Bilingualism and Second Language Acquisition: Distinctions and Connections

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Abstract
In order to explore bilingual development appropriately, it is essential to understand the relationship between second language acquisition (SLA) and bilingualism. Through the review of relevant studies, the connected concepts of bilingualism and SLA are differentiated in this paper to discuss the relationship between the two fields. The distinctions between the two fields are reflected in their definitions, theoretical orientations, and terminology. Due to the lack of a clear understanding of the differences between the SLA and bilingualism, issues regarding the terms researchers use in their research have arisen, and plausible explanations are also discussed. Accordingly, scholars, especially those in the field of bilingualism, are suggested to enter into an agreement concerning the terminology used in research articles.

Key words: bilingualism, SLA, connected concepts, differentiations

Introduction

Bilingualism is a global phenomenon, with two-thirds of the global population being bilingual and most children speaking two or more languages (Ortega, 2009). For example, in the United States (US), over 4.8 million English learners (ELs) enrolled in schools in the 2014/2015 school year. The percentage of ELs increased in more than half of the US states between the 2009/2010 and the 2014/2015 school years (US Department of Education, n.d.), demonstrating that the number of bilinguals in student populations is growing. This increasing number of bilinguals in educational settings has drawn scholars' attention. As such, studies have been carried out to better understand the development of bilinguals in order to respond to the needs of this population. Drawing upon relevant studies, this paper discusses bilingualism and its relationship with second language acquisition (SLA), particularly focusing on the distinct characteristics of both fields. Plausible explanations for these differences are also provided. Also, the relevant issues arising from the differences between the two fields are reviewed, according to which suggestions are given to scholars in relevant fields.

Definitions of Bilingualism

Because of the complex nature of bilingualism, there are multiple definitions. Some scholars emphasize that bilingualism is the regular use of both languages in everyday life. For example, many early scholars of bilingualism, such as Bloomfield (1933, as cited in Garcia, 2009), considered only native-level control of both languages to be indicative of bilingualism. This narrow definition has faced criticism for its ostensible simplicity and ambiguity and has also prevented most people with proficiency in two languages from being categorized as bilinguals. Moreover, the notion of native-like control of two languages is difficult to apply in practice (Baker, 2011).

Scholars later developed much broader definitions of bilingualism. Haugen (1953, as cited in Garcia, 2009), for example, considered minimum proficiency in two languages to be a sign of bilingualism. Some researchers noted that factors such as the context and the interlocutors significantly affect language use as a person may use different languages in different situations with different people for different purposes. Thus, bilingualism is defined as the ability to use more than one language (Baker, 2011). Baker (2011) and Nagel et al. (2015) further state that both the use and function of languages are important in understanding individual bilinguals. Moreover, the alternative use of both languages was labeled as bilingualism (Garcia, 2009). Recent studies have since adopted a broader definition of bilingualism in order to include people with various language abilities in multiple domains.

Traditionally, the concept of bilingualism was viewed as two monolinguals in one person, but the problematic nature of this monolingual view of bilingualism engendered a shift in academic opinion (Grosjean, 1989). As part of a unique phenomenon, bilingual speakers draw upon their entire linguistic repertoire when communicating with others, and both languages operate as intrinsically intertwined components of a whole linguistic system (Baker, 2011; Garcia, 2009). In this way, the concept of bilingualism has been extended beyond the traditional balanced concept of "the bicycle with two perfectly round wheels" (Garcia, 2009, p. 8), and an increasing number of scholars have become aware that balanced bilingualism, as an ideal form, does not truly exist (Baker, 2011; Garcia, 2009). Shin (2013) has asserted that bilinguals typically have different proficiency levels in each language because bilingualism entails speaking two languages that convey different social statuses, serve different purposes, and are appropriate for different contexts. Baker (2011) has asserted that bilinguals have unique linguistic repertoires distinct from those of their monolingual peers. Therefore, the bilingual brain may not be the sum of two monolingual language systems, and bilinguals process languages differently than monolinguals (Abutalebi et al., 2001; Baker, 2011; Garcia, 2009).

Bilingualism and SLA

SLA is a scholarly field that investigates people's capabilities to learn another language in addition to their first language (L1) (Ortega, 2009). As the field that studies language acquisition and development, SLA theories are considered the primary methods for determining the process of acquiring a second language (L2) and the developmental trajectory of these L2s. Often, SLA theories are also used for the study of bilingual development in order to arrive at an understanding. Even though some theories in SLA could be applied to bilingualism (e.g., age is regarded as a major factor in bilingualism), Butler (2013) has argued that bilingualism is a highly complex social, psychological, and linguistic phenomenon; it cannot be simply conceptualized and understood from the perspective of SLA. Thus, it is essential to understand the relationship between SLA and bilingualism in order to explore bilingual development appropriately.

