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# A Look at Modern Day Bilingualism

Honors Capstone

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Bilingualism is a fascinating phenomenon that touches and affects multiple realms of someone's life as well as affecting many societal and larger interactions. By mastering and being fluent in at least two languages, untold opportunities, changes, and perspectives can be learned and further explored. Experiencing life in two languages is like experiencing two different worlds or seeing things from multiple perspectives. People become bilingual for a variety of factors such as assimilation, integration, higher education, or through their profession. Becoming bilingual can affect not only the person's life, but also their own physiology and neurological activity, economic and social standing, and cultural and historical perception; these three specific factors will be the focus of this study as to how bilingualism affects one's life.

Bilingualism was first introduced as a term in 1873 as defined as the ability to speak two languages (Merriam-Webster). This definition is, however, not all-encompassing concept of what this term can mean in actuality. The debate as to when someone is truly bilingual is still a topic today as many deem themselves as not native speakers from birth therefore not bilingual, yet they are highly proficient in two if not more languages. For many, this debate and definition apply only if the acquired second language was introduced simultaneously with their mother tongue at a very young age allowing them to develop near or actual native-level fluency in the language in all of its forms. This term of bilingualism stretches far behind just the grasps and comprehension of language as it also stretches into society and cultures and how people even think and are perceived. Some people don't describe themselves as bilingual, yet they can express themselves almost flawlessly in two or more languages; this has to do with their perception of culture as well as their manner of thinking and how their thoughts are processed before they are able to express them. As famous American linguist, Noam Chomsky once said, "I'm about as monolingual as you come, but nevertheless I have a variety of different languages

at my command, different styles, different ways of talking, which do involve different parameter settings” (Grosjean). This clearly demonstrates that language acquisition doesn’t seem to be the only qualifying factor and definition of bilingualism. In fact, the true distinction for many in the definition of bilingualism is as much a manner of thinking and cultural understanding as it is a matter of fluency and comprehension in languages.

This definition of bilingualism as an encompassing definition of many different areas of understanding often holds many multi-language speakers back from define and declaring themselves as truly and completely bilingual. Those that already completely grasp multiple languages in all of their forms are already opened to seeing more variety and understanding of life which can often lead them to be self-critical when withholding this affirmation. This can be clearly demonstrated and seen in Canli’s study with foreign language professors in Turkey. While all professors were effectively proficient, if not fluent, in the English language to be qualified enough to receive their degrees and teach English as a foreign language, only 24 of the 32 assessed professors categorized themselves as being bilingual (Canli and Canli). Thus, it seems that bilingualism goes much further than its limited definition and understanding of total mastery of multiple languages. Of the eight that said they wouldn’t call themselves bilingual, they had the least teaching experience out of the sample population and all had reportedly never been to or lived in a country where the second language was the official or majority language (Canli and Canli). It seems then that this classification also holds with it some societal and cultural understanding that accompanies the language.

Those professors that did not classify themselves as bilingual cited specific reasons having to do with little experience with the culture, native speakers, and being fully immersed within that language and society. One of the eight stated, “I do not consider myself as a bilingual

person because I have learnt English after I learnt Turkish as my mother tongue. I wasn't brought up learning two languages from birth." Another said, "I haven't lived enough in a country where the target language is spoken" (Canli and Canli). Others expressed that, while they could fully converse and express themselves in English, they felt stronger and more confident explaining ideas in their native Turkish (Canli and Canli). While language and acquiring the secondary language simultaneously with the mother language seems to be deemed as indicators of bilingualism, societal understanding and cultural knowledge along with immersion seem to play critical roles as well.

