

FACTORS INFLUENCING BILINGUAL PARENTS' LANGUAGE PREFERENCE FOR LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: A CASE STUDY

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Language is a major medium for children to express their needs in daily interaction with their parents. In order to foster language development of children with special needs, it is essential for bilingual Malay parents to make appropriate decisions about their language preferences as it will indirectly influence their language input for their children during language activities. The purpose of this manuscript is to highlight part of a case study, namely the motivating factors that influence bilingual parents' language preference to facilitate their children's language development. Two bilingual fathers and three bilingual mothers from three different families were involved in the study. In addition, two children with autism and one child with global developmental delay were also involved in this study. Semi-structured interview and observations were used as data collection methods. Language usage of parents during parent-child interaction was observed at meal time, play time and prayer time. The observation data was used to support findings from the interview session. From the case study, it was found that four main motivational factors influenced parents' language preference: home language culture, language proficiency of parents, language of the majority of those in the community and the child's language preference. The findings are discussed and suggestions are made, which includes benefits for bilingual parents, speech-language pathologists, special educators and mainstream educators.

Keywords: Bilingual parents, language preference, language development, children with special needs

Malaysia is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country. Malay language is the national and official language of Malaysia, so it is commonly used in schools and the government sector. Nevertheless, English language is the most important second language and new curriculum is developed by the Malaysian government to foster English language learning of the young generation to compete with the challenging international community (TMT, 2012). According to Asmah (1987), Malay language is widely used by Malays, the

largest Malaysian population. Concurrently, English must be learnt to obtain the benefits of globalisation (Ungku, 2008). Because of the importance of Malay and English language in Malaysian society, it has contributed to the formation of a Malay-English (Asmah, 1992) bilingual population among the Malays. Ungku also agreed that a bilingual learning environment will stimulate the mental interaction of children and adults that can also enhance their thinking skills and memory. In order to foster national unity, integrative bilingualism should be accomplished. Therefore, Malay and English are taught and learnt throughout the 11 years of compulsory education in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Various aspects are encompassed in the wide-ranging field of bilingualism in children. According to Ovando and Collier (1998), bilingualism is the use of two languages by individuals or groups that does not necessarily require fluency. Wei (2000) also stated that bilingual refers to an individual who knows two languages. Baker (2000) considered that children are born with the ability to be bilingual speakers. Researchers (Genesee, 2002; Goodz, 1994) further found that there are no negative consequences on language acquisition of bilingual children; because exposure to more than one language does not cause delay in language development (De Houwer, 1999; Döpke, 1992; Genesee, 2002).

Tabors (1997) stated that first language acquisition involves five components. They are phonology, vocabulary, grammar, discourse and pragmatics. On the other hand, second language acquisition (SLA) can be divided into two categories, which are simultaneous and sequential SLA (Tabors, 1997). Simultaneous SLA happens when children are exposed to two languages since birth as each parent speaks a different language with the child or both parents use the same language but a caregiver uses a different language with the child. Sequential SLA means that children acquire their second language only after attaining their first language. For instance, a child starts to learn a different language at school than their primary language at home.

Moreover Kagan and Dillon (2006) claimed that first language acquisition usually begins at home, whereas second language is acquired in school. First language can be defined as the primary language or mother tongue that is regularly used by an individual in daily life, especially at home (Baker, 2001).

Most children can learn more than one language without any struggle. The vocabulary growth in each language may demonstrate delays as they are acquiring two or more lexicons, but their combined lexicons are bigger than that of their monolingual peers (Pearson & Fernández, 1994). Compared with monolingual children, bilingual children may demonstrate higher performance in some metalinguistic and emergent literacy tasks (Bialystok, 2001; Bialystok, Shenfield & Codd, 2000), and are able to learn about the arbitrary relation between words and their referents at a young age (Reynolds, 1991).

