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## ANXIETY LEVEL IN PRESCHOOL BILINGUAL CHILDREN (RESEARCH REPORT)

**Abstract:** In the modern era, interest in the problem of bilingualism has become increasingly intense. People of various nationalities, as well as voluntary or forced immigrants, have always lived in monolingual states. Once children and their parents find themselves in a foreign language setting, the issue of learning a second language arises. Parents wish their children to learn the official language of a country in question as soon as possible and therefore, try to provide their children with all possible conditions to facilitate the acquisition of the second language from an early age, for example, parents take their children to preschools where the learning process is conducted in a target language and the majority of children speak it. This article touches upon the issue of the emotional state, in particular, the level of anxiety of bilingual children in kindergartens. The purpose of the study was to find a relationship between anxiety and bilingualism and preschool institutions, as a foreign language environment, and to compare the levels of anxiety in monolingual and bilingual children.

**Keywords:** preschool child; kindergarten; monolingualism; bilingualism; anxiety.

### Introduction

Bilingualism is defined as the ability to use two languages in everyday life. Bilingualism is a widely spread phenomenon. There are two ways we can understand the concept of bilingualism – narrow and broad. In a narrow sense – bilingualism

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means speaking two languages on an equal level, the so-called balanced proficiency, while in a broad sense – it means any use of two languages for communication purposes (our test subjects fall into the latter category). According to recent data, bilingualism is more prevalent across the world than monolingualism. Many children are born and raised in a multicultural and bilingual environment due to the processes pertaining to globalization and integration. The number of children who come to school with more than one language has increased since the year 2000 in Ireland, Italy and Spain by 50%. (Armon-Lotem et al., 2015)

The problem of bilingualism has become the subject of a number of studies. Researchers demonstrate different viewpoints on early bilingualism. In the first half of the 20th century, learning a second language at an early age was thought to hamper the development of cognitive skills and lead to underachievement in education (Macnamara, 1966). The opposite was claimed by Peal and Lambert (1962) who, based on their research, proved that bilingual children demonstrate an intellectual superiority over monolingual peers.

Recent studies have proved that bilingualism does not hinder a child's development but rather helps to improve his or her cognitive skills. The Canadian scholar Elen Bialystok showed in a number of her papers the advantages of bilingual children (ages 4 to 8) over their monolingual peers: bilingual children took a cognitive test and obtained higher results in the part of the test that contained misleading information.

In an interview with the 'New York Times', Ellen Bialystok (2006) noted that parents often ask her whether it is worth teaching their children two languages, to which her answer is always the same – early bilingualism is a gift. Studies show that early bilingualism not only bonds children to the culture of their ancestors but also trains their brain. Bilinguals are relatively better than monolinguals at solving tasks that require switching from one activity to another rather than previously memorized responses (Bialystok, Craik, & Luk, 2012).

New data confirm that cognitive benefits are observed in bilingual infants (Kovacs & Mehler, 2009) and toddlers (Poulin-Dubois et al., 2011). In addition, there is evidence that bilingual infants show better results in certain aspects of memory, such as generalization of information from one event to another (Brito & Barr, 2012).

The above studies view bilingualism within the scope of cognitive development but the question is "what impact does bilingualism have on a child's emotional state, does it cause anxiety?" A high level of anxiety indicates a child's inadequate emotional adaptation to certain social situations. The study of anxiety levels enables us to analyze a child's inner attitude to certain situations and get information about the nature of relationships in the family, kindergarten, school, with peers and adults.

Italian scholar Giuseppe Francescato (1981) notes that bilingual children, especially pupils from monolingual families (where the child is unable to speak the dominant language in the family), painfully respond to expressions made by

dominant monolingual group members. They feel that the group members are against their involvement in the group, ignore and do not accept them as “their own.” The confrontation that may arise between the process of earning a place in a bilingual group and the feeling of oppression and inferiority, can lead to an inner conflict, and sometimes even neurosis.

