

Project Title and Prospectus

Title: Bilingual German Children's Patterns of Language Choice

In this study, I plan to do a case study of four children in a local private German-language immersion program. I intend to examine young bilingual children's language choice; that is, when, where, how often and with whom they use each of their languages. The purpose of this study is two-fold. As a former teacher at this school, I want to be able to help the teachers at the German school understand how context affects the children's language choice; this knowledge may help them encourage greater use of German by the children at the school. On a more scholarly level, I want to see what this information tells us about young children's understanding of the appropriateness of the use of multiple linguistic systems. Research has shown that bilinguals' decisions regarding which language to use in a given situation are constrained by societal rules governing the appropriateness of specific languages in specific contexts; each language has its particular "domains." The decisions of bilingual adults and teenagers regarding which language to use in a given context can be influenced by a multitude of variables, which can be grouped into categories such as interlocutor, topic, setting, and function of interaction. The language choice of very young bilinguals, however, has been shown to be influenced by a much smaller set of variables. Typically, three- and four-year-old bilinguals associate one language with one person, and they rarely waver from this pattern, even when the interlocutor is also bilingual. Occasionally a preschooler's language choice will also be influenced by setting or function of interaction (such as to exclude a monolingual), but these alternative influences are comprised of a fairly small set of variables.

Somewhere between early childhood and early adolescence, bilinguals acquire a cognizance and control of the myriad influences which determine appropriate language choice in their particular communities. The course of development towards this adult norm of bilingual competence has not been documented, and it is the goal of my thesis to begin to identify stages of acquisition of the adult norm.

This study plans to gather naturalistic data through observation. I will observe four children, ideally a four-year-old, a six-year-old, an eight-year-old, and a ten-year-old child. I will follow them throughout their day at school on three different days, and make notes as to which languages they use in which contexts. Observations will consist of my observing each child at his or her ordinary daily activities at the school, such as lunch, circle time, class instruction, and play time. I will make notes about the child's language choices and their accompanying contexts, such as speech participant and setting. Since I wish to observe children who are truly making a choice between languages, and are not constrained by limited fluency, I would like to observe children who are comfortable speaking both German and English. Where possible, such as during instruction and at lunch, these notes will occasionally be supplemented by audiotape recordings.

Participant Recruitment

In the first stage of the subject recruitment process I will send a general letter to all parents of the school introducing myself and informing them about my research. I will then send out to all parents a consent form, along with a letter asking them to sign the form if they are willing to let me use their child or children in my study. The research participants will be chosen from the group whose parents have signed a consent form. I will then talk to the children whose parents have given permission, and obtain their consent also. In addition I will seek consent from the teachers of each of the classrooms. I have already obtained permission from the director of the German-American School of Portland to conduct my research at the school.

Participants

The focus participants of this study will be four children aged four through ten, all students at the German American School of Portland and all bilingual German/English speakers. Students will be chosen based on several factors: 1) their parents' willingness to allow them to participate, 2) their teachers' willingness to allow me to observe in their classrooms, 3) the children's willingness to participate in the study and 4) the children's facility communicating in German and English. Other children who have given consent may also have data recorded and described in the thesis, if they are interacting with the students who are the focus participants.

Informed Consent

Letters introducing myself and explaining my study will be given to all parents and staff of the school. Data collection will not begin until consent forms have been signed and collected. The letters and consent forms will include information about how parents and children can contact me if they have questions about my study, data collection techniques, or any other concerns. Children whose parents do not sign consent forms will not be included in this study.

Each family whose children attend the school has a folder next to the school office which is used as a "mailbox" for communication from teachers and other parents. I will distribute the letters of introduction and explanation, as well as the consent forms (Appendices A and B), in these folders. Signed consent forms will be dropped off in an envelope in the office. Parents will not have access to the envelope to see which other parents have signed forms and which have not.

Similarly, consent forms will be distributed to the teachers at the school (Appendix C). Signed consent forms will be dropped off in an envelope in the office. Teachers will not have access to the envelope to see which other teachers have signed forms and which have not. If a teacher does not give consent to participate, I will choose another classroom to work in.

