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“A Journey to Bilingualism” A Case Study of German-Turkish Bilingual Family

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Abstract

The current study aims to investigate how a bilingual family perceives their bilingualism process and what they have done based on their attitudes and beliefs to support their children’s bilingual development. To that end, a family consisting of a German father, Turkish mother, 13-year old daughter, 9-year old son was asked to respond to interview questions. The results of the study showed that family used one person-one language strategy (Romaine, 1999) for raising bilingual kids. The father took the responsibility of raising the children bilingually and read books in the target language as an extra activity apart from always communicating in German with them. All of the participants seem to be aware of their weaknesses and strengths in their language competence.

Keywords: bilingualism, German-Turkish bilinguals.

Introduction

Many parents in the world regard bilingualism as a personal and family goal and try to provide their children with the opportunity to learn a second language at a young age. In Hamers and Blanc's (2000) book "Bilinguality and Bilingualism", the definition and the process of bilingualism is stated:

In Webster's dictionary (1961) bilingual is defined as 'having or using two languages especially as spoken with the fluency characteristic of a native speaker; a person using two languages especially habitually and with control like that of a native speaker' and bilingualism as 'the constant oral use of two languages'.

Many people view being bilingual is equal to being able to speak two languages perfectly which is similar to the approach of Bloomfield (1935, p.56), who defines bilingualism as 'the native-like control of two languages'. Contrary to this definition, which includes 'perfect bilinguals' Macnamara (1967a) asserts that a bilingual is a person who has "a minimal competence in only one of the four language skills, listening comprehension, speaking, reading and writing, in a language other than his mother tongue. (Hamers & Blanc, 2000, p.6.)

In fact, there are very few "balanced bilinguals" — people who are equally proficient in two languages. Most bilinguals are more comfortable using one language than the other.

Definitions range from a native-like competence in two languages to a minimal proficiency in a second language and there are a number of theoretical and methodological difficulties. However, it is certain that a growing number of families try to raise bilingual children in Turkey, as well as many foreigners living in Turkey are raising their children as bilingual.

Being a small city in the south-east of Turkey not popular with foreigners, there are not many expats living in Kahramanmaraş. Except from Syrian refugees, there are only a few foreigners there.

While bringing up their children bilingually, minority language parents face many problems due to the difference between family culture and environment. Moreover, bilingual children come across some problems in formal education. This study is necessary to obtain practical experience and explicit examples of expat parents and their children's language learning process in Turkey. Studies about bilingualism are few and somehow outdated, and they usually focus on different perspectives of bilingualism. However, there are no studies about the process of bilingualism from the perspectives of bilinguals holistically.

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

How does a bilingual family perceive their bilingualism process?

How do parents act or what have they done based on their attitudes and beliefs to support their children's bilingual development?

Literature Review

In a general definition, a bilingual person is the one who can use two languages in communication. Grosjean (1989) points that a bilingual 'is not two monolinguals in one person', however some bilinguals use a 'monolingual mode' (Grosjean, 2001). In other

words, in one situation they become a monolingual speaker of one language with one person and in another situation they become a monolingual speaker of the other language with another person. However, when the situation allows, some people use both languages together in a 'bilingual mode', or 'rich language stew' (Gupta, 2006). Many bilingual people point out that they can switch from a monolingual to bilingual mode; depending on the situations and the people they are talking to, regardless of whether they are simultaneous or consecutive bilinguals.

Crystal (2004) proposes that in early childhood, the innate mechanisms helping children to acquire their first language also help them acquire second or subsequent languages. However, in a bilingual setting every child does not become bilingual and it depends on the human contribution. De Houwer (2007) found approximately 12 percent reported that two or more languages were spoken in the home in a survey of 1899 households in Flanders, and just 0.75 percent of that number reported that their children were bilingual.

Even though there is the possibility of children becoming bilingual, it is not guaranteed. De Houwer's surveys show that parent attitudes are the best indicators of whether the parent will provide circumstances with adequate input in a minority language for their children to learn it (Pearson, 2008). Parents' and schools' policies can be different while learning two languages at early age; however, with encouragement, continual reinforcement, and input, children around the world can become bilinguals in two languages.

