

THE PURSUIT OF LITERACY IN TWO LANGUAGES AT THE SAME TIME

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 are a multilingual home (Spanish; German) and would like our children to learn to read and write in both languages. My 6-year-old son is learning to read and write in German in school. Is it advisable for my child to start learning to read in Spanish only once he has learned to do so in German? Or is it feasible to pursue his literacy in both languages at the same time?

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Although literacy is often associated with learning to read and write in school, it is a part of a family's language practices. Language development and literacy learning are closely related, so early literacy often emerges from everyday social interactions in the home. Young children acquiring two languages from birth (known as Bilingual First Language Acquisition or BFLA) are already on the path to biliteracy when they sing, play games, tell stories or read books with their parents in their two languages. However, parents often have concerns when BFLA children start school and are only taught to read and write in one of their two languages, which is usually the dominant societal language. They may wonder if their children should also learn to read and write in the non-school language, that is, the other language that is used only within the family and is not taught in school. Some parents may worry that teaching their children to read and write in the non-school language will interfere with the reading and writing of the school language in school.

Would learning to read and write in two languages at the same time burden and confuse the child? There is no evidence suggesting that biliteracy development is harmful. Informal literacy instruction in the non-school language in the family does not negatively affect the formal learning of the school language in school. Here are five research-based reasons for fostering bilingual children's biliteracy:

1. Young bilingual children already have an early understanding of print in both languages

Bilingual children possess metalinguistic awareness from a young age. This explicit and conscious knowledge about language extends to language in print. There is limited research on the early biliteracy development of BFLA children. However, we can draw from research conducted on emergent bilingual children who are exposed to one language from birth and acquire an additional language in early

childhood (known as Early Second Language Acquisition or ESLA). Four- and five-year-olds ESLA children know how to handle books (e.g., they know where to start when reading a book) and understand the directionality of the text (e.g., from left to right, or from top to bottom) in each language. They can also distinguish the different scripts of their two languages quite early on because many objects in their immediate environment display print, e.g. clothes, plastic bags and food labels. For example, a Japanese-English ESLA child can differentiate between the logographic Japanese script and the alphabetic English script.

ESLA children can distinguish between their two languages even when they share the same script. For example, when given two versions of the same book, English-Spanish ESLA preschoolers can distinguish the language based on the print, i.e., English or Spanish. The same script also makes it easier for the children to identify letters. If ESLA children possess an early understanding of print with later exposure to a second language, it is reasonable to expect BFLA children who received earlier exposure to print in both languages to have the same, if not higher, level of print awareness. These early signs of print knowledge show that bilingual children are far from being confused. Instead, they are quite ready for literacy learning in both languages.

2. Language and literacy learning in both languages are interconnected and can be transferred from one language to the other

When bilingual children learn two languages, they are not learning them separately. Children's learning processes are interconnected with cross-language transfer in several aspects. Take, for example, the development of vocabulary which is essential for academic success. Bilingual children may find it easier to learn a new word in the school language if they have already acquired the novel concept in their non-school language at home. Also, when they already possess a larger vocabulary in their non-school language, they become better at using social and linguistic cues to understand the meaning of new words, including those in the school language. BFLA

preschoolers who engage in literacy practices in their non-school language have been found to possess a wide range of vocabulary in the school language. They receive more language-rich input at home from their parents than in classrooms, where they do not get much individual attention from the teacher.

When bilingual children learn to read in two languages, they acquire a deeper conceptual and linguistic proficiency common to both. Strategies and abilities such as decoding and phonological awareness are interconnected and can be transferred from one language to the other. While phonological transfer commonly occurs for languages that share the same script (e.g., English and Spanish), there is also evidence of phonological transfer for languages with different scripts such as English and Chinese. Knowledge of two different scripts enhances a child's phonological awareness, which gives them an edge when they later possibly begin learning a third language in school.



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An ability to write in the non-school language can provide temporary support when bilingual children start school. It can help BFLA and ESLA first graders express more ideas when they write in the school language. Although they may make grammar or spelling mistakes, these inconsistencies gradually disappear as they master the writing conventions of the school language.

3. Literacy practices help maintain and develop the non-school language in the family

Bilingual children tend to become increasingly dominant in the school language as they grow older. When the non-school language is limited to everyday interactions in the family, children may speak less and less of it. Home literacy practices address the widening gap. They help maintain the use of the non-school language and support its development.

Shared book reading is perhaps the single most important literacy practice. Parent's direct teaching (e.g., giving dictation) is not as important as informal learning through book reading. Books provide linguistically rich input that builds vocabulary. Reading promotes cognitively demanding quality talk, so parents should read *with* their children and discuss what was read. Talking and thinking about books helps children build reading proficiency. When parents read to young children, they cultivate an interest in reading and increase parent-child bonding, which supports the development of the non-school language.

Parents should focus on developing an interest in reading by creating a literacy-rich home environment, e.g., they can prepare a range of engaging and appropriate literacy resources in the non-school language that their children enjoy. Bilingual books, if available, are a useful addition to the home library. Shared reading, availability of age- and genre-appropriate literacy resources and modelling of reading by parents are the foundation for independent reading at older ages. Although not all bilingual children become avid readers, parents should encourage independent reading because it contributes to high literacy skills in the non-school language. When children read willingly and independently, their

literacy learning no longer depends on parents. Children can acquire new vocabulary and complex grammar and access a wealth of knowledge on various topics on their own through independent reading.

Writing is a difficult skill to include as part of home literacy practices because of the more structured learning, but it can be facilitated by attending weekend school. Children who are strong readers tend to be strong writers even when they have little practice because they can draw from their rich literacy experiences when they write. However, parents can create opportunities for children to practice writing the non-school language, e.g., postcards and letters to grandparents living far away.

4. Literacy practices in the non-school language help cultivate a bicultural identity

Language and identity are closely related. Our identities are reflected in the languages we use and the languages we use shape our identities. Bilingual children who are highly dominant in the societal language tend to associate themselves with the majority culture. However, those with high levels of bilingualism and biliteracy are more likely to identify with a bicultural identity. Their exposure to the non-school language and minority culture through books and other resources contributes to their identity development. Parents who want to raise their children as bicultural bilinguals would find literacy skills helpful in facilitating their children's identity development. The long process of identity formation extends into young adulthood, so it is necessary to maintain literacy practices until children are much older.

5. It gets harder to teach the non-school language later

Children become busier with their school and extra-curricular activities from middle to late childhood and adolescence, so teaching the non-school language *after* they learn the school language may not be feasible. As children become increasingly proficient in the school language, they may become frustrated with their lower proficiency in the non-school language and more reluctant to learn how to

read and write it. Early childhood allows children to get a head start in learning their non-school language. They spend more time at home, so this is probably the best time for family members to provide literacy-rich input and engage them in literacy practices in the non-school language.

Every bilingual child has the potential to acquire biliteracy. Parents may want to support their children's learning of the school language once they start school. However, support is unnecessary because school lessons usually begin with the basics. Research has indicated that family literacy practices in the school language have little impact on children's learning. However, family literacy practices in the non-school language are essential for the language to develop. They also build a strong foundation for academic learning in both languages.

Parents need to invest a lot of time and effort in fostering their children's biliteracy. They may not feel confident they can help their children learn to read and write in the non-school language. However, they can get the support from parents who share the same goal. For example, they can get practical advice from the community in the weekend school, particularly from parents whose older children have acquired biliteracy quite successfully. The path to biliteracy is not easy, but it can be an enjoyable journey for parents and children with a satisfying reward at the end.

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