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Some Perspectives on Bilingualism vis-a-vis Language Disorders

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The below information provides a brief summary concerning some recent findings in bilingual research. The material is not a typical research article. However; is intended to generate awareness for educators, speech pathologists and others regarding bilingual research.

Have you ever wondered what speaking more than one language can bring to you?

Language is of course the primary mirror to understand another culture and hence there are obvious cultural and social advantages associated with speaking two or more than two languages (bi/multilingualism). More than the ability to just communicate in one language, being bilingual provides us with a certain amount of broadmindedness, adaptation, tolerance and acceptance in life besides other advantages such as more employment opportunities, etc.

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Historical Perspectives on Bilingualism

Despite the obvious cultural and social advantages, historically bilingualism was often viewed as disadvantageous with many studies showing poor performance in bilingual children especially on a number of verbal and nonverbal intelligence tests. Leading bilingual researcher Grosjean (2011) said that thirty years ago he was confronted with many views prevailed against bilingualism such as an overall delay in cognitive ability, poor vocabulary development in bilinguals etc.

Research in the Past Decade

Recent research has challenged the traditional view against bilingualism. Ellen Bialystok, a pioneer in developmental psychology from York University, argues that being bilingual makes an individual better at certain cognitive processing tasks (such as selective attention and inhibitory control) which are collectively known as executive functions (see Bialystok, 2009 for a detailed review on this). This means that a bilingual individual may be better than a monolingual individual in task requiring more attention, inhibition, problem solving, etc. The most interesting finding from her research is that, these skills develop in early childhood as a result of prolonged experience with two languages and persist till adulthood. Some other remarkable findings from her research demonstrate that bilingualism may even act as a lifelong protective mechanism against cognitive decline and may even prevent the onset of dementia for at least 4 years.

Opposing Views against a Bilingual Advantage

However, there are some opposing views against the story of a bilingual advantage. A 2007 article published in developmental science titled “What did Simon say? Revisiting the bilingual advantage” by Morton and Harper (2007) suggests that the differences in monolingual and bilingual cognitive ability may be an actual reflection of differences in socio-economic status (SES) between monolinguals and bilinguals. They claim that the previous studies that reported a bilingual advantage did not control SES and since the association between wealth and cognitive ability is fairly documented, controlling SES may reduce a bilingual advantage.

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Bialystok (2009) in her response to Morton and Harper (2007) refutes their claim. In what she termed as claiming evidence from non-evidence, she argues that the results of Morton & Harper (2007) cannot be taken into consideration as their experiment suffered from methodological setbacks such as a weak design. Most importantly the children participated in the study were not matched for their ages. It should be also noted that there are a large number of other studies that established a bilingual advantage and substantiated the claim of superior executive functioning for bilinguals on a number of cognitive processing tasks.

Differences in Ethnicity- Indian and Canadian Bilinguals

In another study, Bialystok & Viswanathan (2009) compared the performance of bilingual children from similar SES but with different cultural backgrounds to see if the bilingual advantage is rooted in differences of ethnicity and culture. Bilingual children from India and Canada along with monolingual Canadian children were compared for a number of executive functioning tasks. Irrespective of their ethnicity, both groups of bilinguals outperformed monolinguals on all measures of executive control. It appears, therefore, that bilingualism could be one of the strong factors associated with enhanced cognitive control and other factors such as differences in SES and ethnicity could not give a convincing explanation for a bilingual advantage.

Language Learning Advantage in Bilinguals

There are some other remarkable studies which indicate that a bilingual advantage is not just limited to cognitive processing but may even extend to task requiring language learning such as word learning ability. Kaushanskaya & Marian (2009) suggest that bilinguals consistently outperformed monolinguals while learning the translation of non-words. Research in this direction will provide an understanding concerning the untapped language abilities in bilinguals and also provide us with likely explanations behind an association between executive functioning and language learning abilities.

Bilingualism Rescues Poor Children

In a more recent study, researchers have found that bilingualism enriches the poor children. Engel de Abreu et al (2012) examined executive functioning in monolingual children and bilingual children from low-income families and found better performance for poor children in measures of cognitive tasks. What in fact bilingualism does is not just facilitating a cognitive advantage, but preventing the poor children from a cognitive handicap which would have been otherwise inevitable as a result of poor living conditions and wealth.

Advantage or Disadvantage - How does it Matter to a Speech Language Pathologist (SLP)?

