

# A Case Study of two bilinguals

Literacy transfer and Model of reading

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## バイリンガルのケーススタディー

読み書き能力の転移と読み方

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### 1. Introduction: What is meant by bilingualism ?

Since a bicycle has two wheels and binoculars are for two eyes, it would seem that bilingualism is simply about two languages. Japanese people tend to think of bilinguals as ones who can handle with two languages as if both languages were their mother tongue. In fact, a classic definition of bilingualism is ‘the native-like control of two or more languages’ (Bloomfield, 1933). This is too extreme, maximalist (‘native-like’) and also ambiguous (What is meant by ‘control’ and who forms the ‘native’ reference group?) Even if a person is able to control two languages, in reality he or she tends to speak only one language in practice. Alternatively, the individual may regularly speak two languages, but competence in one language may be limited. Another person will use one language for conversation and another for writing and reading. Therefore, his ‘native-like control of two languages’ is of little help.

On the contrary, as a minimalist definition, Diebold’s concept of ‘incipient bilingualism’ exists. The term ‘incipient bilingualism’ allows people with minimal competence in a second language to fit into the bilingual category. For instance, tourists with a few phrases and business people with a few greetings in a second language would be incipient bilinguals. Likewise, Grosjean (1985) advocates functional aspects of language. Language is used in any kinds of scenes. According to him, if you pick up one scene and accomplish your purpose in second language, you could say you are bilingual. The more scenes you can use second language, the more you are bilingual. Compared to Bloomfield’s theory, his conception of bilingual is more realistic and understandable.

On the basis of Grosjean’s theory, I’d like to define bilinguals as “people who can use two languages in appropriate and meaningful ways” because two languages are never static but ever changing and evolving over time and place. Therefore, when we think of bilinguals, we can’t just focus on people who can fluently speak two languages but also people who have some different abilities, potentiality and developmental stages. That is, we need comprehensive approaches to know bilinguals. The aim of this research is to show that the ownership of two languages is not so simple as having two wheels or two eyes.

**2.Terminology**

Before discussing the nature of language abilities, I have to refer to terminology. There exists a range of terms: language ability, language achievement, language competence, language performance, language proficiency and language skills. Different authors and researchers sometimes tend to adopt their own specific meanings and distinctions. There is no standardized use of these terms (Stern, 1992).

Language skills tend to refer to highly specific, observable, clearly definable component such as handwriting. In contrast, language competence is a broad and general term, used particularly to describe an inner, mental representation of language, something potential. This competence refers usually to an underlying system inferred from language performance. Language performance hence becomes the outward evidence for language competence. Language ability and language proficiency tend to be used more as comprehensive terms and therefore used somewhat ambiguously. However, both language ability and language proficiency are distinct from language achievement. Language achievement is usually seen as the outcome of formal instruction. On the other hand, language ability and language proficiency are viewed as the product of a variety of mechanisms: formal leaning, informal language acquisition (e.g. on the street) and of individual characteristics such as ‘intelligence’.

**3. Bilingual abilities: The four Language Abilities**

If we confine the question ‘Are you bilingual?’ to ability in two languages, the question is ‘what ability’? There are four basic language abilities: listening, speaking, reading and writing. These four abilities fit into two dimensions: receptive and productive skills; oracy and literacy. The following table illustrates:

	Oracy	Literacy
Receptive skills	Listening	Reading
Productive skills	Speaking	Writing

The table suggests avoiding a simple classification of who is, or is not, bilingual. Some speak a language, but do not read or write in a language. Some listen with understanding and read language (passive bilingualism) but do not speak or write that language. Some understand a spoken language but do not themselves speak that language. Each language ability can be more or less developed. Therefore, as I mentioned in the opening, the two wheels of bilingualism exist in different sizes and styles. Reading ability can be simple and basic to fluent and accomplished. Generally speaking, this ability in Japanese English learners is superior to other abilities. Someone may listen with understanding in one context (e.g. restaurant) but not in another context (e.g. an academic lecture).

