



Research Unit for Multilingualism & Cross- Cultural Communication

Raising Children in more than one Language: Language Development in Bilingual Children

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Language development in bilingual children

As during monolingual language development, young bilingual children will first acquire what is easy in their languages. At times the bilingual child might find a word or structure much easier or more obvious in one language than in the other and use the easier word or the easier 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, overgeneralisations do not need to be of concern. However, the adult should not use the overgeneralised structure back, but continue to provide a correct model.

Why are some words easier in one language than the other?

Short words are easier for young children than long words. That's why young children shorten words and say *nana* instead of *banana*. If mum's word is shorter than dad's, the bilingual child naturally goes for the shorter option.

Some sound combinations are harder to say than others. That's why young children change *chair* to *tair*. If the word in one language has complex sound combinations and the equivalent in the other language does not, choosing the word in the other language is much the same as what monolingual children do when they choose a simpler word over a more complex word.

Of course, **how often a child has heard a word, is very important** too. Like monolingual children, words which are used all the time are learned first. Thus *car*, or its simplified form *tar*, is learned before the word *van*, unless there is more talk about vans in your child's environment than about cars.

The same applies to grammatical structures. The six verb endings in Italian are acquired very early by monolingual children because there is one ending for each person (*I, you, he* etc) and they are used all the time - in present tense, in past tense, for the future and for the conditional. The German system uses its verb endings all the time as well, but there are only four distinctly different endings for the six grammatical persons, which means that some endings overlap. As a result, German children master the verb system 6 to 12 months later than the Italian children. There is only one personmarker in English, and it is only used in present tense (*he runs*). This takes the longest to acquire because it makes verb markings so infrequent in English.

Such differences may be reflected in bilingual children's acquisition. They may show themselves in the child learning a functionally comparable structure first in one language and only a few months later in the other. In the meantime, the bilingual child might choose to draw on what she has already acquired to fill the gap.

Interestingly, what superficially seem to be interference from the other language may not be that at all. Many aberrant structures show up in monolingual development as well. They are only less frequent there. Thus, the language system must somehow support them.

Contrary to popular belief, **bilingual children acquire all the language milestones within the range of what's normal for monolingual children**. Rate of language development is more likely to be due to the child's abilities and the quality of interaction than hearing two languages as such.

The parent's consistency in language choice is very important. Initially, your child will not know what *a language* is, but only understand that, for example, Mummy and Daddy speak in different ways. If you are consistent with your language choice, it is much easier for your child to realise that everything you say belongs to one system and everything your partner or the grand-parents or the staff at the child care centre say belongs to another. In time, your child will learn both systems.

Nevertheless, there might be aspects of the grammatical development in the Language Other Than English (LOTE) which the bilingual child will never conquer 100%. There isn't much we can do about grammatical structures which are so unsystematic that children need massive amounts of input over many years to fully master them completely. An example of such structures are the article systems in German or French. **We just have to accept slight short comings and cherish what our children are able to do.** It certainly does not diminish the positive aspects of being bilingual!

Milestones of language development

Children develop at very different rates, the more so the younger they are. Therefore, the range of what is normal is very big. Nevertheless, parents and professionals need to know at what point they should take extra care and possibly steps to help a child who is lagging behind. The following provides a rough guide to what is considered typical development during the preschool years.

All the research we have to date indicates that **bilingual children do not develop more slowly than monolingual children** just because they are hearing two languages. They fall within the normal range in at least one of their languages.

The development we expect as typical of children who learn English may have slightly different time lines in other languages because some languages change meaning with grammatical markers rather than small words, or because words are longer or the sound structure is more complex. Some aspects of grammar may also be more regular, more varied or not exist in the other language. Regardless of these differences, children of a certain age have similar memory and processing capacities which dictate their progress with language. Thus much of what we have found to be typical development for English can be expected in other languages as well, but allowances need to be made where aspects of a language may tax children's capacities more or less than English does.

This said, the following can be expected of children's development of language:

- By 6-10 months, children start babbling, and towards the end it sounds nearly like language.
- By 12 months, most children can say their first word; that is not counting parents' excited attributions of *Mummy* to strings of /mamamama/ or *Daddy* to /dadadada/ at five months 😊.
- By 18 months, most children can say 50-100 words; for bilingual children, this number may include words from both languages.

