

Simultaneous Language Acquisition: A Case Study of Concurrent L2 and L3 Learning

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Abstract

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is neither a linear nor a simple process; it is distinctly different from how we acquire our first languages. Today, there is a growing demand to acquire languages beyond the first language from early childhood. This is driven by the current global recognition of bilingualism—the ability to communicate effectively with multiple languages. Among the current trends that attract the attention of researchers in the field of SLA is the simultaneous learning of foreign languages, especially among children. This paper investigates the contemporary phenomenon of children simultaneously acquiring a second language (L2) and a third language (L3) by analysing their levels of proficiency and the external factors that influence the process of L2 and L3 acquisition. Hence, the paper assesses the extent to which second languages learned concurrently can be successfully acquired and identifies the external factors contributing to or hindering the process. The findings illustrate the successful simultaneous acquisition of L2 and L3 by children, given that they exhibit a high level of proficiency by being able to comprehend and communicate effectively in more than one language. These findings further challenge previous studies' views that simultaneous language acquisition may hinder progress in each language.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition; Simultaneous Language Acquisition; Bilingualism; Foreign Languages; L2

1. Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is neither a linear nor a simple process, and it is distinctly different from how we acquire our first languages. Today, there is a growing demand to acquire languages beyond the first language from early childhood. This is driven by the current global recognition of bilingualism, the ability to communicate effectively with multiple languages. Among the current trends that attract the attention of researchers in the field of SLA is the simultaneous learning of foreign languages, especially among children. In this paper, I investigate the contemporary phenomenon of children simultaneously acquiring a second language (L2) and a third language (L3) by analysing their levels of proficiency and the external factors that influence the process of L2 and L3 acquisition. Hence, the paper aims to assess the extent to which second languages learned concurrently can be successfully acquired and identify the external factors contributing to or hindering the process.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Simultaneous Acquisition of L2 and L3

The process of learning or acquiring more than one L2 two concurrently after the first language has been acquired has garnered increasing attention from researchers in the field of applied linguistics, particularly studies related to how we acquire second languages. For instance, Huang et al. (2020) argue that learning more than one foreign language at the same time is more complex than focusing on a language at a specific point in time. Given the complexity, the successful acquisition of L2 and L3 depends on internal and external resources, such as attention, motivation, memory, and temporal resources; when those resources are limited, both languages can be assumed to compete for those limited resources (cf Skehan & Foster, 1997, as cited in Huang et al., 2020). As a consequence of the

competition, Huang et al. (2020) further assert that the learning process of L2 and L3 simultaneously may slow down development in any of the languages.

In Bui's (2023) study, it is reported that while L2 and L3 are developing simultaneously, learners may experience interactions between their L2 and L3 systems or subsystems. Huang et al. (2020) further state that similar interactions may be relevant in the simultaneous acquisition of L2 and L3; this interconnectedness of linguistic subsystems, as observed in studies on cross-linguistic interference phenomena such as transfer, is exemplified (Bardel & Falk, 2007). In addition, Huang et al. (2020) note that simultaneous learning of two foreign languages requires more support and a higher level of motivation from the external environment than learning just one. Given this support and motivation, Verspoor et al. (2008) assert that the subsystems become automated, and competition may transform into a supportive factor in L2 and L3 learning as learners become more proficient. Thus, Schepens et al. (2016) argue that bilingual learners demonstrated an advantage in acquiring L2 or L3, irrespective of their L1.

2.2. Sociocultural Factors and Second Language Acquisition

Theories of language acquisition have been a topic of interest for researchers for many years, and several theoretical approaches and hypotheses have been proposed to explain how children acquire their first or second language. Some of these theories include sociocultural and interactionist theories, and the hypotheses include the interaction hypothesis, among others. According to Safitri (2020), Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasises the role of social interactions by positing that children learn a language in interactions with their environments. Furthermore, Vygotsky introduces the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) as the level at which learners can independently perform tasks and at the point at which they require assistance from a more knowledgeable other (MKO) to complete the same task (Irshad et al., 2022). Thus, Sari (2022) states that external factors, including

environmental and social factors, such as exposure to language and interactions with caregivers, peers, and siblings, strongly influence second language acquisition in children.

