

Reading Language of Bilingual Children and Its Characteristics

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Abstract

Our contribution focuses on the issue of reading children in a bilingual setting, and the control of two languages is natural to them. In spoken language, children express themselves almost flawlessly, but the problem arises when they begin to read. One language is better, easier to understand, more natural. Our contribution is of a research character. Through an interview with a selected sample of children, we try to uncover the phenomena and patterns that occur when reading bilingual children. The article also deals with the reading habits of pupils from the bilingual environment, pupils' reading and book relations. We find out which language learners prefer more when reading books, and how their parents have influenced their language preferences and what reader's interests children have in their early childhood. Children of diverse backgrounds in research are deliberately chosen to meet the requirements of the research goal. We chose four children attending the first grade of elementary school. Each of these children has a second language (English, Norwegian, Belgian and French) besides the Slovak language. Research data was collected through individual interviews with these children. Through this research, we have also sought to identify the importance of reading in the lives of contemporary children.

Keywords: communication, reading, Slovak language, foreign language, reading comprehension, children's books, bilingual environment

Introduction

When a child is born into a specific cultural and social environment, it has a natural need to integrate into it. In particular, the child wants to fulfill his/her own needs and requirements. Real life situations give him incentives to mimic patterns of

communication behavior and speech usage (Lipnická, 2009). A child needs to understand, therefore actively uses the linguistic and communicative habits that are characteristic for a specific socio-cultural community. In line with its own social adaptation, it adapts to the use of a particular language and its means, favored by his/hers own surrounding environment. It should be noted, that a child can make a contact with the language of his or her surroundings also through reading, from an early age. For this very reason is quite important what kind of the environment surrounds a child. If parents are exemplary also in reading area, they can become a role model for their children to mimic this activity and form a positive relationship towards books.

Reading expresses the visual perception of the text or its loud repetition (Belešová, 2014a) considers reading a purpose-oriented activity which always brings some result, whether in the form of knowledge, understanding or clarity. Reading is considered to be the basic communication skill of a person. Reading is an intellectual, very demanding, psychological activity requiring practice (Belešová, Szentesiová, 2016). It is important to remember that reading is closely related to thinking and learning. It is not a superficial process; every reader gives his own thoughts to this activity, a piece of self. It is great that a man can learn to read. There is no other being with this capacity.

We also consider reading as a tool for achieving the various goals that are key to success in social, working and personal life. Reading is a natural part of the main cultural skills, namely communication. De Certeau (1984) defines reading as a complex cognitive process decoding symbols to produce or derive their meaning. It is a means of learning the language, communicating and sharing various information. There is an interaction between the text and the reader within reading. The process of reading requires continuous practice and refinement.

The importance of reading

Thanks to reading, we can continually gain new information, expand our knowledge and learn something interesting. However, reading is also important from a different point of view – a person needs to both mentally and physically relax from everyday hard work and a lot of duties, because permanent stress and constant burden can unhealthy affect the human organism. Reading offers a relaxation, entertainment, guidance and joy to person. Can develop a sense of humor and teaches how to think logically. For many people, it has become not only a significant asset, but also an unimaginable part of their lives. Mistrík (1996), in connection with the importance of reading, states that "reading is educating, art texts reading also creates aesthetic experiences, impacts our feelings, relaxes us".

Belešová (2014b) explains that reading does not only provide children with a lot of new, important and up-to-date information, but also more independence from the

people which used to read to them before. In addition, thanks to reading, non-cognitive processes of the child develop and their needs are emotionally fulfilled.

As Belešová states (2014b), reading is a meaningful activity that fulfills certain functions:

1. educational and upbringing function (reading helps the pupil to acquire new knowledge and develop his abilities, but also teaches him to think critically and to perceive the world around him.) By means of heroic acts in stories, children learn to be brave and powerful even in real life. good, and moral, and this must be strengthened.);
2. motivation function (a good book creates in pupil an interest in specific phenomena and / or areas of society life);
3. communication function (reading develops vocabulary and speech because, thanks to various text genres, the child is more familiar with the stylistic and linguistic aspect of the language);
4. regulatory function (the text is structured by logical continuity);
5. innovative function (text can provide latest science and technology knowledge);
6. imaginative function (the book arouses the pupils imagination and develops his fantasy, allowing him to fully experience individual stories in which there are many supernatural powers and imaginary elements).