L. Vachnadze (2011), the school psychologist, psychologist-consultant, inclusive education specialist, studied a link between bilingualism and school anxiety levels in Azerbaijani first graders living in Georgia. The study has shown that the level of anxiety of young pupils in the bilingual education setting is higher compared to the monolingual approach.

Our aim was to carry out an experimental study of the emotional state, particularly the anxiety level of bilingual children in a kindergarten.

The hypothesis proposed by us is that the anxiety level in bilingual children is higher than in monolingual children.

### **Methodology**

We used the anxiety test by Dorkey et al. (2002) to identify anxiety levels in children. The authors of the test see anxiety as an emotional state which ensures security on a personal level. In our reality, the adapted version of the test had been used for the first time by the Georgian psychologist, N. Imedadze (1966). In the following years, the above methodology was applied for the school age children by the Russian scholar Prikhozhan (2000).

The experiment material included 14 images illustrating typical situations of preschool life. The test consisted of three parts: interaction with adults (walking with parents, getting reprimanded by mother), interaction with children (playing with older children, playing with younger children, isolation, aggressive attack), daily activities (getting dressed, eating, going to bed alone).

Each situation was provided in two scenarios: for girls (the image of a girl of the identical age with the test subject) and for boys (the image of a boy of the identical age with the test subject). Images contained face outlines. The children were given two cropped faces: one happy and the other sad, and they had to pick a face they liked most and place it on the outlined image.

### **Participants**

The study was conducted in five kindergartens in Tbilisi in October 2019. The study subjects were monolingual and bilingual children aged 3.5–4 years, with a total of 114 children (56 monolingual and 58 bilingual). A child was considered bilingual if he or she had been going to a Georgian kindergarten for at least one year and their family language was Russian, Armenian, or Azerbaijani.

### Procedure

The children were shown the images in a strict order. Once an image was presented, the child was asked: “What face do you think the child might have, sad or happy?” The child had to choose a face and place it on the face of the child in the picture. The level of anxiety was determined by the number of sad faces chosen: low 0-20%, medium 20-50%, high 50% and more.

### Results

The level of anxiety in monolingual and bilingual children varies. It is higher with bilingual children – the difference is statistically significant  $t = 2.848$  at 0.01 level.

Figure 1. Anxiety levels of children

Number of children	Anxiety level		
	High	Medium	Low
Monolinguals (56)	15 (26.7%)	6 (10.7%)	35 (62.5%)
Bilinguals (58)	28 (48.2%)	11 (18.9%)	19 (32.7%)

Source: own elaboration.

Figure below illustrates the children’s emotional responses according to the scenarios.

Figure 2. Negative and positive assessment of presented situations

Scenarios	Situations by Scenarios	Number of Monolingual Children		Number of Bilingual Children	
		Negative assessment	Positive assessment	Negative assessment	Positive assessment
Child-to-Child	Playing with younger children	15	41	10	48
	Playing with older children	17	39	14	44
	Attack	46	10	47	11
	Object of aggression	49	7	46	12
	Isolation	45	11	50	8
“Parent-Child”	Walking a baby together with mother	19	37	29	29
	Ignoring	19	37	43	15
	Walking with parents	3	53	5	53
	Reprimand	44	12	45	13
Daily routine activities	Getting dressed alone	20	36	18	40

Scenarios	Situations by Scenarios	Number of Monolingual Children		Number of Bilingual Children	
		Negative assessment	Positive assessment	Negative assessment	Positive assessment
	Putting away toys	14	42	20	38
	Washing hands and face	9	47	15	43
	Eating alone	14	42	25	33
	Going to bed alone	24	32	26	32

Source: own elaboration.

The figure 2 shows the negative and positive assessment provided by bilingual and monolingual children of the images in the following three situations: 1) Interaction with adults 2) Interaction with children, and 3) Daily routine activities.

