



Journal of Languages and Culture

Volume 6 Number 3 April 2015

ISSN 2141-6540



*Academic
Journals*

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Audrey Burns

Full Length Research Paper

Back in the U.S.S.R: A Case Study of English/Russian bilingualism using the model of a flexible bilingual spectrum

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Received 10 September, 2014; Accepted 3 March, 2015

The fields of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and bilingualism are combined in this study to describe language experience using a flexible bilingual spectrum model in which political, economic and social factors are used to analyze levels of bilingualism. A native Russian speaker who learned English in the U.S.S.R. is interviewed and the results are analyzed in a case study, showing the language experience analysis may be enhanced using impact factors juxtaposed with a bilingual spectrum that is modifiable.

Key words: Bilingualism and SLA, spectrum, impact factors, case study, adult bilinguals.

INTRODUCTION

Research Question and Theoretical Framework

For those of us engaged in international education, research, business or government, we are faced with many different types of bilingualism every day from a multitude of cultural angle. Spectrums of bilingualism have been created, analyzed, defined and redefined. The effects of cultural components on language development have also been refined by the Second Language Acquisition ("SLA") field. However, often bilingualism and SLA are disparate fields, with bilingualism focused on ultimate attainment and SLA exploring the pathways to language development and attainment. Bilingualism often represents the end game, and the level of bilingualism that has been obtained, whereas SLA tends to look at the process of language learning (Ortega, 2009).

This study combines aspects of SLA factors and an examination of what it means to be bilingual. The literature in these areas offers a wide and rich narrative of information to draw from. As mentioned, bilingualism and SLA are often viewed as mutually exclusive with bilingualism representing attainment and SLA the path towards that attainment (Garcia, 2009). The idea of bilingualism as represented by a spectrum comes from Chin and Wigglesworth (2007). The spectrum presented moves away from the one idea of what a bilingual speaker is and acknowledges that there are many varying representations of "bilingual" based upon the speaker, the speaker's experiences and also the speaker's own view of what a bilingual is.

In taking a step back to examine factors in SLA that may inform this "bilingual spectrum" for the purposes of

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this study, it is important to look at sociocultural factors. From Garcia (2009), we have the idea that language learning can be considered “elite.” For example, a parent sending their child to a prestigious, private bilingual school that offers Chinese and English language immersion where the public school offers only a regimented half an hour of language instruction per day. Language attainment in this manner can also have economic undertones, as not every parent has the means to provide this type of elite language instruction to their children.

Rowe and Grohmann (2013) look at the diglossic progression of language in Cyprus in their study and introduce in the context of Cyprus a factor of “prestige types” in language, explaining that “...prestige is felt both consciously and non-consciously by speakers entering or functioning in [that] society, and conformity is essentially automatic” (Rowe and Grohmann, 2013). The idea of languages having levels of “prestige” or an “elite” status can be seen as having an impact on language learning. Firth and Wagner (2007) also discuss the idea of language learning as a social accomplishment. Language could be viewed as an asset for obtaining a career, for example.

There are many other social factors that have been explored in the SLA literature. The idea of learning in a social, peer-to-peer environment was expanded upon by Cekaite and Bjork-Willen (2013) in a study of multi-lingual students in Sweden. The students engaged in play and interacted in a common “de facto” language in a peer-to-peer environment, not during any official instruction. This demonstrates that in the context of children in social settings where a second language is used, children will engage in corrections and active language acquisition which is important to note when thinking about a social language learning setting.

Language acquisition can also have political factors. In Kiss’ (2011) study of language policy in the Hungarian minority population in Szekler Land, Romania, the language policy of the state “determines whether a certain minority population has the right to study the official language of the state according to its special linguistic needs or not” (Kiss, 2011). The political atmosphere, therefore, was a majorly important factor in language acquisition for the individuals in state schools in Kiss’ study. The availability of language instruction and resources was based upon political determinations in this context.

The literature provides a basis for the use of a bilingual spectrum as opposed to an across-the-board, immobile definition of a bilingual. The literature also gives analysis of several socioeconomic and political impact factors in SLA that affect language acquisition. For adults whose experiences with language span years, cultures and places, a more fluid analysis is needed to understand their language development and attainment. An analysis that recognizes the bilingual spectrum of these individuals is constantly shifting based on varying cultural

perspectives and situations (important SLA components). What is being suggested is a more nuanced approach to untangling the complex webs of cultural-linguistic development and relationships, taking into account important SLA analysis as well as a changed bilingual analysis.

For some individuals, SLA analysis should take into account the political, economic and social realities of the time period in which the language was learned. How can information about a speaker’s political, economic and social experience while learning language help us to understand the multiple spectrums that exist in evaluating bilingualism?