A more detailed definition of the reading meanings is given by several literary sources. We are inclined towards those which are characteristic for several age groups. In summary, indicators of the importance of reading include:

fantasy – children are fully living up to different stories, for a while they find themselves in another world with imaginary beings and environments;

vocabulary and speech development – is related to the specific text genre, but overall, it can be said that any contact with text develops child's vocabulary;

capability of critical thinking – creating an overall view on life around;

imagination ability – the notion of time uncertainty "once upon a time" and a spatial uncertainty "beyond seven mountain ranges, beyond seven rivers";

fearlessness – based on various heroic acts (eg, cutting the dragon's head, delivering the Sleeping Beauty, bringing the three-golden hair to Grandfather Know-It-All, etc.) in fairy tales children are not scared to show their courage even in real life, they are empowered and motivated;

intellectual abilities development – children learn to recognize new situations, characters, nature;

principles of morality – children learn what (who) is in the book good and evil, which acts and deeds are right and wrong. They build their moral values.

Mistrík (1996) emphasizes, that for modern man is hardly something that important as obtaining information. We are particularly getting these information by reading and we need to learn how to adequately process them. Reading is nowadays an important activity and a part of a human life and is one of the basic components of the general literacy.

Every child is different and unique. Regardless of their book's preference, if it is a classical book or they prefer more modern or electronic version, we need to let them enjoy their choice of book and not criticized them. It is important that children can find a way to read even today, and that parents should lead their children towards love for books so that reading becomes a natural part of their life. It is necessary to realize that when a child reads a book, it becomes a part of their personality and can markedly shape their whole life.

A child growing up in a bilingual environment

In case, when parents live for any reason abroad, to their parental responsibilities is added one more, but not less serious obligation. They have to make a right decision about in what language they will communicate with their children. They are considering, whether it is necessary to maintain the mother tongue in the communication at home, or if to prefer the foreign language usage in the home environment as well, so that a child can be in best possible contact with the second (foreign) language right from the start.

The term mother tongue could be misunderstood as the language that the child learns only from mother or father. Pacherová (2013) states that we can identify the mother tongue as the language we learned as first one, regardless of who from our surroundings taught us. Štefánik (2000) adds, that the mother tongue is stronger than the two (or more) languages, the individual knows. It is the language, to which the individual has the nearest and closest relation, it is the most used language.

There are a large number of bilingualism definitions that differ widely or even contradict themselves. One example is the belief that the bilingual is the one who perfectly masters two languages (Harding-Esch, Riley, 2008). The opposite statement is that every person is essentially bilingual because he knows at least a few words which are not from his mother tongue but of foreign language (Edwards, 2006).

We characterize bilingualism as a person's ability to speak in two languages. Sovák (1990) explains that it is a process of spontaneous learning of a second language independently on the mother tongue, already in pre-school age. It is the acquisition of the second language in a natural way by the bond with some certain persons, while the child gradually creates independent ties to both languages.

The bilingual environment in which the child grows up, can be identified in this context as an environment, in which the child meets with two different languages within his / her family or society that surrounds him / her, when it is often the mother's mother tongue and father's different mother tongue, coming from different countries or geographic areas. Štefánik (2000) describes the bilingual environment simply as an environment in which are two languages are used in rotation for communication.

Depending on the context in which a child acquires a second language, we distinguish: natural bilingualism - evolved naturally in a bilingual environment. An individual acquires two languages either at once or gradually in a bilingual community or in a bilingual family, and in everyday contacts with native speakers this or that language; scholastic (cultural) bilingualism - originated in an artificially created school environment, an individual learns a second language at school, and has not a lot of opportunities outside of the school environment to communicate in this language.

In the bilingual family, multilingual communication takes place mostly because parents come from linguistically diverse settings. For example, when Slovak women marries abroad. After the birth of a child, mother speaks with her child in Slovak, on the contrary his father communicates with a child in his mother tongue and the language of the country in which the family lives.

Research

For the research data collection, we have chosen a qualitative research methodology. We also take into account the theoretical basis of many experts in linguistics and bilingual education in Slovakia and abroad, which we mentioned in the previous theoretical part.

