



Research Unit for Multilingualism & Cross- Cultural Communication

Raising Children in more than one Language: Strategies in the family

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One parent - one language: how does it work?

The *one parent - one language* approach continues to mystify people, in particular young parents who are contemplating setting it up. Since this is the life my family has been living for the last 20 years, let me clarify this here.

Setting it up

In a totally straight forward way, each parent simply talks their own language with the child. I always recommend that parents are very consistent with their language choice in order to maximise their child's opportunities for hearing the LOTE (Language Other Than English), to ensure that the language stays rich as the child grows and to create an environment in which the child cannot easily opt for English.

Variations

In most families, one parent speaks English because this is all they know. This is fine and in no way threatening the LOTE if both parents are committed to the *one parent - one language* arrangement. In another article (see page 6), I discuss the role of the English-speaking parent in this arrangement and how vital it is to its success.

In other families, both parents have a different LOTE as their native tongue and each parent speaks that language with the children, leaving the acquisition of English to contacts outside the family like day-care centres, kindergarten, school, babysitters and friends. With English being everywhere in Australia and most children having lots of contact with people outside the immediate family from a very early age on, this creates very satisfactory results. Of course, the child will also overhear the parents speaking English with each other and with friends.

A third possibility arises where the parents are able to communicate in the LOTE (or one of the LOTEs in the trilingual scenario). In that case the parents have the option of strengthening the LOTE by speaking it to each other instead of English. I consider this a very desirable situation because it maximises the LOTE input without relinquishing any of the *one parent - one language* benefits.

Benefits

The *one parent - one language* set up allows children to grow up with two first languages right from the beginning of their lives. Under these circumstances they will never be in a situation where one of the languages has to be acquired as a second language. Their input in both languages happens on a daily basis and, each being tied to a parent, both languages are of utmost emotional significance for the child.

The *one parent - one language* set-up supports a clear differentiation between the languages and makes the *language contract* (see page 4) the easiest to explain in terms of ‘mummy words’ and ‘daddy words’.

If one of the parents is a native English speaker, a benefit of the *one parent - one language* arrangement not to be underestimated is that the children will never have to feel ‘different’ because of their LOTE ties. Part of them is like any other little Aussie. The LOTE is something they have *in addition* to other children, not instead of English. This makes it very easy for the child to feel good about their LOTE connections and abilities.

Lastly, but for many families very importantly, the *one parent – one language* rule ensures that the languages which the parents represent can always be maintained, no matter where the family lives without having to make any changes to the language arrangement between parents and children. Thus if a French-English speaking family moves from Australia to France and possibly back, both languages can be maintained through any number of moves between countries. This avoids the resistance to speaking whichever is the minority language, which many families experience as a result of moving to another country.

Family communication

So how does communication work in a *one parent - one language* family when they are all together? This seems to be the most puzzling aspects for many people who have never experienced it. And rightly so, I suppose. My ‘English-only’ husband was easily swung to accept this strategy because early in our relationship I took him to meet a family who practised it. My then boyfriend was very impressed with how effortlessly the children spoke English with their father and German with their mother, and how they changed languages effortlessly-as their-gaze moved from one parent to the other. Children do not have a problem speaking one language with one parent and another with the other. In fact, addressing more than one person at the time is something we only learn later in life. If you watch, you’ll find that many adults are not able to do this either, but only look at one person when they talk, usually the last one who talked. Young children simply speak the language of the person they are addressing at the time.

My husband never learnt much German, but he was usually able to understand what was going on. After all, it is not that hard to work out what is being said between young children and an adult, and we were his family and he knew the ins and out of our lives most intimately. When he did not understand, he asked and somebody translated.

Now that our children are older, things have changed somewhat. At 20 and 14 years of age their father can really not follow our conversations in German anymore. Thus sustained conversations around the dinner table mostly happen in English now. But this has only developed recently.

I assure you, in the long run it is all really quite easy and comes totally naturally!

The language contract

The *language contract* is the bread-and-butter for creating an environment in which your children will speak your home language. Once they accept the *language contract* - same as they accept that they have to be buckled in when riding in the car or possibly sitting at the table when eating - the use of the home language can be negotiated and re-negotiated for all the situations in which you may find yourself with your children.

