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Rising Bilingual Children in Indonesian Context: Review of The Scientific Advantages

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Abstract

Bilingual education has become very popular among Indonesian children nowadays. Other than learning it from school, they are also exposed to the second language in their homes. Although some misconceptions persist in society, some parents continue to do so because they believe that bilingualism benefits their children's development, whether in the language or cognitive areas. This paper focuses on the common misconceptions spreading among parents. This research was specifically done based on literature review. Here, the five common myths about bilingualism on early childhood were answered based on scientific explanations given by experts. The finding indicates that being bilingual helps children have strong language development and executive functioning at the same time. Results are interpreted in the context of relevant research and explained based on the theories of some experts.

Keywords Bilingualism, Young Learners, Language Development

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I INTRODUCTION

Bilingualism is really close to people's life in this modern era. It has become very common for children to speak more than one language in their daily lives. Edward (2004) says that the majority of people in this world are bilingual because they know at least two languages. The rate gets higher since the interaction between people around the world is now more intense and limitless at the same time.

Moreover, bilingualism is defined as the ability speak two languages in daily interaction (Byers-Heinlein, 2013). Similarly, Baker (2001) defines bilingualism as people who can communicate in two or more languages or dialects on a daily basis.

Bilingualism is common and has consistently increased in many parts of the world. It is predicted that one in three people in

this world is bilingual or multilingual (Wei, 2000). Albeit the unfinished debate, bilingualism is becoming a trend for modern parents nowadays, not only in Indonesia but also for parents around the world. In Indonesia, most of the people are bilingual because they use Indonesian and their local language by nature. A large number of bilinguals are also found in some States of the USA. For example, in California, it is predicted that in the next 12 years, over 50% of children will end up being bilingual by speaking more than only one language (García, McLaughlin, Spodek, & Saracho, 1995).

Discussions about bilingualism are still new, and the talk is still going on to this day. Parents are really concerned about this case, especially those who come from mid-level socioeconomic families and have been practicing bilingualism in their daily lives (Bialystok, 2016). However, it cannot be ignored that misconceptions exist around this global community related to this case.

Misconceptions about this trend are mostly not based on scientific findings but rather based

on myths only. Many people assume that teaching bilingualism to young children will only harm their linguistic and cognitive development.

Research Questions

This research is aimed to answer some of the myths that have arisen among parents about bilingualism in early childhood. They are:

1. Are bilingual children confused?
2. Are bilingual children smarter?
3. Should each parent speak one language only to their bilingual child?
4. Is earlier better when it comes to teaching bilingualism?
5. Will bilingual children experience language delay and other language difficulties?

These assumptions remain unanswered among parents nowadays. Thus, this article will answer those four questions comprehensively. It is hoped that this research will provide parents and educators with a better understanding of how to teach their children to be bilingual speakers.

II RESEARCH METHODS

In this research, the researchers conducted the study using the literature review methodology, which involved finding, reading, interpreting, assessing, and summarizing academic literature (journals and articles) on bilingualism in early life. The main article used in this study was "Bilingualism in the Early Years: What the Science Says" written by Krista

Byers-Heinlein and Casey Lew-Williams in 2013. To analyze the data, all the important theories were collected and put into a note. This research helps the researchers learn about the history and nature of their topic, and identify research gaps and problems that exist. Lastly, the researchers conclude the findings of this research.

III RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Are bilingual children confused?

The idea that multilingual kids are more likely to become confused is among the major worries that parents have while teaching their kids to speak two languages. Parents are afraid if the children cannot differentiate between their first language and the second language they learn. The term "confused" here is associated with when children mix both languages in the same sentence while speaking. In fact, this is known as "code mixing," which is also normally

done by adult bilinguals. Code mixing is not a sign of confusion since it is a normal part of being bilingual itself (Pearson, 2008). When children can use two languages at the same time, it means that their bilingual brain is active.

Secondly, since the vocabulary of bilingual children is still very limited, just like that of monolinguals, they tend to use the same word to generalize something with a common look, such as saying "cat" to any animal with four legs. This generalization occurs due to the

limited vocabulary they have for their age, not because they learn two languages at the same time.

Interestingly, bilingual children have that kind of ability to distinguish the sound and the rhythm of two languages. The latest research has explained that a 4-month-old monolingual and bilingual baby can differentiate sound, and by the age of 8 months, only the bilingual baby is still aware of the distinction (Weikum et al., 2007). This ability aids children in comprehending the meaning.

2. Are bilingual children smarter?

In many cases, bilinguals have many advantages especially in terms of social understanding. This is not shocking because bilingual children are usually exposed to many languages and many people who speak those languages. In addition, Yow and Markman (2011) say that bilingual children normally have a better ability to distinguish language features like the different sound of the voice.

On the cognitive side, bilinguals show better performance than monolinguals in moving between one activity and responding different task (Bialystok, Craik, & Luk, 2012). This is called executive functioning, where children are undistracted and adaptable to change. Bilinguals have to activate both languages and switch back and forth while speaking. Here, the brain is constantly active, and the language that is not picked needs to be held while another one is selected. Researchers exemplify that this constant practice can bring benefits to brain activity (Green, 1998). In line with that, Bialystok (2001) argues that bilingual children can perform better than monolingual children on the kind of task which require cognitive flexibility like what is stated above.