Steiner (2008) proposes seven steps to raise a bilingual child;

- Building the foundation for your child's bilingualism,
- Making it happen: Setting your goals,
- Becoming a bilingual coach,
- Making your bilingual action plan,
- Overcoming possible obstacles,
- Reading and writing in two languages,
- Adapting to school.

To understand the bilingualism process, we need to look deeper into the people's experiences. In literature there are many studies about different concepts regarding bilingualism, but there are not many qualitative studies about bilingual process as described by bilingual themselves.

Methodology

A German-Turkish bilingual family participated in this study.

Table 1: Participants of the study

Name	Age	Sex
ST	46y 5m	Male
TC	47y 11m	Female
KP	9y 10m	Male
EJ	13y 8m	Female

ST, who is a German male married to a Turkish woman, has been living in Turkey for fifteen years. He can speak German, Turkish and English fluently. TC is the Turkish mother

and she can speak Turkish and German as a bilingual. To obtain more information, KP and EJ's father was asked about the children's exposure to German. The children's father is a German native speaker and their mother is a Turkish native speaker. The father has lived for 15 years in Turkey, and he is able to communicate in Turkish quite fluently in everyday situations. KP's and EJ's mother speaks German quite fluently as she stayed in Germany for five years for academic studies. KP and EJ's parents have teaching positions at the local university. Both siblings attend (different) private schools (8th grade and 4th grade).

The children have been exposed to both Turkish and German languages from birth. They have always lived in Turkey, and the parents of the children have deliberately employed a 'one person-one language' strategy (Romaine, 1999), i.e. the father nearly exclusively speaks German to their children and the mother nearly exclusively speaks Turkish. The environmental language is Turkish, so that it is the dominant language of the bilingual children. Only on holidays do they visit German-speaking countries. Apart from communication with their father and with each other, the children are exposed to German through German TV, Internet and books, and occasional phone calls with relatives in Germany which amount to about 4-8 hours per week. KP and EJ do not use German e-learning programs or schoolbooks, but KP reads children's books with his father for two or three evenings a week, i.e. they take turns reading pages aloud. The father also used to do this activity with his daughter, although now the daughter reads German books on her own; however usually at the request of her father, and no more than one hour per week. Father (ST) reports that there is a tendency to refuse to speak German particularly in the older child, and that the preferred language for conversations among the children is Turkish, and that the younger child is perceived as being better at German.

Data was collected and analyzed by means of the qualitative method which determined the methodology of this study as that of the qualitative method approach. The reason behind using the qualitative method is to get deeper insight about the subject. This method is chosen because the main purpose of the study is to gather information from the participants, rather than making conclusions and the qualitative method is more suitable for this. The main resource for data collection is through interviews. The participants were interviewed and their answers recorded. The children were encouraged to share their language learning experiences freely, even though there was no specific question regarding it. The interview with the father was conducted in English as he mentioned English was his dominant language and felt much more comfortable, whilst interviews with the mother and the children were conducted in Turkish.

The data gathered through the semi-structured interviews were exposed to content analysis. Weber (1990) asserts that "content analysis classifies textual material, reducing it to more relevant, manageable bits of data" (p.5) The interview questions posed to the parents focused upon whether or not they defined themselves as bilingual, what their dominant language is, how they explain their and their children's bilingualism process, whether or not there is a difference between the first and second child's competence in both languages and in which contexts they use each language, how they decide to use each language, and whether or not they see their bilingualism as prestigious. In the following section, each interview with a member of the family is analyzed in turn.

Findings

ST (father)

When asked how he defines his bilingualism, the father stated that:

“Except from my mother tongue, of course it depends what you call bilingual and how do you define bilingual, but I am quite fluent in English, I can communicate with ease but there are of course some domains in which I am not competent for example, proverbs. In fact, I can be multilingual because of my Turkish.”

