

BECOMING BILINGUAL WHEN ACCESS TO THE MINORITY LANGUAGE MAY BE COMPROMISED

Between September and December 2023, Babylonia collected questions from parents regarding their children's language development. This article aims to answer the following questions:

- We want our daughter to be fully bilingual – with such a high dominion of each language that people question whether she speaks any other language at all. Both my husband and I speak Spanish and English in this way, having grown up in Mexico going to an English-speaking school and then moving to the US for university and the rest of our adult lives. The actual question: how can we recreate this for our daughter, knowing that she is in the US and will not be immersed in Spanish the way we were when growing up? Plus finding Spanish-speaking child care is hard – is two days on the weekend and evenings in Spanish enough to have her be bilingual? What would you recommend we do so that we set her up for success in both languages? She is 8 months today.
- I am a non-heritage speaker of another language (Spanish). I can speak fluidly but still make errors that native speakers do not make. My husband and I would like our daughter – currently 2 months old – to be fluent in the second language (Spanish) and plan to enroll her in a bilingual learning environment once she is old enough. In the meantime we join a once per week bilingual storytime, and try to read her stories in Spanish at home. My question is: for language exposure & acquisition, is it better for me to try to speak Spanish to her at home if my Spanish has errors, or just wait, stick to small exposures for now, and let her learning come primarily once she has started daycare/preschool?

Tema

● Virginia C. Mueller
Gathercole
| Florida International
University, Osher
Lifelong Learning
Institute at
UNC Asheville

One of the most rewarding endeavors that parents can engage in is that of bringing up children as bilingual or multilingual speakers. It can also be challenging, due to the myriad linguistic environments in which families navigate: the type of community in which a family lives, the attitudes of the community to each of the languages, the nature of the family's own experiences with the languages. The two very interesting questions above concern bilingual children's acquisition of a minority language, Spanish, in the United States (USA), a context in which there exists a very dominant majority language, English.

Becoming fluent in a language that is not the dominant language of the community can be tricky. It is common for the dominant language to pervade most aspects of the child's life, while the non-dominant language may be restricted to certain contexts – e.g., the home, certain relatives, a selection of cultural contexts. In addition, in a context like that of the USA, for sociopolitical (not linguistic) reasons,

the majority language may have more prestige. And the child is likely to face more situations when the majority language is used than the minority language – e.g., monolingual English speakers will not know Spanish, necessitating the use of English with such interlocutors. Evidence shows that children growing up in such an environment may gradually move towards greater use of English with age, especially in relation to friends and those in the community, but even in the home, where older siblings can be influential in introducing the dominant language. This is not only true in the USA, but also in other countries and in relation to other bilingual and immigrant populations (Van Mol & de Valk, 2018).

The situations posed in the two cases in the abstract are not the same. In the first, the parents are fully fluent in both languages, but they are concerned that their daughter may not fully acquire the minority language because of the overwhelming presence of English. In the second, the mother asks if she should



We want our daughter to be fully bilingual — with such a high dominion of each language that people question whether she speaks any other language at all. Both my husband and I speak Spanish and English in this way, having grown up in Mexico going to an English-speaking school and then moving to the US for university and the rest of our adult lives. The actual question: how can we recreate this for our daughter, knowing that she is in the US and will not be immersed in Spanish the way we were when growing up? Plus finding Spanish-speaking child care is hard — is two days on the weekend and evenings in Spanish enough to have her be bilingual? What would you recommend we do so that we set her up for success in both languages? She is 8 months today.

minimize the use of her own non-native command of Spanish in favor of later access to more fluent speakers.

In response to both questions, it is important to stress, first, that no two speakers of any language, whether bilingual or monolingual, have exactly the same knowledge of their languages. Several factors influence proficiency in a language (Gathercole, 2016). Individuals can differ in subtle (and not so subtle) ways in vocabulary, pronunciation, sentence structure, conversational interaction, and so forth. There is no such thing as an “ideal” speaker of a language. Ultimately, what we learn in language depends to a large extent on the range of contexts in which we experience that language. A common effect in bilinguals’ knowledge is a “distributed effect,” whereby the two languages might be used in different contexts (home vs school, sports vs cooking, etc.), so what is acquired is different for the two languages. The child might know football words in English and cooking words in Spanish, for example. How widely a child hears and uses each language in a variety of situations matters. So a general answer to both questions in the abstract is that the aim should be one of encouraging the child’s access to and

interactions with a variety of speakers of Spanish, in a range of diverse situations in which the language may occur naturally.