#### 4. Varieties of bilinguals

Someone who is approximately equally fluent in two languages across various contexts may be termed an equilingual or ambilingual or, more commonly, a balanced bilingual. Balanced bilingualism is sometimes used as an idealized concept. Fishman (1971) has argued that:

...rarely will anyone be equally competent across all situations. Most bilinguals will use their two languages for different purpose and functions.

For example, a person may use one language at work; the other language at home and in the local community.

As Fishman mentioned, bilinguals tend to be dominant in one of their languages in all or some of their language abilities. This may vary with context and change over time. Dominance in one language may change over time with geographical and social environments. Sometimes it is termed as semilinguals, the group is regarded as not having 'sufficient' competence in either language.

Hansegard (1975; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981) described semilingualism in terms of deficits in six language competence:

1. Size of vocabulary
2. Correctness of language
3. Unconscious processing of language(automatism)
4. Language creation(Neologization)
5. Mastery of the functions of language ( e.g. emotive, cognitive)
6. Meanings and imagery

Thus a semilingual is seen as someone with quantitative and qualitative deficiencies in both their languages when compared with monolinguals.

Skutnabb-Kangas & Toukomaa (1976) proposed a difference between surface fluency and academically related to aspects of language competence. Surface fluency would include the ability to hold a simple conversation in the shop or street and may be acquired fairly quickly (e.g. in two or three years) by second language learning. Academically related language competence, such as literacy in a second language may take from five to seven years or longer to acquire.

These theories gave me two questions about Japanese and English bilinguals: How does first language influence second language acquisition in literacy? How do bilinguals conceive of the reading process?

My own research has focused on these questions above. I experimented on two subjects who can speak and listen to Japanese and English as if both languages were their first language, but each subject has grown up in a completely different environment. And I gave them both Japanese and English proficiency tests, oral reading interview consisting of questions designed to find out general attitudes about reading and conceptions about what is good and effective reading. (Appendix A at the end of this research contains sample questions from the reading interview.) On the basis of their answers to these questions, subjects were classified as meaning-centered or sound-centered.

Inaco-Worrall (1972) tested the sound and meaning separation idea on 30 Africans-English bilinguals aged four to nine. In the first experiment, a typical question was: 'I have three words: CAP, CAN and HAT. Which is more like CAP, CAN or HAT?' A child who says that CAN is more like CAP would appear to be making a choice determined by the sound of the word. That is, CAP and CAN have two out of three letters in common. A child who chooses HAT would appear to be making a choice based on the meaning of the word. According to him, bilinguals tend respond to meaning-centered.

I quoted these concepts and applied them to my subjects' ways of reading such as sound-centered or meaning-centered readers. That is, sound-centered readers tend to focus their attention on the graphic information and phonemic information; as a result, these readers don't necessarily preserve the sense or meaning of the reading selection. On the other hand, meaning-centered readers try to consider understanding what the author wanted to say.

## 5. The study

### Subjects

As previously mentioned, this research focuses on two Japanese and English so called bilinguals. Both are graduate students in New York. The first subject, Sei (pseudonym) is a 23 year-old male whose major is psychology in the school of education. His parents are both Japanese. He was born, grew up and mostly educated in the United States. He has lived in the United States

for 14 years in total. His first language is English. The second subject, Carol (pseudonym), is a 22 year-old female whose major is Teaching English to speakers of Other Languages in the school of education. Her father is American and her mother is Japanese. She was born, grew up and mostly educated in Japan. She has lived in the United States for 3 years in total. Her first language is Japanese. (Table 1)

(Table 1)

	Father	Mother	Education	How long in theUSA	First Language
Sei Male	Japanese	Japanese	Mostly In the USA	15 years	English
Carol Female	American	Japanese	Mostly In Japan	3 years	Japanese

### Data collection and analysis

I tested their English proficiency using TOEFL practice test published by Barons, 1998 and TWE. TOEFL stands for Test of English as a Foreign Language. The test measures an academic college level of non-native speakers who want to stay in a college in the United States or Canada. TWE stands for Test of Written English. This measures the writing ability in English. As a matter of fact, these TOEFL and TWE tests were much more difficult than real ones.

