The Acquisition of Narrative Skills by Spanish L1 and L2 Speakers

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1. Introduction

In this paper we will compare the development of narrative skills in Spanish in two groups of five-year-old children who are brought up in two different Basque-Spanish bilingual environments, where Spanish is their L1 or L2 respectively. Our data are drawn from a research project concerning bilingual language acquisition in family and school contexts, initiated in 2001[1].

The main body of the research on bilingual language acquisition has dealt with children who acquire two languages simultaneously from birth. These studies usually reflect individual development at very early ages (Müller, 1998; Deuchar & Quay, 2000; Meisel, 2001). De Houwer (1990) situates bilingual first language acquisition as early as before one month of age.

But successive acquisition of L1 and L2 is becoming increasingly frequent. On the one hand, this is due to educational immersion programmes, especially among linguistic minority populations, and on the other hand, to the need for migrant populations to acquire the language of their destiny (Hamers & Blanc, 2000; Akinçi, 2001). This fact has also brought about a renewed interest in features such as the critical age factor (Meisel, 2007) and in the possible influence of L1 on L2, where the interpretation of "transfer" or "cross-linguistic influence" is not seen as an inevitable fusion of codes, but rather as relief strategies or as the application of structures that are common in the two languages (Lanza, 1998; Müller & Hulk, 2001).

Concerning the acquisition of narrative skills, several studies have shown that by age five children have generally attained a basic oral narrative capacity, both referring to narrative structure and to the distinction of background / foreground events, etc., although not all their linguistic knowledge is adequately used at discourse level (Bamberg 1987, 1997; Berman & Slobin, 1994, Batoreo, 2001; Idiazabal et al., in press).

In this paper, we compare the extent to which L1 and L2 speakers of Spanish are able to narrate a story in an autonomous way. Subsequently, two discourse aspects that may cause difficulties are analysed. Firstly, we will look into the development of the intrigue or the plot (Adam, 1992; Bronckart, 1996), a relevant feature for the organization of the contents throughout the story. And secondly, we will analyze the introduction of characters, identified as one of the aspects related to text cohesion (Bronckart, 1996; De Weck, 1991).

2. Sociolinguistic background

In the specific context of the present investigation, some sociolinguistic data will be of interest, in particular considering successive bilingualism. According to recent statistics, 36% of the population of the Basque Country consider Basque to be their L1, and 4% consider themselves Basque-Spanish bilinguals from birth. However, although Spanish is L1 for 60% of the population, 80% of Basque children are educated either in Basque or in bilingual programmes, according to data from the Basque Institute of Statistics, EUSTAT (2004), as reflected in Graph 1.

Graph 1. Language of instruction in primary and secondary education
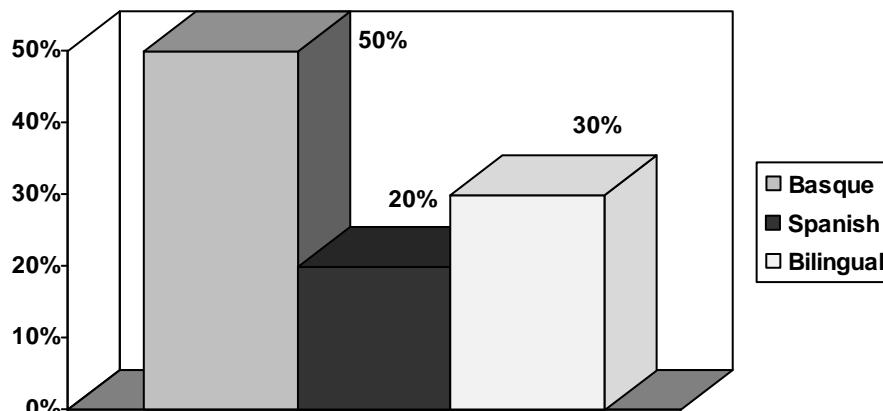
These data explain the fact that successive bilingualism, interpreted as successive language acquisition during childhood (Meisel, 2007), is by far more frequent than early simultaneous bilingualism in the Basque society.

