Investigating a Multilingual Five-year-old Child, Speaking Five Languages from the Perspective of His Mother: A Case Study

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Abstract

In one way or another, almost half of the world's population is bilingual or multilingual, and multilingualism exists in every nation. Therefore, it is inevitable to conduct research into bilingualism. Accordingly, this study aimed at gaining deeper insight into the ways strategies, and challenges are for raising a bilingual child. A case study was conducted to achieve the objective here. The subject of the case is a child who is 5 and a half years old and has five languages in his repertoire. To analyse his case, an interview was conducted with his mother. As a result of analyses, it was found that the parents mainly adopted the One Parent – One Language (OPOL) method and there are some linguistic benefits for the child.

Keywords: *Bilingualism, multilingualism, one parent one language, OPOL*

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INTRODUCTION

The term "bilingualism" may mean different things to different people (Saunders, 1988). According to Bloomfield (1933, p. 56), some people consider bilingualism to be "ideal bilingualism" or "native-like control" of two languages. Bilingualism, according to Haugen (1953, p. 7), begins "at the point where a speaker of one language can produce complete, meaningful utterances in the other language," and Thiéry (1976) describes a "true" bilingual as someone who would consistently be mistaken for a native by native speakers of both languages.

According to Baetens Beardsmore (1982), who shared Mackey's definition, bilingualism must be able to explain the presence of at least two languages within a single speaker while taking into account that one's proficiency in these languages may or may not be equal and that the way one uses the two or more languages is extremely important. These two definitions of multilingualism—which typically refers to a person's usage of two or more languages—come into play.

According to Grosjean (1982), nearly half the world's population is bilingual or multilingual, and multilingualism is present in every country. For this reason, students in a foreign language class can be monolingual, bilingual or multilingual in one or two of the local languages.

When the studies above are considered, the "multilingual majority" need to be included in the studies on bilingual children. In addition, studies investigating multilingual children can provide a new perspective on early bilingualism because in today's world only being bilingual is not a solution for the future. Knowing these things raises a question: how do people become bilingual and multilingual? Concerning answering this question, the deficiency of literature on the techniques and strategies to raise bilingual or multilingual children emerges. Therefore, the focus of this study is to gain deeper insight into the ways or strategies, and challenges of raising a bilingual child.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bilingualism

Language acquisition researchers are becoming more interested in bilingualism and bilingual education as a result of globalization and the ease with which information can now be accessed. Furthermore, everyone encounters bilingualism at some point in their lives. In other words, grownups do not use language exclusively. As a result, different academics and scientists have different definitions of bilingualism because, as Ping (2016) notes, the term is quite flexible. Language domains and context have influenced definitions of bilingualism over time (Saunders, 1988). The definition of bilingualism as "native-like control" of two languages was initially given by Bloomfield (1933). Although this is what many refer to as "ideal bilingualism," the concept has changed throughout time. Similar to Haugen (1953), Diebold (1964) focused on a speaker or group of speakers using at least two languages. The ability to produce understandable utterances in at least two languages and the point at which a speaker of one language can produce complete, meaningful utterances in the other language, as well as proficiency in at least one language, including speaking, writing, listening, and reading, all fall under Haugen's definition of the term (Grosjean, 1982). "The alternative use of two or more languages by the same individual" is how Mackey (1970) defines bilingualism. Beardsmore

(1982) defined bilingualism as "the ability to account for the presence of at least two languages within the same speaker, remembering that ability in these languages may or may not be equal, and the way the two or more languages are used plays a highly significant role." This definition is similar to Mackey's. Despite the fact that bilinguals are usually thought of as two monolinguals in one person, Grosjean (1999) defines the term more broadly, saying that bilinguals are the ones who utilize their languages for a variety of purposes and in a variety of areas of life. According to Hamers and Blanc (2000), bilingualism is "the psychological state of an individual who has access to more than one linguistic code as a means of social communication: the degree of access will vary along several dimensions which are psychological, cognitive, psycholinguistic, social psychological, sociological, sociolinguistic, sociocultural, and linguistic." This provides a unique perspective on bilingualism. The simplest definition of bilingualism is "knowing" two languages (Gottardo & Grant, 2012). Rather than "the bilingual person is the sum of two monolinguals," Grosjean (2008) characterizes bilingualism as "the regular use of two or more languages (or dialects)" and considers a bilingual to be a "specific speaker-hearer in his or her own right." Ultimately, Grosjean (2013) described bilinguals as those whose need for that language determines their level of ability in it.