I came up with this after having read substantial amounts of research on language maintenance, much of which was done by Prof. Michael Clyne here in Australia. Time and again, this research told me that having monolingual speakers of Languages Other Than English (LOTE) around - ideally a live-in grandmother - would be the best insurance that my child will speak German. Well, a suitable grandmother is not that easy to engineer. Pretending not to be able to understand English did not appeal to me either. Along with Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, this fib will be uncovered eventually, most likely much faster than these two trusted friends. So I decided to simply be open and tell my child what the rules are and be as consistent with them as I am with buckling the kids up in the car. *Inescapable rules are eventually always accepted.*

The *language contract* takes the form of an explicit commitment to one and only one language with each person in a young child's life. In many bilingual families, the parents are from different language backgrounds and the languages can be easily tied to mum and dad. When neither of the parents speak English, English may have to be tied to an important person in the child's life outside the immediate family, like her favourite babysitter.

How to introduce the *language contract*

Words like 'English' or 'Greek' represent very abstract concepts which imply the knowledge that languages consist of words and grammar, that these appear in a variety of guises around the world and people only understand those that they have learned. This is definitely beyond two-year-olds. Research indicates that bilingual children can talk about the languages in their environment by their proper terms at around three years of age.

However, at around two years of age, children start to understand that objects belong to people and categorise them accordingly. e.g. 'mummy sock', 'daddy shoe' etc. I have found with my own as well as other families' children that at this stage kids can also understand that words are associated with people. In other words, they understand *sleep* is *schlaf* when we talk about 'mummy words' and 'daddy words'. If it is not mum and dad in your family, just substitute the name of the most important person in your child's life representing that language. In most families it would just be matter of finding a concrete representative for English outside the family.

Talk to your child frequently about mummy words and daddy words. You may do that simply conversationally, particularly when you are the English-speaking parent. This plays an important role in supporting the LOTE. Or you may want to ask your child what your partner says for the toy you are playing with at the moment. You may be surprised for how many words your child has translation equivalents already!

The rest of the child's environment can be categorised along the same line, i.e. people who use mummy words and people who use daddy words. Every time we went to visit someone, we talked in the car about whether these people will use mummy words or daddy words. We then talked about who else in our lives used mummy words - like all the ten people in the German playgroup and some of my adult friends and Oma and Opa. And who used daddy words? In our discussions, daddy words were restricted to grandma and grandpa. My son got a very inflated picture of the number of German speakers in his environment. If that wasn't motivational!

How to enforce the *language contract*

Once you have introduced the *language contract* you have a basis for insisting that your child uses the LOTE. When s/he says something in the 'wrong' language to you, you can remind her of the rules in words she understands: *Yes, daddy says schlaf, but mummy says sleep*. Follow this up with a request to repeat the word: *Can you say sleep?* This will increase the chance that s/he will remember the word next time but not guarantee it. It may take more than one such strategy for the word to sink in. Some words may also be too hard to say just yet. If your child complies or only just tries to comply, give plenty of praise, repeat the word a few more times yourself and get on with what the two of you were doing. This is not a strategy to punish your child, but to draw his attention to the language distribution in your family.

Most people - adults and children alike - learn more from success than from failure. Thus you may want to point out to your child when s/he actually did choose the correct language, which even the most reluctant child in a bilingual environment will do from time to time: *That was a mummy word! That makes mummy very happy!* or *You are so good with mummy words*. You may want to reserve the latter for something difficult your child said so that you won't be caught being insincere. Children can be very sensitive to false praise.

You can extend the *language contract* to mummy books and daddy books, songs, games, etc. To make it a little easier, we had all the mummy books on one shelf and the daddy books on another.

In our family we also used the *language contract* in order to decide who our children were talking to. When they said something in English, my husband had to react, when they said it in German, it was my turn. Sometimes that was very convenient when I didn't feel like getting up. At other times my husband used it to remind our boys that they had to speak German if they wanted me to react. That worked very well and also showed them that dad was behind this 100%.

