# ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH INSIDE A SPANISH CONTEXT: A CASE – STUDY

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**Abstract:** *This paper is the beginning part of a research dealing with the acquisition by a baby of English as a second language. The context of acquisition would fit within the frame type 5 of bilingualism from the list established by Romaine (1989): the parents share the same mother language that is the same than the language spoken in the community. The difference with Romaine's definition is that it is not one of the parents who addresses the baby in English but me. The main aim of the research is to show that a good methodology, and not so much the time of exposition, is the key element towards the acquisition of a second language.*

**Keywords:** baby's linguistic development, bilingualism, bilingual education, language acquisition, second language teaching, meaning overextension.

**Resumen:** *Este artículo es el comienzo de una investigación sobre la adquisición de la lengua inglesa como segunda lengua por parte de un bebé. El contexto de adquisición se encuadraría dentro del bilinguismo tipo 5 de entre los establecidos por Romaine (1989): los padres comparten la misma lengua materna que a su vez es la misma utilizada en la comunidad. La diferencia con la definición de Romaine consiste en que no es uno de los padres quien se dirige al bebé en inglés sino yo. El principal objetivo de la investigación es demostrar que una metodología apropiada, y no tanto el tiempo de exposición,es lla clave para la adquisición de una segunda lengua.*

**Palabras clave:** adquisición de lengua, bilingüismo, desarrollo lingüístico infantil, educación bilingüe, enseñanza de una segunda lengua, extensión de significado.

## 1. Introduction

Bilingualism could be defined as the ability of a person for successfully managing to control (that is to say, encoding and decoding) two different languages. From this starting point and, as Baker (1996) suggests, a great variety of classifications for the term bilingualism has emerged: achieved versus ascribed; compound versus co-ordinate; productive versus receptive; etc.

Along the history of Linguistics, research on bilingualism has not always been directed towards the advantages of it but to its negative effects. That is the position of Jespersen (1992: 148) who expressed that:

> First of all the child in question hardly learns either of the two languages as perfectly as he would have done if he had limited himself to one (…) Secondly, the brain effort required to master the two languages instead of one certainly diminishes the child's power of learning other things which might and ought to be learnt.

In the same fashion, there are other authors claiming that children brought up inside a bilingual context are prone to problems such as stuttering, delay in speaking, etc. But, on the other hand, many claimed, and still do, for the advantages of bilingualism. Researchers such as Peel and Lambert speak about the fact of the existence of <<mental flexibility, a superiority in concept formation, and a more diversified set of mental abilities>> (in Romaine 1998: 112). They also state that (the italics are mine):

> It is not possible to state from the present study whether the more intelligent child became bilingual or whether bilingualism aided his intellectual development, but there is no question about the fact that he is *superior intellectually.*

The case-study presented in this paper supports the idea established by María Luisa Vega (2002) showing that:

> A foreign language can be understand and produced basing the teaching of that second language not on the amount of time the child is exposed to the second language but to a certain methodology previously planned out, designed, thoroughly thought out and steadfastly carried out.

## 2. Case – study

Álvaro is the first male-child of a Spanish couple aged 25 and 29 when the baby was born. The father runs a familiar business inside the field of construction and speaks almost no English at all. Álvaro's mother has better notions of the English language and combines her home life with the gymnasium where she works from time to time. Both of them have standard Castilian accent. They live in Fuenlabrada, a city in the south of Madrid. In this way the language that the baby is constantly hearing is Spanish: his family, the friends of the family, neighbours, etc., being myself the only one addressing him in English.

Since he was born up to the present day a period of 24 months (and an average of one hour and a half/ two hours per day) has been being covered. Seventy per cent of the time, the tow of us have been alone, the rest of time with other members of the family (or friends of them). When speaking with people, although they address me in Spanish, they are always answered back in English. Thus following the idea offered by Romaine (1998: 196) stating that:

> Most of the early investigators seem to stress the view that the 'one person – one language' or 'one language – one source' is the best method of presentation if the child is to avoid confusion and mixing the two languages. Weinreich (1968: 72-4) too emphasized (…) 'the greater the differentiation in the topical and environmental domains in which the two languages are used, the less interference in association'.

This would not be considered a 'normal' way for acquiring a second language, although it would nearly correspond to the type 5 of bilingualism from the different kinds of it listed by Romaine (1989). This type would be the 'non-native parents' kind of bilingualism with the difference that it is not one of the parents the one who addresses the child in a different language but me.

## 2.1. Development of the process

The linguistic development of Álvaro will be divided into two periods: first, from the day he was born up to the 17th month (when he produced his first word in English); second, from the 17th month up to the 26th (this is the current moment and the time when Álvaro has begun to produce two-item words).

The first period is of course one in which the response of the baby towards the language was hardly detected until the 8th month. It was at that time that Álvaro began pointing objects and people under the question "where is/are (the)…?" Being able to recognize the words 'lamp', 'sofa', 'table', 'dummy', 'mummy', 'daddy', and 'nanny' during this month. Álvaro made the set larger during the following months including (pointing) the words 'flowers', 'candles', 'rattle', 'Mickey', 'uncle Jose', 'washing machine', 'your tummy', 'hand', 'picture of the baby', 'Winnie', 'television',' ball', 'car'. He also obeyed to the command "give X to me"/ "give me X" and "give me five".