Though the exact defined timeline of when someone must become bilingual is vaguely defined, there are many different reasons for acquiring a second language. Many people gain this skill as a result of immigration or relocation, assimilation within a society, through higher education, or through or for their profession. While these bilingual learners may be acquiring a new skill set, however, their presence and acceptance aren't always met with tolerance and understanding; unfortunately, the presence of diversity or an unfamiliar language can sometimes be met with hostility, fear, or resentment. This intolerance of foreign speakers is especially true within a monolingual society or culture or one dominated by a majority language, where the presence of another language may not always be welcomed and appreciated. Such examples of intolerance can be seen in the United States under the current government administration that has sought to vilify Hispanics, particularly Mexicans. This vilification of Hispanics has led to an increase in hostility and tensions between the English majority and Spanish speaking minority within America, and outbursts of people attacking Hispanics demanding that they "speak English" have risen (CNN). An example of intolerance can be seen when Hector Torres was attacked at an airport by a stranger for speaking Spanish to his Puerto Rican mother on May 23,

2017 (CNN). Many Hispanic communities feel personally threatened and targeted by the current administration that seems to almost incite hatred against them; they feel that the current actions of the President along with the deplorable things he has said about Hispanics and Mexicans particularly in the past allows or encourages majority English speakers to force their ideas of America and language on others by any means.

This critical situation regarding cultures demanding people assimilate to an already preconceived notion and idea of a society is very dangerous, as many wish to keep in touch with their ancestral culture and, often times, ancestral languages as a means of preserving family history and pride. This scary and poor treatment of a minority language and group within a dominant or monolingual society can create many tensions and friction between the two as the dominant society tries to impose its values and culture and force the minority group to assimilate. To the dominant or monolingual society, having the skill of communicating and expressing oneself in multiple languages is not always praised, but instead often looked upon as a burden or something to discriminate against. This negative opinion regarding multilingual individuals leads to tensions and noticeable differences between generation groups as the original minority language begins to fade and is replaced with the dominant language of the newly immersing society. This diminishing language pattern can often lead young children that are the first new generation of immigrant families to be the bilingual translator between their families and the world around them. Yet as these generations continue, the newer generations will have lost the skill of the original language and connection to their ancestral culture (Alba et al.). This pattern of assimilation and bilingual disadvantage is illustrated by Alba and Shin's Hispanic and Asian economic model of bilingualism within the United States.

While many would assume that being bilingual would be an economic advantage, it actually turns out to be a disadvantage and burden for many minority groups and immigrants both throughout America and Canada. Average yearly incomes and salaries were statistically compared across varying minority groups and secondary languages to monolingual English speakers as well as bilingual minority members. The results showed a disturbing distribution that tended to favor the monolingual English speakers when compared to bilingual and monolingual secondary language speakers. This study also considered how fluent in English the participants were, what language they tended to use at home, and their highest education fulfillment. The results show that individuals who have limited English proficiency suffer a large wage penalty in the U.S. labor market. More importantly, there are few indicators of a general economic advantage to being a “fluent” bilingual versus English monolingual. For several groups, most notably the largest Hispanic and Asian groups—Mexicans, Chinese, and Filipinos—there are indications of an economic penalty for bilingualism (Shin and Alba). This study not only shows the economic value of different minority languages but also shows how society values members of these minority groups. These economic factors driving future generations to abandon their native tongue coupled with the societal pressure to assimilate often outweigh the advantage of keeping the native mother tongue alive for the vast majority of families. Economics and financial opportunities help act as a catalyst for many to adopt new customs and ways and actively assimilate into the culture. Some similar yet intriguing data can be drawn from Canadian models comparing the officially bilingual territories of Québec and New Brunswick.

Many economic studies comparing the French-speaking provinces to the English speaking provinces have been done in Canada with distinctive and peculiar results. Carliner found significant wage returns to Francophones in Canada for being bilingual in English.

However, bilingual Francophones did not earn wages above their English-monolingual counterparts when compared across provinces. Meanwhile, bilingual Anglophones were observed to earn a small amount more than English monolinguals (Carliner). It was also later found that bilingual workers who were fluent in languages other than French and English earned significantly less than French bilinguals and English monolinguals (Pendakur and Pendakur). With this data, it seems that Francophone bilinguals are at an advantage in Canada, yet still aren't as economically powerful as English monolinguals. This data helps determine what drives not only the economy in Canada but also the economic power and advantages associated with each officially recognized language across the bilingual country.

