



ISSUES IN BILINGUALISM IN THE CONTEXT OF AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS. CASE STUDY REPORT

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Abstract

The impact of bilingualism on language development in the context of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) represents the main focus of this article. In order to investigate this aspect the researchers used the single case study qualitative method. The selection criteria were: the presence of ASD, bilingual exposure and language developmental age less than 2 years. The following instruments were used to collect data: semi-structured interview and Communication Matrix translated in Romanian language. The results underline the fact that communication development in a case of ASD with bilingual exposure is reinforced by the two languages specific features, this adding cultural, linguistic and cognitive value to child's speech and language development.

Cuvinte cheie: tulburări din spectru autist, bilingvism, scala Communication Matrix, tulburări de limbaj, abilități de comunicare

Keywords: autism spectrum disorders, bilingualism, Communication Matrix, language disorders, communication skills

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. Bilingualism

Bilingualism's implications in structuring language were widely studied from a psychological, psycho-pedagogical, linguistic and psycholinguistic point of view. Thus, Bodea Hațegan (2009, 2010, 2011) underlines through a study focus on investigating bilingualism and its implication on structuring language at morphological and lexical level that bilingualism influences in a significant manner children with different kind of disabilities language skills (the study focuses on three different categories of children with disability: hearing impaired children, children with learning difficulties and children with cognitive disability). The study

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was conducted on Romanian native speakers having as second language different foreign languages. At morphological level the study underlines bilingualism implication on different important morphemic aspects such as: article, gender, number, diathesis, time, mode, pronoun, comparison degrees of the adjective, compound prepositions, derivative morphemes, supra-segmental morphemes, animate/inanimate category. This indicates that bilingualism prevents the acquisition of certain morphologic abilities. These abilities, however, represent fundamental elements of the morphologic competence in the Romanian language, according to the value of the t test ($p < .01$). These results are also sustained by Paradis, Crago, Genesee, Rice (2008) research, they underlining that bilingual (French-English) children with language impairments have difficulties in handling several morph-syntactical aspects. However these grammatical aspects „may not be an impediment to learning two languages, at least in the domain of grammatical morphology” underline the authors, conclusion (Paradis, Crago, Genesee, Rice, 2008, p. 1).

Regarding the lexical level the above mention study also emphasizes a significant difference between the bilingual children and the non-bilingual children participating in the research. Thus, this result confirmed the stated hypothesis difficulties related to the simultaneous learning of two languages that can cause difficulties in structuring lexical abilities, emphasizing the negative impact of bilingualism on the structuring of the lexical level of the language. These results are comparable with those that can be found in the specialized literature (Pearson; Fernandez; Oller, 1993).

1.2. BILINGUALISM AND AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS (ASD)

The impact of bilingual exposure on language development of children with autism spectrum disorders is very little studied. Thus, there are studies underlining that bilingual exposure is connected with additional delays on language development, when speaking about children with autism (Kremer-Sadlik, 2005). This aspect raises a lot of concerns in the bilingual families with an autistic children, thus most of the parents tend to have one single language option. Regarding this aspect Yu (2013) reported that bilingual families in Chinese-English tend to choose to speak English with their ASD children. Yu (2013) developed a research on 10 bilingual Chinese-English immigrants trying to underline the nature of the language practice, the constraints of the language practice and the impact on children development. The results of this research underline parents' fears about bilingualism to intensify additional delays in children language development. Despite these fears most of the parents (mothers especially) tend to often choose one of the two spoken language based on different criteria such as: communicational needs (taking into consideration that all of the participants in the study were immigrants, they understood that their children need to be prepared to establish communication relations not only within family boundaries, but within a

larger community where English is the dominant spoken language), communicational environment (where the communication act takes place, in front of whom), children`s response (mothers tend to be guided by children`s responses having into consideration that they are an important member of the therapeutically team), mothers personal beliefs regarding the impact of bilingualism on language development (several mothers did not considered that bilingual exposure might have a negative impact on child`s development).

