Personality as a factor in bilingual development

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This study examines the effects of personality differences on the language development of Japanese-English bilingual children. Using the results of a survey of Japanese-English bilingual families, this study demonstrates how personality traits affect bilingual development. In particular, the study examines five main personality traits: extroversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, openness, and conscientiousness and finds that personality plays an indirect role in bilingual development.

この研究は, 日本語と英語のバイリンガルの子供の言語発達の性格相違の効果を検査する。 日本語と英語のバイリンガルの家族の調査結果を使用して, 子供の性格の違いが, バイリンガルの子供の言語発達にいかに影響を与えるか示す。特に、この研究は, 5つの主要な性格特性（外向性、神経質さ、素直さ、好奇心、向上心）について考察し, 個人の性格がバイリンガルの子供の言語発達に間接的役割を担うことを明らかにする。

Although affective variables such as personality and cognitive style are often considered important factors in second language acquisition, they are generally not considered significant in first language acquisition; nearly all people attain native fluency in at least one language, regardless of their individual dispositions. According to Pinker (1995, p. 135), "Learning a first language is something every child does successfully, in a matter of a few years and without the need for formal lessons." A first language, however, does not need to be restricted to a single language. Miesel coined the expression "bilingual first language acquisition" to refer to the "simultaneous acquisition of two languages from birth" (Genesee & Nicoladis, 2006, p. 324). One might therefore conclude that a child learning two languages from birth should also develop complete proficiency in both languages, becoming a so-called "balanced bilingual." In many cases, however, one of the child's languages becomes dominant in most domains of the child's life, or the child may even become a passive bilingual. Many circumstances contribute to an

individual's ultimate bilingual achievement, and personality differences may be one of them.

The original impetus for this study was my observation of my own daughter's bilingual development. Although her language-learning environment seemed very similar to those of the bilingual children of my friends and colleagues, I noticed early on that her bilingualism appeared to be lagging behind. She understood English, but only responded in Japanese, while her bilingual peers were much more forthcoming in English. I considered personality as one possible contributing factor since my daughter exhibited a tendency to be quite reticent in general and reluctant to try new experiences out of a fear of making mistakes. This hunch led me to look into the matter more formally by exploring previous research on the link between personality and language learning and by surveying other parents on their experiences of raising bilingual children.

Factors contributing to bilingual development

Before turning to personality as a factor in bilingual development, however, let's examine some of the other major factors involved. This will help put personality in perspective as only one of a number of contributing factors, which may be mediated by an individual learner's personality. In addition, we will see later how parents rank personality as a contributor among these other factors.

Home language strategy

One of the most important factors is the home language environment, which is often described as the home language strategy (or *policy*), since parents often establish a plan of action in order in ensure that their children become bilingual. Some of the most common home language strategies are briefly described below. For more detailed discussions of these and other strategies, see Barron-Hauwaert (2004), Cunningham-Andersson and Andersson (2004), Deuchar and Quay (2000), King and Mackey (2007), and Pearson (2008).

One parent, one language

This strategy is often touted as the best way to achieve the maximum results for multicultural families. Following this strategy, each parent speaks their own native language exclusively with the child. It is believed that this allows the child to separate the two languages and realize that both are viable communication systems. It also helps the child to realize that different people speak different languages and that switching languages depending on the person being spoken to is a natural way of communicating.

Minority language at home

In this strategy, the minority language is spoken exclusively in the home. A family who follows this strategy in Japan, for example, might speak a minority language such as English at home, while allowing their child to learn the majority language, Japanese, in the wider community. This strategy works well for parents who both speak the minority language fluently, but might be more difficult to implement for families in which only one parent is fluent in the minority language.

Mixed

Following this strategy, one or both parents often switch between languages. At first glance, this may seem less a strategy than a defeatist free-for-all. This strategy might work, however, for bilingual parents who can be models of bilingualism for their children (Noguchi, 1996).

Time and place

In this somewhat uncommon strategy, one language is designated for certain times and/or places. For example, a family might decide that English will be spoken exclusively at dinnertime.

Time spent abroad

This is likely the first factor that comes to mind when most people consider the best way to learn a language. If you want to learn French, go to France, they will say. The same is true for parents raising bilingual children. A large number of the informal articles written by such parents for *Bilingual Japan*, the newsletter of the Bilingualism Special Interest Group (BSIG) of JALT, tell stories of how their children's English was activated by extended vacations or sabbaticals in their home countries. See, for example, Weatherford (2005).

