

## **Applied Linguistics Research of Bilingualism and its Incentives for Foreign Language Pedagogy**

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### **Abstract**

Possibly the simplest definition of bilingualism is the one pointing to the ability of a person to communicate in two languages. Most frequently, bilingualism is the outcome of raising children in a bilingual family, the result of long-term exposure to more languages, or the outcome of bilingual education that is provided by a school system. It is the latter relationship between bilingualism and bilingual education that should be of special interest to language pedagogy academics, school managers and school legislative makers because, since 1989, bilingual education has become extraordinarily popular among parents and learners, the result of which is the continually growing number of bilingual primary and secondary schools. On the other hand, it is necessary to see the many significant pitfalls in applying bilingual education in Slovak schools: nearly non-existent research which leads to a lack of empirically proven knowledge, many important aspects of bilingual education remain unexplained, and both psychological and cognitive effects of bilingual education are usually explained entirely intuitively, without reasonable empirical background. Bilingual schools in Slovakia also seek proven procedures of good practice or valid instruments for measuring the quality of bilingual education. The objective of this study is to "track" one of the possible paths to a better understanding of bilingualism and to analyse some of the latest research in applied linguistics (namely sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and neurolinguistics), which may be inspirational for further development of bilingual education.

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### **Key words**

Bilingualism, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, bilingual education, foreign language teaching

### **Introduction**

Worldwide, bilingual education belongs to the areas of contemporary pedagogy that brings out some important controversies (philosophical, conceptual, sociological, political, economical, etc.) and thus calls for extensive and intensive debate (Baker & Prys Jones, 1998). While in some countries (the U.S.A., the U.K.), bilingualism is connected with negative social aspects (such as

poverty, social and economical exclusion) - since in those countries bilingual education is related mostly to schooling immigrants or teaching heritage languages; however in Slovakia and other central European countries, the term (mostly related to education provided both in mother language and one of foreign languages, e.g. English, Spanish and Italian) connotes with exclusivity and elitism.

In previous papers, we investigated the contemporary state of bilingual education in Slovakia, in particular, analysing seven areas: reflection of bilingual education in school **legislation** and state pedagogical documents, **purposes** of bilingual education in Slovakia, its organization, structure of bilingual **schools curricula, types of bilingual** education applied in Slovak bilingual schools, and how bilingual education is both reflected in (and saturated by) the latest **research** findings (Pokrivčáková, 2013a) and the need of specific teacher training for bilingual education (Pokrivčáková, 2013b). In those papers, we pointed out some significant pitfalls of applying bilingual education in Slovak schools: nearly non-existent research leading to the situation when some crucial aspects of bilingual education have remained unexplained and unconfirmed. Psychological and cognitive effects of bilingual education are usually explained entirely intuitively, without reasonable empirical background. Bilingual schools in Slovakia also seek proven procedures of good practice or valid instruments for measuring the quality of bilingual education. This led us to defining the objectives of this study as to “track” one of the possible paths to a better understanding of bilingualism through learning the bilingualism-related knowledge of other disciplines, especially applied linguistics, which has already been gathered. In other words, the aim of the paper is to analyse some of the latest research in applied linguistics (namely sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and neurolinguistics), which may be inspirational for further development of bilingual education and its specific means (e.g. specific evaluation instruments).

### **Used terminology**

Most likely, the simplest definition of **bilingualism** comes from Valdez & Figueora (1994) claiming that bilingualism means “knowing” two languages. The problem is the authors do not explain what “to know” means.

On the contrary, other authors see bilingualism as a complicated complex influenced by multiple factors such as the age of acquisition of both languages, the amount of exposure to both languages, the way how both languages were learned, and the level of proficiency and communication skills in each language. Modern definitions admit that bilingualism is composed of multiple subskills and a bilingual (a person with the trait of bilingualism) can have varying levels of proficiency in both languages. It means a person may be highly proficient in one

language and less proficient in the other, or he may be highly proficient in reading and nearly unable to speak in a second language.

Tokuhama-Espinoza (2009) summarized several key factors influencing (both in positive or negative way) development of bilingualism:

1. **Timing** (when exposure to two languages or formal bilingual education started);
2. **Aptitude** (a language "talent");
3. **Motivation** (both positive and negative);
4. **Strategy** (how both languages are learnt);
5. **Consistency** (how stable and consistent the exposure to both languages is);
6. **Opportunity and support** (does a person have enough opportunities to communicate in both languages? Are they supported by their families, friends, community, etc?);
7. **Linguistic and historic relationship between languages** (it is much easier to become bilingual in languages coming from the same language family, e.g. Slovak and Czech, than to be bilingual in "distant", unrelated languages with different graphical, lexical and syntactical characteristics, e.g. Slovak and Chinese);
8. **Closest people's attitude** (e.g. parents, siblings, closest friends);
9. **Gender** (it is believed that thanks to better cooperation of both hemispheres, girls are better in acquiring bilingualism);

Based on the combination of the above mentioned factors, researchers usually distinguish several types of bilingualism. Timing, for example, is crucial for distinguishing between **simultaneous bilingualism**, which occurs when two languages are acquired from birth or very early, prior to one year of age (De Houwer, 2005) and **sequential bilingualism**, when one language is acquired following another.

