

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

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Bringing Up Children Bilingually - Problems and Prospects

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Bringing Up Children Bilingually: Problems and Prospects

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Abstract: In this age of globalization, any extra knowledge or skill is an added advantage and increases our scope and expertise to maneuver. Psychologists are of the opinion that human beings are capable of learning only until the age of four. Once they cross this age, they can only expand upon the knowledge they have acquired or enlarge upon their experiences. But they lose the capacity of gaining any new basic skill. Thus, the timeframe we have in hand to equip our children for the future is very narrow. This article endeavours to discuss how our inability or unwillingness to utilize this opportunity of educating our children in a second language from an early age handicaps them in their later years. We will also try to suggest ways to help a child to grow up with equal emphasis on two languages – his mother tongue and a second language in the light of the problems we may encounter on the way.

Introduction

The conception of language as a special gift of the Almighty has been recognized in diverse and unrelated cultures and is itself significant of the reverence rightly accorded by reflecting persons to this priceless human capability.¹

If you learn to use a single language from your infancy, you are said to be a native speaker of that language. During the greater part of our lives we accept our use and understanding of our native language without awareness, comment or question. We only realize the complexity of every normal person's linguistic ability when we try to learn one or more foreign languages after mastering our native language. It reveals just how much is involved in mankind's faculty of communication through language.

'Most cultures in the world have engendered among certain of their members some realization of the scope and power of language'.² Individuals are born, grow up and live in an environment physically and culturally determined by its past; they participate in that environment, and some are instrumental in effecting changes in it. These changes are motivated by certain necessities, advantages or principles. For example, the spread of English round the world in the wake of trade, empire building, migration and settlement has ensured the teaching of the language a role sometimes central, sometimes peripheral in the educational history of virtually every country on earth.

So, in spite of the intricacy of languages and difficulty of learning a foreign language it is always advantageous to learn at least one more language besides our native tongue. To do this motivation must be found and opportunities must be created.

Children are exceptional language learners. Given the opportunity and environment they can pick up any language with excellent phonetic and grammatical standard. But unfortunately, most children are brought up in a monolingual environment. By the time they are introduced to a

second language at school or in certain circumstances, they have already lost valuable time and much of their facility to learn another language. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* says, 'the principle obstacle to learning a language is knowing one already, and it may also be that the faculty of grammar construction established in childhood is one that is gradually lost as childhood recedes'.³ Parents can help utilize the early years of their children's lives by being active in helping their children learn more than one language and this article aims to guide them in this regard.

We will use certain terms in this article to indicate certain concepts. 'Monolingual' will be used here to mean someone who speaks or uses only one language, whereas 'bilingual' and 'multilingual' refer to people who are adept in two or more languages respectively. The language used by most people around the speaker will be considered as the 'majority language' and the language spoken by a lesser number of people is to be termed as the 'minority language'. The language in which the speaker finds himself stronger is considered to be his 'dominant language'.

What is bilingualism?

Bilingualism is the ability to communicate and correspond in two languages, one being your native language and another being a minority language. Whereas the researchers Una Cunningham Andersson and Staffan Andersson think 'Balanced bilingualism means that both languages are equally strong',⁴ according to Cindy's website bilingualism is simply the ability to use two languages on a regular basis, whatever the languages may be. She also thinks 'a person does not have to speak both languages with equal fluency to be a bilingual. It is very common for bilinguals, even those who have been bilingual since birth, to be dominant in one language'.⁵

Every normal person acquires his mother tongue with unconscious ease. But people's ability to learn additional languages varies just as it does in the case of other intellectual activities. Thus, there is little doubt in our minds that the second concept seems to be nearer to the truth.

