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Bilingual language acquisition in preschool age: The emotional context of kindergarten daily routines

Summary

This study aims to enhance bilingual language acquisition in very young children in a Portuguese kindergarten. The promotion of children's language and cognition is done through access to another language – English – in their daily context by incorporating the language into the children's routines and school daily activities. We collected data from an immersion teacher training program towards bilingualism use, the development of their assistants' English language fluency, the parents' awareness and beliefs about English and children's language development. The sample includes 140 children, aged 5 months to 6 years, teachers and teaching assistants. Teachers have changed their language beliefs concerning English and the program has influenced their practice. The results showed that children develop communicative skills in both languages when surrounded by a bilingual friendly and emotional environment. They use both languages in their everyday life and have created a positive and emotional relationship with the English.

Keywords: bilingual language acquisition, young children, kindergarten, daily routines, emotional learning context

Introduction

In many countries English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching now begins in pre-primary school classrooms (Robinson et al. 2015). Considering this situation and the fact that "(...) communication in foreign languages is among the key competencies necessary for personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social cohesion and employability in a knowledge society" (Council of European Union, 2011), we implemented the Kindergarten Project in order to promote children's cognitive and language development.

Regular use of more than one language is believed to improve cognitive skills, such as creativity and problem solving and cognitive advantages of bilingualism have even been found during the first year of life (Brito et al. 2015; Kovacs, Mehler 2009). Garbin et al. (2010) studied the bridging language and attention; they have shown the positive brain basis of the impact of bilingualism on cognitive control.

The analysis of kindergarten children cognitive skills is still under process. However, research shows that being bilingual can have tangible practical benefits. The improvements in cognitive and sensory processing driven by bilingual experience may help a bilingual person to better process information in the environment, leading to a clearer signal for learning. This kind of improved attention to detail may help explain why bilingual adults learn a third language better than monolingual adults learn a second language (Kaushanskaya, Marian 2009).

The bilingual language-learning advantage may be rooted in the ability to focus on information about the new language while reducing interference from the languages they already know. This ability would allow bilingual people to more easily access newly learned words, leading to larger gains in vocabulary than those experienced by monolingual people who are not as skilled at inhibiting competing information (Bartolotti, Marian 2012).

Despite certain linguistic limitations that have been observed in bilinguals (e.g., increased naming difficulty) (Gollan et al. 2005), bilingualism has been associated with improved metalinguistic awareness (the ability to recognize language as a system that can be manipulated and explored), as well as with better memory, visual-spatial skills, and even creativity. The cognitive, neural, and social advantages observed in bilingual people highlight the need to consider how bilingualism shapes the activity and the architecture of the brain, and ultimately how language is represented in the human mind, especially since the majority of speakers in the world experience life through more than one language (Diaz, Klingler 1991).

Since the 70s, the National Consortia for Bilingual Education (1971) indicates the benefits of a curriculum with activities which are appropriate for five-year-olds which relate to their cultural background and which deal with concepts within their immediate range of experiences. Early and highly proficient bilingual children who acquire a second language (in L2-immersion) from home or social community benefit from enhanced cognitive development compared to monolingual peers (Bialystok et al. 2012; Kovacs Mehler 2009; Martin-Rhee, Bialystok 2008; Nicolay & Poncelet 2013, 2015).

Like previous studies examining executive attention and control in young children (Yang et al. 2011), Brito, Sebastián-Gallés and Barr (2015), with a sample of 18-month-old infants exposed to two similar languages (Spanish-Catalan) or two more different (English-Spanish), find that bilingualism acts independently of variables like language similarity and cultural background on a memory generalization measure.

This project aims to promote children's cognitive and language growth through access to another language in their daily context. It involves the Center's Daycare (6 months – 3 years), preschool (3–4 years) and kindergarten (5–6 years) class teachers, training assis-

tants; and it also considers the parents' feedback and the children's preferences and learning rhythm. The aim of the present study is to answer the following three research questions: (1) When surrounded by an emotional unbalanced bilingual environment, do young children develop communicative and cognitive skills in both languages? (2) Do they use spontaneously both languages in their everyday life and do they create an emotional relationship with the English language? And (3) When submitted to a bilingual training teaching program, do kindergarten teachers change their language beliefs concerning the English language and, if so, how does that influence their classroom practice?