This linguistic and economic analysis is further explored through Benton's *New Canadian Perspectives* collection. Benton approaches Francophone inequality and misrepresentation within the Canadian economy and elaborates on how they must bear the burden of bilingualism. He shows that the motivations for second language learners can help show who has the economic power in the relationship and in what state the learners are in. He addresses this so-called burden of bilingualism as putting it as the lower economic power must match the higher power's language in order to engage in trade and business in the hopes of bettering themselves (Benton). Benton also later shows that those who learn the second language due to higher academics or higher professions are more likely to do business and trade and almost welcome the speakers of this second language; this can create an even further divide between languages and cultures as one tends to grow and overrun as an almost sense of cultural and linguistic imperialism. Breton points to Québec as the Québécois are almost forced to be bilingual, but highly prefer to speak and work with other Francophones; he says that this concerning sense of monolingualism is only becoming worse, but leaves Québécois people at a

disadvantage for not learning and perfecting their English. As the Francophone Québécois strive to retain their language and historical customs, this unfortunately further isolates them and lowers their ability to work and interact with the rest of Anglophone Canada that is more economically dominant.

The burden of bilingualism seems to fall upon the smaller, less populated, and less economically powerful regions and territories. Québec fits all of these criteria when compared to the rest of Anglophone Canada and thus must be forced to learn and engage more in English than the anglophones do in French. The evidence is clear that, historically, Francophones have invested, on the average, more resources per capita in the learning of a second language than have the Anglophones ever have (Brenton). This heavy importance placed upon second language learning makes geographical and historical sense, as Québec has often been suppressed by the rest of Anglophone Canada as well as laws coming from anglophone Ottawa.

The first anglophone conquest against French Canada dates back to 1759 under Lord Egremont when the British conquered what was then Nouvelle France and attacked the city of Québec (Blood and Morrissette). The French eventually capitulated after the battle at the Plains of Abraham in Québec and the period of the English military regime began. Under this suppressive regime, the previous French citizens had to swear against their previous nation and loyalty, against their religion, and against their own language. The goal of this demoralizing act on behalf of the English was to remove all aspects of previous French society and make the new conquests part of the new British regime (Blood and Morrissette). Speaking their own native language became a crime as well as maintaining loyalty to their previous nation or God. Eventually, this isolating cruelty was overturned by the Québec Act in 1774, which once again recognized French as an official language in the Québec region and allowed Québec to practice

Catholicism as well as maintain their own justice system. These acts of recognition were still followed by many years of tension which finally surmounted in the Tranquil Revolution in the 1960's and 70's which once again reaffirmed educational rights in French at all levels and French expression throughout Québec (Blood and Morrisette). This inspired a literary, cultural, economic and political revolution in Québec that later influenced the second revolution in the 1990's. During this period, sovereign parties were gaining a large following within Québec and many Québécois wanted Québec to be its own sovereign nation apart from anglophone Canada. The referendum barely failed with a 50.58% favor against the decision to split from the rest of Canada, but many Québécois still feel strongly independent from Canada today (Blood and Morrisette). This sense of pride and sovereignty can be seen to explain why many Francophones are falling into the dangerous realm of favoring monolingualism within Québec and only choose to interact with other French speakers; they are still afraid and remember what happened in their past to their identity and culture so they strive to preserve it today by whatever means necessary, even at their own demise and downfall. This is why many Francophones will choose to do business and interact with other Francophones instead of compromising and learning or using English to better themselves economically.

It then seems that not only does economics play a significant role in the burden of bilingualism, but historical and cultural aspects play an important role as well as they affect the preservation of a culture and society. This burden can then be affected by aspects such as geography and national borders, national size and population, history, as well as economics. These factors can all play significant roles in deciding between two countries which must learn the other's language. Ultimately, it is these factors that make a variety of languages desirable and attractive as to who they could most benefit based on location, economic situation, and power.

