

Dynamics of Bilingual Journey: A Case Study

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Abstract

This essay explores the language learning experiences of two bilingual people from different culture and educational background and evaluates it in the light of Baker's (2011) 'Dimension of Bilingualism'. It also investigates the social, political, geographical and educational issues that influence this language learning since bilingual experience is unique to every individual. It is believed that the study will contribute to develop critical insight about the uniqueness of bilingual journey and help language educators and researchers to adapt more individualistic and sophisticated way to deal with the complex issue in bilingual educational settings.

Keywords: Bilingualism, Bilingual Education, Dimension, Language.

Introduction

We are living in an increasingly globalised world where interdependence among nations is growing day by day. Thus, the ability of speaking two or more languages definitely has some benefits. Bilingualism works as a bridge between two different parts of the world, two different culture and lifestyle. Thus it changes one's view about the other culture leading one close to the other. Bilingual ability is not only essential in the countries like America, Canada, Australia, India or China where there are multilingual communities; it is also important to any monolingual country since the advancement of information technology brings the people from every corner of the world closer to each other. So definitely, it is the bilingual or multilingual people who will be able to keep pace with the advancement of the world and celebrate the progress. Bilingualism increases ones knowledge, intercultural understanding thereby minimizes misconception, prejudices and misunderstanding. Thus it creates more opportunity to become successful in the globalised world.

According to Edward (2004) "Everyone is bilingual". His all inclusive definition of bilingualism suggests that whoever knows a few words from another language, can be

regarded as bilingual. However, bilingualism is broadly defined as a person's ability to listen, speak, read and write in two languages with some degree of proficiency (Laws, Kilgour, & Kasabov, cited in Kabil 2005). But the idea of Bilingualism is not confined to the linguistic ability rather it emphasises on the regular use of language. Grosjean (mentioned in Baker, 2011 p. 4) argues that "bilinguals are those who use two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives". Again Baker (2011) mentions another difference i.e. language ability and language use by the bilinguals. According to him, some people know two languages well but tend to speak only one while other people may regularly use two languages but the competency of the two languages may vary. On the other hand, some people use one language for conversation and another for reading and writing. Thus, according to Baker (2011), bilingual experience varies in case of every person depending on degree and function of language.

However, Baker (2011) points out some dimensions of bilingualism that need to be considered while assessing any bilingual case. To assess the bilingual journey of the subjects some of the prominent factors like – age, domain, ability, culture and context have been used.

Methodology

As a method of data collection, 'Interview' technique has been used because it provides the opportunity to collect authentic and natural data. Two participants from different culture and educational backgrounds have been interviewed. To de-identify the interviewees in this study a pseudonym is given to each of them. (Participant 1 is named as Sharmila and participant 2 as Osama).

A Brief Discussion about the Background of the Participants and Their Bilingual Journey

Participant 1 (Sharmila): She was born and brought up in India. Her mother tongue is Malayalam and her second and third languages are respectively English and Hindi. Thirty-four years old Sharmila holds both Indian and Australian citizenship. She has migrated to Australia ten years ago with her husband who had a good prospect in Australia as a doctor. Sharmila has completed Bachelor of Arts, Postgraduate degree in Primary Education and is currently working as a teacher in a primary school of Melbourne. Being a bilingual, Sharmila

wants to bring up her two daughters as bilingual so that they can gain knowledge and wisdom from both Australian and Indian culture and never be uprooted from their cultural identity and values. Since Malayalam is not offered in the LOTE program, she wants her daughters to learn Hindi as a second language.