METHODOLOGY – A CASE STUDY

As the research question focuses specifically on the individual language experience as related to political, economic and social factors (“impact factors”) to develop bilingual spectrums, a qualitative case study was used. The participant (“Masha”) has a multitude of varied language experience, has lived across continents and possesses an understanding of language development and the ability to reflect upon her language experiences. The ability to reflect ended up being very important to the research as the participant was able to illustrate details of importance that related to the impact factors. The interview was an hour in length based on pre-prepared questions, but free-dialogue was allowed as well. The interview was recorded.

RESULTS

Masha grew up in Moscow and had unique opportunities when it came to language instruction for the political climate in the U.S.S.R. During that time, English instruction was unpopular due to the nature of relations between the U.S.S.R. and the United States and was discouraged in favor of other languages like German. Beginning at the age of four, Masha received private English language instruction. A group of eleven families made up of academics (Masha referred to them as the “Russian intelligentsia”) hired a private English tutor and the children were taught English, drawing, and dancing in private homes.

In furthering her study of English, Masha attended an English immersion school in Leningrad from the 2nd to the 10th grade. This school varied from other schools in Leningrad in the volume of English taught. The amount of English instruction the students were provided with increased with the grade level. Masha views the immersion experience as one that was beneficial to her language development.

As a part of her increased immersion instruction at school in Leningrad, additional cultural components were added to Masha’s language learning in Leningrad: English Literature, American Literature, and English theatre began to be taught in the school in the 4th and 5th grades. Similarly to Masha’s experience with the drawing and dancing courses as a young child, her English language instruction was complemented with cultural

reinforcements.

Masha believes strongly that in order to be bilingual one needs to be exposed at a very early age to both languages and acquire native like thought and proficiency in both. In discussing this concept of defining bilingualism in our conversation, Masha referred to Vladimir Nabokov¹.

Masha does not consider Nabokov to have been a bilingual. Her justification is that Nabokov was not able to translate his earlier Russian novels into English; he had his son translate them for him. She thinks his son had better acclimated to the language culture of English than Nabokov was able to, Nabokov being older when he immigrated to the United States. Masha does not consider herself bilingual. In fact, when prompted with the idea of “bilingual” as describing her language abilities, she said “calling people like myself bilingual is a major mistake.”

In addition to learning English, Masha learnt French through private tutors and expresses that she now speaks “really bad French” with friends and she can also read and understand German (the latter being learnt outside of the classroom setting).

Masha continued her language development through college, studying English and Russian literature. Her career for the past forty years has taken her from Russia to England to the United States for varying frequencies. She now resides half the year in Russia and the other half in the United States.

Analysis

Analyzing impact factors

Masha provided an overview of language development and has had ample time in her life to reflect upon her bilingualism. In order to juxtapose SLA analysis to an evaluation of Masha on the bilingual spectrum, we will use the “impact factors” of political, social and economic factors to categorize some pieces of Masha’s language development factors to understand and refer to later when we create a bilingual spectrum. In this analysis, it is important that the impact factors represent Masha’s view of her language learning experience, the question of whether the impact factors are true or not are not relevant to this study.

The political atmosphere in which the majority of Masha’s language learning took place was in many senses closed off from the rest of the world in her experience. English instruction was unpopular in the U.S.S.R. due to political relations and other languages

besides English, like German were popular for second language learning and pushed in the education system. We may infer that in the posited hierarchy of second languages to be learned, English held an interesting place on the spectrum. While useful, it was not pushed in the state school system in the experience of this individual. The idea that language hierarchy and languages being used as a political tool allows for the idea of language learning as a political tool.

In many parts of the world, parents are able to send their children to bilingual schools to receive instruction in a language that is viewed as “elite” and useful (Garcia, 2009). The political goals for this may be to become well informed and able in a global dialogue and to have more opportunities career-wise. In Masha’s case, political factors were well at play in the underlying current between the two disparate cultures the English and Russian languages represented.

It is interesting to note that the Soviet Union also practiced a colonial linguistic policy similar to that of the British Empire in India and Hong Kong, the Spanish in Central and South America, and the French in Haiti, in that the U.S.S.R would implement mandatory Russian instruction in their satellite states (i.e. The Ukraine, Lithuania, Albania). It is important to understand the political climate of language in order to understand the full language experience. Growing up, not only was Masha instructed in the premier, dominant language of Russian, she was also instructed in English, a language viewed as influential (and elite in some contexts, but not all).

