



Bilingualism and speech language difficulties in children

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“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” **Fred Genesee**

In my time at a speech therapy unit, I had worked with many children who are both bilingual in Chinese and English. Almost all of them had Mandarin or Cantonese as their first language and English or Malay as the second language. In school, a third language also arised in the picture too. So, in addition to their mother tongue, they had to cope with two other languages.

This has implications for those struggling with speech and language difficulties in their development. In Malaysian schools, we fmd also a diversity of languages a school-going child is exposed to. The medium of instruction could either be in Malay, Chinese and or English.

Below are extracts from “Raising Bilingual Children” (Marsha Rosenberg) concerning factors involved in children who are bilingual. For easy reference, we will henceforth name the language/languages spoken at home as L1, language used in school as L2 and others as L3.

Children who learn two languages in a stressful environment may have language development problems but so do children learning only one language in that same sort of environment. Another factor includes some parents speaking only one language(L1), the language of the home, and are unable to speak the language of the school(L2) and possibly of the community (L3). The parents may have language ability in two or more languages but have made a decision about which language they speak with the child. The language or languages of other family members when speaking with the child, such as the language spoken between siblings or between children and grandparents plays a major factor too. The last factor is the language the child uses in the community.

A type of childhood bilingualism is called sequential or successive bilingualism. This happens when a child has one established language before learning a second language, whether in preschool or later (at the age of three, they usually separate simultaneous and sequential

language learning). Some kids and adults, of course, usually learn a second language formally through school or language classes.

Families who take the time to discuss their goals for language development often see their kids acquire higher levels of language skills in both languages. Parents need to talk about how bilingualism will be achieved for their children, looking at what language strategies will be used by each parent, what is being taught at school, and what areas need to be emphasized outside of school.

Experts stress separating the languages to make language acquisition easier for children. When they are learning two languages at the same time, parents need to work out language strategies that emphasize boundaries between the languages. For example:

1) One parent, one language. Each parent consistently speaks one language while the other parent speaks another language (usually each on speaking his or her native language to the child and possibly the common language to each other).

Both parents speak one language in the home(L1) and a second language is used at school (L2).

One language is used in the home and at school and the second language is used in the community.

Both parents speak both languages to the child but separate the languages according to speaking situations or alternate days.

2) Consistency is the key in early language learning. If you mix languages in the same conversation, young kids experience difficulty separating vocabulary and grammar into the appropriate language. The child may learn the “mixed” language as one hybrid language.

3) Parents also need to consider how to strike a balance between the languages. If a child attends school in one language all day and has only a short time to hear the other language at home, it’s likely the school language will develop more easily than the home language. Parents have to plan for additional time spent using the home language in a variety of situations and with a variety of speakers. Rich language experiences in both languages are essential for good bilingual development.

4) The quality of the language interaction is also very important. The language used shouldn’t be too complex and parents should learn to expand their child’s language as well as give encouragement and approval. Parents need to be good listeners and good language models by introducing rich vocabulary and varied conversations

Providing books, music, and even videos in both languages is also important.

Parents should also be aware of individual difference among children. Each child learns language at his or her own speed. This is related to a variety of factors, such as:

- Stability and mobility. A family that remains in the second language community for a longer period of time will increase the chances of the child retaining the second language.
- Relationships within the family affect bilingual language development. For example, if the father speaks a different language than the mother, but frequent trips take him away from home, the child will not learn his language as easily as the mother's.
- Attitudes toward each language expressed by the parents, other family members, the school, the community and especially the child, will affect the development of one or both of the languages. Both languages must be given importance and a sense of worth in all aspects of the child's life. All kids have a need and a desire to communicate when language experiences are positive and meaningful.

Knowing two or more languages truly gives kids many advantages in life. Bilingual kids have the advantage of knowing two cultures, of being able to communicate with a wider variety of people, and of possible economic advantages in their future. Research has even shown advantages in thinking skills among bilingual individuals.

But deciding to raise bilingual kids is a decision that should be carefully considered as it affects children for the rest of their lives. Parents need to consider the child's self identity, self-esteem, schooling options, as well as social factors when planning for bilingualism. Becoming bilingual is a special gift parents can offer their children, but the gift must be planned and presented with care for it to be well used and appreciated.

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CASE STUDY

The following are personal experiences with two cases. Assuredly many have encountered these situations in the clinic. It is a challenge meeting these children with speech and language difficulties, as I've found myself in a conflict to choose the language to engage therapy in.

Case 1

An example is a family with a 6 year old who walked in with reported articulation difficulties. The parents informed that his English tutor reported that the child could not speak clearly. They were all mainly Chinese-speaking at home. However, they requested that therapy be carried out in English. At the request of the parents, we followed through with correcting articulation errors in English phonology. I found myself working through this alongside words in Mandarin to correct errors in Chinese phonology too. I felt that it would not be fruitful to just correct errors in his second language but not his first language. I wondered again, was it not a dilemma at times to decide whether we should go with the parents' wishes or what we see as best.

Case 2

The second case scenario is a child who was of mixed Malay and Chinese parentage and therefore was exposed to these two languages. English was spoken in the home environment. She was 3 years old, and had just started talking. At the assessment, her mother was advised that the child be exposed to one language only especially in teaching new words. In our therapy sessions, it was often challenging to choose the language to engage in. In one particular session, her grandmother (Chinese speaking), father (Malay speaking) and mother (English speaking) were in the room. As we interacted during the session, I could feel myself in the child's shoes and being bombarded with words in 3 different languages (with the same meaning). It had been emphasized to the parents that one language should be maintained as far as possible so that we did not confuse her. So we had decided to keep to English in therapy. However, the child was looked after by the grandmother at home most of the day and she spoke Cantonese with her. Again this would hinder the child's progress to develop words in one language.

In conclusion, in a multilingual country such as ours, it is challenging to choose just one language to work in speech therapy for children who are delayed or disordered in speech and language development. This is especially so as many Malaysian children are either bilingual or trilingual. Would it be the mother tongue, the national language or language used in the school? It is indeed difficult for these children to cope with learning speech and language in one spoken language, let alone two or three. I often find myself advising parents that the language to choose is the one most used and understood by the child regardless of other factors. Easier said than done!