Crystal (1997) predicted that around two thirds of children in this world are brought up in a bilingual environment. In the process of language learning, Jwan and Ogechi (2004) found variation with degree in terms of psychological, social, sociological, socio-cultural and linguistic development during the two languages learning. According to D'Acerno (1990), there are three types of bilingualism, categorised as compound, coordinate and sub-coordinate bilingualism. A compound bilingual is an individual who learns two languages in the same environment and the speaker gains a concept with two ways of expressions. For coordinate bilingual speaker, he or she learns two languages in different environments. For example, the speaker speaks Malay at home and speaks English at school. Besides, the speaker has two sets of concepts and two lexicons connected to them. The sub-coordinate bilingual speakers has a main set of meaning expressed through their first language and another linguistic system attached to them (Weinreich, 1968), where one language dominates.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

My personal interest in this research topic arose from personal encounters with bilingual Malay parents, who rarely speak Malay to their daughter with special needs. This could be due to academic motivation to speak English and also the global trend of using English as an international language for communication. Moreover, working as a speech-language pathologist in the multi-lingual society of Malaysia has given me opportunities to be exposed to various perceptions of parents regarding language preferences for their children during therapy sessions. The consistency of a particular language usage during therapy sessions will affect the speech and language development of children with special needs; if parents are mixing their language when communicating with their children, the children will be confused and this will further interrupt their speech and language development.

This manuscript highlights the factors that motivate bilingual Malay parents to use a particular language during language development activities with their young children with special needs.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Currently, there are many linguists become more attracted to code-switching among bilingual speakers (Almeida, 2004; Hoffmann, 1991; Jennifer, 2006; Malcolm, 2007). Bilingual parents may start interaction with their children in one language, and later on code-switch to a second language. Bilingual parents may also choose to produce part of the utterance or sentence in the second language and then continue again in the first language. Bilingual parents may also switch

to the second language for one word among the utterance of first language. The conceptual framework of the study is illustrated in Figure 1.

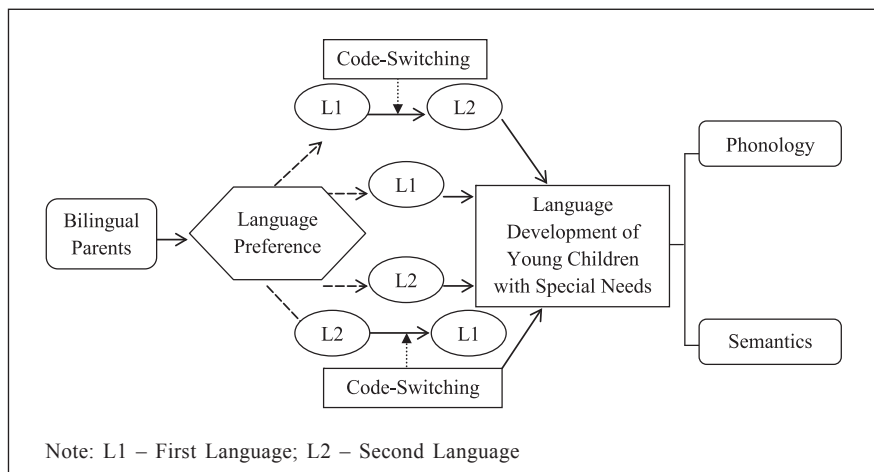


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The existing study utilised multiple case study design to investigate issues of language preference concerning bilingual parents for language development of their children with special needs. Case study in educational research is crucial as it indicates genuine, complex, and contextually rich circumstances and frequently concerning a dilemma, conflict or difficulty that one or more of the characters in the case must negotiate (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2005).

Sample

In order to have a homogeneous sample, only children from one parent household and/or two-parent households were involved in this study. Hence, three cases, namely Case 1 (bilingual Malay mother only and a child with Global Developmental Delay), Case 2 (bilingual Malay mother, father and a child with autism), and Case 3 (bilingual Malay mother, father and a child with autism) were involved in this study.

Case 1

Case 1 was a bilingual Malay mother who could speak both English and Malay. She used Malay most of the time in the home environment. She is the manager of

a company. She had her overseas university degree. She spends about two hours daily with her child with special needs. Her husband does not stay with the family as he works outstation frequently. Father speaks Malay at home with the child.