As for their Japanese proficiency, I used Japanese Language Proficiency Test (Level1) created and edited by Association of International Education, Japan and The Japan Foundation. The test measures Japanese proficiency including an academic college level of non-native speakers.

All results were performed using their criteria. TWE was evaluated by two experts. One is an instructor who has been teaching writing for more than 20 years in American Language Institute at New York University. The other is a professor in New York University. She used to be a scorer of TOEFL and TWE. TWE was evaluated on a very broad six-point scale from very poor to excellent depending on the amount of accuracy of addressing the writing task, organizing and developing, using clearly appropriate details to support a thesis or illustrate ideas, displaying consistent facility in the use of language, and demonstrating syntactic variety and appropriate word choice. The scores these two experts gave to my subjects' essays are averaged in Table 2.

### Setting

Since I wanted to control conditions as much as possible, I gave the subjects an equal situation. I provided same day, time and a place to have them take both English and Japanese

tests. Each test was carried out on Friday evening. Unexpectedly, they both did a part time job in the afternoon. Sei worked as a waiter in a restaurant. On the other hand, Carol took care of children as a baby sitter. Therefore, their physical conditions were almost same when they were taking two tests.

After they had taken two tests, I did an oral reading interview about reading attitudes.

**Result 1 : English (TOEFL advanced practice test 1998 published by Barons)**

TOEFL test can measure three abilities: Listening, Structure, Reading. Listening part has fifty questions from short conversation to long conversation like lectures. Structure part has forty questions. They must be done in twenty-five minutes. Reading part has fifty questions. They must be done in fifty-five minutes. TWE can measure writing skill as I mentioned above.

(Table 2) English Result

	Listening	Structure	Reading	TWE(Writing)	
Sei	44 / 50	39 / 40	41 / 50	6 / 6	5
				4 / 6	
Carol	42 / 50	37 / 40	40 / 50	5 / 6	4.2
				3.5 / 6	

As you can see above, you can hardly find significant differences between their English scores in each part. Not to mention the fact that Sei was able to gain good scores in each section because he was educated in America. According to two experts, both comments about his writing were very similar. They stated that his essay was well developed, and despite of some minor usage problem, very strong in terms of syntax, vocabulary and grammar, moreover, he contained a clear thesis statement. However, although Carol’s first language is Japanese and learned English only in her high school and college, her English proficiency is quite advanced as well. Actually She told me that she had had a complex about being expected to know English by her classmates when she was a kid because her appearance was more like Caucasians, which made her dislike English and didn’t learn it, instead she liked and kept reading Japanese books. When she decided to go to a college in Japan, she just started to study English for entrance. On the other hand, when it comes to speaking and listening abilities, since her father is American and she has more frequent chances to use English than those of ordinary Japanese people, there is no doubt that her pronunciation is completely native speakers like. As a matter of fact, some of my american professors testified that her speaking was perfect in terms of not only pronunciation but also syntax

and word choices. Look at her reading and writing scores. Especially reading score is almost same as that of Sei's. As for her writing, two experts gave comments like these: one commented "She dealt with the topic and it was well developed. Although grammatically there are repeated errors, syntax and usage were good." The other's comment was like this "Although the introduction is a bit short and the topic is somewhat minimally developed, still her thesis statement is clear."

Now, we take a look at Japanese Language Proficiency Test result.

## **Result 2 : Japanese (Japanese Language Proficiency Test ( published by Association of International Education, Japan and The Japan Foundation)**

This test is divided into three parts to measure abilities such as listening, vocabulary & idioms, and reading & grammar. Listening part has 26 questions. In the Vocabulary & Idioms part, there are six different sections and 69 questions in total. Reading & Grammar parts have 56 questions.