A list of items constantly repeated to Álvaro since his birthday include:
- Hi dear/ love/ sweetie.
- How is my boy/ child?
- Good/ Right.
- Where is mummy/ daddy?
- Look, there is mummy/ daddy.
- Are you X1 ?/ Is my (little) boy/ baby X1?
- Yes, my (little) boy/ baby is X1.
- No, my (little) boy/ baby is not X1.
  (X1 = hungry, sleepy, happy, wet, dirty, etc.)
- What is my (little) boy/ baby going to do?
- My (little) boy/ baby is going to X2.

(X2 = drink his glass of milk/orange juice/water; take his baby food; sleep; have his bath; etc.)

- Come my boy.
- Come up with Diego.
- Who is there? / who is coming?
- Daddy/ Mummy is there. / Mummy/ Daddy is coming.
- Daddy/ mummy is going off, say bye.
- On/ Off.
- In/ Out.
- Up/ Down.
- Some more? / Still more?
- Look! What is this? It is my baby's/ your/ the child's X3.
    (X3 = parts of the body).
                        It is a X4.
    (X4 = an object from the house).
- Say hello/ hi.
- Say bye-bye/ goodbye.
- Give me a kiss.
- Give mummy/ daddy/ the little girl/boy a kiss.
- What's happened?
- Finished.
- Dirty nappy.
- Let's play with your/ the baby's/ my boy's toys.
- Let's watch a DVD.
- Let's take some water/ juice/ etc.
- Don't cry my boy.
- Everything's ok/ alright.

When Álvaro was older, we began spending some time outside the house and thus the number of items repeated to him got increased:

- Let's go to the park.
- Let's go to the swimming pool.
- Let's play with the children.
- Take care with the stairs.
- Be careful.
- Mind your foot/ hand/ finger/ head.
- The lift, look, this is the lift.
- Press the button.
- Oh! Today is hot/ cold/ windy.
- Oh! It's a hot/ cold/ windy day!
- Look! A car/ a big car/ a green car/ a big green car.
- Don't run.
- Take it easy.
- Do you want to stay here/ go back home (with mummy)/ play with the children?
- Look at this/ these X5, it is a/ they are some X5.
    (X5 = elements from the park: bird(s), tree(s), flower(s), etc.).
- Look at the doggie/ birdie/ catty.
- What does the doggie/ birdie/ catty say? (Imitation of the tweeting, barking, meowing).
- Take mummy's/ my hand.
- The light is red/ yellow/ green.
- Don't cross/ stop.
- Time to cross/ now we can cross.
- Not that way, this other.
- Come here.
- Wait (for me/mummy/etc.).

As told, the second period begins with Álvaro producing his first word in English. If it is taken into account that the average age for a baby to begin speaking (better said babbling) is estimated around the first birthday, it can be said that Álvaro's first word was a little late. Anyway, from that point up to the present day his linguistic development is quite satisfactory. By the time he began speaking, it could be observed the phenomenon of overextension of meanings. Overextension is to be understood as defined by Dale: <<A phenomenon that is widespread in every language is that of overextension of the use of a word to refer to a broader category than is appropriate in the corresponding adult language>> (P. Dale 1976: 9). Thus, the word 'car' was used to refer to lorries, buses, mottos, tractors, etc; the word 'ball' was used to refer to rounded items such as balls of any type and size, balloons, etc; or even the name of a cat, Coco, was used to refer to any cat.

It was also at this initial stage that the use of English or Spanish words was made in a quite free way, depending (I dare infer) on which word was easierly produced. In this way (and no matter with whom the baby were), Álvaro always produced 'ball' (instead of 'pelota'), 'tete' (instead of dummy). It needs to be said that during the last months Álvaro has begun to "differentiate" this use taking into account the people he is with (that is, using 'pelota' with his mother but 'ball' with me) although he continues using words freely.

## 2.2. Production level

**17th month:**
- Ball [bo]
- Car [ka]
- Up and down [apanau]
- That's  [das]

**18th month:**
- Please [pis]
- Bye-bye [baba]
- Banana [banana] [manana]
- Motto [moto]

**20th month:**
- Pooh [pu]
- Quickly [kwiki]
- Nanny [nani]
- Dirty [deti]
- Moon [mu:]
- Please [pis]

**22nd month:**
- Apple [apo]
- Pee [pi:]
- Tummy [tami]
- Open [ope] [opa]
- Dog [do]
- Cow [kau]

**24th month:**
- Cheeks [chis]
- Mouth [maθ]
- Nose [nous]
- Eyes [ais]
- Blue [bu]

It is at this period when Álvaro has begun producing two-item words:
- Blue car [bu ka]
- Open, please [ope/ opa pis] (Other items followed by 'please' are 'up' and 'car')
- Pee quickly [pi kwiki]

Regarding the next steps to be followed, the purpose is to observe the way in which the baby is going to acquire grammatical structures looking for an "order". That is to say, observing which rules he will acquired earlier that others and contrasting this acquisition with the acquisition of his mother language, as told, Spanish. In order to do that, a specific set of input sentences will be developed and Krashen's theories about the acquisition of English as a second language. Taking into account a further future, the aim will be concentrated in the study of the role of the first language in second language acquisition (dealing with concepts such as interference, transfer, etc.) as well as in the study of interlanguage.

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