Contact with family members

This refers mainly to family members who speak a minority language such as English with children who are being raised in a country like Japan. This factor is of course related to time spent abroad, as much of the contact with these family members takes place during family visits overseas. Minority language family members may also make extended visits to the majority language country, and these visits may be significant as well. Typically, such family members speak only the minority language, so a child must communicate with them in that language. A desire to communicate with grandma and grandpa, for example, can be a strong motivator to learn and use the minority language.

Contact with peers

This factor is also related to the previous one, in that peers may be same-age family members such as cousins, but it also includes other bilingual friends or even, as in the case of my own daughter, classmates who speak only the minority language. In my experience, contact with peers has been an enormously influential factor in my daughter's language development. According to Pinker (1998, p. xi), "Children always end up with the language and accent of their peers." Similarly, Maneva (2004) found that exposure to "egalitarian" interaction in a non-dominant language plays a considerable role in the activation and development of that language.

Parents' language abilities

The extent to which a child's parents speak more than one language can be a big factor in the child's language development. If one parent can speak and understand only the minority language, for example, the child will be forced to communicate with that parent in the minority language, which may foster the child's development of that language.

On the other hand, bilingual parents may serve as models of bilingualism for the children, as mentioned earlier.

Personality and language acquisition

According to Dörnyei (2005, p. 10), "personality is the most individual characteristic of a human being," but he also maintains that personality is not as important in language acquisition as other individual characteristics such as aptitude and motivation, which is reflected in the relative lack of studies on language acquisition and personality. Dörnyei concedes, however, that personality does merit investigation as a factor in language acquisition because, quoting Pervin and John (2001, p. 3), "Personality is the part of the field of psychology that most considers people in their entirety as individuals and as complex beings."

The study of personality has a long history in the field of psychology, and the range of studies and approaches to the subject is too vast to cover in this paper. For the purpose of this study, I would like to focus on the so-called "Big Five" Model, which is often attributed to the work of Goldberg (1992, 1993).

The Big Five Model

The Big Five Model comprises five dimensions that can be described with the acronym OCEAN: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. The following descriptions come from the online Big Five Personality Test, which was used as part of the survey described later in this paper.

- Openness to Experience/Intellect—High scorers tend to be original, creative, curious, complex; low scorers tend to be conventional, down to earth, narrow interests, uncreative.

- Conscientiousness—High scorers tend to be reliable, well-organized, self-disciplined, careful; low scorers tend to be disorganized, undependable, negligent.

- Extraversion—High scorers tend to be sociable, friendly, fun loving, talkative; low scorers tend to be introverted, reserved, inhibited, quiet.

- Agreeableness—High scorers tend to be good natured, sympathetic, forgiving, courteous; low scorers tend to be critical, rude, harsh, callous.

- Neuroticism—High scorers tend to be nervous, high-strung, insecure, worrying; low scorers tend to be calm, relaxed, secure, hardy.

The Big Five Model and second language acquisition

Among the Big Five traits, extraversion has been studied the most as a factor in second language acquisition, but the results have been inconsistent (Hamers & Blanc, 2000). The reasoning behind the importance attributed to extraversion is that extraverts should be more adept at communicating with others, and therefore better at learning a foreign language. Some studies have found a slightly positive correlation between second language achievement and extraversion, while others have found no significance.

One of the most interesting studies on the Big Five traits and second language acquisition was conducted by MacIntyre and Charos (1996). Their study is centered around the concept of "willingness to communicate," which is defined as "a stable predisposition toward communication when free to choose to do so" (p. 7). There may be a number of reasons why someone might not be willing to communicate, including anxiety, introversion, alienation, and lack of communicative competence. When anxiety, introversion, and alienation decrease, communicative competence is improved, and willingness to communicate increases. Within this framework, MacIntyre and Charos studied 92 native-English speaking students taking introductory level conversational French in Ottawa, Canada. Among the factors they examined was the relationship between the Big Five personality traits and achievement in French. They found that each personality trait plays a different role in contributing to willingness to communicate and ultimate achievement in the target language.

