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The Attitudes of Bilingual Children to a New Language

Yoko Wilson

Abstract

The current study is an analysis of interviews of two simultaneous bilingual children, which were implemented while the children stayed abroad, in Norway for a year, from April 2017 to March 2018. The interviews were carried out to explore how bilingual children reacted to their new environment and to their third language, Norwegian, which was their first non-native language. They showed reticence toward actively using Norwegian although their overall attitude toward Norway was positive. At the end of the year, English became their primary language while Japanese lost its relative dominance. Through coding and analysis, four topics emerged, two of which (people and school) are discussed in this study. This is a part of a larger case study currently in progress.

Informants

The informants were two daughters of the author, aged seven and nine at the beginning of their stay in Norway, in an intermarried family of an American father and a Japanese mother (the author). They were born and raised in Japan. All of their schooling had been in the local Japanese school system. They had very limited experience outside Japan. They both had been to Italy for 10 days before starting elementary school. In addition, the older had had two trips to the US for about two weeks each. They were too young to remember anything but vague memories from their stays overseas.

Before moving to Norway, they both used English predominantly at home with both of their parents and spoke Japanese exclusively at their local kindergarten and elementary school. They were both fluent in both languages, however their preference of language shifted over the years. Until the end of kindergarten both children were more fluent in English, however, after they had entered elementary school, they began to show differences. While the older child, Ena (pseudonym) stayed more fluent in and preferred English, the younger, Rina (pseudonym) became more fluent in and preferred Japanese. When the younger Rina started elementary school, the two started to speak more Japanese than English at home too. This phenomenon, the older child being more fluent in the minority language than the younger, is often observed among multilingual children as shown in the study by Keller, Troesch and Grob (2015). Immediately after they left Japan for Norway with their English-speaking father, they switched to use English exclusively. One week later, when I reunited with them in Norway, they no longer voluntarily used any Japanese between them, or even to me.

Since Ena had attended school in Japan for three years, she was already able to read and write

functionally in Japanese, including using kanji. Rina, on the other hand, was a beginner reader and writer in Japanese after having spent her first year at school. As for English, whereas Ena had a solid reading skill in English and was able to write too, Rina was barely able to read and not yet functionally able to write in English – she had difficulty writing the alphabet.

Prior Knowledge of Norwegian

They did not experience Norwegian in Norway as a complete clean slate. Before they left Japan, they had practiced Norwegian (bokmål, the more dominant dialect in Norway) through computer software designed to teach children a foreign language. As they arrived in Norway, they were able to recognize some words such as ‘dog’ or ‘cat’ and phrases ‘hello’ or ‘thank you’. However, their knowledge was very limited, that is, they did not speak it functionally as they arrived.

Life in Norway

During the year, the family stayed in a house in a small village on a lake about two hours by car from the capital city, Oslo. There were no shops in the village. The nearest shop was a gas station 2.5 km away. Ena became seriously ill soon after she arrived in Norway and had to delay her school start by one month. In addition, due to this illness, she was not allowed to take part in sports throughout the following two months. Their elementary school was small with the standard seven grades with only one class in each grade (the biggest class having 26 children). Some other students were from immigrant families but they grew up in Norway and did not need any extra help in Norwegian. As the children arrived in Norway, in April 2017, they were placed in the fourth grade and the second grade and moved up to the fifth and third grade respectively after the summer vacation. At the end of the year, Rina (the younger) scored in the normal range in the national test on Norwegian aimed at native speakers. In addition, by the end of the year, she acquired a good accent in Norwegian and on one occasion, the father of her friend mentioned she sounded just like a Norwegian child when she spoke in short sentences. Ena (the older) refused to speak Norwegian at school, her homeroom teacher mentioning that she never heard her speak Norwegian except in one instance in December. However, neither of them showed much motivation or interest in actively learning or using Norwegian.

Back in Japan

After the year was over and when they came back to Japan, they became more willing to use Norwegian. The parents found out that they were able to understand most Norwegian TV shows for children (age appropriate level) and especially Ena can translate for the father when he doesn't follow the story. That was beyond what the parents thought they were able to handle. When asked why she speaks more Norwegian now than in Norway, Ena answered that it was more comfortable because her interlocutors were not native speakers.

