

Chapter 20

Language Acquisition for the Bilingual Child: A Perspective on Raising Bilingual Children in the U.S.

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To start a discussion regarding second language acquisition, the term “bilingualism” must be defined. In its simplest form, bilingualism is defined as ‘knowing’ two languages.

Immigrants arriving in the U.S. face many decisions. Among them is whether or not to raise their child to be bilingual. Parents often base their decision on information available to them from professionals working with their children and what they perceive to be the expectations from mainstream society. A family’s desire to retain their cultural identity and home language also plays a role in making this decision. If professionals do not support the native language of families, the mother tongue may disappear by the third generation. In addition, a rift between the family and providers may form when professionals insist on callously disregarding the culture and the language of the families they serve. This paper intends to:

- Explore bilingualism in the U.S.
- Address parental concerns in raising a bilingual child.
- Provide approaches and strategies for second language acquisition.

The issue of oral bilingualism for children with hearing loss will also be addressed.

Bilingualism in the U.S.

To start a discussion regarding second language acquisition, the term “bilingualism” must be defined. Bilingualism is a complex term that, “. . . is influenced by multiple factors, such as the age of acquisition of the

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second language, continued exposure to the first language, relative skill in each language, and the circumstances under which each language is learned” (Gottardo & Grant, 2008). Regardless of this complexity, for the purposes of this paper, a simple definition of bilingualism has been selected. “In its simplest form, bilingualism is defined as ‘knowing’ two languages” (Valdez & Figueora, 1994, as cited in Gottardo & Grant, 2012).

A child can become bilingual by simultaneous acquisition or successive acquisition of the second language. “A child under the age of 3 who is exposed to two languages usually experiences simultaneous acquisition. If the child is exposed to the second language at an older age, successive acquisition usually occurs” (National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, 1995).

For the acquisition of a second language, earlier is better (Petitto, 2009). Researchers have “consistently found that proficiency in the later-exposed bilingual and/or second language learners declined dramatically if learned after puberty (Johnson & Newport, 1989; McDonald 2000, as cited in Pettito & Dunbar, 2004). However, “children arriving late to a bilingual context can and do achieve

language competence in their new language” (Pettito & Dunbar, 2004).

True balanced bilingualism, also called equilingualism, occurs when individuals are equally fluent in two languages. There are different levels of bilingualism and “native-like proficiency in both languages, referred to as ‘true’ bilingualism, is rare” (Cutler, Mehler, Norris, & Segui, as cited by Gottardo & Grant, 2008). Most multilingual people have a dominant language.

Bilingualism is common in many parts of the world. For example, in Spain, many children learn Spanish and Catalan; in the Andes, children speak Quichua or Quechua, as well as Spanish; and in India (whose official language is Hindi), its “subsidiary official language” is English. Many children are multilingual. Sadly, “research indicates that success in raising children to be bilingual remains the exception in the U.S., as most children eventually become English-dominant or even monolingual in English” (Fillmore, 2000, as cited in King & Fogle, 2006). Among the reasons for this trend are the negative attitudes toward diversity from those who are meant to provide support for families and the inability (or unwillingness) of certain programs and providers to deliver services in the native language of immigrant families. This could be due to financial constraints or lack of bilingual personnel. Another factor that influences this societal tendency for monolingualism is the high status of English in the U.S. The political climate toward immigrants can impact a family’s decision to retain the mother tongue or to select English as the only language for their child. Another reason for the monolingual trend in the U.S. is that American parents may not have many opportunities for providing foreign language exposure for their children.

In the past, some teachers and service providers (including early interventionists) in the U.S. advised immigrant parents against raising their child to be bilingual, stating that it diminished the ability to learn English. Sorace and Ladd (n.d.) in



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their research reminded us that “fifty years ago, educators throughout North America used to tell immigrant parents that it was better for their children’s schooling if they spoke English at home.” Surprisingly, even today there are educators who tell parents the same thing.