Situational motivation appears to be by far the strongest influence on the speed and apparent ease of learning a new language. As a survey of British and Welsh students found out, English children in Welsh schools perform worse in Welsh than Welsh students do in English in English schools. The reason may be that English is necessary for further education, newspapers are in English as are most television and radio programmes and most of the better-paid jobs require English. In comparison Welsh is not of much practical use outside Wales.⁶

Provided parents inspire their children sufficiently and create a learning environment for them, children will be equally interested in learning both the languages introduced to them. Children who grow up with two languages have a unique chance to acquire them both in a way that is not possible for those who meet their second language later in life. Small children are able to learn and speak a second language without any trace of a foreign accent, just as they learned their first language. However, if it is not possible to start early, interference may take place in pronunciation, in grammar and in the meaning of words from their first language. In such cases the older children may be allowed to mix the languages for ease of communication or for effect with others who share their linguistic background. 'But they soon learn to keep the languages

‘pure’ when around monolinguals, at least at the lexical level, even if they still have interference from the majority language in their grammar and pronunciation of the minority language’.⁷ Even if the child is reluctant to speak the minority language, an extensive passive knowledge can be maintained if the parents persevere with speaking the minority language as often as possible. This passive knowledge can be built up at a later stage.

But some linguists think that learning a minority language should not be ‘merely a question of activating an existing but inert knowledge of the language, but of stimulating the development of the language system itself’.⁸ The success of informal learning, such as mastering the mother tongue naturally by living, working and interacting with other people as everyday occurrence in infancy, has always impressed language teachers. ‘Attempts to reproduce the same effect by creating the same causes have been a regular feature of language teaching history’.⁹ We would like to follow the same procedure in this discussion.

The best time to begin

A child is known to begin to learn while it is still in its mother’s womb. Thus, it is never too early to start teaching your child a second language. Parents can begin to plan before the birth of the baby by deciding which languages they wish to teach their children and which parent is going to speak which language to the kids. They must be fairly consistent in speaking the language each parent has chosen right from the time the baby is born. Some parents may not find much to talk to their children about, especially in the first two years, before the child begins using words to communicate. ‘While small children are extremely good at letting us know what they want without the use of words, there is no reason for the parents to rely on smiles, gestures and hugs for communication. A chatty parent will be a major resource for the child, letting the child hear a large number of words in many different contexts ... If you talk as though they understand ... they will come to understand. ... When you chat with your children, it is important to give them a chance to respond’.¹⁰

The younger the children, the better they will be able to approximate the pronunciation and absorb the grammatical framework of the language.

Most parents, teachers and linguists agree that it is essential for the children who grow up with two languages to have at least one language, which they know very well. The Nobel prize winning Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore has expressed the same view in ‘*Amar Chelebela*’ (My Childhood): ‘*Agey chai Bangla bhashar ganthuni, tarporey Engreji shekhar pattan*’ (First you need the foundation in Bangla, then you can start learning English).¹¹

Usually, the majority language is also a school language. So, families are more likely to succeed in giving their children two active languages if the mother, rather than the father, speaks the minority language, as it may not be possible for the father to spend as much time with the children as to give them enough input in the minority language.

The response of the children need not necessarily be in the language they are spoken to. If the children choose to go through a stage of answering the minority language-speaking parent in the majority language, it is easy to go on in that language. The passive command attained by the

child in listening to the parent helps them to speak it later. This transfer from one language to another 'often seems to come at 2 ½ years of age'.¹²

So, the waiting is worthwhile.

Therefore, the effort you make to give your child the gift of bilingualism will not be in vain. Sooner or later, you will be seeing the results and feeling happy that you took the right decision!

How will you go about it?

Second language learning is sometimes a challenging task. In fact, different factors are key issues in the case of learning an extra language. Different agents play different roles while one learns an additional language. We learn language at home, from our surroundings, at educational institutions and at different language teaching centers. It demands a coordinated effort to learn an extra language. Different organs may help from different angles. Here we will discuss different methods of learning.

Motivation and attitudes have a strong relationship with second/foreign language learning. Motivation has medicinal effects upon the children while they learn a second language. It is considered the single most important factor in raising children with two languages. Without a good reason the effort required to learn a language is simply not worth making. Children need to be motivated to accept being spoken to in the minority language and to make the attempts to answer their parent(s) in that language. After all if learners are highly motivated, they will learn something in even the most difficult situation. And if they are not motivated, they probably won't learn much, even with lots of class time, small classes and excellent resources.