3. Corpus

Our experiment was carried out in a school context, where children from pre-school classrooms participated in a story-telling activity, a genre which is familiar for young children since it is a common activity both at home and at school. The corpus consists of videotaped and transcribed sequences of oral story-telling produced by five-year-old children who are L1 and L2 speakers of Spanish. The group of 35 L1 Spanish-speaking children attended pre-school immersion programmes in Basque from age two in a predominantly Spanish-speaking environment, where, according to statistics (Instituto de Estadística de Navarra, 2001), only 6% of the population is Basque-speaking. Data extracted from a questionnaire given to the parents showed that the family language was Spanish in all cases.

The group of 24 L2 speakers of Spanish came from Basque-speaking or Spanish-Basque bilingual families in an area where 64% of the population is Basque speaking (EUSTAT, 2001). Data from parents' questionnaires showed that in this case Basque was the only or the predominant family language. This is the reason why all these subjects have been included in the Spanish L2 group. A further reason for this is that their school language is Basque, although Spanish is present in their environment in mass media and social use as one of the community languages (Table 1)[2].

Table 1: Corpus.

	Number of subjects	Family	School language	Linguistic environment
Spanish L1 group	35	Spanish speaking	Basque (L2)	Spanish speaking
Spanish L2 group	24	Basque or Basque-Spanish speaking	Basque (L1)	Mainly Basque but also Spanish speaking

From the original corpus of 30 L2 subjects, 6 were excluded either because they narrated the whole story in Basque (with very skilful translations!) or because they didn't narrate at all, not even with adult help.

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[2] According to town council statistics, in this area Basque is used consistently but not exclusively by 58% of the population. Spanish is used for everyday communication by 42% of the population (Soziolinguistika Klusterra, 2006).

4. Method

All our data were collected in a semi-experimental classroom setting, where the children were videotaped while listening to and re-telling a story in Spanish based on a wordless picture-book. It should be stressed that at school our subjects had only carried out story-telling in Basque, their classroom language.

Before initiating the task, the children were told that their performance would be videotaped and shown to smaller children who did not know the story. This material was then transcribed for our analysis.

In each session the adult told the story based on 12 wordless pictures representing the most important episodes to a group of five children. Subsequently, two of them stayed with the adult while the other three waited in another room. The first child, elected at random and sitting on the teacher's chair, told the story again to a second child, with help of the illustrations and of adult's comments in case of need. After this, the "narrator" left the room and the second child, now sitting on the teacher's chair, in turn told the story to the third and so on, until the five children had completed the session.

Then, again the adult told the story to the next group of five children. In order not to interrupt or deviate the chain of transmission, not more than five children at a time were present during each session.

Berman and Slobin (1994) argue that eliciting the same story makes it possible to control the contents of the texts produced by children and to compare different groups of subjects or different languages. For this purpose, the well-known "Frog Story" (Mayer, 1965) has been applied to a great variety of subjects and languages all over the world. In this sense, our research method is similar to the one used in the "Frog Story", although some differences should be mentioned. In our case the children were first asked to listen to the story and then reproduce it, whereas when using the "Frog Story" no model is given to the subjects, who just look at the pictures while telling the story. In our opinion, an adult's story-telling regarded as a model may have positive effects on children's representations or knowledge of the story-telling genre in a classroom setting. These representations include the physical aspects of the communicative action (when and where it happens, who the listeners are, etc.). They also relate to interactive aspects (the narrator before the audience is expected to guide the interaction) or the purpose of the communicative action (telling the story to younger children via video-taping).

We believe that these context-related parameters should be kept in mind when interpreting the results, since the experimental procedure is as important as the age factor in children's language acquisition research (Gonnand & Jisa, 2000). This is shown by Brigaudiot (1993), who compares five-to-six-year-old children's narratives elicited from different tasks. This author concludes that the best organised and most coherent narratives are produced by children who have previously listened to the story told by an adult.

5. The story

Many researchers have proposed that traditional stories follow a fixed thematic structure. We chose a story about a little girl, Centellita, which, following Adam (1992), can be clearly divided into five main thematic parts, briefly summarised as follows: Centellita and her mother who lived in the forest ran out of fire and could not cook and heat their house. The mother told her to go and find fire at the witch's house. The heroine met three helpers (one fairy, the dwarf and the owl) and was faced with three difficult tasks to overcome (having to remove snow to chop wood and to define the number of birds in the forest). Having solved the problems with the aid of the helpers, she obtained the fire. Centellita and her mother could cook and heat their house and lived happily ever after.