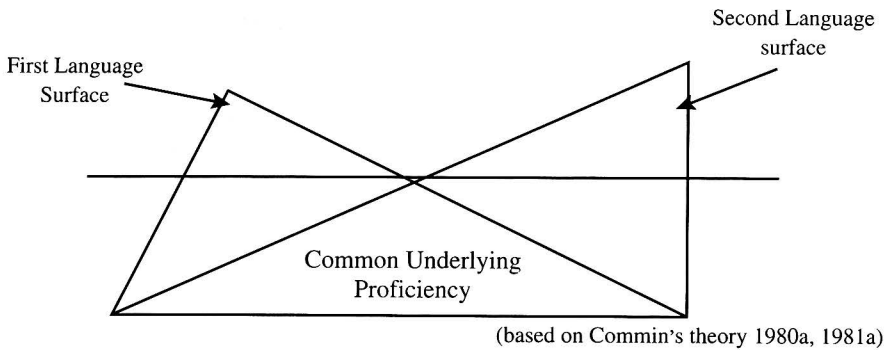
**(Table 3) Japanese Result**

	Listening	Vocabulary & idioms	Reading & Grammar
Sei	81 / 100	89 / 100	177 / 200
Carol	92 / 100	99 / 100	184 / 200

Although Carol who has been educated in Japan has a little better score than Sei in each section, you can't see a significant difference between each their score. There is no doubt that Sei can speak and listen to Japanese because his parents are Japanese and at least has a chance to use it at home. What amazed me is his literacy in Japanese. According to him, only his education in Japan was a college, four years, and there he learned Japanese language. He hasn't had many chances to read books written in Japanese. However, since his elementary school encouraged him to read books, he has liked reading English books.

## **Theory and Conclusion**

Commins' (1980, 81) Common Underlying Proficiency Model of bilingualism can be pictorially represented in the form of two icebergs (see below). The two icebergs are separate above the surface. That is, two languages are visibly different in outward. Underneath the surface, the two icebergs are fused so that the two languages do not function separately. Both languages operate through the same central processing system.



From his point of view, we can assume that although bilinguals have two different languages, it is just on the surface because fundamental aspects such as cognition, perception can operate in the common place. In short, this model can imply that it is natural that a literacy-transfer from one language to another should happen.

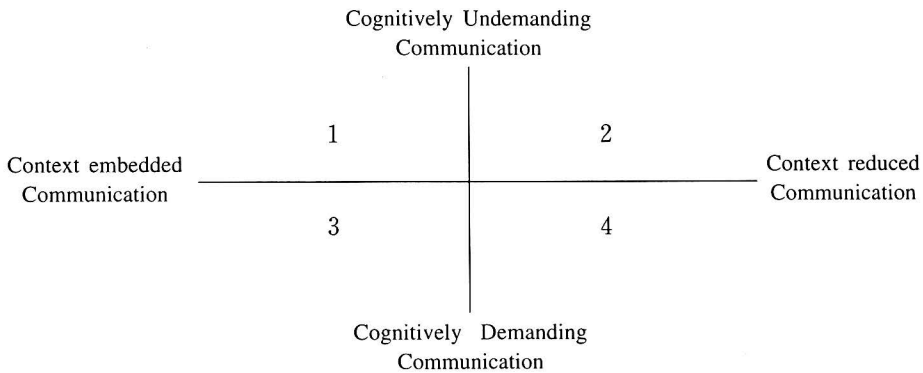
When you see the subjects' results, you will notice that their first language transfers to their second language in reading. However, this is not unusual thing. Think about that for example, when you compare a person who has never learned any kind of instrument with a person who has played the piano. Which person do you think is faster to learn how to play the violin? It is sure that it will take a time for both of them to get used to new instrument. However, once getting used to it, a person who has played the piano can get the point and improve very quickly, though the way of performing between piano and violin is completely different. Same thing can be happened in sports. Although every sport has different rules and requires different skills, fundamental things such as training and patience are in common. Therefore, when a person who has ever played something tries to start a new sport, he/ she can be able to succeed in overcoming all difficulties fast.