The more we can do about motivation, the more we can expect success in teaching a second language. If we study our society, we will find that more than ninety per cent Muslims can read the holy Qur'an though they do not understand the language, nor do they know how to speak or write it. It is the result of motivation. Since our childhood, we have learned and believed that Arabic is the language of the day of resurrection. Moreover, the Qur'an and the Hadith are revealed and recorded in Arabic. This single motivation has enabled many Muslims to learn Arabic or at least to read it.

We must promote children's self image as speakers of the minority language. 'A belief in oneself is a powerful tool. Children who are encouraged in their use of minority language and praised for their proficiency will quickly come to see themselves as speakers of that language. They may, of course, be disappointed when they realize that they are not actually indistinguishable from their monolingual peers, but they are much more likely to want to communicate in the minority language if they believe that they do it well'.¹³ In this situation a little bit of encouragement can take a child a long way.

We should work systematically with our children when teaching an extra language. When we notice that our children are not getting any help with their minority language in the community or in their school, we may want to try to support them in an academic way at home though some parents may find it difficult to set up a structured learning situation at home.

For pre-school children, we can provide them with a different, interesting early learning books which may help them in learning reading, writing, counting and colours in the minority language.

With children from age seven or eight we may work through the kinds of material the children usually use in their language work in a country where the minority language is spoken. To make the teaching more scientific we may contact teachers in our home country and ask what books they recommend. Books should be chosen carefully so that they may suit the children. Most children with two languages are not quite up to the level of their monolingual peers in the minority language. If we can get hold of books intended for home schooling, these might be suitable. Parents can spend a few hours regularly with their children when they do not have much homework or they have vacations.

If we follow the above-mentioned procedures with patience and perseverance, it is expected that the children will gradually develop their command over the minority language. Both the renowned linguists Palmer and Bloomfield agree, 'the starting point in acquiring a new language is lexical and not grammatical'.¹⁴

The methodology of working with the teenagers is quite different. It is noticed that as the children grow older, they may be less likely to want to speak the minority language. Pleasing a parent is, for many young people, no longer sufficient motivation for making an extra effort or being different. If the minority language is a school language, both people who have grown up with the language and their schoolmates may see the value of being proficient, although some may find that being better than the rest of the class is an embarrassment in itself. Besides that, the famous linguist Harold E. Palmer has distinguished between language learning in real life and learning in a classroom. 'Having noted the success of the former, particularly among infants ... he attributed the relative failure of the latter to a misunderstanding of the nature of the language learning process'.¹⁵

Because there is a difference between the spontaneous capacity of human beings to acquire language naturally and unconsciously on one hand, and the trained capacity of the classroom learner which allows him to organise his learning and apply his conscious knowledge to the task in hand, on the other.

When a child crosses its childhood, parents have to adopt different strategies to teach him/her the minority language. If young people are to develop their language further it will have to be through contact with other speakers of the language. The extreme method to do so is simply to uproot the family and move to another country. This places not only the children but also the parents in a situation where they will be exposed to and need to learn a second language. A less drastic method is to let the children attend an international school or kindergarten if such an option is available locally.

When other people are not available for the child to speak to, books, videos and satellite TV can be helpful. So the contacts a child may avail with another language may be of two kinds. Some of these contacts may be one way, e.g. through the printed media (newspapers, magazines, books etc.) or through electronic media (radio, TV programmes) in the minority language. Internet

websites may be used for reading newspaper and magazines. Satellite TV programmes in the minority language can help to a great extent. Random use of a minority language will enrich the skill of that language. If somebody is unwilling to practice it s/he might be motivated in the following manners.

There may be some ways to associate the desired career with the minority language. Suppose, one wants to take journalism as her/his profession. So, a second language will give him a scope to work in two markets. If, for example, a career in banking is the goal, knowledge of two languages and cultures is an asset. A prospective teacher can either teach in a country where the minority language is spoken or be a resource for the pupils with two languages in the majority language country. A young person who wishes to work in tourism or other service jobs will find the minority language useful sooner or later.