Although a noticeable change has taken place in SLA as more attention has been given to the socio-contextual factors in learning an L2, most SLA scholars still firmly believe that SLA should focus on language learning rather than language use and that language learning is essentially a mental process. Moreover, SLA conventionally takes monolingual competence as the ultimate achievement of language development. These notions have been problematized by scholars of bilingualism. Shin (2013) has criticized the monolingual notion of SLA by arguing that SLA research mainly emphasizes the acquisition of L2 grammar and morphology while giving little recognition to the social context in which the L2 is learned. Accordingly, differences between bilingualism and SLA should be recognized.

Firstly, as demonstrated in its definitions, SLA is a field that concentrates on the process of learning an additional language, whereas bilingualism focuses on the development and utilization of all languages in an individual. Studies on bilingualism also consider the contextual factors that affect the use of different languages, which are often neglected in SLA studies. For instance, Gallo et al. (2014) examined the

influence of language ideologies on bilingual students' language choices in both Spanish and English. The researchers noted that a more positive attitude fostered the development of bilingualism and encouraged the use of L1 (Spanish in this case) in school settings. However, studies in the field of SLA typically focus on the development of the target language and how various factors (e.g., anxiety, motivation, and oral feedback) impact the learning process. Research objective, therefore, is one essential distinction between SLA and bilingualism. Secondly, SLA and bilingualism hold different theoretical orientations. On the one hand, SLA takes a monolingual perspective and treats monolingual competence as the default benchmark of language development. On the other hand, scholars in bilingualism promote a holistic perspective and significantly problematize the monolingual perspective in bilingualism.

Because of the widespread monolingual perspective in L2 learning, the measuring instruments used to assess bilingual development are always questioned (Escamilla et al., 2014; Menken, 2010). When being assessed, bilinguals are often compared to their monolingual peers. This conflicts with the claims that bilinguals are not the sum of two monolinguals, and that both languages that a bilingual obtains should be regarded as an entire linguistic repertoire. For example, the US's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy strongly emphasizes English language learning and requires specific achievements in bilinguals' English language development. Many scholars in bilingualism have criticized the monolingual notion of the NCLB policy, such as Menken (2010), who determined its problematic influences on ELs through the linguistic analysis of high-stakes tests. Since the statewide high-stakes tests are administrated in English, Menken (2010) argued that the tests failed to separate language proficiency from content knowledge, thereby causing an extra burden on ELs, which resulted in the inaccurate assessment of ELs. In a similar vein, drawing on data from a larger study, Hopewell and Escamilla (2014) analyzed 268 Spanish-English bilingual students' cut scores for reading assessments from both a parallel monolingual perspective—only considering English reading scores—and a holistic bilingual perspective—considering reading scores in both English and Spanish. They found that thousands of emergent bilingual students were labeled as "at risk" in a monolingual assessment framework, whereas a holistic bilingual perspective provided a complete profile for each bilingual student. Therefore, analyzing bilingual students from a parallel monolingual perspective could not precisely determine their overall linguistic knowledge, resulting in problems with placement. At the same time, bilingual students might also be constrained from accessing resources. Therefore, the monolingual perspective in the field of SLA cannot comprehensively explain bilinguals' complex linguistic features. Additionally, the use of the monolingual perspective in assessments is aimed toward identifying problems rather than determining the potential abilities of bilingual students, which makes it impossible to portray the complete profiles of individual bilingual students (Orellana & D'Warte, 2010). Thus, SLA and bilingualism hold different theoretical orientations and view language learners from different perspectives, which impacts how language learners and language learning are understood in each field.

These distinct orientations also affect the conceptualization of terminology in both fields. For example, in SLA, the term *language interference* represents the mixed use of all languages, and the notion of *transfer* refers to the interaction between languages in an individual's repertoire. Many scholars in bilingualism, on the contrary, regard the term *interference* as undesirable as it implies a problem in bilingual speech, and they view the mixed use of languages as a language deficiency (Baker, 2011). Also, many scholars in bilingualism have problematized the term *transfer* in that they have refuted that it indicates boundaries between languages in an individual, which contradicts the holistic bilingual perspective that states all the languages of a bilingual interact multi-directionally. As a result, the different orientations and perspectives in these fields are manifested in the terminology adopted in SLA and bilingualism studies.

A Bilingual Turn in SLA

An increasing number of scholars have criticized the monolingual perspective in language development for alleged biases, namely that the monolingual perspective focuses only on the process of learning a target language and neglects the language's social functions (Butler, 2013; Kachru, 1994; May, 2013; Ortega, 2013; Sridhar, 1994). Thus, a sociocultural perspective on SLA is highly recommended (May, 2013; Ortega, 2013).

Concerning native-like competence, bilinguals' use of an L1 is viewed as deficient, and bilinguals' composite use of languages has largely been ignored (Sridhar, 1994). In questioning the monolingual bias in SLA, Kachru (1994) explained that, in bilingual contexts, it is common and appropriate for bilinguals to switch languages depending on the situation, thereby demonstrating that the use of different languages depends largely on contexts and interlocutors. The concepts in SLA ignore authentic language practices in bilingual contexts and cannot adequately explain bilinguals' language acculturation.