Method

Participants

The sample includes 140 children aged 5 months to 6 years from a Portuguese kindergarten. It also includes 17 teaching assistants and 9 kindergarten teachers.

Instruments

The basic instruments used in the study were applied to assess:

Teachers: (1) Survey on teacher's language skills – according to CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) levels; (2) Awareness of teachers' major strengths and weaknesses/fears concerning English; (3) Awareness of how teachers relate to English; (4) Analysis of teachers' preferences concerning class activities; (5) children's achievements sheet.

Parents: parents' questionnaires about their awareness and beliefs about English and children's language development (online, google docs).


Children: survey of children's emotions towards English and related activities. The latter was applied by the teachers at the end of the school year with the help of visual aids and Portuguese (Figure 1).

Procedure


We implemented an L2-immersion teacher and teacher's assistants training program in three school years.

In the 1st year: after applied the program instruments, we gathered the main topics to be worked with the children throughout the school year.

In the 2nd year the program included the following topics: (1) Language input sessions: focus on speaking and oral interaction for the participants (games and role play) (sessions lasted 1 hour and took place once a month); (2) Practical sessions: exploring children's English literature that could be adapted to the topic of the month; exploring rhymes, experimenting and practicing native English songs and games; learning and preparing the classroom materials (realia) to be used in English (sessions with the teacher lasted 2 hours and took place once a month). All participants kept a journal about their experience, the activities are done in class and the children's responses and/or spontaneous use of English.



Infantário da
ROCHINHA



English@Rochinha

Nome	Idade	Sala
<u>Flora Leon</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>pelicanos</u>

1. Observa e pinta o que achas melhor?

1.1. Gostas de ouvir músicas em Inglês?				
1.2. Gostas de cantar em Inglês?				
1.3. Gostas de ouvir histórias em Inglês?				
1.4. Gostas de jogar em Inglês?				
1.5. Gostas de Inglês?				

2. Observa e pinta o que mais gostas de fazer quando tens Inglês:

Cantar				
Ouvir música				
Desenhar				
Pintar				
Jogar				
Ouvir histórias				
Falar				
Escrever				
Ler				
Ver videos				
Brincar				

Legenda: Sim - Mais ou Menos - Não - Não sei -

Sempre que uma atividade não for aplicável à Sala/Criança em questão a Educadora deverá indicar NA – Não Aplicável

Figure 1. Children’s survey

They also reflected on their awareness on using English in context and how it was developed through the school year, relating the children’s productions with a deeper knowledge of the language.

In the 3rd year, the program included follow-up sessions to help participants with more difficulty in getting material or to prepare for a certain topic (sessions lasted 1 hour and were held once a month). Furthermore, teachers contacted the person responsible for the training program through email whenever they had any kind of difficulties or doubts. Finally, teachers were asked to fill in a questionnaire on their children’s achievements.

Results

Immersion training program

After program implementation, there were great differences among the teacher's knowledge of English. Analysis indicated that there was a wider range of knowledge among the teachers in all the skills indicated in the CEFR – from A1 to C1 measured by Cambridge tests.

The major strengths identified were: willingness to learn, enthusiasm; awareness of English as being an important language for them and the children's future. The major weaknesses and fears revealed were: to fail expectations concerning their ability to learn, relearn, speak and put into practice the English language; to make mistakes in front of their peers, the teaching assistants and the children; to speak English in front of an adult (mainly the program developer and the teaching assistants). Three of the nine teachers clearly indicated that they didn't like English. By the end of the first year of the program, 8 out of 9 teachers declared that they like English. Only 1 of the teachers did not answer.

All participants revealed that they mostly use stories (books, videos), songs (mainly to indicate routines to children or to change activities), games (several types of games), TPR (total physical response activities were referred as being used without mentioning this specific definition), realia (the use of real materials, and tools in order to allow children to relate with things from their real life), visual aids (usually, the teacher preferred reality oriented photos to drawings, videos, etc.).