When he is asked about his dominant language, he mentioned that although he has been in Turkey for fifteen years, English is his dominant language.

“Apart from German, English definitely. But sometimes when I speak to Turks, even if I know they are quite proficient in English, I sometimes choose Turkish because I think I can convey my message better in Turkish because I can be sure that other person can understand better. I mean reading between the lines.”

When asked about his bilingual process, he stated that he learned English at school and he went to university and studied Latin and History. It is of interest that he said:

“Up to that time I can't say that I was German-English bilingual. Then I started to work as an English instructor and I completed my M.A. and I had so many things to do with English. Then my English improved so that I became bilingual. I was over 30 which is quite unusual.”

It seems that identifying oneself as bilingual is related to competence in that language and that could be the answer why many English instructors or teachers do not define themselves as bilingual. Moreover, undertaking academic studies such as M.A. degree may also help to improve language competence and self-confidence.

“But anyway, I started to learn English at the age of eight, I have a long English learning history, but this becoming very fluent and having no problem expressing myself started later on I think, but I benefited through my learning process.”

It may also be concluded that long term input is important to achieve competence in a language.

Regarding his Turkish, he mentioned that he didn't receive formal instruction, but living in the country helped him to learn the language. He learned from communication, and knew about the culture and language. He also stated that when he made a mistake, with inference from German or English, people corrected him and explained the correct choice; something unique to living in the country that the language is spoken.

While raising bilingual children, he uses one person- one language strategy (Romaine, 1999) and he has always spoken German to his children from birth. He reads books in German together with the children and creates contexts for them to use the language, such as phoning the relatives in Germany or writing postcards to their grandmother.

“With my daughter, I used to read books every night, one page I read, one page she read. I am still doing it with my son, even though he is nine years old. It is very difficult, they don't want to read books, but I know it is very beneficial for language acquisition.”

He focused on the importance of input in both his learning process and his children's bilingualism process.

"My daughter first started to speak Turkish and then she spoke German, but my son, he started to speak Turkish and German together; although I think he is more proficient in German. And when he speaks, he speaks 80% German, but my daughter 80% Turkish and I have to tell her "Please speak German with me."

He mentioned that his daughter usually refuses to speak German because she feels much more comfortable with Turkish. He points out that the second child has been exposed to more communication in the target language, but with his first child, he was the only input resource.

He still continues speaking in German with the children and he thinks that they are quite fluent in both languages, but their dominant language is Turkish and they make a lot of mistakes in German.

He said that he always speaks in German to his children in every context, even when he is together with his Turkish friends. He suggested being consistent in speaking the target language and he also pointed to the importance of extra resources such as books, DVDs and videos. He advised not to care about code-switching and the mistakes of the children. He advised to be much more relaxed and tolerant attitude towards the mistakes of children.

TC (mother)

TC doesn't define herself as bilingual, even though she could communicate in German quite fluently. Her dominant language is Turkish and she always speaks in Turkish to the children.

"I never speak German with my children, ST speaks in German and I respond in Turkish, always."

She also mentioned that the children's dominant language is Turkish, and she said:

"When she started to speak, my daughter understood German 100%, but she responded in Turkish. I think she imitated me and did whatever I did. However, my son was different. He responded in Turkish and German according to the context. I was not sure whether my daughter would speak in German or not until we went to Germany."

As she spends more time with her daughter, the daughter imitates TC and always prefers Turkish.

"I see being bilingual as being prestigious. It is very good for my children."

According to one person-one language strategy, she always communicates in Turkish with the children and since the daughter spends more time with the mother, she may choose to speak in Turkish.

EJ (daughter)

She defines herself as half German and half Turkish. She also states that Turkish is her dominant language and she can express herself better in Turkish.

"I feel comfortable while talking in Turkish because everybody speaks Turkish and I use Turkish a lot."

As an expected result, she is not aware of her bilingualism process, and when asked about it:

“I learned German as you learned Turkish, I learned it when I was a child because of my mother and father. I didn’t do anything special.”