Subjects with a high level of openness (or intellect) have a more positive perception of their competence in the second language, which leads to a greater willingness to communicate. High scorers on the conscientiousness trait tend to excel at systematic learning, such as studying a textbook in a classroom setting. As expected, extraverts have less anxiety about using a foreign language and communicating with strangers. People who score high on the agreeableness trait tend to have pleasant contact with others and are therefore more willing to communicate with target language group members. Finally, MacIntyre and Charos found that a high degree of neuroticism does not appear to lead to greater anxiety about using a foreign language since

"language anxiety is not strongly related to general trait anxiety" (p. 11). However, the flip side of neuroticism—emotional stability—does appear to lead to greater "integrativeness" because "people who feel less anxious appear to be more disposed to interacting with members of the second language community" (p. 19).

Personality and bilingual development

Having read MacIntyre and Charos' paper, I wanted to investigate the connection between personality and the language development of bilingual children. As a first step, I decided to conduct a survey of parents who are raising bilingual children in an attempt to discover whether the Big Five personality traits have any correlation to their children's language abilities. In future, I would like to conduct more rigorous experiments to confirm and expand on the results presented here.

Survey of parents raising children bilingually

Members of the Bilingualism SIG of JALT were invited to take part in a survey on bilingualism and personality through the SIG's email discussion group. There was a total of 23 respondents, who were parents raising children bilingually in Japanese and English, primarily in Japan. Among the responses, language and personality data was provided for 29 individuals ranging in age range from 2 to 22, with an average age of 10.

The survey was conducted in two parts—an online personality test, which was followed by a questionnaire on the children's language backgrounds and achievement. The Big

Five Personality Test at <outofservice.com> was chosen among several available online tests. The main advantage of this particular test is that it allows the test-takers to simultaneously rate their own personality along with that of another person. (Parents were asked to complete the test on their children's behalf.) The test consists of 48 statements that the respondent must rank on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. It includes statements like, "I see myself (or other person) as someone who is talkative/tends to find fault with others/is depressed, blue/is original, comes up with new ideas/is reserved," and so on. The results are given as percentile scores, which the respondents were asked to save or print out in order to report them in the second part of the survey.

The second part of the survey was an online questionnaire about the children's language background and achievement, with the final page asking the respondents to input the percentile scores from the personality test. Parents were able to enter data for up to three children. The most relevant questions for the purpose of this paper are discussed in the following sections.

Importance of factors contributing to bilingualism

One of the questions on the survey was, "How important do you think the following factors have been in your child's bilingual development?" The choices (described previously) were: home language strategy, time spent abroad, contact with family members, contact with peers, parents' language abilities, and child's personality. The four-point scale ranged from not at all important to very important. The results are shown in Figure 1, with the y-axis representing the percentage of responses.
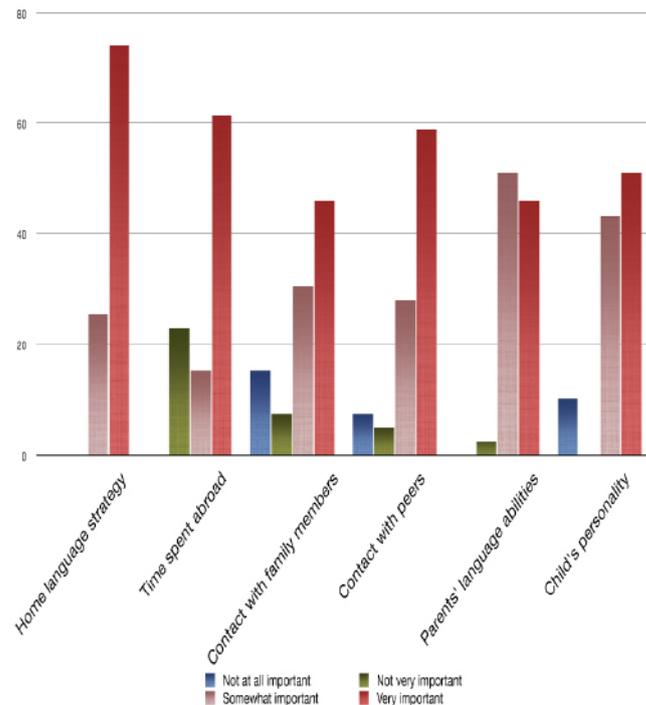

Figure 1. Parents' rating of the importance of contributing factors

As the chart shows, parents rated home language strategy as the most important, with all respondents saying that it was either very important or somewhat important. Interestingly, although nearly 90% of respondents said that their child's

personality was also very important or somewhat important, approximately 10% said that personality was not important at all. There were no respondents who chose "not very important" for personality, indicating that the minority who did not think personality was important had a rather strongly negative opinion about its impact.