As we can see, the story corresponds to the classical symmetric structure of a children's tale with a happy ending. It also contains characters that appeal to children's imagination and a plot that evokes magic actions. All these features make this story appropriate for young children.

6. Level of narrative autonomy

Authors like Bamberg (1987) or Berman and Slobin (1994) have shown that the age of five is a crucial period in the development of narrative skills. It has also been argued that at the same period not all children have developed the same level of autonomy when narrating a story (Serra et al, 2000).

If then the fact of not being an L1 speaker is added to the age factor, our hypothesis is that L1 Spanish speakers will be more autonomous in developing their stories, whereas L2 speakers will depend more on adult help.

The following data show the extent to which L1 and L2 speakers are able to narrate the story in an autonomous way (Table 2). The similar but inverse proportions (in absolute numbers and in percentages) when comparing L1 and L2 speakers are rather striking.

Table 2: Level of narrative autonomy.

Group	Autonomous	Adult help
Spanish L1	77.1% 27 / 35	22.9% 8 / 35
Spanish L2	37.5% 9 / 24	62.5% 15 / 24

These global data show that although L2 speakers have more difficulties in autonomous narration, almost 25% of L1 speakers still need help in order to produce the story. As pointed out by Serra et al. (2000), not all children can be expected to have reached the threshold of autonomy in narrating at this age, even if they are L1 speakers. In the following, we will look into the reasons why help is needed, and the point to which they are similar or different for L1 and L2 speakers.

6.1. Lack of vocabulary

Among Spanish L2 speakers a frequent reason is the lack of vocabulary, as reflected in the following example:

(1) Child (L2):   Centellita. Ez dakit nola esaten dan 'nora zoaz'
        Centellita. I don't know how you say 'nora zoaz' (*where are you going).*
     Adult :   ¿Adónde vas?
        Where are you going?
     Child (L2):   ¿Adónde vas? Voy a casa de la bruja.
        Where are you going? I'm going to the witch's house.

In the second example, the child has a similar vocabulary problem:

(2) Child (L2):   La hada le dijo erre- errepikatzeko nola esaten da erderaz?
        The fairy told her to re- how do you say 'errepikatzeko' in Spanish?
     Adult: ¿Repetir? Eh? Repetir
        Repeat? To repeat.
     Child (L2):   Repetir e hada tres veces. Y luego...
        To repeat fairy three times. And then…

Even L1 subjects occasionally forget a word in Spanish. In the following example, the L1 Spanish child even switches over to Basque when asking a Basque L1 friend:

(3) Child 1 (L1):   ¿Cómo se – nola izena du? Aizkora?
        What's its name? 'Aizkora'.
     Child 2:   Ez dakit.
        I don't know.
     Child 1 (L1):   Aizkora euskaraz da.
        'Aizkora' is in Basque.

Child 2:	Ez dakit.
	I don't know.
Adult 1:	Si Gorka no sabe, a Leire y si Leire no sabe a mí.
	If Gorka doesn't know, ask Leire and if Leire doesn't know, ask me.
Adult 2:	'Aizkora' en castellano es hacha.
	'*Aizkora' is axe in Spanish.*
Child 1 (L1):	Hacha. El hacha x x cortó todos los hierros.
	Axe. The axe cut all the iron bars.

6.2. Forgetting actions

In both groups of speakers, help is needed when some part of the action is forgotten:

(4) Child 1 (L1): Vete donde la bruja del fuego y ... ¿Me das pistas Alaia?
Go to the witch of fire and ... Will you give me a hint, Alaia?

Child 2: ¿Qué?
What?

Child 1 (L1): Que si me das pistas?
Give me a hint?

Child 2: x x x

Child 1 (L1): Pues entonces…
Then ...

Child 2: Se encontró con un hada.
She met a fairy.

(5) Child 1(L2): ¿Cuántos pájaros hay? No sé cuántos.
How many birds are there? I don't know how many.