- By 24 months, most children know 200-300 words and frequently combine two words; about 50% of what they say is intelligible; two-syllable words emerge as well. If words are typically longer in the LOTE than in English, word combinations may take a little more time or children may drastically reduce lengthy words to fit their sound capacities.
- By 24-30 months, children start to use grammatical markers provided they are frequent and regular. In English that is mostly *-ing* on verbs and plural *-s* on nouns. In other languages it may be person markers on verbs for *I* and *you* etc. or word endings that distinguish people from things. Children also begin to use negations like *can't* and *don't* and start to understand and use *what* and *where* in English. Whether or not they do this in your LOTE at the same time may depend on how prominent those words are, i.e. whether they are at the beginning or end of an utterance or tucked away somewhere as an ending of a word. It will also depend on how frequently these words are used towards children. There are significant cultural differences in this respect.
- By 30-36 months, most children produce simple sentences and increasingly more grammatical markers. Their speech is 75% intelligible now. They understand and start to use *why*-questions as well as basic spatial terms like *in*, *on*, *under*, etc. Again, there might be differences in the accessibility to these concepts in your LOTE.
- By 36-42 months, children understand more complex sentences with *and*, *but*, *when*, and *because*. Their sentences sound largely correct by adult standards now, although mostly they are still short. Overgeneralisations are very common at this age. Research has shown that overgeneralisations indicate healthy progress with language development. Research into bilingual children has also shown that overgeneralisations may at times happen across languages, and although they may be very noticeable, they are infrequent and transient. Overgeneralisations indicate that the child is learning rules and actively creating new utterances. That is fantastic! That is not to mean that adults should not repeat what the child has said correctly, but with the intent to communicate that they have understood, not that they want to correct.

When not to worry

- When the child is lagging behind in only one language but doing well in the other.
- When the child is too shy to talk in some contexts, but speaks freely and well for his/her age in others. Being shy may take the form of not saying anything or whispering or not speaking clearly.

When to get professional support

- When the child does not understand age-appropriate instructions without nonverbal cues in either language.
- When the child is speaking much less than other children in both languages.
- When the child is less intelligible than other children of the same age in both languages.

- When the child does not want to play with the parents or other people s/he is close to.
- When the child plays significantly differently to other children of the same age, e.g. only looks at the wheels of the car turning but does not push it or refuses to place people into cars.
- When the child never imitates you.

Bilingualism and difficulties with language development?

Time and again, parents who are talking a Language other than English (LOTE) with their child at home report that they have been advised by professionals to only speak English because the child stutters, has difficulty processing language he hears, is slow to start speaking, or has other language symptoms associated with developmental difficulties. What can parents make of this advice?

The reality of the situation is that we have no research evidence on how bilingualism affects the language development of children with language-related developmental delays. By the same token we do not have any research evidence that stopping one of the languages improves the child's abilities in the other language.

We do have evidence, however, that **bilingualism DOES NOT CAUSE any difficulties with language development**. We know that because bilingual children do not have such problems any more frequently than do monolingual children.

However, there is evidence that **some 10% of children have difficulties with speech or language** and need professional help. Bilingual children are not exempted from this.

If bilingualism does not cause language-related developmental problems (nor any other developmental problems, for that matter), then **stopping one of the languages is not going to fix the problem**. Developmental difficulties need to be properly diagnosed as to their likely cause, and intervention needs to target that cause or its symptoms.

Language development is very much a matter of extracting rules. These include rules of form for the grammar and sound structure, rules of motor movements for the sound production, and rules of meaning for how to use words and sentences. For children who have difficulties with any of these levels the **rules need to be made more explicit**.

Interestingly, languages differ on how much difficulties similar rules may cause the young child. For example, subject-verb agreement as in *I go - he goes* is relatively difficult in English, since it only happens on one person and only in present tense. In contrast, in Italian every person has a different

ending and frequency and predictability facilitate this to develop at a much earlier age. So why would dropping Italian improve the child's ability with subject-verb agreement in English?

There is research evidence coming out of the Netherlands that stopping the home language often has the opposite effect to that intended: **Parents who stop the home language may talk less with their child!** This is not surprising to anyone who has tried speaking a language they are not as familiar or confident with. People who have never learned a second language might not be able to conceptualise this. While their advice of **"the more English the better"** is well intentioned; it does not actually work like that. It **is not the more English that is the better, but the richer the language input the better!** When parents follow the easily dished out advice to only talk English with their child, they may quickly find themselves in a situation where **the child loses the ability to speak the home language, but no gains may be made in the area of the developmental problem.**

If a child appears to have a developmental problem, it is important to see a specialist for a proper diagnosis and proper management of the disorder. Increasing numbers of professionals understand the importance of the home language for many Australian families and are confident that they can help families with bilingual children without advising against the use of their family language.