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Parental Strategies for Developing Bilingualism in Children

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Every year thousands of LDS missionaries return home from foreign lands, marry and begin rearing their families. Additional thousands of church members move to areas where a language other than their mother tongue is spoken. These individuals, along with their spouses, are faced with the peculiar problem of deciding which language or languages they will use in interacting with their children.

Many of these parents would like their children to become bilingual but they fear that exposing them to two languages may have negative effects on their cognitive, linguistic, or social development. Other parents, especially those who speak the second language non-natively, are concerned about the unnatural relationship they might have with their children if they attempt to communicate with them exclusively in the second language.

Some couples have attempted to expose their children to a second language only to find that it is difficult to be consistently in the use of the second language. Others have been able to use the second language fairly consistently, but have become discouraged when their children reached a certain age and peer influence became so overwhelming that their children stopped speaking the second language with them.

In this paper I shall examine the validity of these parents' concerns regarding the possible negative effects of exposing their children to a second language in early childhood. Then I shall discuss several different strategies parents have used to develop bilingualism in their children and shall review the relative effectiveness of each.

Bilingualism and Cognitive Development

The relationship between bilingualism and intelligence has long been a concern to students of bilingualism. Studies investigating this relationship date back to the early part of this century and extensive reviews of the literature have been written by a number of authors including Peal and Lambert (1962), Arsenian (1937), Darcy (1953) and Macnamara (1966).

Early studies tended to find that bilingualism correlated negatively
with intelligence as measured in a variety of ways and in a variety of contexts. Bilinguals were generally observed to perform more poorly than monolinguals on tests measuring verbal intelligence, while performing on a par with them on tests of non-verbal IQ. More recent investigators have identified methodological defects in those earlier studies which render their results questionable.

In the early 1960's Peal and Lambert (1962) began a study to investigate the monolingual-bilingual problem in a Canadian setting with expectations of finding bilingual deficits as the literature suggested, but instead they found that bilingualism may favorably affect intelligence. Specifically they found that English-French bilinguals had significantly higher non-verbal and verbal IQ scores than did monolinguals matched for socioeconomic background. An important follow-up study by Ainsfeld (1964) with the same group of subjects confirmed these results.

Since the early 1960's a number of carefully controlled studies from around the world have confirmed the Peal-Lambert conclusions. Balkan (1970), in a major study in Switzerland, tested bilinguals and monolinguals aged 11-16, who were matched for performance on a general intelligence test and matched for socioeconomic status. His bilinguals scored significantly higher than the monolinguals on tests of numerical aptitude, verbal flexibility, perceptual flexibility and general reasoning. He concluded that bilingualism was probably responsible for the bilingual children's demonstrated superior abilities in certain abstract skills even though they were matched with the monolinguals on measures of general intelligence.

Ben-Zeev (1972), studying Hebrew-English bilinguals aged 5-8 in New York and Israel, investigated a hypothesis derived from Piaget's theory of cognitive development. She proposed that bilingual children undergo certain intellectual conflicts earlier than monolinguals, and in the process of resolving these conflicts, develop higher levels of intellectual development earlier. Her hypothesis was supported by findings that bilinguals showed earlier development of abstract operational thinking and superior cognitive flexibility.

Ianco-Worrall (1972), in a study involving 4-6 year old English-Afrikaans bilinguals, found that bilinguals came to a realization of the arbitrary nature of name-object relationships 2 to 3 years earlier than monolinguals. This ability has been frequently mentioned in the literature as being important to the intellectual development of children.

Another recent study by Scott (1977) of French-English bilinguals in Montreal offers some of the most conclusive evidence to date of the positive effects of bilingualism on cognition. Subjects were all monolingual English-speaking participants in a French immersion program matched for IQ and socio-economic background with monolingual French and monolingual English-speaking controls. Data was collected over a period of seven years. Bilinguals scored significantly higher
on tests of divergent thinking than did their monolingual counterparts.

The studies cited in this review offer strong support for the hypothesis that bilingualism has a positive effect on cognitive functioning. There are no recent studies in the literature which suggest the contrary. It would seem, therefore, that the concern of parents that fostering bilingualism in their children might have negative repercussions on their cognitive development is unjustified. On the contrary, if children achieve a sufficient degree of proficiency in two languages, parents might expect this to result in improved cognitive functioning.

Bilingualism and Social Development

In recent years there has been a growing concern on the part of parents and educators regarding the effects of bilingualism on self concept and personality development. This is particularly true in societies where the children's native language and culture lack prestige. Most early views regarded these effects as primarily negative. The bilingual's personality was believed to be "... characterized by conflict of values, identities and cultural outlooks" (Segalowitz, 1977).

