An Investigation of Multilinguals' Language Development

Barrie Matte

多言語話者の言語発達に関する研究

マット　バリー

Abstract

Multilingualism has become increasingly common in modern society. Development of language ability can occur at any age, however, the reason for acquiring multiple languages can vary. The current study focuses on the language development of a group of adult multilinguals, and how they came to acquire multiple languages, as well as their use of languages throughout their life and in their current daily life. The results suggest that it is possible for language to be acquired at any age and used as a primary daily language or workplace language, as long as the context for using the language is valued or of great importance to the language user.

Keywords: Monolingualism, Bilingualism, Multilingualism, Lingua Franca, SLA

（Received September 24, 2021）

抄　　録

多言語主義は現代社会で益々一般的になっている。言語能力の発達はどの年齢でも起こり得るが、多言語を習得する理由は様々である。この研究では多言語を話すことができる成人のグループにおける言語発達、彼らのこれまでの人生と現在の日常生活における言語の使用、そして彼らがどのようにして多言語を習得するに至ったのかに焦点をあてる。この研究の結果から言語を使用する文脈に価値が置かれている、または言語を使用する者にとって非常に重要である限り、言語はあらゆる年齢で習得され、主要な日常言語または職場での言語として使用されることが可能であるということが示唆された。

キーワード：単一言語、バイリンガル、多言語、リンガ・フランカ、SLA

（2021 年 9 月 24 日受理）

1. Introduction

The following study is based on a series of inquiries made into the acquisition of languages by multilinguals. Having frequent contact with multilingual family, friends, and coworkers, I began to wonder how multilinguals viewed their own development of languages, and whether they were conscious of the language choices they make in everyday life. To investigate this an instrument was designed and given to a group of 20 participants from my acquaintances, with various nationalities, gender, languages, and first languages (L1). Questions about development of a second language (L2) have been constant in the field of second language acquisition, however much research overlooks the qualitative inferences that can be made from observation and self-reporting done by subjects of interest.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Multilingualism and Power

Power can be found everywhere, and according to Foucauldian theory, this is not necessarily a negative trait of society (Fejes, 2013). In fact, power can come in the form of knowledge, of which having more or less can either distance someone from society, or allow them to participate in it. Balance, or equal distribution of power, is thus necessary in keeping society in check (Alexander & Baker, 1995). Language falls into the category of knowledge, and as seen in this study, language is often not equally accessible, however it can become contextually indispensable. For many bilingual and multilingual speakers who learned their L2 or L3 at a later age, it was due to their occupation, location, or social relationships, and used as a lingua franca. Porras et al. (2014) suggested that globalization could also be a driving factor in the growing necessity of learning additional languages later in life, so as to improve communication in the workplace.

Multilingualism is a term often used interchangeably with bilingualism, resulting in a variety of interpretations, as noted by Baker (2011) and Sia and Dewaele (2006). For simplicity, multilingualism is operationalized in this study as the ability to use more than two languages (Cambridge University Press, n.d.).

Baker (2011) proposed that multilingualism can be developed through various "routes," including multilingualism from birth, from subsequent exposure during childhood, and from entering new language communities.

2.2 Multilingualism and Feelings

One interesting area that has been pursued in the field of second language acquisition

(SLA) has been the feelings felt while switching between languages as a multi-language user. Dewaele and Nakano (2012) researched self-perception of emotions that multilinguals reported from switching between their L1, L2, L3, and L4. Participants in their study (N = 106) were mostly comprised of university students that were studying abroad outside of their L1 environment. In order to collect data, participants completed an online questionnaire which focused on sociographical background, educational, and linguistic history. The researchers found that self-perceived proficiency was a predictor of the scales, mostly in the participants' L2 and L3, together with age of acquisition (later in life), which suggested that acquiring language at an older age contributed more to positive self-perception of multi-language use.