Both children stay fond of Norway even now and they like to do a few things that they consider

typically Norwegian, such as watching NRK (the Norwegian national broadcasting company) TV shows or listening some songs they learned in Norway. Another way Norwegian has remained in their lives is that when they need to talk about something that they do not want people around them to understand, they will often use Norwegian. They began a distance course in Norwegian (Globalskolen) five months after returning from Norway and have continued for over one year in order to maintain their Norwegian skills. Overall their interest and motivation to continue using Norwegian has remained high, and although living away from Norway, their language skills have been generally maintained.

Interview Method

Both informants were interviewed by the author, three times during the year, in April, August, and January for around 15–20 minutes each. English was used during the interviews because it was the language most frequently used at home. The interview method was semi-structured. I asked them both about the following points during the first interview. During the second and third interview sessions, I did not ask all the follow-up points for each question when the answers were already obvious. In addition the wordings and the orders of questions were altered to better fit into the flow of the interviews.

- I . Tell me about your life in Norway.
 - A) What are things you like?
 - B) What are things you don't like?
 - C) Tell me about school.
 - D) Tell me about people/your friends.
- II . Tell me about your Norwegian use.
 - A) Where or when do you use it?
 - B) To who do you speak it?
 - C) How do you feel when you speak it?
 - D) How do people respond?
- III . Tell me about your English use.
 - A) Where or when do you use it?
 - B) To who do you speak it?
 - C) How do you feel when you speak it?
 - D) How do people respond?
- IV . Tell me about your Japanese use.
 - A) Where or when do you use it?
 - B) To who do you speak it?
 - C) How do you feel when you speak it? Is it different from Norwegian and English?
 - D) How do people respond?
- V . Is Norway different from Japan or is it similar?

Results

The case study by Shi (2005) on her son is the most similar in format to the current study. However, the informant in Shi's study was already 11 years and 8 months old. That is, he was older than my informants. Probably due to her young age, Rina often used short sentences and sometimes fell into one-word answers, such as "happy" or "sometimes", whereas Ena generally answered with more words for each question. Also Rina code-switched 12 times (seven times into Japanese and five times into Norwegian) whereas Ena did only once (into Japanese). This may have been triggered by her personality but also possibly by her age.

The answers to the questions are organized in the following section in the tables. These answers are not the direct quotes but the gist of what they said.

Table 1. Question 1. Tell me about your life in Norway.

	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3
Ena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She found the Norwegian school much better. • There was more nature. • She liked the house in which the family lived. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She found the summer vacation great and very different from Japan. • She talked about outdoor activities she had done. • She did not look forward to the start of school even though she preferred it to Japanese school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She loved her life in Norway. • She found Norway different from Japan.
Rina	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She described her life as fun. • She said she liked almost everything, including school. • She missed her stuffed animals in Japan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She believed she had the best summer vacation. • She talked about the outdoor activities she had done during the vacation. • She looked forward to the school start. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She thought her life was both good and bad. The bad part was that she missed her friends in Japan. • She was not sure if she looked forward to going back to Japan.

They generally both showed positive attitudes toward Norway throughout the year and Rina mentioned she missed Japan. While Rina did not say whether she preferred Norway or Japan, Ena showed her preference of Norway multiple times. It is ironic that Ena insisted that she liked Norway better because she experienced serious illness while there, and later did not enjoy the school as much as her sister.

Table 2. Question 2. Tell me about your Norwegian use.

	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3
Ena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She used Norwegian to speak to two of her friends who were not fluent in English. • She used more Norwegian at school but not much during class. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She mostly spoke English during the summer vacation. • She believed trying to use Norwegian among the family members at home was not ideal. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She used mostly English at school but in some classes she used some Norwegian.
Rina	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She spoke a little Norwegian at school both in and out of class. • It was very hard. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She spoke a little Norwegian when the family spoke Norwegian together, which she did not want to do. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She used Norwegian with other children except a few who were fluent in English. • Norwegian in class was still very difficult.

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They generally did not speak Norwegian at home throughout the year. I also noticed through everyday conversations with them that they preferred English at school too.

