

Bilingual First Language Acquisition: a Blessing or a Trap?

PROFDOC ELEEL Programme

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Background

With increasing trend of globalisation, more children have the opportunity to be exposed to more than one language from an early age.

e.g.

- Bilingual parent(s)
- Other family members speak a different language
- Living in a place with complex linguistic landscape
- Family immigration before birth or at very early age etc.



Key Question

Is it good or bad for infants to learn two first languages?

Why Important?

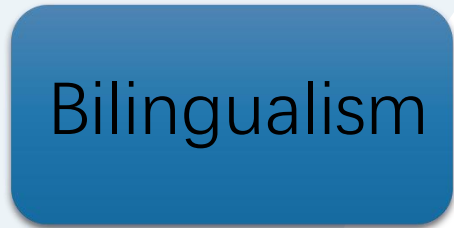
Research gap

- Infants VS adults
(DeAnda, Poulin-Dubois et al. 2016)
- Different mechanisms of language learning

Practical implications

- Find better approaches on infants' bilingual acquisition
- Children's life-long development

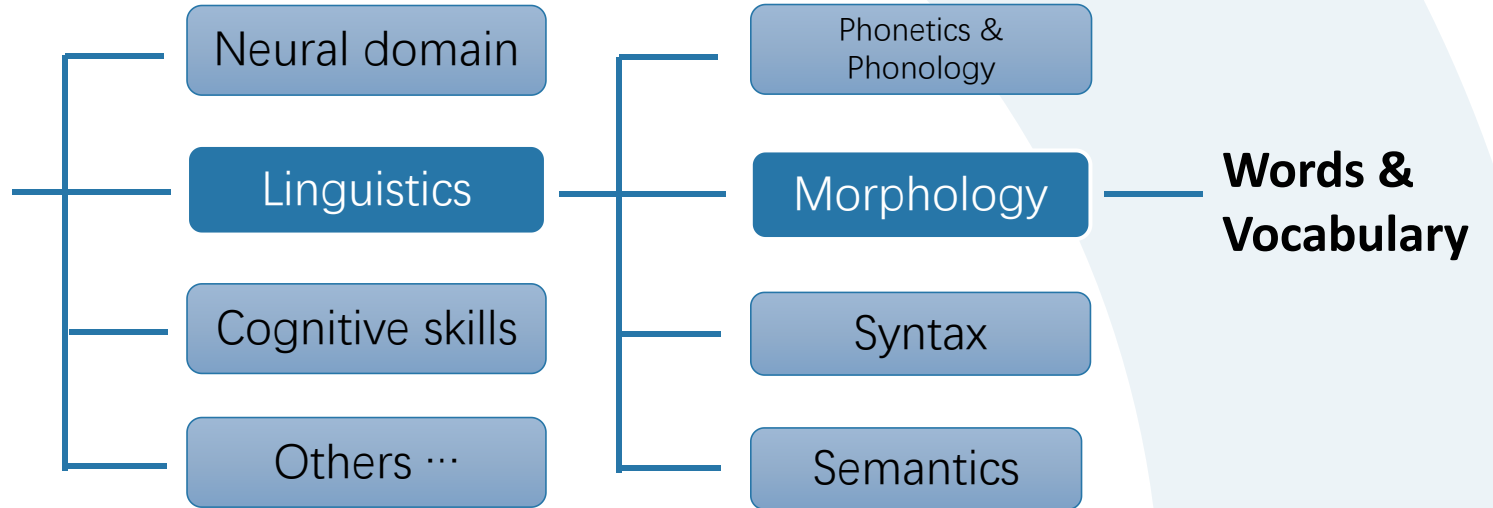
Methods



L1, L2 → SLA
L1=L2 → BFLA



Impacts



Presentation Structure



Background & Key question



BFLA: Definition



Focus: Lexical development and vocabulary of BFLA children



Practical Implications on bilingual children's language acquisition



Rationale



Reference

Definition of BFLA

Bilingual First Language Acquisition (BFLA):

A term that was only properly introduced in the late 1980s (Wei 2010) by scholars such as Meisel (1989) and De Houwer (1990).

Children learn two **first languages** **simultaneously**.

1. **Age**: from birth to preschool (0-6)
 - morphosyntax is generally in place (Ng, Wigglesworth 2007)
 - there is often only one dominant language used in the school
2. **L1=L2**: constant and regular exposure to both languages (Houwer 2009)
3. **Simultaneously**: no time lag between the baby's first hearing of Language A and Language B. (Houwer 2009, and Taura, Taura 2012)



Focus: Lexical development and Vocabulary

1. Within the Language A and Language B

Whether the bilingual infants understand translation equivalents?



Result 1

13-month-old bilingual infants all understand translation equivalents



Result 2

the extent to which children understand translation equivalents is marked by large inter-individual variability



Findings

- BFLA infants can quickly understand doublets in two languages, and
- the more advanced infants' comprehension skills are, the more meanings they know in two languages rather than just one.