In their Journals, they indicated to feel more comfortable to speak the language after having attended the Program. They considered that their work had been enriched by including English in their class daily routines as well as in their lives. "... It opened new horizons. The new materials enriched my work within my class..." – A.; "... I confess that I used to forget about English beyond its moment in the timetable; however, once you get into the routine it is easier and the children expect you to..." – S.

Parents Questionnaires

Parents followed their children's achievements and were enthusiastic about their children's participation. They consider English very important, indicating either specific words, songs, chunks of language or topics in which their children are producing in English and interacting with, such as parts of the body, numbers (up to 5, up to 10, up to 20), animals, greetings, shapes, colours, boy/girl, mummy/daddy, fruits, happy birthday (expression and song), twinkle, twinkle little star, food (bread, milk, etc). Here we present some of the most representative parents' statements:

"My son loves English."

"He is always singing English songs around the house and asking and how do you say this or that in English."

"It would be interesting to suggest some stories in English for me to read to my child."

"You should keep the project, they should have always English within their activities."

"Do give parents a structure of what is being taught so that we can keep it up, at home."

"More English practice in class."

Children’s survey

It is clear that children enjoyed most of the activities they did in English. They created an emotional connection with the English language (Figure 2 and 3).

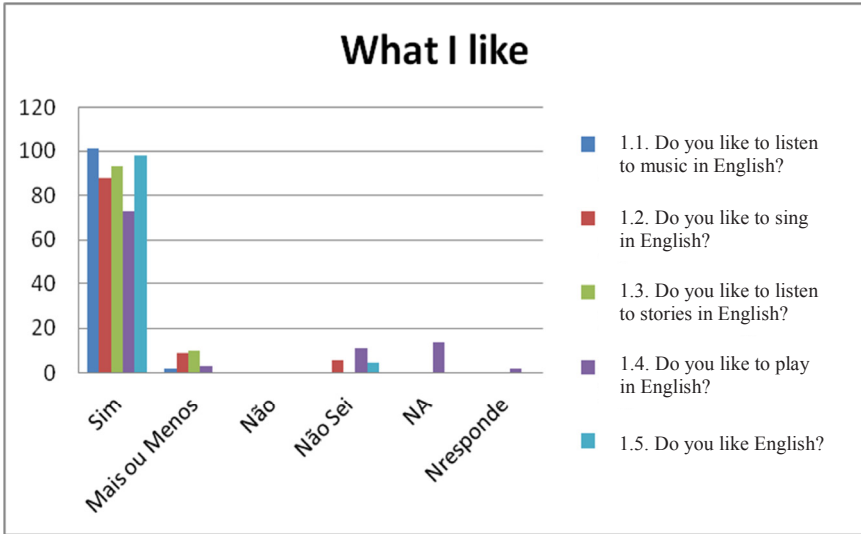


Figure 2. Children’s preferences towards English language

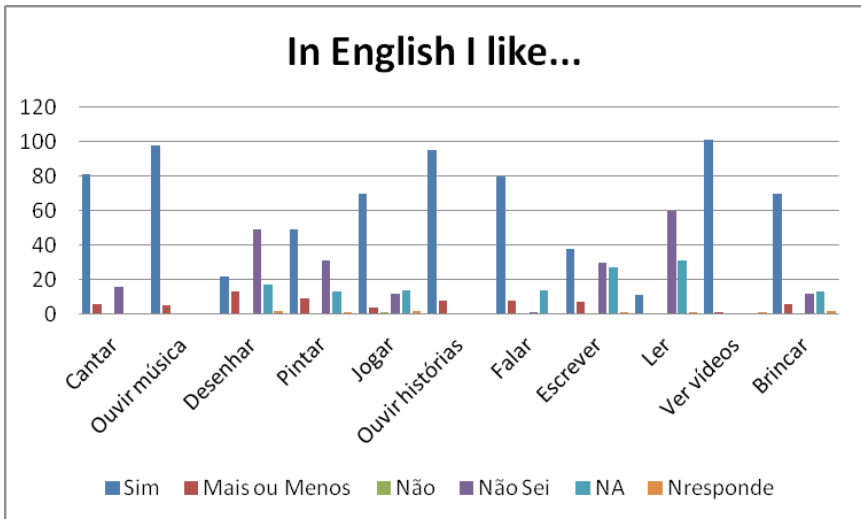


Figure 3. What children prefer to do in English?