Hambly, Fombonne (2012) investigated the impact of bilingual exposure on a larger group of autistic participants (n-75). They assessed children`s language and social development by focusing on the fallowing abilities: initiating of pointing, response to pointing, attention to voice, vocabulary level, social interactions, language acquisitions (first words, first phrase). They concluded that there were no significant differences between the participants in the research, thus, they concluded that „bilingually – exposed children with ASD did not experience additional delays in language development” (Hambly, Fombonne, 2012, p. 1342). Petersen, Marinova-Todd & Mirenda (2012) developed a research comparing 14 monolingual (English) and 14 bilingual children (English –Chinese). They reported even better lexical abilities in the case of bilingual exposure, underlining that ASD can be bilingual exposed without negative implications on their language development.

These findings are consonant with that reported in the case of the typically developed children (Bialystok, 2001; Attariba, Heredia, 2008) or in the case of children with language impairments (Crutchley, Conti-Ramsden, Bottinig,, 1997; Gutierrez-Clellen, Simon-Cerejido, Wagner, 2008; Paradis, Crago, Genesee, Rice, 2003).

American Speech-Language Hearing Association (ASHA 2004, 2005, 2011) is also mentioned in Yu (2013) research as promoting the importance of mother tongue language due to the cultural heritage even if ASHA do recognize the fact that many speech and language therapists use to advise immigrant parents to speak with their children the official language of the country they live in. Thus, in these cases mother tongue language is not spoken anymore in these families. From this point of view the focus on bilingualism and its implication on different developmental aspects is required by the worldwide social climate, the emigration phenomenon, this having a significant impact on the education of children, especially when they face different disabilities or difficulties.

2. OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESES

2.1.OBJECTIVES

- Drawing a communication profile by using Communication Matrix in the context of a bilingual child with autism spectrum disorders.
- Underlining the way bilingualism influence communication development in the case of a child with autism spectrum disorders.

2.2. HYPOTHESES

- Maternal language ensures higher acquisitions regarding communication development in the case of autism spectrum disorders.
- Bilingual exposure can negatively influence language development in the case of autism spectrum disorders.

3. METHOD

3.1. PARTICIPANT

In order to reach the above mentioned objective, this research is designed based on a single case study. The participant in the research is C.A., a 4.9 years old girl diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. The parents are Romanians, but they lived and worked in Spain when C.A. was born. The maternal language was Romanian.

C.A. was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder when she was 3.2 years old and she started ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis) therapy in Spanish. From birth to that time the parents spoke Romanian and Spanish at home. When she started the therapy, the therapists recommended the family to speak only Spanish at home with the child. When she was 4.5 years old her parents decided to come back to Romania. All the family members started to speak Romanian languages. According to the mother's report, C.A. was able to understand simple commands in Romanian language after two weeks of living in Romania, and "she acts like she feels very comfortable in the new context". Also, the mother said "she used to say the same things using the word in Spain and the word in Romanian" giving us two simple example: "pâine"- "pan" (bread), "agua"- "apa" (water).

In present C.A. is enrolled in a private center that provides one-to-one therapy services for children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder in Romania. The therapy follows ABA's principles. The therapy sessions include gross motor activities (bike, hammock and trampoline), fine motor activities (coloring, puzzles, beads, clips, piano) academic activities (books, computer) and games with different toys (dolls, cars). C.A. attends the center daily for 6-7 hours. All the therapists speak Romanian and the parents started to speak only Romanian at home.

3.2. INSTRUMENTS

The semi-structured interview was the main instrument used for collecting data. This type of interview has a more flexible structure, it being the most appropriate method for collecting data regarding parents' attitude and direct experiences. This interview had three major parts: a. the first part contained questions regarding child's anamnesis from birth till now (questions about pregnancy, birth, motor and linguistic acquisitions, medical problems, family medical history); b. the second part focused on aspects regarding language development; c. the third part focus on aspects regarding the bilingual exposure.

Data collected based on the semi-structured interview were completed using Communication Matrix Scale. The Communication Matrix is an instrument that assesses the first stages of communication occurring in the first two years of life, in typically developing children. The parent answer some questions regarding the reason the child communicate and the behaviors the child uses to communicate. These communicative behaviors are organized in seven levels: Level I Pre-Intentional Behavior, Level II. Intentional Behavior, Level III. Unconventional Pre-symbolic Communication, Level IV. Conventional Pre-symbolic Communication, Level V. Concrete Symbols, Level VI. Abstract Symbols, and Level VII. Language (Rowland, 2011, 2010).

