

# Language Proficiency of Bilingual Learners

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## Abstract

The question of whether a learner in bilingual education can have the same performance in both languages is a vexed issue as it has long been investigated with controversial findings. This research was conducted in “Barrack Obama” bilingual private school of Dakar with a French-English program. The first and second semester marks of twenty-two learners in 8<sup>th</sup> grade have been used to measure the latter’s performance in the two languages during the academic year 2018-2019. It follows our analysis that fifteen of these students have a similar annual grade in both languages while three others show more performance in French; and the remaining four are better at English. However, the study also shows that the said balanced bilinguals have lack of proficiency in both languages. Only few of them (4) have good and equivalent proficiency in both languages while the remainder show weaker performance. This imbalance is surely due to the age at which he learner enters the bilingual system, their IQ and their ability to learn languages as well.

**Keywords:** Bilingual education, Balanced bilingual, Language proficiency, French, English

## 1. Introduction

Bilingual education, one of the most important components of bilingualism is a vexed question in the research area of linguistics and psychology. Genesee (2004) defines bilingual education as an ‘education that aims to promote bilingual (or multilingual) competence by using both (or all) languages as media of instruction for significant portions of the academic curriculum’. Baker and Prys-John (1998: 466) note that, “if there is a useful demarcation, then bilingual education may be said to start when more than one language is used to teach content (e.g., Science, Mathematics, Social Sciences or Humanities) rather just being taught as a subject by itself”. These definitions raise a question as to the solidity of the learner’s

language advancement and academic achievements. For Bialystok (2018), the majority of these research has focused on children's development of the crucial linguistic abilities.

This study, conducted from French-English bilingual students, examines the same linguistic proficiency issue with the premise that “a child will never achieve the same proficiency in both languages, only few can become real balanced bilinguals. There will always be a stronger and a weaker language” KOKTURK et al. (2016: 74). The research intends to investigate whether it is possible for these French-English bilingual learners to have (1) good and (2) equivalent abilities in their two languages. To that effect, we set ourselves three objectives.

- ✓ To analyse whether these French-English bilingual learners have good performance in English through the four general skills of listening, reading, writing and speaking;
- ✓ To compare their performance in English and French in order to determine whether there is a stronger and weaker language;
- ✓ To analyse whether or not the learners' early or later exposure to the bilingual program has an influence on this dual language proficiency, considering that some of them can start learning the two languages from kindergarten while the others can start at primary school or even later at the first year of their secondary school.

## 2. Literature

This literature review starts with an overview over the language acquisition of the child. That helps to understand both the first and second language acquisition processes. In most of these studies, the proficiency in a language depends on the intensity a child is exposed to a second language.

### 2.1 Language Acquisition of the Child

In language acquisition theories, the critical period hypothesis (CPH) refers to the time frame for optimal acquisition of any language. According to Lenneberg (1961), this critical time period starts with an onset of two years of age and ends with a closure at around puberty. He further explains the reason of such a closure as the end of “natural plasticity” or functioning and accordingly “the completion of hemispheric lateralization in human brain”, that is, the growth of mental abilities underlying language in different lobes of brain (Kukturk et al., 2016: 76).

Reporting some studies done in this critical age issue in (Loup, 2005), Kukturk et al. (Ebd) indicate that even if the basic language acquisition of a child is generally accepted to take place between the first and the fourth year, opinions vary on the age of closure for the critical period. For instance, Patkowski, Johnson and Newport (1989) state the cut-off point in mid to late teens whereas Marberry's (1993) research shows the closure fairly earlier. Yet, some researchers like Seliger pointed out multiple closure period for different components of a language due to the fact that the end of neural plasticity changes for different skills. In these studies, it is indicated that phonology is the first to close around the age of 6, followed by

morphology and syntax at puberty and lexical semantics with the possibility of remaining available throughout an individual's life span.

After explaining this early language acquisition process, Kukturk et al. conclude that in relation with the critical period hypothesis (CPH), it can be assumed that the language acquisition process of the child is mainly completed before puberty, regardless it is monolingual or multilingual. That's why, the earlier the learners are exposed to a second language, the more likely they are to gain native like command of the language. Yet, they believe that this does not mean that from this age on it is not possible to learn a new language. Still, the process takes place, the acquisition process will be different though. Scientists think that the neural network that is responsible for the language acquisition process is not as fast and flexible any more. Besides that, the process goes on in a different way (Ebd., p. 77).