Case 2

Case 2 consists of bilingual Malay mother and father who could speak both English and Malay. Both parents use mixed English and Malay at home. Mother was chief architect of a company. Father was a businessman. Both had their overseas university degrees. They spent about one to two hours daily with their child with special needs.

Case 3

Case 3 consists of bilingual Malay father and mother who could speak both English and Malay. Both parents use mixed English and Malay (Sarawak Malay) at home. Both the parents had their education in formal Malay language, but they usually speak Sarawak Malay in their community. Mother was a human resource manager of a company and father was a businessman.

Sampling Method

Purposive sampling was adopted in this study to carry out a deep investigation regarding the opinions of bilingual Malay parents' language preference for language development of their young children with special needs.

Instrumentation

Face to face semi-structured interviews of respondents were conducted and a set of interview questions were answered by the respondents. Besides, a 20-minute (two separate 10-minute) observation with the use of observation checklist was carried out to obtain data on parental language usage during parent-child interaction sessions. Video recordings were also conducted to obtain data on parental language usage during the parent-child interaction sessions in the natural home setting.

Procedure

The study was conducted based on one interview session and two observation sessions for each case. Besides, the interview and observation sessions were carried out in the natural setting to reflect the genuine situation of each case. The data obtained from the observation sessions and video recording served as triangulation to the interview data in order to provide a more reliable finding.

Data Analysis

Data collected from interview and direct observation during language development activities were analysed qualitatively. The conversation of the parents during interview and the language usage during parent-child interaction sessions were transcribed into written language and the pattern of the responses were compared and described. Content analysis was used to analyse the responses from the respondents. Besides, coding method was used to analyse and categorise all the responses from the subjects according to different themes.

RESULTS

Since language preference of bilingual Malay parents for their children with special needs is an issue, the different motivational factors that may contribute to the bilingual Malay parents' language preference for their children with special needs was vital as it would help researchers to explore deeply the underlying factors in order to facilitate resolution. From the study, four main motivational factors that influenced parents' language preference were home language culture, language proficiency of parents, language of the majority of those living in the community and child's language preference. These motivational factors had influenced the way bilingual Malay parents selected their languages to communicate with their children with special needs in daily language activities.

Home Language Culture

Home language culture is determined by language usage of parents. It reflects the identity of a particular culture if they speak a particular language. Sometimes, parents speak their native language in the home environment in order to fulfill their social and emotional needs. From the interview with parents in Case 2, the mother mentioned that their home language culture was to speak in mixed languages with her son:

"...We feel comfortable to mix. Actually, in this house our main language is Malay...here in this house we "cakap campur" (speech by mixing the languages), both BM (Malay) and BI (English), it is by nature, and by luck our maid can also understand..."

During meal time at home, it was observed that the mother (in Case 2) used mixed English and Malay utterances with her son, such as: "Apa tu (What is that)?", "Bawang goreng (fried onion). Apa ni (What is this)?", "No jumping...no screaming, that's right" and "Tangan letak mana (Where should you put your hand)? OK, some more"..."

From the interview with parents in Case 3, both parents tended to speak more Sarawak Malay than English to their son because it was their home language culture. They did not use the Malay that was spoken in Peninsular Malaysia at home as they were from the East Malaysia (Sarawak):

“...I speak Sarawak Malay because at home still have others around...but when we talk in BM (Malay), when the relatives come also seems like ‘actions’... It is not our dialect...BM (Malay) is just like English for us...but then among us, in our own community...If we do that it is very weird, why are we talking in BM (Malay)?...If we are going to speak in English, if it is in English, the grandma is with us, so we can’t talk in English...If we were to talk in BM at home, it is so weird, unless one of us is from the west Malaysia...”

Language Proficiency of Parents

It is important for parents to speak to their child fluently in order to foster language comprehension and usage in their children with special needs. Sometimes, parents choose to speak a particular language because they are proficient in that language. From the interview with the parent in Case 1, the mother mentioned that her husband used to speak only Malay to their son with special needs as his Malay language proficiency was better than English:

“...Normally my husband speaks Malay, he is not that fluent in English...”

For both parents in Case 2, sometimes they preferred to use English rather than Malay with their son because they were more proficient in English. It was also due to their English education background:

“...It is always easier for me to speak in English than Malay because the vocabulary, a lot more vocabulary in English than in Malay. Just like IT...I am in the English medium. I go to the school in America, so I should be communicating in that language very well...”

During meal time, the father (in Case 2) used mainly English to interact with their son as seen in the following observation, such as: “sit”, “come”, “eat” and adjectives such as “enough”, “last”, “finish” and “good”.

Language of the Majority of Those in the Community

Language used by majority in the home environment may become a motivation factor for parents’ language preference, in order to communicate their ideas

effectively to all family members. As Malay language was the major language used by all family members at home and their living community, the mother in Case 1 chose to speak Malay with her son with special needs:

“...I prefer Malay because the majority in my home environment is using Malay, so we better use Malay to develop his vocab...But in the situation in the mixture of English and Malay, and Malay is the majority, I will prefer to use Malay instead...I usually speak Malay to him. Because the environment, the surrounding. In his home environment almost all of them are using Malay. I normally use Malay because we stay in the Malay community.....I use Malay to communicate with him because it is the community language...”

The following were some observation made that showed the mother was using Malay in her home environment during meal time with her son. She called the name of his son to get his attention such as “DN, DN, buka mulut (open your mouth), buka mulut, sikit lagi (little bit more), sikit lagi” and “DN, DN, dah kenyang (are you full)? Dah kenyang?”. She repeated herself a lot in order to get attention and cooperation from her son. She gave instructions and comments during the meal time. Besides, she also asked questions by using single word by adjusted her intonation such as “Sedap (Delicious)?”, “Nak (Want)?” and “Kenyang (Full)?”. She also praised her son by using Malay such as “Buka mulut, pandai (Open your mouth, smart)”...

The mother further explained that she stayed in a medium class community; therefore she chose to speak Malay to her son, and that her Malay language usage was related to her middle class status in her living community:

“...It depends on the society, medium class society normally that is the norm, so we tend to follow the norm...”

“...May be because it could be status symbol, normally by saying that their children are speaking English and will show that ok there is someone at the high-end, this is more among the Malays, it is how we categorise the society to the language we use as well. If it is more English, then it will be the high end society. If it is more Malay, then it will be medium and low end. It is more regular among the Malays...”

Both parents in Case 2 mentioned that the language environment of their son was dynamic and their son responded to the language environment differently according to different places and speakers in the environment. Therefore, both parents would use both English and Malay in different amount with their son with special needs.

“...That’s the thing. I think the culture, the environment. ...With TF (NJ’s father) he speaks Malay. So, we allow that to happen so he can get both to switch back and forth. But he does understand, if I say it in two languages of the same item, he understands... Luckily he got other activity with NASOM (National Autism Society of Malaysia), going to art class, so all in English...”

During meal time, it was observed that the mother used different amount of English and Malay utterances to communicate with her son, such as:

“NJ, please wash hand”, “OK, switch off the TV”, “Open this, open this”, “What are you choosing?”, “Last one, you get one drink” and “OK, mama eat together”.

Sometimes, she used Malay utterances such as:

“Bawang goreng (Fried onion)”, “OK, sikit saja (little bit only), sikit saja, sikit saja”, “Janganlah macam tu (don’t be like that)”, “Tak nak, makan (Don’t want, eat)”, “Kaki, turun (put down your leg), kaki (leg), kaki”...”

Child’s Language Preference

On certain occasions, parents were motivated to speak a particular language to their children with special needs because their children were responsive to that particular language, to foster development of language comprehension and expression. From the interview with parent in Case 1, the mother stated that she chose to speak Malay with her son with special needs as her son was responsive to Malay words spoken by others:

“...Because he is more familiar with Malay words, which is being spoken by others, I think it is more important to use Malay for now...”

The following was some observation made which indicated that the mother used Malay to interact with her son during meal time. She spoke Malay to her son during meal time. She repeated a lot in her instruction to require her son to open his mouth, such as *“DN, DN, buka mulut (open your mouth), buka mulut, sikit lagi (some more), sikit lagi”* and *“Nak (Want)? Nak lagi (Want some more)? Dalam mulut dah habis dah (Have you finished eating)? Buka mulut (open your mouth)”...*

For the father in Case 2, he chose to speak more English than Malay to his son because his son usually speaks English to him:

“...with me he will speak English...”

During meal time, it was observed that the father used English utterances to interact with his son, such as:

*“Sit down, sit down”, “Come here, sit down”, “NJ good, let’s eat”
and “Slowly”...”*

In the interview with the father in Case 3, he preferred to use more English than Malay with his son with special needs because he realised that his son was responsive to English rather than Malay:

“...I feel that he knows English, I mean his strong side, I think it is in English...”

During play time, both parents use English language only to communicate with their son, such as: *“Play the shark”, “Turn, turn right”, “Eat the fish”, “Go up”, “Not this”, “Mama go already, say bye” and “Some more here”.*

DISCUSSION

Home language culture affects language usage of parents as it reflects the identity of a particular culture if they speak a particular language. Sometimes, parents speak their native language in the home environment in order to fulfill their social and emotional needs. Even though the home language culture was Malay, some parents used to speak in mixed languages with their children. This might be due to the strong influence of their habitual speaking style that made them feel comfortable to mix the languages when speaking to their child with special needs.

Likewise, parents who used more Sarawak Malay than English with their children, felt that it was their home language culture. They did not use the Malay that was spoken in Peninsular Malaysia at home as they were from the east of Malaysia (Sarawak). Current usage of Sarawak Malay included contemporary Malay words or assimilated from other languages, spoken by the urban speech community. According to Asmah (1992), as part of the Malay language society, the Malays of Kuching have their own accent that was different from other Malay accents or the standard national accent. In the perspective of regional differences, Malay language turned into an integrating device between the people of the Malay Peninsula and the states of Sabah and Sarawak in Borneo. A major role of language was the expression of identity – indicating who we are and where we ‘belong’ and many social conditions showed language which unites rather than informs (Crystal, 2003).

Another contributing factor of language preferences was preserving cultural and ethnical identity formation (Heller, 1987). Researchers investigating bilingualism and language learning have also recognised the importance of identity (Jwan & Ogechi, 2004). The apparent belief of motivation by many

theorists overlooks the relationship between power, identity, and the individual's dedication to learning the target language.

It was important for parents to speak to their child fluently in order to foster language comprehension and language usage in their children with special needs. Sometimes, parents chose to speak a particular language because they were proficient in that language (Lim, 2008). Kasuya (2000) found that a bilingual Japanese-English mother, alone with her child, typically spoke entirely in Japanese switching to English only if English speakers were present. This might be due to the mother's fluency in Japanese was superior to her English. The study was similar to this case study as a parent would use Malay with his son with special needs as his Malay language proficiency was better than his English. Sometimes parents preferred to use English rather than Malay with their children because they showed better language proficiency in English and it might be due to their English education background. They felt comfortable using English with their children as they also think in English language. It was also found that some of the parents were not fluent in using English to communicate with their children and this indirectly affected their confidence and choice to use English during language activities at home (Powers, 2008).

In terms of language proficiency factor, NAYE (2009) highly agrees that parents should speak in the language that they are most comfortable in order to improve their young children's language. Powers (2008) also suggested that the most efficient approach for children's language learning is regular exposure to and repetition in the language that the parents are most comfortable speaking. It is because some parents may not have enough confidence to speak languages other their native language when promoting language skills of their children at home.

However, Kremer-Sadlik (2005) stated that parents of children with autism have been advised to speak only one language to their child, especially the language that the child will receive the majority of their education through, irrespective of the parent's language proficiency. This suggestion might be made because children with special needs would be confused when their parents spoke two languages to them. Deuchar and Quay (2000) illustrated that children exposed to more than one language during early stages might be confused linguistically, cognitively and emotionally. Thus, this was an issue of Malay parents who hope that their children could learn two languages to fulfil their academic needs in the school setting. On the other hand, Genesee and Nicoladis (2006), who focused on dual language development, found that there was no disadvantage of bilingualism for children with special needs. As a consequence, bilingual Malay parents needed to take into consideration the different aspects of bilingual language learning before they decide to use monolingual or bilingual speaking pattern with their children with special needs.