Masha described her family as members of the “Russian intelligencia,” who pooled their resources with other families to provide their children with unique and quality language experiences. From a very young age, Masha was taught English in a bilingual environment and through an acculturation model (Ortega, 2009). The inclusion of aspects like teaching drawing, dancing in English during these lessons brought the children into an English speaking world rift with cultural development. From an economic perspective, Masha was of the elite when it came to language learning opportunities. As English instruction was not popular in the schools then, for children to have the opportunity to learn, their parents most likely would have needed to have the capital to hire private tutors or place their children into private schools.

Masha’s English instruction also fits well in the idea of learning as a social accomplishment (Firth and Wagner, 2007). Learning English was not simply a school course to be used and discarded in Masha’s case, it was something she did as a peer group with many of her social equals taking part. Nor was it limited to the language classes only, the children continued their language development by being taught in English in other subjects (first the drawing and dancing in the private lessons and later on, the bilingual structure of the private

¹ Nabokov, a prolific Russian-born writer, began his career writing Russian novels. Upon emigrating from Europe to the United States Nabokov wrote in English and wrote one of his most famous works, *Lolita*, in English.

Table 1. Simplified representation of analysis using impact factors.

Impact factor	Masha’s experience	Analysis
Political	L2 was not widely taught; L2 had potential political usefulness.	L2 was useful in the hierarchy of languages at the time; L2 could be used by her as a political tool to advance her career/global knowledge.
Economic	Family could afford to provide private L2 instruction with cultural components and later on, private, bilingual schooling.	Unique opportunity to learn L2 in social, bilingual environment with aspects of acculturation model.
Social	L2 was instructed with other students of similar backgrounds; students engaged in cultural components infused with L2.	L2 learning was social accomplishment; Social motivations at play in language learning.

school).

Cekaite and Bjork-Willen (2013) demonstrated that the social factor in peer-to-peer interactions can have a large impact on the way language is acquired and ultimate attainment. In Masha’s case, she was primarily taught English through social immersion with other children. This means that like the children in Cekaite and Bjork-Willen’s (2013) study, she was interacting in English through peer-to-peer interactions. Although most of the children she was interacting with were not finding a common language to speak in like the children in the study, we can see that Masha’s language development was impacted by peer corrections and interactions.

Table 1 is a summary of the analysis of Masha’s language development using our impact factors.

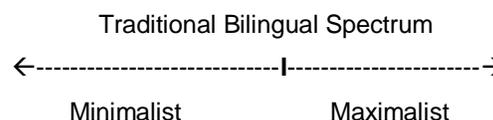
Using this model, pieces of Masha’s language learning experience are able to be pieced away and analyzed in the specific context in which she learned the language. In this way, the L2 learner’s experience may vary widely. An important factor of Masha’s language development is that Masha’s language development did not stop as her schooling concluded; she went on to a bilingual career and global lifestyle, living and traveling between continents and between an English-speaking society and a Russian one. As Masha continued in her language development, how do the L2 impact factors analyzed above play a role in her bilingual expression and the evaluation by others of her bilingualism?

The flexible bilingual spectrum

The basis for the flexible bilingual spectrum that will be used to analyze Masha’s present language use is Chin and Wigglesworth’s (2007) creation of the scale of minimalist-maximalist bilingualism. One side of the scale represents the minimalist bilingual, in which the threshold of being a “bilingual” is very low. An example of a “minimalist bilingual” would be being able to order in a restaurant in a second language, or have a basic understanding of a television show in a second language. On the other end of the spectrum is the maximalist, a

very high threshold of bilingualism. The “maximalist bilingual” should be able to operate in all aspects of the second language as well as they do in the first language. The maximalist bilingual is one that is unattainable, for the very definition of bilingual is that it is not monolingual (Chin and Wigglesworth 2007).

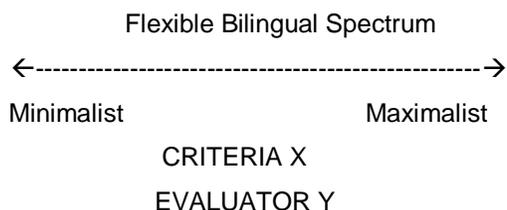
Based on Masha’s self-evaluation of her “bilingualism,” she would be placed somewhere in the middle of the bilingual spectrum. In drawing the bilingual spectrum based on Chin and Wigglesworth’s model, her bilingualism could be represented as such:



While an individual who has had extensive education beginning at an early age in a second language, has a long career in which she needs to operate effectively in both languages and lived for a long period of time in a country where the second language is primarily spoke would probably not be characterized as somewhere in the middle of the above spectrum, this is how Masha views herself as a bilingual in the broad sense.