Yet, this drive to learn or preserve another language can often be met by resistance, turmoil, or financial difficulty. The educational cost must greatly outweigh the possible benefits or should possibly be shared between the parties as it ultimately benefits both. Allowing this education of a foreign language in one's own language allows for a much more comprehensive understanding and progression in the foreign language and allows these speakers to fully learn and realize their potential by accommodating to their initial language of education. Allowing education to continue in many people's mother tongue allows students to not only better themselves but also understand things on a much deeper level than possible in a second language. By not forcing learners to try to comprehend topics or different fields in a foreign language, much confusion and misunderstanding can be avoided—ultimately making the education time spent much more effectively. Such ease and fluidity can be seen and used for better comprehension of the material because the learners have already developed a needed register of knowledge and vocabulary in that particular area (Ríordáin et al). Imagine having to learn an already complicated process or skill while also trying to have to decipher a foreign language using high tier and specific unknown vocabulary; by accommodating to the learner's already existing tools and register, the learning of new information can continue much easier and allows the learner to continue to better themselves as they still try to grasp the already foreign language.

While for many learning another language may help them gain an advantage economically, recent studies and findings that relate bilingualism to the brain may provide even more of an intriguing incentive to learn a second language; despite opening people's mind up about other cultures than their own and allowing them to think and perceive the world another way, learning and becoming fluent in another language has some particular and fascinating effects on the brain and on one's neurology. The scientific process of learning and using multiple

languages has been studied and regarded for years and has been linked with many positive side effects and results. When it comes to learning a second language, however, adults are at a disadvantage. As we age, our brain's plasticity (its ability to create new neurons and synapses) is reduced. By following brain damage that causes a loss of speech, researchers have observed that children are more likely to regain the power of speech by creating new pathways in the brain in order to replace the damaged ones (Montrul). One theory on why learning a foreign language is so hard for adults focuses more on the process we go through to do so, rather than the loss of plasticity. Robert Bley-Vroman explains in *Linguistic Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition* that adults approach learning a new language with an adult problem-solving process, rather than in the same way a child develops language for the first time (Gass et al). This means even though adults generally progress through the early stages of learning a language faster than children, people who are exposed to a foreign language first during childhood usually achieve a higher proficiency than those who start out as adults. Adults will also develop a second completely separate language center in the brain for the newly developing language, whereas children that simultaneously learn multiple languages interestingly only develop one language center within their brain. This is why it is much harder to reach a maximum level of fluency in a foreign language when the learner was not exposed to it as a child, yet is still possible with a lot of focus and hard work and possible immersion in the language and culture.

This process of learning and acquiring a new language can create new neuropathways within the brain and the language center that can allow learners to think and perceive the world in a new and previously unexplored way. There is still debate, however, among neurologists as to when the exact period of so-called “fossilization” is within the brain that can make becoming natively fluent in another language so difficult if not impossible. Montrul finds that, without

almost constant stimulation in the primary language and interaction, it can actually fade before the “fossilization” of the language acquisition factors and areas of the brain. In this way, the secondary language can actually replace the primary language as it is what the subject is exposed to on a much broader and invasive scale (Montrul). The incomplete acquisition of the first primary language can also make learning the second language much more difficult as concepts of grammar, tenses, and order and construction of ideas may not be fully present or understood (Montrul). Montrul believes that once past this point of “fossilization,” acquiring native fluency of a language is impossible and language loss can set in and become permanently forgotten.

All hope is not yet lost, however, as Vega-Mendoza et al. sought to study the cognitive function in late acquisition bilingual speakers and to compare them with early acquisition bilingual speakers and similar monolingual subjects. These studies and examinations were done through examining verbal fluency in the second learned language and a picture and word association reaction. The findings from the experiments tended to show that bilingual subjects outperformed monolingual subjects and were almost equal to multilingual subjects (Vega-Mendoza et al.). The team suggested a possible ceiling effect that may happen when learning a second language and there may be a maximum effect that happens when learning another language, so adding another possible language may have little to almost no effect. Finally, when comparing late acquisition learners to early learners, the team found little difference between the two suggesting that late learners could attain the same degree of fluency and proficiency as early learners and share in the same cognitive benefits. However, it must be noted that this was within the concept of full immersion and daily use of the language ( Vega-Mendoza et al.). Therefore, it seems there may still be a vital window within childhood where exposure to and acquisition of other foreign languages is at its easiest and prime and yet, unfortunately, this doesn't always

coincide with usual formal educational models of when a foreign language is introduced to learners.