She uses L2 only with her father and with her relatives in Germany, but she prefers Turkish talking to her mother. She confesses that:

“Only in some situations, when I want to say something to my mother secretly, I talk in German.”

She is aware of the advantage of being bilingual and for high school she thinks it will be very good to know German.

However, she also recognizes that she makes mistakes while speaking and writing in German. She code-switches whenever she doesn’t remember something in L2.

KP (son)

While defining his cultural identity he also sees himself as combination of two cultures. However, it is inevitable to speak Turkish and to be more competent in Turkish since he lives in Turkey and go to a Turkish school.

“I am kind of mixed blood, half German half Turk, and I speak Turkish a lot because we live in Turkey. Here I can only speak German with my family.”

He is not aware of his bilingual process.

“When I was small, my father taught me. And I read German books together with my father.”

“I speak German when I don’t want others to understand me.”

He chooses the contexts that he can use both languages.

Conclusion and Discussion

Regarding this family's bilingual process, the father, who is also a researcher in ELT, is aware of the theories of bilingualism and he is conscious of the process. He is also very consistent in his language policy, one-person- one language (Romaine, 1999). Even though there has been resistance of the child, he always speaks in German, which is very important for raising bilingual children. He also tries hard to teach English to his kids. Indeed, parents often referred to bilingualism as a 'gift' that they wished to impart, and an important advantage for their children (also see Piller, 2001). This embrace of additive bilingualism for children has been characterized by some as part of the movement towards 'hyper-parenting', that is, the "management of children's lives in pursuit of child success as a measure of parental achievement" (Piller, 2005, as cited in King & Fogle, 2006, p.696).

Reading in the target language is another important subject that should be taken into consideration in raising bilingual kids. They admitted that it contributes a lot to the language development of the children. ST (the father) undertook research and compared two pair siblings of similar background with his own children and the results showed that his children were better in literacy because of reading books in the target language.

When it comes to the mother, she seems not to be aware of the process, and doesn't feel competent in the target language. However, she encourages the father in this process. She also sees bilingualism as prestigious in a monolingual community. Moreover, in defining themselves as bilingual, there are some interesting results. ST is German and has been living in Turkey for fifteen years, but apart from his native language, he accepts English as his dominant language. Even though he is also very competent in Turkish, he never hesitated to mention English as his dominant language and felt much more comfortable to express himself in English. It may be concluded that the more you read, write and use the language, the more competent you feel in that language. Also, having an academic career may contribute a lot to language competence in the target language and defining oneself as bilingual. TC (the mother) was in Germany for five years which is quite a long time for a person to define themselves as bilingual, but she insisted that she is not bilingual because she uses the language only in very rare situations.

It was normal for the children to define themselves as bilingual and of mixed blood. Also they were not aware of the process and perceived the target language as their mother tongue. However, the older child sometimes refused to speak in German and was much more comfortable while speaking in Turkish. They accept Turkish as their dominant language and this is in line with previous studies. Most researchers agree that a balanced bilingual, with equal proficiency in both languages is hardly found in real life and that there is almost always a dominant language (e.g. Grosjean, 1989; Olsson & Sullivan, 2005). This is because bilinguals usually use their languages in different domains and children are normally more exposed to one language, usually the language of the dominant environment, and they need to use this language, e.g. in school, more than the other. Also as an adolescent, they may feel secure to be part of the society in which they live. They are also aware of their weaknesses and strengths in language.

This study is the first study that investigates the bilingual process of a family with all its members. However, it has some limitations in various aspects. First of all, only interview questions were used to get the idea about their process, observation and other kinds of instruments may be used to get much more data. Finally, small sample size may be

considered as another limitation; however, since the study was a qualitative study involving qualitative methods, a bigger sample size would be too difficult to deal with in this limited time. For a further study, whether getting an academic career in the target language affects the perception of language competence and defining oneself as bilingual may be investigated. Extra activities used for raising bilingual kids and their effect on language may also be studied.

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