The aim of our research is to identify the relation of children from selected bilingual families to reading. True bilingualism means complete fluidity in all aspects of language: understanding, speaking, reading and writing. The aim is not to determine the methodical process of reading in different languages, nor to identify approaches to bilingual reading. Our aim is to examine what place reading holds in the lives of bilingual children attending primary education (1st – 4th year of elementary school) in foreign countries. We are investigating whether these pupils likes to read, and whether or not they have preference to read only in one of the language or they are reading without any distinction both in Slovak and foreign language.

Research questions

In this research, we want to focus on questions that reveal the relation of selected bilingual children to reading. Questions are designed in accordance with our research aims so that their answers cover the questions asked:

Are pupils interested in reading books?

Do they prefer books in their mother tongue or in other language?

Do they know books of Slovak authors' as well or only foreign books written in another language?

Do these pupils have their favorite heroin from a children's book?

Do they talk with parents about what they have read? If so, then in what language?

Methodological process

For our research needs we addressed 4 bilingual families living abroad. The condition was for their children to be bilingually educated and to communicate fluently with at least two languages. Specific families have been recommended to us from our common acquaintances, so it was an accessible selection of people for our research. Since these families have lived outside of Slovakia for most of the year, we had to reconcile their time and adapt them to time requirements. We waited until they returned to Slovakia and visited them. We have used their familiar environment (inside of families of these children) so that the pupil involved in our research felt good and could thus eliminate the fear, stress and other negative circumstances that could affect the objectivity of the investigation. We interviewed the children in their familiar environment. We have agreed on dates of interviews individually with the children's parents. Each interview evolved individually, depending on the child's communication abilities. The average duration of the semi-structured interview took approximately 15 minutes. As we met the experience that our children were not too convincing and did not express themselves clearly, we decided to ask our parents a few additional questions. By doing this, we have reached the agreement (or diversity) of all participants' responses. Because it happened that the child replied that he/she didn't read in the mother tongue his/her books, but the parent claimed something quite different.

We characterize our overall research strategy and process as a process of qualitative methodology followed by an open coding technique. To collect the data, we used a semi-structured interview that contained a pre-prepared set of questions for children coming from a bilingual environment. We have adapted the additional questions to the ongoing interview. We have recorded their testimonies using audiovisual technology to prevent the loss of important data. We then literally transcribed the information we acquired into the computer. It should be noted that the families of our friends and acquaintances mentioned in this paper live abroad. They visit Slovak relatives only once or twice a year - during the summer holidays and at Christmas.

All 4 children within the research sample were in age of eight, nine years, two children were 10 years old, of which 3 were girls and one boy.

Boy Brian (8 years) was born in Paris, his father is French, mother of Slovakia. Currently living in Paris. Mother said she "*realizes she should talk more with her son in Slovak, because they communicate mostly in French during the day.*"

Dalma (9 years old girl) was born in Oxford, her father is an Englishman, mother of Slovakia. He speaks Slovak only when he is visiting her grandparents in Slovakia, in other cases he speaks exclusively in English, although he understands Slovak well and almost everything. Mother and her daughter communicate daily in English in particular. She said in the interview that *"parents should try harder if they want to raise their child also as a bilingual reader, because the child will not become as one on its own"*. She also stated that *"her own lack of systematics and patience in bilingual education and the unwanted outcome is the fact that her daughter understands in Slovak, but in their mutual communication she answers exclusively in English."*

The girl Frida (10 years old) was born in Brussels, her mother is Belgian, father of Slovak. She speaks Slovak only when she visits her grandparents in Slovakia, in most cases she speaks exclusively in French, although she understands almost everything in Slovak. Her father stated that *"from the very beginning, he tried very hard to keep his children as good in Slovak language as in French, but since they were also in contact with Flemish and German, the Slovak had come to a halt."*

Helen (10 years old) was born in Slovakia. When she was in her pre-school age, her family moved to Norway, her parents are working there, she and her brother go to Norwegian primary school. Both her mother and grandmother make sure that both children are raised bilingually. They continue in Norwegian and in Slovak, and they also undergo commission tests at primary school in Slovakia every year to obtain the education provided by the Slovak Republic. Her mother said she *"tries to bilingualized her children, so she speaks with them at home in Slovak, and her husband in Norwegian"*.