If someone may not find enough scope to exercise minority language out of his home, he may cultivate it at least at home. Regularly being addressed in the minority language will often be enough to ensure that the young person has a passive command of the language. This can relatively easily be turned into an active command when required, for example when there is communicative need for it, such as on a visit to a country where the minority language is spoken. If the language is not a part of the family's daily life, the children's knowledge of it will be difficult to maintain.

Proficiency in their two languages may vary among children and it depends on the circumstances of their childhood. It is possible for them as adults to improve their language skill though the proficiency may not equal that of someone who has mastered the language in infancy. A person having passive knowledge of a minority language may become an active speaker if he has to visit he country where the language is spoken. He may find that he knows much more of the language than he thought. A person with a scanty knowledge of the minority language may want to learn the language as an adult.

In some cases such adult learners might find that they can learn to speak the minority language easily and with good pronunciation. People who have equal mastery over both languages throughout their childhood and adolescence may be able to use their languages regularly at work or in their spare time. It is easy to let one of the languages to fall into disuse if opportunities to use it are not sought out. So, they should try to see below the surface and devote their effort and energy and ability in the language (in particularly their fluencies) by offering many wide ranging activities to practise.

Linguist Harold E. Palmer's principle of concreteness was a restatement of the direct method notion of giving examples rather than rules, and trying to teach a foreign language as far as possible through experience as opposed to intellectual discussion. A good method deliberately sets out to combine alternative strategies. Such as 'the most successful linguists have attained their proficiency by memorising sentences they could not analyze'.¹⁶

So, parents can maintain the following order of methods and expectations in mind in teaching their children a second language alongside their native language:

- i. Become proficient in recognising and in producing foreign sounds and tones, both isolated and in combination.
- ii. Memoreise (without analysis or synthesis) a large number of complete sentences chosen specifically for this purpose by the teacher or by the composer of the course.
- iii. Learn to build up all types of sentences (both regular and irregular) from 'working sentence units' chosen specifically for this purpose by the teacher or by the composer of the course.
- iv. Learn how to convert 'dictionary words' into 'working sentence units'.¹⁷

At the closing we want to suggest that parents should use their native language(s) to the child rather than deliberately trying to teach the child a particular language.

The three most common methods used by parents all over the world are:

- i. One parent one language (OPOL) – The parents speak different native languages and each speaks his/her own native language to their children.
- ii. Minority language at home – Also known as the foreign home pattern. Everyone speaks the minority language at home and the majority language outside. The minority language may be but does not have to be the native language of both parents.
- iii. Less common patterns – any pattern that works for your family is a good pattern of course. This is just a brief selection of all the possible patterns; the first person to speak chooses the language; one language is spoken everyday, the other on extended vacations to another country; one language is spoken everyday, the other on special occasions; the children attend school immersion programmes, etc.¹⁸

Whichever of these methods the parents choose, consistency is important. They should realize that the child would pick up the community language without being taught it. We also suggest that parents should be strict about establishing the non-community language as the language of the home. Let not the languages be switched. If one parent is not proficient in the foreign language it is best for that parent to stick to her/his native language. Parents may provide opportunities for the child to hear the non-community language, by, for example, getting a weekly playgroup together with other mothers/fathers and children who speak the language they are trying to teach their child. Children's TV programmes or VCD in the language can be effective although these are passive means of teaching, the kids can pick new vocabulary up from this. We can find the authenticity of this claim when we observe the multitude of Bangladeshi people who watch Hindi movies regularly can speak Hindi well enough.

Necessity and advantage of proficiency in two languages

J.L.M. Trim wrote in 1973, 'the major developments of the last thirty years have progressively weakened the self-sufficiency of national cultures, even in day to day living. Mass travel for business and pleasure over continental motorway networks and air routes, electronic media, mass movement of immigrant labour and at managerial level in multinational corporations, supranational economic, cultural and political institutions, interdependence of imports/exports in

an increasingly united market, all conspire to render hard national frontiers ... increasingly obsolete'.¹⁹

Today the world is more globalized. Communication is crucial. The soul of communication is the acknowledgement of the fact that language can help you reach out across geographic, cultural and religious borders. For, different languages are but varying manifestations of the same notions. To win the game we must first be able to think in other languages than our own and know what language really is.