The interactionist perspective further accentuates the role of communication in language learning, hypothesising that children acquire the necessary knowledge through exposure to the target language in the thousands of hours of interactions with those around them (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Additionally, Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams (2013) note that interactions between a new language learner and a proficient language speaker are appropriate and needed, considering their importance for successful language acquisition. Zhang et al. (2013) further highlight that Vygotsky's ZPD comes into play here as it encourages the use of negotiating language between learners and proficient speakers. This implies that meaningful interaction propels linguistic development, whether it is a first language or a second language. While the interactions take place, language being a behaviour, it is believed that imitation, practice, and positive reinforcement play a significant role in its acquisition, being associated with behaviourist theory (Al-Harbi, 2020). Hence, Sari (2022) emphasises that children who grow up in language-rich environments at an early age tend to have more advanced language skills, while social interactions with their environments contribute to their language development.

2.3. Bilingualism in Children and its Advantages

Several studies have shown that compared to monolingual children, bilingual children generally possess more advanced language skills. In his article, Al-Harbi (2020) notes that bilingualism may also increase cognitive flexibility as children acquire the ability to switch between languages and develop a greater understanding of language structure. Moreover, bilingualism can offer cultural advantages, as children can interact with a wider range of individuals and gain diverse perspectives. According to Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams (2013), many children around the world today grow up by being exposed to and acquiring two

or more languages from their early childhood, and this norm comes with many benefits. A study by Yurtsever et al. (2023) reported that bilingual children outperform monolingual children far more often than one would expect by chance.

However, bilingualism can also have adverse effects on language acquisition. In his article, Sankar (2018) notes that bilingualism can be both an advantage and a challenge for language acquisition, depending on age and frequency/quality of exposure to each language. He further emphasises imbalances in language dominance or limited exposure to one of the languages. This can lead to language delays and confusion, where children may mix languages or struggle to differentiate between them. Additionally, Al-Harbi (2020) notes that code-switching, where children alternate between languages within a conversation, especially with their first language, is typical in bilingual children and can impact language development. A limitation of bilingualism arises when one language is favoured over another; for instance, if one language is more frequently heard or valued in the community, learners may eventually use the language better (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

3. Methodology

This qualitative study aims to investigate the simultaneous acquisition of two second languages in children, exploring the factors influencing success and challenges in the process. To achieve this, the following methodology was employed:

3.1. Research Design

In this study, I present an analytical study that investigates the process of simultaneous second language acquisition in children, whether it can be easily achieved or there may be challenges along the process, examining the factors that influence the acquisition and potential variations in proficiency levels. This method is suitable for this study as it enables an in-depth exploration of the complex process of simultaneous language acquisition in children and the intertwined connections between the process and the learning contextual factors.

3.2. Research Question

The present study aims to investigate the research questions given below:

1. To what extent do children demonstrate successful simultaneous acquisition of two second languages, and what external factors contribute to or challenge this process?
2. Are there observable differences in the proficiency levels achieved in each of the two second languages when acquired simultaneously, and how do external factors impact these outcomes?

3.3. Participants

Being qualitative research, the participants are mainly two children learning English and Arabic as second languages simultaneously. The children are 8 and 11 years old, respectively. Apart from the children, I interviewed their mother and sister to gather information to understand external factors that influence the process.

3.4. Data Collection

For data collection purposes, I reached out to the children's parents, specifically their mother, explained the study's purpose and possible advantages, and obtained the mother's informed consent. Data for this study was gathered through observational and interview-based data collection techniques. While I had a conversation with the children to observe and gain in-depth insight into their proficiency in both English and Arabic, I interviewed the mother and sister to elicit the external factors that influence the children's simultaneous second language acquisition. While the conversational interactions with the children were spontaneous, the interviews with the mother and sister were conducted through semi-structured interview questions.

