

The Home/School Connection:

Collaborating to Promote Best Practice in World Language Education, PreK-8

Issue 3

Common Misunderstandings about Early Second Language Learning

It is estimated that there may be as many children who grow up learning two languages as one. Despite this, childhood bilingualism is poorly understood by many and regarded with skepticism by others.

— Fred Genesee, “Bilingual Acquisition”

Dear Parents,

Misunderstandings about early second language learning abound. Let us examine a few in this issue of Home/School Connection:

Children Learning Languages in School

Is it true that learning a second language has a negative impact on first language development?

On the contrary, learning a second language contributes to children’s overall phonemic awareness. Recognizing sounds that are different from those of the first language will help children to develop better phonological skills in the first language. Also, children who study two languages learn to compare and establish connections between the two languages, which results in a deeper understanding of both.

What if my child is not speaking after a couple of classes, does this mean that she or he is not learning?

Children who are learning a second language pass through a “silent period.” This is so because receptive skills always develop before expressive skills. The silent period will last longer with younger children. Even in their first language, babies take an average of one to two years to start speaking, and when they do so it is only in small, often inaccurate chunks of language. The same process occurs when learning a second language! It takes time to learn to speak another language. Parents can help by praising their children’s efforts to speak, as well as by providing a supportive environment conducive to purposeful communication in the second language.

Children Growing Up Bilingually

Do bilingual children “confuse” languages?

Language “transfer” is a normal occurrence for children who are learning two languages before the age of three, and it happens at all levels of language processing: they may mix sounds, words, phrases and even grammatical structures.

As a matter of fact, language transfer is a more sophisticated process than it seems because what the child is doing is applying and utilizing skills from two language systems. By age four or five, most bilingual children can function very well in both languages, especially when supported by language-rich environments.

Do children who learn two languages in early childhood take a longer time to develop language abilities?

This is more difficult to explain since circumstances may vary from child to child. For example, young children may have acquired more vocabulary for use in certain situations in one language than in the other, depending on exposure. Therefore, if you are approaching the child from the “weaker” language, the child may seem to be lagging behind other children in vocabulary acquisition and usage. The fact is that while bilingual children may demonstrate less vocabulary in each of their separate languages than do native speakers of those languages, they tend to have more overall vocabulary than do monolingual children. Vocabulary can be built up over time by reading and increased quality of exposure to both languages.

This is a simplified explanation, and there are other issues related to this topic. The essential thing to note is that bilingualism (the phenomenon of speaking two languages effectively for communicative purposes) is not the equivalent of two times monolingualism (speaking only one

language). Bilingual children are not simply “double monolinguals”. The phenomenon of bilingualism is a complex array of cognitive, linguistic and psychological phenomenon. Therefore diagnostic and assessment practices need to be tailored to their bilingual/bicultural status by looking at the whole picture.

Children in Toddler/Preschool Language Programs:

Should I wait until my child is older to introduce a second language?

The earlier the better! Babies are called “world citizens” because they can hear all sounds in the world. The brain quickly starts to trim out connections not utilized. Since this ability to hear sounds is closely related to age and—as explained above—children do not confuse languages, it is only your comfort level at introducing a second language that is at stake. The best way to build this comfort level is by being informed and involved in the learning process as well. You may even want to explore ways to learn together with your child!

Should my child only learn a few words at a time?

Not advised! It is best to use language naturally in communicative situations, as with a first language.

When children are learning a language in preschool or elementary school, parents can support the learning at home by using

bilingual books, videos, DVDs, etc. It is highly recommended that parents take the project a step further and enroll in adult language classes. This will allow you to provide language interaction opportunities for your child at home beyond the one word level.

What Advantages Will my Child Have by Learning Two Languages?

Colin Baker sums it up very well in his book *The Care and Education of Young Bilinguals*:

Communication Advantages

- Wider communication (extended family, community, international links, employment).
- Literacy in two languages.

Cultural Advantages

- Broader enculturation, deeper multiculturalism, two ‘language worlds’ of experience.
- Greater tolerance and less racism.

Cognitive Advantages

- Thinking benefits (e.g. creativity, sensitivity to communication).

Character Advantages

- Raised self-esteem.
- Security in identity.

Curriculum Advantages

- Increased curriculum achievement.
- Ease in learning a third language.

Cash and Career Advantages

- Economic and Employment benefits.

Earlychildhood News

<http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com/earlychildhood/article_view.aspx?ArticleID=38>.

Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2000.

NNELL can assist teachers, parents and administrators with learning and advocacy efforts. Contact your State Representative today. We would love to hear from you!

This issue of Home/School Connection was written by Ana Lomba. It is full of tips and resources that can be found at www.nnell.org. Teachers may reproduce it and send it home in their students’ backpacks. Send suggestions/comments to Tammy Dann, NNELL’s Early Language Advocate: trdann@q.com