Traditionally, children whose home language is other than English are often perceived as deficient by many educators (Fillmore, 1992). Another factor that can thwart bilingualism efforts by parents is that children’s native language is not acknowledged or valued in American public schools. Current literature stresses the importance of providing services to limited English-speaking families in their native language when working with children with special needs (Hardin et al., 2009), as well as children without disabilities. “Research also indicates that parents’ beliefs, attitudes, and interactions with their children are important in helping children become bilingual (De Houwer, 1998; Lanza, 1997, as cited in King & Fogle, 2006).

Parental Concerns about Raising a Child to be Bilingual

Parents wanting to raise a bilingual child in the U.S. share the following two concerns:

- 1 Will bilingualism result in developmental delays?
- 2 Will it result in language confusion?

Bilingualism and Delays

Even today there are professionals who believe that brains are wired to be monolingual, and bilingualism may lead to language delays. However, there is no evidence that human beings are programmed to be monolinguals. In fact, “recent brain scanning studies of adult bilingual brains have demonstrated that

the neural pathways for bilingual’s two languages are the same (and similar to monolinguals) but only if they had early bilingual language exposure” (Klein, Milner, Zatorre, Evans, & Meyer, 1995, as cited by Petitto & Kovelman, 2003). Petitto and Kovelman have even stated that perhaps “our brains were neurologically set to be multilingual.” The traditional view that bilingual babies exhibited language delays and confusion, because they possess a single, fused representation of their two languages, has been challenged by new findings “that very young bilingual infants have distinct representations of their two input languages from their first steps into the language acquisition process” (Petitto, 2002, as cited by Petitto, 2001).

When considering bilingualism and language delays, Fenson (1994) warns that, “It is important to differentiate between the popular use of the term ‘language delay’ in reference to a child who is perceived to take longer than average to begin to speak, but who is well within the normal range of productive vocabulary development” (as cited in King & Fogle, 2006). And “the clinical use of the term to refer to significant delays in the development of language . . . Without this differentiation, undue concerns may arise” (King & Fogle, 2006). King and Fogle continue by saying that, “Terminology issues aside, the research is quite clear. No empirical evidence links bilingualism to language delay of any sort.”

There are those who think that learning a second language interferes with mastering the primary language and can lead to language impairment, especially for children with cochlear implants. “Research suggests that children who learn a second language are more creative and better at solving complex problems than those who do not. Individuals who speak more than one language have the ability to communicate with more people, read more literature, and benefit more fully from travel abroad. Knowing a second language also gives people a competitive advantage in the workforce” (Cal Center for Applied Linguistics, n.d.).

Current literature stresses the importance of providing services to limited English-speaking families in their native language when working with children with special needs, as well as children without disabilities.

It has been found that 15-month-old infants learning two languages may be delayed by 2 or 3 months in their ability to distinguish new words that differ in small ways in comparison to monolingual children. Researchers suggest that this delay is a kind of flexibility that allows bilingual children to be open to the great diversity of words to which they are exposed in both languages.

The perception of clinical language delay in bilingual children may arise from the fact that it is not uncommon for “preschool bilingual children to know fewer words in each language than monolingual children when each language is examined separately” (Genesee, 2012). In fact, good evidence exists that bilingual children and young adults have smaller vocabularies in each of their languages than do monolingual children of the same age (Pearson, 1993; Pearson, Fernandez, Lewedeg, & Oller, 1997; Hoff & Elledge, 2003, as cited in Hoff & McKay, 2005). Nevertheless, if we count the total number of words a child has in both languages, “Bilingual children have vocabularies that are the same size or larger than those of monolingual children” (Pearson, Fernández, & Oller, 1993, as cited in Hoff & MacKay, 2005). This discrepancy in vocabulary size may exist, “Because bilingual children must share their limited memory with two languages, they can store fewer words in each language than monolingual children—but the same number, or more words, when you consider both languages” (Genesee, 2012).

