

# Case Study of a Bilingual First Language Learner

Georgina M. Orbeta<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Eastern Visayas State University-Ormoc City Campus, Georgina.orbeta

## ABSTRACT

This case study chose a 4-year old child named Sharaf. He is considered a simultaneous bilingual since he is learning multiple languages since birth, but his first language or the dominant language being learned is Cebuano. The researcher studied how he learned Cebuano, although in his age when the study was conducted, he has already acquired the language, but his acquisition of the first language is not yet stable. The data from audio and video recordings, observations as well as noted utterances and behaviours of the subject include the first months since the subject was born until May 2017. Additional data were from conversations with his significant others such as his parents, relatives, and grandmother. The main goal of this study is to know what language acquisition theories and principles were manifested in the observations of the subject. The theories and principles that were evident in the observations were Behaviorist theories, Piaget's Sensorimotor Stage of Cognitive Development and Tomasello's Usage Based Theory. Regarding the effect of his being born premature to language development, no sign was seen based on Lenneberg's chart, that he has delay in language acquisition. However, he had some challenges in acquiring his first language fully due to exposure to other languages. Some ways to overcome this difficulty have been identified: code-mixing, use of non-verbal symbols and asking questions.

## Keywords

Acquisition, Bilingual, Language and Learner

Article Received: 10 August 2020, Revised: 25 October 2020, Accepted: 18 November 2020

## Introduction

Language is our means to become fully human. We are born with it, and we are remembered through language. It has been one of the most precious gifts God has given us. Even if we have already acquired one, we still want to acquire another. That is why, with social sciences we conduct case studies on how language is acquired. This study is one of those attempts to answer our main question of how language is acquired from our very own experience with the subject. With limited time, I have tried to test whether the theories I have been studying are valid through recorded observations of the subject.

## Review Of Related Literature

There have been many case studies on language acquisition, either first or second language acquisition and studies pertaining to bilingualism. The following are among those case studies which are closely related to this study.

A case study of Joel Meniado from the University of the Philippines focuses on the process of first language acquisition of a 3-year old Lebanese child. There are many commonalities of the case studies that we have conducted; such as the duration of the study, research design, data gathering procedure, questions, and most of the theoretical bases. Thus, observation notes, interviews, and recordings were analyzed based on the theories and principles of language acquisition. According to the findings of the study, the subject has acquired his first language largely biologically and that he has a well-functioning Language Acquisition Device (Meniado, 2016). On the other hand, the abovementioned study focuses only on the acquisition of the subject's first language and just slightly mentioned that he has understood another language, which is English; while this case study can also analyze how being a bilingual has affected his acquisition of first language. Although there are

a number of researches on simultaneous bilinguals, some challenges are also identified by an article in Portland State University: □ Much of the research that is available does not differentiate between sequential and simultaneous learners. □ Of the research studies that have been conducted, many focus on a specific population group □ Research often does not differentiate between bilingual individuals who are in additive bilingual situations vs. subtractive bilingual situations (Bjelland, 2009) On this same article on Simultaneous Bilingualism, one of the findings in a study conducted to toddlers between the ages of 24-27 months to test whether their being bilingual were a disadvantage. It revealed that bilingual toddlers were not inferior in conceptual vocabulary size and verb diversity when words in both languages were combined. Junker and Stockman 6) found that nearly half of the bilingual conceptual vocabulary (43%) was associated with lexical forms in both languages (Junker and Stockman, as cited by Bjelland, 2009). Also, when children decode unfamiliar words they have not read before, they use their knowledge of how words are pronounced. This can be orthographic which based on the sequences of letters or phonological that is related to the sequences of sounds. Accordingly, these are the same for monolingual and bilingual children (Bjelland, 2009). Another study was on Simultaneous Bilingual Language Acquisition with emphasis on the role of parental input on receptive vocabulary development. The results show that the

children's exposure to German and French language is not balanced. This imbalance is leading to a slowed development of the receptive vocabulary in the minority language, while the majority language is keeping pace with monolingual peers (MacLeod, Fabiano-Smith, Boegner-Pagé & Fontolliet, 2012). For the related studies on the effect of premature birth to language development, there were two articles I have used to correlate with this study. One is a study by Allison Tanner: The Effects of Premature

Birth on Language Development which has emphasized that prelinguistic skills begin to develop right after birth. The study was made to test if the author's belief that prelanguage and language development skills are negatively affected in children who are born premature and significantly effected in infants and toddlers. Results show that premature birth has a negative effect to a child's language development (Tanner, 2012).

