

# **Thoughts on servicing bilingual paediatric clients with severe communication impairment**

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Meeting a family with a child whose communication is severely impaired and who in addition speak a language we do not share is a challenging experience. It is easy for old doubts to surface. How can the child possibly cope with the additional complication of a second language when s/he is not even able to speak one? Won't the inevitable shifts between home language and English add to the anxiety of an already confusing world? Is s/he intellectually able to process and remember twice as many words, grammatical structures and additional social rules? How will I support her communication if I do not know her home language? The purpose of this article is to address these issues and to encourage speech pathologists to trust their knowledge about bilingualism and the benefits of family-centred practice in this scenario, and to develop some creative therapy ideas.

## **Effects of bilingualism on language development**

There is ample evidence that bilingualism in children with normal development is not detrimental but most likely beneficial to their intellectual and academic progress (Bialystok 2001; Döpke ed. 2000, which also has many references to other publications; Meisel ed. 1990). A very small but gradually growing body of research shows that even for children with language delay, in particular with SLI and/or difficulties with literacy, bilingualism does not worsen the condition (Abu-Rabia & Siegel 2002; Håkansson et al. 2003; Paradis et al. 2003; Genesee et al. 2004).

## **Effects of input quality on language development**

A huge body of research from the 60s, 70s and 80s provides evidence that input conditions affect the linguistic and cognitive development of monolingual children. Rich language input in the preschool years is likely to be the most important factor in children's academic success during primary school (eg. Basil Bernstein, Gordon Wells, Shirley Brice-Heath, Toni Cross; Ernst Moerck; Elizabeth Bates - to name just a few). Some of the same authors have shown that impoverished language conditions at home have a pervasively inhibiting affect on children's educational attainment.

In bilingual environments, rich input in one language affects the child's linguistic and academic abilities in a second language (Cummins 2000). By the same token, impoverished language input at home - whether in the home language or in English - puts the child at risk for less than optimal achievement at school. Important in this argument is the finding that it is not the more English the higher the achievement, but the richer the language input the higher the achievement! Children easily learn two languages, especially when the languages are presented simultaneously (eg. Tracy 1998; Döpke ed. 2000; Meisel ed. 1990, ed. 1994) The brain is not a container which can only hold a finite amount; it is more like a balloon - the more you put in, the bigger it gets (don't think this metaphor to the end, please; that part is not true either!)

## **Likely effects of English-only advice**

There is *no* evidence that asking parents to only speak English improves the child's ability to learn and/or use language (Genesee et al. 2004, and in various contributions to the infochilides listserv). To the contrary, we have observational and anecdotal evidence that the relationship between parents and their children may become jeopardised when parents speak a language with them which they are not comfortable with, through which they cannot relate their own

identity, their feelings, their heritage, their games and stories. Observations of such families suggest that the interactions between parents and children become even more reduced, resulting in further impoverishment of the input<sup>1</sup>.

The language shift may have a profound affect on the family. To the child the language shift itself might become more confusing than the previous road to bilingualism ever was. Firstly, because prior to the advise given to the parents to only speak English, the child associated his/her parents with the home language. Just because the child does not speak or does not react to language the way administrators of tests expect, does not mean that the language used with the child so far does not matter. Secondly, changing the language is not easy for the parents either. Any adult who speaks more than one language can attest to the fact that people have a preferred language with each person they know, same as monolingual people have a preferred style or register with each person they know. The preferred language is determined by the history of language use with that person and thus the type of relationship the two interactants have with each other. Consequently, the change in language may be more unsettling for the child than the monolingual professional can imagine. The language situation is likely to be further complicated for the child by parents not being able to be consistent, speaking English when they remember that they are supposed to do so, but frequently shifting back to the more familiar language. Moreover, parents are unlikely to shift to English when speaking to each other because language choice is so central in defining the relationship between them.<sup>2</sup> Thus the child will find him/herself in a situation where at best the people around him speak English with him, but another language to each other. At worst s/he gets an unpredictable mixture or hardly any language addressed to her at all. In what way is this

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<sup>1</sup> Research has suggested that adult input to children with language delay and in particular to nonverbal children is much reduced in cognitive quality anyway (Henry 2001).

<sup>2</sup> I have ample personal accounts of parents who ask me how they can make their child change to their language of origin, but state that it is totally impossible for them to speak that language with their partner because they are so used to speaking English with him/her.

going to make the language environment more stable or more conducive to language development?<sup>3</sup> Thirdly - and although last not unimportantly - there may be other children in the family who are affected by the English-only advice. If English-only becomes a policy for the whole family, the home language gets lost for all children and with it they may lose connections with the parents' families back home, the parents may lose their aspirations for the future of their other children, and the relationships to the community may become weakened.

In summary: There is a little bit of evidence that bilingualism does not increase difficulties which a child may have with language development, but there is no evidence at all that there is any advantage from asking parents to shift to English-only. Implicational evidence from tangentially related research on the language choice behaviour of bilinguals suggests that advising parents to only speak English with their children may further complicate rather than simplify the language environment for the child. The effects on the rest of the family may be far reaching and outside the professional's imagination. Under these conditions, professionals are better advised to go with a position for which there is scant positive evidence than with a position for which there is no positive evidence at all, but potentially negative secondary consequences.