3. The Present Study

The origin of this study came from the question "how do bilinguals view themselves as language users?" Initially, I felt that pursuing the use of language by bilinguals would be interesting. However, as I considered multilinguals that I know, I decided instead to focus on how self-perception of themselves as language users would give better insight in two areas: how to not only better understand the importance of learning an L2 or L3, but also the way in which language contributes to everyday existence for multilinguals. As a pilot study, the instrument used was also developed as an inquiry into how better instruments can be developed for future investigations into linguistic backgrounds.

4. Methodology

4. 1 Participants

The participants (N = 20) in this study were acquaintances of the researcher, who were invited to participate via email. After giving consent to participate in the study, an invitation to the online survey was sent through a web link during subsequent correspondence. Each of the participants were selected for having either an L2 or an L3, as well as representing a variety of nationalities, ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, ages, and genders (see Table 1 and Table 2 for details).

Table 1 *Demographics of Participants: Gender and Age*

Age	Female	Male	
	n (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)
20-29	1 (11)		1 (5)
30-39	6 (67)	7 (64)	13 (65)
40-49	1 (11)	3 (27)	4 (20)
60-69	1 (11)		1 (5)
70-79		1 (9)	1 (5)
Total	9 (45)	11 (55)	20

Table 2 *Demographics of Participants: Nationality*

Nationality	*n* (%)
American	5 (25)
Australian	2 (10)
British	2 (10)
Canadian	4 (20)
Indonesian	1 (5)
Japanese	5 (25)
Korean	1 (5)
Total	20

4. 2 Procedures

A 23-item survey (Appendix A) was created for this study, with the purpose of eliciting some preliminary information about the participants, and how their languages have contributed to their lives. In order to develop the items, first the nature of the study was considered. The intention of the research was to examine the role of language in the lives of multilinguals, so the items needed to reflect this as much as possible. Once the survey was completed, it was uploaded to www.surveymonkey.com and a link was provided to each participant.

4. 3 Measurement

The instrument was designed to investigate six aspects of the nature of language and multilingualism: general information about the participants, demographics of the participants, the languages used by the participants, the average daily usage of languages by the participants, information about participants' families, as well as other possible ways in which the participants interact with their L2 and/or L3. For details, see Appendix A.

4. 4   Analyses

After the data was extracted from www.surveymonkey.com, it was converted for use with Microsoft Excel software. Due to time constraints, only general descriptive analyses were performed.

5.   Results

The data collected from the survey is discussed together with Tables below.

The analyses of the participants' demographics revealed that the majority of participants were American ($n = 5$) or Japanese ($n = 5$), with the remaining participants being Australian, British, Canadian, Indonesian, or Korean (see Table 2). At the time of the study, the majority of participants resided outside of their birth countries ($n = 16$). As for professions, 70% ($n = 14$) reported their profession to be education related. See Table 3 for more details.

Table 3   *Demographics of Participants: Profession*

Profession	n (%)
Education	14 (70)
Health	2 (10)
Homemaker	1 (5)
Retired	2 (10)
Student	1 (5)
Total	20

Demographics of language among participants were quite varied. All 20 participants reported an L2, however only 13 reported an L3. In Table 4 the results from the survey show that the majority spoke English ($n = 14$) or Japanese ($n = 5$) as their L1, while Japanese ($n = 9$) and English ($n = 6$) were also the most common L2. Participants were allowed to select multiple languages for their L1, L2, or L3, which occurred among a few participants' L3s, thus no percentages were provided for L3s. The most common L3 were Spanish ($n = 5$) and French ($n = 4$). See Table 4 for more details.

Table 4 *Demographics of Participants: L1, L2, L3*

	L1	L2	L3
Language	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n*
Chinese		1 (5)	3
English	14 (70)	6 (30)	
French		3 (15)	4
German			1
Japanese	5 (25)	9 (45)	1
Korean	1 (5)		2
Spanish			5
Vietnamese		1 (5)	1
Welsh			1
Total	20	20	13

With regards to language used by participants at home and school, English was most common, followed by Japanese and French. See Table 5 for more details.