Having access to a second language might be enough to build a career on, particularly if the language is less well known and not usually studied by speakers of other languages. In such a case, the young person with an excellent command of two languages may be in a strong position.

During the late 80s and early 90s, many Rohingya Muslims were driven out of their homeland, Myanmar, by ethnic extremists. These people spread out to various countries around Myanmar as refugees. At this time the United Nation took steps to rehabilitate them and provide them with the basic requirements of life as well as record their statements about their plight. To do this the UN needed people who spoke the Rohingya language and who also had a good knowledge of English so as to translate it for them. Since their native tongue is very close to the Chittagonian dialect (a local dialect of the Bangla language used by people living in the southeastern area of Bangladesh), a good knowledge of the Chittagonian dialect and English language became the means of a job opportunity in the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) offices in many countries for many Bangladeshis.

Apart from that, the knowledge of a second language gives one a sense of self-confidence. If the minority language is also a school language, the child can show exceptional performance in that particular subject and win the admiration of his fellow classmates and acclaim of his teachers. Besides, acquiring literacy in the minority language can open up a new world of literature and thereby language to a child. Knowledge of literature of another language opens up doors to the culture and society of another country:

In addition to stretching their minds intellectually, learning two languages allows children to stretch their understanding of people beyond their dominant culture. Being able to step into another culture through its language is like being able to live a second life. Although some bilingual children do not have a lot of exposure, the culture of their second language, the language itself conveys much of the culture of the people who speak that language. ... Bilingual children have some experience seeing how different cultures cause different people to interpret completely differently the exact same circumstances. e.g. seeing two different cultures internally helps bilingual children realize that much of what is considered universal human behaviour within a culture may be unique to that culture. This awareness and understanding of differences between people prepares children to reserve judgment when they see someone respond 'inappropriately' to a situation. Bilingual children not only better appreciate what is human versus what is cultural, but they are also more inclined to have a better appreciation of the language.²⁰

This may help them later on in life to adjust more easily if they wish to immigrate to or work in another country.

Problems encountered and suggestions for solution

Language learning is easier to children than to adults and ‘there are biological reasons why very few adults can learn to speak a new language with a native accent’.²¹ However, that should not stop us from acquiring valuable language skills at any age.

Children who are corrected overly often or teased for making mistakes in the minority language will be reluctant to speak it and will be unsure of their ability to communicate using that language. But children, who learn two languages in a loving, supportive environment, learn them both well.

Bilingual children need songs, bedtime stories and other linguistic stimulations just as monolingual children do, except that bilingual children need it in both their languages. This means extra demand on their parents’ time, both for stimulation and in order to acquire the necessary stimulants.

Books are an important resource. Reading or being read to is an extremely effective way to increase a child’s vocabulary and familiarity with the written language. A side effect is the widening of experience offered in books including a good deal of information about the culture in which the book is set. Children may be reluctant to read in the minority language even after they are technically able to do so. Our solution is to let the children listen to a taped reading of the book while they follow the text in the printed book.

Another tendency of parents may be to use only words they know their children understand when talking to them, meaning that the children do not often get a chance to learn a new word. If there are many unfamiliar words in the text, you may want to substitute some of them with words the children know, but an alternative is to use the word and explain it straightaway.

Sometimes in trying to teach a child a second language which is not the mother tongue of the parent, no matter how well you know the language, it can be difficult to talk to a tiny baby in that language, to sing and play and scold and comfort without the resources learned in their own childhood. This will certainly leave some deficiency in the vocabulary of the child as well. There may also be lapses in the vocabulary such as names of fruits, flowers, trees, animals, colours, food and so on. ‘In a language which is not completely mastered speakers do not have access to stylistic variation and nuances of meaning’.²²

Someone in this position may find it difficult to win an argument in his second language. It may not be possible to overcome this problem absolutely. But effort can help one to overcome almost any problem. After all, there is always the option of using another language for bilinguals!