Our boys used the *language contract* quite consciously themselves to indicate who they were addressing. This led to a particularly funny incident when the younger one was just-over 4 years of age. I was chatting with visiting friends when he called for help from the toilet - in German. I didn't want to be interrupted and sent my husband. He came back and reported that our son had insisted: *I want Mum to wipe my bottom in German*. Well ... now I had no choice.

Benefits of the *language contract*

The *language contract* allows you to simulate monolingual interaction without the restrictions of the pretence. If necessary one can easily step out of it by temporarily suspending the rules in favour of

an interim arrangement. This may be useful, when you take your child to the doctor or when a little friend is visiting, or in order to be able to read a book or sing a song in your partner's language. It also allows you to help your child with the other language, for example to give him the word he is missing or to correct a structure.

To step out of the *language contract* you simply give the reason why and for how long this will be the case. For example, if you are able to speak your partner's LOTE but are the designated English speaker for your child you may want to change this when the in-laws are visiting. Thus, you tell your child that this afternoon mummy is going to speak Spanish just like daddy and grandma and grandpa so you can all play together. This will help to get the most out of the afternoon for your child with respect to Spanish.

From a cognitive perspective, the explicitness of the *language contract* directs the child's attention to the differences with which people speak and heightens her awareness of the different words, the different grammatical structures, the different rules of interaction associated with each of her languages. **Attention is central to learning.**

In summary, an explicit *language contract* allows parents to **maintain outward consistency of language choice** even when this consistency has to be flaunted for practical reasons at times.

How can English-speaking parents and relatives support the LOTE?

I am often asked by English speaking parents if they need to learn their partner's language in order to make sure that their child will learn the Language Other Than English (LOTE).

It is certainly great for language maintenance if both parents speak the LOTE. The *one parent - one language* arrangement is still possible if they decide that the native (or better) English speaker will always speak English with the child, but that the designated English speaker will speak the LOTE whenever there are other LOTE speakers around, starting with the other parent, but including relatives, friends and community contacts. In many ways, that is an ideal set-up, which ensures maximal and undisturbed LOTE input and continuous English input at the same time.

Many families, however, have not got that option. Only one parent speaking the LOTE is very common in Australia and certainly very common among those families who come to our 'Raising Children Bilingually' seminars.

If I was an English-speaking parent with a LOTE speaking partner I would enjoy learning my partner's language. What better opportunity for becoming competent in another language than having my family around me speaking it every day. It would be so much more fun and successful than only attending language classes. Some people I know have become very good and are able to speak the LOTE with their spouses and their children now.

Realistically, this is not everybody's cup of tea (or beer, as we say in German). Most people do not get to such a high level of language proficiency in their spouse's LOTE. (Depending on the language, I would not either.) Others don't have the time or do not want to take language classes: This does not mean they cannot support the LOTE development of their children. There are a lot of ways in which this can be done.

- Praise your children directly and to others while the kids can overhear it. Overheard praise is often even more powerful than direct praise. Tell them that you are proud of them, how clever they are, etc. Children want to hear that from their parents anyway, thus it is also a good investment in your relationship with your children.
- Ask your children what your partner (i.e. mummy or daddy respectively) would say. That provides some fantastic opportunities for making the language differentiation explicit without reminding the children that they have chosen the wrong language, which is the context in which the LOTE speaking parent is mostly providing opportunities of this type. Additionally, it shows your children that you are really interested, it activates their word knowledge in the LOTE, teaches them translation skills, and it makes them feel good about themselves for being so clever. And you might even learn a word or two 😊
- Remind your children to speak the LOTE to your spouse. You'll be surprised how powerful it is when you say *if you want mummy to help, you have to ask her in Italian or use mummy words* if this is what your child understands at the moment.
- Closely related to that is that you follow the *one parent - one language* rule yourself and that is not only in speaking but also in responding: when the children speak English, the English speaking parents needs to react, when they talk in LOTE it's for the LOTE speaker. I found this a very convenient strategy myself. When we were riding in the car for example and I was tired of responding to their endless tirades, I'd react to their first utterance in English by telling my husband: *they are talking to you*. Not unexpectedly, the children turned it around and insisted, that we responded to them according to their language choice. One day my husband reacted to a call from the toilet and came back roaring with laughter: *He said he wants his bottom wiped in German*. Well, our son had called out in German...
- George Saunders (Bilingual Children: From birth to teens. Multilingual Matters, 1988) suggested that the English-speaking parent allows LOTE time by stepping back when children and spouse interact. Running translations of what they say to each other are not necessary and rather counterproductive. Little kids can't concentrate on that much talk and usually only remember the last thing that was said to them. Mind you, this is the same, for monolingual children: If you feel your spouse has said things that the children might not know in English and it is important to you that they do, pick the topic up later.
- Ask your children what mummy has said or tell them to tell mummy etc., possibly appended with a reminder to do it in the LOTE: *hey you've got to say in English to me!* Monolingual parents encourage their children to pass on messages and news as well in order to encourage language use. In the case of bilingual families it additionally encourages language awareness and translation skills.
- George Saunders also suggested to split siblings for one-to-one activities with the parents from time to time. This may be particularly important for the younger ones who often stand in the shadow of the older, conversationally more competent child. Again, this is not specific to bilingual children, but would be a very good strategy for supporting the language development of monolingual children as well. This strategy does wonders for each of the parents' relationship to their children as well!