Table 5 *Demographics of Participants: Language Usage*

	Home	E.S.	J.H.S. / H.S.	University
Language	*n*	*n*	*n*	*n*
Chinese	2	1		1
English	11	13	14	17
French	1	3	5	2
German			1	2
Japanese	5	5	6	8
Korean	1	2	2	
Spanish		1	3	3
Vietnamese	1			
Welsh	1	1		

Note. E.S. refers to *Elementary School, J.H.S.* refers to *Junior High School*, and *H.S.* refers to *High School*

Responding to item 14 (have you ever lived in a country or area with a different language than your L1?), only two participants said that they had not. Responding to item 15 (what languages do / did you speak at your workplace?), 16 participants reported that they use two languages at work, three participants reported that they use between three and five languages at work, while only one participant reported using one language at work. See Table 6 for more details. Item 16 asked participants about which languages are spoken in their home. Only five languages were selected, including Chinese, English, French, Japanese, and Korean. See Table 7 for more details.

Table 6 *Demographics of Participants: Languages at Work*

Language	*n* (%)
Chinese	3 (15)
English	18 (90)
French	2 (10)
Japanese	17 (85)
Korean	1 (5)
Spanish	1 (5)
Vietnamese	1 (5)

Table 7 *Demographics of Participants: Languages at Home*

Language	*n*
Chinese	1
English	20
French	1
Japanese	14
Korean	2

Items 17-19 asked participants to provide an approximation for the time they use their L1 / L2 / L3 in an average day, using percentages. On an average day, the majority of participants (*n* = 15) indicated that they mostly speak their L1 (51%-100% of the day) on an average day, while 80% (*n* = 16) speak their L2 less than half of an average day. Very few use their L3 in an average day. See Table 8 for more details.

Table 8 *Demographics of Participants: Language Use in an Average Day*

	L1	L2	L3
%	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)
0		2 (10)	10 (77)
1-30	3 (15)	8 (40)	3 (23)
31-50	2 (10)	6 (30)	
51-65	3 (15)	1 (5)	
66-80	5 (25)	2 (10)	
81-100	7 (35)	1 (5)	
Total	20	20	13

With regards to item 20 (are any of your family members also bilingual?), of the 20 participants in this study, only three reported that there are no other bilingual / multilinguals in their family. With regards to item 21 (Do your parents have the same first language?), only two of the 20 participants reported that they do not.

Items 22 and 23 asked participants about the media which they use that is not in their L1. Three participants reported that they do not read books, magazines, or websites in more than one language, while only one participant reported that they do not watch TV, movies, or listen to music in more than one language.

The last two items of the survey asked participants with children (n = 13) whether they spoke another language with their children together with their spouse (item 24) and which languages that they used (item 25). 85% (n = 11) of the participants with children responded that they use more than one language with them, of which they all indicated that the languages they use are English and Japanese.

6. Discussion

The most interesting results from this study included the findings about multilinguals coming from monolingual families, the participants who mostly use their L2 in daily life, and participants who became multilingual later in life.

The majority of multilinguals in this study indicated that the main usage of their L2 or L3 was at their workplace, with a few using it mostly at home. Recently there has been a global trend of employers seeking multilinguals for jobs (Porras et al., 2014), possibly due to globalization and efforts to reduce anxiety for L1 speakers that they could otherwise feel from encountering speakers of a different L1 in the workplace, creating stress from miscommunications, etc. With regards to Foucauldian theory, this could be seen either positively as a balance of power (shared languages) or negatively as an unwillingness to balance language usage throughout society, so as to not exclude minority language speakers.

Baker (2011) commented that "rarely are bilinguals equal in their ability or use of their two or more languages" (p. 4), as was seen in this study. However, the results from this study were that 20% (n = 4) spoke their L2 more than 50% of their day, with 30% (n = 6) indicating that they use their L2 35-50% of an average day. This group of participants fell into one of two categories: they were either living in a country that does not use their L1 (n = 8), or they do not have the same L1 as their spouse (n = 8). This suggests that context has a great influence on necessity, and future studies could use follow-up interviews and proficiency tests to confirm whether such participants are required to use it in their daily life, and whether they have sufficient ability to use their L2 as a lingua franca in their settings.