Participant 2 (Osama): Osama was born in Kabul, Afghanistan. His mother tongue is Dari and his second language is Pashto, another official language of Afghanistan. Later he learnt English, Urdu and Bahasa Malay. His language learning experience is greatly shaped by socio-political and educational factors. After the Soviet Union invasion in Afghanistan in 1979, Osama with his family settled in Pakistan as refugees where he learnt Urdu to continue basic communication and later for educational purpose. They remained in Pakistan until the collapse of the communist regime in 1992 when they could return home. But the internal conflict and foreign influence in the socio-economic and political arena of the country set new fire on the flame which compelled them to take refuge in Pakistan again in 1994. In 1996 Osama went to Malaysia for higher study. There he had to learn Malay since it was compulsory for his degree. After completion of his Masters in Information Technology, Osama started to work in Malaysia where his son picked up Malay as his first language. However, the parents tried to maintain the hereditary language (Dari) of the child at home. But finally he with his family has migrated to Australia where they had to equip themselves again in another language – English.

Result

The analysis of the data clearly shows that bilingual experience varies with every individual which conforms to Baker's theory. Here the term bilingual is used to mean multilingual persons since both of my subjects are multilingual. The analysis of the data is presented in the light of Baker's (2011) dimension of bilingualism.

Age

Age is an important factor in second language acquisition. There is a lot of controversy among the researchers regarding the influence of age in SLA. Some researchers opine that the lower the age at which a second language is learnt, the greater the long-term proficiency in that language. But others hold a different view. They argue that older children

and young adults learn a language more efficiently and quickly than young children because of their cognitive superiority (Baker 2011, P.124).

However, in case of both participants of this study, the age of first language acquisition is 1-2 year when their language faculty was first developing. Sharmila started learning her second language (English) at the age of five as she was admitted into an English Medium school. She started learning Hindi, her third language, at the age of seven because it is the official language of India. She needed to know Hindi to communicate with the people other than her community.

On the other hand Osama started to learn his second language Pasto at the age of six and third language English at the age of eleven (in secondary school). And he has learnt Malay when he was adult. So, both of them can be categorized as consecutive or sequential bilingual since according to Baker “Sequential acquisition of bilingualism refers to the situation where a child or adult acquires a first language, and later becomes proficient in the second language and sometimes further languages” (Baker, 2011, p. 116).

Osama believes that age has some influence on accent because young children can acquire native like pronunciation which is difficult for adults but age can not affect acquiring mastery on second language. His comment on age creates a resonance with the statement of Marinova-Todd *et al.* “age does influence language learning, but primarily because it is associated with social, psychological, educational and other factors that can affect L2 proficiency, not because of any critical period that limits the possibility of language learning by adults' Marinova-Todd *et al.* (mentioned in Baker 2011 p. 125)

While evaluating the relationship between age and language learning, Sharmila says that *“It is better to start learning a second language at early age but this does not necessarily mean that the person will be successful in acquiring the language. There are other factors that influence successful acquisition. Motivation to learn and opportunity to use the language regularly impact highly on successful acquisition.”*

This is very true. In many EFL settings it is found that bilingual education is creating only passive bilingual. For example, in Bangladeshi curriculum English has been introduced

in the earliest grade i.e. in class 1 from 1991(www.moedu.gov.bd , 2014). But still Bangladeshi bilinguals are passive bilingual. Their receptive skills are good to some extent but productive skills specially speaking skill is very limited because they have no opportunity to use the language outside the classroom and there is no assessment of oral proficiency in the curriculum. The emphasis is only on language form rather than language use.

Domain

Domain, as defined by Baker (2011), is the context of acquiring and using the language. Context largely varies in case of every bilingual. “An individual’s different languages are often used for different purposes. For example, one language is used at home and another in school” Baker (2011, p.3).

Sharmila has learnt English in a formal setting, in an English medium school where she has learnt English as a compulsory subject. Not only that the medium of instruction of every class was English. She further studied English in university. Her learning of Hindi was both formal and informal. Since it is the national language of India, she had to learn it as a compulsory subject. Besides she was able to pick the language from her surroundings- street, market and other places of social gathering.