- Help with the housework so your spouse has time for playing and reading with the children. For example, if you do the dishes, your spouse can play with the children while they are having a bath.

While this article mainly addresses the English-speaking parents, all of it also applies to other English-speaking relatives or to families in trilingual situations, most importantly for the LOTE with less time allocation.

Language choice between siblings

Wouldn't it be great if brothers and sisters spoke the Language Other Than English (LOTE) to each other? Unfortunately they often don't. How come? And can anything be done about this?

Research by Michael Clyne and his colleagues has shown that it is typical for children in Australia to speak English with each other even though they speak the LOTE with their parents and other adults. Actually this is where the crux lies: unless they live in a linguistically tight-knit LOTE community with many children, they are speaking their parents' LOTE only with adults and English with ALL children.

Children define their relationship towards each other in part through the language they are speaking, just like adults do. Most first-born children have their first experiences with peers in play groups or childcare centres. In most cases these are experiences with children who speak English. Hence they come to associate English with interaction with other children.

As soon as the little brother or sister becomes a playmate, this experience is generalised to the sibling and - alas! - English becomes the preferred language. Of course, the younger child follows the older one's lead and sees the relationship with big brother or big sister as defined through English even before s/he has ever experienced any children outside the home.

A further reason for the persistence of English in interaction between siblings are the play words learned from English peers and for which they simply don't have the language skills in the home language. It is a normal part of communication to use the words most easily available to us. That's why we as adults code switch too, and can often only avoid it with a lot of attention to what we are saying, by talking around words we do not know, asking the person we talk to for help or even looking words up. It is not realistic to expect such level of control from children at any age. Many adults can't do it either. I only do it for pedagogical reasons when talking to my children too. 😊

So much for the bad news, which I explored in some detail because we need to know what is underlying a behaviour if we want to change it. In the rest of this article I will suggest some strategies for parents to modify this behaviour.

Much work can be done before the new arrival is anywhere close to saying the first word. Make the older child proud of knowing your language and wanting to teach the little one. Spend quality time together with your firstborn and baby, model what to say, and generally work on your own relationship with the older child in this time of threat to it, as well as the relationship between the kids. Doing this and providing a lot of LOTE language models goes a long way towards the older one anticipating that good times with the little intruder will involve talking the LOTE.

The first hurdle to the older child's good intentions comes when first words in English are easier to say than in the LOTE. As soon as the little one utters words in English, the older one follows every communicator's good practice and uses the same words back. That's when you need to try and teach your own strategies to your child. It might not work, but it doesn't hurt trying. In my family it has become an area where the older one is fully licenced to boss the younger one around - and loving it!

Nevertheless, you will find that even the best intentioned and most capable children will frequently resort to English when caught up in the excitement of their play. This you can only influence by being present and providing the models for their play language which they are missing.

Explicitly extend the *language contract* to include that your language is to be spoken between them whenever you are present. You may have to use your model-and-request-repetition strategies again to get compliance.