

## ***SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN ENGLISH BILINGUAL CONTEXTS: THE GENERATIVE PERSPECTIVE***

### **AQUISIÇÃO DO INGLÊS COMO L2 EM CONTEXTO BILÍNGUE: A PERSPECTIVA GERATIVA**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Bilingualism grows exponentially in Brazil, both as a phenomenon and a tendency, as evidenced by the number of Brazilian researchers involved in studying it (Mello, 1999; Megale, 2005; Marcelino, 2007, 2009; Flory & Souza, 2009). Sometimes, though, this may come across as a new trend to be dogmatically followed because it is very happening, in a way that is similar to every other educational trend seen as a godsend to solve each and every problem at the moment. In a context where most of the debates focus on the educational and pedagogical aspects of bilingual education, a major and essential element seems to have been neglected in the context of language development: the *acquisition* of the English Language. The generative linguistic perspective, however, does have a relevant agenda to contribute to the area (Songbird, 1999; Herschensohn, 2000; White, 2003; Meisel, 2011, among others). This paper raises linguistic questions pertinent to the context of L2 acquisition, such as the role of input in the development of English as an L2 at an early stage of life, in light of the Theory of Principles and Parameters (Chomsky, 1986, 1988, 1995). Towards the end of this paper, I entertain a reflection on the importance of providing the child in the bilingual context with optimal input as a means of maximizing the chances of an early learner to acquire and develop the L2, at an age in which s/he is best equipped to engage in language *acquisition*.

**Keywords:** L2 acquisition; bilingualism; Principles and Parameters

## RESUMO

O Bilinguismo cresce exponencialmente no Brasil, como fenômeno e como tendência, o que pode ser observado pelo número de pesquisadores brasileiros que o pesquisam (Mello, 1999; Megale, 2005; Marcelino, 2007, 2009; Flory & Souza, 2009). Às vezes, no entanto, esse crescimento pode vir como resultado de uma tendência que é dogmaticamente seguida por ser moderna, de forma semelhante a qualquer outra tendência educacional milagrosa, capaz de resolver todos os problemas do momento. Em um contexto em que a maior parte dos debates se ocupa de aspectos educacionais e pedagógicos da educação bilíngue, um elemento essencial e de grande importância parece estar fora da discussão sobre desenvolvimento linguístico: a *aquisição* da língua inglesa. A perspectiva gerativista, entretanto, oferece uma agenda relevante para o tratamento do tema. (Songbird, 1999; Herschensohn, 2000; White, 2003; Meisel, 2011, entre outros). Este trabalho levanta questões linguísticas pertinentes ao contexto de desenvolvimento de L2, como o papel do input no desenvolvimento do inglês em estágios iniciais da vida, à luz da Teoria de Princípios e Parâmetros (Chomsky, 1986, 1988, 1995). Na parte final do trabalho, apresento uma reflexão sobre a importância de se prover input ideal à criança no contexto bilíngue, como forma de maximização das chances de desenvolvimento e aquisição de uma L2, valendo-se do seu momento aquisicional privilegiado pela pouca idade.

**Palavras-Chave:** aquisição de L2; bilinguismo; Princípios e Parâmetros

### The Brazilian bilingual context for English in São Paulo

I will give a very brief account of bilingual education, inasmuch as it is not the main object of this study. Nevertheless, an understanding of this context is relevant for future discussion<sup>1</sup>. The bilingual schools are characterized by different views of what a bilingual school is. Grosjean (1982) summarizes different possibilities:

Schools in the United Kingdom where half the school subjects are taught in English are called bilingual schools. Schools in Canada in which all subjects are taught in English to French-Canadian children are called bilingual schools. Schools in the Soviet Union in which all the subjects except Russian are taught in English are bilingual schools, as are schools in which some of the subjects are taught in Georgian and the rest in Russian. Schools in the United States where English is taught as a second language are called bilingual schools, as are parochial schools

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed description of the contexts, see Megale, 2005 and Paradis et al, 2011.

and even weekend ethnic schools... [Thus] the concept of “bilingual school” has been used without qualification to cover such a wide range of uses of two languages in Education. (GROSJEAN, 1982:213)

Grosjean brings into light the complexity of defining a bilingual school. Such complexity is on a par with defining what a bilingual individual is, as will be briefly discussed for purposes of our discussion in subsequent sections. One thing that must not be forgotten is that our context is the Brazilian one. As neatly organized and flawless as imported approaches to bilingual education may seem to be, they are still foreign and need adaptation to fit in our context, to say the least. The context in which bilingual schools arose in Brazil had the following major characteristics:

- a) schools felt the need to make their English language instruction more efficient.
- b) parents sought a school which could put together a good education and efficient English language teaching.

