Raising Children Bilingually
Some suggestions for parents

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Many Australian parents wish to pass on to their children the language of their own childhood. The degree to which parents are successful in raising their children bilingually varies greatly. Very importantly it seems to be less due to outside circumstances like the language group they come from, whether they have grandparents who can support them or how affluent the family is, but rather to the amount of information parents have about the situation the language learning child is in.

Bilingualism is not detrimental to the child's development

Parents of the 90s can rest assured that growing up bilingually is not detrimental to the child's development. It does not cause stuttering and it does not "confuse". Rather it encourages even very young children to think and talk about language, and it enhances the opportunities for language play that young children are typically fond of. Some crosslinguistic influences in vocabulary and grammar are normal aspects of primary language acquisition and due to the child actively participating in the language acquisition process. These things are important for parents to know when they meet scepticism in the lay and professional communities – scepticism which still persist in spite of a rich body of research indicating that growing up bilingually is anything between harmless to advantageous.

The community language is automatically disadvantaged

However, very often children do not learn to speak the community language in spite of parents' best efforts. What is important to realise is that in many ways the community language is automatically disadvantaged. In most cases there are fewer people speaking the community language to the child than there are people who speak English. In particular children who are prepared to speak the community language when playing with other children are difficult to find. In most bilingual families the children would competently speak the community language with their parents, but not with their brothers and sisters. This appears to be a reality in Australia which is difficult to overcome.

The relative proportion of time for which the child would hear the community language in, let's say the course of a week, is usually quite restricted compared to the time during which she hears English, even if the mother is the main care giver and the main transmitter of the language. This is unavoidably due to the numerous situations during which the parent will interact with other people and then use English. This very fact also imposes limitations on the range of situations during which the child can hear the community language and therefore the variety of language she is exposed to.

However, all these seeming difficulties *can* be overcome. The key issues are:
• Parental *consistency of language choice* determines the amount and variety of exposure to the community language.
• Intensive interactions between parents and children provide the child with *language input which is conducive to language learning* and can make up for the lack of quantity of language input – at least to some degree.
• Explicit discussions of the *language contract* help the child to conceptualise the language choice pattern and promote conscious differentiation between formal aspects of the languages.
• Insisting that the child uses the community language when interacting with the parents *creates a need to speak* the community language for the child.

Consistency in speaking the community language

It is vitally important that parents realise that children's ability to use the community language is directly related to how frequently they are spoken to in that language and that every time parents speak English to the child they support the child's development of English at the expense of her development of the community language. Parents who consistently speak the community language with their children automatically increase the amount of exposure to that language.

Consistency in language use is also extremely important for reasons of habit. Many adults find it very difficult to speak their community language to their children consistently. They frequently fall back into English because this is the language they speak to everybody else. This way the child is placed in a situation like the following:

> *Mummy speaks English or Greek to me and everybody else speaks English to me.*
> *Consequently I can choose to speak English or Greek to Mummy, but because I*
> *hear English much more than Greek, English is easier to use. So why should I use*
> *Greek?*

However, if the parent can get used to only speaking the community language himself when interacting with the child, then the following scenario is the one that presents itself to the child:

> *Daddy speaks English to most people, but with me he only speaks Italian. I love*
> *Daddy and I like him to spend special time with me. I want to do everything Daddy*
> *does and I also want to speak like him.*

In order for the adult to feel comfortable about using the community language with the child it is best to make a decision to *never* speak anything but this particular language with the child and to start this as soon as the child is born or from the first time you have contact with a child if she is not your own.

Parents who always speak the community language to their child do not only increase the time during which the child has a chance to hear the language, but also the range of situations in which they are likely to speak it. And amazingly, this also increases the number of people the child will overhear speaking the community language. To my own delight, speaking German unashamedly with my sons at all times and in all places has given us the opportunity for meeting many people in our local community who also speak German. These people tend to approach us when they hear us talk German, and they give my children the impression that German is used quite widely. This is very important as the child grows older and the relative usefulness of a language becomes an issue for him.

Quality interaction produces language input which is conducive to language learning

The restrictions in time of exposure to the community language can be countered by the quality of interaction which takes place when parents and children are together. This is particularly important when working parents, who can only spend a few hours a day with their children, wish to transmit a community language. The more interlocutors there are, the more likely the chance that some of them will provide the type of input necessary to learn the language, or everybody provides a little bit of useful input which eventually amounts to what the child needs to decode and encode the language. But if a parent is the only or main communicator who uses the community language, then the whole burden of providing appropriate input rests on his or her shoulders. However, if the child is able to decode what parents say to her, feels understood when she tries to talk to them and, therefore, finds it rewarding to talk to them and hear them talk to her, she *is* going to learn that language.

So what do parents need to do in order to provide a rich verbal environment? Most importantly, parents need to play with their child regularly, they need to concentrate on what the child is doing and trying to say and then follow her lead. This will automatically help the parent understand what the child is saying as well as help the child decode what the parent is saying.

Cuddling up with the child in a soft corner or on a special seat and looking at books together is stimulating for the children and relaxing for the parent, and provides a predictable language environment for the child. Initially it is much more important to talk about the pictures than to read the text. Once the child knows a book, she will want to talk about the pictures, and parents can gradually build on the child's contributions with longer and more complex utterances.