## Methods

The paper used a case study research design which aims to identify Language Acquisition Theories and Principles that are manifested or not applied in the subject's attempt at learning his first language. As indicated in the table of Data Gathering, the methods used were audio and video recording, observations of the subject's behaviour and word utterances, short interviews and natural conversations with Sharaf, searching and evaluation of the subject's past pictures and videos, and interviews from people who spend time with him. Recordings included were recorded prior to the date this Case Study had been assigned to us. The records are from the subject's first few months, year 2013 towards the scheduled date that this project is submitted which is May 2017. Majority of the data gathering, but not limited to, is done and comes from my own observation, others from interviews or questions asked from the father and grandmother's experience with the child. A laptop and cellphone were used to record videos and take pictures. Sharaf's facebook account which was created by his Aunt was accessed wherein his pictures and videos were saved. There were more than 30 hours of total data gathered. Sharaf was selected since he qualifies as subject for this study: First Language Acquisition. It is an advantage to choose him as the subject since he near the researcher, there is easy access to his past and present language development.

This study aimed to know what language acquisition theories and principles are evident or manifested in the observations of the subject. Knowing these can be useful in developing effective methods on how to teach a bilingual learner. It is also important to identify parts or points in time of his language acquisition for the past years which have shown evidence that the theories and principles are valid.

Since it is given that the subject is premature, this study also would like to know if being premature has affected his language development milestones. It is important to also know the ways that help the subject overcome difficulties and successfully acquire his first language.

Thorough study of the Language Acquisition Theories and Case Studies related to First language acquisition were done to find out which theories are exhibited or seen in the subject's attempt to acquiring the language. Studies on Bilingualism and acquiring a second language is also studied since at this stage, Sharaf has already used more than one language. Additional research is done to answer the third question which is on the relationship of his being born premature to language development.

## Presentation Of Data And Analysis

There are more than 30 hours worth of data recorded for this study. For every observation or record, remarks related to a

language theory or principle was noted. The main research problem is how the subject acquires his first language, although at his age he has already learned it since he is already 4 years old. That is why much of the data was taken when he was still a few months old until present age. For this question, it correlates with the answer of Meniado's Case Study that his first language acquisition is due to his innate capacity. Although born premature, there were no signs that his language development was delayed in his few months after birth. Right after he was born, he was put in an incubator and though there were restrictions on his movements (with the limited space), he was still able to show signs of early communicative skills. What the subject has acquired in his first language is not solely attributed to his innate ability since language specific learning is still important. Children only learn this language specific knowledge as he interacts with people around him (Saville-Troike, 2006). Aside from his innate capacities, he is also greatly influenced by his environment since he lives in a place where Cebuano is the major language spoken. In the first note on the data gathered, there was a picture taken of him pointing his finger at something when someone was talking to him in Cebuano. This shows that even if infants were still unable to utter words, they can understand us through their gestures. Sharaf's acquisition of his first language and becoming a simultaneous bilingual has been influenced by the people whom he interacts every day.

Language Acquisition Theories and Principles Manifested in the Observations of the Subject:

a. Behaviorism- Sharaf learns his first language due to associations (classical conditioning) when he is conditioned that something is bad and I become angry when he does a bad thing; and with reward (operant conditioning) comes repeated behavior (Gleason, 2013). This theory has also explained how he was able to memorize a short Baha'i prayer. His parents are very pleased every time he recites the prayer, at first 'repeat after me' session and later on, he successfully memorized it. In addition, his recorded action of imitating to read a book is an indication that the behavioral approach's statement is valid, that children are passive beneficiaries of the language training techniques employed by their parents (Gleason, 2013).

b. Piaget's Sensorimotor Stage of Cognitive Development- When Sharaf was 2 years old, he was looking for his ball in the place where it was usually placed even if it was no longer there. This theory of Piaget is manifested in the subject's recorded behavior.

c. Tomasello's Usage Based Theory- Sharaf uses more than one language: Cebuano (major language), Waray (little exposure since his grandmother and father speaks it sometimes, Tagalog (his grandmother usually speaks it) and English (mostly through watching videos on the internet). It has been noted that when he wants to go with his grandmother,

he uses the word "sama" which means "to go with." When his parents are leaving, he uses the word "kuyog" which is Cebuano. Tomasello's Usage-Based Approach mentions that utterance is used to both direct a recipient's attention to something referentially, and also to express a communicative motive (Bavin, 2009).