Language majority in the living environment may become a motivation factor for parents' language preference. It is because parents speak the language predominantly used in the home environment in order to communicate their ideas

effectively to all family members. Certain parents in this study used to speak Malay with their children because Malay was the primary language used in their home environment. Malay language usage was also related to their middle class status in their community. Lim (2008) also found that parents of children with special needs in Malaysia want to preserve their native language even though they understand that the language of community is important for their children. The language of community in her research includes Malay and English language. The findings of Lim (2008) also helped to explain that parents spoke Malay to their children as it was the native language used in the home environment.

Even though bilingual Malay parents speak Malay to reveal ethnic identity and national policy makes Malay the medium of instruction, pragmatic Malaysians have moved towards using English, which is crucial as an international language of trade, diplomacy, communication and information, particularly in the urban regions and among middle and upper class Malaysians (David, McLellan, Rafik-Galea, & Abdullah, 2009). In a country like Costa Rica where Spanish was the population's primary language, it was found that exposing a child to a second language like English was demanding too (Pacheco & Allen, 2011). Furthermore, Lee (2009) reported that even Asian parents chose to develop their children's proficiency in their native language; they depend on teachers who speak English to develop literacy in their young children.

Language environment of children was dynamic and they responded differently according to different places and speakers in the environment. Therefore, some parents used both English and Malay in different amount with their children with special needs. Herman (1961) found that numerous psychological factors to be considered when focusing on language preference. These psychological factors include different background of the speakers and the direct environment that is related to their individual needs. The individual needs of the speaker consist of emotional attachment to a specific language, the degree of desire to use a particular language and the proficiency of the speakers in a specific language. Place (2012) revealed the strong influence of English in Spanish-English bilingual homes, where children who had more language mixing experienced less single language exposure, and exposure to language mixing reduced more Spanish-only exposure than English-only exposure.

In certain occasions, parents were motivated to speak a particular language to their children with special needs because their children were responsive to that particular language (Lim, 2008). Researchers also found that when children are able to distinguish a particular language used by a certain individual, they are prone to firmly use the language with that individual even if the individual chooses to speak another language (Baker, 2000; Fantini, 1985; Jisa, 2000). Researchers further found that children are thoughtful of their language preference because they can be influenced by the language when it is spoken directly to them (Harrison & Piette, 1980; Malave, 1997; Parke & Drury, 2001).

Furthermore, in this study, certain parents preferred to use more English than Malay with their children with special needs because they realized that their children were responsive to English rather than Malay. Their children responded better with English and the parents were motivated (Gardner, 2006) to continue using English with their children in daily routines, including language development activities. Besides, there is a problem when children sometimes reject their native language and choose to speak in another language in a bilingual setting (Baker, 1995). Differences in the parents' interactional styles as well as factors related to the children's personalities need to be investigated further (Kasuya, 2000). If children were more responsive to English than Malay, a bilingual parent might also adopt the one-person one-language (OPOL) strategy to ensure a balanced bilingual language development in their children with special needs. Williams (2009) further claimed that what was exciting about the OPOL method was that the child would associate a specific parent with a specific language.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study may be useful for different parties as a reference or educational information such as parents, therapists, teachers and special educators, who deal with children with special needs. Future study may consider using ethnographic study to look into the culture of bilingualism of Malay and also non-Malay parents who have children with special needs. Besides, future research can look into the population of multilingual parents' language preference for their children with special needs, such as trilingual Mandarin-English-Malay or Tamil-English-Malay parents. The language preference may be different due to complexity of multiple linguistic environment and various cultural linguistic factors.

In addition, observation of parent-child language usage can be done in different situations and places in order to obtain a holistic view of the case study. Besides, data can be collected through revision of parent diaries, notes of child's language development or other related documents about language development of their children with special needs in order to provide a more reliable and fruitful data for this case study.

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