Singing and laughing with the child, and talking about the surrounding world will further enrich the language input. The lack of varied interlocutors can to some degree be compensated through audio and video cassettes. For many languages there are a wide range of music cassettes, radio plays and children's video programs available commercially or through sources in the home country.

Introducing the Language Contract

The development of the community language can be significantly enhanced by being explicit about the language contract. While young children might not understand the abstract concept of "language", they are able to hear differences between languages at a very early age, probably within the first few months of their lives. By about two years of age most children become obsessed with attributing objects to one parent or the other. This is a perfect time to stop accepting words from either language from the child and to introduce the concept of languages being tied to specific people:

Child: *das a plane*
       'that a plane'
Mother: *ja das ist ein Flugzeug !*
       'yes that is a plane!'
       Aber Mami sagt nicht plane, Mami sagt Flugzeug !
       'But Mummy doesn't say plane, Mummy says Flugzeug!'
   –> *Daddy sagt plane , und Mami sagt Flugzeug !*
       'Daddy says plane, and Mummy says Flugzeug!'
   –> *kannst du Flugzeug sagen?*
       'can you say 'plane'?'

Little sequences like this are extremely useful for the child's successful acquisition of the community language. First of all, the adult is positive about the child's attempt at communicating, and by rephrasing and translating what the child has just said proves to the child that she has understood. This in itself is the reward the child would have wanted. Secondly, the desired vocabulary item is repeated several times. It is quite possible that the child chose *plane* because she had never heard *Flugzeug* before. The child might also have chosen *plane* rather than *Flugzeug* because *plane* is effectively easier to pronounce than *Flugzeug*. Or the child might have chosen the English word because she hears it more often and from more people so that it comes to mind more easily. All of this is counteracted to a degree by the repeated use of the appropriate term. Lastly, but very importantly, the "language contract" is being made explicit by this sequence. Stating the language contract explicitly provides the child with a means for talking about her language environment and directs her attention towards differences between the languages in general.

Creating a need to speak the community language

English being the easy way out appears to be a common cause for the lack of development in the community language. From the bilingual child's point of view, most English speakers do not understand the community language, but all community language speakers she knows understand English. So, speaking Thai with English speakers in Australia is generally unsuccessful and consequently avoided, but if speaking English with Thai speakers doesn't cause any problems for the interaction, why should she avoid an English word when it comes to mind first. If that attitude persists, then English will be increasingly more accessible than Thai, and soon the child will find it harder and harder to express herself in Thai. The answer to that is not to allow the use of English to be the easy way out when the communication contract specifies the use of the community language. Sequences like the one illustrated above do just that: they delay the ongoing interaction and focus on the language contract. Soon the child will realise that abiding by the language contract is the easier way after all.

Another very important aspect of the example above is that the child is actively involved in the repair sequence. This way her attention is assured, and the fact that she has to repeat the term makes it more likely that she will be saying *Flugzeug* next time around.

As the adult becomes more confident that the child knows a particular community language term even if she has chosen the English equivalent, it is possible to simply ask for "the Daddy word" or the German, Greek or Italian word, or the like, and let the child provide the translation herself. At this point it would even be possible to play a game of "I don't understand you when you speak English with me". But of course, the child knows the parents *do* understand English and might not accept this game. If she doesn't, there is always the possibility of making the language contract explicit once again.

It is, however, very important that parents do not expect the child to do things she cannot yet do. This would be very frustrating to the child and totally counterproductive to the acquisition of the community language. Therefore the first step should always be to *model* in the community language and to *request a repetition of the model*. Only when adults are sure that the child can use the community language equivalent should they *request that the child translates*.

It is also important not to frustrate each and every attempt the child makes at communi-cating. It is usually enough to target a few very persistent vocabulary items to motivate the child to pay closer attention to words as well as structures in the community language.

Raising a child bilingually is a rewarding experience for both adult and child. It is educationally sound and intellectually worthwhile. Because of the complexity of language use, identity and emotions, it might not always be plain sailing, but if the adult is committed to it and observes a few basic principles, as discussed above, the outcome is most likely successful.

Suggested reading:

Baker, C. (1995) *A Parents' and Teachers' Guide to Bilingualism*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters

Crystal, D. (1986) *Listen to your Child. A Parent's Guide to Children's Language*. Harmondsworth: Penguin

Döpke, S. (1992) *One Parent – One Language. An Interactional Approach*. Amsterdam: Benjamins

Janssen, C. and A. Pauwels (1993) *Raising Children Bilingually in Australia*. Canberra: National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia [available through the Department of Linguistics, Monash University]

Makin, L., J. Campbell and C.J. Diaz (1994) *One Childhood – Many Languages*. Pymble, NSW: Harper Educational Publishers

Saunders, G. (1988) *Bilingual Children: From Birth to Teens*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters

The Bilingual Family Newsletter. Edited by M. Grover. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters

Trelease, J. (1986): *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. Richmond, VIC: Penguin

Wells, G. (1986) *The Meaning Makers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann