
High-level Proficiency Speakers in Bilingualism*

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Abstract

This brief report provides a succinct picture of high-level proficiency speakers in the field of bilingualism and second language acquisition: i.e., in what ways high-level proficiency has been reported in the studies of those two academic domains. In empirical studies in second language acquisition, some learners have reportedly been judged as being in the native-speaker range in certain linguistic domains, e.g., grammaticality judgement, phonological production among others. Having said that, in bilingualism, there is an argument that if the speaker were examined carefully all “across the board”, there might be other results (Hyltenstam, 2016a, 2016c, Hyltenstam, Bratning, & Fant, 2018a), and that bi/multilingual users are not the combination of two similar figures of monolinguals. This report also briefly covers the relations of age effects and acquisition and how they are interpreted, in the final section.

Introduction

Second language learning is the process of learning another language in addition to their native language. Whether one can attain perfectly nativelike proficiency has often been the center of linguistic debate. To illustrate exceptionally successful nativelike second language speakers, Grosjean (2010) wrote that professionally trained “deep cover” spies or sleeper agents often demonstrate advanced language proficiency of the target language, so that no one

* The term bilingualism indicates the learning and use of two or more languages, which includes multilingualism and plurilingualism.

sees them as men in mission sent from another power. Bilingualism researcher, Grosjean continued that “native-speaker fluency is very difficult to get it right (*ibid*)” and that the person must learn to be able to use just one language in all situations, which is quite unusual for normal bilinguals; normal bilinguals use the two languages for “different purposes, different domains of life with different people (*ibid*).” His claim here is indicative that a normal bilingual speaker is not a combination of two perfectly ideal, native monolingual speakers who may show nativelike aspects in all domains and, therefore, can be measured in monolingual scales, but normal bilinguals are rather a fusion of two language sets.

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), however, second language users’ imperfect conditions have been called as *interlanguage* (Selinker, 1972) errors or fossilized forms: how far their linguistic form is away from that of the native-speaking control group; how complete or incomplete the forms are. Adult second language learners and foreign language learners are considered to show “incomplete and variable” forms compared to the first language and child second language learners (Sorace, 2003). To explore the notional differences between the two domains, this brief report attempts to provide a succinct picture of the recent research on the exceptionally high-level second language development and age effects with respect to bilingualism.

Nativelikeness in SLA and Bilingualism

In SLA studies, there has traditionally been a dichotomy of “*native*” versus “*non-native speaker*”, which assumes the superiority of the former over the latter (Dewaele, 2018). In data-driven cross-sectional SLA studies, it was often the case that the experimental group of ‘non-native speakers’ was tested and compared with the results of a ‘native-speaking’ control group, to characterize the defects or how far the non-native speakers were from the native speakers’ baseline. These studies were based on the assumption that second language speakers are continuously moving toward the target norms to reach the native-like state in the continuum of interlanguage development, while such assumptions do not necessarily apply to the speakers living in the bilingual or multilingual contexts.

In SLA, the product and process differences between adults and children learners are found in some domains. The state at the onset of learning by adults

is not the same as the state of young children because the adults know at least one language already by the time they begin the second. The ultimate attainment of the adult learners is often reported to differ from the one attained by children learners, either. The adult learners show the varying degrees of “imperfections” when they are compared with the native speakers’ baseline of the target language (Sorace, 2003). Researchers seem to agree that “an overall state of competence identical to that of monolingual speakers is difficult to attain in adult second language acquisition (*ibid.*)”

The concept of a *bilingual* person has been defined in numerous ways in bilingualism: with the narrowest definition of “the native-like control of two languages” (Bloomfield, 1935), the broader definition of “the ability to use two or more languages sufficiently to carry on a limited casual conversation” (Myers-Scotton, 2006), and the minimum definition as an incipient bilingual characterizing “the initial stages of the learning” (Diebold, 1964). Bloomfield’s definition will probably label only a few on this planet to be bilingual, whereas almost every learner of a new language can be considered to be bilingual if one accepts Diebold’s definition of incipient bilingualism. Then, how are the exceptionally high-level speakers investigated and characterized in the field of bilingualism today?