3. Should each parent speak one language only to their bilingual child?

One strategy that is popular among parents nowadays is the one-person-one-language strategy (ODOP), which was suggested more than 100 years ago (Ronjat, 1913). It is believed that this strategy is effective in preventing children from experiencing language confusion. However, this belief is countered by De Houwer (2007), who suggests that children who get equal exposure from both languages

from the same bilingual parent often perform better in the two languages. In addition, (Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams, 2013) add that it is crucial to keep in mind that young children learn language through interacting with and listening to other speakers.

Babies need to get enough exposure like the sounds, rythms, words, and grammars of the languages on a regular basis. The more exposure they get, the better they will perform in both languages. Getting exposed to more words gives children more chance to learn a language. In addition, Pearson (2008) suggests that children can also play with other children who speak the same target language to get more exposure to the language. Talking about what languages approaches that is best for early bilingual children, the best answer would be to practice any method that encourages both high-quality and high-quantity exposure to each of their children's languages. One-person-one-language, one-language at home, one-language outside, specific days of the week to speak certain language, or mornings/afternoons are a few structured ways that might be used in this situation. Parents just need to adjust it to their family context (Lanza, 2004). Parents and other adults who are responsible for looking after bilingual children should take the initiative to make sure they have enough exposure towards both languages so they can fully master them (Genesee, 2009).

4. Is earlier better?

Humans' brains are better able to receive new languages in their early lives. In addition, the environment is also more conducive to learning a new language at a younger age. The intense exposure children get when they are children will provide them with numerous, varied, and interesting chances to learn about the element that made up their native language. Therefore, it is often assumed that younger children will pick up a second language faster and easier than adult. This believe refer to the critical period hypothesis theory in language learning, which states that early development, often considered to take place between birth and the ages of 12 to 13, is when human brain capacities to process language learning are at their best performance (Long, 1990). As a result, during this time, language learning is

comparatively simple and leads to maximum language proficiency (Genesee, 2009). Things get very different when children are growing up. They learn languages in the classroom, where the language and the grammar are explained to them, unlike when they acquire them naturally from people around them. Defining and explaining things can be useful, but they lack the strength of actually learning a language naturally from adult users (Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams, 2013).

Moreover, talking about learning language rules and grammar, bilinguals can perform better. Bilingual people who learn two languages since the very early age are known as simultaneous bilinguals, while those who learn a primary language followed by a second language as babies or adults are known as sequential bilinguals (Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams, 2013). Evidence suggests that simultaneous bilinguals have some significant advantages over sequential bilinguals. They typically have better accents, a wider range of vocabulary, stronger grammatical skills, and superior real-time language processing abilities. On the other hand, people who study Spanish and English from birth demonstrate an impressive ability in analyzing grammar. For instance, children and adults who learn Spanish after mastering their first language frequently struggle to master the complicated Spanish gender. Meanwhile, those who learn it while they are younger will be able to master the Spanish grammar more easily and effectively (Lew-Williams & Fernald, 2007, 2010).

When parents have missed the chance to expose their children to bilingual since

the very younger age, they still have to chance to improve it when they grow up. Parents can put their children to bilingual childcare or preschool in order to catch up with intensive exposure to the target language.

5. Will bilingual children experience language delay and other language disorders?

The most common misconception among parents about bilingualism is that it causes language delay. Meanwhile, research shows that the amount of vocabulary owned by bilingual children, if calculated from the two languages, is equal to the amount of vocabulary owned by monolingual children. If they see someone mispronounce or say something unclear in one of the languages, they can fix it like monolinguals do (Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams, 2013). If parents see some problems with their children's speech development, they can bring their children to a pediatrician or language pathologist to get a further check. The issue is that only few therapists receive adequate training related to the needs of bilingual children in terms of learning, which can sometimes result in bilingual children being inaccurately diagnosed to have language delay or language disorder Bedore & Pena, 2008). Even if children who are bilinguals may start talking a little later than those children who are monolinguals, they still do so between the ages of 8 and 15 months (Lowry, 2016). Additionally, when bilingual toddlers begin to use short sentences, their grammar development follows the same timeline and patterns as monolingual children. It shows that bilingualism does not cause any speech delay at all.

IV CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the scientific findings about five of the most frequent queries from parents regarding early bilingualism. According to research, the way parents think about early bilingualism needs to be changed because the myths that are arisen among parents are not scientifically proven (Werker & Byers-Heinlein, 2008). Parents of bilingual children should just let their children to get enough exposure of the second language (L2) in order to support their children to be successful bilinguals since the very young age.

As children grow, interaction by using the first language (L1) should be continued in order to keep balance mastery by the children. Here, the language that is not actively used should be spoken more frequent in the neighborhood (Pearson, 2008). Two things must be kept in mind in this case: one strategy to encourage early development through second language acquisition which is possible at any age. It means, parents are never too late or too early to do so.

From the explanation above, it can be concluded that bilingual children are not

confused. They mix the languages as a sign that their bilingual brain is active, and it is called "code mixing," where adult bilinguals also do that. Second, bilingualism makes children have better cognitive and linguistic development. Being bilingual will also activate children's executive functioning. Thirdly, the one-parent-one-language strategy can be used, but that is not the only strategy. Parents can combine it with other strategies too, like learning one language for a specific place. The idea that the earlier you start learning a second language, the better, is

scientifically valid and widely accepted by experts. Finally, misconceptions about bilingual children experiencing language delay are dispelled by the fact that the amount of vocabulary owned by bilingual children from both languages equals the amount of vocabulary owned by monolingual children from one language. Thus, from the explanation above, it can be said that bilingualism in early childhood has a positive impact on children's language development.

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