Bilingual and multilingual children: adapting theoretical knowledge to the practice of public education

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Current situation, justification for the choice of topic

As a result of globalization and the accompanying spread of languages and diseppearance of physical borders, an increasing number of bilingual and multilingual families are being integrated into our society. Their children therefore, are being placed into formal education in Hungary.

The Hungarian school system is monolingual, so the language of education is Hungarian, the teachers give instructions in Hungarian.

Bilingual and multilingual children think differently because two or more languages and cultures interact. Research with bilingual children shows that there are many benefits to using two or more languages. However, Hungarian is not the dominant language for bilingual and multilingual children in our country, so their performance in pre-school screening and school tests is lower than that of their monolingual peers.

Why do we study bilingualism and multilingualism?

A large proportion of the world's population speaks and understands more than one language on a daily basis. Multilingualism is the norm, although in Hungary it is difficult to accept and we are less prepared for it.

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Bilingualism and multilingualism are widely researched topics, and research on bilingual and multilingual children can also be found (Bialystock, 1991, De Houwer, 1987, 1990, 1995, Grosjean, 1987, MacNamara, 1966, Stavans and Hoffmann, 2015). In Hungary there are researchers who deal with this topic (e.g. Navracsics, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2010, Bartha, 1999).

Many children around the world born or grown to be bilingual. We can look at bilingualism from different perspectives: traditional (Bloomfield or Braun), liberal (Hali or Macnamara) and holistic (Grosjean). Bilingualism is defined as (knowing" two languages (Valdez and Figueroa, 1994).

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In a different approach „acquisition of two languages that use different speech sounds, vocabulary and grammar rules" (Weiten, 2010). As Grosjean said: A bilingual is like a high hurdler. He doesn't have to jump as high as a high jumper or run as fast as a sprinter. Instead, he is a unique individual with special skills. The definition is complex, it must include the degree of proficiency of each language and circumstances under which each language is learned.

Multilingualism shows higher complexitiy level than bilingualism (Aronin and Jessner, 2015). Nowadays we know that a multilingual person uses different languages in different domains of life so that the levels of proficiency can differ strongly according to their needs. Multilingual acquisition differs from monolingual development. It involves more layers that affect ultimate acquisition including: second and/or multiple language acquisition factors, environmental factors, individual factors, developmental factors and if the child has disabilities, then disabilities are also confounding factors (Brice, 2015).

Bilingual acquisition is a complicated process. The majority of monolingual children learn their language from their parents. Bilingual or multilingual children, on the other hand, can learn languages from a variety of sources, including grandparents, playmates, school teachers, media etc. Their language exposure varies with time and situation.

Language acquisition of bilingual children

Bilingual children have less exposure to each of their languages than monolingual children, and as a result, they never completely master either language and never achieve monolingual proficiency. When compared to monolingual children of the same age, young bilingual children can know fewer words in one or both of their languages. How do we measure proficiency? How do we determine if bilingual children's language development is normal?

Bilinguals and multilinguals learn languages differently from monolinguals

The Dynamic Model of Multilingualism (DMM; Herdina and Jessner, 2002) is the lates approach to multilingualism. This model applies Dynamic Systems Theory (DCT; De Bot, Lowie and Verspoor, 2007; Aronin and Jessner, 2015) to multilingualism.

Within a multilingual system, language systems are highly interdependent because they interact with each other. In the Dynamic Model of Multilingualism, the Multilingualism factor (M factor) encompasses the set of skills and abilities that a multilingual language user develops on the basis of his or her prior linguistic and metacognitive knowledge (Jessner, 2006).

The elements of multilingual competence: linguistic awareness (metalinguistic awareness), language knowledge and inter-linguistic relations. Multilingual awareness is a key element of multilingual learning (2006, 2008, 2014).

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The bilingual and multilingual learner builds up a relationship between languages, and usually consciously exploits the transition between languages, which is a key feature of multilingual language use and learning.

Multilingual people have the advantage of metalinguistic awareness. More directed attention, more flexibility to adapt to new rules, more flexibility of thought, because they use two systems and there is a crossover between the two.

Start school succesfully

A successful start to school is a worldwide research and development issue, as it determines learning outcomes in later years, so it is important that all children start school prepared. Research seeks to identify the skills that are crucial for later development, and reliable and valid instruments are needed to determine the level of development needed to start school (Snow, Van Hemel, 2008., Csapó, Molnár, Nagy, 2015).

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The transition period between preschool and primary school has already been a sensitive period for children (Merényi and Rádi, 2019., Vojnitsné and Zilahiné, 2008). The success or failure of a child's entry into school can have an impact on the child's whole life. if language barriers prevent the child from accessing the information and development they need, they may drop out, lose motivation, and may have social problems that lead to referrals to specialist services after screening.

Pedagogical implications

What can schools do? The impact of bilingualism and multilingualism is positive if the environment is inclusive. In a multilingual environment, the school values and integrates the first language into the education. It is important to promote multilingualism, reinforce identities, motivate and encourage learners.

The European Commission makes the following recommendations in its publication *Rethinking language education and linguistic diversity in schools*: preparing teachers for teaching in multilingual settings, supporting language learning throughout the education system, developing inclusive and innovative pedagogies, finding innovative ways of testing and assessment, implementing comprehensive approaches to create supportive environments (European Commission, 2017).

The parent-teacher-child relationship is the basis for a child's successful integration into society.

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