One final point of interest from the study was about age of acquisition. While participants were not asked to indicate at what point they considered themselves multilingual, only five spoke more than one language at home while growing up, six spoke

two or more languages in elementary school, 11 spoke two or more in junior / high school, and 12 spoke two or more in university. This implies that eight of the 20 participants (40%) did not focus on language learning until after completing university, and only two of these eight spoke more than one language at home. The majority of these eight participants (75%, $n = 6$) indicated only using their L2 5-30% of an average day, however the other two participants indicated between 55% and 80% usage of their L2 in an average day. For learners of an L2 that they didn't acquire until they were adults, that is a very substantial amount of non-L1 language use.

7. Conclusion

7. 1 Implications

While this study is unable to provide conclusive evidence as to the main benefits of multilingualism, the participants indicated that they were able to live and work using their L2 and L3, and despite some participants coming from monolingual families, most of the multilingual parents in the study indicated that they were raising their children to also be multilingual. A positive impact on society could thus be that having more multilingual members ensures the survival of languages, so long as they have contexts in which to use them, and see the value in using them.

With regard to becoming multilingual, the results from this study suggest that language acquisition for a variety of contexts can be a motivational force that language learners can benefit from. Real-world examples of L2 and L3 users are important to remind students that not only can they achieve their language acquisition goals, but also provide a multitude of potential uses for their target L2 or L3.

7. 2 Limitations

While there was a large volume of information obtained in this study, data was only obtained through a convenience sample and the number of participants was not enough to make stronger claims about their respective groups. To improve this study, increasing the number of participants from each background would serve to provide better insight into how participants view themselves as multilinguals.

For a more focused study, however, perhaps it would be most beneficial to focus on one aspect of being a multilingual, such as a shared L1, gender, age, or place of origin, and collect data from as many participants as possible with that commonality instead of from such a broad grouping as in the current study, possibly in a series of case studies.

Claims of validity for the instrument are also difficulty, as no investigations into such dimensions were conducted, due to time constraints.

7. 3 Future Studies

　Moving forward, future studies should include revisions to the instrument used in this study to include greater understanding of the media participants view, their education, and more detail about their families. Further studies would also benefit from including proficiency measures, so as to assess how proficient the participants are with their L2 or L3. Including some additional questions about learner-specific traits, such as their willingness to communicate in each of their respective languages and their self-efficacy for each of their languages, and to find out in which contexts they would use each of their languages would also be beneficial. Interviewing participants would also be advantageous to determine the extent to which they are able to function well within their workplace with their L2 or L3. Perhaps one final addition to a future study would be to inquire about whether L2 or L3 usage is viewed as positive or negative within their respective communities.

References

Alexander, S. H. & Baker, K. (1995). A Marxist analysis of the bilingual education movement: The emergence of an elite in language minorities. *Sociological Spectrum: Mid-South Sociological Association, 15* (2), 99-116. doi: 10.1080/02732173.1995.9982090 (DF 3)

Baker, C. (2011). *Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism* (5th ed.). Multilingual Matters.

Cambridge University Press. (n.d.). Multilingual. In *dictionary.cambridge.org dictionary*. Retrieved November 27, 2020, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/multilingual

Dewaele, J. M., & Nakano, S. (2012). Multilingual's perceptions of feeling different when switching languages. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 34* (2), 107-120. doi: 10.1080/01434632.2012.712133

Fejes, A. (2013). Foucault, confession, and reflective practices. In M. Murphy (Ed.), *Social theory and education research: Understanding Foucault, Habermas, Bourdieu and Derrida* (pp. 52-66). Routledge.

Porras, D., Ee, J. & Gándara, P. (2014). Employer Preferences: Do Bilingual Applicants and Employees Experience an Advantage?. In R. Callahan & P. Gándara (Ed.), *The Bilingual Advantage: Language, Literacy and the US Labor Market* (pp. 234-258). Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters. doi:10.21832/9781783092437-011

Sia, J., & Dewaele, J. M. (2006). Are you bilingual? *Birkbeck Studies in Applied Linguistics, 1,* 1-19. doi: 10.1177/13670069070110040301

Appendix A
Bilingualism Survey

Thank you for participating in my survey! All information you provide will be kept confidential, and will be permanently deleted upon request.