3.5. Data Analysis

At the end of the observational conversations and interviews, the relevant data from the responses of the participants were transcribed verbatim (see Appendix), and I analysed them. Based on the study research questions, I formulated three themes for the analysis and

discussion of the data. In the analysis and discussion section, these themes were used for thematic analysis while referencing the data and comparing them to the existing literature, which was used to conclude the simultaneous acquisition of two second languages and external factors contributing to or challenging this process.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations of this study were given utmost importance. The parents of the children were informed about the nature of the study and provided informed consent. The study ensured the anonymity of the participants by referring to the children as P1 and P2 and the mothers and sister as P3 and P4, respectively, to keep their identities secret and protect their privacy. The study also ensured the confidentiality of the data by sharing it with authorised personnel.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Analysis of Proficiency in L2 and L3

In this section, I analyse the proficiency of the two participants in both their L2 and L3, Arabic and English, respectively. First, it is observed that the participants demonstrate a high level of proficiency in both languages, and they are confident enough to communicate with both. During a conversation with the P1 in their L2, when asked about his day and school attendance on that particular day, he responded with correct sentences, “It was fine,” and “No, I did not go to school because there is a mid term break,” respectively. In addition, when P2 was asked about her activities for the day, she responded with correct sentences (refer to Lines 16-19). These grammatically correct sentences highlight how well they can comprehend and communicate in the language. Moreover, when the participants were asked to describe what they could see in pictures shown to them, they demonstrated a high understanding and proficiency in conveying their interpretations. For instance, P1 and P2, when prompted to identify expressions and actions in the displayed pictures, responded, “Laughing... They are

happy. They are laughing” and “Playing... They are playing,” respectively (refer to Lines 29-36).

Furthermore, the findings regarding the participants’ L3, Arabic, reveal the participants’ ability to comprehend Arabic input and provide correct output in the same language. Specifically, in Line 59, I addressed P2 with the phrase “يا بنت الصغيرة,” meaning “Oh little girl,” to call her attention for further questioning. Despite the term not being her name, she was able to understand my reference and gave an apt response (refer to Lines 61-63). In addition, P1 engaged in a conversation where he was asked about his nationality (refer to Lines 64-67). When questioned about his origin, he responded with the grammatically correct sentence “أنا من مدينة ايوو، نيجيريا” meaning, “I am from Iwo city, Nigeria.” I further engaged him in a contrasting conversation, assuming he was not from Nigeria, and asked him to translate the phrase “لا، أنا من أمريكا” meaning, “No, I am from America.” He responded with a correct translation of the phrase. Thus, it is evident that both participants demonstrate proficiency in simultaneously acquiring L2 and L3, as they can understand inputs and produce outputs in the respective languages. However, concluding their success in concurrently acquiring two foreign languages is insufficient; understanding the facilitating factors is equally important.

4.2. Factors Influencing Successful Acquisition of L2 and L3

In this section, I discuss factors influencing the successful simultaneous acquisition of the participants’ L2 and L3. In a subsequent interview with the participants’ mother, it was revealed that they learn and use both languages at home. However, the mother notes, “what they are learning from outside the home is more than what they are learning from home,” and emphasises the significant role of their interactions with society. This supports the interactionist perspective that children become successful in language acquisition when there are numerous social interactions in the target language (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). It was

further mentioned that the participants' success in English could be attributed to their school environment and the opportunities to use the language "while playing with their friends" (refer to Lines 76-78). Given that children raised in language-rich environments during early childhood exhibit enhanced language proficiency and social interactions further contribute to the process (Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams, 2013; Sari, 2022), the participants' environment, people using their L2 and L3, and interactions with those people contributed to their acquisition success.

