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ABSTRACT

Bilingualism is common in Lebanon's educational system. The national curriculum requires students to learn a second language beginning in kindergarten and to study science and mathematics in that second language in later years. The national curriculum requires that another foreign language be taught by seventh grade. Although Arabic is the national language, all Lebanese children are required to achieve mastery in at least one foreign language. Many Lebanese parents use a foreign language at home in order to facilitate their children's school learning. At age 3, children attend nursery school, with admissions tests given in their dominant language. By the end of nursery school, children can speak one or two languages fluently. The critical point for second language acquisition without an accent is near puberty. Factors affecting language acquisition between ages 6 and 10 years include: brain development and maturation, psychomotor coordination of the speech muscles, intellectual development, and the affective domain (self-consciousness and attitudes). Children learning two languages simultaneously acquire them using similar strategies. The errors they make are developmental and not subject to first-language interference. Children who do not continue their foreign language use after their early education find that their language skills deteriorate. (SM)

What Language Should a Lebanese Child Learn First?

By
Jocelyne Bahous, Ph.D.

Bilingualism is a common feature of the educational system in Lebanon. The Lebanese national curriculum requires that a foreign language be taught as of KG1 and that sciences and mathematics be taught later on in that foreign language, which is considered as a second language. The national curriculum also requires that another foreign language be taught as of Grade 7; nevertheless, the majority of the Lebanese private schools start teaching the foreign language at yet an earlier stage. Some start as of Grade 1, while others introduce it in Grade 4. Less importance is given to the second foreign language, yet many students end up enrolling in universities whose language of instruction is the foreign language they acquired at a later stage in their academic life. Therefore, although Arabic is the national language, all Lebanese students are required to achieve mastery in at least one foreign language.

Many Lebanese parents start using a foreign language with their children the first day they are born. Their belief is that it is easier for their children to acquire their native language, Arabic, when they go to school than it is to acquire a foreign language. Their objective is clear: they want their children to speak a foreign language as fluently as if it were their native tongue. Whether these parents are successful in their attempts or not can only be revealed when a study of the following factors is conducted. The child's mental growth at such an early age along with the role of both parents and school in developing the child's cognitive skills should be studied in the light of the effect of such early tutoring on later performance.

Nowadays parents find it a necessity that their three-year-old child speaks at least one foreign language correctly. As a result, they speak to their child only in French or English. Other parents agree between themselves that one parent uses English, while the other uses French.

When the parents send their child to day-care centers, they require that the foreign language they have chosen to teach their child be used as a means, or even, as the only means of communication at that day care center. Unfortunately, some day care centers yield to these parents' requests simply because they have to satisfy public demand. As Sandra Simpson reports (1999, October 11), not all of them are convinced of the necessity of using a foreign language with children whose ages vary from 40 days to 3 years. Julinda Abu Nasr, founder of the Lebanese American University's early childhood education major and its nursery, adds in this respect that many nurseries are purely business enterprises and so will "bow to parents' wishes to keep the fees coming in". Abu Nasr also has her doubts concerning the programs and the methodology followed in teaching preschool children (1999, October 11).

At the age of three, children are admitted into nursery school. Children, of course, must first pass a readiness test that determines their admission into school. This test is given in the language in which the child can best express himself regardless of what language is to be used in that school at the nursery level. Some schools in Lebanon use Arabic and a foreign language in their nursery class; others use only a foreign language, while others use two foreign languages. In the latter two cases, Arabic is integrated in KG1. At the end of the nursery level, children can speak one or sometimes two

languages quite fluently. Children who were never exposed to the foreign language(s) taught in this class face difficulties the first 2-3 months and gradually learn to communicate with their peers in the foreign language without any inhibitions.

What language repertoire does a 3- year old child have? Atkinson et.al. (1996) reports that at age 1, the child speaks a few isolated words, at about 2, the child speaks 2- and 3-word sentences; at age 3, sentences become more grammatical; and at age 4, the child sounds much like an adult.

Most discussions on first and second language acquisition differences center on the question of whether there is a "critical period" for language acquisition; i.e., a biologically determined period of life when language can be acquired more easily than at any later time. The answer to this question is yes there is a critical point for second language acquisition, and that is near the age of puberty. Beyond puberty, people seem to be relatively incapable of acquiring a near native accent of the second language.

According to Max Cynader (cited in Dwyer 1993), a specialist in mental growth at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, researchers have begun to plot distinct and critical periods of brain development during which particular skills must be learned. According to Cynader, the brain is most adept at mastering many of the most basic thinking skills during the primary school years, between the ages of 6 and 10. The implication is that educators should work very hard at getting it right early. Four major factors affect language acquisition at that age.