(Houwer 2006)

More evidence from neuroscience that corroborates the above findings (Groba, et al. 2019)

Focus: Lexical comprehension and Vocabulary

2. Contrast BFLA children with their monolingual peers

Aspects	Bilingual children	Monolingual peers
Vocabulary size (HOUWER et al. 2014)	13 months-20 months: larger 20 months-36 months: same or smaller	13 months-20 months: smaller 20 months-36 months: same or larger
Words acquiring speed (LEGACY, ZESIGER et al. 2016)	13 months-20 months: same or higher 20 months-36 months: same or lower	13 months-20 months: same or lower 20 months-36 months: same or higher
Conceptual vocabulary (age of 2) (Thordardottir 2011)	Relatively same	Relatively same
Conceptual vocabulary (age of 5) (Thordardottir 2011)	Relatively same	Relatively same
Expressive vocabulary (age of 5) (Thordardottir 2011)	Same or smaller Greater exposure was needed to match	Same or larger

Focus: Lexical comprehension and Vocabulary

2. Contrast BFLA children with their monolingual peers



Findings

- Generally, BFLA does not impede lexical development.
- In early stage, BFLA infants learn words quicker and thus have a larger size of vocabulary compare with monolingual peers.
- In later stage, monolingual infants would catch up in words learning speed and reach relatively same level of lexical development.
- BFLA and monolingual children show no difference in understanding conceptual words, but BFLA children may have less expressive vocabulary.
- Extensive language input (especially expressive vocabulary) is vital for bilingual children. (Other researchers such as Junker and Stockman (2002), Thordardottir (2011) and Hart and Risley (1995) support this argument too.)



Practical Implications

OPOL family language policy

- One-parent-one-language refers to an approach that one parent only speaks one fixed language to the child in early bilingual development.
- By strictly separating the two languages from the beginning, the child would learn both languages easily without too much confusion or mixing of languages.
- More researches are needed on the application of OPOL in the real life. (Barron-Hauwaert 2004)

Rationale using Gibb' Reflective Cycle (1)

Description

With increasing trend of globalisation, more children have the opportunity to be exposed to two or more languages from a very early age or even from birth. For example, in the cases of family members are coming from different speech communities, living in places with complex linguistic landscape (Slavkov 2018), and family immigration etc., it would be able for those children to acquire two first languages simultaneously. This is referred as bilingual first language acquisition (BFLA), which term was only properly introduced in the late 1980s (Wei 2010) by scholars such as Meisel (1989) and De Houwer (1990). Currently, a research gap exists in the infant bilinguals compared with their adult counterparts (DeAnda, Poulin-Dubois et al. 2016).

Feelings

After choosing this topic, I started to think about “what” and “how” questions: In which ways the BFLA will affect those children. Whether BFLA will facilitate or, on the contrary, impede children’s bilingual learning? Are such children expected to understand, read, speak and write their two languages as good as their monolingual peers? Answering those questions are of great significance as it would deliver many practical implications.

Rationale using Gibb' Reflective Cycle (2)

Evaluation

I mainly focused on BFLA implications on children's lexical development – a vital aspect of linguistics. I streamlined findings of many studies and built a model to examine to which level the children grasp their lexical understanding and vocabulary through contrasting not only in between LA and LB, but also in between bilingual and monolingual children. It came to the result that, in general, BFLA would not impede children's lexical development. Compared with monolingual peers, BFLA children could even learn words faster at early stage, and then the speed would slow down to reach relatively same size of vocabulary (Houwer et al. 2014, Legacy, Zesiger et al. 2016). However, while maintaining relatively same size of vocabulary, bilinguals know fewer expressive words, and therefore more exposure to expressive vocabulary would be needed (Thordardottir 2011).

Analysis

After evaluation, I discussed the merits and limitations of the research itself and the research method I used. Many papers I read used the method of comparative analysis which is a good way to make the study more comprehensive and convincing. Moreover, what I found useful in critical assessment is cross-referencing, for example, I drew some evidence from neuroscience to support the argument, through which a more critical and multidimensional analysis would be built. However, due to the time limit of the presentation, the research papers I studied do not extend to the BFLA implications beyond age of 6, and I didn't look into different language combinations, whether in the same language family for example, and its impacts on previous findings.

Rationale using Gibb' Reflective Cycle (3)

Conclusion

The above research has important practical implications. For example, one-parent-one-language strategy (Barron-Hauwaert 2004), because it can reduce the confusion by strictly separating the two languages from the beginning and balance the exposure of two languages. In conclusion, I believe through this presentation and its relevant research work, I have deepened my understanding in this field and I believe the expectation of this task has been well fulfilled.

Action Plan

The skills I learnt from this task including literature research skill, critical assessment through integration and cross-referencing, and presentation skill will be of great use to my future research work. As for more specific in this research field, areas such as the implications of BFLA that extend from children to adulthood or analyse on other linguistic aspects can be further explored.

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