### **Passive Bilingualism**

Not all bilinguals in this world are active bilinguals, ie. are able to speak both languages. Vast numbers of people without any impairments are able to understand more than one language, but only speak one. This is called "passive bilingualism". While the ideal might be to have equal and age-appropriate abilities in both languages, understanding a second language is still

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<sup>3</sup> May the reader please apologise my shifts between pronouns in order to stay gender inclusive in already complex sentences.

a worthwhile skill. There are no studies whatsoever which show that having comprehension skills in a second language affects the output abilities of the first language. On the basis of the research evidence on bilingualism and language disorder which we have so far (see above) there is no reason to believe that passive bilingualism should affect children with language disorder differently to children with unremarkable development.

Sometime last year, we had a discussion on the AGOSCI listserv about a preschool child with Downs Syndrome, who heard both German and English at home. We were told that he did not say anything in either language, but he reacted equally to both. This child can be considered a passive bilingual up to his abilities at the time. Since his lack of speaking was most likely related to motor difficulties, discontinuing German, as the child care personnel had advised the mother to do, would have been unlikely to result in a flurry of English words.

I am currently working with a 12-year-old with autism, who communicates with a Lightwriter but whose oral output is nearly only echolalic. The parents speak Cantonese with each other, but English to my client. One day we could overhear the parents having an animated discussion in an adjoining room, which got my client rather distracted. So I asked him if he understood his parents when they spoke Cantonese. He wrote: "I heard it all my life." How stupid of me to ask!

### **Bilingualism and motor disabilities**

Many of the children we see who present with severe communication impairment are not as cognitively impaired as their motor difficulties may suggest - if they are cognitively impaired at all. There is certainly no reason why a person with cerebral palsy could not benefit from bilingualism in much the same way as a child with normal physical development. If they can become literate in one language, they can become literate in two languages. Skills increase a person's self-esteem and opportunities for employment and hence independence. I would not

want to be responsible for taking away further opportunities from a person in an already disadvantaged situation.

When working on functional oral vocabulary with a person with severe motor impairment, the home language might prove to be an additional resource. Motorically simple words are very limited in most languages. Being able to draw on that pool in an additional language may significantly increase the number of words the client can learn to say. I routinely call on words in both my clients' languages for that. There is no reason why we or the people caring for the person with severe motor impairment cannot learn a handful of words in that person's language. My experience with care personnel has so far been very positive in this respect.

### **Bilingualism and intellectual impairment**

There are no studies regarding the benefits or detriments of bilingualism versus monolingualism in relation to intellectual impairment either. At the current state of affairs our most founded position is to extend our understanding of bilingualism, family dynamics and language acquisition to this group as well.

### **AAC as a bridge between home language and English**

Visual forms of communication can take on the additional function of mediating between English and the home language for any one who does not share the home language - or English for that matter. For the client this will not cause any problems since languages are connected in the brain through their underlying concepts anyway. Boardmaker has the fantastic facility of searching and displaying words in a range of languages, the newer versions offering even more choices than the older ones. For languages which Boardmaker does not contain, family members, interpreters or community leaders may be able to help with

translations. Keyword signing with AUSLAN signs can equally serve as a translation tool for those not sharing the clients' home language.

### **How to advice parents**

All parents benefit from being taught strategies which facilitate their children's language acquisition. Apart from a small number of language specific grammatical features, these are universal across languages. While they might not be universal across cultures, parents' learning about Australian middle class teaching strategies ultimately facilitates the child's later orientation in the Australian school system. Where the cultural difference is too big, strategies need to be modified to reflect what the family can be comfortable with, or other care givers might be able to take this on.

An important adult input strategies is the reading of books. Picture book reading has been researched for its benefit in treatment of language delayed children and produced encouraging positive results (Crain-Thoreson & Dale 1999; Dale et al. 1996; Hargrave & Senechal 2000; Hoffman 1997; Ratner et al. 1993; Whitehurst et al. 1988) Their visual aspect provides signal stability for joint focus, repeatability and gradable complexity. Picture books can be easily adapted for bilingual families, in particular when we have adapted them for switch users in PowerPoint already.

In the interest of transparency and orientation for the client it is highly desirable that language choice is consistent. At the very least, parents should be advised never to switch languages mid-sentence. Mid-sentence switching basically makes it impossible for the child to work out where the home language ends and English starts. Children are not born with a concept of language. They develop this through consistent exposure in predictable contexts. Ideally children can reliably categorise language by the person who speaks to them. This can best be accomplished when the same person always speaks the same language with the child.

## Conclusion

We have no evidence that bilingualism further increases the burden on children with severe communication disorders. Moreover, we have no evidence that advising families to only speak English improves language development. I hope that this paper provided encouragement to professionals working with bilingual families to support them in their language choices. The challenges presented by severe communication impairment are the same for monolingual and bilingual families. The specific communication techniques employed for this group of clients can provide a bridge for language barriers.

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