Regarding the use of English Sharmila says that she used to speak English frequently while she was in India. She says, *“Having good command over English is a matter of prestige in India. It represents better education, better culture and higher intellect. Indians who have good English skills like to show it off; in their conversation they frequently switch from the local language to English.”*

As India is a multi- lingual country, English enjoys the position of second language for maintaining social integration. It also ensures better career development and job opportunity. Her speech highlights Indian peoples’ code mixing and code switching tendency which is very natural behavior of bilingual persons.

In the report of National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT 2006) it has been said that “English in India today is a symbol of people’s aspirations for

quality in education and fuller participation in national and international life” (NCERT 2006, p.1).

This enthusiasm of learning English in the national life of India resembles the findings of Mejâia and Marie (2002) who state that the countries that have a colonial history and the legacy of a colonial world language like India and the independent nations of Africa, consider using international language as matter of social prestige and vital to the modernisation of the economy and to the development of science and technology.

About her present context (Australia) Sharmila says that English has almost replaced her mother tongue. She can hardly use Malayalam though sometimes she uses Hindi to communicate with the Indian migrant community in Australia. Malaylam is uses only to contact with her family in India over the phone.

Osama too has learnt English as a compulsory subject in secondary school. In Afghanistan English is taught as a foreign language. His primary motivation to learn English was to get a good job. Unlike Sharmila, Osama faced many difficulties in learning English. This is mostly because he has got little opportunity to listen and speak English until he went to Malaysia.

When asked about the motivation for learning his second language Pasto, his answer was *“Afghanistan is a multilingual country. There are almost forty different language communities with nearly two hundred dialects. To communicate with most of the language communities I needed both Pasto and Dari, the two official languages of Afghanistan.”*

Here his motivation for learning Pasto is to socialize himself with the wide language community, i.e. the ethnic groups. This is in line with Edward (2004) who argues that speaking a particular language can assert ones belonging to a particular language community. In case of multilingual communities Edwards opines, “....membership in more than one speech community could produce more immediately observable result at the individual level; if two or more languages are exercising some influence, then an individual could conceivably display an interesting pattern woven from several linguistic threads, a pattern which might look quite distinctive against a more unidimensional one (Edward 2004, pp.23-24).

Ability

According to Baker (2011) the ability of using language varies with every bilingual- some bilingual actively speak and write in both language i.e. active bilingual but others have just receptive ability i.e. passive bilingual. A person's ability in different languages also varies. While answering about the question of ability, Sharmila says that her ability (both receptive and productive) to use English is of advanced level. She considers herself as active bilingual of English but a passive bilingual of Hindi since her productive skill of Hindi is intermediate and usability of Hindi is limited.

On the other hand, Osama considers himself as an active bilingual of English and passive bilingual of Urdu and Malay in which his ability is intermediate and beginner level respectively. But he thinks that he was a passive bilingual of English before he migrated to Malaysia because he did not have much opportunity to use English and his proficiency was not up to the mark. His language learning was confined to classroom only. Baker (2011) indicated that "opportunities for participation in the second language may be rare". But Osama had the receptive ability that is why whenever he has got the opportunity to use it, he has emerged as an active bilingual. Regarding the English teaching standard in Afghanistan Cannon (1963, p. 316) mentions, "The instructors are primarily Afghans who labor under the serious disadvantage of being the only one who are exposing the students to English.....The child seldom has contact with natives. The intonation pattern and the word order of his teacher may be incomprehensible to native speaker of English".

This is a common scenario in many target removed context where Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been introduced but there is no significant improvement in the ability of the students. Teachers' low linguistic proficiency is one of the important reasons behind that.

Culture

Bilinguals become more or less bicultural or multicultural especially those who have acquired the second language along with the socio-cultural experience, for example, the migrants. Because in such context language learning is accompanied by the process of acculturation that bridges their old and new cultural experience and help them behave in a

culturally appropriate way (Baker 2011). Each language one learns brings with it a set of values, beliefs, and attitudes that belong to the members of a language community at a given time. In answer to the question whether learning a language also includes its culture Sharmila says :

“Of course; language is used for communicating in the society. So a person should know the social norms otherwise there is a risk of misunderstanding or offending the listener. A second language speaker should have the idea how to address someone, make request, apologize or express gratitude because these norms are culture specific”.