While it seems there may be a restricted “crucial time” for foreign language instruction, there are some neurological preventative and healthy measures that accompany the learning and mastering of a foreign language. Linked and researched preventative or delaying effects of bilingualism have been studied with diseases such as Alzheimer’s accompanied by dementia and the onset of aphasia. Faroqi-Shah et al. examined the effects of aphasia on patients and their ability to retrieve and produce words and as well on their cognitive control; these experiments were done specifically to compare the effects of aphasia which is known to delay and make retrieve and producing words more difficult on monolingual suffers and bilingual sufferers. For bilingual speakers, the ability to produce the desired word, an effect similar to aphasia, is used to suppress the undesired language to produce the target second language (Faroqi-Shah et al.). This is the main intriguing factor that launched the comparative study to see whether the aphasia sufferers that were bilingual would still able to retrieve and produce at least one of their languages or words when examined. It was found that bilingual subjects had a higher cognitive control and in a majority of the groups examined bilingual subjects had an advantage and helped to support the inhibitory control advantage hypothesis (Faroqi-Shah et al.).

When it comes to Alzheimer’s disease coupled along with dementia, bilingualism is believed to be linked to some preventative and lessening effects of this traumatic disease. In thorough studies, lifelong bilinguals that continually used both of their languages were examined and it was found that where individuals frequently used both languages appears to significantly delay dementia, though benefits are unlikely to emerge if individuals become bilingual later in life or use their second language infrequently (Atkinson). So while this may, in fact, delay the

onset and severity of the disease, it again is related to exposure and acquisition age of the second language. Further studies have shown using the neurodegenerative disorder FTD (Frontotemporal Dementia) as a model to study cognitive consequences of bilingualism, evidence that bilingualism has a protective effect against dementia has been found, but also data that suggest that this effect is domain-specific within areas of the brain (Suvarna). So while only certain areas of the brain may be preventively targeted and affected, there are still clear and visible benefits to learning and practicing a foreign language.

It seems apparent that being bilingual has many positive neurological aspects, yet the critical age of introduction and mastery seem to accompany them along with what use and exercise the languages are used for. However, many critics of bilingual early education often fear that introducing a language early on might confuse and delay the acquisition of one if not both of the target languages. To closely examine this argument and worry regarding losing the languages by being exposed to too much at an early age, the work of Weimer may be examined. Weimer and Gasquoine sought to examine, through their study, the effect of a dominant language or a shared language on the development of belief reasoning and emotional understanding. For their experiment, they used Mexican American children ranging from monolingual in English or Spanish to bilingual in both. To examine the development of the children's reasoning and their emotional comprehension the team used a two false and one true belief task and an emotion comprehension assessment (Weimer and Gasquoine). For the children that were bilingual, the tests were given in both languages to create a comparison to their monolingual counterparts. The results gathered suggested that bilingual children developed reasoning ability and emotional comprehension on the same threshold that monolingual children did (Weimer and Gasquoine). The implications the study set forth are very intriguing propositions for the future on whether

these results would be similar in the future, as American schools predominately only promote the proficiency and enhancement and further higher thought in English. This teaching style may ultimately affect the thought process and perception of English and bilingual speakers. Using these results, no apparent delay or stunting of processing, reasoning, or language acquisition was encountered when the children learned the languages at simultaneous times. This suggests that there may be no better time to introduce a valuable lifelong and healthy skill such as mastery of a foreign language.

Throughout this investigatory insight into bilingualism, major benefits have been explored through various realms ranging from health benefits to possible economic incentives, to possible increased connections and understanding of a culture or country. The benefits of learning another language almost seem invaluable and crucial to the ever-expanding globally connected modern world today. By beginning to learn about and from each other, exchange and dialogue can finally begin as views and perceptions can be lifted and replaced by new ways of thinking and mutual understanding. Not only does studying a foreign language introduce you to new ideas, cultures, and ways of thinking, it also introduces you to an outsider's perception of your own culture as you try to see what foreigner learners perceive of you. By expanding your way of thinking and perceiving the world today, you can truly begin to analyze and look within your own society as to what and where the value lies and what should truly be emphasized and treasured.

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