According to the definitions and their modifications, bilingualism has given way to multilingualism, which often refers to a person's use of two or more languages. According to Flynn et al. (2005), learning more than one language is a common linguistic accomplishment for the majority of people worldwide. In parallel, Grosjean (1982) claimed that multilingualism exists in every nation on the planet and that about half of the world's population is bilingual or multilingual in some way. Furthermore, Chomsky stated in Flynn et al. (2005) that "Children grow up speaking a variety of languages in most parts of the world today and in most of human history." Being multilingual comes naturally to many.

Simultaneous vs Successive Bilingualism

Bilinguals acquire two languages in different order. Children can become bilingual simultaneously or successively (Summer, 2017). Some of them acquire two languages as their mother tongues since early childhood (Hamers & Blanc, 2005) and this is called as simultaneous bilingualism. Parallel to Hamers & Blanc (2005), Kim et al., (2015) expressed the simultaneous bilingualism that children's exposure to both their native language and English in their home environment from birth. On the other hand, children who receive, first, exposure to their native language as their first language (L1) at home, and are, then, exposed to English as a second language (L2) later during school time are referred to as successive bilingualism (Tabors 1997, cited in Kim et al., 2015).

In the study by Kim et al. (2015), they stated that previous studies set age cut-offs between simultaneous and successive bilingualism to examine potential differences between learners. Studies by many researchers (de Houwer, 2009; Genesee, & Crago, 2004; McLaughlin, 1985; Padilla & Lindholm, 1984; Paradis, Summer, 2017) focused on the issue, age cut-offs, in their studies. According to McLaughlin (1985), the age of cut-off is three. This means that children exposed to a second language before the age of three are called simultaneous bilinguals and, accordingly, the others who acquired the second language after the age of three are accepted as successive bilinguals according to Kim et al. (2015). Similarly, as cited in the study of

Summer (2017), When exposed to two languages before the age of three, a kid typically acquires both simultaneously. Subsequent acquisition typically takes place if the kid is exposed to the second language later in life (National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, 1995). The threshold for simultaneous bilingualism varies depending on the viewpoints of the researchers and gets more stringent. The age of three may be too late for simultaneous bilingualism (Kim et al., 2015), states that "there will necessarily be developmental differences between a child whose exposure to both languages begins at birth and one whose exposure to one of those languages begins between ages 2 and 3." Furthermore, whereas de Houwer (2009) and Padilla and Lindholm (1984) suggested that simultaneous bilingualism begins from birth, Paradis, Genesee, and Crago (2004) limited the cut-off to the end of age one.

In short, most of the simultaneous bilinguals acquire two languages simultaneously because they grow up in a mixed-lingual family as is in the context of the subject of this study. In the context of this study, each parent speaks different languages therefore; the child simultaneously acquires both languages. In addition, the child acquires the third and fourth languages in a successive way of bilingualism.

One Parent One Language Principle

One parent, one language (OPOL) was first proposed by Ronjat (1913), who brought up his son as a multilingual in French and German. According to this approach, one parent should always speak in a single language with their child, while the other parent should only speak in a different language (Bain et al., 1980; Barron-Hauwaert, 2004, Verhagen, Kuiken, & Andringa, 2022).

Bilingual kids are sensitive to phonological, lexical, and syntactic variations between their languages (Nicoladis & Genesee, 1996). According to research, parents of bilingual children should use the OPOL principle to help their children use both languages differently depending on the situation or the person speaking (de Houwer, 1990; Deuchar & Quay, 1999; Genesee, Lanza, 1992; Nicoladis, & Paradis, 1995; Nicoladis & Genesee, 1996).

Benefits of Being Bilingual

Bilinguals are always thought to be advantageous in many aspects for scientists. Some of the benefits of being bilingual are given below. Numerous studies on the cognitive (Bialystok, 2017) and social (Wang et al., 2023) benefits of bilingualism support the benefits of bilingualism. Due to the constant requirement to transition between languages, bilingual people also frequently have improved executive functions, such as an ability to solve problems and multitask (Alshewiter, 2024). Bialystok (1984) emphasized metalinguistic linguistic and metalinguistic abilities. He mentioned that bilingualism increases the sophistication of the conceptualization of metalinguistic awareness and the skill to access knowledge about language in addition to the ability to control linguistic processes and apply them to a problematic situation. Similarly, being bilingual enhances metalinguistic abilities and sensitivity to the details and structure of language. In addition, bilinguals have better recognition of ambiguities, control of language processing and they have better correction of ungrammatical sentences.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the experiences of a multilingual child acquiring different languages from the perspective of his mother.