Many laics and also some pedagogical documents understand the term bilingualism as the situation when a person has a native-like proficiency in both languages – **true, "pure" bilingualism**. Such people are very difficult to find. Much more frequent are **additive bilinguals** who maintain their high-quality communicative skills in a mother language and they learn a second language as an addition to it. The situation is rather opposite with bilingual learners who, while improving their skills in a second language, gradually lose or decrease their communicative skills in mother languages (**subtractive bilingualism**). Moreover, some authors define **balanced bilingualism**, as neither of two languages is dominant, and a bilingual communicates in both languages equally

well. **Elective bilingualism**, on the other hand, is developed if a learner chooses to be bilingual and learn a second language, not because of social or work-related reasons, but because they want it.

Most frequently, bilingualism is the outcome of either raising children in a bilingual family, or the result of long-term exposure to more languages in various social environments, or the outcome of formal bilingual education provided by a school system. Considering various types of social environments in which bilingualism is acquired and various types of links between languages, researchers have identified seven possible topologies of bilingualism (c.f. Maghsoudi, 2010, p. 36):

**Ambilingualism:** a bilingual demonstrates equal ability in both languages and in all domains, it is nearly impossible to trace any influence of one language on the other;

**Equilingualism:** a bilingual has roughly equivalent ability in both languages;

**Functional bilingualism:** a bilingual can perform a limited set of activities in a second language;

**Receptive/passive bilingualism:** a bilingual comprehends a second language (either in spoken or written form) but is not able to produce it;

**Productive/active bilingualism:** along with comprehension, a bilingual can produce second language utterances;

**Natural/primary bilingualism:** the acquisition of a second language in a natural setting (e.g. bilingual family) without formal instructing or training;

**Academic/secondary bilingualism:** a bilingual acquires a second language through formal teaching at school. This type of bilingualism integrates developing biliteracy as a rule (c.f. Bialystok, 2007; Bialystok, Luk, & Kwan, 2005).

**Bilingual education** (both formal and informal) is provided in at least two languages. In reality, the concept is more complicated and a comparative study of the situation in various countries has proved that it “means different things in different places” (Hall, Smith & Wicaksono, 2011, p. 177). In this paper, bilingual education is understood as a term enveloping any system of education in which the curriculum (or at least part of it) is presented to learners in two (or more) languages, irrespective of their combination, so that they may develop bilingualism and biliteracy as close to true bilingualism as possible.

### **3 Initial background of the study**

In Slovakia, bilingual education has become extraordinarily popular among both parents and learners; the result of which is the continually growing number of bilingual primary and secondary schools (the number of bilingual schools in

Slovakia has increased in the period of the last 10 years by more than 100% - from 25 to 56 schools).

In Slovakia, the additive type of bilingual education is dominant when considering the degree to which the two languages are used. In most cases, a mother tongue is used as the first language of instruction, while a foreign language is used only as a secondary instructional language in some subjects, or in the teaching of only some topics or lessons (which points to a strong form of bilingual education which promotes bilingualism and academic literacy in both languages). The weak form of bilingualism is performed only at 11 Slovak schools where English, German and Bulgarian are used as the only languages of instruction (for more details see Pokrivčáková, 2013a). Despite its growing popularity, many important aspects of bilingual education remain unexplained (e.g. both psychological and cognitive effects of bilingual education are usually explained entirely intuitively without a reasonable empirical background). Bilingual schools in Slovakia also seek proven procedures of good practice or valid instruments for measuring the quality of bilingual education. These are the areas where research in applied linguistics (more specifically in sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and neurolinguistics) might help to understand bilingualism and mechanisms of bilingual education better, as well as to model effective procedures of academic bilingual education together with valid instruments for measuring its quality. The objective of the paper therefore, is to introduce and analyse some of the latest researches in applied linguistics, which may be inspirational for further development of bilingual education. The paper focuses exclusively on academic bilingualism and discusses the results of recently published applied linguistic research that may be interesting and inspirational for language pedagogy academics, school managers and designers of school legislation.

