

Language Barriers and Counter Measures of Toddlers in HK Multilingual Environment

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Abstract

With the deepening of research of domestic and foreign scholars, multilingualism research has also aroused the interests of scholars. This paper focuses on the diverse multilingual families in HK, which is a cultural blending classic. With a brief account of the language acquisition barriers among toddlers fostered under multilingual circumstances, this paper also analyze the causes of such phenomena. It ends with some advice on how to treat the toddlers' language acquisition barriers in multilingual families and suggests that an evolutionary view on multilingual performance.

Keywords: multilingual, toddlers, language acquisition barriers, Hong Kong

1. Literature Review

In recent years, many Chinese and foreign scholars have paid a lot of attention to the development on children's language acquisition and ability. They try to analyze and argue from sociology, Physiology, psychology, cognitive linguistics, in which cognitive psychology are combined in the research because of its strong explanatory power and strict logical relations. So, it attracted the attention of scholars. Cognitive psychologists hold the idea that learners' own inner development, spirit and power play a decisive role in human learning process. Cognitive theory holds that there exist two species different views in the relationship between language and cognitive: as represented by Singer (1990), some scholars think language system and cognitive process work respectively in different parts of brain to process information. He proposed the famous information processing mode and thought people contains 3 levels including surface, text base and discourse situation) three a level in the process of understanding a language.

People can understand a sentence or utterance, and remember the meaning just because the meaning of language can be divided into basic units of a sentence. Each sentence contains one or more the propositions, which are respectively constitute by predicate and the subject (argument). Language and cognitive processes are composed of information processed in different parts of the brain. Propositions which are derived from the information fall into hierarchical text basics. Generally speaking, higher level proposition is easier to remember. Information on the surface forms of memory is less than inner memory. But there exists another view which believes that in the process of language acquisition, the basic cognitive ability must be used. Chomsky, as the representative of the cognitive school, put forward the revolutionary cognitive explanation about human language acquisition. He explained the complexity of language structure from the syntactic analysis, on this basis, children of different level of intelligence can acquire such a complicated language in a relatively short period of time (data shows, although the infant brain has not yet fully mature, but before the age of three, most children can master the core part of language—syntax). This is the logic question of the language theory asked by Chomsky, this explanation to the question is that humans are born with language acquisition mechanism.

Pinker called the ability of language acquisition for children as "The Language Instinct". Children's language acquisition is just like fish in the water cruising and birds' learning to fly. It's so easily and naturally. Children's language acquisition even begins from human embryos who survive in the matrix. At that time the fetus would identify and remember his mother's voice, music, and names and so on. For example, early in the last century, 60 fetuses (mean age of 39 weeks) participated in the experiment. The researchers give half of the fetuses (30) two minutes of listening to a tape recording, the content of which is poetry readings by their mothers. In the mean time, the researchers let the other 30 fetuses hear a stranger reading the same poetry. Sounds can be heard by

fetus through speakers (95 db) which are placing about 10 cm above the wombs. The researchers recorded the fetus' heart rates in the listening process. They noted that when the fetus heard his mother's voice, the heart rates will accelerate, but when heard the sounds of a stranger, the heart rates will reduce. Researchers guessed maybe the speed-up of heart rates were due to the excitement when the baby heard the sound of his mother. This study demonstrated that even before birth a baby can accurately distinguish sounds and voices of one's mother. This is strong evidence to show that before the new born baby is born, a baby has had such magical ability to identify sounds of one's mother and even respond to the sounds of one's mother and he seems to like the sounds of his mother better than any others.

2. Language Acquisition and Analysis of the Status of Toddlers' Raised in HK's Multi-Lingual Family

2.1 Hong Kong Multilingual Families and Children 1-2 Years Old Status Quo in Language Acquisition

Because of great developments happened in technological, economic, social, cultural, transport areas, the process of internationalization flourish, blurring the boundaries between nations. The whole world has fused into a global village. Since the 1970s, people who use a different native language in the world have exchanged more frequently frequent exchanges because of international fusion. Although from different countries and having totally different cultural backgrounds, more and more people with different nationalities and speaking different native language get married and form a family. Thus a lot of children under such a bilingual or multilingual family environments were born and raised. Hong Kong is a typical city as a fusion of Chinese and Western cultures, languages and societies. People from different countries and districts in the world work, study and live here, which make unique Hong Kong families and these families bred bilingual or multilingual children. In this multi-lingual environment, what is the situation in the 1-2 year-old children's language acquisition? Let's look at some real examples.