As for Krashen (2014), language acquisition process should be differentiated from language learning process. Language learning is defined as a conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules of the language and being able to talk about them whereas acquisition is described as a subconscious process like the way a child learns language, which is, picking up a language, not consciously being aware of the rules but developing a feel for correctness. In this study, language learning (learning a second language) is considered.

## *2.2 Effects of Bilingual Education*

In the past, many parents were apprehensive that their children would have language delay if they learned two languages at the same time. They believed that two languages could not coexist in a person's mind at the same level, and a second language took second place to the first one, diminishing the level of proficiency of the latter.

According to (Pransiska, 2017: 391), there is a number of "myths" about bilingualism and in particular about teaching children a second language early such as language learning delay, split personality, cerebral confusion or mixing language that affects confusion

Jespersen (1922) maintains that the bilingual child hardly learns either of the two languages as perfectly as he would have learned one. However, he further claims that the intellectual effort needed to master two languages diminishes the child's ability to learn other things.

Appel and Muysken (1987 as cited in Al-Amri (2013: 2) argue that the idea that bilingualism has a negative effect on linguistic skills is predicated on the balance hypothesis which claims that human beings have a feel for language learning, and that knowing one language restricts to successfully learn another language. So it is expected that more proficiency in one language results in fewer skills in the other ones.

However, many research show that language delay can have many causes with no evidence related to bilingualism. Quite a number of studies have challenged the above mentioned balance hypothesis, and contend that learning simultaneously two languages does not impinge on the learner's linguistic skills. For instance, Cenoz (2003: 83), examined the effect of bilingualism on cognitive development, metalinguistic awareness and communicative skills and found that the context where one learns a second or third language does not affect

the previous language mastery. The results of the review tends to confirm that the benefit of bilinguals is over monolinguals in language learning. Cenoz agrees that for general aspects of language proficiency, bilingualism has a positive effect on third language acquisition in additive context. This according to him, can be related to learning strategies, metalinguistic awareness, communicative ability or the fact that bilinguals have a ‘wider linguistic repertoire’. Also, on the basis of the interdependence hypothesis, (Cummins 2000: 2-3) says:

To the extent that instruction in L<sub>x</sub> is effective in promoting proficiency in L<sub>x</sub>, transfer of this proficiency to L<sub>y</sub> will occur provided there is adequate exposure to L<sub>y</sub> (either in school or environment) and adequate motivation to learn L<sub>y</sub>.

He explains, in concrete terms, what this principle means is that in, for example, a Turkish-English bilingual program intended for native speakers of Turkish, English instruction that develops English reading and writing skills is not just developing English skills, it is also developing a deeper conceptual and linguistic proficiency that is strongly related to the development of literacy in the majority language (Turkish). In other words, although the surface aspects (e.g., pronunciation, fluency) of different languages are clearly separate, there is an underlying cognitive / academic proficiency that is common across languages. This common underlying proficiency makes possible the transfer of cognitive/academic or literacy-related proficiency from one language to another.

Cummins also uses this same interdependence hypothesis and indicates that a child’s second language competence is partly dependent on the level of competence already achieved in the first language. The more developed the first language, the easier it will be to develop the second language, whereas if the first language is at a low stage of evolution, it will be more difficult to achieve a high level of bilingualism (Cummins 1978, 2000; in Obzori et al. 2011: 176).

In his study investigating the performance of both bilingual and monolingual learners of English language in a second language situation in Nigeria, Abolaji (2012) confirms that proficiency in the first language enables a bilingual to perform better in the second language. However, he further suggests that an understanding of the distinction between additive and subtractive bilingualism should arm language teachers with methods and measures that will ensure that the learning / acquisition of a second language does not lead to any loss or weakening of the first language. That may demand for programmes / activities that would help learners to recognize, value, develop and use their first language thereby ensuring the development of the second language (Abolaji 2012: 83).

Grosjean and his colleagues, on the other hand, believe that balanced proficiency in a bilingual individual’s languages seems impossible in a sense that the level of proficiency in a language depends on the ‘domains’ it is used. They further state that “bilinguals use their languages for different purposes, in different domains of life, to accomplish different things. Their level of fluency in a language depends on their need for that language. Hence, many bilinguals are more fluent in a given language” (Grosjean & Li 2013: 7).