Responding more specifically:

In cases like that of the first question above, when both parents are fluent bilinguals, evidence shows that children are more likely to use and to become fluent in the minority language when the parents speak the minority language at home. (And in the end, in such contexts in which the majority language is dominant in the community, children still tend to gain majority language proficiency levels that are indistinguishable from those of their peers.) E.g., in Wales, the children who develop Welsh to the highest degree are those whose parents speak only Welsh to them in the home (Gathercole, 2007). De Houwer’s (2007) work shows that, similarly, in officially Dutch-speaking Flanders children are more likely to speak a minority language when both parents speak exclusively that language in the home or one speaks that language exclusively and the other speaks that language alongside Dutch.

With regard to the parents’ specific question about how much exposure is needed,



Prof. V. C. Mueller Gathercole, Ph.D., has over forty years of experience researching and teaching bilingualism, child language, and linguistics. Her extensive work on bilingualism in Wales and in Miami has been published in multiple journals and in books such as *Issues in the Assessment of Bilinguals* and *Solutions for the Assessment of Bilinguals*. She served as Co-Director of the ESRC Centre for Bilingualism in Wales and recently as President of the International Association for the Study of Child Language.



I am a non-heritage speaker of another language (Spanish). I can speak fluidly but still make errors that native speakers do not make. My husband and I would like our daughter — currently 2 months old — to be fluent in the second language (Spanish) and plan to enroll her in a bilingual learning environment once she is old enough. In the meantime we join a once per week bilingual storytime, and try to read her stories in Spanish at home. My question is: for language exposure & acquisition, is it better for me to try to speak Spanish to her at home if my Spanish has errors, or just wait, stick to small exposures for now, and let her learning come primarily once she has started daycare/preschool?

researchers differ on the exact proportion of time but generally agree that bilingual children can be seen to gain proficiency as long as they have a certain minimal level of exposure (although it is not clear exactly what that minimal level is). Exposure to and development in both languages is supported by contemporaneous cognitive development, so some aspects of language are learned conjointly in the child's two languages, such as learning how to put narratives together and learning some literacy skills. However, success largely depends on the variety of contexts in which the child hears and uses the language, the language sources, and the complexity and domains of the structures involved (Unsworth, 2016). In general, the more parents can encourage access to the non-dominant language, from more, and diverse fluent speakers (Place & Hoff, 2011), the greater the likelihood that the child will become fluent in that language.

The second question poses a slightly more complex situation. In all language learning, children “reconstruct” the language from what they hear those around them saying, by drawing out patterns and rules from that input. Even though the mother asking the question says that

she makes occasional errors in Spanish, this should not be a deterrent, because as long as the daughter also has access to other speakers, especially highly fluent speakers, those speakers will provide linguistic models from which the daughter can extract consistent linguistic patterns. (Anecdotal evidence confirms this: Children often end up “correcting” second-language-learning parents who may deviate from the patterns heard from the larger community of speakers.) A child's peers play an important role in language development, so access to other children who speak the language is beneficial. As is the case for all language learning, the earlier, and the more, a child has exposure to the language, the better.