In addition, it is worth mentioning that I recalled a time when I observed P2 using the term "Freeze" (refer to Lines 130-137). I inquired further about where and how she learned the word. The participant's sister revealed that she learned the word from a game she played with her brother, P1, and after numerous repetitions, the word was stored in her long-term memory, and she could now apply the same word to other things. Obviously, playing games with others is a social interaction as it does not happen in isolation, and it requires communication, validating the behaviourism stance that interactions in the target language, followed by imitation and practice, lead to greater success for learners (Al-Harbi, 2020). It is worth noting that a further inquiry into where P1 learned the word revealed that it was from an individual who often comes to their home for a particular reason (refer to Lines 143-144). Arguably, this individual is more likely to be proficient in the language than them. This supports the interactionist perspective that interactions between a new language learner and a proficient learner are required for successful language acquisition, and Vygotsky's ZPD is relevant here as that individual serves as the MKO that helps the participants to acquire new words (Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams, 2013; Irshad et al., 2022).

4.3. Observational Differences Between L2 and L3

As the findings illustrate, the participants demonstrate a high proficiency level in both their L2 and L3. It is noteworthy that the level of exposure to these languages differs. The

mother indicates learning in varied settings and exposure, with more English use among family and friends compared to Arabic, which is mainly used within the family. Additionally, their sister notes a greater ability to express themselves in English (refer to Lines 113-115). Though not reflected in the collected data, it can be expected that participants may demonstrate varying language proficiency levels based on their exposure. Given that a limitation of bilingualism arises when one language is more frequently heard or valued in the community, and the interactionist perspective stresses that children acquire the necessary knowledge in the target language through interaction with their environment (Lightbown & Spada, 2013), it can be inferred that unequal exposure to both languages among participants may result in proficiency differences.

However, further inquiry from the mother revealed that the languages themselves do not hinder each other but actually assist in the participants' simultaneous acquisition. Here, the mother implies that learning L2 and L3 simultaneously does not affect each other but aids the process with many benefits. This supports the view that children exposed to and acquiring more than one language from early childhood have distinct benefits compared to monolingual children (Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams, 2013; Schepens et al., 2016; Yurtsever et al., 2023). Moreover, the collected data show that the children code-switch between both L2 and L3. For instance, one participant remarked, “ما أجمل dress!!” meaning “What a nice dress!!” when expressing admiration for their sister's new dress. This implies that participants alternate between their L2 and L3, a phenomenon consistent with Al-Harbi's assertion (2020) that bilingual children are expected to code-switch, a phenomenon that occurs when there is an interconnectedness of linguistic subsystems. While some studies suggest that learning L2 and L3 together may impact language development (Al-Harbi, 2020; Huang et al., 2020; Sankar, 2018), this study's findings indicate that simultaneous and successful learning of L2 and L3 is possible with equal access to external resources.

5. Implications

Contrary to previous studies, the research findings challenge the view that simultaneous learning of multiple languages is inherently more complex or hinders language development. Though its process is different from how children acquire their first language, the observed success indicates that equal access to external resources can mitigate challenges while acquiring L2 and L3. This suggests that the subsystems involved in language learning can automate, and competition between languages becomes supportive as learners' proficiency increases, as previously stated by Schepens et al. (2016) and Verspoor et al. (2008). By being under favourable conditions, children can attain proficiency in both L2 and L3 and challenge the view that concurrent learning of L2 and L3 may hinder language development. Therefore, previous studies on the limitations of simultaneous learning of two foreign languages may need to be reconsidered.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study illustrate the successful simultaneous acquisition of L2 and L3 by two children, given that they exhibit a high level of proficiency by being able to comprehend and communicate effectively in both Arabic and English. These findings further challenge previous studies' views that simultaneous language acquisition may hinder progress in each language. In addition, the study highlights the importance of social interaction and exposure to languages in facilitating successful language acquisition. Evidently, the interactions the participants have with their family, friends, and others in their community play a significant role in their ability to acquire and use both languages. Therefore, the findings show that a successful simultaneous acquisition of L2 and L3 is possible, and the process can come with many benefits. While the study suggests positive outcomes, its

limitations, such as a small participant pool and a focus on children, prompt the need for further research to extend generalisability and applicability beyond this age group.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Notational Conventions Used in the Transcription