### **3. The Bilingual Education Model in Barack Obama Bilingual School**

The West African Bilingual School, also called Barack Obama Bilingual School is a private school that offers courses in kindergarten, elementary, secondary and high schools where the learners have the possibility to take both the Senegalese baccalaureate exam and its American equivalent. They are provided with an intensive curricula programs in English language (16 h per week), while French is taught following the national syllabus (6 h per week).

In this school not all the students start their bilingual program at the same levels. Some of them have been there from kindergarten; some others at elementary level while the remainder arrive at Six Form. Besides these language classes, subjects such as mathematics, computer science, biology, and geography are taught both in French and English during the whole cursus, except in grades preceding exam classes. According to the administration, they are doing so because most of the learners take the same general exams of the country. That's why they need to stop the intensive English classes and fully focus on the national program which is mainly taught in French. But, those who take the American exam will be reinforced in English when requested by parents.

### **4. Hypothesis**

From these above mentioned studies and the strategies developed to promote the acquisition of English as a second language in Barrack Obama bilingual program, it can be predicted that learners can have good skills in English. However, knowing that French; rather than English; is the language of the sociolinguistic environment that Senegalese people (including these students), use in several domains of their life, French represents then the higher language of these learners. But, I also believe that learners who have been in the bilingual system from their early childhood (kindergarten), can show more similar proficiency in the two languages than their peers do.

### **5. Methodology**

The data of this study is collected from the annual grade sheets of 22 students. These learners were at grade 8th during the academic year 2018-2019 and were between 12 and 13 years old. They all speak Wolof and another local language if Wolof is not their mother language. To conduct this research, I used the final grade sheets of the two semesters, containing all the tests and assignments done in French, English and other subjects. I selected the grades in French and English languages since the study only focuses on the learners' proficiency in these languages as subjects and not as languages of instruction of the other subjects.

First, the final grade of each student has been calculated in English through the three following constituents: 'English as Main Course', 'English Reading and Writing', and 'English Listening and Speaking' to determine their performance in English. Secondly, the final grade in French involving three main activities: 'Orthography and Grammar'; 'Redaction'; and 'Recitation' has also been calculated for each student. In comparison, the English annual grade of these learners has been compared to their French one to investigate whether there is any difference in the two languages' proficiency. Table 1 shows the French and English subjects in 8th grade yearly syllabus and their coefficients (in brackets), while

Table 2 presents the learners' individual performance in both languages during the first and second semester of the academic year 2018-2019. Table 2 also shows the level at which each student entered the French-English bilingual program.

Table 1. English and French subjects in the grade 8th annual syllabus

First and Second Semesters	English Main Course (3)	English Reading and Writing (1)	English Listening and Speaking (1)	Ortho. Gram (2)	Recitation (1)	Redaction (2)
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Table 2. Learners' annual performance in English and French