By individual settings: Critical value  $\chi^2 = 3.84$ . "Child-to-Child" – the difference between bilingual and monolingual children is statistically unreliable, "Child-to-Parent" – the difference between bilingual and monolingual children is  $\chi^2 = 18.5$  which is statistically significant. "Routine activities" – the difference between bilingual and monolingual children is reliable  $\chi^2 = 4.15$ .

## Discussion

The first days of a child in the kindergarten are often associated with the problem of his or her adaptation to newly proposed conditions (Gersamia & Imedadze, 2015), while bilingual children encounter another problem – a foreign language environment.

We consider a child to be bilingual when their kindergarten environment does not coincide with the family language environment and when they have been involved in the foreign language setting for at least a year.

The main issue discussed in this paper is determination of the emotional state of the child, in particular, his or her anxiety level, in a kindergarten i.e. a foreign language environment.

The statistical analysis of the research shows that bilingual children demonstrated a significantly higher level of anxiety than monolingual children, which confirms the research hypothesis.

As for qualitative analysis, the children's positive or negative assessment of different situations is age-appropriate with the tested individuals. If children under the age of 3 play with other children, by the age of 4, they develop an interest in peers as to role-play game partners. Therefore, situations of "aggression" or "isolation" cause negative emotions in children, and the scenarios like "playing with younger children" and "playing with older children", as a rule, earn a positive assessment. In these scenarios, bilingual and monolingual children do not reveal a significant

difference since peer-to-peer communication is stronger irrespective of the number of languages spoken.

The frequency of negative assessments in situations of “reprimanding” and “ignoring” is dictated by the desire to interact with parents, as children develop negative feelings when they encounter negative attitudes or neglect from parents.

As regards everyday situations, “getting dressed”, “washing hands and face”, “going to bed alone” and “eating alone” have earned medium or negative assessment because the child at this age is more attached to mother and this attachment seems more obvious due to the bilingualism.

The negative assessment with the lowest frequency was reported concerning the situation of walking with parents. But most surprisingly, eight children still had a negative attitude toward this situation.

We believe children’s reaction is caused by the absence of emotional warmth they should receive from their parents while on a walk. One girl noted: “When walking with my parents, I will have a happy face, whereas my mother and father will be sad.” Here’s another example: a child regarding the scenario of the “object of aggression” remarked that he or she would have a happy face because he or she likes being scolded by his or her father. That means that the child is lacking the contact with his or her father so much that even a negative attitude on the part of the father is much appreciated.

As mentioned above, by the age of 4, a child shows an interest in another child as a game partner. Therefore, the child may develop negative emotions when he or she cannot actively engage in the play time due to language barrier, which is why, the child may become isolated or an object of aggression. However, if a child has leadership skills, he or she can organize a role-playing game attracting other children’s interests who then try to imitate him or her. This was the case (according to kindergarten teachers) with a Russian-speaking girl brought to a Georgian kindergarten, who, thanks to her energetic and outgoing personality, managed to teach the Russian language to most of the children.

Preschool is the time when a child learns a foreign language relatively easier than an adult. The sooner a child starts learning a foreign language, the sooner he or she will master it. (Birdsong & Molis, 2001; Hakuta, Bialistok, & Wiley, 2003).

The child-tailored environment should provide the conditions facilitating the child’s involvement in various activities. Here, an adult (the teacher) plays an important role. The adult should ensure that children interact with one another. In the first days of the child in the kindergarten, the teacher should frequently use action-oriented games, which, as confirmed by our earlier study, relieve tension and contribute to lowering the anxiety level owing to their dynamic nature and positive emotional attitudes of children (Gersamia & Imedadze, 2015). Besides, active games, unlike verbal didactic games, do not require proficient language competences. The child needs only to understand what actions he or she has to perform as per the game rules.