More recent SLA scholars, such as Butler (2013), Kachru (1994), and May (2013), have acknowledged that bilingualism research has challenged some widely accepted concepts and notions in SLA, and they have noted the inappropriate nature of monolingual bias in bilingual contexts. As a result, the unique features of bilingualism have motivated SLA scholars to question and reconceptualize theories and notions in SLA from a different perspective: bilingualism, which is labeled as *the bilingual turn* (May, 2013). A bilingual perspective is believed to expand SLA studies' horizons and provide a more holistic view of language learners' linguistic repertoires.

Current Issues

The above analysis shows that SLA and bilingualism are two interactive yet different fields. However, issues have arisen due to the lack of a clear understanding of the differences between the two fields.

The first problem regards the terms researchers adopt to label their participants. In the field of bilingualism, child bilingualism has been widely and systematically explored, whereas the development of bilingualism in adulthood has not been extensively investigated. Without a well-developed understanding of and criteria for bilingualism, individuals who learn an additional language in adulthood are often referred to as L2 learners in most cases. Only adults who use all their languages for a sufficient amount of time are regarded as adult bilinguals, such as participants in Schrauf and Rubin's (1998) study. All adult participants in this study, referred to as "adult bilinguals," had immigrated to the US for twenty or even thirty years before the study was conducted. They used both Spanish and English frequently in their daily lives. In the same vein, all participants had been learning an L2 for at least five years in Bialystok et al.'s (2014) study and were identified as "adult bilinguals." Nevertheless, adults learning an L2 for a short period are frequently regarded as L2 learners. For instance, in a study examining participants' learning strategies and styles, Ehrman and Oxford (1990) labeled those who had started learning Turkish as "adult language learners." Consequently, it can be seen that researchers tend to adopt their own criteria for identifying their participants, but very few scholars present their labeling criteria in their studies.

Another related issue is that, without clearly identified distinctions between bilingual and L2 learners, some scholars alternate between both terms in their studies (e.g., Levine et al., 2014; van Booven, 2011). For example, in the book *Preparing Classroom Teachers to Succeed with Second Language Learners: Lessons from A Faculty Learning Community* (Levine et al., 2014), despite using "second language learners" in the title of the book, most of the chapter authors use the term "bilingual" when referring to people from linguistically and culturally diverse groups. This is an important point because, on the one hand, when adults are learning an L2, they are frequently conceptualized from an SLA perspective, and only the learning of the L2 is the focus in most of these studies in that some studies are interested in the

grammatical development of an L2 (e.g., Johnson et al., 1996), and some favor discovering the effect of learning an L2 on learners' academic achievement (e.g., Kanno & Cromley, 2013). On the other hand, when adult language learners are recognized as adult bilinguals, the studies always investigate all the languages of an individual, and the product of bilingualism becomes the focus of the exploration (e.g., Bialystok et al., 2014).

One plausible explanation for the dichotomy in labeling adult bilinguals or adult L2 learners from an SLA perspective is that most adults learn an L2 after they have acquired and achieved advanced proficiency in their L1. In this case, the development of an L2 is the target of exploration, and individuals who learn an additional language in adulthood are always studied from the perspective of SLA. Therefore, it might not be necessary to emphasize the development of the participants' L1 too strongly.

Additionally, some political factors may also affect the issue. For instance, the targeted audience for Levine et al.'s (2014) book is teacher educators working with pre-service or in-service teachers from both English as a second language (ESL) and mainstream classrooms, and, therefore, using the term "second language learners" in the title will entice more of these readers to read the book. The type of academic journals in which the researchers wish to be published is another primary consideration when choosing the terms they will use. Studies published in journals in fields related to SLA usually adopt the term "L2 learner" (e.g., Ehrman & Oxford, 1990; Johnson et al., 1996), whereas researchers often use "bilinguals" when publishing their works in journals in the field of bilingualism or an interdiscipline in which bilingualism is included (e.g., Kanno & Cromley, 2013; van Booven, 2011). In accordance with the discussion above, it is suggested that researchers explicitly detail the criteria of these different terms in their own studies. At the same time, it is also recommended that the field of bilingualism establishes well-developed criteria that researchers agree upon, especially for identifying adult learners.

Conclusion

Bilingualism and SLA are two distinct yet connected fields. Each field has unique characteristics in regard to its definition, theoretical orientation, and conceptualization of terminology. In SLA, the monolingual perspective in language development has been problematized, and a sociocultural perspective on SLA has been highly promoted and advocated. Consequently, a bilingual turn has been developed in the field of SLA. Nevertheless, a meager understanding of the differences between the two fields may cause the inappropriate use of terminology in research articles. Thus, scholars in relevant fields are recommended to develop a clear understanding of the characteristics of each field, enabling them to create criteria for terminology used in research articles.

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