Discussion

Throughout our project, it was taken into consideration that we intended to create a friendly environment towards bilingualism in a Portuguese context. All the activities were related to their daily routines so they come naturally to the children. We considered that our main goal was to promote an early access to the English language to very young children in a friendly and natural context, allowing them to relate to the language in their daily routines and interactions. Some authors may consider it simply as an early language acquisition system of English as a L2 (ESL) and/or of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), nonetheless we consider it a starting point into a broader notion of giving the children at kindergarten an opportunity to become bilinguals. In our context, the concept of being bilingual can be used to refer to those children who have access to more than one language at school. It does not necessarily imply full fluency in both or all their languages (Cameron 2004).

Our results indicated that children develop communicative skills in general when assessed with the Portage Development Scale and in the school daily life. They created an emotional relationship with the English language and used it spontaneously. Results also shown that children accessed to English in context and created a relationship with English, and developed good communicative skills in both languages. A friendly bilingual environment was created in kindergarten with good results. As research has shown, children's language grows with projects like this (Huttenlocher et al. 2010). This suggests that immersive learning of a second language, something relatively easy to promote, could help protecting children growing in difficult conditions from cognitive problems.

Furthermore, teachers changed their language beliefs concerning the English language and the Program influenced the teachers' and teaching assistants' practice (Department of Education and Skills, 2006). This project is according to Robinson, Mourão, and Kang (2015), that teachers should develop their own practice in teaching English in pre-primary classrooms to answer them in the 21 Century changing world challenge.

Parents' feedback were quite positive, too. Research shown that (...) parents are important for children's FL development. In particular, (...) not only parent education but their personal relationship with the FL impact upon children's FL skills. In many of our contexts tourism is a major branch of the economy and thus knowing foreign languages is viewed as necessary and even a norm (Enever 2011). Other authors indicated that parents play a major role in shaping their children's attitudes. Parent's attitudes toward the language and the people affect their children's success in learning the language (Tavil 2009). Another recent study indicated that "(...) parental attitudes play a vital role in motivating children to learn EFL as early as possible and to acquire communicative skills in various foreign languages" (Grival, Chouvarda 2012). Children need to switch flexibly between languages if the situation requires. Thanks to this intensive practice in controlling attention, keeping one language in mind while suppressing the other and switching between the two, proficient bilingualism may lead to more efficient executive control skills (Kurkjian et al. 2001; Prior, MacWhinney 2010).

Overall, we have focused on creating a project which tends to involve parents, children and the all-school community to enhance children's natural abilities, as stated by the European Commission (2011). The results shown that children developed good communicative skills in both languages when surrounded by a bilingual friendly environment (Bartolotti, Marian 2012). They used both languages in their everyday life and have created an emotional relationship with the English language (Bialystok et al. 2012).

Limitations

This is a project with several areas that are still being analysed and worked on and it has limitations, such as we did not record the children's emotions; the different level of teachers' English and we did not select a control group.

Conclusion

It has been able, so far, to promote a solid cooperation amongst teachers, teaching assistants, school board and parents. All have been working on enhancing children natural abilities, believing that promoting a friendly environment towards bilingualism will give the children at kindergarten the possibility to gain advantage in a growing society and to develop their utmost inner abilities in areas beyond language, like in solving problems that require controlling attention to specific aspects of a display and inhibiting attention to misleading aspects that are salient but associated with an incorrect response. This advantage is not confined to language processing but includes a variety of non-verbal tasks that require controlled attention and selectivity in such problems as forming conceptual categories, seeing alternative images in ambiguous figures, and understanding the difference between the appearance and functional reality of a misleading object.

Being able to use and speak two languages goes further and it not confined to the linguistic domain, where such influence would be expected, but extend as well to non-verbal cognitive abilities (Bialystok 2008). We believe in this project structure and in its ability to succeed and to help our children to be successful in a wider range of areas later throughout their lives. It would be interesting to know how the children relate to the same activities in Portuguese, which is another item to be analysed further in another stage of the project.

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