My comments so far have to do with linguistic development *per se* and with providing adequate exposure to the language to ensure successful development. It is important to keep in mind as well everything else that goes into becoming a bilingual speaker. Learning and speaking a language entails issues of identity, access to a community of speakers, the development of attitudes towards a linguistic group and a culture, and even the fostering of a general appreciation of diversity. The form that these take in

a given child can be negative or positive and can be tinged by how those around them view these. It is unfortunate that in many societies in which a minority language is overshadowed extensively by a dominant language there is derision or devaluing of the minority language, of its use, or of those who speak the language. In fact, in many societies people have been punished for speaking a minority language. For example, in Wales, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Welsh children were castigated for speaking a word of Welsh in school and, if “caught,” were forced to wear a “Welsh not” (a board usually with “WN” on it, rather like a dunce cap). This board was passed from offending child to offending child until at the end of the day, the last child wearing the “Welsh not” received a physical punishment. The USA is not immune from such negative attitudes, and bilingual children can pick up such views. Too often children of immigrants feel there is no value in speaking the minority language, or, worse, that it is bad for them to speak it (see the contribution by Ruth Kircher in this issue for more about this).

Parents can help foster positive attitudes towards the minority language and its speakers and help their child take joy in his/her ability to communicate in that language and in sharing two languages and two cultures. Positive attitudes can be promoted through interaction with other speakers, especially other families with children who speak the language, through exposure to fun and rewarding events in which the language is used, through exposure to “cool” people like celebrities who speak the language, and even, if possible, through visiting places or countries in which the language is the language of the community.

For both of the questions in the abstract, the bottom line is that children learn a language from exposure to and use of that language. The more parents can foster exposure on a regular basis, the more likely it is that the child will develop into a fully fluent bilingual speaker. And the more that parents can make this a pleasant and rewarding experience, the more likely it is that the child will also develop positive attitudes towards the language, its speakers, and its culture, and will ultimately take pride in his or her identity as a member of that speech community.

I can propose some practical suggestions: In a situation in which there is a dominant language in the community, parents may promote acquisition of the minority language as follows:

1. Use the minority language at home. Help foster an environment in which it is natural, possibly even the default, for the child to use the minority language with you.
2. Expose your child to other adults and children who speak the minority language.
 - A. Expose the child to a range of fluent adult speakers of the language.
 - B. Encourage interaction with children who are also learning or speak the minority language.
 - C. The more you can expose your child to a variety of sources for the language, the richer his/her experience with the language will be.¹
3. Make sure you continue to use and expose your child to the minority language once the child starts school, especially if the majority language is dominant there.
4. If possible, send your child to a bilingual school or one in which the minority language is used as a medium of education.
5. Approach the acquisition of language as a natural and positive phenomenon and expose your child to the joy and benefits of being bilingual and everything that that entails beyond knowing the language itself.
6. Finally, don't give up. There will be ups and downs in your child's uptake of the minority language, or even in particular aspects of the language. Such transitions and pockets of abilities are natural in language development, regardless of whether the child is growing up as a monolingual or bilingual speaker.

References

- De Houwer, A.** (2007). **Parental language input patterns and children's bilingual use.** *Applied Psycholinguistics* 28(3): 411-424.
- Gathercole, V. C. M.** (Editor). (2007). *Language transmission in bilingual families in Wales.* Cardiff: Welsh Language Board.
- Gathercole, V. C. M.** (2016). Factors moderating proficiency in bilinguals. In: E. Nicoladis & S. Montanari (Eds.), *Bilingualism across the lifespan: Factors moderating language proficiency.* Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, pp. 123-140.
- Place, S., & Hoff, E.** (2011). Properties of dual language exposure that influence two-year-olds' bilingual proficiency. *Child Development* 82(6), 1834-1849.
- Unsworth, S.** (2016). Quantity and quality of language input in bilingual language development. In: E. Nicoladis & S. Montanari (Eds.), *Bilingualism across the lifespan: Factors moderating language proficiency.* Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, pp. 103-121.
- Van Mol, C., & de Valk, H. A. G.** (2018). European movers' language use patterns at home: A case-study of European bi-national families in the Netherlands. *European Societies* 20(4), 665-689.

Acknowledgements: I wish to thank Peggy Mueller and Rebecca Burns for very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this response

¹ As a child gets older, parents can take advantage of internet sites in which one can directly interact with and have live conversations with speakers of many other languages. A few are the following: Speaky: <https://www.speaky.com/> Tandem: <https://www.tandem.net/> For more information, see <https://preply.com/en/blog/language-exchange-app/>.