Shedding light on how bilingualism treats advanced second language proficiency, this section reads Hyltenstam’s recent books (2016, 2018a) on high-level proficiency or near-native speakers of second language in comparison with the field of SLA. In their research, they argue that changing terminologies to, for example, an ‘L1 user’ instead of native speakers and an ‘LX user’ instead of non-native speakers as in Dewaele (2018) does not necessarily change the attitudes and perceptions to how non-native speakers are treated (p. 6). Then, Hyltenstam, Bartning, & Fant (2018b) poses an important theoretical question: “Can high-level second language users attain a level of second language proficiency which is impossible to differentiate from native speaker proficiency? (p. 4)” In other words, how is a second (or Xth) language speaker NOT easily identified as a non-native speaker, as in Grosjean’s story?

In contradistinction of native and non-native speakers, they separate basic linguistic cognition and higher linguistic cognition (Hyltenstam, Bartning, & Fant, 2018b) and suggest that if a second language speaker were indistinguishable from

native speakers in the contexts which require basic linguistic cognition, he would be considered nativelike, whereas higher cognition comprises literacy-related knowledge, which may vary in degrees even in native speakers' competence (p. 6). Similar conceptualization can be found in Cummins' work (2008) with respect to the separation of basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive and academic language proficiency (CALP). Moreover, Hyltenstam et al. argue that they do not want to require second language speakers to have "knowledge of aspects of the language that not even all native speakers have access to in order to label them as nativelike (p. 6)." There has been a tendency, though, that in SLA or linguistic theorization, reference is made to monolingualism as if monolingual features can be applied to bi/multilingual speakers of multilingual contexts. It is a restricted view of bi/multilingual speakers if they are captured as a combination of two monolingual, ideal speaker-hearers (Hyltenstam, Bartning, & Fant, 2018a, 2018b).

Age Effects and Nativelikeness

The learning process of second language includes *imitation*, *reinforcement* and *analogy*. According to Fischer (2019), analogy is:

“a cognitive process involving comparison whereby the information concerning one element is linked to another element through observed similarities. [...] Analogy is concerned with (1) similarities between observable properties (material or *horizontal* analogy) and (2) causal similarities, i.e., the relations between a material property and a function of that property (*vertical* analogy) (p. 1).”

To execute cognitive processing such as analogy when learning another language at some points in life, age can come into play as a limiting factor or at least as an affecting factor to the learner's language development.

Within the theoretical frameworks of second language acquisition, psychology, bilingualism and others, age factors or the critical period hypothesis (CPH) has been a long-standing scientific debate. Discussions about the effects of age or maturational constraints date back to the two neurologists, Penfield &

Roberts' (1959) *Speech and Brain Mechanisms*. They claimed that children should be introduced to second languages early in life, or it would become difficult to achieve a good result if they were not (p. 255), based on the brain damage studies and children's language acquisition. Lenneberg (1967), then, claimed from a psycho-biological perspective in his *Biological Foundations of Language* that 'language-learning-blocks' rapidly increase after puberty; automatic acquisition from mere exposure to the language is likely to decline after certain age; and after puberty, foreign language learning requires labored efforts and foreign accents will remain strongly (p. 176). The focus of the controversy that followed this hypothesis was whether children overpower adults and, if so, whether it is the implication of the existence of the biological critical period or non-biological yet age-dependent changes in conditions (Abrahamsson, Hyltenstam, & Bylund, 2018, p. 17). Singleton (2003) claimed that beyond a certain critical period, the relevant behavior of language acquisition was not acquired, while Krashen, Long, & Scarcella (1979) had argued that second language learners "who begin natural exposure to second language during childhood generally achieve higher second language proficiency than those beginning as adults (p. 161)."

