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## Bilingualism in Indonesian Children's Language Acquisition

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### Abstract

*Language acquisition and development are two important phases in a child's life. Hundreds of ideas have been tested to build a scientific explanation for how children may understand and produce the languages of their environment. Language intake, exposure volume and duration, and grammatical complexity all appear to have a role in influencing children's language development. These intricacies become even more complicated as children differ greatly from one another. It's on top of the several languages the children pick up along the route. Some children speak only one language (monolingual), whereas others speak multiple languages (bilingual). Apart from the endless debate about whether being bilingual is a blessing or a curse, it is fascinating to study how those children finally end up being bilinguals, either through acquisition or learning. Therefore, this article aims at portraying the phenomenon of bilingualism in Indonesian children's language acquisition by looking at the strengths and weaknesses of being bilinguals, the important factors in second language acquisition and learning, and the strategies for second language acquisition and learning. In conclusion, to be bilingual, a child has undergone a very long process. Even though some experts are still debating whether bilingualism is beneficial or even harmful for their cognitive, psychological, and linguistic competence, children nowadays are created to be bilinguals even since they were born. As a result, those children grow up as multilingual children who are ready to cope with the dynamic of the environmental changes around them.*

**Keywords:** *bilingualism; language acquisition; factors; strategies*

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## Introduction

If we pay attention to people's conversations around us, we will find that it is now prevalent to listen to people employing more than one language in their conversations. The reason for doing it may vary, from merely showing solidarity to reflecting social status. These people who can express themselves in more than one language are called bilinguals and the phenomenon that some people become bilinguals is known as bilingualism. While it is interesting to study bilingualism possessed by people in general, it is even more interesting and challenging to explore the phenomenon of bilingualism possessed by children.

In general, bilingualism is defined as a person's ability to understand and produce two different languages (Crystal, 2003; O'Grady, 2010; Parker & Riley, 2010; Saville-Troike, 2012; Steinberg, Nagata, & Aline, 2001). This definition supports the most well-known definition of bilingualism given by Bloomfield (1933) who defines bilingualism as the 'native-like' control of two languages. This term "native-like" may sound too heavy, that is why some other experts then formulate more realistic definitions, such as Titone (1972) as quoted by Hamers & Blanc (2004), who claim bilingualism is the individual's capacity to speak a second language while following the concepts and structures of that language rather than paraphrasing his or her mother tongue. Then, Spolsky (1998) defines a bilingual as a person who has some functional ability in a second language. This ability may vary from one bilingual to another. However, Steinberg et al. (2001) explain further that bilingualism does not include bidialectalism, which is a person's ability to use one language in some different dialects. Therefore, when we say that a person is bilingual, he/she must be able to express him/herself in two or more different languages.

In Indonesia, bilingualism is not something new. The history of bilingualism in Indonesia dates back to the period when Indonesia was colonized by some foreign governments. Lauder (2008) describes that when Indonesia was colonized by the Dutch, many Indonesian people became bilinguals of

Indonesian and Dutch, especially the scholars. During this period, English was taught beginning from Junior High School (MULO = Meer Uitgebreid Lager Onderwijs or extended elementary school). As Dutch is akin to English linguistically, and all of the students who entered MULO had a solid foundation in Dutch when they studied at the elementary school, English was relatively easy to master. As a result of quality education, MULO graduates could speak, read, and write in both English and Dutch, besides Indonesian.

Then, during the Japanese occupation for three and a half years, the education system was radically changed. No more schools for the elite. It was an egalitarian system. Instead of Dutch, Japanese was taught intensively as it was designed to become the second language in Indonesia. The Indonesian language was to play a crucial role in education as well as in society at large. Some educated people living at this age then became bilinguals of Indonesian and Japanese. When Japan was conquered by America and the Dutch left Indonesia for good, many scholars still mastered English, Dutch, Japanese, and Indonesian. However, Dutch and Japanese speakers decreased from time to time. English, on the other hand, was established in 1967 to be the foreign language of Indonesia and taught in Indonesian schools (Zein, Sukyadi, Hamied, & Lengkanawati, 2020). From that description, we can see clearly that bilingualism, or multilingualism, is common in Indonesia. Besides English, Japanese, and Dutch, Indonesian people also possess some local languages like Javanese, Sundanese, Madurese, and many others. Therefore, children who are born in Indonesian communities usually, by nature, will become bilinguals.

Hamers & Blanc (2004) define a bilingual community as a linguistic community where several individuals in that community are bilinguals and two languages are in contact. This will result that two languages can be used in the same interaction. Similarly, Fishman (1971), as quoted by Platt & Platt (1975) suggests that bilingualism can only happen in a complex speech community which causes the people in that community to become aware to acquire several languages. Furthermore, Gumperz (1982) also mentions that bilingual

people usually use their own idioms for in-group communication and the common language for their interaction and communication with outsiders. In this case, the bilinguals have a repertoire of domain-related rules of language choice (Spolsky, 1998), meaning that bilinguals can choose which language he/she is going to use. In other words, since the members of a bilingual community usually vary in the capacity of mastering the languages used in the community, those people have to be intelligibly able to set a condition where they can communicate effectively. This condition then leads bilinguals to switch between codes.