While this view may have been partially true of linguistic minority children in societies where their native language and culture suffered from low prestige, there is no evidence that such effects are attributable to bilingualism per se. As a matter of fact, the little research available that has been conducted on personality and social adjustment among bilinguals whose native language and culture are not subordinate, indicates no such negative effects.

Aellen and Lambert (1969), for example, examined the effects of mixed French-English parentage on the personality and social adjustment of children. Using semantic differential questionnaires administered to children of monolingual French, monolingual English and mixed French-English parentage, they found that the children of mixed parentage were not significantly different from the other two groups on variables of ethnic identification, identification with parents, self esteem and stability.

More recently Genesee, Tucker and Lambert (1975) conducted a study examining the effects of bilingual schooling on social skills. The Subjects were three groups of English-speaking children in grades k, 1, and 2. Group one attended a unilingual English school, group two participated in a partial immersion program in French, and group three was in a total immersion program in French. Subjects were required to explain how to play a game to two different listeners, one blindfolded and the other not blindfolded.

There were no significant differences in the number of rules mentioned
by monolinguals and bilinguals to each listener. The two immersion groups mentioned more about materials of the game to the blindfolded group than to the seeing listeners, while the monolinguals did not. Genesee, et al., interpreted this as evidence to support the hypothesis that children educated in a second language would be more sensitive to the communication needs of listeners than children educated in their native language.

It appears, then, that bilingualism per se is not likely to have negative effects on children's personality and social development. Being a member of a minority culture, immersed in a majority cultural environment may create problems in social adjustment for a child, particularly if the minority culture is socially subordinate, but such problems have not been observed in children from the majority culture who learn minority languages.

**Bilingualism and Linguistic Development**

Perhaps the greatest concern of bilingual parents regarding the fostering of bilingualism in their children has been with linguistic development. It is almost a universally accepted fact among working class linguistic minorities that learning the vernacular of the parents will interfere with the normal linguistic development of the child in the majority language. It is common practice in the Southwest, for example, for parents who speak little or no English to prohibit their children from speaking Spanish at home. Likewise, in Paraguay, Guarani-speaking parents often punish their children for speaking Guarani at home. The assumption in both cases seems to be that the child cannot adequately learn both languages and thus to learn the minority language will put the child at a disadvantage in the majority language school system. While it is wise on the part of parents to be concerned about their children's learning of the majority language, such punishment can have negative effects on their children's cognitive and linguistic development as well as on their socio-emotional well being.

Early researchers on the effects of bilingualism on language development suggested that bilingual children typically did not control either of their languages as well as unilinguals did. Macnamara (1966), in a monumental study of bilingualism in Ireland, for example, found that Irish-English bilinguals performed more poorly in English than did monolingual English speakers, and more poorly in Irish than the monolingual Irish speakers. Unfortunately his study, as many of the other early studies, failed to control for the socio-economic background and degree of bilingualism of the children.

More recently, research has shown that in some particulars bilinguals do perform more poorly than unilinguals on measures of language development. In other areas, however, they seem to surpass their monolingual counterparts. Taylor (1974), for example, hypothesized that children exposed to two languages from infancy would acquire
their first words at the same age as monolinguals, but that their vocabulary growth would take place more slowly. His rationale was that due to the difficulty of discriminating the conditions under which one label occurs rather than the other, the bilinguals would experience greater difficulty in acquiring the higher order concept that "all concepts have labels."

A number of research studies have confirmed his predictions regarding the onset of first words and the slower vocabulary development in bilinguals. Doyle, Champagne and Segalowitz (1978) examined the effects of the one parent:one language strategy on the bilingual development of children in Canada and found that Taylor's predictions were supported by the data, but in addition they found that the bilinguals scored significantly higher on a measure of expressive language. In syntactic development, the bilinguals tended to do less well, but the differences were not significant.

Ben-Zeev (1977), in another study of Hebrew-English bilinguals, aged 5;4 to 8;6 in the United States and Israel, found that the bilinguals scored significantly lower on a measure of English vocabulary, but they demonstrated "more advanced processing of verbal material, more discriminating perceptual distinctions, more propensity to search for structure in perceptual situations and more capacity to reorganize their perceptions in response to feedback" (p. 1109). In a similar study reported earlier, Ben-Zeev (1972) found no significant differences between bilinguals and unilinguals in their ability to analyze syntax.

While Taylor's predictions regarding retarded vocabulary development in bilinguals were confirmed by these studies, his explanation of these phenomena may be in error. In both of the studies cited above, vocabulary development was measured with the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. Bilinguals' performance on the test was measured separately for the different languages. No attempt was made to examine items which may have been known in one language but not in the other. Ben-Zeev (1977) noted that "bilinguals usually have to learn two different labels for any given referent, one from each language. Therefore any particular label from one language or the other had occurred with less frequency in his experience and is less well learned." If the investigator had examined the number of different items recognized by the bilinguals in both their languages, the bilinguals might have known as many items as the monolinguals.