d. Research results have indicated that children as young as two years old in their early stages of bilingual development

use their two languages differentially and appropriately with others (Genesee, 2012). Sharaf has been seen to communicate with his grandmother and parents in different ways. e. Bilingual children who are not always exposed to one of their languages may use the sounds, words or grammar of their stronger language when using the weaker language (Genesee, 2012). Sharaf's stronger language is Cebuano that is why at present he often speaks this language, although mixed with Tagalog and English words. When he talks or responds to his grandmother in Tagalog, his tone is Cebuano-like.

Other discussions in the main resources of this course are evident in the subject's actuations, utterances and behaviors. One of them is the use of labels to identify something but uses a different name for it. Sharaf names the "choco pao" of Chowking as "brown an white." The mother temporarily agrees with the "mislabel" since the child has his own categories.

For the second question on the effect of Sharaf's being born premature to his language development, the two related studies have indicated that there is a negative effect to it. Although Tanner's study said that children born premature do not always exhibit signs of language delay, I tried to look into the developmental milestones of Lenneberg from Lust's book. At 3 months, he was able to smile when someone was talking to him and it matched with the chart. At 12 months, although he could not utter words, he seemed to understand what we were saying by his actions such as pointing and responding when his name was called. In another chart showing language milestones of infants, at 12-18 months, he was able to imitate what adults around him were doing such as taking a phone and acting like he was making a call. This is also in congruence with the observed behavior of Sharaf when he was 1 year and 6 months old.

The ways that help the subject overcome difficulties and successfully acquire his first language: a. Code switching- Sharaf uses two languages or more in a single utterance. He was supposed to speak in full Cebuano sentence but forgets the term for 'dog' in Cebuano, so he used "aso" which is tagalong. b. Use of non-verbal symbols- He continues or finishes his sentence with action. c. Asking questions- He frequently asks questions if he finds it hard to say the right word.

### Conclusions And Recommendations

Based on the data gathered and the noted theories and principles most of the subject's utterances, actuations and behaviors are in accordance to the language acquisition theories and principles. Sharaf's first language is acquired at the same time the other languages are acquired that is why he is called a simultaneous bilingual learner. However, Cebuano is his dominant or major language since most of his utterances are in Cebuano; the environment is most responsible for this. Most known language theories such as Behaviorism and Socio-Cognitive are manifested in the subject's observed utterances and actuations. It can be concluded that as of Sharaf's age, there is no sign of language delay, only challenges in fully acquiring his first language due to multiple languages exposure. Further studies with more in-depth study on the language acquisition theories and principles and more observations on the subject

is recommended to have more complete answers to research questions

### References

- [1] Bavin, E.L. (ed.)(2009). The Cambridge handbook of child language. Cambridge University Press: UK. Bjelland, Jerae (2009). Simultaneous Bilingualism. Multicultural Topics in Communications, Sciences and Disorders. Portland State University Ellis, R. (1997). Second language acquisition. Oxford University Press.
- [2] Gass, S. & Selinker, L. (2008). Second language acquisition: An introductory course (3rd ed). Routledge: NY. Genesee, Fred. (2012). Simultaneous Bilingual Acquisition. Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network.
- [3] Gleason, J. B. (2005). The development of language. Pearson Education: USA. Lust, B.C. (2006). Child language acquisition and growth. Cambridge University Press: UK.
- [4] Macleod, Andrea; Fabiano-Smith, Lea; Boegner-Page and Fontolliet, Salome. Simultaneous bilingual language acquisition: The role of parental input on receptive vocabulary development. NCBI. Published online 2012 Dec 30. doi: 10.1177/0265659012466862 Meniado, Joel C. (2016) First language acquisition: A case study of a three-year old Lebanese child. Journal of Child Language Acquisition and Development – JCLAD Vol: 4 Issue: 3 98-112
- [5] Orillos, L. (1997). Language acquisition theories, principles, and research. UPOU: Quezon City, Phil. Saville-Troike, M. (2006). Introducing second language acquisition. Cambridge University Press: UK Tanner, Allison M., "The Effects of Premature Birth on Language Development" (2012). Research Papers. Paper 250. [http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/gs\\_rp/250](http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/gs_rp/250) Trawinski, M. ( 2005). An outline of second language acquisition theories. Krakow.