

HOW TO RETAIN A NEWLY ACQUIRED LANGUAGE AFTER RETURNING FROM A STAY ABROAD

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

– My children (German-speaking, monolingual - city of Bern) attended school in France due to our family's stay abroad for several months. They learned to communicate and they all have a great foundation in French (they are 4, 6 and 8 years old). However, I wonder how I can continue to promote their French skills in a German-speaking environment at home. Extracurricular activities are only available quite far away (Biel, Fribourg) and with bilingual families, German is simply spoken, as this is also the school language. Or is this not necessary at all and can I trust that the basics will emerge when French is needed again? Thank you very much for your answer!

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I am trained as a linguist but have expanded my focus from technical-theoretical issues to more applied, educational, psychological, social, and policy aspects of language(s). My interests are in bilingualism and multilingualism, language teaching and learning, language and society, family language policy (FLP), inclusion, equity, diversity and social justice.

Introduction

The question that this article responds to is interesting and important, and is often asked by families in similar circumstances. It is hard to give a definitive answer because there are many different factors that may affect the long-term retention of a language that was acquired through a brief stay abroad and then exposure to that language stopped upon return to the home country (sometimes this is referred to as a returnee situation or context). The current research on this topic is not very conclusive and there is a large degree of individual variation, but overall, my recommendation would be to 1) look for strategies to help the children continue to have some exposure to the language that is no longer used regularly (French in the case described in the abstract), 2) find some opportunities to also produce that language (i.e., speak and write French, if possible), and 3) keep the language relevant in the children's lives, also trying to connect it to positive experiences and have fun with it. To

expand on this recommendation, I will first explain some theoretical-conceptual aspects related to the question and then I will list a few specific suggestions for strategies that might be used for language retention and re-activation.

Family Language Policy (FLP)

One of the research fields that deals with this topic is the field of family language policy (FLP). FLP combines insights from language development research and language policy research and seeks to understand how bi/multilingual children learn and retain their languages, how children can flourish in various languages, and what their families' impact and role are in this process (see, for example, King & Fogle, 2008). In the case described in the abstract, the family made the choice to relocate to France for a few months and enroll the children in a French school. As I have shown in some of my previous work, the language of schooling is a powerful factor that influences children's

language outcomes (Slavkov, 2017). The stay in France also provided natural exposure and socialization opportunities for the children which helped them learn to communicate in French quickly, as pointed out by the parent. To use De Houwer's (2009) terms, the family probably has positive attitudes towards French and high impact beliefs (beliefs that parents' choices and actions are not inconsequential and that they influence the child's language outcomes). This helped the three children acquire an initial foundation in French, as aptly described by the parent. One question that arises is how thoroughly and deeply the three children acquired French. Because of the relatively short exposure of a few months, they probably did not acquire as much vocabulary or grammar structure as children who have spent a longer period of time in France, or as children who were born and raised there. This is not a trivial point: children are generally very good with the phonological aspects of language and even after a few months of exposure through a stay abroad they may sound just like the other French-speaking children at their school. However, that would likely be only on the surface and their internal knowledge of grammar and the richness of their vocabulary would still be more limited, and that limitation may remain somewhat hidden. Furthermore, when it comes to reading and writing, we should also assume that these skills would be less developed in French after just a brief period of schooling in that language, in comparison with children who have had longer period of schooling in French. Overall, it would be reasonable to assume that in this case the children have a foundation in French but the acquisition process is far from complete.

Language attrition

Another relevant point to the case described in the abstract is that the children have likely started to forget or lose some of their French since their return to a predominantly German-speaking schooling and social environment in Bern, Switzerland. The research field that deals with this phenomenon is the field of language attrition, and more specifically in this case, the field of second/foreign language attrition (see, for example, Mehotcheva & Köpke, 2019). Within this field, the question that one may wonder about is how

quickly and to what extent a child would forget or lose an additional language that they have learnt over the course of several months during a stay abroad. Once again, it is difficult to comment on this, considering that we do not know for sure how much exactly was acquired previously and to what extent the new language has solidified. A period of several months in France is quite short and although the literature is not conclusive on this topic, some authors suggest that a few of years of living in the L2 environment would be more likely to result in lasting retention. The question of age also comes to mind. Generally, older children may be



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less vulnerable to attrition than younger ones and thus the 8-year-old may have higher chances of French language retention than the younger siblings. However, again, this prediction is not set in stone and outcomes may vary. Additionally, the language attrition literature has generally found that productive aspects of language, such as speaking and writing, are harder to retain than receptive aspects of language, such as recognizing words, listening, reading, and understanding. It may also be expected that the longer the time that elapses between when exposure stopped and potential future renewed exposure to the language, the slower or more difficult the re-activation might be. Overall, the phenomenon of language re-learning or re-activation has been studied less than language attrition, but there are some studies that report reactivation after a period of no active use of a language. So, as the parent suggests in the abstract, if a child has acquired a base, we can assume that some French will re-emerge, but the longer we wait the less likely this would be and the more the child would need to re-learn.

