

Multilingualism without a Dominant Language in the Preschool Age: A Case of Natural Italian-Russian-German-English Multilingualism

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Abstract : The purpose of keeping bi/multilingualism is usually a way to let the child speak two/three languages at the same level. The main problem which normally appears is a mixed language or a domination of one language. The same level of two or more languages would be ideal but practically not easily reachable. So it was made an experiment with a girl with a natural multilingualism as an attempt to avoid a dominant language in the preschool age. The girl lives in Germany and the main languages for her are Italian, Russian and German but she also hears every day English. 'One parent - one language' strategy was used since the beginning so Italian and Russian were spoken to her since her birth, English was spoken between the parents and when she was 1,5 it was added German as a language of a nursery. In order to avoid a dominant language, she was always put in international groups with activity in different languages. Even if it was not possible to avoid an interference of languages in this case we can talk not only about natural multilingualism but also about balanced bilingualism in preschool time. The languages have been developing in parallel with different accents in a different period. Now at the age of 6 we can see natural horizontal multilingualism Russian/Italian/German/English. At the moment, her Russian/Italian bilingualism is balanced. German vocabulary is less but the language is active and English is receptive. We can also see a reciprocal interference of all the three languages (English is receptive so the simple phrases are normally said correctly but they are not enough to judge the level of language interference and it is not noticed any 'English' mistakes in other languages). After analysis of the state of every language, we can see as a positive and negative result of the experiment. As a positive result we can see that in the age of 6 the girl does not refuse any language, three languages are active, she differentiate languages and even if she says a word from another language she notifies that it is not a correct word, and the most important are the fact, that she does not have a preferred language. As a prove of the last statement it is to be noticed not only her self-identification as 'half Russian and half Italian' but also an answer to the question about her 'mother tongue': 'I do not know, probably, when I have my own children I will speak one day Russian and one day Italian and sometimes German'. As a negative result, we can notice that not only a development of all the three languages are a little bit slower than it is supposed for her age but since she does not have a dominating language she also does not have a 'perfect' language and the interference is reciprocal. In any case, the experiment shows that it is possible to keep at least two languages without a preference in a pre-school multilingual space.

Keywords : balanced bilingualism, language interference, natural multilingualism, preschool multilingual education

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