Research findings interpretation

At the beginning of our interview, we found out whether pupils read books, because reading books by nowadays children is not as popular as they used to be. And this is no exception if the children grow up in a monolingual or bilingual family.

Brian and Frida said they rarely read the books. Helen also does not read the books, she said, *"I rather watch TV."* Dalma said she reads books, *"especially when I'm bored, or when I lie in bed in the evening and I am trying to fall sleep, then I read books to make myself tired more easily."* Based on the answers we got, we can say that reading is not one of the most popular hobbies of by us addressed children. All parents, however, said their children likes to read the books.

In the case of monolingual children, we know that language skills, such as vocabulary, knowledge and the ability to manipulate with phonological knowledge, encourage their reading learning. The phonetic consciousness and vocabulary of a young child predominantly predict their future readership. For bilingual children, there was no problem with reading and confusing languages. According to Jasinska and Petitova (2018), bilingual children are good readers and even have some advantages over their monolingual peers. In addition, children who were exposed for the first time in

English at school, with their linguistic knowledge, reached their peers and showed no disadvantages of reading at the time when they reached the fourth year.

Do you think that you need to read books and devote time to reading? This was our second question examining the general opinion of bilingual children.

Brian, Frida and Helen answered positively. Additionally, Dalma added that *"it is important to start reading books while I am only a child, because it is necessary for my future life when I grow up. But also to read my books to my children."* Children are aware of the importance of reading, especially in order to gain information and further education. But they also have a variety of other interests that have been told to us prior to the realization of each interview. They probably didn't think much about meaning of reading, therefore, it is important to encourage them to think about reading and asking them questions to direct their thinking to the meaning of reading in their lives.

The children we have addressed, can speak in multiple languages, so it is likely that their language will not only be used for oral communication but will also be used for reading. All parents have mentioned how much they want to communicate with their children in the Slovak language, even though they live abroad. In this case, it is more than necessary for them to provide and read the Slovakian books with their children, devoting their time and learning to read them practically in a foreign language. Parents, as they told us, try to read with children, but the time spent is not enough for children to start longing or desiring to read Slovak books, let alone foreign ones. This task very rarely belongs to grandmother, who comes to visit or vice versa, when the children come to vacation to her.

In the next part of the interview, we asked the children that if they read and know Slovak books as well, in what particularly do they see the difference, or the similarity compare with the foreign language books.

Brian could not answer, because he doesn't read Slovakian books often enough. Frida reads Slovak book rarely as well. Helen argues that *"Norwegian books are easier. I sometimes do not understand the text in Slovak books."* Dalma states, *"that Slovak books are similar to each other. English books are different, you have more to choose from."*

Many families choose to focus only on the mother tongue when they teach their children to read. They feel that if they start with this language then their children will feel good about this language before they learn to read the language of the environment in which they live.

Therefore, we directed our other question for children towards answer who their favorite book hero from a Slovak or foreign book is and why.

Dalma claims to for her it is the *"Harry Potter because he has the magic skills that he did not know before. And he has to fight evil."* And also *"the girl Vanina, because she helped the older lady, she was well-educated, daring, and took care of everything at*

home." Frida said that her most favorite fairytale figure is *"Cinderella because she's a very brave girl. Despite the fact that it is difficult in life, she can manage."* We see that children identify themselves and select book heroes from foreign literature.

The following interpretation approaches the responses of parents living abroad who are developing bilingual reading skills of their children. We asked them that what they think based on what their child chooses a book. Do parents perceive in some way that their children naturally tend to incline towards Slovak or foreign texts.