Research Questions

1- What kind of strategies and techniques are used while raising a bilingual child?

2- What are the challenges bilinguals face during the acquisition of a second language or more languages?

3- What are the benefits of being bilingual?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

When the study's objective is to answer the "how" and "why" questions, you have no control over study participants' behaviour, you want to talk about contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon being studied, or it is hard to tell the difference between the phenomenon and context, you should think about using a case study design.

This study used the case study design as its research methodology. A case study is a particular occurrence that is often intended to demonstrate a broader concept, according to Nisbet and Watt (1984). Due to the utilization of numerous sources of information, case studies enable researchers to obtain a comprehensive understanding of problems and can offer a picture of them. According to Stake (1995), "case studies are used when we seek to understand the specifics of an interaction with its context." Case studies give us a structured approach to observing problems, gathering information, evaluating information, and then discussing the outcomes.

Participant

The participant is a mother who came to Türkiye from Ukraine and she regards herself as Russian. In addition, she is teaching English at a school of foreign languages at a state university. She is a multilingual person who can speak English, Russian, Turkish and German. She has a son who is 5 years and 6 months old. Now her son is multilingual too. He can communicate in English, Russian, Turkish and German whereas he is now learning Arabic. Although he cannot read and write but can speak fluently four languages except Arabic.

Data Collection Tool

In order to have an in-depth understanding of the key strategies in raising bilingual children and gain a detailed comprehension of the language acquisition process of an early bilingual child, I collected data mainly employing face-to-face semi-structured interviews with Maria, Kaya's mother. The data consists of a thirty-minute interview in total, which was recorded. Although questions were prepared, the researcher allowed the data to emerge naturally and used follow-up questions to prompt when the participant answered a question.

Ethical Considerations

For ethical considerations, a pseudonym was used in the study. In addition, the subject of the study is a colleague of the researcher to whom the researcher can talk sincerely; therefore,

the data collected is reliable. Moreover, the researcher got permission from the administration of the school. In addition, the name of the institution where the subject of the study was not given.

FINDINGS

Case of Kaya

Maria, Kaya's mother, is an English instructor at a school of foreign languages at a state university. She was born in Russia and studied English and German Language Teaching at the university. Because of her Turkish roots and studying German at the university, she could speak Russian, Turkish and German when she came to Türkiye when she was 26 years old. His father is Turkish and he can only speak Turkish.

I would like to start with the language history of Kaya. He was born in a family in which the father is Turkish and the mother is Russian. As she is from Russia, she wants her son to be bilingual and she wants her son to speak Russian and Turkish although she is teaching English at a university. It is understood from her sentence that she articulated during the interview: "I come from Russia and want him to be able to communicate in both languages equally." In the early stages of his bilingualism, her mum spoke to him in Russian while his father interacted in Turkish with him. In this sense, he is a simultaneous or balanced bilingual because he acquired both languages at the same time from birth. After he could speak and understand both languages, her mother started to speak to him in English. After that, the same thing occurs for the next language.

"When I understood that he can speak both well, and understands well, I started English. When I understood that he was already…as you know…ease with English, I started German. Especially, when he reached a specific level, like elementary for example. When he was already pre-intermediate or intermediate, we started a new language."

He is now 5 and a half years old and he can speak and understand Turkish, Russian and English equally and started German and Arabic. He has started to speak German but not in Arabic yet. In Arabic, he is just absorbing.

Strategies

During the initial stages, from birth, the parents followed the parent-one language (OPOL) method that they thought to be suitable for their situation. She spoke to her son, Kaya, only in Russian and her husband spoke to him only in Turkish all the time.

"One parent-one language method is the only suitable one for us."

Therefore, she believes that speaking both languages simultaneously from the very beginning is very useful since Turkish and Russian are from different language groups and don't have any similarities in terms of grammar, alphabet, phonetics, etc. Moreover, she stated that also her parents learnt languages in this way.

They followed an OPOL-like strategy for the successive languages as well. For instance, they try to create an environment in which the mother speaks only in English while his father and the relatives speak to him only in Turkish because, as she mentioned in the interview, she does not want to spoil her son's Turkish since her Turkish is not good at Turkish pronunciation.

"I still speak English because I don't want his language spoiled since my Turkish is very bad. My Turkish is not good enough with the accents I speak."

Another strategy that they use is games or project-based activities. She mentioned that they start learning new languages by playing games. She created a game for him to teach the new language.