	Notation	Meaning
1	R	Researcher (Interviewer)
2	P1	First child
3	P2	Second child
4	M	To denote the children's mother
5	S	To denote the children's sister
6	Xyz	To keep identity secret (in sentences)
7	[]	To show action
8	,	Small pause
9	...	Long pause (if in the middle of a sentence) Incomplete sentence (if at the end of a sentence)

Appendix B: Transcriptions of the Data

First Round of Conversation with both Children

1. **R:** Good afternoon, P1. How are you?
2. **P1:** Good afternoon. I am fine.
3. **R:** How was your day?
4. **P1:** It was fine.
5. **R:** Alright. Good! Did you go to school today?
6. **P1:** No, I did not go to school because there is a midterm
7. break.
8. **R:** Okay. Enjoy your holiday then. So, what did you eat today?

9. **P1:** We ate rice and beans in the morning.
10. **R:** What about in the afternoon?
11. **P1:** We ate... Amala with Ewedu.
12. **R:** P2, why are you laughing?
13. **P2:** [laughing] Nothing.
14. **R:** Okay, your brother told me now that you are on holiday.
15. **P2:** Yes
16. **R:** So, what have you been doing?
17. **P2:** I am playing with my friends
18. **R:** Who are those friends?
19. **P2:** Nura... and Fridaus

Second Round of Conversation with both Children

20. **R:** P1, back to you. Help me to say this in English "Mo fe gba
21. bolu."
22. **P1:** I want to play football.
23. **R:** Your turn P2, how do you say "Mo fe se ere pelu Nura."
24. **P2:** I want to play with Nura.
25. **R:** Okay. Good! P1, can you see the picture on the screen?
26. **P1:** Yes
27. **R:** What can you see?
28. **P1:** A mother and a son... They are playing.
29. **R:** What is the expression on their face?
30. **P1:** Laughing... They are happy. They are laughing.
31. **R:** P2, can you see what is on the screen?
32. **P2:** Na'am... Yes.
33. **R:** Count them and tell me how many people you can see.
34. **P2:** They are 18.
35. **R:** What are they doing?

36. **P2:** They playing... They are playing.

37. **R:** Who told you the correct sentence?

38. **P2:** No one told me.

Third Round of Conversation with both Children

39. **R:** P1, back to you. I want you to talk about yourself.

40. **P1:** My name is Xyz Xyz. I am a boy. I am in JSS 1 class. I

41. live in Iwo. My favourite food is rice and beans. My favourite

42. colour is colour orange.

43. **R:** How many brothers and sisters do you have?

44. **P1:** I have two younger and elder sisters and two elder

45. brothers.

46. **R:** P2, Your turn. Introduce yourself in three sentences.

47. **M:** My name is Xyz Xyz. I am a girl. I am... 8 years old.

48. **R:** Alright. Thank you!

Fourth Round of Conversation with both Children

49. **R:** Now, we are going to have a short conversation in Arabic.

50. **P1-P2:** Okay.

51. **R:** **السَّلَامُ عَلَيْكُمْ وَرَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ وَبَرَكَاتُهُ** (As Salaamu 'Alaykum Wa

52. RahmatuLlahi Wa Barakaatuhu)

53. **P1-P2:** **وَعَلَيْكُمْ السَّلَامُ وَرَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ وَبَرَكَاتُهُ** (Wa 'Alaykumu Salaam Wa

54. RahmatuLlahi Wa Barakaatuhu)

55. **R:** **يا حسين كيف حالك** (Oh Hussain, How are you?)

56. **P1:** **أنا بخير والحمد لله** (I am fine and all thanks to Allah)

57. **R:** P2, what is the meaning of what I just asked P1?

58. **P2:** How are you?

59. **R:** Good! **يا بنت الصغيرة ما اسمك** (Oh little girl, What is your

60. name?)

61. **P2:** اسمي محسنة (My name is Muhsinah)
62. **R:** What does that mean?
63. **P2:** You asked, "What is your name?"
64. **R:** أنت من أين أنت؟ (Hussain, where are you from?)
65. **P1:** أنا من مدينة ابو، نيجيريا (I am from Iwo city, Nigeria)
66. **R:** Okay, translate this to English "أنا من أمريكا".
67. **P1:** No, I am from America.
68. **R:** Good. We are done. Thank you guys!