“Another explanation of bilingual children’s smaller vocabularies in each language is related to the learning environment. Many bilingual children do not have totally equivalent vocabularies in both languages, because they often learn each language from different people and/or in different settings” (Genesee, 2007). “The current view is that this difference reflects differences in the amount of input in each language that children receive” (Pearson et al., 1997, as cited by Hoff & MacKay, 2005).

Differences between monolingual and bilingual learners do exist but have nothing to do with delays or impairments. Byers-Heinlein, Burns, and Werker (2010) acknowledge that there are “differences between bilingual and monolingual children. For example, it has been found that 15-month-old infants learning

two languages may be delayed by 2 or 3 months in their ability to distinguish new words that differ in small ways (e.g., “bit” vs. “bet”) in comparison to monolingual children” (as cited in Genesee, 2012). However, as Genesee (2011) explains, “In the long-run, this short delay has an insignificant effect on bilingual children’s overall language ability. Researchers suggest that this delay is a kind of flexibility that allows bilingual children to be open to the great diversity of words to which they are exposed in both languages.”

The use of the term delay in the literature, referring to this “initial short delay,” may account for the prevalent belief there is a “language delay” in the clinical and educational sense. This view is disseminated by popular parenting literature. “Even if the differences in vocabulary persist into adulthood, we must remember that bilinguals are able to communicate and function in two languages, whereas monolinguals can function in only one” Genesee (2012).

Bilingualism and Language Confusion

Code-switching. Bilingual children engage in code-switching. Hoffman (1991) defined code-switching as “the alternate use of two or more languages within the same utterance or during the same conversation” (as cited in Dulm, 2007). Milroy and Muysken (1995) define code-switching as “the alternative used by bilinguals of two or more languages in the same conversation.” An important term to remember is situational code-switching, also called transactional code-switching. “In situational code-switching, two different languages are assigned to two or more different situations. An individual may have knowledge of all the languages associated with different situations. Conversational etiquette, however, requires the use of only one language at a time” (Adebola, 2011). “Transactional code-switching links the use of certain codes to different domains” (Gluth, 2002)—for example, speaking one language at home and switching to another at work.



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Table 1

Examples of Spanish-English Code-Switching

Switching between sentences . . .

“I was going to tell you something.
Pero no me acuerdo que, es.”

Switching between sentences— first sentence repeated in the second language

“Ella es bonita. She is pretty.”

Switching in the middle of a sentence . . .

“I just can’t no puedo concentrarme con
tanto ruido.”

Children who code-switch are not confused, because they are able to use their two languages appropriately with different people. In fact, the ability to switch back and forth between languages is a sign of mastery of two linguistic systems, not a sign of language confusion.

Bilingual children also engage in borrowing. Muysken (1995) defines borrowing as “the incorporation of lexical elements from one language in the lexicon of another language” (as cited in Dulm, 2007). Borrowing is “the introduction of single words or short, frozen, idiomatic phrases from one variety into another” (Gumperz, 1982, as cited by Cal & Turnbull, n.d.). “A loanword can also be called a borrowing” (Rice, 2011). Loanwords are words adopted by the speakers of one language from a different language. An example of an English loanword into Spanish dealing with organizations, restaurants, or institutions is, “Vamos al la United Nations en el carro” or “nos vamos al Disney World a ver a Mickie Mouse.” Here we see a mixing from Spanish to English with the name of an organization and a restaurant used. Other examples of Spanish borrowing from English are “parqueadero,” “sandwich,” and “garaje.” Examples of English borrowing from Spanish are “armada,” “armadillo,” and “bravado.”