In the kindergartens selected by us, with a high number of bilingual children, teachers used small cards with daily communication words (greetings, words necessary in daily life such as: come, give, take, sit down, etc.) in the mother tongue of the bilingual children. This contributed to the positive attitude of the children towards the teacher and removed the tension characteristic of the first encounter.

### **Limitations**

In one of the kindergartens, we met with three Iranian children (newcomers), with whom we, unfortunately, could not communicate as the languages that we could speak were not familiar to them (they were not fluent in English, nor did they understand Russian at all). But quite interestingly, one of them (a girl) recited a Georgian poem by heart (she had memorized the words mechanically and, what is most important, retrieved them from the memory correctly).

### **Conclusion**

The comparative study of the preschool monolingual and bilingual children's anxiety levels has shown that bilingual children have a higher level of anxiety ( $t = 2.848$ ).

The comparative study of the anxiety levels in monolingual and bilingual preschoolers has revealed a significantly higher level of anxiety in bilingual children, especially when assessing the scenarios illustrating different social interactions. Thus, we may conclude that the language barrier complicates the relationship with peers, which is why the level of anxiety increases.

It can be assumed that with the improvement of the second language competence, the difficulties will fade away.

The major role in tackling the problem is played by the teacher who should create appropriate conditions for the facilitation of the child's involvement in the group. One of the ways to do so is to offer group games, action-oriented games in particular, which, as mentioned above, relieve tension and help to lower the level of anxiety.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations have been developed to assist bilingual children to learn a second language relatively easily and engage actively in communication with the outside world:

1. Parents should ensure that children interact with those individuals, both adults and peers, who speak the target language in playgrounds, during strolls, etc.

2. If any parent or family member is fluent in the target language, it is advisable to use the common method: “one adult-one language”. The effectiveness of this method has been confirmed by scholars (Imedadze, 1967; Barron-Hauwaert, 2004). Yet it should also be noted that there are cases when children who hear two languages from one parent learn both languages successfully (De Houwer, 2007).
3. In our capital city, there are neighborhoods resided by certain ethnic minorities. Accordingly, the number of children of those nationalities in the kindergartens is higher than in kindergartens in other districts. In such a case, it is desirable for the teacher to know the basic communication vocabulary to help a child (if he or she is a newcomer) overcome the stress caused by a foreign language setting.
4. Teachers should use active games as well as the stress-coping techniques, especially, in the first days to help children minimize the anxiety level when they occur in a foreign language environment.

#### Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments.

#### Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants (adults and children’s parents) included in the study. This article does not include any identifying information for individual participants.

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## POZIOM LĘKU U DZIECI DWUJĘZYCZNYCH W WIEKU PRZEDSZKOLNYM (RAPORT Z BADAŃ)

**Streszczenie:** W epoce nowożytnej zainteresowanie problemem dwujęzyczności rośnie. Ludzie różnych narodowości, a także imigranci dobrowolni lub przymuszeni, zawsze mieszkali w państwach jednojęzycznych. Gdy dzieci i ich rodzice stykają się na co dzień z obcym językiem, pojawia się problem nauki drugiego języka. Rodzice chcą, aby ich dzieci uczyły się języka ojczystego danego kraju tak szybko, jak to możliwe, dlatego starają się zapewnić dzieciom wszelkie możliwe warunki, aby ułatwić naukę drugiego języka od najmłodszych lat, na przykład rodzice zapisują dzieci do przedszkoli, w których proces

uczenia odbywa się w języku ojczystym danego kraju i którym posługuje się większość dzieci. Ten artykuł dotyczy kwestii stanu emocjonalnego, w szczególności poziomu lęku dwujęzycznych dzieci w przedszkolach. Celem badania było znalezienie związku między lękiem i dwujęzycznością a instytucjami przedszkolnymi, jako środowiskiem języka obcego, oraz porównanie poziomów lęku u jednojęzycznych i dwujęzycznych dzieci.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dziecko w wieku przedszkolnym; przedszkole; jednojęzyczność; dwujęzyczność; lęk.