It is particularly valuable for the child to meet other children who speak the minority language so that the child does not hear only adult language. A child who talks only to adults in the minority language may sound precocious and will miss a large part of the language. The ideal situation for children is to regularly meet monolingual speakers of the minority language so that there is no chance for them to slip into the majority language. If that is not possible, then there is the passive

source of TV and VCDs. Here we may choose to adopt a minority language only policy for videos or satellite TV programmes.

Bilingual parents often want their children to read and write, not just speak, both languages. Since the children will learn only one language in school, the parents have to find ways to teach the other – though they may need help with phonetics and spelling! If the languages use different writing systems, parents might consider special evening classes if they are available or teaching resources from the home country if it is practical.

Mastering a minority language may be just as difficult for children as it is for adults. Some people are of the opinion that for the youngest children, living with two languages ‘is primarily negative. Their initial attempts to analyse the stream of sound flowing around them into meaningful units are hindered by the sheer number of different words they hear. Later they need to learn two words for everything, and later still two systems of putting words together’.²³

It cannot be denied that children with two languages have more to learn than monolingual children; but with adequate support from parents, it is not difficult for children to acquire two languages with the same level of proficiency.

Children with two languages may use direct translation between their languages assuming, that a word which has a certain translation in one context will always have that translation. But in certain languages the same word can have various implications, which differ from one another widely. e.g. the word ‘bar’ in the English can mean a place where drinks are served, or a place where lawyers meet, or a hindrance.

When a lady asked Dr. Samuel Johnson, ‘what is the difference between a man and a woman?’, he replied, ‘I can’t conceive Madam, can you?’ Here he plays upon the word conceive which can mean ‘imagine’ or ‘bear children’. So, anyone thinking one word can mean only one thing can make grievous mistakes.

Another problem of learning languages in this process where languages are used only in certain circumstances or to certain people is that vocabulary in the two languages is learned unevenly. ‘Men and women use language differently; it is often in monolingual families who tries to encourage the children to moderate their language and avoid using slang and non-standard expressions, while the father introduces these expressions, perhaps particularly to his sons’.²⁴ Thus, whereas a girl may learn standard language from her mother, a boy learning the same language may seem feminine. On the contrary a boy learning a language from his father may seem adept, but a girl learning the language from her father may lack vocabulary to describe household chores in that language for example or may sound strangely masculine. For younger children, who are away from home for the first time at day-care or pre-school, parents may notice that the children lack word in the home language to tell about their day’s activities. There are often many gaps in these children’s vocabulary, not only in the home language but also in the majority language.

‘Some teenagers may feel that they have to choose between their two cultural allegiances. They need to know where they ‘belong’. They might orient themselves aggressively toward the majority language /culture in the country where they live’.²⁵

Children who feel accepted by both their cultures will identify with both. Unfortunately, it happens that two cultures have such unfriendly relations that a child, who should belong to both is, instead, shunned by both. This is not, however, a specifically bilingual issue.

Well-meaning relatives may be uncomfortable with the whole idea of bilingualism, and believe it will do the child more harm than good. This is especially true if they cannot see any practical benefits from knowing those two languages. A useful method for brushing off unwanted advice is to just listen politely and say ‘thank you for the advice, I will be sure to think about that!’ Then take the advice you think is sensible and useful, and forget the rest.

Conclusion

‘Language is perhaps the most specifically human of mankind’s faculties. In striving towards the understanding and knowledge of language, man has throughout his intellectual history been seeking more fully to attain self-knowledge’.²⁶

This is why books are the best gifts, education is the most valuable asset and wisdom is the worthiest inheritance parents should bestow upon their children. The more you can make bilingualism seem like a natural and unremarkable part of family life, the more likely it is that the children will grow up to enjoy being bilingual. In this globalized world, immigration and export of human resource have become very common phenomena across the world.

As a result, the acquisition of a second language has become a prime necessity for many people. We strongly believe the methodology, which has been discussed here will pave the way for learning a second language to those who cherish the hope of acquiring it. The obstacles and barriers in learning a second language mentioned in this paper will obviously guide and make cautious not only the second language learners but also the teachers or instructors. The prospects and advantages of a bilingual that have been pointed out here will certainly encourage people to acquire an extra language spontaneously.

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