THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTIVATING THE MINORITY LANGUAGE TO ENSURE CHILDREN'S BILINGUALISM

Tema

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 parents of two children (9 and 6 years). At home we do not follow an OPOL approach, instead we use the two family languages flexibly and according to the communicative moments. The children almost always respond in their strongest language, which is also the language that is dominant in the environment around us. On the one hand we understand that this is normal, on the other we feel that their skills in one of the family languages are not developed enough. Better to adopt an OPOL approach? But how to avoid forcing and frustrating impositions?**
- **If I speak to my child sometimes in Catalan and primarily in english , will I create confusion? I want her to acquire this language but it's hard for me to stick to it 100%. My partner speaks only english to her**
- **We are an English speaking family living in the United States. My husband is a native French speaker, but has never spoken French to our boys who are now 5 and 8 years old. He would like to start teaching them now but they get easily frustrated and try to avoid engaging with him if he's speaking in French. What's his best bet for getting them to learn at this point? What can I do as an English speaker to help**

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More and more families in our globalized world are interested in raising children who are fluent in multiple languages and competent at navigating different cultures. But raising multilingual and multicultural children can take some efforts, especially when families live in countries in which one language is ever dominant (for example, English in the United States or Italian in Italy). Traditionally, mixed families (in which parents are from different countries and/or have different native languages) have been advised to use the "one parent one language" (OPOL) approach to raise bilingual children from the time they are born, where parent A consistently speaks language A with the child, and parent B consistently speaks language B with the child. Note that for this approach to work, parents have been advised to be *consistent*. Specifically, they must not only reliably speak their language with the child but they must socialize them into responding in the same language by adopting discourse strategies that highlight their language preference (perhaps by even faking not to understand the non-parental language, see Lanza, 1997). This is not because parental language switching/mixing or acceptance of the other language will confuse the child but because switches to/acceptance of the other language will signal to the child that it is appropriate to use the non-parental language (Lanza, 1997). In this case, the child may just end up choosing the language they prefer – almost certainly the one spoken in the community, thus never learning or losing skills in the parent's or minority language.

While the OPOL approach was hailed as the most effective way to raise a bilingual child for almost a century, research in the last twenty years has shown that it may not be the best approach to ensure bilingualism in children, especially for some families (De Houwer, 2007). For example, hearing one language from just one parent may limit language exposure to just how that single person speaks it; if both parents speak the same minority language (say, Spanish in the

United States), the child will be more successful at learning this language when both parents use it consistently at home. Ultimately, the acquisition of the societal or local language will happen naturally through schooling and exposure to mainstream culture, so increasing exposure and use of the minority language is the best strategy to ensure bilingualism in children.

So what does the latest research say about this issue? The key messages are that:

1. In order to ensure that a child learns a minority language, extra effort should be made to "protect" time spent using this language. While learning the societal/local language will happen naturally for the child, learning the minority language will depend on how much exposure to, and practice with, this language the child will have.
2. When both parents speak the societal language at home, in addition to one or both parents using a minority language, the odds of the child learning to speak the minority language decrease substantially. Chances for children speaking the home minority language are highest in monolingual homes using only the minority language, or in bilingual homes where both parents speak the minority language and in addition at most one parent speaks the societal language (De Houwer, 2007).
3. While the OPOL approach may feel unnatural for some parents because some situations call for multiple-language use (for example, when speakers of other languages are present), parents can be successful at optimizing their home language environment to maximize minority language exposure.

These considerations give us some insights as to how to best promote bilingualism among children. First, the child will need a large amount of exposure to the minority language in order to learn it. Speaking the societal language at home will limit the child's opportunities to hear and practice the minority language. Limited amount of exposure to this language may often result in passive bilingualism, which means that the child will understand the language but speak it limitedly. Thus, unless the child is exposed to the minority language outside of the home, limiting minority language use at home may result in the child favoring the societal language with consequences for the proficiency they will develop in the non-societal language.

