

The State of Multilingual Education in Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This article analyzes the significance of bilingual and multilingual education, focusing on the experiences of children who grow up in diverse linguistic environments. It examines the various types of bilingual and multilingual acquisition, distinguishing between simultaneous and sequential language learning, as well as the dynamics of minority and majority languages. The discussion then shifts to the role of school-based bilingual education in promoting language development and biliteracy. It also addresses the difference between 'strong' and 'weak' bilingual education, highlights examples from different educational models globally, and assesses their implications for children's cognitive, social, and academic growth. The case of Uzbekistan serves as a practical example, illustrating the country's opportunities and challenges in establishing a robust multilingual education system.

Key words: Bilingual education, multilingual communication, simultaneous bilingualism, sequential bilingualism, minority language acquisition, majority language acquisition, cross-linguistic influence, bilingual education models.

INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that most children around the world grow up learning more than one language. However, these bilingual and multilingual children vary in terms of when they were first exposed to each language and the sociolinguistic context in which these languages are used. These variations impact language acquisition patterns, rates of learning, and ultimate proficiency in each language. Additionally, the research issues and questions related to dual and multiple language acquisition can differ depending on the type of bilingual or multilingual child. Genesee et al. (2004) classify bilingual children based on two main factors: whether their exposure to the two languages was simultaneous or sequential, and whether those languages are minority or majority languages. Simultaneous bilinguals are those who begin learning both languages from birth or before the age of 3 (de Houwer 1995; McLaughlin 1978). Most simultaneous bilinguals studied are children who learn their two languages at home, with each parent speaking their native language to the child. However, some simultaneous bilinguals are exposed to both languages from both parents who switch between them, or one language is primarily learned at daycare and the other at home. This type of bilingualism is often called bilingual first language acquisition (BFLA). In contrast, sequential bilingualism involves learning one language after the other language is already somewhat established, typically after age 3. Sequential bilingual children often speak their first language (L1) with their parents at home and their second language (L2) at school.

METHODOLOGY

This research aims to examine bilingual and trilingual language development in early childhood, focusing on the cognitive, linguistic, and social impacts of bilingual and bilingual education programs. The methodology involves both qualitative and quantitative research approaches to ensure a comprehensive exploration of the subject.

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RESULTS

For some bilingual children, whether simultaneous or sequential, one of their languages is a minority language. This means it is not widely spoken outside the home and holds little to no cultural, political, or educational importance in the larger society. For simultaneous bilinguals, this often means that the parent who speaks the minority language is the primary, and sometimes the only, source of that language, a scenario known as ‘family bilingualism’ (Lanza 1997). Sequential bilinguals with a minority first language (L1) are typically children from immigrant families, where both parents speak the L1 at home and the child learns the dominant language of the society in community settings and at school.

On the other hand, some bilinguals grow up speaking two majority languages. For example, French-English bilinguals in Montréal, Canada, can be considered majority language bilinguals, as both languages are widely spoken in the community and share similar social status. Sequential bilinguals who speak the majority societal language, such as English in Canada or the United States, at home and in their communities but attend school in another language, like French or Spanish, can be classified as L1 majority – L2 minority children. It’s important to recognize that the minority-majority classification is not a strict dichotomy but rather a spectrum (Suyal 2002). For instance, while French and English are both majority languages in Québec and New Brunswick in Canada, Spanish has different levels of status depending on the region in the United States (Oller and Eilers 2002), and Nepali is considered a minority language in most places in North America.

Simultaneous bilinguals differ from sequential bilinguals in that they are exposed to two languages from infancy, without being old enough to consciously recognize that their input comes from two separate linguistic sources. This has led researchers to question whether these children initially form a single linguistic system that later needs to be divided into two distinct systems (Genesee 1989; Leopold 1949; Volterra and Taeschner 1978). However, current research has moved beyond the ‘one system or two?’ debate to focus on more detailed questions regarding the extent of contact and separation between the two languages as they develop (e.g., see contributions in Döpke 2000). Another key topic in bilingual first language acquisition (BFLA) research is how bilinguals compare to their monolingual peers in terms of language learning patterns and achievements. Bilingual children need to acquire two language systems within the same time frame that monolinguals acquire just one. Additionally, they often do not receive equal input in both languages, which can result in one language being more dominant or proficient than the other. This can lead to different acquisition rates compared to monolingual children.

