How Does Maternal Education Influence Language Acquisition?

Interdependencies between Environment and Input in the Bilingual Development of Immigrant and Refugee Children

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Abstract

Research examining monolingual children’s acquisition demonstrates that children’s language development is intricately connected to the linguistic input they receive. However, their input varies on an individual basis; input is shaped by the broader social context in which they live (environment). Thus far, few studies have empirically investigated interdependencies between environment and linguistic input for bilingual children. To address this knowledge gap, this study uses a social interactionist approach to explicitly examine the relationship between the linguistic input child second language (L2) learners receive and their mothers’ level of education.

It is generally assumed that higher levels of maternal education will be associated with increased language abilities in children because mothers with higher levels of education provide their children with more linguistic input. This assumption, however, is based largely on studies about monolingual children. Existing research suggests that the relationship between maternal education and linguistic input is more complicated for child L2 learners. For example, some researchers have proposed that higher maternal education is associated with more first language (L1) input and less L2 input but others have suggested the opposite effect. Such discrepancies highlight the need to better understand the interdependencies between maternal education and linguistic input.

The specific research questions asked in this thesis are: (RQ1) Is maternal education a determinant of children’s L1 and L2 development? If so, are higher levels of education associated with higher language scores? (RQ2) Does maternal education impact the linguistic input migrant children receive at home? If so, does maternal education have the same effect on the linguistic input provided to immigrant compared to refugee children? (RQ3) Besides maternal education, what other variables influence the linguistic input children receive at home?
(RQ4) Do these intermediary environment and input factors determine children’s L1 and L2 development? And, (RQ5) Do the results presented to address Question 1 align with the results presented to address Questions 2, 3 and 4?

Participants were 89 immigrant/refugee children, living in Canada with diverse L1s. They completed an English story-telling task. Their parents also answered detailed questions about L1 development, as well as demographic and linguistic input information. Regression modelling revealed that relative quantity of language use by the mother (input), the siblings (input) and the child (output) positively influenced children’s L1 and L2 development. Additionally, maternal L2 fluency and months of exposure to English at school (a cumulative input variable) had a positive impact on L2 scores. Maternal education was related to children’s input but the direction of the relationship depended on immigration status. For immigrant families, higher levels of education were associated with less English use. In the refugee group, higher levels of education were associated with more English use. Thus, as one example of interdependencies in bilingual acquisition, this study revealed a complex relationship between immigration status, maternal education, linguistic input and children’s bilingual development.

Such interdependencies highlight the fact that children’s language development must be considered within the complex system of children’s specific circumstances. For each child, environment- and input-level variables are interwoven to produce an individualized learning context. As a consequence, it is not simply variation in individual variables that underlies individual differences in bilingual children’s emerging abilities; variation in the interdependencies between variables is also fundamental to the process of acquisition.