Spanish Journal of Innovation and INTEGRITY

Bilingualism and Literacy Acquisition: A Complex Interrelated Process

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Abstract: The article examines the influence of bilingualism on the process of acquiring literacy. Differences in literacy acquisition in children with early and late bilingualism, the role of the context of language use, and the quality of instruction are analyzed. Particular attention is paid to the influence of environmental support and methodological aspects of teaching bilingual children to read and write. The article highlights the complexity and complexity of this process, highlighting both the potential difficulties and cognitive benefits associated with bilingualism. In conclusion, it is concluded that it is necessary to take into account the characteristics of bilingual development when developing methods for teaching literacy.

Key words: Bilingualism, literacy acquisition, early bilingualism, late bilingualism, cognitive development, language interference, code switching, interlingual communication, quality of learning, environmental support, literacy teaching methods, bilingual education, language development, learning to read, learning to write.

Introduction

The influence of bilingualism on literacy acquisition is a complex and multifaceted topic that attracts the attention of researchers in psycholinguistics, cognitive science, and education. There is a widely held belief that bilingualism may hinder literacy acquisition; however, this assertion is not always supported by empirical data. In fact, the impact of bilingualism on literacy depends on numerous factors, including the age at which a person begins learning languages, the context in which the languages are used, the quality of education, and the level of support provided by the environment. This article examines these factors in detail, analyzing the relationship between bilingualism and literacy acquisition and identifying both the potential challenges and opportunities associated with bilingual development. Special attention will be given to methodological aspects of teaching literacy to bilingual children and ways to ensure their successful linguistic and cognitive development.

Main Body

The impact of bilingualism on literacy acquisition is determined by the complex interplay of various factors, which can be divided into several key groups:

Age of Language Acquisition: A crucial distinction exists between early and late bilingualism.

Early bilingualism, where a child is exposed to two languages from an early age, is often associated with temporary delays in speech development for each language individually. However, numerous studies show that by school age, these delays are resolved, and bilingual children achieve the same level of language development as their monolingual peers. Moreover, some studies suggest cognitive advantages of early bilingualism, such as increased cognitive flexibility and more developed metacognitive skills. These factors may even facilitate faster literacy acquisition.

Late bilingualism, where a second language is learned later in life, is often associated with greater difficulties in literacy acquisition, especially if learning occurs outside a natural language environment. In such cases, ensuring high-quality education and support from teachers and family is essential.

The study of the intellectual development of bilingual children is a significant aspect of bilingualism research. The relationship between language and thought has been noted by researchers since the early 20th century. In the 1920s, early bilingualism was thought to negatively affect children's overall mental development. Subsequent studies, however, demonstrated the positive influence of bilingualism on children's development.

L.S. Vygotsky was one of the first to hypothesize, during a period of negative views on bilingualism, that multilingualism positively impacts thinking and children's mental development. He argued that the ability to express one thought in several languages allows a child to perceive their language as a linguistic system among others, fostering linguistic consciousness and cognitive development.[2]

Classification of Bilingualism by Age:

Late bilinguals acquire a second language during adolescence or adulthood. Some researchers argue that by the age of 6 to 12, children already perceive a second language as unattainable. This has led to the view that becoming bilingual is only feasible after reaching puberty. In this context, the "weaker" language must pass through a "critical period for language acquisition."

Bilinguals are also classified based on their linguistic skills, which fall into four categories: reading, writing, comprehension, and speaking.

Context of Language Use: The way languages are used in the environment plays an essential role.

If languages are distinctly separated by context (e.g., one language at home and another at school), the risk of interference may be reduced, facilitating literacy acquisition in each language. However, code-switching, while often viewed as problematic, may represent a natural stage in language development, especially in children with early bilingualism. It is important to assess code-switching within its context and avoid automatically interpreting it as a negative effect of bilingualism.

Acquiring a second language and using two or more languages in communication alter brain function during speech activities. Simultaneous use of multiple languages requires the rapid execution of cognitive operations such as recognizing speech signals, identifying the code (language), activating it amidst competition between codes, selecting elements from competing codes, switching codes without mixing them, and controlling the semantic realization in the chosen language. [1.17]

Interference Between Languages: Language interference is a marker of cultural contact in the "coexistence" of different linguistic systems. Eliminating cultural accents due to insufficient study occurs much more slowly than overcoming linguistic norm violations. Given the interconnection between cultural and linguistic systems, proficiency in a language eventually minimizes cultural accents. [3.89]

Code-Switching: This refers to transitioning from one language (dialect, style) to another during communication, depending on the conditions of interaction. For code-switching to occur, direct contact between the languages must exist.

Language Contact: Language contacts involve the interaction and mutual influence of languages resulting from the contact of linguistic communities. Language contacts generally occur within specific geographic areas and are influenced by ethnic, historical, and social factors. On an idiomatic level, the result of language contact is interference, while on a broader linguistic level, it is convergence. Intensive and prolonged language contact may lead to the formation of linguistic unions. [5.138]

Quality of Education and Support from the Environment:

The success of literacy acquisition in a bilingual environment largely depends on the quality of education and the level of support from the environment. Access to quality education in both languages, support from parents and teachers, and the use of diverse teaching methods adapted to the characteristics of bilingual development are all critical factors influencing outcomes. If one language is not supported at home or school, this may lead to a significant decline in language skills and difficulties in literacy acquisition in that language.

Proper methodological use of computer technologies in teaching bilingual students with insufficient proficiency in Russian improves the learning process by engaging cognitive activities without requiring rote memorization. This approach facilitates the perception and understanding of the real world, serving as a universal component of the applied teaching technology.

The optimal organization of learning through computer technologies provides the following benefits:

Emphasizing various types of student learning activities.

Encouraging teachers, as directors of learning, to involve students in active cognitive learning rather than merely transmitting information.

Using educational content as a tool for organizing learning activities rather than as the primary goal.

Allowing students to act as agents in the learning process alongside subject teachers, with personal development being one of the educational objectives. [7.28]

Methodological Aspects:

Effective methods for teaching literacy in a bilingual environment must consider the interaction of two linguistic systems. Instruction should focus on developing metacognitive skills, the ability to analyze and compare linguistic structures, and fostering a positive attitude toward both languages. An integrated approach, where languages are interconnected during lessons, may be more effective than separate instruction in each language.

The innovative orientation of education involves applying new methodologies in teaching and presenting information. Using explanatory-illustrative, research-based, and creative methods in teaching expands the possibilities of modern education and enhances its effectiveness. [4.48]

Bilingual education enables the application of innovative pedagogical and methodological approaches from different educational systems, which are essential for teaching and learning in light of educational standards. It stimulates cognition and creativity by combining the experiences of two educational systems, creating a dynamic learning process that encourages active and engaged problem-solving and self-directed learning among students. [6.48]

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