There are two versions for Communication Matrix: a version for specialists and a version for parents. The Communication Matrix version for specialists was used in this study. The Communication Matrix is available in six languages: English, Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Korean, Vietnamese and Romanian. In this research Romanian version was used in order to collect data from the parent and the therapists, regarding C.A.'s communicative behaviors, and the English online version in order to generate the Communication Matrix Profile.

3.3. PROCEDURE

Data were collected in the semi interview with the father and the mother. The researchers also had two 60 minutes session of direct interaction with C.A. The receptive and expressive language was evaluated during these sessions; C.A. answered to some simple questions, followed simple commands and played different games. The participant was observed during a therapy session. Communication Matrix Profile was generated by collecting data from the speech therapist and two other therapists who worked with C.A. in the past 3 months.

4. RESULTS

Father does not report any abnormalities during pregnancy and birth. Motor development milestones were achieved at appropriate times. According to father's

report C.A. did not present any babbling during the first year of life. The only vocalizes she was able to say were „câți [citsi] (how many in English); ca [ka] (as in English)”. In Romanian the word „câți” has two specific Romanian phonemes „â” - a centered, closed, unrounded, vowel and „ț”-a mixture between „t” and „s”, it is an affricate consonant, beginning with an explosion as in „t” and ending in s friction as in „s”, it is a voiceless sound, produced without the participation of the vocal cords, it is an oral sound, articulated behind the upper alveolar board. While pronouncing the final phoneme is shortened, it barely hearing, thus from an articulator point of view this word is as simple pronounced as the other word „ca” [ka].

C.A. presents a special interest for letters. There are some sounds very annoying for her: real motorcycle starting sounds and concrete breaker sound. It is well known the fact that autistic children have many auditory processing disorders. In this case this auditory processing disorders manifest as a hearing sensibility when listening the above mentioned sounds no matter their intensity.

According to the records from Spain, when C.A. was 4.5 years old, she was able to pronounce several words in Spanish, words presented in Table 1.

Table 1. C.A.’s verbal words in Spanish at 4.5 years old

Words		Requests		Persons		Rewards	
Spanish	English	Spanish	English	Spanish	English	Spanish	English
piña [ˈpiɲa]	pineapple	agua [ˈaywa]	Water	mama [ˈmama]	mother	chupa [ˈʧupa]	lollipop
ocho [ˈotʃo]	eye	pompa [ˈpompa]	Pomp	abuela [aˈβwela]	grandmother	zumo [ˈθumo]	juice
gomi [ˈgomi]	jelly	chupa [ˈʧupa]	Lollipop	Caliopia [kaˈljopja]	Caliopia	pan [pan]	bread
pompa [ˈpompa]	pomp	gomi [ˈgomi]	Jelly			gomi [ˈgomi]	jelly
guapa [ˈgwapa]	lovely	„zumo” [ˈθumo]	Juice			chuches [ˈʧuʧes].	sweets
hueso [ˈweso]	bone	puzzle- [ˈpuθθle]	Puzzle				
si [si]	if	muñeca – [muˈɲeka]	Wrist				
bota [ˈbota]	boot	serpiente [serˈpjente]	snake				
uva [ˈuβa]	grape	martillo [marˈtiʎo].	Hammer				
vaca [ˈbaka]	cow						
chupa [ˈʧupa]	lollipop						
cinco [ˈθiŋko]	five						
agua [ˈaywa]	water						
zumo [ˈθumo]	juice						
Caliopia [kaˈljopja]	Caliopia						
Manuela [maˈnwela]	Manuela						

The words pronounced in Romanian language are presented in Table 2. The words are phonetically written in both languages and translated in English in order to be able to make comparisons.

Table 2. C.A.'s verbal words in Romanian at 4.9 years old

WORDS		REQUESTS		PERSONS		REWARDS	
Romanian	English	Romanian	English	Romanian	English	Romanian	English
ac[ak]	needle	gata [gata]	finish	mama	mother	ciupa	lollipop
mama [mama]	mother	afară [afarə]	out	[mama]		[çiupa]	
tata	father	ciupa	lollipop	tata [tata]	father	afară [afarə]	out
[tata]		[çiupa]		Clau [Clau`]	Clau	suc	juice
pana [pana]	feather			bunica	grandmother	[suc]	
				[bunika]			
cubu [cubu`]	cube						
pomu [pomu`]	tree						
ochi [ochi`]	eye						
mâna [mîna]	hand						
cot [kot]	elbow						
becu [beku`]	light						
	bulb						
pui [pu`]	chicken						
ou [ou]	egg						
banana	banana						
[banana]							
apă [apə]	water						
ciupa [çiupa]	lollipop						
cană [kanə]	cup						
papuci	shoes						
[papuçi]							
da	yes						
[da]							
nu	no						
[nu]							