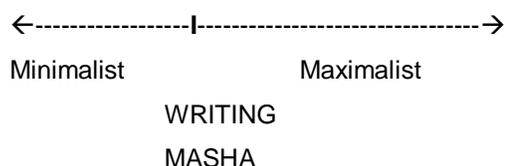
Why is this the case? That Masha who has navigated a successful bilingual career and that involves all aspects of language expression such as speaking, writing, reading and who obviously has had some of the best language instruction opportunities view herself as so mediocre on the bilingual scale?

In revisiting Masha’s comments about the author Nabokov, we see that this is one of her marks of bilingualism, to be able to operate as effectively in the second language as in the first - the definition of maximalist. Now while an outsider’s evaluation of Masha’s bilingualism might place her much closer to the maximalist end of the scale, we now may expand the conceptualization of the bilingual scale to include some of the impact factors that influence Masha’s perception of her bilingualism. To bring in the impact factors, the scale will be drawn as such:



“Criteria X” is represented by a specific aspect of L2 expression. “Evaluator Y” represents who is evaluating the speaker’s bilingualism. For example:

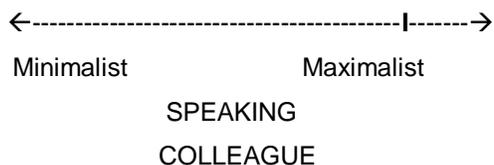
Example A of Flexible Bilingual Spectrum



In this representation, Masha evaluates herself in the lower-middle of the minimalist/maximalist scale in writing in her L2. We now may relate this back to one of the aspects of her language learning experience. For the political impact factor, English as an L2 was not widely taught in Masha’s learning experience. She sees the Russian author Vladimir Nabokov as almost a language-learning peer. According to Masha, writing the best-selling novel *Lolita* in English was not an adequate reason to classify Nabokov as a true “bilingual,” because Nabokov was not able to translate his other Russian works into English himself. Therefore, at least in the writing aspect, Masha would consider herself even lower on the scale than Nabokov as this is one of the only peer Russian to English L2 learners in her view.

Now another representation of the flexible bilingual spectrum:

Example B of Flexible Bilingual Spectrum



In this representation, Masha’s colleague evaluates Masha as very close to maximalist on the bilingual scale in speaking. Reaching the impact factors, Masha was able to receive English instruction from a very young age (economic) and also learned English in a dynamic, bilingual environment with her peers (social). Thus, Masha, from a young age, developed speaking traits like her L2 accent and speech disfluency (i.e. filler words like “um”) that are near native-like. In using the flexible

bilingual spectrum, more aspects of SLA experience are able to be applied to the present evaluation of the bilingual.

This evaluation is needed to inform us of the many layered experiences and influences of adult bilinguals who may live in many language spheres. Impact factors are a helpful way to frame the SLA experience for these individuals, as they provide a descriptive window into unique SLA realities. These impact factors then lend themselves well to the more flexible bilingual spectrum taking into account the criterion and evaluator.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

The flexible bilingual spectrum analysis from the basis of impact factors combines aspects of the fields of SLA and bilingualism that provide a rich opportunity of analysis for language speakers with varied experiences. It is useful to think about impact factors when looking at bilingual spectrums. For one, it places SLA more broadly in cultural, social and historical contexts. Secondly, it provides a more methodical and unique approach to examining bilingual (or multilingual) adults who have had layers and years of language development and experience.

While a weakness of the study may be seen in the relevance of the “impact factors,” the impact factors in this study were chosen for their broadness and their applicability to SLA experiences of all kinds. In expanding the idea of the flexible bilingual spectrum, the impact factors may be modified and tailored closer to the experiences of the speaker who is being evaluated.

Another weakness of the study is that the method used in gather information is dependent upon the L2 speaker’s perspective. The results used for analysis are gathered completely from the speaker’s description. A potential follow-up in using the flexible bilingual spectrum would be to gather data using another method, perhaps in evaluating an L2 speaker’s dialogue or in using other sources to gather information on the cultural climate of the L2 speaker’s experience while learning the L2.

The case study presented in this paper and the application of a flexible bilingual spectrum demonstrates that the fields of SLA and bilingualism, thought to be disparate by some, may be intertwined to further describe and analyze language experiences and expression.

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A vibrant, multi-colored Chinese dragon sculpture is the central focus, set against a clear blue sky. The dragon is intricately detailed with scales in shades of gold, green, and red, and flowing manes. It is depicted in a dynamic, leaping pose, holding a small object in its mouth. The background is a solid, deep blue, which makes the dragon stand out prominently.

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