Retention and Reactivation Strategies

Strategies aimed at retention and re-activation of a language to which a child no longer has exposure can vary from one family to another, depending on access and personal preferences. We can think of these strategies as having both linguistic aspects and socio-psychological aspects. In terms of linguistic aspects, the objective would be to expose the child to as much authentic linguistic input in the target language as possible, and also to give the child opportunities to put that input into practice by producing language (output) and interacting with the language (recall the importance of productive skills mentioned in the previous section). In terms of socio-psychological aspects, the objective would be to give the child opportunities to use the language within an authentic and appropriate social environment and to associate French with positive emotions, which would in turn influence the child's desire to retain it. Of course, none of these strategies would be as effective as the previous situation of living in a French speaking environment and going to school in France, but nonetheless they can mitigate

the effects of language attrition and facilitate retention. Some examples may include reading books to the child or with the child (perhaps the 8-year-old could already read some on their own as well), listening to songs, podcasts, watching TV or movies in French, playing board games or video games in French, or engaging with social media or electronic devices in French (when age appropriate and with parental guidance, as needed). With older children who may use computers or cell phones, the settings of the device could be switched to French, or web-browsers can be set to French. Other technological applications may include setting chat bots or smart home platforms like Alexa or Google Home to French, or engaging with AI tools such as ChatGPT in French, etc. For parents who do not want to use too much technology with their children, museum visits where there may be signs, recordings, videos, live presentations, or interactive workshops in multiple languages, escape-rooms, guided tours of cultural or historic landmarks, city walking tours, etc., are options to be explored. Cafes and restaurants where French is spoken may also be a good idea and the family could create a habit of going to a certain place where the children have a chance to hear and speak some French, and thus associate pleasant family activities with that language. As a personal anecdote, in mostly German-speaking Vienna, my family has a favourite little French bistro where we eat quiche, salad, and desert once every few weeks and we speak French with the very friendly and kind owner. This has turned into a family ritual that reminds us of the value of French and we associate this language with positive emotions. Family meals and/or movie nights at home (for example French Fridays) may also be integrated into the plan. For example, the family can watch a movie in French once a week and also combine this with delicious French treats like macarons, mousse au chocolat, crème brûlée, and so on. Holidays, trips to visit family or friends, or summer camps in a region or country where French is spoken are also beneficial strategies for re-learning and reactivation that have been documented by some researchers.

Families themselves can be creative and pro-active in developing their own strategies. The key points to remember are that children need 1) input or exposure (in

other words, they need to hear the language so they can keep their knowledge of the structure, vocabulary, and sound system alive and build on the already existing knowledge); 2) production or output (in other words, opportunities to use the language by speaking, interacting, or writing in it, not just hearing it or reading it); and 3) opportunities to associate the language with positive experiences and keep its social relevance in their lives, which would keep them motivated and interested, rather than seeing continuous French learning as a chore or a punishment.

Some words of caution

In some of the early stages of the language development and family language policy literature there was perhaps more of a focus on what parents do or can do, a focus that sometimes gave the impression that children are passive recipients of parental actions and strategies. However, in later work there has been more awareness and more discussion of children's agency. In other words, children can and do form counterstrategies in response to parental strategies: they may resist or refuse to engage in some activities, including speaking a given language, and they may very well promote their own linguistic agenda (usually using the majority or dominant societal language, or the language that they use at school or use with most of their friends). As I have found in some of my own work (Slavkov, 2015), children may develop negative emotions and strong reactions (e.g. they may get upset, start crying, etc.) or they may get embarrassed if they are asked or forced to speak a given language. Normativity, correction, or comments about their incomplete knowledge, errors, "accent", etc. can also impact negatively children's desire to use a previously acquired language. This is why it is important to be persistent but gentle, loving, empathetic, and understanding in promoting language retention and reactivation. Finding numerous and rich activities that represent positive experiences and fun, game-based ways of practicing French should be viewed as a golden standard. At the same time, realistic expectations are also important. Perhaps none of these strategies could replace living in a French-speaking region or country and being enrolled in a school where the language of instruction

is French. Thus, the retention and re-activation of French upon return to the German-speaking environment described in the abstract will likely be limited in the new context with fewer opportunities to use French. Nonetheless, with a positive attitude and some careful parental planning some retention and potentially further development can be achieved.

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