Brian's mom replied that her son *"chooses the book alone and prefers French books. He now reads himself."* Dalma's mother claims that *"her daughter chooses on her own her books, and reads from early childhood, and she is attending summer readings festivals organized by the local library. He naturally reads in a language in which he feels more at home (English). On the other hand, we monitor the selection of her books and try to direct her to choose the right literature appropriate to her age and abilities. For a reward, we often go to the bookstore to choose a book of her choice. Also, from every visit to Slovakia they will bring a book, stories, fairy tales, cookbooks, an encyclopedia, etc."*

From the testimony we can see that parents care that their child would choose a suitable book. They don't take book as something ordinary, but rather as a gift, or a valuation that a child deserves. Dalma chooses mostly English books, because this language is more natural to her and she better controls it. But she will always bring with her a Slovak book after a visit to Slovakia. Although Dalma said that she reads more English books, it is very likely that sometimes she reaches out for the Slovak ones, as it is available for her in several genres now. Frida's father says that children choose their own books and that they *"prefer French-language books, they have a lot of them at home."* He first argued in the interview how important it is for his children to not reject talking in Slovak, but then he himself is a proof that they have resigned in reading Slovak books and allowed children to read books in a language they choose themselves. Mother of Helen makes sure that her child gets in touch with Slovak books. *"In Norwegian she chooses for herself, I choose rather in Slovak for her. She is more found of Slovak stories because they are more fun."* This answer is practically the only one (from the parent's testimonies) with attend to try to keep their child with the books in their mother tongue. When children get books in different languages, they will be able to compare and choose those which impress them more and attract them more.

Parents are trying to lead their children towards reading, in such a way that they let them have enough space to choose books at their discretion. We think it is right when parents can, if necessary, adequately and non-violently direct their child to choose the right literature that can support the interests of the child. We add that each family approaches bilingual education and thus also bilingual reading individually. Ellen Royuer in one electronic communication admitted that his children in Taiwan grew up as trilingual. They have never actively tried to teach them how to read in any

language. He read them in bed as much as possible in French, sometimes in English. However, children learned to read when they first attended the first class (both Chinese and English). He gave them a lot of books, and he read to them for a long time before bedtime, and then, when they were about 8-9 years of age, they could read in Chinese and English, and spontaneously began to read in French.

Very important is also the parent's response to the way their children read. Parents are those who are directly present while their children read also because children at primary school need an adult supervision to help them read and explain to them some unclear words or text they do not understand. We asked them if they observed any differences in the child's reactions on Slovak and foreign language text.

Brian's mom very briefly responded that Brian had *"less vocabulary in Slovak. Related to that we have to more often explain a meaning of the words."* Similarly thinks Dalma's mother saying that *„the text in Slovak is more demanding than English one. It is more or less a foreign text for her, both in language and culturally. When reading the English text, the perception is immediate, in the case of the Slovak text we often stop by the vocabulary, the meaning of the words, but also the whole cultural context, I have to make parallels between what she already knows about Slovakia or her life in England, or supplement my text with my own experiences and memories of Slovakia."* I think that Dalma's mother captured the very essence of the reading in a language other than the Slovak one. Each language has its cultural specifics, each language has its origins in a certain historical context and these differences are also reflected in books. It is difficult for parents to explain to children words they do not understand. It takes their time, patience and perseverance in the explanation. Frida's father expresses it with similar words *"When I used to read them when they were small, there were differences in the texts. Often, I had to stop to explain to them the either realities or the meaning of some words. When my daughters read in Slovak, they had a basic reading problem. They were able to read the text, but they had to focus very much on the letters č, ž, š, ch. When I asked them if they understood, they admitted they did not. We had to break the text off and explain it."* Helen's mother sometimes use to read to her kids out loud. *"When I have time, I read her Slovak books. Norwegian she can read herself and I feel she no longer needs it. I do not feel the differences. Every book is original in its own way."*

We can say that books written in Slovak have made for children more difficulties with understanding the meaning of some words, especially related to facts and history; on the other hand, children have difficulty reading correctly the words because they first learned to read in other than Slovak language, so some letters and groups of letters required more time and training for children to practice reading correctly. We note that the Slovak language is a demanding language because it uses various other forms of language (eg, vowels, w, dz, ia, ä, ó, etc.). The acquisition of the Slovak language by Pekarovičová (2013) on the background of Slavic languages facilitates in particular:

- identical representation of grammatical categories, as well as a similar set of forms;

- the same number of grammatical cases, similar or even the same principles of substantive inflection
- related processes of adjective and adverbial comparison;
- an identical set of conjugation.