When it comes to trilingualism in early childhood, the challenges related to input quantity and language proficiency become even more significant. Research on early trilingualism has shown that the least dominant language—typically the one with the least input—might show incomplete acquisition of certain grammatical features or may become more passive than active in the child’s language use (Hoffman 1985; Maneva 2004). This section will explore how phonological, lexical, and morphosyntactic development occurs in children learning multiple languages simultaneously to address these questions: (1) Do bilingual children have a unified or separate linguistic system in the early stages? (2) What is the nature of cross-linguistic influence among the developing languages of bilingual children? (3) How do bilinguals compare to their monolingual peers? Do they exhibit unique developmental patterns or fall behind in acquisition rates in one or both languages?

Since many children spend approximately 15,000 hours in school, there is significant potential for bilingualism and biliteracy to develop during this time. In numerous countries, such as Canada, Scandinavian nations, and South Africa, bilingual and multilingual education provides opportunities for this kind of development. This chapter aims to explore how children achieve bilingualism in school through bilingual education. It begins by discussing the concept of ‘bilingual education’ and the various types of dual language instruction. The term ‘bilingual education’ is often used in a broad and sometimes unclear way, encompassing schools that teach bilingually or those that simply have bilingual students. It can refer to educational settings where students shift from being dominant in a minority language to being dominant in the majority language, as well as those that aim to foster true



bilingualism and biliteracy. To clarify, 'bilingual education' should be specifically used for programs where some, most, or all subjects are taught in two languages, known as 'strong' bilingual education (Baker 2006). In contrast, 'weak' forms involve using the home language briefly as a transitional phase before moving predominantly to the majority language. Additionally, there are instances where there is no bilingual instruction, yet the term 'bilingual education' is inappropriately applied simply because bilingual children are present. It's important to note that 'bilingual education' does not refer to programs where a second language is taught purely as a subject; it must involve using the language for teaching content. For example, second language classes (like French in the US or UK) and English as a foreign language programs (TESOL/TEFL) are not considered bilingual education. However, while some children become bilingual through second language lessons, this chapter argues that the most effective way for children to achieve bilingualism in school is through 'strong' bilingual education. But what exactly defines 'strong' bilingual education? There are several types of 'strong' bilingual education programs. One well-researched model comes from Canada and is known as immersion education or immersion bilingual education, where children from English-speaking households are taught in French (Johnstone 2002). These children become fluent in French through content-based learning in an immersive environment. Such immersion schools typically serve children who are native speakers of the majority language and teach through two majority languages.

'Weak' bilingual education involves the integration of children from minority language communities into mainstream education, where their home language is only used for a brief period of adaptation. For example, in immigrant communities where education is conducted in the majority language, 'weak' forms of bilingual education may include language support staff who help children transition from their home language to the majority language. In the U.S., transitional bilingual education allows children to use their home language for one to six years with the goal of shifting them to using the majority language exclusively. The term 'weak' signifies that the home language is only used temporarily, resulting in a focus on monolingualism and assimilation into the majority language.

Academics often critique these 'weak' models, citing issues such as lower academic achievement, diminished self-esteem, higher rates of school absenteeism and dropout, loss of the home language, and slower acquisition of the majority language (Ovando, Collier, and Combs 2003). These outcomes are partly due to the denial of the cognitive and academic strengths children have gained through their home language. If children are required to learn and perform in a language that is not yet fully developed, they may struggle with complex academic content. Additionally, the language used in classrooms is more abstract and context-reduced compared to conversational language, which can hinder comprehension. Cummins (2000) distinguishes between context-reduced and context-embedded communication, as well as cognitively demanding versus undemanding communication, with classroom language generally being more challenging and context-reduced.