Student	English			French			Exposure under the bilingual system
	1st Sem	2 <sup>nd</sup> Sem	Annual grade	1st Sem	2 <sup>nd</sup> Sem	Annual grade	
Student 1	12,9	14,25	<b>13,58</b>	14,9	13,6	<b>14,25</b>	Kindergarten
Student 2	9,2	12	<b>10,6</b>	12,83	12,3	<b>12,57</b>	Six Form
Student 3	13,85	14,1	<b>13,98</b>	6,82	9,3	<b>8,06</b>	Native
Student 4	11,05	11,85	<b>11,45</b>	8,38	8,6	<b>8,49</b>	Kindergarten
Student 5	8,98	11,7	<b>10,34</b>	12,05	10,65	<b>11,35</b>	Elementary
Student 6	16,5	16,3	<b>16,4</b>	14,68	16,85	<b>15,77</b>	Six Form
Student 7	15,65	15,75	<b>15,7</b>	16,11	15,98	<b>16,04</b>	Elementary
Student 8	7,4	10,8	<b>9,1</b>	11,37	11,3	<b>11,34</b>	Elementary
Student 9	11,5	13	<b>12,25</b>	11,87	13,38	<b>12,63</b>	Kindergarten
Student 10	13,85	15,85	<b>14,85</b>	16,54	16,3	<b>16,42</b>	Kindergarten
Student 11	6,7	10,1	<b>8,4</b>	7,85	10,3	<b>9,08</b>	Six Form
Student 12	8,9	11,55	<b>10,23</b>	10,68	8,66	<b>9,67</b>	Six Form
Student 13	9,25	12,5	<b>10,88</b>	12,3	12,68	<b>12,49</b>	Elementary
Student 14	15,65	14,2	<b>14,93</b>	15,61	15,83	<b>15,72</b>	Elementary
Student 15	15,85	16,9	<b>16,38</b>	8,48	9,25	<b>8,87</b>	Kindergarten
Student 16	12,98	12,85	<b>12,91</b>	13,7	13,9	<b>13,8</b>	Elementary
Student 17	11,1	13,5	<b>12,3</b>	12,63	12,43	<b>12,53</b>	Six Form
Student 18	5,75	9,65	<b>7,7</b>	6,38	6,7	<b>6,54</b>	Six Form
Student 19	14,85	12,7	<b>13,78</b>	12,38	12,35	<b>12,37</b>	Elementary
Student 20	12,4	12,2	<b>12,3</b>	12,2	10,45	<b>11,33</b>	Elementary
Student 21	11,95	12,95	<b>12,45</b>	13,66	13,02	<b>13,34</b>	Elementary
Student 22	10,51	13,95	<b>12,23</b>	14,02	12,18	<b>13,1</b>	Elementary
<b>Total</b>	<b>11,67</b>	<b>13,12</b>	<b>12,40</b>	<b>12,07</b>	<b>12,09</b>	<b>12,08</b>	

## 6. Findings and Discussions

Adopting the general grading system of the country, the English and French annual performance of these bilingual learners are classified as follows:

1. Excellent (appreciating works that deserve 18, 19, 20)
2. Very good (used when the works deserve 16 and 17).
3. Good (that goes with 14 and 15);
4. Fairly good (which is the appreciation of grades such as 12 and 13);
5. Fair (including 10 and 11);
6. Not sufficient (that includes grades such as 7, 8, 9) and finally
7. Poor (for those who have less than 7)

With respect to the first research question, it is found that not all students are good at English and their level in this language changes from one learner to another. For instance, the analysis of the grades in table 2 shows that student 6 and 15 have a ‘very good’ level in English at the end of their school year with a final grade comprised between 16 and 17. This table also indicates that student 7, 10 and 14 are ‘good’ at English having respectively (15, 5); (14, 85) and (14, 93) in their annual performance. What is worth noting in this analysis is, a great number of these participants have a ‘fairly good’ level in English. For instance, 9 students out of 22 such as the student 1; 3; 9; 16; 17; 19; 20; 21; and 22 have all final grades that vary between 12 and 13 but lower than 14. Still, in their proficiency in English, the student 2, 4, 5, 12 and 13 have ‘fair’ grades that go from 10, 6 to 11, 4 5. Finally, it has also been shown that student 18; 11; and 8 are ‘insufficiently’ proficient in English and respectively get (7, 7); (8, 4) and (9, 1) as annual grades.

The comparison of these learners’ French and English annual performance reported in table 2 doesn’t validate the second hypothesis set earlier in this paper, predicting that French would be their greater language. The study reveals that French is the stronger language of only 4 learners while English constitutes the stronger language of 3 other students and the remainder can be called balanced bilinguals with close proficiency in the two languages.

### *6.1 Balanced Bilingual Learners*

These bilinguals are more present in the data. The analysis has indicated that among the 22 students involved in this study, 15 have an annual grade in English which is close to their French grade. These balanced learners are different in their linguistic performance. For instance, student 6 and 7 are ‘very good’ bilinguals; Student 1 and 14 are ‘good’ at both languages while 7 others such as the student 9, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, and 22 are ‘fairly good’. Finally, among these balanced bilinguals, student 5 and student 12 have ‘fair’ levels in both French and English while student 11 and 18 are not good at all at any language.

### *6.2 Learners With More Proficiency in English*

As mentioned above, 3 students show stronger performance in English than in French. This analysis indicates that student 15 is very good at English while student 3 has a ‘good’ grade in this language. As for student 4, he is just fair. The analysis also shows that all of these learners have insufficient levels in French.