In the middle of this context, schools, parents and teachers did not know what to expect from the so-called “bilingual schools.” The initial situation was chaotic and each school was doing something different and putting together professionals and consultants that did not really understand the concept behind the term. Some believed it had to be similar to the International Schools, others believed that the students would miss out on their Brazilianness because of a foreign culture. It was a while until the dust settled and the situation became a little clearer. Today we know that: a) the bilingual school is a Brazilian school; b) no kid is going to be less Brazilian because they go to a Bilingual School. If anything, the Bilingual School is meant to broaden the horizons of its students, make them more globalized and better prepared for an interconnected world, give them an extra pair of eyes and make them more “culture-sensitive” (Wei, 2000); and ultimately on a health-oriented note, it will delay the manifestation of Alzheimer and other forms of dementia (Bialystok et al, 2007, 2011).

The different types of bilingual schools, their methods and approaches as well as their beliefs may vary significantly and describing them lies beyond the scope of this article. Suffice to say that for purposes of my discussion, I will consider a bilingual school one that has most of the

time geared towards the kids in English.

Next, I will address the linguistic aspects of bilingual education; namely, the role of English in such context.

### **Being a Bilingual in the Bilingual Education Context in Brazil**

The debate over who is or isn't a bilingual is far from over. It is very difficult to determine from which point along the continuum one becomes a bilingual. The definitions abound and are everything but compatible. One may choose a version of the definition of a bilingual ranging from "being a native speaker in two languages" (Bloomfield, 1933) to "passing as a member of two different linguistic communities" (Thierry, 1978). Wei (2000) provides an extensive review and typology of bilinguals to include those that only understand, those that only read, etc.

In this article, I will draw on the concept of an early consecutive bilingual (Marcelino, 2009) to refer to the child who is exposed to the English language from the ages 1 – 2 on, in a full immersion program.

### **Input in English**

Considering aspects of first language acquisition, as outlined in a Linguistic Theory (Chomsky, 1981), a child develops a language by being exposed to robust input in that language. This input contains the Primary Linguistic Data (PLD) from which the child extracts the information to build their language (Chomsky, 1965). The PLD contains essential information from which the child will build the grammar of his/her language. This information is what we may call informally "a linguistic property of English/Portuguese/Japanese, etc." This property is responsible for a number of structures that are connected to that property; thus, the minute the child realizes that property (a specific Parameter), all the other structures related to that property will become available for the child. For example:

- When a child realizes the linguistic property that the *object* comes after the verb in English, he/she realizes that the language has the structure (S)VO. Another structure that is related to this property is the fact that the noun comes after the preposition, so the child doesn't have to learn this structure (Prep NP) separately.

- When the child realizes the *property* that in his/her (SVO) language the subject can be invisible (*comi um pedaço de bolo*), he/she will also know that the object can be invisible (*eu comprei o livro e guardei [o livro] sem ler [o livro]*), that subject and verb can be inverted (*estava eu lá no cinema quando...*) and a few other structures that are *all* related to that specific property.

This would account for the fact that kids learning their first language go through a “linguistic explosion,” and go from not speaking much (or from mumbling) to producing a lot of language in a very limited amount of time. The “trick” is that they do not have to learn each and every structure separately, or one at a time, they attain the linguistic property and the related structures follow. The foreign language learner, however, has to acquire these structures separately and one at a time, usually. This takes a lot more time than learning them “in chunks” because they are all inside “the same linguistic property bag.”

Sometimes, though, the relationship between the property and the structures are not so obvious. In English, there is a linguistic property that allows you to freely combine nouns (N+N+N+...) as in *car door* and *car door window*. This very same property, which Snyder (1995) calls “The Compounding Parameter,” is related to the following structures (Marcelino, 2007<sup>2</sup>):

- |                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| a. <i>Resultative:</i>           | John wiped the table clean.                 |
| b. <i>Verb-Particle:</i>         | Mary picked up the book/picked the book up. |
| c. <i>Double Object Dative:</i>  | Alice sent Sue the letter.                  |
| d. <i>Preposition Stranding:</i> | I know who Alice sent the letter to.        |

This way, the linguistic theory gives its linguistic account of language acquisition. Namely, that the child’s job is to select from all the input presented to him/her the Primary Linguistic Data (PLD) from which the grammar of his/her native language is constructed. Next, I will consider the input in the bilingual context in light of this account.

<sup>2</sup> Snyder originally relates far more structures to the Compounding Parameter cluster. In my 2007 dissertation, however, I select only five of those structures to analyze. I call them “core structures” (leaving the remaining structures for subsequent analyses). For more details on the analysis as well as an argumentation towards electing some structures the core ones, see Marcelino (2007).

## The English Language and the Bilingual Context in Brazil

In the bilingual context, the discussions seem to evolve around the approach, the pedagogical view of teaching and other issues pertaining to the area of Education. Although these are important issues, they are not the focus of this text. In a regular Brazilian school, one needs not worry if a child will or will not develop his/her native language. Parents who come and visit the regular schools do not ask questions such as “will my kid become a native speaker of Portuguese?”