Osama too believes that second language learner should know the culture of the target language so that he can behave in a socially appropriate manner.

It is true that linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language (Krasner 1999). Linguistic knowledge has to be associated with cultural knowledge or pragmatics.

The concept of bilingualism and identity are closely connected. As Baker (2011) mentioned “We construct our identities yet they are also created and confined by other players, situations and unfolding play. Second language acquisition is such a play and it relates to identity formation” (Baker, 2011, p. 132). Again, Edwards (2004) opines bilingualism links an individual to more than one ethnocultural community. According to Edwards (2004, P. 27), “the deeper the linguistic and cultural borrowing into another community, the greater the impact upon identity” So, the participants were asked if bilingualism has affected their identity. Sharmila answered “No. But it has changed my attitude by broadening my knowledge drawn from two cultures while Osama thinks that bilingualism has made him a world citizen.

Context

Both participants were asked if it is possible to keep your culture even when you don't speak your own mother tongue. Sharmila answered “*It is hard to maintain the culture if we don't speak the language and live abroad where there are very few people sharing the*

same culture. I think my daughters will be deviated from my culture to join the mainstream culture”.

So, their context is a subtractive context. They cannot speak their mother tongue and will lose interest for her culture.

But Osama holds a different view. He believes that it is possible to be affected by the dominant culture but it does not necessarily mean that we have to lose our own culture. To him culture is associated with religious values which one should never lose. This, according to Baker (2011), explains an additive bilingual situation where the addition of a second language and culture cannot replace or the first language and culture.

Conclusion

This essay explores the bilingual journey of two persons who are chosen from different culture and educational background. They are also from different gender. However, their bilingual experience shows that every bilingual case is different. It is also found that Bakers dimension of bilingualism cannot cover every individual case. There should have been some more dimensions like motivation, attitude, identity, language etc. From their experience it is also found that some bilinguals are losing their language and culture for being exposed to a dominant language and culture. Some of them avoid their native language intentionally because minority languages are devalued and treated with low, inferior status by the society. But for others the deviation is due to lack of opportunity to practice the language. However, this is not a positive sign because language once lost cannot be resurrected and its loss takes with it culture and customs and way of seeing the world through its use of metaphor, idiom and grammatical structuring (Harmer, 2007).

Language and cultural diversity should be maintained by promoting bilingual education.

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Appendix

Background Questions

- 1-Gender:.....
- 2-Age:
- 3-Nationality:.....
4. Country of origin:
5. Mother tongue:.....
- 6.Educational Background:.....

Interview Questions

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1. What languages do you speak?
First language:
Second language:
Third language:
Others:
2. Where did you learn these languages?
First language:
Second language:
Third language:
Others:
3. When did you learn these languages?
First language:
Second language:
Third language:
Others:
4. Do you think that second language should be introduced at an early stage of life? If yes, why?
5. What are the factors that motivated you to learn other languages?
6. Have you ever faced any difficulties while learning these languages? What are those?
7. How have you managed to overcome these difficulties?
8. Where do you use the following languages (context: home, outside, work, others):
Mother tongue:
First language:
Second language:
Third language:
Others:
9. Have you shifted to another language? Why?
10. Is it important to live in a foreign country to acquire its language?
11. How often do you use your mother tongue?
12. Is your mother tongue still your inner language? Do you think, dream in that language?
13. Do you feel that your second or third language has affected the ability of using your first language? Can you give an example?
14. How do you assess your language proficiency level in each language?

15. Have you ever heard the word bilingualism?
 16. Do you consider yourself as a bilingual person?
 17. It is said that bilingual people are bicultural- how much is it applicable to you?
 18. Has your bilingual identity affected your own cultural identity?
 19. Has your bilingual ability changed your view about the world?
 20. Has it brought you any privilege or prestige in the society?
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