When their children switch from one language to another, many parents fear that children may undergo language confusion. However, parents need not be concerned when children engage in any of the behaviors mentioned above. “

Research on child bilingual code mixing indicates that it is not a sign of confusion” (Genesee, 2003, as cited in Genesee, 2012). Children who code-switch are not confused, “because they are able to use their two languages appropriately with different people” (Genesee, 2012). In fact, “the ability to switch back and forth between languages is a sign of mastery of two linguistic systems, not a sign of language confusion. Children as young as 2 are able to code-switch in socially appropriate ways” (Lanza, 1992, as cited by King & Fogle, 2006). Research has demonstrated “that many normally developing bilingual children mix their two languages with the type and amount of code-switching dependent on environmental factors, such as how much the parents or wider community engage in code-switching” (King & Fogle, 2006). “Code-switching may be a good indicator of bilingual fluency for children who are still learning English as their second language” (Reyes & Ervin-Tripp, n.d.). Nilep (n.d.) states that, “Switching codes is a means by which language users may contextualize communication.” Research indicates that bilingual children at about 2 years of age have the ability to separate their languages and code-switch to address different interlocutors in different situations (Nicoladis & Genesee, 1996, as cited by Gutierrez-Clellen, 1999). “Children who are younger use more borrowing, because they are in the process of learning their second language” (Reyes & Ervin-Tripp, n.d.).

Approaches in Raising a Bilingual Child: Strategies to Maintain the First Language

There are different approaches in raising a bilingual child that emphasize the

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separation of languages. One common approach is to use the mother tongue at home and the language of the environment/society outside the home—for example, at school, church, or when they are playing with neighborhood kids. Another approach used by families is when one parent speaks one language and the other speaks to the child in another language. “This approach can be a good compromise for families who want their children to maintain their heritage language, but at the same time don’t want them to arrive at school not knowing English” (Hinton, 1999).

According to Deborah D. K. Ruuskanen from The Linguistics List—Eastern Michigan University, factors that contribute in successfully raising a bilingual child include:

- The parents speaking only their mother tongue to the child.
- The child having some reason to learn the languages (motivation).
- Reinforcement of some kind for these languages, preferably outside the home.

Another important factor is consistency and meaningful language input. The child will learn to seamlessly code-switch, depending on location or circumstance. Success in raising a bilingual child appears to depend on whether a “language plan” has been worked out in advance. After the family has chosen a family language strategy, consistency is key (Rosenberg, 1996; 2012). Table 2 shows a sample language plan created by Lucia Q. Sumner (2012).

Parental Concerns over Loss of First Language

Many immigrant parents in the U.S. raise their children to be bilingual, but fear that their children may leave the native tongue behind once they learn English. This fear may not be unsubstantiated. It has been observed by this author that when bilingual children enter kindergarten and start using English, their native language usage often begins to decrease. Eventually English becomes the dominant language, and in some cases, children stop using their native language altogether. The

Table 2
Language Plan Sample

Goal: Bilingualism	
Strategy/plan:	
1	<i>Language A.</i> Both parents speak.
2	<i>Language A.</i> Therapy sessions in the home.
3	<i>Language A.</i> Home media.
4	<i>Language B.</i> School.
5	<i>Language A.</i> Additional ways to strengthen input: Involvement within the cultural community (festivals, church, parades, etc.)
6	<i>Language B.</i> Additional ways to strengthen: Incidental learning in the outside environment (movies, library, supermarket, etc.)

Hispanic/Latino children are the fastest-growing youth population in the United States, and they demonstrate a higher prevalence of hearing impairment than other children in America.

Christian Science Monitor (2011) reported that the U.S. has been called “the graveyard of languages for encouraging English and excluding other tongues. Currently about 55 million Americans speak a language besides English at home, but by the third generation, the home language tends to atrophy. “Parents watch in horror as their children or grandchildren gradually lose their cultural values, beliefs, and native language—falling first into a state of cultural amnesia that often leads to the death of their cultural identity. When this happens, parents may feel alienated from their own children. “If the children do not maintain their home language, they risk losing the ability to communicate well with their family members (Wong Fillmore, 1991, as cited in National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, 1995).

