

Two Languages in Early Childhood

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Monash University, 1994

Do you want your child to be bilingual? Maybe the grandparents can't understand English, maybe you are planning to move to another country or to return home after having lived overseas for a long time, or maybe you just feel that you need to speak your own language with your child in order to feel good in your role as parent. There can be many reasons for deciding to speak a language to a child other than the one spoken by the majority of people in your society and thereby open the opportunity for the child to become bilingual.

Being bilingual is totally normal. Around the globe, there are many more people who are bilingual than monolingual. And after decades of research on the effects of bilingualism on children's development, we are now certain that bilingualism as such only has positive effects on the child's development. Bilingual children have been found to learn to read more quickly and more effectively, to be able to use language in more flexible ways, to be more expressive, and to be able to reflect upon language use at an earlier age than do monolingual children. At times bilingual children have even been found to excel in non-language related areas of intellectual development. Children whose parents are non-native speakers of the majority language have been found to have better skills in the majority language when they are in school later on, when their parents always spoke their own language with them than when the parents chose to use the majority language, with which they were less familiar themselves. If you have the opportunity to expose your child to a second language in early childhood, you are exploiting an important resource for your child's intellectual development.

You might know people who have tried to speak a language other than English to their child, but who report that they had to give this because the child didn't like it, or because the child confused the two languages, or because their child was just not able to express herself in the minority language. How come there is this discrepancy of positive effects of bilingualism on a child's development reported by researchers and frustration reported by some parents? In this chapter I will discuss effective ways of exposing your child to a language other than the one spoken by the majority of people in your society, address a number of issues that are commonly experienced as difficult by parents and make suggestions for overcoming them.

Language is for communication, and human beings are uniquely disposed to learning language because they want to communicate with each other on a complex intellectual level. Hence the key to learning a language for a young child is to have a person in her life who is important to her and who uses that particular language. Children cannot learn a language in an emotional vacuum. Both, being emotionally important to the child and to be able to transmit skills in a particular language to the child, is tied to how frequently the child sees that person and how intensive the contact between the child and adult is. Quite clearly, a parent is best equipped to pass on a minority language. But grandparents, babysitters or child care centres might also be successful.

Language learning is most effective if the language is tied to particular people. The language we use is part of what defines our relationship to a particular person. In that way, language is self-perpetuating. Changing to another language calls the relationship into question. Many bilingual adults can vouch for that. Sometimes parents report that they attempted to tie a minority language to particular situations. This works well when both parents speak the same minority language and their language is always used at home, but not when the family goes out. Home presents a natural complex of interaction, a rich emotional environment, and is varied enough for language skills to develop. Parents who try to speak the minority language at certain times of the day or in certain rooms of the house are hardly ever successful in their endeavour because this division of language use is unnatural to both the parents and the children, and all participants quickly return to speaking to each other whatever feels most comfortable.

Consistency in language use is extremely important. Many adults find that very difficult. They frequently fall back into English (if they live in Australia, for example) 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 minority 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 confident about using the minority 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.

In many ways the minority language is automatically disadvantaged. In most cases there are fewer people speaking the minority language to the child than there are people who speak English. In particular children who are prepared to speak the minority language when playing with your child are difficult to find. In most bilingual families the children competently speak the minority language with their parents, but not with their brothers and sisters. This appears to be a reality in Australia which is difficult to overcome. Somehow most children seem to come to the conclusion that speaking the minority language is something one does with adults but children always speak English to one another.

The relative proportion of time for which the child would hear the minority 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 mother 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 minority language and therefore the variety of language she is exposed to.

However, all these seeming difficulties *can* be overcome. Obviously, being consistent in speaking the minority language to the child instantly increases the exposure to that language. If you are the only person speaking the minority language to the child regularly I strongly recommend not to restrict its use to when you are alone with the child. The time you will be alone with her decreases rapidly as she grows older. It might be more advisable to enlist other people's understanding for not switching to English when you want to say something to your child and to translate yourself or have the child translate after the exchange between you and the child is finished. I have found that this approach even works with my son's friends, who are all fascinated by his ability to speak German and now highly motivated to learn another language themselves.

If you do decide to always speak the minority language to the child in your care then you do not only increase the time at which the child has a chance to hear the language, but also the range of situations in which you are likely to speak it. Just think of the many things you are doing and talking about when you are out of the house. And amazingly, this also increases the number of people the child will overhear speaking the minority 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.

The restrictions in time of exposure to the minority language can very well be countered by the quality of interaction which takes place when you are with the child. This is particularly important when a mother or a father who spend many hours during the day at work wish to transmit a minority language. If you are the only person or one of very few people who speak the minority language with the child then it is very important that you learn to communicate with the child in a way that is conducive to language learning. If the child is able to decode what you say to her, feels understood when she tries to talk to you and, therefore, finds it rewarding to talk to you and hear you talk to her, she *is* going to learn that 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 recode the language. But if you are the only or main communicator who uses the minority language, then the whole burden of providing appropriate input rests on your shoulders.