Finally, I will talk to each child to make sure they have consented to be observed by me and to answer their questions. I will obtain verbal consent from children under age 8 and written consent for children over age 8. I do not wish to influence the nature of the data by telling the children exactly what I am studying, but I will offer them a general explanation.

All letters and consent forms will be provided in both English and in German so that all participants can read the information in their native languages.

First-Person Scenario

Parent

After we received the letter of introduction from Miranda Novash describing the research she intended to do at the school, my husband and I discussed the matter and decided to consent to our child's participation. We felt that our child would not be harmed in any way by being part of a classroom under observation, and maybe Miranda's study will help the school find more ways to encourage the children to use German. When the consent form arrived I signed it and dropped it off in the school office. A week later, I received another letter from Miranda thanking us for signing the form and telling us the date of her first observation. The day before the observation my husband had a few concerns and called Miranda at the number she provided in her letters. Specifically, he was worried that once the observations began, our son might feel uncomfortable being watched. Miranda has said that the children can tell her if they want to stop participating, but my husband feels that if our son is uncomfortable being watched, he also would not be comfortable telling this to the researcher. Miranda answered my husband's questions openly and thoroughly. She agreed that the children might feel awkward approaching her to say they've changed their minds. Miranda suggested that we ask our child every evening how his day went, and what it was like having an extra person in the classroom. If he expresses any discomfort to us, then we can let Miranda know and he won't have to approach her directly. My husband and I were satisfied with this answer; our son is not shy, but you can never really predict how a child will feel when he finds himself in an unfamiliar situation. Miranda has also agreed to provide us with a summary of the results of the study when her thesis is completed.

Student

Our family got a letter a few weeks ago from Miranda Novash, who used to be a teacher at our school. She wants to come observe our classes for a while to see how we use German at the school and write a report about what she sees. My parents asked me if I would mind if she observed me. I said no and we each signed a consent form. A few days later Miranda came to school and talked to me about her report and asked if I had any questions about what she was doing. A few times after that she came and watched our class. Mostly she just sat there quietly, but once in a while she would follow certain students around. Sometimes she brought a tape recorder to record what was going on. Once when she was following my friend around, my friend didn't want her to, and told Miranda that he didn't want to be observed that day. Miranda said that was OK and she

left for that day. After she came a few times she said she was finished and gave each of us a card to thank us for letting her join our class.

Teacher

Miranda came to observe in our class for the first time today. She's pursuing a master's degree in Applied Linguistics at PSU, and as part of her thesis she is recording some of the children at the school as they go about their business. When she first told me about her project, I thought it sounded great. We're always trying to find ways to encourage the children to speak more German, and I thought she might uncover some useful information. When I saw the consent form, though, I was a little nervous – it sounded pretty official. Miranda explained what everything meant though, and repeated that any time I change my mind I can always back out. So far it hasn't been much of a problem having her in class though. Today when she came my students spent the first fifteen minutes turning around and peeking at her, and they did a little whispering, but since she was sitting in the back they forgot about her after awhile. Pretty soon everything was back to normal, and the students were concentrating on their lesson. I think they'll probably notice even less next time she comes. I don't think there is going to be any problem with her observing us.

Potential Risks and Safeguards

There is some risk that someone will find out who is participating in the study or who is the focus of observation. The other risk for this study is that children might also feel uncomfortable knowing that there is someone in their classroom watching them. This might make them feel awkward or uncomfortable. There is also a risk that having an observer in the classroom could affect their concentration on the teacher, either because the children feel awkward or because there is someone new and interesting in the classroom.

To safeguard against the possibility of children feeling awkward being observed, I will do several things. Parents and other children will not be told who precisely is the focus of observation. In addition, if I wish to observe a child closely, I will always ask if it is OK for me to sit nearby. If they say no, I will not observe them at this time. To safeguard participant confidentiality, all information about the children and teachers who participate will remain confidential. Each participant (child or teacher) will be given a code name and only referred to by that code name in publications.

To alleviate the risk of my presence disrupting the class, I will visit the class a few times at non-instructional times such as lunch and recess until they become used to my presence. Since I previously taught at the school many children know me already and thus will hopefully accept my presence in the classroom.

