



Bilingual Acquisition

By Fred Genesee

Language acquisition is an everyday and yet magical feat of childhood. Within three to five years, virtually all children become fully competent in at least one language. We accept this as totally normal. We seldom worry about whether or not it will happen even though it is the most complex accomplishment of early childhood. Even more remarkable are those children who simultaneously acquire proficiency in two, or more, languages during the preschool years. Within the same time frame as it takes monolingual children to learn one language, bilingual children learn two languages and become adept at using them in socially diverse and appropriate ways.

It is estimated that there may be as many children who grow up learning two languages as one. Despite this, childhood bilingualism is poorly understood by many and regarded with skepticism by others. Because of lack of familiarity with or knowledge about childhood bilingualism, parents, educators, and early childhood specialists may express doubts about childhood bilingualism and they may expect negative consequences to result from children learning two languages during the preschool years. Such concerns are especially common in communities where most children grow up monolingual and, as a result, adult members of the community come to view monolingualism as normal and bilingualism as abnormal.

In recent years, researchers have been actively involved in studying bilingual acquisition and, although all the research evidence is not yet in, we now have a more detailed description of important aspects of bilingual development than previously. Bilingual acquisition is complex. In comparison with monolingual children who usually learn language from their parents, bilingual children may depend not only on parents but also on grandparents, playmates, or childcare and daycare workers to learn their languages. Bilingual children may learn their languages primarily in the home, like monolingual children, or in the daycare, or neighborhood. Bilingual children's exposure to their languages can also differ greatly, as, for example, if the child is learning one language from a parent who works at home and the other from a parent who works outside the home. Their language exposure can fluctuate greatly over time, if, for example, the parent who is the primary source of one of the languages takes a job in another city and is only home on weekends.

Here are responses to some concerns that are commonly expressed by parents and child care professionals about bilingual acquisition in early childhood.

1. Learning two languages in childhood is difficult and can result in delays in language development.

Children who have regular and rich exposure to both languages on a daily or weekly basis from parents and other caregivers exhibit the same milestones in language development and at roughly the same ages as monolingual children. It is important to remember that there are large individual differences in language acquisition -- some children acquire their first words or use complex utterances much earlier than other children. Delay in the emergence of these milestones does not necessarily mean that there is something seriously wrong; in most cases it simply means that the child has taken longer to reach this stage. The same kinds of differences are characteristic of bilingual children.

It is important that parents of bilingual children provide systematic exposure to both languages all the time and that they avoid radical changes to the language environment of the child. Such changes can disrupt

language development and create difficulties for the child.

2. Bilingual children have less exposure to each of their languages than monolingual children. As a result, they never master either language fully and, compared to monolingual children, they never become as proficient.

Bilingual children can acquire the same proficiency in all aspects of their two languages over time as monolingual children even though they usually have less exposure to each language. Bilingual children acquire the same proficiency in the phonological and grammatical aspects of their two languages as monolingual children do in their one language, provided they are given regular and substantial exposure to each. Bilingual children may have somewhat different patterns of development in certain aspects of language in the short term. Vocabulary is one of those areas. Sometimes, young bilingual children know fewer words in one or both of their languages in comparison with monolingual children of the same age. This is probably because all young children have limited memory capacities, and bilingual children must store words from two languages, not just one. As well, because bilingual children learn words in each language from different people, they sometimes know certain words in one language but not in the other. When the vocabulary that bilingual children know in both languages is considered together, they generally know the same number of words and have the same range of vocabulary as their monolingual peers. Most importantly, when and if differences like these occur, they are short term and are likely to disappear by the time the children begin school.

Interpersonal communication is another area where bilingual children sometimes differ. The ways of communicating in certain social situations or of expressing certain meanings can be quite different in some languages. If bilingual children are acquiring such languages and they have not had full exposure to one or both of them, then they may not have acquired the ability to express these meanings or they may not be proficient in certain social situations. Given adequate and appropriate experience with their languages, most bilingual children quickly acquire all of the social language skills and ways of expressing themselves they need.

Generally speaking, bilingual children's overall proficiency in each language reflects the amount of time they spend in each. Thus, a child who has just returned from a visit to a grandparent where only one of the languages was used, may prefer to use only that language for awhile and, thus, may appear to have lost some proficiency in the other language. This is usually a short term, temporary shift in preference that is corrected once the child is exposed to the neglected language. It is important not to overreact to these temporary fluctuations in proficiency since they are usually temporary.

Parents can best ensure that their children achieve full proficiency in both languages by providing rich experiences with each and especially with the language that might otherwise not get strong support in the extended community; for example, a minority language such as Spanish or Chinese in North America. It is important in this regard that parents who do not speak the majority language of the community continue to use their native language so that they expose their child to varied and rich ways of using language. This is difficult to do if parents use a language that they are not proficient in. It is also important for parents to maintain use of heritage languages in the home because it is part of the family culture and an important part of the child's developing identity. It helps them feel unique and connected to their families.

3. Young bilingual children can't keep their languages separate; they use both at the same time; they are obviously confused.

At some stage, most bilingual children use sounds and words from both languages in the same utterances or conversations even though the people talking with them are using only one language. Some parents and early childhood educators are concerned when they hear this because they believe that it means that the child is confused and cannot separate the two languages. Research shows that this is not true. The main

reason for children mixing their languages in these ways is because they lack sufficient vocabulary in one or both languages to express themselves entirely in each language. Thus, they borrow from the other language. Indeed, this is an effective communication strategy in most families because parents and other adults who care for bilingual children usually understand both languages and may mix the languages themselves when talking with the child.

Bilingual adults in some communities mix their languages extensively. Research has shown that the most proficient bilinguals mix the most and in the most sophisticated ways without violating the rules of either language. It is normal for children growing up in these communities to mix their languages extensively because they are simply learning the patterns of communication that are common in their community.

In any case, mixing languages is a natural and normal aspect of early bilingual acquisition, even among proficient adult bilinguals. Parents should not try to stop their children from mixing. Bilingual children will naturally stop doing it, unless of course mixing is a frequent form of language use in the community.

4. Using both languages in the same sentence or conversation is bad. Parents can discourage and even prevent their children from doing this by making sure that each of them uses one and only one language with their child at all times. The same goes for other adults who interact with the child.

Research has shown that most bilingual children mix their languages sometimes no matter how much their parents mix, for the reasons mentioned earlier. As well, most parents mix their languages when talking with their young children because it is a natural and effective way of communicating with one another and their children. Because mixing languages is common among people who are bilingual, it can be difficult and unnatural, if not impossible, to keep the languages completely separate. If most people in the children's wider community use only one language, then there is probably no reason to worry about how much parents or children mix; the children will eventually learn the monolingual patterns.

5. What are the most important things for parents or early childhood educators to know about early childhood bilingualism?

There are number of important things to keep in mind:

- bilingual acquisition is a common and normal childhood experience
- all children are capable of learning two languages in childhood
- knowing the language of one's parents is an important and essential component of children's cultural identity and sense of belonging
- bilingual acquisition is facilitated if children have sustained, rich, and varied experiences in both languages
- proficiency in both languages is more likely if children have sustained exposure in the home to the language that is used less extensively in the community; the language that is used more widely will get support outside the home
- parents can facilitate bilingual proficiency by using the language they know best and by using it in varied and extensive ways

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