Parents may be reassured to know there are ways to reduce the risk of first language loss by giving ample opportunities for enriched language conversations in the native language. Dopke (1992) found that families whose children succeed in maintaining their bilingualism beyond the school years share the following factors:

- The parents were consistent about the approach and most importantly did not let the children respond to them in the inappropriate language.
- The children had people besides their parents to talk to in the heritage language—for example, extended family, peers, and other adults in the community.

Another way to keep children interested in their native language is to participate in activities and events, such as festivals, in which the native language is spoken. Providing reading material, music, and media in the home language may also help motivate children to remain interested. Other ways to support the home language can come from the community—for example, church, festivals, Saturday classes, and after school programs with activities in the native language. “All of the students who

reported that they retained fluency or near fluency in their native tongue came from homes where the heritage language was spoken by matter of policy” (Hinton, 1999).

Special Considerations

Oral Bilingualism and Hearing Loss in the U.S.

Hearing loss and oral bilingualism is an important topic, because hearing impairment is the most common sensory deficit—affecting more than 250 million people around the world. “Hispanic/Latino children are the fastest-growing youth population in the United States” (National Council of la Raza, 2010), and they “demonstrate a higher prevalence of hearing impairment than other children in America.” (Mehra, Eavey, & Keamy, 2009).

Zwolan and Thomas (2011) report the following good news: “Children implanted at younger ages tended to demonstrate better skills more quickly and tended to reach levels similar to children with normal hearing at much faster rates.” They further noted, “A cochlear implant can make oral proficiency in more than one language possible for prelingually deaf children.” Cote and Gilliat (n.d.) agree. They reported that, “The results of the four studies reviewed indicate that children with cochlear implants raised in bilingual oral environments can indeed learn more than one language.” And to the concern about cochlear implants and tonal

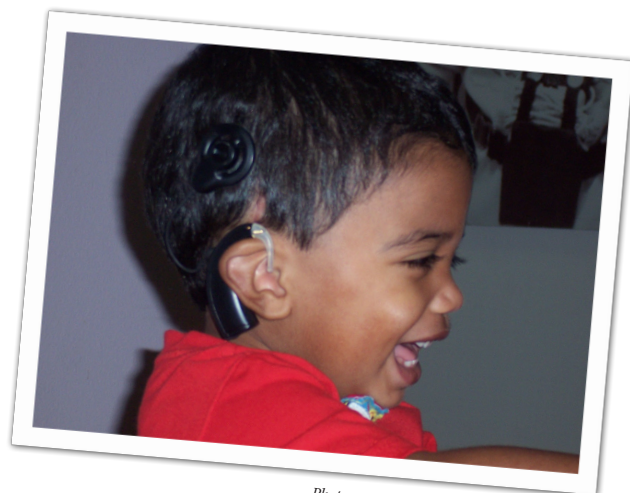


Photo courtesy of John Cochlear Americas

Children exposed to two languages since early childhood—either two spoken languages or a signed language and a spoken language—achieve their language milestone on the same maturational timetables.

languages, Zwolan and Thomas (2011) responded that, “New technology makes learning tonal languages a possibility for children with CIs.” They also stressed the importance of following the principles of the auditory-verbal approach for bilingualism to succeed when working with children with cochlear implants.

There are many anecdotal stories suggesting that children with unilateral hearing loss, mild losses, and those with a bilateral hearing loss with proper amplification are capable of learning two or more languages. New research seems to confirm that. Gerner de García (1993) stated that hearing-impaired children “can become multilingual” (as cited in Call, 2006), as long as they have access to the speech spectrum and are properly amplified. Preliminary conclusions from a study by Douglas and Zarate (2008) found:

- * With good speech perception, intervention, and immersion in both languages, hearing-impaired children tended to make monthly gains relatively equal in both languages.
- Children demonstrated the same bilingual phenomenon as reported in normal hearing developing bilinguals.

- Bilingualism is a team effort and no less difficult than helping a hearing-impaired child to acquire one language.
- Providing individual services in the minority language while immersing the child in a majority language center-based program does not impair the child’s ability to learn the majority language.
- With normal cognition and no other disabilities, duration of deafness, inconsistent use, and/or inappropriate amplification seem to be the largest contributing factor(s) to a child’s reduced facility for learning any spoken language in a timely manner.