1. First name (this information will be kept confidential, and only used in order to keep track of respondents)

2. Your age

    18-19 years old

    20-29 years old

    30-39 years old

    40-49 years old

    50-59 years old

    60-69 years old

    70-79 years old

    80-89 years old

3. Gender

    Male

    Female

4. Your country of origin (Where you were born)

5. Your country of residence (Where you currently live)

6. Your profession

    Education

    Service industry

    Government

    Health

    Finance

    Law

    Full-time Student

    Retired

    Other (please specify)

7. What language do you consider to be your first language (L1)?

    English

    French

    Japanese

    Chinese

    Mandarin

    Vietnamese

    Korean

    Arabic

    Italian

    Spanish

    Portuguese

    Other (please specify)

8. What language do you consider to be your second language (L2)?

    English

    French

    Japanese

    Chinese

    Mandarin

    Vietnamese

    Korean

    Arabic

    Italian

    Spanish

    Portuguese

    Other (please specify)

9. If you speak a third or more languages, please choose from below (more than one answer is possible).

    English

    French

    Japanese

    Chinese

    Mandarin

    Vietnamese

    Korean

    Arabic

    Italian

    Spanish

    Portuguese

    Other (please specify)

10. What languages did you speak at home when you were growing up? (more than 1 answer is possible).

    English

    French

    Japanese

    Chinese

    Mandarin

    Vietnamese

    Korean

    Arabic

    Italian

    Spanish

    Portuguese

    Other (please specify)

11. What languages did you speak at your elementary school? (more than 1 answer is possible).

    English

    French

    Japanese

    Chinese

    Mandarin

    Vietnamese

    Korean

    Arabic

    Italian

    Spanish

    Portuguese

    Other (please specify)

12. What languages did you speak at your junior high school / high school? (more than 1 answer is possible).

    English

    French

    Japanese

    Chinese

    Mandarin

    Vietnamese

    Korean

    Arabic

    Italian

    Spanish

Portuguese

Other (please specify)

13. What languages did you speak at your university / college? (more than 1 answer is possible).

English

French

Japanese

Chinese

Mandarin

Vietnamese

Korean

Arabic

Italian

Spanish

Portuguese

Other (please specify)

14. Have you ever lived in a country or area with a different language than your L1?

Yes

No

15. What languages do / did you speak at your workplace? (more than 1 answer is possible).

English

French

Japanese

Chinese

Mandarin

Vietnamese

Korean

Arabic

Italian

Spanish

Portuguese

Other (please specify)

16. What languages do you speak in your home? (more than 1 answer is possible).

English

French

Japanese

Chinese

Mandarin

Vietnamese

Korean

Arabic

Italian

Spanish

Portuguese

Other (please specify)

17. How much time do you speak your L1 on an average day?

0%

1-30%

31-50%

51-65%

66-80%

81-100%

18. How much time do you speak your L2 on an average day?

0%

1-30%

31-50%

51-65%

66-80%

81-100%

19. How much time do you speak your L3 (if you have one) on an average day?

0%

1-30%

31-50%

51-65%

66-80%

81-100%

20. Are any of your family members also bilingual? If so, please write the languages they speak below.

21. Do your parents have the same first language?

Yes

No

I'm not sure

22. Do you read books / magazines / websites in more than one language?

Yes

No

23. Do you watch TV / movies / listen to music in more than one language?
    Yes
    No

24. If you have children, did you and your spouse speak more than one language with them?
    Yes
    No

25. If you have children, which languages do / did you and your spouse speak with them? (more than 1 answer is possible).
    English
    French
    Japanese
    Chinese
    Mandarin
    Vietnamese
    Korean
    Arabic
    Italian
    Spanish
    Portuguese
    Other (please specify)