Adult: ¿Cuántos había, muchos o pocos?
How many were there, a lot or a few?

Child 1 (L2): Muchos.
A lot.

Adult: ¿Tú te acuerdas. G. cuántos había? ¿Más o menos dos? ¿Dos pájaros o más?
Do you remember G., how many there were? More or less two? Two birds or more?

Child 2: Más.
More.

Adult: Cuántos, a ver, vamos a decir un número.
How many, let's see, let's say a number.

Child 1 (L2): Veinte y ocho.
Twenty and eight.

(6) Adult: ¿Qué le dijo la bruja entonces? ¿Qué tenía que hacer?
What did the witch tell her then? What did she have to do?

Child (L2): Las pruebas.
The tasks.

Adult: Las pruebas. ¿Cuántas pruebas?
The tasks. How many tasks?

Child (L2): Tres.
Three.

Adult: Entonces, qué le dijo la bruja? Te daré la llama del fuego si...
Then, what did the witch say to her. I'll give you the fire if...

Child (L2): E- quitar la nieve.
Um- remove the snow...

6.3. Not remembering the characters

A third reason for the lack of autonomy is the difficulty in remembering who the characters are (the fairy, the dwarf and the owl) or even the name of the main character, the little girl, Centellita. This happens to both L1 and L2 subjects:

(7) Child (L1):   Había una vez una niña que se llamaba e- e?
           There was once a girl who was called um um?
    Adult: Que se llamaba Cen-
           Who was called Cen-
    Child (L1):   Centellita.

(8) Adult: A ver M., tú igual sabes el nombre de la niña. Cen-
           Let's see, M. Perhaps you know the girl's name. Cen-
    Child (L2):   -tellita!

(9) Child (L1):   Repitiendo tres veces, e? ¿Cómo era?
           Repeating three times, eh? How was it?
    Adult: Hada
           Fairy.
    Child (L1):   A la hada y
           To the fairy, and ...

(10) Child 1 (L2): Y después se encontró a un...¿Cómo era?
             And then she met a... How was it?
    Adult: Pregúntale a I.
           Ask I.
    Child 2:   Ez dakit.
           I don't know.
    Child 1(L2): ¿Cómo se llamaba?
           What was its name?
    Adult: Gnomo
           Dwarf.

(11) Child (L2):   x x x pájaro.
           x x x bird.
    Adult: Igual I. sabe. ¿Cómo se dice el pájaro?
           Perhaps I. knows. What (kind of) bird was it?
    Child 2:   Buho.
           Owl.

The amount of interactive help needed in these children's productions should not overshadow another important fact: it has been shown that young children (Sebastian, 1989) as well as L2 subjects (Akinçi & Kern, 1998; Montanari, 2002) often limit their performance to picture descriptions using deictic devices. However, this is not the case in our corpus. Although our subjects are guided by pictures, all of them tend to concentrate on the actions that take place in the story.

7. Story structure

According to the textual architecture proposed by Bronckart (1996), the general structure of the text constitutes one of the levels of this architecture, where the organisation of the thematic contents is included. In the specific case of narrative texts, the organisation of the thematic contents is reflected in the story plot.

This approach to discourse analysis can also be applied to specific works about story structures, such as Propp (1970) or Adam (1992). These researches have proposed that traditional stories follow a fixed thematic structure that is considered a discourse feature of these texts. In order to determine whether our children are able to develop the appropriate narrative structure, focus will be put on the core thematic components of the story (Propp, 1970; Adam, 1992), as shown in Table 3:

Table 3: Core components and symmetric elements of the Centellita story.

Introduction	Time and/or place anchoring. Presentation of the main characters. Explicit mention of the lack of fire.
Main body	Leaving home. Meeting the three helpers and receiving their offers of help. Meeting the witch, being told the conditions for getting the fire. Carrying out the tasks with the aid of the three helpers. Obtaining the fire.
Conclusion	Returning home. Explicit mention of having fire.

In this part of our analysis only the 25 Spanish L1 speakers and the 9 L2 speakers have been considered. When adult help is frequently needed it becomes problematic to distinguish the child's autonomous capacity to develop a narrative structure.