Parents' rating of their child's English ability

Another question on the survey was intended to evaluate the children's English speaking ability. Since English is a minority language in Japan, the children's English ability is similar to that of a second language learner and can therefore be compared to second language acquisition studies. The parents were asked to respond to the statement, "My child is a good English speaker" on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. For the purpose of analysis, a child was considered to be a "good English speaker" if the parent chose "strongly agree" or "agree" and "not a good English speaker" for "neither agree nor disagree," "disagree," or "strongly disagree". A total of 23 individuals were considered a good English speaker, while 6 were not.

Personality traits and English speaking ability

The children's personality scores were compared with their English speaking ability ratings, and an interesting pattern emerged. Figure 2 shows the results, with the x-axis representing the average percentile scores for each personality dimension.
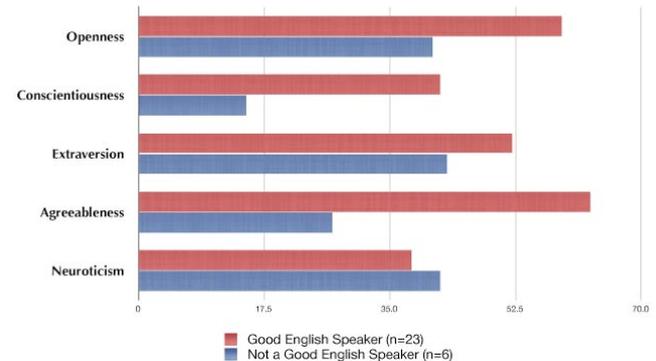

Figure 2. Personality traits and English speaking ability

As the chart shows, the good English speakers have higher scores on all the personality traits except for neuroticism. In other words, the good English speakers are rated as more positive individuals overall. The results for neuroticism are consistent with the results of the other traits because neuroticism is at the negative end of the spectrum, while the others are positive. If the neuroticism dimension were switched to its positive side—emotional stability—the good English speakers would have higher scores on this trait as well.

There are at least two ways of interpreting these results. One is that bilinguals who score high on the positive personality traits tend to have an advantage when it comes to learning how to speak a minority language. As MacIntyre

and Charos (1996) showed, each of the personality traits contributes in some way towards second language achievement. Another way to look at the results, however, is to consider that the parents who judge their children as poor English speakers might as a result have negative opinions of those children's personalities. After all, it was the parents themselves who rated both the children's English abilities and their personalities, which may have colored their judgments of the two characteristics.

Looking at each trait separately, agreeableness was the highest-scoring trait among the good English speakers, followed by openness, extraversion, conscientiousness, and neuroticism, in that order. As the sample size was small, however, I am hesitant to speculate on the distinct significance of each trait individually.

Limitations of the survey

Although some interesting trends emerged, there are clearly some limitations to what we can conclude from these results. The first is that the sample size of 29 individuals is rather small. I hope in future to be able to gather more data. Second, the two-part nature of the survey was somewhat confusing for some of the respondents, who admitted to not being able to follow the directions precisely. This also contributed to the lack of data. Third, it might have been preferable to use an independent measure of English ability rather than have the parents rate their own children's speaking ability. In addition, at least one respondent felt that rating her child's speaking ability alone was too limiting and wanted to be able to rate reading and writing as well. Finally, several bilingual respondents commented that it was

impossible for them to complete the personality test because they felt that they had different personalities, or "sides," depending on which language they were operating in. This is an interesting conundrum that deserves further study on its own.

Conclusion

Personality is just one of a number of important factors that may contribute to a child's bilingual development. Individual traits are neither bad nor good on their own, and different situations favor different traits. My advice to anyone attempting to raise a child bilingually is to be aware of your child's personality traits and how they affect language learning in different contexts. Play to your child's strengths, and work with their weaknesses. If your child is the extroverted type, for example, make sure that she has plenty of opportunities to play and communicate with other children who speak the target language. If, on the other hand, your child seems somewhat introverted, you may have to develop a strategy to help her to gradually join group activities.

Personality is certainly not the single determining factor in a child's bilingual development, but understanding how your child's personality traits play an indirect role may help you direct them on the path towards successful bilingualism.

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