For the tape recordings, it will be impossible for me to ensure that I only record the voices of children who have given informed consent. However, I can ensure that only utterances from children who have given consent will be used. I will only transcribe the utterances of children for whom I have full informed consent (from both child and parent).

I will also assure all parents and children that any child or parent who changes their mind about participating can withdraw their consent at any time.

There is also some risk that the teachers will feel awkward being observed or being audiotaped. In addition, the risk that children might become distracted by my presence could impact the teachers' ability to carry out their instructional plans. As I stated above, I will minimize the risk of distraction by initially allowing the children to become comfortable with my presence in non-instructional settings such as lunch and recess. To alleviate the risk that teachers might feel awkward being observed, I will always notify them well in advance of the dates I plan to observe, so that they will not be taken by surprise. I will encourage them to tell me if the dates I have planned are inconvenient. I will also tell them that they can ask me to stop observing their class at any time without having to provide me with a reason.

Potential Benefits

Since it is the goal of the German American School of Portland to create and maintain a body of bilingual students, this study may help them design their program to optimally meet this goal. Knowledge of what influences a bilingual child's decision to use a given language may help them provide contexts which foster children's use of their weaker language. Such knowledge will also help teachers and parents understand the linguistic behavior of the children, which may help the adults make the best decisions for the children. This study may also increase educators' and linguists' knowledge of the language choices made by young children.

Records and Distribution

All data gathered about the participants will be kept confidential and will be used only for research purposes, which means the data will be analyzed and published in a master's thesis. In the published thesis only code-names will be used in order to protect the participants' confidentiality.

This study will include some audiotaping of the subjects in order to provide concrete examples of the linguistic behavior under study. All of the participants (children and their parents and teachers) will be informed of this in writing, and the consent form will include consent to be audiotaped. If any children who are not participants end up being recorded incidentally, this data will not be used or transcribed. All parents and children, both participants and non-participants, will be informed of this.

All audiotapes, notes, forms, and other information about the participants will be marked confidential and kept in a secure location for three years after they are collected. After this time, the data will be archived in a secure location in the office of my advisor, Dr. Lynn Santelmann. The archive will contain notes about who has given permission and who has not, so that no data from non-participants will be used. Access to these data will be restricted to myself and my thesis advisors.

Appendix A

Parental Informed Consent Form

Dear Parent:

You and your child are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Miranda Kussmaul Novash, who was formerly a teaching assistant at the German American School of Portland (GSP). Miranda is currently a graduate student at Portland State University (PSU), and is working on her master's degree in Applied Linguistics, under the supervision of Dr. Lynn Santelmann at PSU. She hopes to learn more about what influences a bilingual child's decision to use a particular language.

If you decide to participate, your child will be part of the researcher's observations of the children's regular daily routine at the GSP. Ms. Kussmaul Novash will observe at the school several times this spring, but she will not interfere with classroom activities or with the children's routine in any way. Audiotaping may occur during some of these sessions. You and your child may not receive any direct benefit from this study, but the study may provide information that would help teachers, students, and parents involved in immersion programs in the future.

There is some risk that you or your child may feel uncomfortable about the observations or the audiotaping. If that happens, you and your child retain the right to withdraw your consent and end your participation at any time. There is also a small risk that Ms. Kussmaul Novash's presence may be distracting to the children in class. To safeguard against this, Ms. Kussmaul Novash will first introduce herself to the children during recess and non-class times, so the children can become used to her presence. She will not interact with the children during class time unless asked to do so by the teachers. If the teachers feel that her presence is disruptive, she will leave. Finally, there is a small risk that someone may be able to connect what your child has said in class with your child's name. To safeguard against this, any information which can be connected to your or your child that is obtained in connection with this study will be kept confidential. Invented names will be used for the school and all of the people in the study. Also, all observation notes and tape recordings will be stored in a secure location under the researcher's control for three years. After this time, the data will be archived in a secure location in Dr. Lynn Santelmann's office, where only Ms. Kussmaul Novash and her thesis advisors will have access to them.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You and your child do not have to take part in this study. Should you or your child decide not to participate in this study it will not affect your relationship with the German School of Portland, Portland State University or Miranda Kussmaul Novash, or Lynn Santelmann. If you and your child decide to withdraw from this study at any time, this will also not affect your relationship with the researchers, PSU, or the GSP.