In code-switching studies, we recognize at least two codes, or languages, are involved. The dominant language is often called the matrix language. Myers-Scotton (2009) states that the base language is called the Matrix Language (ML) and the contributing language (or languages) is called the Embedded Language (EL). The ML is dominant and supplies the morpho-syntactic frame of the clause or sentence and the EL has the auxiliary function and supplies content morphemes that are embedded into the ML. In the context of nowadays Indonesian children, Zen & Apriana (2015) reveal that the Matrix Language of the children is mostly Indonesian. Many of them use Indonesian at home and their first encounter with local languages is at school. The result of this study also strengthens the belief that most Indonesian children are bilinguals.

Bilingualism can be viewed from different perspectives, which then lead to different classifications. When we look at bilingualism from the point of view of their first and second language competence, we will have Balanced Bilinguals and Dominant Bilinguals. According to Butler & Hakuta (2006), we say a child is a balanced bilingual if he/she has an equal competence between his/her first and second language. Then, if the competence of one language is better than the other, we call this bilingual a dominant bilingual. Steinberg et al. (2001) also propose another classification, depending on the time of the acquisition or learning. When a child acquires or learns his/her first and second language at the same time, we call this child a simultaneous

bilingual. On the other hand, when one language is acquired or learned after the other, we can say that this child is a sequential bilingual. Interestingly, each of these classifications is having both strengths and weaknesses.

### **Bilingual Children: Strengths and Weaknesses**

Bilingualism in a child is actually not a rare case anymore. Many kinds of research have been done to reveal the language acquisition of a child in terms of their bilingualism. Werker (2012) believes that more than 50% of children population in the world are bilinguals and they get the exposure to both languages from birth. However, issues concerning whether bilingualism is beneficial or harmful to a child's language acquisition and development keep haunting not only language experts but also parents. Crystal (2003) is among those experts who believe that bilingualism carries negative consequences for children's language acquisition due to the incapability of the brain to process two different language systems at the same time. In other words, bilingualism in a child will slow down the process of acquisition of the child's first and second languages.

A similar reaction toward bilingualism is also shown by Meisel (2006) who finds a negative impact of bilingualism on the children's cognitive, psychological, and linguistic competence. Kennison (2014) supports the idea and claims that one common concern among parents who are raising bilingual children is that the children will be confused learning two languages at the same time and will mix up the two languages. When the bilingual children are mixing up their languages and later figuring out that the two languages are separate entities, it could cause them to lag behind their monolingual peers in the long term. This is known as the Fusion Hypothesis (Meisel, 1989 in Kennison, 2014).

On the other hand, a study conducted by Thordardottir (2015) shows that bilingual children can perform equally well as those monolingual children, as long as those bilingual children receive equal exposure to

both languages. However, children with unequal exposure to both languages show unequal performance across languages and scored significantly lower than monolinguals. A previous yet similar study was conducted by Peal and Lambert (1962), Bruck, Lambert, and Tucker (1976), and Bain & Yu (1980) which are elaborated in Steinberg et al. (2001). Peal and Lambert (1962) had carried out an intelligence test for 164 primary school students, some of whom were monolinguals while some others were bilinguals. The result shows that the achievements of bilingual children surpass the achievements of monolinguals. The conclusion drawn referring to the result of the experiment is that children's bilingualism enriches their mental and cognitive competence. Another test was carried out by Bruck, Lambert, and Tucker (1976) measuring creativity and language competence. The test was given to a group of monolingual students and a group of bilinguals at a total immersion program school of English and French. Again, the result shows that bilingual students achieve better scores than monolinguals in terms of creativity. In addition, the second language competence of the bilingual students is almost native-like. Then, an experiment done by Bain and Yu (1980) on a group of bilingual children from various countries (Alberta, Canada, Alsace, France, and Hong Kong) also reveal a fundamental finding that bilingual children are better in cognitive performance compared to the monolinguals.

Regarding the cognitive performance of bilingual children, recent researches show that bilingualism appears to speed up the children's cognitive processing as well as their ability to adjust to environmental changes. Not only is that, in the long term, bilingualism is also believed to be able to prevent cognitive decline. This will then protect the brain from the symptom of dementia (Bialystok, Craik, & Luk, 2012; Byrd, 2012; Marian & Shook, 2012).