C.A. answers to her name, identifies and discriminates her body parts in Spanish and Romanian language. During the last 3 months C.A. lived in Romania, she gained new concepts. Even if the spoken language has changed, the new communication abilities are achieved, she is able to answer Yes/No questions using the correspondent adverbs "Da (Yes)/Nu (No)", to verbalize "Gata (It is enough)" when she finishes her work, to identify some objects and pictures in a book. One of the most important concepts C.A. achieved was to verbalize when she needs to use the toilet. The isolated phonemes she is able to pronounced are: A, E, I, O, U, B, P, D, T, G, M, N, and F.

During the direct interaction sessions C.A. answered some short questions "What is your name? How old are you? What is your mother's name? What is your father's name?" At the beginning of each activity C.A. choose a reinforcing item. The most frequent reinforcing item C.A. chose was the candy. C.A. was able to

and disyllabic words. C.A. tends to transform the monosyllabic word in a disyllabic one in order to longer the pronunciation by adding “u” vowel in the end of the word. This happens in Romanian language where “u” vowel added in the end of the monosyllabic word transforms the words in disyllabic words, it being a linking vowel between the root of the word and the definite article morpheme. This transformation is common in spoken language. In C.A. case the monosyllabic words transformed in disyllabic ones are: “pomu” (in English tree), “cubu” (in English cube), “becu” (in English light bulb). This transformation also happens in other three cases where C.A. pronounces the words with other pronunciation disorders, as it is presented in Table 3.

Analyzing the words used by C.A. from the semantic point of view there is also a high correspondence between the Spanish pronounced words and the Romanian ones, this underlining that language development is reinforced by the bilingual exposure. For example, it was even easier for her to learn the body parts in Romanian, because they sound similar in Spanish. (ex. “ocho”-“ochi”). Even the presence of the linking vowel “u” in Romanian can be explained through the Romanian-Spanish mixture from the rhythmic point of view. Romanian language is not as rhythmic as Spanish, if in Spanish the stress is placed in the last part of the words (on final syllables), in Romanian it is mainly place on the first syllables from the word. When prolonging the words the child has the possibility to use secondary stress in Romanian words, on the last syllables from the pronounced words (Dascălu-Jinga, 2001).

The usage of the linking vowel “u”, even if it results from the phonetic mixture of the two spoken languages is of great help for the child. From the speech and language therapy practice it helps the child improve pronunciation and get to a superior level on communication skills (to more phonetically complex words-disyllabic words, three or even more syllables words).

From a functional point of view the words C.A. uses are concrete words, able to help her signal her basic needs. All the listed pronounced are context- specific from a semantic point of view, C.A. being able to require things, to express intentions, needs and to make herself understood by parents and therapists, in a high degree.

Regarding Communication Matrix profile the first three levels of the language acquisition (I. Pre-Intentional Behavior, II. Intentional Behavior, III. Unconventional Pre-symbolic Communication) are mastered. Nine cells in the Conventional Communication level are also mastered, she demonstrates the emerging of two cells in the fourth level (yellow color/light colored), the conventional communication level, she uses some conventional gestures and sounds with the intent of affecting caregiver’s behavior. There are three cells with some offers things or share, uses polite social forms and asks questions in this level that need to start working on. Mastering these levels places C.A.’s language development between 12-24 months. Her language delay is of approximately 3 years.

Despite the fact that generating the Communication Matrix Profile the therapist has the chance to establish child's language development stage, the profile presents the exact level of communication the child has mastered and the communication abilities the child is emerging, thus it is very useful to elaborate the objectives for the intervention plan. In this case the objectives will focus on how to offer/share different things, how to request more of an action, to use polite social forms, to ask questions, to ask for help. A list of syllables and short words containing vowels and consonants C.A. is able to pronounce will be given to all the specialists and the parents. Because C.A. loves music and she has great abilities to imitate movements and words, having into consideration her auditory processing sensibility, the therapist will teach her new songs accompanied by movements. The researcher recommended the specialist to keep track of the vocabulary words C.A. can verbalize.