Interview with their Mother

69. **R:** So, where are the children learning the languages?
70. **M:** What they are learning from outside the home is more than
71. what they are learning from home. Though they are learning the
72. languages from home too, the interactions they are having with
73. society helps a lot.
74. **R:** Do they learn them in formal settings such as schools, or
75. just from the environment?
76. **M:** They acquire new words of the languages in their schools,
77. and they get to practice the English language while playing
78. with their friends.
79. **R:** Okay. Do they learn both languages in the same settings?
80. **M:** Hmm... They do not learn the language in the same place. We
81. have a Western school where they learn the English language,
82. and we also have Madarsa, where they learn the Arabic
83. language.
84. **R:** Alright. When and how do they get time to balance both
85. types of schools?
86. **M:** They go to Western school in the morning till around 3:30
87. pm (Monday to Friday). Then, they go to Madrasa around 4:00 pm

88. and come back home around 6:30 pm (Saturday to Wednesday).
89. **R:** Do you think one is not affecting the other? I mean the
90. learning of both languages themselves.
91. **M:** They do not affect each other... In fact, they help each
92. other.
93. **R:** Do they speak the Arabic language with people outside the
94. home?
95. **M:** No, those they are living with, parents, brothers and
96. sisters.
97. **R:** So, if you speak the Arabic language with them now, can
98. they understand what you say?
99. **M:** Yes, they will understand.
100. **R:** If you can speak Arabic with them, how do you acquire the
101. language? And do you also speak English with them?
102. **M:** We are more proficient in Arabic than English, as that is
103. our field of study. The interaction they have within the home
104. is what keeps their Arabic proficiency alive. As for English,
105. we can understand people when they speak English, and we can
106. also speak it a little bit because we learn it from society.
107. So, I can not say our English speaking helps the children
108. much, but our Arabic proficiency does. We interact with them
109. in the language. But definitely, the interaction with the
110. environment does help their English proficiency.

Interview with their Sister

111. **R:** What can you say about the children's proficiency in both
112. languages?
113. **S:** Well, I can say they understand both languages, Arabic and
114. English... But in terms of expression, they can express

115. themselves in English more than Arabic language.

116. **R:** Alright. What do you think... I mean, what are the factors
117. that contribute to their proficiency?

118. **S:** It is the environment. The interaction with other people
119. around them contributes to their proficiency in both
120. languages.

121. **R:** Okay. Do you also speak the languages with them?

122. **S:** I am also part of the environment because I use the
123. English language to communicate with them at home. Whenever I
124. speak English with them, they respond with the same language.

125. **R:** Alright. I called one day, and I was talking to P2. She
126. mentioned a new word, which I know is beyond her level to be
127. taught in school. I forgot the word, can you please call her
128. here?

129. **S:** Sure... [Calling for her] She is here.

130. **R:** P2, you used an English word for your elder sister the
131. other day I called. Can you please remind me of that?

132. **P2:** Freeze.

133. **R:** Yes, thank you. So, where did she learn this word to the
134. extent that she knows when and how to use it?

135. **S:** She learned the word from a game that she plays together
136. with his brother. After so many repetitions, the word stays
137. with her, and she can use it in other contexts, too.

138. **R:** Alright, can you please help me to call P1 here?

139. **S:** He is here

140. **R:** So, P1. I was informed now that you guys play a game where
141. you use the word "Freeze," and you were the one who taught
142. your sister the word. From whom did you learn the game word?

143. **P1:** From Auntie Xyz. She often comes to learn the Arabic
144. language from Mum.
145. **R:** This implies that the environment helps here.
146. **S:** Exactly, and Auntie Xyz is part of this environment.
147. **R:** Alright, thank you. So, do the children mix both languages
148. when speaking?
149. **S:** Yes, they often do that. For instance, there was a day I
150. bought a new dress, and one of them said, "ما أجمل dress!!"