There is, of course, a lot of evidence for a bilingual advantage but it will be interesting to examine the specific relationship between bilingualism, cognitive flexibility and language learning. This is particularly relevant for speech language pathologists as many of us often encounter bilingual patients with significant language and cognitive impairments.

There are also other issues which we face in our daily therapy settings. It was once assumed that speaking two languages with a bilingual child will result in language confusion and may further boost overall language impairment and cause a delay in language development. This argument is overly contentious and it is time to dispel such myths.

The argument that bilingualism causes language delay, especially specific language impairment (SLI) is now debunked by researchers like Johanne Paradis from University of Alberta (Read Paradis, J., 2010 the interface between bilingual development and specific language impairment for a detailed review on this). Hence we have enough evidence to suggest that bilingualism neither causes a language delay nor result in language confusion rather it only gives certain advantages on specific cognitive processing skills.

However, irrespective of the overwhelming evidence, it is often observed that educators and therapists alike suppress the home language of a bilingual patient and encourages speaking in a non-native and less proficient language (In Indian context, this preference is mostly for English). It is important to understand that parents or caretakers of a bilingual patient should

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also speak in the language in which therapy is carried out. Otherwise it will lead to natural language suppression at home which will further reduce the individual's opportunity to communicate with siblings, spouse, parents, grandparents, etc.

Indian Context - Bilingualism and Language Disorders

Researchers like Chengappa (2009) have argued over the years that even in worst cases with cognitive impairment (such as children with mental retardation) bilingualism may not be detrimental. In her Keynote address at International symposium on bilingualism, Netherlands (2009), she suggested that there is a strong need to nurture both the languages from the beginning and it will be beneficial in the long run (for children with mental retardation, autism, SLI, etc.). She alerts that Indian researchers should be more aware about the language differences as it has already caused a considerable amount of miscommunication among speech pathologists. For example, agrammatic patients make a number of omission errors in English whereas the errors may appear in the form of substitutions in richly inflected Indian languages. Therefore the severity of English Broca's aphasics may be more than their non-English speaking counterparts. Such issues related to language differences need to be addressed during the assessment of a bilingual patient.

Gist of What Has Been Discussed So Far

Earlier research often viewed bilingualism as disadvantageous and this led to the assumption that bilinguals suffered from a cognitive-verbal handicap.

Recent evidence suggests that bilinguals exhibit a superior performance on a number of cognitive processing tasks. However, the conflicting view indicates that the reported bilingual advantage could be a reflection of differences in participants' socio economic status.

But evidence also suggests that differences in SES may not be a convincing explanation for a bilingual advantage. Bilingualism has been found to prevent cognitive handicap in poor children from low-income families and irrespective of SES, ethnicity and culture bilinguals showed an advantage.

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Recently, studies that have attempted to disentangle the relationship between bilingualism and language learning have demonstrated a bilingual advantage in tasks like novel word learning (e.g., Kaushanskaya & Marian, 2009).

Message for Indian Speech Language Pathologists

Assessment and treatment approaches in a bilingual patient should be carried out only after acquiring specific understanding about the languages involved (at each level - phonology, semantics, morpho-syntax). The treatment approaches should not follow merely an Anglo-centric approach.

Any tendency to suppress the home language should be discarded. Such trends should not be encouraged even in therapy settings. A language impaired bilingual individual should be allowed to communicate freely in both the languages. There should be a strong need to nurture both active languages in a bilingual patient.

Some Broad Interesting Future Research Questions

There is a need to understand the interaction between specific cognitive processing skills and bilingualism. Bilingual cognitive advantages and its impact on language learning ability is a promising area for future research.

Case specific research is needed to understand how bilingualism interacts with language impairment such as autism, SLI, aphasia and hearing impairment. It will be also interesting to explore whether bilingualism can act as a protective mechanism against cognitive decline in bilingual individuals with aphasia.

In Indian context, there is a need to understand multilingualism. More than bilingualism, we have all the necessary conditions to explore multilingualism and its impact on cognitive-linguistic abilities. It will be very interesting to examine whether bilingualism can prevent a cognitive decline in Indian children from low-income families. Therefore an interesting direction for future research would be to assess various cognitive-linguistic abilities in children from low income families in particular for tasks involving inhibitory control and

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language learning abilities (e.g., novel word learning). This will have a lot of important consequences for therapeutic assessment and intervention.

Take Home Message

There is nothing disadvantageous about being bilingual. Bilingualism in fact enriches culturally, socially and positively influences certain cognitive processing skills.

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