If you have any questions or concerns about your child's participation in this study or about your rights as research participants, please contact the Human Subjects Research Review Committee, Office of Research and Sponsored Projects, 111 Cramer Hall, Portland State University, (503) 725-8182. If you have questions about the study itself, please contact either Miranda Kussmaul Novash personally at (503) 293-9418 or at mircrez@yahoo.com or Dr. Lynn Santelmann at (503) 725-4140 or santelmannl@pdx.edu.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understood the above information and agree for yourself and your child _____ to participate in this study. Please understand that you may withdraw your consent at any time without penalty, and that by signing this form you are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this form for your own records.

Parent's Signature: _____

Parent's Printed Name: _____

Child or Children's Name(s) _____

Date: _____

Appendix B: Child Consent Form

Dear _____ ,

Your parents have said that it is okay for you to be a part of a project about children who can speak German and English. If you agree to be part of this project, it means that I will be watching some of your classes and activities, and I will sometimes take notes about what you are doing. Sometimes I will also be tape recording what goes on at school. All of the notes and everything you say will be kept private.

If you don't want to be part of this project, that's okay! Just tell me. You won't get into any trouble. If you ever have any questions about what I'm doing, you can always ask me to explain. I will always be happy to talk to you.

If you want to give it a try, please sign your name on the line below. And remember, if you change your mind, you can always tell me any time!

Signed,

Date: _____

Appendix C: Teacher consent form

Dear Teacher:

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Miranda Kussmaul Novash, a graduate student from Portland State University (PSU). This study is a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's degree in Applied Linguistics, and is being carried out under the supervision of Dr. Lynn Santelmann. This study hopes to learn more about what influences a bilingual child to choose to use a particular language. You may not receive any direct benefit from this study, but the study may provide information which would be useful to teachers, students, and parents involved in language-immersion programs in the future.

If you agree to participate, you will be part of the researcher's observations of the regular daily routine at the German American School of Portland. The researcher will be observing your class three or four times this spring, and she will not interfere with regular classroom activities. The researcher will contact you in advance to arrange with you convenient dates for the observations. Audiotaping may occur during some of these observations.

While participating in this study, it is possible that you may find it uncomfortable or inconvenient to be observed or audiotaped. For this reason, you have the right to end your participation in the study at any time. There is also a small risk that Ms. Kussmaul Novash's presence may be distracting to the children in class. To safeguard against this, Ms. Kussmaul Novash will first introduce herself to the children during recess and non-class times, so the children can become used to her presence. She will not interact with the children during class time unless you ask her to do so. If you feel that her presence is disruptive, she will leave. Finally, there is a small risk that what you say in class may be able to be linked to you. To safeguard against this, any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be connected to you will be kept confidential. Invented names will be used for the school and all of the people in the study. Also, all observation notes and tape recordings will be stored in a secure location under the researcher's control for three years. After this time, the data will be archived in a secure location in Dr. Lynn Santelmann's office, where only Ms. Kussmaul Novash and her thesis advisors will have access to them.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study, and it will not affect your relationship with the German American School of Portland, with Portland State University, with Miranda Kussmaul Novash or with Lynn Santelmann. You may also withdraw from this study at any time without affecting your relationship with the German American School of Portland, with PSU, or with Miranda Kussmaul Novash.

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study or about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Human Subjects Research Review

Committee, Office of Research and Sponsored Projects, 111 Cramer Hall, Portland State University, (503) 725-8182. If you have questions about the study itself, please contact either Miranda Kussmaul Novash personally at (503) 293-9418 or at mircrez@yahoo.com or Dr. Lynn Santelmann at (503) 725-4140 or santelmannl@pdx.edu.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understood the above information and agree to participate in this study. Please understand that you may withdraw your consent at any time without penalty, and that by signing this form you are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this form for your own records.

Signature: _____

Name (printed): _____

Date: _____