No matter what language the child uses, Romanian or Spanish, the first levels of communication are the same, thus underlining that Communication Matrix levels are suitable for studying cases of bilingual exposure as they are not dependent on historical languages, they addressing language in a more general way (if we take into consideration Coşeriu's perspectives on language levels, 1999). This case proves the fact that communication abilities follow the same pattern, a child with autism is able to develop communication skills in two different languages, without being negatively influenced by this mixed linguistic exposure.

The bilingualism issues in families with a child diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder creates many controversies. Is it important or necessary to promote maternal languages in families with children with autism spectrum disorders in the first years of life or should we promote bilingual exposure as a linguistic and cognitive stimulation mean? These questions are of an extreme importance as they arise in parents' mind all the time and therapists are supposed to offer evidence-based solutions. These solutions are more likely to be identified within the child's and family's specific, they being deeply connected with each intrinsic dynamic situation. In order to able to answer the above questions and to offer a perspective in this case, mothers' opinion was asked about her child bilingual exposure.

Regarding this, findings confirm the conclusions of some recent researchers Hambly, Fombonne (2012), Petersen, Marinova-Todd & Mirenda (2012), the mother does not believe the Spanish language had a negative influence toward C.A.'s communication languages. Once her family came back into Romania, she considers that C.A. is more comfortable to communicate using maternal language, taking into consideration the new environment, even from linguistic point of view. The mother does not regret they used only Spanish language during the time they started the therapy in Spanish, everybody tried to make things easier for C.A. "we thought it is a normal continuing to use the same language the therapists used because all the requests and all the communication began in the therapy".

Mother also underlines the fact that the bilingual exposure was absolutely necessary considering the fact that the family used to live in a foreign country and

that she felt important for the child to preserve their cultural identity. Thus, she stresses that in their situation the bilingual exposure solution was the best linguistic solution she could find for the child.

Based on mothers` opinions regarding bilingual exposure, the following conclusions can be drawn: bilingual exposure is a necessity in certain situations; this mixed linguistic option is mainly a family personal decision; this decision has influence on child`s development, but not in a negative way.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Communication Matrix proved to be a valuable assessing instrument based on which the researchers could structure the interviews in a bilingual situation. Language and communication development in the case of a bilingual exposure needs to be approached not just in terms of idiomatic competence or discursive competence, but also in terms of elocutionary competence, a more general competence situated according to Coseriu`s linguistic approach at a universal linguistic level (Coseriu, 1999). Thus, it is very important to use a universal, more general tool to evaluate and to track progress for the child`s communication abilities in this case of Romanian–Spanish bilingualism. Communication Matrix is also a valuable and useful assessing tool from the perspective of the developmental disorders it addresses. Among the developmental disorders ASD are common ones and they require a very specific approach both from the assessment and therapeutic perspective. Based on this, after using it during the assessing stage, Communication Matrix can also be used in the next months to establish the progress the child will make and to set new therapeutic objectives. New research is needed in the bilingualism field in the context of autism spectrum disorder to increase the reliability of this data.

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REZUMAT

Autorii articolului încearcă să delimiteze prin acest material modul în care contextul bilingv, expunerea concomitentă la două sisteme lingvistice diferite, influențează structurarea abilităților de comunicare, în contextul prezenței unei tulburări din spectru autist. Metoda de abordare este una calitativă, prin intermediul studiului de caz, date fiind constrângerile diagnostice și de expunere simultană la două limbi, necesitatea prezenței bilingvismului. Datele culese cu ajutorul observației sistematice, a interviului semi-structurat și a scalei Communication Matrix evidențiază faptul că, în cazul asupra căruia se focalizează demersul investigativ, cazul unui copil cu tulburări din spectru autist, expus simultan atât la sistemul lingvistic românesc, cât și la cel spaniol, prezența bilingvismului facilitează dezvoltarea abilităților sale de comunicare. Datele acestui articol trebuie privite ca sistem de bune practici, deciziile la nivelul altor cazuri, cu privire la expunerea bilingvă, recomandându-se a se face în funcție de specificul și particularitățile cazurilor țintite.