During the interviews both of them mentioned reticence to use Norwegian at some point. Ena was more reticent to use Norwegian than Rina, however Rina also emphasized how difficult Norwegian in class was. Especially during the third interview, Rina told how difficult Norwegian was, as opposed to English and Japanese "...if you are at my class, you'd be like "Yeah, I (mother) get why Rina hates it." She also said "Take it from me, it's super hard".

Ena's motivation to use Norwegian appears to have waned over the year. In the first interview it is clear that her attitude toward using Norwegian was not very positive, however she obviously was trying at school.

Once I spoke almost all day in Norwegian because I was speaking with Veronica (pseudonym). Yeah, the only time I speak English is that... when I didn't know the word in Norwegian and I was getting fed up with speaking Norwegian.

Well first half of the day, I just feel really paranoid about speaking Norwegian, but later, I'm fine.

This however changed in the third interview. When asked about why she chose English, she responded "I have a bunch of weird ideas that I can't explain (in Norwegian)." She was not satisfied with her Norwegian competence. I asked further about her avoidance of Norwegian.

Author: Is it really because you can't speak? (In reference to not using Norwegian)

Ena: Sometimes no.

Author: Why?

Ena: I just got used to it. (Meaning that she got used to not using Norwegian)

Aside from her dissatisfaction, it also appears she had fallen into the habit of using English even when she could handle the communication in Norwegian. In addition to this inertia, fear of embarrassment emerged in the interviews. During the first interview she mentioned her worry about making errors "I'm a bit embarrassed... They are native speakers, you know. I'm just a person who would probably make a lot of mistakes and stuff." She mentioned in the third interview she found her father speaking Japanese embarrassing too. She believed he had "terrible pronunciation" and it was embarrassing even in a town in Norway where nobody else spoke Japanese. It appears her perfectionism or fear of errors handicapped her from actively trying to use Norwegian that she did not feel confident with. As Le Page and Tabouret-Keller asserted "to speak - or even not to speak in a social encounter - is always an act of identity." (As cited in Bailey, 2007) This applied for a nine-year-old child.

Table 3. Question 3. Tell me about your English use.

	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3
Ena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She used it with everyone. • She felt calm and normal when using English. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She mostly spoke English during the summer vacation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whenever she could use English, she used English.
Rina	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She used English almost always home and at school too. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She spoke a lot of English. • She stated that when she would go back to school after the vacation, she would be speaking English. 	

They spent a large amount of time speaking English not only at home but also at school where the classes were carried out in Norwegian. They got translation help from the teachers during the classes so they were able to follow the content. After the summer vacation, the school provided a special Norwegian class for non-native speakers for Ena and Rina to attend two times a week. Even in this class, much of the time was carried out in English. English established itself as their primary and preferred language during this year.

Table 4. Question 4. Tell me about your Japanese use.

	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3
Ena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She used Japanese with her sister and mother at home. • She felt fine with using it. • The writing system (kanji) appeared stupid. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She spoke only a little. • Her father's Japanese was embarrassing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She did not recall that she used to use a lot of Japanese to communicate with her sister less than a year ago. • She showed reticence to speak Japanese, which she associated with bad past experiences.
Rina	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She used Japanese with her sister and mother at home. • She emphasized Japanese was very easy. • It felt the same to speak English and Japanese. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She spoke some Japanese at home. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After she answered that Japanese was easier than Norwegian, she switched to Japanese.

Both of them used little Japanese over the year because they each had only two other speakers of Japanese in their environment. On the other hand, English was extremely functional everywhere in Norway. Everyone in the family was able to speak English and English was the most dominant and prestigious foreign language in Norway. Accordingly much of communication with adults could be carried out in English while Japanese had no value as a communication tool outside home. In order to maintain the girls' Japanese, the family had to deliberately use it though it was not most convenient. As a result, Japanese use waned over the year.

The interview results reflect this. It is remarkable that Ena's generally positive attitude toward Japanese at the beginning became far less positive over the year. In addition, she did not remember that she used to use more Japanese every day to communicate with her sister at home.

During the first interview, Ena described the Japanese writing system as "stupid" because it takes a long time to learn all the kanji. She had always liked to read, however around this time, due to her sickness, she started to spend yet more time reading and was transitioning into chapter books in English. Her comment may have been influenced by this improvement in English reading, which was

done with relative ease.

