Getting Children Started in A Second Language

Jie Shi
The English Language Program
International Christian University, Tokyo, Japan
shi@icu.ac.jp

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The phenomenon of bilingualism is considered as a natural product of human contact (Hoffmann, 1-3). With the increasing number of bilinguals in the present world community, the complexity of bilingualism embraces not only the field of language teaching but also psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics (Baker, 5). The multi-perspective nature of bilingualism and bilingual education makes it one of the most challenging tasks of teachers and researchers of above-mentioned areas. As summarized by Beardsmore, “Bilingualism as a concept has open-ended semantics.” (1)

It is natural that a bilingual needs to function a social environment or a speech community, which makes bilingualism an individual as well as a social phenomenon (Hamers and Blanc, 6). Romaine claims “Bilingualism cannot be understood except in relation to social context.” (xiii) Bilinguals interact and function in speech communities where languages are accepted, maintained, shifted and sometimes lost (Romaine, 38-50; Grosjean, 102). The discussion on diglossia (Ferguson, 232) or the relationship between the ‘High’ and ‘Low’ languages used in a speech community is beneficial to the increasing bilingual and multilingual communities in the world where the domain languages shift along with the changes of the cultures and societies.

One way to study bilingualism is to divide it into two types: infant or early bilingualism and adult or late bilingualism. It is the former that the presenter of this paper is concerned of. Like adult bilinguals, infant bilinguals also need a supporting environment in their pursuit of becoming a bilingual (Zentella, 1-16). In fact, the social and family support is even more crucial to the “grooming” of infant bilinguals whose language abilities largely depends on the immediate surrounding. In contrast with adult bilingualism, however, there seems to be less research done on children learning and
acquiring two or more languages, which entails several possible reasons: one is the fact that in most of the bilingual families, parents are not teachers or researchers themselves; others may be related to the difficulty of following a young bilingual longitudinally in order to collecting reliable data. Thus, much more cases should be analyzed and collated in order to identify the patterns and systems of infant bilinguals.

To pursue the factors which influence and help maintain infant bilingualism especially focusing on the involvement and the attitude of bilingual parents, the presenter of this paper will introduce a case study of a bilingual Saturday Afternoon School organized by a group of teacher-parents. This bilingual education project is also a research project supported by the Research Institute of Education of the International Christian University. The organization of the School, the parents’ attitude and roles, children’s attitudes towards bilingual education, the curriculum and materials development, and children’s language attainment will be discussed.

References