In the context of simultaneous and sequential bilingualism, Nicoladis & Genesee (1997) point out that simultaneous bilinguals show the same patterns of morpho-syntactic development as monolinguals, for example in the use of finite verbs, subject pronouns, and verbal negation. In addition, David & Wei

(2008) and Junker & Stockman (2002) argue that those young bilinguals, just like young monolingual learners, tend to omit function words and grammatical morphology during the two-word stage and in some of their three-word stage and even in their multi-word utterances. However, many experts say that sequential bilinguals tend to have some difficulties with vocabulary, morphology, and syntax, due to the different grammatical structures between the languages. Fortunately, these difficulties do not cause a significant delay in the language development of those sequential bilingual children unless they have their own personal impairment.

Despite the positive or negative impact of bilingualism on children's language acquisition, many experts are also keen on studying the criteria of second language competence. In this context, Steinberg et al. (2001) argue that this competence can be measured from some aspects, such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Meanwhile, Bachman and Palmer (1996) in Butler & Hakuta (2006) categorize competence into two domains, real-life domains, and language instructional domains. According to them, a bilingual does not necessarily have to be competent in both domains.

Apart from the endless debate about whether being bilingual is a blessing or a curse, it is fascinating to study how those children finally end up being bilinguals, either through acquisition or learning. Therefore, before we go further on the factors that can influence the success of a child's second language acquisition and learning, we need to have first a clear distinction between the term "acquisition" and "learning". According to Dorsch (2011), acquisition usually means an unconscious process of absorbing a language while learning means a more conscious process of getting the ability to understand and produce a language. From this definition, we can now hold a clear cut between acquisition and learning, that an acquisition process is unconscious while a learning process is conscious, even though in many cases, the two terms are usually interchangeable.

## Important Factors in Second Language Acquisition and Learning

Children's language acquisition has always been a very interesting yet challenging field of study. Our curiosity about how children acquire language, or languages, has led us to countless investigations and conclusions. Many language experts believe that children's language acquisitions start even before the babies are born. Babies can hear the voices coming from outside their mother's womb. Later, as soon as they come into the world, they hear and enjoy the voices that they hear from their parents and other caregivers, including their older siblings. Then, from their birth up to the age of five years old, children develop language very quickly. Their language mostly begins to develop via repetition and imitation of their surroundings. Experts believe that from the age of two years old, children are usually able to produce simple phrases, and by the age of three, they should be able to produce full sentences. By four years old, they should be able to produce full talk, although they may still make some grammatical errors. Then, by the age of five, they should be able to produce basic language.

Rice (1989) mentions that language acquisition has three major components. The first one is the language itself, the second one is the child and his/her abilities to acquire language, and the third one is the environmental setting. These three components contribute to the success of a child's language acquisition, either for their first, or second language acquisition. Then, Steinberg et al. (2001) mention the three factors that can influence the success of a child's second language acquisition: 1) psychological factors, 2) social factors, and 3) other psychological factors. The psychological factor has other three sub-factors, intellectual, memory, and motoric capacity. According to them, the intellectual factor carries two basic patterns in second language acquisition and learning, they are explication and induction. The first pattern refers to a conscious effort done by parents or teachers in introducing the structure of a second language to the child. Here we can highlight that this explication pattern belongs to a learning process because it involves a conscious act.

On the other hand, the second pattern, induction, is an acquisition process because it refers to a "self-discovery" method where the child is seeking the structure of the second language by him/herself through daily exposure, especially in the family. From the child's daily activities, such as listening, watching, asking questions, and answering questions, he/she can draw a regularity as well as variety in a certain system of language. Later on, they will adopt and adapt this system and use it in their own context.

The second sub-factor, memory, is also a very influential psychological factor in the process of second language acquisition and learning. Steinberg et al. (2001) strengthen a hypothesis that children have a marvelous capacity for storing, processing, and retrieving language data. This is the scientific reason why children can develop their bilingualism better and faster than adults. However, Lenneberg (1967) in Steinberg et al. (2001) also underlines that this memory capacity will continuously decrease as the children come into puberty.

The last sub-factor, motoric capacity, will determine the success of a child in acquiring or learning a language. Because the main component of a language is sound, the child's ability to produce an accurate sound becomes crucial. The articulator is the executor of all the processes from the brain to the nerves. When the child reaches the age of 12 years old, this motoric capacity decreases with the decreasing of their brain plasticity.

The second important factor in a child's second language acquisition and learning is the social factor. This factor is strongly connected to the language environment of the child and the forms of the interaction that occur, either formally or informally. Again, if we refer back to the distinction between acquisition and learning, this formal interaction occurs in the learning process while the informal interaction occurs in the acquisition process. One important highlight by Steinberg et al. (2001) shows that informal interaction suits young children better. This is because they tend to enjoy language exposure in a more natural setting, such as at home or a playground, where the induction pattern can

work better. On the other hand, a more formal interaction that occurs in a learning process, such as in a classroom setting, will work better for grown-up children because they already have an understanding of their responsibility in language learning.