### **Sociolinguistic impulses**

Sociolinguistics as one of the disciplines of applied linguistics comes out from the initial assumption that people acquire/learn languages in social environments and thus any language phenomena should be studied in relation to relevant social phenomena (Auer, 2007). As Lanza (2008, p. 73) pointed out, sociolinguistic research proved that bilingual speech is always “socially embedded”. Or, as Angermeyer (2010, p. 467) concludes: “It seems clear then that any theory of bilingual speech needs to include the socio-cultural context of language use and needs to account for a relationship between the community-level social facts of the contact situation and the linguistic facts of the bilingual speech of individuals”.

Sociolinguistics studies bilingualism either as a characteristic of social groups, or communities located in a particular region (societal bilingualism), various language-in-contact phenomena, and impact of various social-environmental factors on developing individual bilingualism (c.f. Wei, 1994; Woolard, 1997).

The following social and environmental factors having impact on whether individuals become bilinguals or remain monolinguals were identified by sociolinguistic research (e.g. Pearson, 2007):

- a) **the amount of continual exposure to both languages** (e.g. a greater chance of true bilingualism exists if learners are exposed to both languages early and often, not only at schools but in families and in communities, as well);
- b)
- c) **the attitudes of close social surrounding** (parents, siblings and peers) toward bilingualism has been proved to be a significant determinant as well;
- d) **the popularity/attractiveness of languages in community** has been proved to be another significant factor (i.e. if learners and the community they live in, perceive both languages as attractive, the potential for reaching higher levels of bilingualism increases. However, if one of the languages is perceived as unattractive in a particular social community or context, learners are more likely to reject it and remain monolingual).

In addition to the above mentioned factors, sociolinguistics studies the specific socially determined language-contact phenomena such as:

- **socially-determined language choice** (e.g. diglossia), i.e. using different languages for different functions in various social contexts. Learners, for example, use one language for family discussions, for counting and praying, and the second language for formal communication (Spolsky, 2010);
- **codeswitching**, i.e. switching between two languages within a single conversation, usually at a turn boundary (Auer, 1998; Gardner-Chloros, 2008; Gregor, 2003; Poplack, 1980).

Example:

A: I have a stomach-ache.

B: Oh, I am so sorry. Are you hungry?

A: *Hej!* Yes.

- **codemixing**, i.e. including material from two languages (words or syntax structure) in a syntactic structure or a single utterance (Muyske, 2000).

Example: Today was a very good day. I went to school and took my *vysvedčenie* (= a final school report). After that, the holidays started.

Codemixing is most frequently represented by using **borrowings (insertions)** when elements from one language are included to the structures

of the other language (Muysken, 1997; Auer, 1998; Angermeyer, 2010). Studying bilingualism, researchers point to the possibility to identify the dominant language of a bilingual by studying symmetry/asymmetry in his/her using insertions. Identification of a dominant language is interesting also in exolingual context. For example, Angermeyer (2010) studied the frequency and types of socially determined language-contact phenomena in performance of litigants and court interpreters. He found out that insertions of English elements to structures of their mother languages were noticeably more frequent while the inverted insertions were very rare. Angermeyer, reminding of the results of previous studies by Muysken (2000), concluded that this asymmetrical structure of language contact reflects social dominance of English language in analysed interactions and “relates to power asymmetries found between speakers of different languages who participate in these interactions” (2010, p. 476). (In the light of such a conclusion, it would be interesting to study and compare the perception of languages of instruction of bilingual school learners and then compare the results with the perception of Slovak and English of learners at mainstream Slovak schools. Language pedagogy would then apply the findings on dominance/subordination of languages in bilingual education while studying the topic of learners’ motivation);

- **and language transfer**, which will be either positive or negative. Positive transfer occurs when a particular word, unit or structure of both languages in context is similar or even the same (e.g. cognates). It helps individuals exposed to both languages acquire a second language easier and produce a correct language sooner. In the contrary situation, when speakers and writers transfer words, units and structures that differ in two languages, negative transfer occurs, potentially causing errors in language production (e.g. using Slovak syntactical rules for word order while writing a text in English). Research of language transfer may thus be very useful for bilingual education pedagogy; since it would help both model procedures of more effective teaching based on positive transfer and explain some typical mechanisms of making errors caused by negative transfer (Ordóñez, Carlo, Snow, & McLaughlin, 2002).

### **Bilingualism in psycholinguistic research**

The social factors explained above, play crucial roles in other areas of applied linguistics, such as psycholinguistics (for more see Kroll & de Groot, 1998) and neurolinguistics (c.f. Paradis, 2004). For example, psycholinguistics focus on determining how two languages are organized in a bilingual’s brain and

consequently, whether they assist each other (positive transfer) or interfere with each other (negative transfer) (Gottardo & Grant, 2008).