While this is may not be a concern in a regular Brazilian school, it is an issue when it comes to the English language and the bilingual schools. Most of the times, kids produce, at a very early stage, sentences and sentence fragments which clearly show that the language they are building is not English, although it does have English words. My concern is that they produce sentences that are representatives of the Portuguese language and its “properties.” This way, it would be like speaking Portuguese with English words. “Have a bug here” (tem um bicho aqui) is an example of sentences that I have heard quite often. While most teachers may acknowledge the fact that the kid is using English, I advocate the idea that that sentence is not English. This may be related to a number of factors. Here are a few:

- a) The kids are not exposed to English enough
- Most of the approaches used today in Bilingual Education derive from a pedagogy of forming a citizen, teaching values and beliefs and respect for one another. While these elements are essential for the constitution of a person, they do not consider the Linguistic aspect of being in contact with an L2. Those elements are important, but mere focus on them without a linguistic program to accompany the overall development is a waste of the child’s capacity for language development. It is, therefore, important to bring the pendulum back to “content,” realizing that content is also important in the educational process.

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<sup>3</sup> This structure in English is associated with the function of offering, “have a cup of tea.”

- b) The kids may be exposed to English, but there is no focus on language development or the kind of input to which the kids are exposed.

This is based on the erroneous view that in a Brazilian speaking environment, speaking whatever English to the kid would suffice for them to develop an L2. It is often argued that in the Brazilian bilingual context, the child can simply “learn” the L2 by doing things with it. While this can, in principle, teach values, beliefs and social awareness, it will not prevent the kid from using Portuguese in order to carry out the tasks proposed in the school environment. Further, it will not present them with the necessary PLD to help them put their language making capacity to its best use. They can develop structures that resemble those of their L1, with L2 words, at best. In doing so, they are associating the supposed “English structures” to the L1 Parameters (linguistic properties). The result would be, inevitably, a kind of pidgin, or creole.

- c) The bilingual environment also has a lot of Portuguese. As mentioned earlier, bilingual schools do not come to terms with the criteria used to call themselves “bilingual.” As Grosjean (1982) shows, different schools in different parts of the world use the term arbitrarily to classify schools that have L2 instruction along a very open continuum. It is not different in Brazil, where our schools vary a great deal in the amount of English exposure given to the children. As long as the exposure is structured, based on the L2 Parameters (very important for the development of the cluster of structures), this should not be a problem.
- d) English is not used around the school premises as a language for communication, but simply as “the classroom language.” It is socially important for the children to understand that the language they are exposed to is a real language, which can be used for its most primal objective: communication. Children “pick up” language they hear around them. Having an English speaking environment around the school premises can be very helpful for the children to realize they are not simply entertaining one more activity (which happens to be in English). It is a lot

more meaningful for the children to realize that communication happens in L2 than to simply believe it to be a language associated with one specific activity they have throughout the day.

**FINAL REMARKS**

The ideal bilingual program should include a language program which receives as much importance as the pedagogical plan. Ideally, they should not be seen separately. It is time we understood that the linguistic environment in which the kids learn English is very different from the one found in a regular Brazilian school, where we do not have to worry about whether or not our kids will learn Portuguese. In developing their L1, kids will use their Language Faculty to develop their L1 in light of the PLD contained in the environment around them:

**Language Faculty ----- L1 (Grammar of L1)**

**Language Faculty-----L1 (Grammar1, Grammar2, Grammar3...)**

Grammar1, Grammar2, Grammar3 are different realizations of the same Grammar of L1 that any speaker of a given language develop along his life. In developing it, they become aware of different dialects and social situations that call for specific uses of the language, in Chomskyan terms, their system of use or E-Language. This is bound to happen in an L1, given the optimal conditions for language development. In an L2 process, not all of the conditions are optimal. As I brought into the discussion in the previous section, the child being in their best developmental moment for language development should be given ideal opportunities to develop it. A child being exposed to the language in a bilingual education environment that does not consider the development of the L2 *might* end up developing a language which resembles English, but is not English:

**Language Faculty ----- L1 (Grammar of L1)**

**Language Faculty-----L1 + ?L2 (Grammar of**



L1+L2 lexicon, Grammar of L2 modified by L1, Grammar of Creole language...)

It is crucial that we focus on language development. After all, the bilingual school children are at the optimal age for language development. I do not mean to advocate that an L2 is not developing unless it is as perfect as it can be. This would be a setback considering the Globalized world as it is, and the role of the English language in this panorama. However, I do believe that it is our duty to present kids with the best possible material from which they can develop. Depriving the children in the Bilingual Education context from a good linguistic program is the same as not allowing them to put their most natural abilities in language development to their own advantage.

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