

Title: Convergence: When Two Languages Meet

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Abstract:

This study documents one child's bilingual language development to answer if language exposure and input in each language must be equivalent for achieving bilingual proficiency when the home language is not the majority language. The child developed a firm base for language simultaneously and above average skills in both languages. Findings suggest that quality and consistent exposure and input in each language, even if disproportionate, promote simultaneous bilingualism. Implications for SLPs are discussed in their role in the assessment of bilinguals and in providing parents training and resources to maintain quality exposure and input in the minority language at home.

Summary:

The child, referred to as RM, showed Portuguese dominance in the initial stages of her dual language development due to greater Portuguese exposure and limited community interaction at a younger age. English was a peripheral language until RM was introduced to videos and songs in English, as well as English-speaking nursery workers and babysitters, where English exposure increased significantly. As time has passed, though RM uses both languages on a daily basis, she is showing a tendency to favor English.

Even with greater exposure to the majority language within the majority culture, RM appears to be developing a firm base for language simultaneously in both languages. Her overall language skills are above average given her age when tested in either language. Her vocabulary skills are reduced by comparison but still within normal limits. The measures also show that 75% of her receptive vocabulary is overlapping and 27-35% of her expressive vocabulary is overlapping at 24 months.

These preliminary data support the current research showing that dual language learning from infancy is a natural and advantageous process given sufficient exposure and input in each language. Though more normative data is needed regarding the specific amount of language exposure and input necessary in each language, this study suggests that quality and consistent exposure and input in both languages place the dual language learner on the right path to simultaneous bilingualism, even if the minority language exposure is not the same and essentially limited in the majority community. It should be noted that in this study quality input signified a linguistic environment where mother-child interactions involved ongoing verbal interactions about things, routines and events, as well as singing, book sharing and reading experiences, including purposeful modeling, expansions, and recasts. Consistent input signified that mother-child interactions were constant and exclusively in Portuguese from birth, and the strict exclusion of English was intentional to clearly draw a line between the two languages in her linguistic environment.

As this study is continued, it will further investigate if and at what point RM's vocabulary knowledge and use approximate 100% translational equivalents and at what age language differentiation becomes visibly apparent, where she understands Portuguese is not the majority language in her community and reserved for her immediate family.

This study holds implications for educators and SLPs who have regular contact with children of diverse backgrounds and their families. There are SLPs and educators in the majority community who discourage parents from speaking to their children in languages other than English, even when English is not their dominant language or language of preference. As this study suggests, exposure and input are extremely important so we should find ways to support rich, consistent and long-term exposure and input of minority languages through parent education, training, and accessibility to appropriate materials and resources. The home language is also crucial in the intervention process with bilingual children with language impairment, and incorporating systematic support of the home language in addition to the majority language has been shown to yield marked gains.

Professional Biography:

Ana Paula G. Mumy, MS, CCC-SLP is a trilingual speech/language pathologist who has worked with children for eleven years in a variety of settings and has developed many therapy tools for English-speaking and Spanish-speaking children. She works as a school-based SLP and provides consulting services for schools and organizations needing assistance with bilingual populations. She is also the author of several continuing education eCourses and innovative therapy products. In the words of one of her colleagues, *"The development of Ana Paula's website, products, and seminars is a testimony to her commitment to high quality resources for the SLP community."*

Learning Outcomes:

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Describe the process of simultaneous bilingualism and its implications.
2. State research-based reasons for actively and systematically supporting the home language of culturally and linguistically diverse children.
3. Utilize conceptual scoring to obtain more accurate representations of typical language development of bilingual children.