First, neurological considerations have to be carefully studied. Researchers have found that the development and maturation of the brain affect language acquisition. Lateralization of the brain is the key to answering this question. As the human brain matures, certain functions such as the intellectual, logical, and analytic are assigned to the left hemisphere of the brain, while the right hemisphere controls functions related to emotional and social needs. Stephen Krashen (1973 cited in Brown 1994) believed the development of lateralization might be complete around age 5. Krashen's suggestion does not grossly conflict with research on first language acquisition if fluency in the first language is to be considered achieved by age 5. Scovel (1984 cited in Brown 1994) distinguishes "between 'emergence of lateralization (at birth, but quite evident at 5) and completion (only evident at about puberty)." Scovel suggests that the plasticity of the brain prior to puberty enables children to acquire not only their first language but also a second language and that possibly people find difficulty to easily acquire fluent control of a second language due to the lateralization of the brain. Lenneberg (1967 cited in Brown 1994) and others suggest that lateralization is a slow process that begins around the age of 2 and is completed around puberty.

The second factor, the psychomotor coordination of the speech muscles, explains how a child has full control of his speech muscles at the age of 5. The physical development of the child must be considered carefully. At birth, the speech muscles are developed only to the extent that the larynx can control sustained cries. These speech muscles gradually develop and control of some complex sounds in certain languages (such as the r and l in English) sometimes is not achieved until after age 5, though virtually complete phonemics control is present in most 5-year-old children. Therefore, due to the physical advantage in the phonemic control and the mysterious plasticity, children can acquire a second language after the age of 5.

It is no wonder that children acquire authentic pronunciation while adults generally do not since pronunciation involves the control of so many muscles. However, it is important to remember that pronunciation of a language is not by any means the sole criterion for acquisition nor is it really the most important. Many people have less than perfect pronunciation, but they may have a better command of a second language than native speakers.

Piaget's contributions fall in the cognitive domain. According to Piaget, the most critical stage for a consideration of a first and second language acquisition appears at puberty. While explaining the intellectual development of a child, Piaget points out that a crucial change occurs as the child moves from the concrete operational stage (age 7-11) to the formal operational stage (age 11-16).

Piaget also considers the notion of equilibration. Equilibration is defined as the "progressive interior organization of knowledge in stepwise fashion." That is cognition develops as a process of moving from states of doubt and uncertainty (disequilibrium) to stages of resolution and certainty (equilibrium) and then back to further doubt that is, in time, resolved. Equilibrium is achieved when formal operations are organized. This implies that disequilibrium may provide the key motivation for language acquisition: language interacts with cognition to achieve equilibrium.

Ausubel explains the difference between rote learning, which is purely mechanical and thus not related to existing knowledge, and meaningful learning which relates new items and experiences to knowledge that exists in the cognitive framework. He emphasizes the fact that children are not rote learners and repetition and mimicking *are* meaningful activities. Thus, classroom learning should not depend on rote learning (Brown 1994).

The affective domain is yet another factor, which also explains language acquisition. Very young children are totally egocentric. As they grow older, they become more self-conscious. In pre-adolescence, children develop an acute consciousness of themselves as separate and identifiable entities, which still need protecting. They, therefore, develop inhibitions about this self-identity fearing to expose too much self-doubt. At puberty, these inhibitions are increased when they undergo critical physical, cognitive, and emotional changes.

Attitudes, and especially negative attitudes towards culture, language, and races affect success in learning a language. Very young children are not developed enough cognitively to possess these attitudes. However, as a child reaches school age, he begins to acquire attitudes towards types and stereotypes of people. Most of these attitudes are taught consciously or unconsciously by parents, other adults, and peers.

Moreover, peer pressure children encounter in language learning pushes them to conform. Adults tend to tolerate linguistic differences if they can understand the speaker. However, children are harsher critics of another's actions and words, and as a result, may provide a necessary and sufficient degree of pressure to learn the second language.

Finally, it is clear that children learning two languages simultaneously acquire them by the use of similar strategies. The errors they make are developmental; i.e., not subject to L1 interference (Dulay and Burt 1973, 1974 cited in Ellis 1985). They are in fact, learning two first languages, and the key to success is in distinguishing separate contexts for the two languages. It is true that bilingual children develop semantic awareness of words ahead of monolinguals and are superior at evaluating semantically anomalous sentences (Cook 1995). Tough (1995) explains that the conditions for acquiring L2

should resemble as far as possible those of children living in a family where two languages are in daily use and where the children are frequently involved in using both. Otherwise, as children grow older, their command of the second language weakens. This is evident in many Lebanese schools. Children reach Grade 6 possessing a good command of one or more foreign languages. Gradually, as the ideas become more complex, they fail to express themselves fluently. As a result, they resort to using Arabic in their science classes. Cummins and Swain (1989) explain what may have happened. They conducted a study on children whose native language was English and who were taught French as a second language in the school setting of a French immersion program. The results of their study showed the inability of nonnative speakers to demonstrate native speaker productive competence, not because their comprehensible input is limited, but because their comprehensible output is limited. This is due to the fact that students are not given adequate opportunities to use the target language or they are not being pushed in their output.

Parents should be advised not to push their children too much to learn a foreign language when they are too young. Children have to acquire their first language first. Gradually, between the age of five and puberty, they can acquire a second language as if it were their native tongue. Finally, children should be provided with opportunities to use the foreign languages they learned.

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