The author's niece Shannon was born in a more-than-one-language family. Actually, her family is a typical multilingual one. Her father is a native of Hong Kong. As mother tongues, he speaks two languages: Cantonese and English and her mothers are from mainland China, whose native language is Chinese. Her grandparents are Hakkas and as a consequence they speak Hakka and Cantonese. The grandmother from her mother's side comes from Sichuan province of China who uses Sichuan dialect and Mandarin for communication. Besides the 5 languages used in Shannon's daily life, there is a maid at home, using Philippines English. In such a complex language environment, Shannon has experienced great challenges in early language acquisition. In theory, infancy is a critical period of language development of a person. Under monolingual environment, children will begin to speak normally between 10-15 months. However, it is not true in Shannon's case.

When she was 17 months old, Shannon still did not speak. It seems there is a language barrier hindering her language acquisition procedure to a certain extent. The whole family was worried about it and even gets desperate. After six years, the same thing happened in Shannon's younger brother Kaden. As an 18 months child he can only speak several words with simple pronunciations like Mom, daddy, "popo". Through our surveys of more than 50 families, we found that there were 34 families, a total of 46 children confronted with similar problems in the early stages of language acquisition. These children cannot express effective words for communication nearly 17 months old, which reflecting a certain language barriers.

In order to ensure this is an objective and scientific research, the author contacted more than a hundred bilingual or multilingual families lived in Hong Kong through internet and made telephone interviews. The data reveal that 64.7 percent children who are under the multi-lingual environment have encountered different degree of language ability retardation which refers to the fact that the language ability of young children to express and understand is lower than those of their peers. It is estimated that about 3% of children have been confronted with this problem in Hong Kong.

Department of Pediatrics of University of Hong Kong held a survey of 630 children under the age of 5. After assessment, confirmed that 326 people have language retardation symptoms. The study also found that 60% children who suffered slow language ability contacted at least two or more language at home, including English, Mandarin, Cantonese and Hakka.

2.2 Analysis of Misunderstanding and Disturbance in Multilingual Children's Language Acquisition

The above examples and data would easily aroused tension and anxiety of parents. It is easy to let the children's multilingual language acquisition be misunderstood by people. In some newspapers and magazines or Internet media, we can see a lot of reports on this phenomenon, for example:

a. There is a report entitled "language barriers are easier to be found in multilingual circumstances" with <http://news.sohu.com/20050804/n226563764.shtml>

In the report, University of Hong Kong research shows that the language ability of children under 5 years of age in families that English and other languages mixed, may appear 2 times higher possibilities to slow language acquisition than those of single language families

b. There is a report entitled “Multi language environment is not conducive to children learning to speak”

http://www.yaolan.com/edu/article2007_200872720456642.shtml

c. There is a report entitled “3 and a half years old boy’s learning three languages leading to the aphasia” http://www.fx120.net/baby/200402/baby_379762.html. The reporter mentioned a child named Tung Tung who lives in the city of Shanghai experienced a mixed language training program, in which he was taught to speak in Chinese, English, and Japanese thus, suffered serious result in aphasia.

And reports like these are beyond count. People have many misconceptions and worry about children’s early language acquisition in multilingual environment. We need treat this problem in a scientific and objective way. Generally speaking, there are several characteristics in children’s early language acquisition under multi-language circumstances as follows:

Firstly, according to the study of Werker (1989), in the 0 to 12 months the baby is very sensitive to language. In the period of 0 - 4 months, infants can distinguish between different languages, in the period after 12 months; infants’ language resolution began to drop dramatically. When children are three years old, they have nearly no difference in language resolution with adults. These changes are explored and conclusions are due to the dendrites and synapses in the early brain cells which can receive various language phonemes are getting gradually shrinking and even disappearing because of stimulation. Therefore, we can infer during the period of their first year, the main language acquisition of infants is mainly manifested in the form of language listening and distinguishing ability. In a multilingual environment, a large number of auditory perception and trunk of hybrid phonemes may lead to the disorder of children’s language perception, as a result it is difficult for children to have the ability to distinguish between different language systems quickly and accurately, so the children feel quite difficult to select appropriate phonemes to fulfill effective expression and communication.