According to our hypothesis, the children will develop the story, although not all the symmetric elements will appear in all stories. The following four groups represent the presence or lack of the core thematic components shown in Table 3.

A: all thematic components appear.

B: core components from the main body of the story are missing.

C: components from the introduction and the conclusion are missing.

D: components from all parts are missing.

In Table 4 the results of our analysis are summarised.

Table 4: Story structure.

	A	B	C	D	total
L1 Spanish	17 62.96%	3 11.11%	4 14.81%	3 11.11%	27
L2 Spanish	2 22.2%	0	2 22.2%	5 55.6%	9

Table 4 shows that a fair number of L1 speakers (62.96%) are able to produce complete stories, whereas only 22.2% of L2 speakers do so. However, it should be remembered that the 17 children from group A represent only 50% of the whole corpus of L1 Spanish speakers, and the 9 L2 speakers only 37.5% of their corpus, which seems to support the hypothesis of the late acquisition of discourse skills (Berman & Slobin, 1994).

It also becomes clear that L2 speakers have greater difficulties in developing their stories, as data from table 2 show. Only 2 out of 9 produce complete stories.

It should be pointed out that not many of the children, either L1 or L2 are grouped in B and C. Among the B group both the introduction and the conclusion were produced as expected, whereas some components of the main body of the story were forgotten. The C group subjects showed the opposite behaviour, not finishing the story or starting directly with the main body.

This fact makes it more interesting to focus attention on the D group, where 55% of the L2 speakers do produce the story, although some components are missing, which gives it an asymmetric structure. The fairy may not be introduced but appears to remove the snow, the dwarf appears but may not cut the iron bars, etc.

8. Introduction of characters

The introduction of characters is considered one of the aspects of nominal cohesion, which contributes to the thematic coherence of texts (Bronckart 1996). When producing a narrative text, speakers need to build coherent referential chains and the first step is that of introducing new elements (characters, places, tools…). According to Batoreo (2001) the setting constructions that introduce the characters at the very beginning and during the narration process imply the introduction of new referents, which means that this information is to be indefinite:

(12) There was once a bird

(13) And then a cat arrived

Previous studies have shown that the use of indefinite constructions for the introduction of characters in narratives increases with age. Children start using cognitive and linguistic structuring strategies in an adult way for organising their discourse around the age of 6 – 7, a development which may continue for several years more (Bamberg, 1987; De Weck, 1991; Hickmann et al., 1996; Hickmann, 2003).

In the case of our research, there is another factor to be kept in mind in addition to age: the communicative context.

According to De Weck's (1991) approach, the contents of a fairy tale are a priori decontextualised from the communicative context, and consequently the introduction of characters needs linguistic forms that mark this relationship of disjunction between the contents and the communicative context, such as the indefinite forms proposed by Batoreo (2001).

However, if we analyse the communicative context of our experiment, we must consider it as potentially ambiguous. On the one hand, the child could interpret that the content of the story is characterised by its decontextualised nature, and also that the recipients of the story (the younger children), are not present in the immediate communicative context regardless that the child and the adult who are listening to the story are familiar with it. Consequently, the story-teller would use indefinite forms to introduce the characters. Following De Weck, we refer to these as strong introductions, as in the case of *the fairy* in (14):

(14) Centellita iba caminando por el bosque cuando de repente se encontró con un hada.
     Centellita was walking through the forest when she suddenly met a fairy.

The use of this kind of strong introduction to refer for the first time to the fairy could be interpreted as a trace of a keener awareness of the social role of the narrator by the child.

On the other hand, the story-teller could ignore the fact that the recipients of the story are the younger children, using definite forms to introduce the characters (*the fairy* in 15). According to De Weck, this kind of introductions is considered a weak introduction, as far as the story-teller ignores some dimensions of the communicative situation:

(15) Centellita se encontró con el hada.
     Centellita met the fairy.

This distinction between strong and weak introductions will prove important to determine the point to which the children are able to adopt the "narrator before an audience" perspective not recurring to "shared" or "mutual" knowledge of the story.

According to our hypothesis, both L1 and L2 subjects will have some problems with the use of strong introductions. Table 5 shows the extent to which our subjects recur to strong or weak introductions of the main character.