The problem with the acquisition of Slovak language is mainly:

- different suffix cases;
- different application of the life category, which does not specifically express itself in some languages (South Slavic languages) or expresses otherwise than in Slovak (Russian, Polish);
- a different preposition system and rate of use;
- differences in the formation of aspectual and their application in speech practice, and so on.

For a child who does not learn this language when starting school, it can be difficult to master it. We were trying to find out from parents if they think that their child should learn to read first fluently in Slovak and then another language and what approach would they prefer.

Brian's mom said that her son, *"since he goes to school in France, learned to read only in French, I did not force him to read in Slovak, but we tried it and he is quite well in it."* It is natural that a child learns to read in that language, in which country he lives in. Dalma's mother states that *"since in the UK they start to read at the age of three, she naturally learned to read in English first, and later tried the Slovak language, though not very systematically, only here and there while family visits either here or in Slovakia."* Frida's father shares a similar opinion. *"When a child starts attending a French speaking school, she has to learn to read French first, so we did."* Also, Helens mother says as well as other parents. *"We learned Norwegian, and therefor also to read in Norwegian, and today she can read in both languages without any difficulties."*

At the beginning of compulsory schooling, great attention is paid to the development of reading. As Harding-Esch and Riley (2003) report, if a child refuses to read in a second language, it is better not to force him, but to give him for reading purpose his favorite stories at home when possible. He needs more time to solve this new situation. Morgenstern, Šulová and Schöll (2011) report that most bilingual children learn to read only in the language they have at school. This was also the result of interviews with parents. At the same time, acquiring the ability to read and write in a weak (non-dominant, secondary) language leads to consolidation of this language in a child. Many experts do not recommend starting to teach children to read and write at the same time in both languages, but first start with a language that is stronger with the child (communicating with their surroundings). And until about two years later, when the ability of a child to read and write in that language is already fixed, start with the weaker language. If both languages start simultaneously, it can be very

complicated for the child. It is correct when the child first becomes fully acquainted with one language system altogether before it becomes aware that in another language it may be completely different.

From the knowledge of linguistic dominance, it is important to find out that children are actually deciding which language will be dominant for them, or rather it is their parents who decides, because they determine how often their child comes in contact with each language. Parents who choose to raise their own children in other than in their mother tongue should have solid linguistic and cultural abilities and constantly seek further education. Stagnation of language education of parents could have a very counterproductive impact on the language development of the child. Another condition of bilingual education is constant communication with the child, especially if it grows in a different monolingual environment. The child must be motivated to use the language (and hence read it) and this need is only created by his parent (Jiménez, 2010).

Conclusion

The aim of this study is to point out the facts that come from bilingual education in relation to multicultural reading. Research has been conceived as a mapping study into the real functioning of bilingual children in the field of acquiring their reading habits. We focused on their attitudes towards reading, their need to read. We also found out which language they prefer more when reading books and how they evaluate books written in the Slovak and other language in which they usually communicate.

Belešová and Szentesiová (2017) also carried out research of the same focus. The study included children attending the elementary school and coming from a Slovak-Italian family, a Slovak-Albanian family and a Slovak family who lived in Spain for a decade. Data received from children from a multicultural environment has signaled, that reading generally belongs to their favorite activities. None of the children said they would not like to read or that they would refuse to read at all in one of the languages. Children read different genres of books, not just fairy tales. Books are chosen according to their interests, either sport or different mysteries or other themes. They devote their reading time mainly to acquiring information, improving vocabulary, spelling and grammar of the Slovak language. All the selected children grew up in a foreign country and considered the Slovak language as demanding. Despite the fact that all of them live in Slovakia today, they are more likely to read in a foreign language books.

These data are also significant for our research findings as they have a major impact on the reading of bilingual children. The environment in which children lived and lives has greatly influenced and continues to influence them. We consider this aspect to be the most important in terms of the data we received, because the environment in which the child grows contributes to this fact to the greatest extent. It is not always the ambition of the parent to develop a Slovak language of a child. Also significant is

the children attendance of pre-school facility in a foreign country. The child communicates with his parents, adapts to the environment in which he grows up. The reality of a particular place affects him, he sees the letters, is directly confronted with foreign text. And he becomes a natural part of his life. Therefore, interpretation of our research findings suggests that children do not incline to the Slovak language usage, but rather to the language they use directly in their present life.

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