Secondly, there is an agreement of scholars which is 0-3 years old children’s language development will experience four stages. Please see Table 1 as follows:

Table 1. Four stages of 0-3 years old children’s language development

STAGE	babbling	Holophrastic stage	two-word stage	simple sentences
AGE	0-6 months	6-12 months	12-24 months	24-36 months
LINGUISTIC	Simple syllables	Using single word	Using two words	Using simple sentence
TASK		expressing ideas	expressing ideas	expressing ideas

Generally speaking, Holophrastic stage also called pre language stage. Children of 6 months to 1 year old can imitate the adults’ peaking and babble out one’s first speech sounds, words. They can understand some words and sentences and use specific voice to express certain meanings. The two-word stage begins roughly in the 12 months to the child’s second year. At this stage, children are heard uttering two-word expressions in a variety of combinations; express a certain variety of grammatical relations.

Although the above stages may emerge early or delay due to individual differences, both the children living in monolingual or multilingual families will experience these stages in normal conditions. Therefore, we can see that in their early period (from 0 to 36 months) infants and young children (toddlers and little kids) are experiencing numerous silence stages in language acquisition. Their seemingly silence are not the true silence in nature.

According to the theory of Chomsky’s language acquisition mechanism, at this stage infants are using its natural “universal grammar” for language listening and understanding in their minds. Children will use these valuable silence stages to acquire language in multilingual and monolingual environment. Therefore, children’s science period in language acquisition are not because of brain disorder caused by so-called a variety of languages in their living environment, but because the children need a lot of time to accomplish a variety of languages, speech discrimination, language understanding and processing. The more types of languages in their living environment, the more time the children need.

3. Strategies to Solve Barriers of 1 or 2 Year-old Children in the Language Acquisition

After the scientific analysis and explanations on the obstacles in early language acquisition for children about

1-2 years old, then we should think about how to deal with the obstacles.

3.1 Clear Misunderstandings and Deepen Understanding

First of all, language obstacles or barriers of children in multi languages environment are not lifelong, which can be solved naturally with the growth of children. We should distinguish them from the language disorders caused by some brain disease, injury or dysplasia and other pathological causes. These language disorders need systematic treatment as early as possible. When growing up, children in a multi-language environment will overcome language obstacles or barriers and can speak several languages very fluently and normally in general. The language obstacles or barriers only appeared in the period of adolescence in multilingual families. When they go through the early language acquisition period, the children in general have been able to use multiple languages. So, the language obstacles and barriers are just temporary. There is no need to worry or even feel anxiety to it. Secondly, Professor Patricia Kull of University of Washington recorded brain activities of Noah (a child born and raised in a multilingual environment) and she discovered by the recording data that multi languages environment even has many benefits for the child. "The brain of a baby will produce two different circuits. One responds to his mother tongue, the other responds to the second languages." Many studies have shown that, the conversion ability that exercised more often in multi-language child from a region to another region in the brain can make the child have a better performance in some aspects, that is to say, multi-language environment will be of great benefit to children's thinking ability.

3.2 The Principle of One People/Parent—One Language

As early as 20 years ago, some foreign scholars put forward the method that the family members fixed family communication pattern to solve language barriers of 1-2 years old children who were born and raised in multilingual environments. How to conduct the method? The answer is every family member use one fixed language to communicate with the child. Take Shannon's family as an example. When communicate with Shannon, the father is encouraged to speak English and as their communication language is fixed, he will not speak other languages with her. When communicate with Shannon, the grandparents are encouraged to speak Hakka language and as their communication language is fixed, no more languages are involved in their communication, too.

In family members' the long-term contact with children in a fixed language in communication there will set up a communication "contract" (Liu & Liu, 2014) which is difficult for outsiders to understand. This is because although the forms of language are different, the concepts that the language refer to are similar and skills which used by human in the use of language are interlinked. Members of the multilingual family adhere to the principle of one person one language. As a result, they can make children get quicker and more effective understanding of the difference in language system by mixed language inputs. Besides, in children's further language internalization process, they can establish the ability more easily to distinguish different phonemes, vocabularies and meanings on the basis of their perception of the difference between language systems, Following are the specific use of the principle: everyone in the family uses a language to exchange with children. A child's cognitive system is formed by all the languages he speaks and his way of thinking. Children can establish different ways of thinking to mobilize different phonemes, words and even the modes of thinking when face different family members, and all the different language forms and thinking are in order, so that children can correctly use a variety of different languages.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, in the early period of language acquisition, children raised in multi lingual environment are more likely to experience language disadvantage and it does not always accompanied with the children by a lifetime. In fact, through telephone interviews and track record, the author found that the language disadvantages of Shannon and Kaden, as well as more than 90 children in the multi languages families have been resolved easily and naturally with their growth of age. Therefore, people should avoid using a static view of multilingual children in language acquisition performance.

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