So what do you need to do in order to provide a rich verbal environment? For most people there are only a few very easy steps to be taken: Enjoy playing with your child. Concentrate on what she is doing and go along with it. This will automatically help you understand what your child is saying as well as help the child decode what you are saying. Cuddle up with the child in a soft corner or on a special seat and look at books together. 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 tell you about the pictures, and you can gradually build on her contributions with longer and more complex utterances. Sing and laugh with her, and talk about the world around you. The lack of varied interlocutors can to some degree be compensated for 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.

The development of the minority language can be further 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 weeks 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 "mummy says" and "daddy says":

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 *Flugzeug*'?

Little sequences like this are extremely useful for the child's successful acquisition of the minority 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 of talking about the language environment she encounters and directs her attention towards differences between the languages in general.

The majority language being the easy way out appears to be a common cause for the lack of development in the minority language. From the bilingual child's point of view, majority language speakers do not understand the minority language, but all minority language speakers she knows understand the majority language. 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, than 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 minority 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 we can be sure of her attention, and the fact that she has to repeat the term makes it more likely that she will be saying *Flugzeug* next time around. All learning is most successful when we actively participate.

As the adult becomes more confident that the child knows a particular minority 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 whatever the particular language is you expect the child to speak with you. Then the child can provide the translation by 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 you *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 we 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 minority language. Therefore the first step should always be to *model* in the minority language and to request a repetition of the model. Only when we are sure that the child can use the minority language equivalent should we request that the child translates herself.

And it is also important not to frustrate each and every attempt the child makes at communicating with us. It is usually enough to target a few very persisting vocabulary items to motivate the child to pay closer attention to words as well as structures in the minority language.

I have only been talking about vocabulary items so far, because they are relatively easily corrected. Quite often there is a degree of structural interference between the languages as well. However, the structural interference appears to be largely motivated by the child's developing cognitive ability, and intervention on that level is most likely to be unsuccessful. The normal adult practice of repeating what the child has said in a corrected and slightly expanded form, as in the following example, is quite sufficient to ensure that progress in the development of the minority language will continue.

Child: I need not that

Adult: Oh you don't need that. Well then you don't have to have it.

For the normal child, that is the child without any genuine language learning problems, these interferences will disappear in time. Nevertheless, by explicitly directing the child's attention to vocabulary items, we are motivating him to also take note of structural differences between the languages.

As during monolingual language development, children who are simultaneously exposed to two languages will first acquire what is regular or salient in their languages. At times the bilingual child might find a similar grammatical function much easier or more obvious in one language than in the other and therefore uses the same structure in both languages. With time the child will be able to process more and more language cues and eventually this strategy will be dropped and the correct form will be used in each language. In other words, overgeneralisation

doesn't need to be of any concern. The adult should just not use the overgeneralised structures back, but continue to provide a correct model.

Consistency, which I advocated above for reasons of maximising exposure and committing the child to a language contract, plays an important role in the structural development of the languages as well. Initially the child will not know what "a language" is, but only understand that mummy and daddy speak in different ways. If the interlocutors are consistent with their language choice the child will find it much easier to realise that everything mummy says belongs to one system and everything daddy says to another. The two different systems are later easily labelled "English" and "Japanese".

There might however be some few aspects of grammatical development in the minority language which the bilingual child will never conquer a hundred percent. The German article system would be an example. It is largely unsystematic, and the limited input we can provide as isolated interlocutors doesn't seem to be enough for the child to get it right. There is really not much we can do about aspects of grammatical development which are dependent on extensive input which can't be provided by only a few speakers. I suppose we just have to accept these slight shortcomings and cherish what our children *are* able to do. It certainly doesn't diminish the positive aspects of being bilingual in general.

While I have predominantly talked about situations in which children acquire two languages simultaneously, most of what I have said so far also holds true when young children have already taken the first steps into one language before they are confronted with a second language. The further the child has advanced with her first language, the more dissimilar the experience she has with the second language will be, and the more reluctant she might be as a consequence. The older the child is, the more the minority language interlocutors turn into teachers and the less natural the interaction is bound to be, unless the child truly believes that the person who speaks the minority language cannot speak English. If a parent or other close care giver is totally committed to changing the established language of interaction, a very firm contract needs to be established to which the adult (!) adheres without fail. This contract should initially specify one or two situations in which the adult will only speak the minority language and encourage the child to participate in the minority language through sequences like the first one discussed above, ie. modelling and request for repetition. Gradually new situations can be added, and the child can be required to use the minority language up to her ability, until it is the normal mode of interaction between the care giver and the child. This process might take a number of years. Even more than in the case of simultaneous bilingualism, interactions in a later-introduced minority language need to be rich and fun, and centred around the interests of the child.

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 in this chapter, the outcome is most likely successful.

- Decide on a course of action and be consistent with your own language use;
- Engage in rich and rewarding interaction with the child;
- Make the "language contract" explicit to the child;
- Be positive about the child's past and future achievements;
- Try and extend the language contact through other people, book, songs, and children's programs on audio and video cassettes.

The following books are recommended for further reading:

- Arnberg, L. (1987) *Raising Children Bilingually: The Preschool Years*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters
- Döpke, S. (1992) *One Parent – One Language. An Interactional Approach*. Amsterdam: Benjamins

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

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

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

I further recommend *The Bilingual Family Newsletter*, edited by George Saunders. This Newsletter is published by Multilingual Matters and appears four times a year. It provides a forum for the exchange of experiences bilingual families have as well as expert advice.