### *6.3 Learners With More Proficiency in French*

The comparison of these learners' annual grades show that 4 of them are better at French than at English. Among them, the student 10 is revealed to be good at both French and English while student 2 and 13 have fair level in English but are both fairly good at French. Still in this group of bilingual learners more proficient in French, one can notice that the French grade of the student 8 is just fair and his grade in English is weaker, meaning that he is good neither at French his first language nor at English, his second language.

From the statistics presented in table 2 above, 10 students have been under the bilingual system from elementary level; 6 others from Six Form (the first year of secondary school) and the remaining 6 students started earlier in kindergarten. The third question of the study, investigating whether the learners' exposure in the bilingual program has an influence in their dual linguistic performance is not validated. It has been indicated that those who have been in the bilingual program from the elementary level are more balanced in the two languages. For instance, among the 15 balanced bilinguals named above, 8 started the bilingual program at this level, meaning when they were around 6 years old. The study also shows that 5 other balanced bilingual students only got enrolled in the bilingual program later at Six Form, when they were between 11 and 2 years.

Then, a plausible explanation of a bilingual learner to have a similar performance in both languages can be related to three factors: the age of the learners, their IQ and their ability to learn languages.

Related to the learner's age, the analysis shows that students who are six and more years old are likely to master the two languages at a similar level. With respect to the fact of being good at both languages, it has been indicated that it is the learner's IQ; rather than the duration under the bilingual system which is the influencing factor. For instance, the annual grade sheets of these students inform that student 6, 10, and 14 who have been recognized here as good and equivalent bilinguals, also have good grades in all their subjects of study including (French, English, Science, mathematics, biology etc.). Yet, the study confirms that one can easily learn languages but, find other areas of study more challenging. This is proven through the student 7 who is good at languages (both French and English) but becomes poor in subjects like history, mathematics and "life and earth sciences".

## **7. Conclusion**

The findings of the data collected in Barrack Obama Bilingual private school show that even if French is the language used in people's most domains of life, it doesn't constitute the stronger language of the bilingual learners. The analysis indicates that only 3 out of the 22 learners involved in this study are better at French while 4 others show more proficiency in English. All the remaining students, a total of 15, are more or less equivalent in the two languages. These results are not in line with (Grosjean & Li 2013) predicting that the bilingual level of fluency in a language depends on their need for that language. That's why many bilinguals are more fluent in a given language". In Senegal, French is the official language of the country and is by far more used than English (which is exclusively a target

language at school). Yet, as indicated, French is the stronger language of only three (3) bilingual students.

The study also shows that having a similar proficiency in both languages (hereafter French and English) doesn't depend on the learner's exposure under the bilingual program. Rather, it can be believed that those who have started learning their second language at 6 or more years old tend to be more equivalent bilinguals than those who have been in the program from the early childhood. This research also implies that the learners' IQ is an important variable that makes them good and equivalent bilinguals. These two findings partly corroborate Kukturk et al., stating that age is an important issue for the bilingual's language development. But, also the conditions of first and second language acquisition and the individual progression have significant impacts. They add that for the successful acquisition, many factors that are responsible for the cognitive and affective differences between learners are relevant, including intelligence and the ability to learn. Also, the cognitive style, motivation, attitudes, personality factors and learning and teaching conditions play a vital role (Kukturk et al., 2016: 81-82).

What seems missing in the above quoted literature is the bilingual's ability to acquire languages which is another relevant factor in the successful learning of a first and second language. The present study indicates that a learner can easily learn languages but, find other areas of study more challenging. This can be seen through student 7 who is good at languages (both French and English) but becomes poor in subjects like history, mathematics and "life and earth sciences". Then, it means that being intelligent or having abilities to learn do not necessarily mean having abilities to learn languages. Thus, some future research could investigate, if learning languages is different from learning other non-language subjects.

Also, it has been observed that in bilingual programs in Senegal, subjects like 'listening' and 'speaking' are taught with more consideration in English (the second language) than in French (the first language). For instance, in Barrack Obama bilingual school where this study has been conducted, both 'listening' and 'speaking' are taught as core subjects in the academic syllabus of English with adequate materials while they are not taught at all in French. Then, a research can be further conducted in a bilingual education context where all the subjects are equally taught in both languages.

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