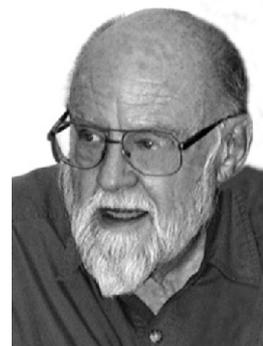


Editorial

Bilingualism: Not as Straightforward as You Might Think

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Most people would assume that the ability to speak two languages is nothing but good. Indeed, there is a movement here in Texas, and in other states, to add Spanish to the curriculum in every elementary public school at the first or second grade level, on the assumption that the earlier you learn a second language, the better. But the situation may not be that straightforward. In this issue of *JAAA*, authors Deborah Weiss and James Dempsey, of Southern Connecticut State University, report results of a study suggesting that there may be a downside to universal bilingualism.

They administered the English and Spanish versions of the HINT test, both in quiet and in noise, to a group of native speakers of Spanish who had subsequently learned English as a second language. Two groups were formed; those who learned English at an early age (before age 7) and those who learned English at a later age (after age 11). Most of the results were in accord with expectation. Participants scored better on the HINT test in their native language (Spanish) than in their second language (English), but one curious result was unexpected: Those who learned English after the age of 11 scored better on the Spanish HINT test than those who learned English before the age of 7. This result was troublesome. Why should those who learned English as a second language early in life do less well on a test of word recognition in their native language than those who learned English later.

To pursue this further, the authors calculated each participant's "bilingual age," a measure of experience with English as a second language. They then correlated this measure with performance on the Spanish HINT score. In both the quiet and noise conditions of the HINT, the bilingual age score was significantly negatively correlated with HINT. Moreover, the correlation

was strongest in the noise condition. In other words, the more experience these participants had with English, the less well they did on the Spanish HINT test, particularly in the competing noise condition. In the case of the English HINT scores, however, the correlations were not significant. This is an interesting finding. In the authors' words:

...the less experience with the L2 (English), the better the individual was able to perceive speech in L1 (Spanish), especially under noisy conditions. Since all the bilingual participants spoke Spanish since birth . . . it appears that longer exposure to [English] resulted in either deterioration of speech perception in Spanish or failure to develop speech perception in Spanish to its fullest.

The authors note that this result is consistent with previous research indicating that bilinguals need more time than monolinguals to process verbal materials in both languages and that bilinguals perform less well than monolinguals on other measures of speech perception under noisy or degraded conditions.

As we have said many times in these pages, there are no simple answers to complex problems.

James Jerger
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