Psycholinguists distinguish two fundamental types of bilingualism:

- **compound bilingualism:** two languages are closely connected since one language was learned after (and through) the other. The result is that two languages are integrated in one language system with two sets of words (e.g. for compound bilinguals words “a house” and “dom” are absolute synonyms naming the same mental concept).
- **co-ordinate bilingualism:** each language was learnt in different circumstances and in a separate context. Mental vocabulary and language systems are so distinct that they do not interfere. Two languages exist in a bilingual’s brain as two independent systems, each with its own vocabulary and grammar rules (e.g. for a co-ordinate bilingual a word “house” is related to a completely different concept – e.g. a mental picture of Victorian house in London - than a word “dom” which could relate to a mental picture of a typical wooden house in Slovakia).

Psycholinguistics is also interested in research activities, such as identifying and analysing a bilingual person’s mental dictionary, and examining cognitive consequences of bilingualism, i.e. whether bilingual children have better or worse cognitive and language skills in comparison to their monolingual peers (Dijkstra & van Heuven, 2002; Feldman & Healy, 1998; Jiang, 2004).

At present, there is a relatively general psycholinguistic assumption that bilingualism affects different language and cognitive skills in both positive and negative ways. It has been proved by many research studies that vocabulary development is typically delayed in learning a second language, whether that language is acquired sequentially or simultaneously (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005). On the other hand, some research has proved the positive impact of bilingualism on literacy acquisition (Schwartz, Geva, Share, & Leikin, 2007) and metalinguistic awareness (Bruck & Genesee, 1995; Caravolas & Bruck, 1993). As far as bilingualism’s impact on other cognitive functions is concerned, many research studies (e.g. Morales, Calvo, & Bialystok, 2013) have shown that bilingual children develop a better working memory, they have a longer concentration span, they are better in focusing their attention, and they perform better in multitasking (Kraus et al., 2012).

### **Neurolinguistic perspectives**

Neurolinguistics, as the last discipline of applied linguistics discussed in this paper, deals with the consequences of bilingualism for the neural architecture of human brains (Fabbro, 1999). Like sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics, it

focuses on phenomena such as language contact, language interference, and code-switching; but from the neurological perspective.

Neurolinguistics named 4 components of verbal communication: implicit linguistic competence, metalinguistic knowledge, pragmatics, and motivation. What might be of immense importance for language pedagogy is the relationship between linguistic competence (i.e. ability to communicate in a language) and metalinguistic knowledge (descriptive knowledge of a language, usually acquired in the academic environment through formal education in schools) neurolinguistics identified. While linguistic competence „is acquired incidentally, is stored implicitly, is used automatically, and is subserved by procedural memory“, metalinguistic knowledge „is learned consciously, is stored explicitly, is used in a controlled manner, and is subserved by declarative memory“ (Paradis, online). Therefore implicit linguistic competence and metalinguistic knowledge rely on different cerebral structures; they can be only unlikely developed by the same procedures and means. “Metalinguistic knowledge never becomes implicit competence, or the other way around. Both develop independently“ (Paradis, online). It means that learning about the language (e.g. Grammar Translation Method techniques or academic way of learning languages through explicit grammar rules) can never be directly transformed in knowing a language (the ability to communicate fluently, communicative competence).

### **Conclusion: Implications for formal bilingual education**

Based on multiple observations in bilingual classes, Gondová (2012) concluded that the only difference in the teaching practice of teachers at Slovak monolingual schools and those who teach at bilingual schools lies in the fact that the latter ones teach either in a foreign language, or they integrate two languages of instruction. In general, both groups of teachers teach rather “traditionally”, preferring monolingual and frontal teaching techniques (e.g. lecturing) and applying nearly exclusively a convergent type of tasks. Teachers seem to give up using more creative and cognitively more challenging teaching techniques. Moreover, it seems that many teachers at bilingual schools are not even aware of a positive impact bilingual education might have on the development of their students’ cognitive functions and they do not apply techniques that could assist in achieving such an impact. Informing teachers about the latest research findings in applied linguistics, as well as incorporating these findings into teacher training courses, could help overcome this deficit.

Another serious problem related to bilingual education in Slovakia, which was mentioned above, is the lack of valid evaluation instruments, or even the lack of basic information on evaluation of language production in the context of bilingual education. A good example of such misunderstanding is the incorrect evaluation

of code-switching in learners' performance. Teachers usually see code-switching as an attempt to hide fluency or a gap in active vocabulary. Applied linguistics, on the other hand, distinguishes several functions of code-switching (Zentella, 1985), thus hiding the deficit of lexical items in a second language, which accounts for only about 10 per cent of code-switches (Gudykunst, 2004). Other reasons/functions of code-switching might include co-ordinate bilingualism or creative experimentation with language. Deeper understanding the sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic, and neurolinguistic background of code-switching and other bilingual speech phenomena would assist pedagogical documents designers to design more valid and objective procedures of evaluating learners outcomes in academic bilingual education.

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