In contrast, politicians, policymakers, and some segments of the public often support 'weak' bilingual education, believing it essential for children in minority language communities to integrate into the majority language society (e.g., English in the U.S.) as quickly as possible. The idea is that early and thorough exposure to the majority language provides the best chance for educational and social equality. This perspective assumes that assimilation into the majority language is necessary for economic, social, and cultural opportunities. However, underlying this belief is sometimes the goal of assimilating minority groups to be more controllable or subordinate, particularly groups that might be seen as culturally, religiously, or politically challenging.

DISCUSSION

The educational statistics for Uzbekistan highlight both the potential and the challenges involved in developing a robust multilingual education system. Uzbekistan's education system already provides instruction in multiple languages, including Uzbek, Russian, and various minority languages such as Karakalpak, Tajik, and Kazakh. This linguistic diversity creates a strong foundation for fostering a multilingual education system that mirrors the country's sociolinguistic landscape. According to the statistics provided by the Ministry of Education Of Uzbekistan in 2018-2019 years, there are several schools teaching in other languages than Uzbek. These data are presented in Table 1.



Table 1. Number of schools by languages in Uzbekistan

Total number of schools	9691
Total number of students	5,821,861
Languages of instruction	Uzbek (85.6%), Russian (10%), Karakalpak (2%), Tajik (1.2%), Kazakh (1.0%), Kyrgyz (0.1%), Turkmen (0.2%)
Number of schools by language	Uzbek (8,853), Russian (862), Karakalpak (366), Kazakh (370), Tajik (244), Kyrgyz (42), Turkmen (43)

The presence of schools that offer instruction in languages other than Uzbek indicates an opportunity to expand bilingual and even trilingual educational programs. Such an approach can support linguistic and cognitive development, enhancing students' proficiency in multiple languages from an early age. Additionally, the country's network of specialized and boarding schools can serve as an ideal platform for creating tailored multilingual programs, effectively addressing the educational needs of both majority and minority language communities. However, there are significant **challenges** to overcome. Although Uzbek is the primary language of instruction, accounting for 85.6% of total students, Russian is also widely used (10%), while other minority languages have much lower representation, such as Tajik at 1.2% and Kyrgyz at 0.1%. This unequal distribution can lead to imbalances in language acquisition and proficiency, potentially limiting opportunities for students who are not learning in the dominant languages. Students who grow up speaking minority languages at home may face difficulties transitioning to a school system where the primary languages of instruction are Uzbek or Russian. This transition can negatively impact their academic performance and contribute to educational inequities, hindering their overall learning experience. Schools that use minority languages for instruction may struggle with limited resources, which can affect the quality and availability of education in these languages. In contrast, schools teaching in Uzbek or Russian often have more comprehensive support, creating disparities in educational outcomes. To address these challenges, **comprehensive bilingual programs** should be implemented to promote balanced linguistic development by integrating both Uzbek and Russian more evenly across curricula. Such initiatives would help maintain language parity and support students' linguistic capabilities. Additionally, efforts should be made to expand the quality and accessibility of education in minority languages. This can be achieved through targeted teacher training and curriculum development, fostering an inclusive environment that celebrates linguistic diversity and cultural heritage. Finally, equipping teachers with the skills needed for multilingual education is essential. Training educators in effective multilingual teaching methods and classroom management will help address challenges related to language dominance and comprehension, ensuring all students receive equal educational opportunities. These strategies can help Uzbekistan build on its current educational framework to create a more equitable and inclusive multilingual education system.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of bilingual and multilingual language acquisition, alongside the analysis of educational models and their impact, demonstrates that bilingualism is a complex yet highly beneficial process. It enhances cognitive, social, and academic skills, providing children with significant advantages in an increasingly globalized world. However, challenges such as unequal language representation, resource constraints, and potential negative impacts on educational performance must be addressed. The case of Uzbekistan underscores the importance of promoting balanced bilingual and trilingual education, integrating minority language support, and ensuring effective teacher training to maximize students' linguistic and cognitive potential. Moving forward, educational frameworks should prioritize comprehensive 'strong' bilingual programs that recognize the value of all languages, cultivate cultural inclusivity, and contribute to long-term academic and social equity. By fostering multilingual education, countries can empower their future generations with the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in a linguistically diverse and interconnected world.



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