"He started playing in these languages. No matter what the time was. There was a time when he liked dinosaurs. We acted dinosaurs in different situations, for example, dinosaurs are ill. So, we go to the hospital so we learn together. This is temperature, this is this, and this is this, in different languages."

She does not instruct in the language. While they are playing, her son absorbs and acquires the new language. She designed drip feed sessions for games. For example, while he is acquiring German, they speak German only for an hour during the day. That means that her son is exposed to the new language 7 hours a week.

In addition to games, they create projects suitable for the situations or events they come across in their daily life. When the interview took place, they were a project about cacao beans. That is because they had a film called "Child and Chocolate Factory" in English and watched the film. After the film, they talked about how cocoa beans become chocolate; and what they do to make chocolate. They discussed why they need cocoa beans. They also do projects in Turkish in which he can speak to his father in Turkish and his mother speaks to him in Russian and English. The time was about the 10th of November which was the day of commemoration of Atatürk.

"We do the project about Atatürk. You know, the 10th of November is coming so we chose Atatürk for this project. We talked about Atatürk this week, these days a lot. Mostly Daddy talks about it, I speak to him in Russian and English, and yesterday evening we talked to them about Ataturk.

The other strategy they use is that they create contexts in which they speak a couple of languages for themselves. For instance, they speak Russian and German at home while they speak English and Turkish outside the home. To choose these couple languages, they have a criterion; the couple cannot be from the same language family. For example, they do not speak German and English in any context.

"At home, we speak only Russian and German. Russian is after school. However, if you go out when we leave the door let me take out of the door. He starts speaking English. Outside, Russian and German are banned. So outside should be English inside Russian and German. With Daddy, he speaks Turkish. He speaks Turkish only with his daddy and at school with his friends when he got out, he speaks Turkish with his friends. Therefore, it is not with me because my Turkish is not as well as Daddy's Turkish."

Challenges

In the early stages while learning Turkish and Russian, in contrast with the general assumption, she states that her son does not get confused because he can understand easily regardless of the language. In addition, she adds that even when he does not say a word in any language, she corrects him accurately so he can understand what is wrong.

"He can understand easily when what language is spoken. He never mixes up and simply switches from one to another. If he doesn't know a word in any of the languages, I just accurately correct him or precisely repeat his sentence so he can understand what is wrong."

However, in the latter stages, as he becomes proficient in languages, one language can have an impact on the other. For example, the sound for the [L] letter is strong in Russian while it is softer. Therefore, pronunciation of the words or articulation of a letter can be a problem for them.

Another challenge they have faced is using feminine speech that she used while talking to her son. As a result, she adds that he tries to pretend like her.

"I am a female, I have to use feminine gender in my speech, and sometimes he tends to speak like me."

However, she has solved this problem by using toys and pretending to be a male character.

Lastly, the most challenging situation is that they cannot provide him with an authentic environment in which he can be exposed to the language he is acquiring. Living in a city where people always speak Turkish is a challenge for them to achieve quicker improvement in the languages he is acquiring.

"In this city, it is difficult to find partners to speak the language. If I can find a person who is English… it's hard to find a person who can speak German not adults, but I need a child because children play together."

Benefits

According to her, as a bilingual child, his son will have better job opportunities and can communicate easily. In addition, claims that bilingual children have wider worldviews, and they have higher cognitive capacity when compared to monolinguals.

"There are endless benefits in terms of job opportunities, tourism, and communication. Bilingual people have a wider world view and both brain hemispheres work simultaneously, these people can use both of them better in comparison with monolingual ones."

Furthermore, she stated some social benefits that they expect to experience. For instance, she expects his son to talk to his grandparents in Russian when they go to her motherland or speak to her friends when they are in Germany.

"First, he will feel free when he goes to my motherland; he will be able to talk to all my relatives. When we go to Germany, he will be able to talk to all of my friends that I have in there."

In addition, she expects him to read books in their original languages. For example, he can read books in the original language. That is so great. Just imagine you can read Dostoyevsky in Russian, Orhan Pamuk in Turkish, and Emily Dickinson in English.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study shed light on the multifaceted experiences of raising a multilingual child and the strategies, challenges, and benefits of bilingualism. Kaya's case provides a rich context for examining bilingual language acquisition through the lens of parental strategies and perspectives, aligning with recent research on bilingual upbringing. et al. (2015) and Summer (2017) stated that if a child acquires two languages at the same time until the age of three, he becomes simultaneously bilingual. In Kaya's case, the situation is

nearly the same except for the other languages that he has acquired. Although he started as a simultaneous bilingual from birth, later he turned into a multilingual child by adding German, English and Arabic to his repertoire.