Families who have not reliably spoken the minority language at home and have children who already prefer the societal language can, however, make adjustments to home language use to increase their children's minority language exposure. First, they can gradually expand their own use of the minority language, actively choosing this language over the societal language when possible. For example, they may begin by using the minority language in play contexts, where the communicative demands are more limited and children can actively participate with limited proficiency. Parents may also continue using the societal language in certain situations, for example, to help their children with homework (which will most likely be in the societal language), but they may decide to use the

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minority language in all other communicative contexts. Children may continue to respond in the societal language; but over time, increased exposure to the minority language will be beneficial. An additional strategy is to exploit the media to increase minority language exposure at home. Children can be introduced to new media content that entertains them – be it on TV, online, or through music – but that also further exposes them to the minority language. Exposure to media alone will not make children fluent in a language in which they have limited competence but it will increase their opportunities to hear sounds, words, and sentences in that language. Parents could also recruit a friend, grandparent, babysitter, or au-pair who exclusively speaks the minority language to the child. This is indeed a very effective method for encouraging school-age children to learn a new language (or a language they understand but speak in a limited way): children will develop a new language use pattern with this person that exclusively relies on the minority language. It is crucial that parents communicate their appreciation of the minority language and of bilingualism to their children, so that they understand why speaking a language that is not used by mainstream society is important. Finally, since education plays a crucial role in promoting bilingualism in school age, the last and perhaps most successful strategy for helping children gain fluency in a minority language is to enroll them in an educational program that uses this language for instruction. Parents can choose from Saturday/Sunday language schools, where children receive instruction in the minority language once a week for a few hours, to bilingual/full immersion programs, where children are educated in a combination of both the societal and minority language or fully in the minority language.

As an expert in multilingual development with two trilingual teen daughters, I know that all these strategies can be effective in raising multilingual children. First, we strictly adopted the OPOL approach at home since our daughters were born, with me using exclusively Italian, my husband (an American English speaker) English, and our nanny (a Mexican Spanish speaker) Spanish. Not only were we consistent in our language choice but we encouraged the girls to answer in the language we had adopted through discourse strategies that highlighted our language preference. While my husband did not speak Italian and our language of communication was English, he understood the importance of emphasizing Italian and Spanish, the minority languages, in the American context. We thus actively limited English use at home to expose the children primarily to Italian and Spanish. Not only did we enlist one specific person to provide input in those languages but also exploited the media to increase Italian and Spanish exposure. In fact, until our daughters were five, we created a context where Italian and Spanish prevailed in their daily life, with TV watching and music listening occurring exclusively in these languages. We also actively sought Italian- and Spanish-speaking families with children who spoke those languages so that the girls could have a "community of practice" (Oriyama, 2016) – various speakers, including peers – with whom to engage in both of those languages. When the girls began school, we enrolled them in an Italian/English dual language program, in which instruction was delivered in both languages from age five to eleven. Finally, we took the girls on extensive trips to Italy and Mexico to show them that Italian and Spanish, while being minority languages in our context, were languages spoken by the majority of the community in those countries.

While orchestrating such a family language plan might appear daunting for some families, ultimately, parents should assess the extent to which raising bilingual children is a priority and whether

they feel there will be consequences of modifying home language use patterns. Clearly, the easiest situation is adopting the OPOL approach from the moment children are born, so that they will adopt a specific language use pattern with each parent from the start, where speaking the minority language feels natural. But parents can be successful at increasing minority language exposure even with older children who already favor the societal language. Nonetheless, if adopting OPOL or increasing the use of the minority language at home causes stress, either to parents, children or both, families should reassess what is in their best interest. Ultimately, parents should strive for everyone to experience harmonious bilingual development (De Houwer, 2015), where both children and families have a positive subjective experience with bilingualism and develop wellbeing in their language contact situation. De Houwer (2020) is an excellent accessible source on why so many children who hear two languages end up speaking just a single language. Hopefully parents can use it to further learn how to best promote bi/multilingualism in their children.

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