as bilinguals are in demand in the new global economy. Despite these advantages, the most typical trajectory for immigrant families in the United States is that only first-generation children (or the one- and-a-half generation—those born in the U.S. shortly after their parents' arrival) are bilingual, and that the second and later generations are likely to be absorbed into the norms of the larger monolingual society. Given the relatively poor outcomes of foreign language teaching in the United States, this trajectory reflects the forfeiture of linguistic resources that might well be conserved with educational policies more focused on maintaining and developing immigrants' language skills in L1 as well as L2.

## **Factors Influencing Second Language Learning**

Forces that impinge on the likelihood of successful L2 learning include cognitive influences (e.g., knowledge of L1, linguistic analysis capacity, memory), motivational influences (e.g., interest in the L2, value of the L2 to the learner, positive affect toward speakers of the L2), social influences (e.g., opportunities to interact with L2 speakers, access to useful feedback from L2 speakers), and instruction (e.g., quantity, quality, design). These influences all tend to covary with age, with the social status of the learner, and with other factors, such as reasons for learning the L2. Although the myth of a critical period for L2 acquisition dominates public understanding, there are, in fact, no biological data supporting the existence of a critical period for second language learning.

Older learners can achieve high, even native-like levels of proficiency in an L2 under the right conditions, and younger learners sometimes do not achieve this level of proficiency. Very young learners in an immigrant situation are also much more likely to lose their first language in the process of acquiring the second, thus ending up monolingual rather than bilingual as a result of L2 acquisition.

## **Summary**

Questions about individuals' second language learning cannot be understood without simultaneous attention to the larger sociocultural and sociolinguistic framework within which learning a second language is occurring. Certainly, there are cognitive challenges associated with L2 acquisition—learning new phonological, grammatical, semantic, and interactional rules is hard. But the cognitive challenge associated with learning Spanish, for example, is quite different for the Aymara speaker in Peru, who sees it simultaneously as the language of economic advancement and of oppression, than it is for the English speaker in Kansas, who sees it as the language of underpaid immigrant workers, or for the third-generation Mexican American in California, who sees it as the language of history and extended family. Until it is understood how the larger sociocultural and sociolinguistic factors interact with the cognitive and psycholinguistic factors influencing acquisition and maintenance of a second language, it will be difficult to design optimal educational programs for either language-minority children or English speakers learning foreign languages.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

August, D., & Hakuta, K. (Eds.). (1997). *Improving schooling for language-minority children: A research agenda*. National Academy Press.

Bialystok, E. (1997). Effects of lingualism and biliteracy on children's emerging concepts of print. *Developmental Psychology*, 33(3), 429–440.

Campos, S. J. (1995). The Carpinteria Preschool Program: A long-term effects study. In E. Garcia & B. McLaughlin (Eds.), *Meeting the challenge of linguistic and cultural diversity in early childhood education*. Teachers College Press.

Campos S. J., & Keatings, H. R. (1988). The Carpinteria language-minority student experience: From theory to practice, to success. In T. Skutnabb-Kangas & J. Cummins (Eds.), *Minority education: From shame to struggle*. Multilingual Matters.

Center for Applied Linguistics. (n.d.). Two-way immersion. Retrieved from <http://www.cal.org/twi>

Cisero, C., & Royer, J. (1995). The development and cross-language transfer of phonological awareness. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 20, 275–303.

Cummins, J. (1979). Linguistic interdependence and the educational development of bilingual children. *Review of Educational Research*, 49(2), 222–251.

Durgunoglu, A. Y., Nagy, W. E., & Hancin-Bhatt, B. J. (1993). Cross language transfer of phonological awareness. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 85, 453–465.

Goldenberg, C. (2001). Making schools work for low-income families in the 21st century. In S. Neuman & D. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of early literacy research*. Guilford Press.

Goldenberg, C., Reese, L., & Gallimore, R. (1992). Effects of school literacy materials on Latino children's home experiences and early literacy achievement. *American Journal of Education*, 100, 497–536.

Greene, J. (1998). *A meta-analysis of the effectiveness of bilingual education*. The Tomas Rivera Policy Institute.

Marinova-Todd, S., Marshall, D. B., & Snow, C. E. (2000). Three misconceptions about age and second language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 34(1), 9–34.

Meyer, M. M., & Fienberg, S. E. (Eds.). (1992). *Assessing evaluation studies: The case of bilingual education strategies*. National Academy Press.

National Assessment of Educational Progress. (2000). *NAEP 1999 trends in academic progress: Three decades of student performance*. National Center for Education Statistics.

National Center for Education Statistics. (1996). *Quick tables and figures: Family literacy activities*. U.S. Department of Education.

Reese, L., Garnier, H., Gallimore, R., & Goldenberg, C. (2000). Longitudinal analysis of the antecedents of emergent Spanish literacy and middle-school English reading achievement of Spanish-speaking students. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(3), 633–662.

Rodriguez, J. L., Diaz, R. M., Duran, D., & Espinosa, L. (1995). The impact of bilingual preschool education on the language development of Spanish-speaking children. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 10(4), 475–490.

Sandoval-Martinez, S. (1982). Findings from the Head Start Bilingual Curriculum Development and Evaluation Effort. *NABE Journal*, 7(1), 1–12.

Snow, C., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (1998). Preventing reading difficulties in young children. National Academy Press.

Tabors, P., & Snow, C. (2001). Young bilingual children and early literacy development. In S. Neuman & D. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of early literacy research*. Guilford Press.

Verhoeven, L. (1994). Transfer in bilingual development. *Language Learning*, 14, 381–415.

Willig, A. (1985). A meta-analysis of selected studies of the effectiveness of bilingual education. *Review of Educational Research*, 55, 269–317.

Wong-Fillmore, L. (1991). When learning a second language means losing the first. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 6, 323–346.

#### INTERNET RESOURCE

Center for Applied Linguistics. “Two-Way Immersion.” <[www.cal.org/twi](http://www.cal.org/twi)>.

Catherine E. Snow

Margaret Freedson-Gonzalez