Call (2006) reported that:

- Three languages will not confuse a deaf or hard-of-hearing child (Gerner de García, 1993b, 1995a).
- As long as self-identity is not in dilemma, being trilingual can boost a child’s self-esteem.

The historical consequences of hearing loss that have included the inability to interpret speech sounds are changing due to new technologies. Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EHDI) programs are making it possible for children with hearing loss to more easily learn a second spoken language.

Bilingualism and Sign Language: Bimodal Bilingualism

Children exposed to two languages since early childhood—either two spoken languages or a signed language and a spoken language—achieve their language milestone on the same maturational timetables (Petitto et al., 2001). “Being exposed to a signed and spoken language from birth does not cause a child to be language delayed and confused” (Petitto & Kovelman, 2003).

“The human brain can entertain multiple pathways for language expression and



Photo courtesy of John Tracy Clinic

Bilingualism is becoming considerably more advantageous. Being bilingual is an investment in the future, because at the beginning of the 21st century, proficiency in only one language is not enough for economic, societal, and educational success.

reception, and the cerebral specialization for language functions is not exclusive to the mechanisms for producing and perceiving speech and sound” (Petitto et al, 2000). Humans “are born with a propensity to acquire language. Whether the language comes as speech or sign language, it does not appear to matter to the brain” (Pettito, n.d.).

Spanglish

Since Hispanic/Latino children are the fastest-growing youth population in the U.S., this discussion cannot be complete without discussing Spanglish. The term “Spanglish” originated in the late 1960s and refers mainly to Spanish which employs loanwords from English as substitutes for Spanish words” (Department of Translation Studies, University of Tampere, 2010). In Spanglish, the loanwords are altered and adapted. American Spanish has adapted several English words to the phonology and morphology of traditional Spanish. For example, the Spanglish word “troca” borrows from the English word “truck.” The true Spanish word for “troca” is “camion.” To account for the development of Spanglish, “two types of phenomena are proposed—superficial, including borrowing and code-switching, and deep, including lexical-semantic, grammatical, and the “equalization to English” phenomenon” (Ardila, 2005). For some Latino researchers Spanglish “represents a form of acculturation of the new Spanish-speaking community within the larger English-speaking American population, rather than ‘assimilation’ into the host culture” (Department of Translation Studies, University of Tampere, 2010).

Conclusion

In this chapter, the issues of bilingualism in the U.S. and parental concerns regarding raising a bilingual child have

been addressed. Current evidence shows no indication of clinical delays or language confusion for children learning two languages. The research is clear, “language development can be typical or atypical regardless of the number of languages in a child’s repertoire. Speech-language and developmental clinical conditions affect multilinguals and monolinguals alike, which means that there is no correlation between multilingualism or monolingualism and disorder” (Ferrira, 2011).

Approaches and strategies for raising a bilingual child were discussed, as well as strategies for preventing the decline of the first language after a child enters school. The issue of oral bilingualism for children with hearing loss was also addressed. The available research involving children with cochlear implants, as well as properly amplified hearing aid users, suggests that oral bilingualism may now be a realistic possibility for children with hearing loss. Dr. Pettito’s research demonstrates that children can learn spoken and sign languages simultaneously. To the brain, it does not matter whether language comes from the mouth or manually in the form of sign language (Pettito, n.d.). The keys to raising a bilingual, multilingual, or bimodal child seem to be:

- Early exposure
- Consistency
- Equal input

Bilingualism is becoming considerably more advantageous. Being bilingual is an investment in the future, because “at the beginning of the 21st century, proficiency in only one language is not enough for economic, societal, and educational success. Global interdependence and mass communication often require the ability to function in more than one language” (Clark, n.d.). Preserving the native language is a child’s right in order to preserve his/her cultural identity.

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