The discussion saw a new development when a quantitative SLA survey by Johnson & Newport (1989) was published. With the afore-mentioned background, falsifiability became the center of discussion as their study statistically analyzed the correlations between the Chinese and Korean immigrants' grammaticality in English as a second language and the age of onset. Following the meta-analysis of Johnson & Newport (1989), more CPH studies were conducted showing varying results of critical periods and age impact, which allowed various positions of interpretation. This brought about more versions of the hypothesis resulting in a new ideological controversy and was extended to its applicability in foreign language learning settings. Singleton & Ryan (2004) and Singleton (2005) stated that "diverse and competing versions of the hypothesis itself undermines its plausibility (p. 269)."

In bilingualism studies, Swedish researchers' group has conducted a number of bilingualism research studies (Abrahamsson, 2012, Abrahamsson, Hyltenstam, & Bylund, 2018, Hyltenstam, 2016a, Hyltenstam, Bartning, & Fant, 2018a, for example), which brought about new insights. They reported that no study had shown a lacking relationship between the age of onset and ultimate attainment

levels. Particularly, in an age-on-nativeness study using 200 Spanish speakers learning Swedish as a second language, Abrahamsson (2012) claims:

“A few studies have indeed reported nativelike behavior in some post-puberty late learners” [but] “in the few studies that have employed a wide range of linguistic tests and tasks, adult learners have not exhibited nativelike L2 proficiency across the board of measures, which, according to some, suggests that the hypothesis still holds (p. 187, underlined by the present writer),”

leaving the phrase “across the board” to be an important aspect. Given that the hypothesis holds, the question is then whether the differences between adults and children come from age-related biological conditions or age-related other abilities, and how differently the early and late learners arrive at their second language proficiency. There have been various positions regarding the hypothesis: the earlier age of onset relates to more efficient language acquisition; the onset age in adolescence and early adulthood is more efficient and successful, particularly in instructional settings; the earlier age of onset relates to success in some domains such as phonology and communicative skills whereas the late onset has advantages in academic domain, analytical strategies; the earlier onset is better in the long run (Singleton & Ryan, 2004). Among them, there is a noteworthy version of interpretation that suggests the qualitative change in the learning process and product (Bley-Vroman, 1989). With this conceptual background, Abrahamsson (2012) concluded that age is a strong predictor of ultimate attainment among early learners (age of onset 1–15), while it is no longer predictive for late learners (age of onset 16–30) in a multilingual context, and that the results of his study about the participants’ grammar and pronunciations supported the claims made by Lenneberg (1969) and Johnson & Newport (1989), and also inferred that early and late learners used fundamentally different systems as claimed in Bley-Vroman (1989). Given that, polyglots who use many languages are exceptionally advanced plurilingual individuals but have only been anecdotally accounted for. In Hyltenstam’ (2016b) attempt to explore the cognitive qualities seen in polyglots’ extraordinary knowledge of many languages, they are described as self-taught, highly motivated learners with high confidence in their language learning approaches (p. 229). These qualities, even anecdotal, provide us with further

research questions as to whether abilities and predispositions override age effects, or whether the age-related quality differences in abilities and predispositions are the predictor to high-level proficiency.

Conclusion

Speakers living in bilingual or multilingual contexts learn and use languages for different purposes in different domains of life with different people, as was mentioned earlier. Parallel distribution of language use in the two languages can be theoretically possible, but the parallel syntactic forms to express one meaning in two languages all the time may not be the speaker's needs. Language use is context-based. Therefore, what a bilingual speaker says in language A for interactions at school may not necessarily be the same expectation as what the speaker does in language B at home. These context-dependent language learning features and use should be taken into account especially when researchers assess proficiency focusing on some linguistic domains, because the possible distance from the native-speakers' norms may be due to the person's bilingualism. The literature covered in this report may suggest that multilingual contexts, abilities and predispositions come into play when one attempts to examine high-level second language learners' knowledge.

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