Language is same. Being able to read in one language means you also have learned about the language and the language itself as well at a same time. Therefore, when you learn the second language, the previous experience can help you understand reading and writing in second language.

Since the subjects had already had knowledge and competence about reading in their first language, they didn't have any difficulties reading in their second language (see Table 3.4).

A further development of this theory proposed two dimensions (Commins, 1981 b, 1983b, 1984b). This theory is represented in the diagram below:





Both dimensions show communicative proficiency. The first dimension refers to the amount of contextual support available to a student. Context embedded communication exists when a student needs quite a lot of support in communication, particularly via body language. For instance, by pointing to objects, using the eyes, head nods, hand gestures, people give and receive plenty of clues and cues to help understand the content of the message. On the other hand, in context reduced communication there will be very few cues to the meaning that is being transmitted.

The second dimension is the level of cognitive demands required in communication. Cognitive demanding communication may occur when people are required to think, write something logically and have knowledge, while cognitive undemanding communication may occur when people talk in the street, shop and restaurant.

Commins (1984a, 1984b) expressed this distinction in terms of basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive / academic language proficiency (CALPS). Surface fluency or basic interpersonal communication skills will fit into the first quadrant (see diagram). That is, BICS is context embedded, cognitively undemanding use of a language. Language that is cognitively and academically more advanced fits into the fourth quadrant. Commins (1981b) theory suggests that second language competency in the first quadrant (surface fluency) develops relatively independently of first language surface fluency. In comparison, context reduced, cognitively demanding communication develops inter-dependently and can be promoted by either language or by both languages in an interactive way.

In conclusion, the more developed the first language, the easier it will be to develop the second language. When the first language is at a low stage of evolution, the more difficult the achievement of bilingualism will be. Since both my subjects have been well enough developed in their first language, they are able to apply reading skills in their first language to that of their second language.

This result provided me with the next question: What about their reading attitudes?

## Oral Reading Interview Result

When asked what they thought made a good reader, both Sei and Carol were neatly summarized a meaning centered approach: When asked what they do when they encounter something that they don't understand in reading, each replied " Well, I make a guess.....I still keep reading." A good reader, for them, is someone who " knows the interpretation of the author." A final indication of their ideas about reading came in their responses to the question of what they would like to do better as a reader:

"I guess I would like to read more... the more you read, the better you get, like writing, right? The more you write, the better ideas get in your mind. Writing, too, the ideas get better in your mind if you read more."

Each response to the reading interview questions was quite same. The idea about reading voiced by these two readers, their concern for " the interpretation of the author", " getting the ideas inside their heads," as well as their willingness to " make a guess" and to "read more", is identified as meaning-centered. Readers possessing this theoretical orientation regard the ability to understand the meaning of a text as the measure of success in reading. As they explained: " I just try and read and if I can't, I guess the meaning. If I don't know a word, I just write the word on the paper. I don't want to use the dictionary." Like other meaning-centered readers, they often guess at the meaning of what they are reading, using the sounds, words, and grammar to help their formulate their guesses.

Obviously, from their interviews, they are classified as a meaning-centered reading approach.

In summary, a meaning-centered approach to reading may allow the reader to successfully transfer good first language reading strategies to the second language and this kind of readers can be seen as striking a successful balance between text-based and knowledge-based processing.

## Appendix A

Sample questions from Reading Interview (see Burke 1978)

1. When you are reading and you come to something you don't understand, what do you do ? Do you ever do anything else?
2. Who is a good reader that you think? What makes \_\_\_\_\_ a good reader?
3. If you knew someone who was having difficulty with reading, how would you help that person?
4. What would you like to do better as a reader?

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(さとう ともか 本学非常勤講師)