When the findings are examined, it is seen that OPOL, in which one parent maintains exclusive use of one language in all dialogues with the child and the other parent exclusively uses the other language with the child (Bain et al., 1980; Barron-Hauwaert, 2004), shaped Kaya's language acquisition. Furthermore, his parents created new contexts for him to maintain this strategy in the acquisition of new languages.

When it comes to the benefits, although his mother did not mention them in the interview, it can be understood from some of her expressions that Kaya can use translanguaging in which he has a linguistic repertoire from which they selects features of the languages he has acquired to communicate effectively as stated by Garcia (2009). In addition, acquiring 5 languages in 5 years can be explained with sensitivity to the details and structure of language and it can be related to linguistic ability.

The benefits of bilingualism, as observed in Kaya's case, align with extensive literature on the cognitive (Bialystok, 2017), and social (Wang et al., 2023) advantages of being bilingual. Bilingual individuals also often exhibit enhanced executive functions such as better problem-solving and multitasking skills, due to the constant need to switch between languages (Alshewiter, 2024). Kaya's ability to navigate multiple languages simultaneously reflects this cognitive flexibility. Socially, bilingualism facilitates cross-cultural communication and fosters a broader worldview. Kaya's mother's anticipation that her son will communicate with relatives in Russia and friends in Germany underscores the role of bilingualism in strengthening familial and social bonds. These findings are supported by Wang et al. (2023), who found that bilingualism enhances social connectedness.

The ability to access literature in its original language, as mentioned in the findings, is another significant benefit. Reading Dostoyevsky in Russian or Emily Dickinson in English provides a deeper appreciation of cultural nuances, which shows that language learning is inseparable from cultural learning. Kaya's multilingual abilities position him to engage with diverse literary and cultural works, enriching his intellectual and emotional growth.

While the benefits of bilingualism are well-documented, parents who mix languages find a multilingual upbringing more challenging than a monolingual one (Hoevenaars, 2021; Koelewijn, Hoevenaars, & Verhagen, 2023). One prominent issue is the difficulty in providing authentic language environments, particularly for minority languages. Kaya's mother's concern about finding peers for her son to practice German or Arabic aligns with the "input quantity hypothesis," which posits that the language that receives less exposure in the bilingual constellation usually displays a delayed and protracted rate of development, further pointing to the role of input quantity (Guo, 2023). This challenge is further compounded by their residence in a predominantly Turkish-speaking city, which limits opportunities for naturalistic interaction in other languages. Regarding the challenges they have faced, languages have some impacts on each other especially in the articulation of the sounds. In addition, the biggest challenge is that he is not exposed to the new language as much as he needs because the context is the place where Turkish is spoken mostly and it is difficult to find a person, especially a child, to practice the new language.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the complexities of multilingual upbringing. By examining the strategies, challenges, and benefits experienced by Kaya and his family, it contributes to a deeper understanding of bilingualism from a parental perspective. The findings underscore the importance of deliberate language planning and contextualized learning, while also highlighting the need for broader societal support to maximize the potential of bilingual children.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

There are some implications for parents, educators and policymakers. Parents raising bilingual children can adopt structured yet flexible approaches like the OPOL method and context-specific language use demonstrated in Kaya's case. This study highlights the importance of consistent exposure and creative learning environments, such as play-based and project-based activities, to foster multilingual development. Additionally, parents should recognize the role of community engagement in providing authentic language exposure and consider leveraging digital tools, such as language-learning apps or online communities, to supplement language practice where local resources are limited.

Educators can use insights from this study to design immersive and engaging language-learning activities tailored to children's interests. For example, incorporating thematic projects and using bilingual storytelling in classrooms can make language acquisition more meaningful. Furthermore, schools can develop partnerships with community organizations to create multilingual events or language exchange programs, enhancing opportunities for authentic interaction.

Policymakers can draw from the challenges highlighted in this study to address gaps in bilingual education. Investing in multilingual resources, such as libraries with books in various languages or language clubs, can support families raising bilingual children. Additionally, policies promoting inclusive language education that cater to minority and heritage languages can help create equitable opportunities for children like Kaya to achieve linguistic and cultural proficiency.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This case study is limited to one participant, which provides non-generalizable findings. In order to make it more generalisable, a study could be carried out with more participants or cases. Future research could also explore the long-term impact of the strategies identified in this study on multilingual proficiency. Longitudinal studies examining the cognitive, academic, and social outcomes of children raised in multilingual environments can provide valuable insights.

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