Table 5: Introduction of main character (Centellita).

	Strong	Weak	Others
Spanish L1	19/27 70.4%	7/27 25.9%	1/27 3.7%
Spanish L2	1/9 11.1%	6/9 66.7%	2/9 22.2%

Table 5 shows clearly that most L1 speakers introduce the main character (Centellita) in the expected way like "there was once a little girl called Centellita" or "once upon a time a little girl, Centellita…". It should be pointed out, however, that 25% of them use weak introductions like "Centellita lived with her mother". L2 speakers are more inconsistent when introducing Centellita. As we can see most of them use weak introductions relying probably on shared or mutual knowledge. Among "others" it is curious to observe the use of "Centellita" as a common noun ("una Centellita"), both by L1 and L2 subjects.

When it comes to the other characters, as shown in Table 6 and 7, strong introductions occur predominantly for both groups of speakers. It is important to observe that proportions change completely among L2 subjects as compared to Table 5. The L2 subjects use strong introductions almost to the same extent as L1 subjects for the fairy and the dwarf.

Table 6: Introduction of other characters (fairy, dwarf)

	Fairy			Dwarf		
	Strong	Weak	Others	Strong	Weak	Others
Spanish L1	24/27 (88.9%)	1/27 (3.7%)	2/27 (7.4%)	26/27 (96.3%)	0	1/27 (3.7%)
Spanisg L2	7/9 (77.8%)	0	2/9 (22.2%)	8/9 (88.9%)	0	1/9 (11.1%)

It is also interesting to see that the owl is introduced by strong devices in 100% of the L2 speakers. For L1 subjects strong introductions occur predominantly in similar proportions for the three characters.

Table 7: Introduction of other characters (owl)

	Owl		
	Strong	Weak	Others
Spanish L1	25/27 (92.6%)	1/27 (3.7%)	1/27 (3.7%)
Spanish L2	9/9 (100%)	0	0

These results agree with De Weck's (1991) work, in the sense that the strong introduction of the main character is less systematic than the first mention of the other characters.

On the whole, our five-year-old subjects perform quite well, since they show their ability to adopt the "narrator before an audience perspective". Nevertheless, it should be remembered that 8 L1 subjects out of 35 and 15 L2 subjects out of 24 are not included in Tables 5 and 6, due to the fact that in most cases they needed help to introduce the characters and also to develop the story.

9. Conclusion

By the age of five as much as 75% of the Spanish L1 subjects have acquired a sufficient level of narrative autonomy. Spanish L2 speakers have more difficulties and 62% of them depend on interactive help. There are several reasons for this. The most frequent difficulty among L2 speakers is the lack of vocabulary in Spanish, whereas forgetting the actions or characters' names are common to both groups. Therefore, it would seem that the difference in narrative autonomy is in part due to linguistic difficulties for L2 speakers.

As far as story structure is concerned, L1 speakers produce complete stories to a greater extent than L2 subjects (62% vs. 22%). But it should be pointed out that 55% of the nine L2 speakers who narrate autonomously actually develop the frame of the story, although as we have seen in Section 6 this does not mean that it is completely reproduced.

Dealing with the introduction of characters, fewer L2 speakers than L1 subjects use strong introductions for the main character. On the whole, more weak introductions appear for the main character than for the secondary characters among both L1 and L2 subjects. For the other characters we have found balanced proportions for both groups. As we have already mentioned, according to De Weck (1991) the introduction of the main character tends to cause more problems than that of secondary characters.

From a more general perspective, two main points could be stressed. On the one hand, our L2 subjects have only been exposed to story-telling in Basque, both at school and at home. And still, part of them produces narrations in their L2 Spanish. However, the experimental procedure used in this study may have contributed to these results. On the other hand, L1 subjects could be expected to produce stories in Spanish, but it should be remembered that although they may have listened to story-telling in Spanish at home, they have never been trained to narrate in Spanish at school, their school language being Basque. In this sense, our data could be explained by the fact that positive transfer not only occurs from L1 to L2, but also from L2 to L1 when it comes to specific skills such as story-telling (Cummins, 1991; Idiazabal & Larringan, 1997).

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