

Becoming Bilingual 1: young children learning more than one language

The following ideas are based on an excellent talk given by Dr Charmian Kenner, of Goldsmiths, University of London.

Speaking in two languages is the norm throughout the world. England is unusual, because most English people are monolingual, growing up learning and using only one language. Children in India, for example, are likely to learn three languages before they start school, and most Swedish children will be almost fluent in English by the time they leave school. Being able to speak in more than one language is a great gift!

- Speaking two languages comes naturally, though it may not seem very natural in the early days. Babies' brains are 'wired' to learn any language, whichever and how many they encounter. And bilingualism stimulates the brain...so it's good for you!
- Babies start to babble using lots of different sounds. Many of them don't sound like anything in their home language. Some linguists argue that babbling is an 'international language,' used by babies all over the world. Gradually they drop the sounds that don't appear in the languages they hear around them, and use mainly the sounds of their home languages. Bilingual babies are the same as monolingual babies: they say understandable words during their first year, and go on to develop two-word combinations, and then everything takes off!
- Bilingual children know very early in life about different languages. There are examples of children as young as 12 months understanding instructions that Grandma gives in Portuguese, for example, while Mummy speaks only English.
- Bilingual children learn how to *code switch* very early in life. They know, for example, that using words in Portuguese gets a response from Grandma, while they use English only with Mummy. A two-year-old offered 'ice cream' to his English-speaking mother and then 'glace' to his French-speaking grandmother.
- If children mix words from each language, it is not because of confusion; they will usually have a very good reason for doing it. Children (and sometimes adults!) mix two languages in one sentence because they are using all their knowledge of language to communicate. They might want a banana, but only know how to say it in one language. So little Pablo might tell you 'I want *platano*' because he is learning Spanish at home and English at nursery, but hasn't learned 'banana' yet. Or perhaps Pablo is speaking to a practitioner who also speaks Spanish, and he knows she will understand. Either way we can help him by trying to find out what he means, giving him the banana, and teaching him how to say it in English.

- There are many benefits for learning if you are bilingual. Children can think about their ideas in two languages. They can find out how language works: even very young children can compare their languages, rather than being confused by them. A five-year-old once asked, “Where do you put ‘big’ in English? Do you say, ‘Car very big’, or very big car?” Because in my language (Spanish) we say ‘coche muy grande’ (car very big).”
- Children learning two languages feel secure in their identities, and this can lead to deeper self-confidence. Language and culture are often very closely linked, so for example a child from Bosnia now living in England, but who speaks his home language as well as English, will continue to have links with his family’s culture and customs (and can communicate with his grandparents when he visits them.)
- Parents often decide how they will speak to their children. For example Alex has a Spanish-speaking mother and an English-speaking father. Mum speaks to Alex in Spanish, and Dad speaks to him in English. This decision is known as ‘One Parent One Language’ (OPOL), and will help Alex learn two languages. Another family may decide to only speak one language at home, and the children learn English at pre-school. This is just as effective as OPOL.
- Whatever decisions are made, children need to know their first language well, because it will help them to learn English. When they understand an idea in their first language, (such as numbers or colours), they easily pick up the English words that mean the same thing. They also know how to use the grammar and vocabulary in their first language, so they can quickly work out what is similar or different about the English language.
- It is very important that parents use the language they know best and feel most comfortable with. This is how they can help their children develop language, talk about ideas and learn about the world. A child who develops good use of mother language is more likely to learn good English. But if parents use English instead, children will lose their mother language. Neither language will progress, and the child can have problems in both languages.

Useful references

- *A Parents’ and Teachers’ Guide to Bilingualism* by Colin Baker (Multilingual Matters)
- *Home Pages: Literacy Links for Bilingual Children* by Charmian Kenner (Trentham)
- *Becoming Biliterate* by Charmian Kenner (Trentham)
- www.bilingualism-matters.org.uk
- www.mantralingua.com
- www.bilingualfamilynewsletter.com
- www.ourlanguages.org.uk