The last factor that also contributes to the process of second language acquisition and learning of a child is the other psychological factors, which entail motivation and attitude. Since the two factors need conscious control of the mind, both of them belong to the factors in the learning process. Motivation is always the most important factor for success in any learning process, including language learning. Even though most studies reveal that children below two years old do not need motivation factors because they can naturally react to any language exposed to them and then naturally develop their language skills, children above two years old already start to need motivation for their actions. A child who has higher motivation in learning a second language will succeed faster than the others.

Besides motivation, attitude is also very important. Douglas Brown (1987) in Steinberg et al. (2001) found that a negative attitude can harm the function of the memory which then consequently will decrease the capacity of the brain to store, proceed, and retrieve the language data. However, many studies show that most children can build a positive attitude toward second language learning because they are usually unable to recognize the stereotype that spreads around them about the negative impact of second language exposure.

Besides the three factors proposed by Steinberg et al. (2001), there are also some other ideas on the factors that can contribute to the success of a child's language acquisition. One recent research by Bao & Liu (2021) proposes three major affective factors in second language acquisition, self-esteem, motivation, and anxiety, which are modified from Krashen (1985)'s Affective Filter Hypothesis. According to them, children with high self-esteem and motivation are less worried and more driven to learn a new language. On the other hand, children with high anxiety will experience the biggest affective obstacle in language learning.

In addition, Sun (2019) reveals that age and first language proficiency should also be included in the important factors in language acquisition. Regarding age, while adults generally perform better at the beginning due to their superior cognitive abilities, children perform better in terms of pronunciation and standard accent and are more likely to succeed in learning a second language and communicating with it. Then, because language transfer occurs frequently during the process of second language acquisition and learning, the children's ability in their mother tongue will also have a significant impact.

Understanding the important factors in second language acquisition and learning is of course beneficial to understanding how children can finally end up being bilinguals. However, understanding the strategies of the exposure given to those children is also needed to get a thorough picturesque of the phenomenon.

### **Strategies in Second Language Acquisitions and Learning**

In the previous section, we already have two basic patterns in second language acquisition and learning, which are explication and induction. In both patterns, the role of parents has a huge portion of necessity. Either consciously teaching their children two languages at home or unconsciously exposing those children to a bilingual family setting, parents are responsible for creating bilingual children.

According to Barron-Hauwaert (2004), two language strategies are used by parents at home. The first one is 1P1L (One Parent One Language) and the second one is 1P2L (One Parent Two Languages). The term "One Person, One Language (OPOL)" was first introduced by a French linguist, Maurice Grammont, in 1902. His theory proposes that parents should separate the languages used at home as soon as possible, to prevent confusion among their bilingual children. This theory is then adapted by many other linguists, including Barron-Hauwaert.

The 1P1L strategy proposes that one parent should only use one language in a

bilingual family while the other one can use the second language. This mostly happens in families where the parents come from two different language environments. For example, when Dad comes from an English-speaking country while Mom comes from a French-speaking country, Dad should only speak English at home while Mom should only speak French. This way, according to Grammont (1902), is better for children's language development. This is in line with Steinberg et al. (2001) who claim that children who are exposed to the 1P1L strategy tend to acquire a second language faster and learn the language skill better than the children who are exposed to the 1P2L strategy. The consistency of 1P1L in language use seems to be more effective for the children.

However, in many recent situations in Indonesia, parents are also bilinguals and they tend to use both of their languages with their children. For example, when Dad is an Indonesian-Javanese bilingual and the Mom is an Indonesian-Madurese bilingual, they tend to mix up their languages at home which then results in a multilingual child of Indonesian, Javanese, and Madurese (Zen & Apriana, 2015). This is similar to the result of a study done by McLaughlin (1987) in Steinberg et al (2001) that children who are exposed to the 1P2L strategy tend to produce more code-mixings where they mix up vocabularies and grammar of two languages into one sentence.

## Conclusion

To be bilingual, a child has undergone a very long process. Even though some experts are still debating whether bilingualism is beneficial or even harmful for their cognitive, psychological, and linguistic competence, children nowadays are created to be bilinguals. In the Indonesian context, for example, children are exposed to several languages at the same time even since they were born. Some factors are responsible for bringing those children to be bilingual, including Steinberg's psychological, social, and other psychological factors, Bao & Liu's factors of self-esteem, motivation, and anxiety, as well as Sun's factors of age and first language proficiency.

Still in the Indonesian context, even though the 1P1L is believed to be more

beneficial for the children's language development, many bilingual parents in Indonesia tend to use both of their languages with their children. As a result, those children grow up as multilingual children who are ready to cope with the dynamic of the environmental changes around them.

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