Rina did not express any negative attitude toward Japanese language during the interviews. In the third interview, she suddenly switched to Japanese and said “Atarimaeni kore shabatteruno (I’m speaking this naturally)” after she told me that Japanese was easier than Norwegian. Maybe she was trying to emphasize the ease of using Japanese for her by code-switching.

Table 5. Question 5. Is Norway different from Japan or similar?

	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3
Ena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everything was different. • The Norwegian school was smaller and better. • There was more nature in Norway. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summer vacations in Japan and Norway were not similar at all. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Norway was different. • There were fewer mean people and boys were less annoying.
Rina	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There were houses in both Norway and Japan but the houses themselves were not similar to each other. • The school was better in Norway because of less homework. 		

Both children stated their school in Norway was better in the first interview. Although I only asked this question in the first interviews, Ena kept stating that Norway was very different from Japan throughout the year without me asking her about it specifically. Rina stopped talking about the differences. Ena kept a positive attitude toward Norway, which contrasted with her negative attitude toward Japan.

Outside the interviews she also often recalled her experience of being bullied in Japan and it was the topic appeared in the second interview. It appears that her past negative experience in the Japanese school system influenced her avoidance of Norwegian school. She said that she did not look forward to going back to the Norwegian school after the summer vacation because “the beginning of the (Japanese) school was...the worst. ...I know this’ll be different but still I’m not looking forward to it... Because in Japan, bullies, bullies, bullies.”

Coding

Since I deliberately allowed them to “go off the topic”, though they answered all my questions, often their answers only superficially touched on the topics I wanted to hear. Because of this, I did not expect that the data had too much information relevant to the original goals of this study. After reflection, I realized that these “off topic” parts of their answers contained what mattered to them back then, even though it was not directly about language or answering my questions specifically. They spoke about how they perceived the world around them and organized their understanding, even though it maybe simplistic. After this realization, I coded and analyzed the data. In retrospect, it may have been more productive if I had given them even more control over choosing what to talk about.

In the first coding, I looked for recurring words the informants used using In Vivo Coding (Saladaña, 2013), particularly the words they chose themselves rather than copying my wording. Then I

examined those words to find if they could be organized into topics. Through this process following topics emerged: people, school, nature and belongings. For the purposes of the current study, I am limiting the discussion to only the topics of people and school.

Topics which emerged though coding and analysis

Topic 1: People

The first topic is “people.” Although both children talked a lot about people, they used distinct styles. Rina spoke mostly about real people that she personally knew. She tended to stress how much fun she had with them. She often used the word “fun” when talking about people. In addition, the two of her five code-switching instances into Norwegian during the interviews were “Bli med og lek! (Join in and play!)” and “Vil du bli med og leke? (Do you want to join in and play?)”. Both were about playing.

On the other hand, Ena made less frequent references to real people unless she was asked about them specifically. In order to describe the difference, I use the word “reference” to refer to a talk about the topic, namely people here, regardless of the length. It can be a monologue or a dialogue with me, which is punctuated with my questions or clarification requests. When the topic changed during the interview, I treated it as the end of the reference. Rina made the total of 28 (19 of them individually identified) people references whereas Ena made 25 (13 of them individually identified). 13 of these references by Rina showed a positive attitude toward them whereas only four of Ena’s were clearly positive. Ena used names less frequently and used more general terms such as “people”, “boys” or occasionally “girls”. Those references were generally in indicating how poorly they treated her, or how they might treat her poorly. Ena also brought up the word “boys” more often than Rina did. The word “boys” was often accompanied with such words as “stupid” and “annoying”. She tended to portray them somewhat as enemies of her and girls, though she assessed her boy classmates in Norway “not nearly as annoying as” their counterpart in Japan.

Interestingly all positive four references by Ena had names. These are too few to generalize, but she possibly had more positive attitude to real people than more abstract and generalized ideas about people in her mind.

Topic 2: School

The word “school” also appeared frequently during the interviews. Both children mentioned how good they were at some class activities, for example, Ena mentioned she was good at crossword puzzles and Rina insisted that math was too easy for her.

When asked to talk about school, Rina had a tendency of talking about her classmates or teachers. She showed appreciation toward her classmates and teachers portraying them “...there are a lot of nice friends. Almost all my friends are nice [First interview]” and she was happy to go back to school when the summer vacation was coming to an end. She said “When I go to the classroom, I’m gonna say it to her (her classroom teacher). And I’m going to be so happy.... I can’t wait to see them (her class mates) [Second interview]”. She did not make negative remarks on people. In addition, she showed her contentment with the free time she received at school, expressing “The best part is

it's like one hour and the *free minute* (Norwegian for break time influencing her English), one hour, lunch, *free minute*. [First interview].” In the first interview, she also mentioned that she loved the schoolyard where she was able to play with the equipment such as swings or zipline. On the other hand, when the topic was class content, she generally made negative statements about it, such as “... if you were at my class, you'd be like ‘Yeah, I get why Hikari hates this (referring to Norwegian and math classes)’ [Third interview].” The only class she made clearly positive descriptions were the special Norwegian class for non-native speakers she took with her sister. Because they were the only students who required special class in Norwegian at the school, they were alone in class with the teacher. Her comment does not clearly indicate what she learned in class, but she summarized the class as ‘fun’ [Third interview]. For her, the school seemed to have had a value as a place to hang out with her peers and teachers rather than as a place to study.

In addition, Rina talked about playing at school and less homework as a positive side of the school in Norway whereas Ena did not talk much about playing at school.

Ena did not talk about school as enthusiastically as Rina. Her descriptions of the school stayed more general and tend to not to have as detailed information as Rina's. She did not come to like the school in Norway as much as Rina did. Not only during the interviews, but also in everyday life on several occasions, she mentioned how difficult it was for her to go to school even in Norway where she did not experience bullying, rationalizing this as being due to her experience being bullied in school in Japan.

Discussion

In the interview, Rina came across more content with her life in Norway. She had a positive attitude toward people and the school at large. She talked about people and the school in context of playing. Ena, on the other hand, had a harder life. She was less positive toward a generalized image of people and school than Rina due to her bad past experience. Despite her less positive attitude, she liked a few people with whom she became close to in Norway.

Before the stay in Norway, I naively imagined the children would become relatively fluent in Norwegian without trouble just because they were children. This, however, did not happen. The children showed clear reticence or avoidance to actively use Norwegian. The older Ena also showed a sense of embarrassment or fear about making errors in front of native speakers, even though she was only ten at the end of the stay.

I also did not predict that English would establish its position as the primary language for the children during the year in Norway where English is not the official language. Even now, after they have been back in Japan for one year and half, they mostly use English with each other. Before the stay, Japanese had a very sturdy place in their language repertoire and used to compete with English. In some cases, they preferred to use it. Norwegian, however, did not even come close to the other languages. The children's Norwegian use was limited mostly to school and in cases where they had to use it, for example, when others did not understand English.

Their preference of English may simply be a result of its versatility in Norway and accessibility for them. Namely it was the most cost efficient language. They may have been more willing to use

Norwegian if they hadn't been able to speak English. To illustrate this point, I want to reference an anecdote from a Norwegian textbook for non-native speakers in which an immigrant student from a non-English speaking country says that she became very fluent in English after she has moved to Norway. It is true that English is so widely used among adults in Norway that it is often easier to speak English with the population, rather than learning Norwegian.

It is possible that the informants switching to English is also an identity issue. According to Edwards (as cited in Kanno, 2010) "language is not only a tool of communication but 'an emblem of groupness.'" Both children in this study may have chosen, though probably unconsciously, to belong to the English-speaking group. In the study by Kanno (2010), bilingual returnees from Canada showed "a desire to be included in what they perceived to be the 'mainstream' of the society". The children in the current study did not seem to be attracted to the mainstream language of Norway or Japan. Possibly they may have perceived English as the mainstream in the world because in both Norway and Japan, English has a high prestige.

Last but not least, the relative short duration of the stay must be taken into consideration since it definitely played a big roll in all aspects of the children's lives. This time limit may have freed them from pressure to acculturate fully into Norwegian society and may also have discouraged them from learning the language.

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