Whatever the situation with vocabulary development, bilinguals have not been shown to develop more slowly than monolinguals in any other area of language. As was mentioned earlier, the Doyle, et al. study showed no significant differences in syntactic development between the two groups. Likewise Ben-Zeev (1972) found no significant difference between monolinguals and bilinguals in their ability to analyze syntax.

It seems, therefore, that parents' concerns about retarding their
children's linguistic development in the majority language by promoting their development of a second language is ill founded.

PARENTAL STRATEGIES

In a recent article on parental strategies for language interaction in bilingual families, Schmidt-Mackey (1977) identifies four different patterns of interaction: 1) strategies of person in which each interlocutor in the child's environment always addresses the child in the same language, 2) strategies of place in which a particular language is always spoken in a particular environment or environments, 3) strategies of time, topic, and/or activity wherein boundaries for the use of each language are set in terms of time, the particular topic being discussed, or the activities in which the speakers are engaged, and 4) strategies of alternation in which speakers use two or more languages concurrently.

Strategies of Person

By far the most common interaction pattern reported in the literature is the so-called one person:one language pattern. This pattern obtains in all situations where a child is obliged to interact with two different monolingual speech communities or where bilinguals consciously choose to restrict their interaction with the child to a particular language.

The prevalence of this pattern is probably due in large part to the feeling among many educated people that language mixing or code switching is undesirable and to be avoided. In a study of bilingualism in children, Doyle, et al. (1978) found that there was a high correlation between the use of the one person:one language strategy and the education of the parents.

The earliest mention of this strategy in the literature was made by Ronjat, who published a study in 1913 of his son, Louis', bilingual development in German and French. Upon the recommendation of Maurice Grammont, Ronjat spoke to the child only in French while his wife spoke to him only in German. Maternal grandparents, who often stayed with the Ronjats, spoke to Louis only in German, while paternal grandparents spoke to him in French. Servants, maids and cooks, who were replaced periodically, at times spoke German and at other times, French. Frequent trips were made to the country and to visit relatives where Louis was exposed to many different people, some of whom spoke only German, others only French, and others presumably both. Little mention is made of the children in Louis' environment, with the exception of one little girl who apparently was bilingual also. Louis met her when he was about two and a half years of age, and they spoke French together at first. Later they would speak German together or sing in German to attract the attention of passersby. Later they spoke together almost exclusively in German,
except when other children were present who didn't speak German.

During the first two years of Louis' life, he spoke more German than French. This was apparently due to the fact that his father was the only French speaker with whom he had consistent interaction and his father was presumably at work much of the time (Ronjat, 1912, p. 5).

After about 20 months of age, however, Louis began being exposed to a great deal more French through visits to French-speaking relatives, visits to Paris, and through contact with newly hired French-speaking caretakers. After the age of two, his dominance began to change and by age three, French was his stronger language.

Although few details are given of Louis' linguistic development during his fourth and fifth years, there were apparently additional switches in dominance caused by changes in his environment.

Louis attended primary and secondary schools in French, and thus eventually became dominant in French in academic and technical vocabulary, but continued to prefer German literature (Schmidt-Mackay, 1977).

Ronjat attributed the success of his child's bilingual development to the strict one person:one language strategy employed by him, his wife, the grandparents, servants and friends. There seemed to have been other important factors involved, however. First of all, there were apparently numerous bilingual people in Louis' environment, even some children. Likewise the frequent visits made by Louis and his mother to relatives who spoke one language or the other undoubtedly influenced his development. Also the fact that at least one child with whom he had frequent contact spoke both languages cannot be dismissed as an important factor.

The next in-depth case study of a child's bilingual development via the one person:one language strategy was begun in the United States about three decades after that of Ronjat. In this case, Leopold (1939) spoke to his daughter (Hildegard) only in German, while his wife spoke to her only in English. Leopold makes little mention of the other people in Hildegard's world except to say that he was the lone speaker of German (Leopold, 1954).

During the first two years of her life, Hildegard's linguistic development was characterized as an amalgamation of the two linguistic systems. By the end of the second year, her English had begun to dominate. During her third year, her English sentence patterns progressed with "astonishing rapidity" while her German syntax was "stagnant" (1954, pp. 26, 27). By the end of her fourth year her language was decidedly English with occasional intrusions of German words. She spoke English to her father even though he addressed her in German.

At the end of her fifth year, the Leopolds moved to Germany for six
months. For the first month Hildegard was left alone with German speakers. During that time she became "completely fluent" in German and her English receded. She was "unable to say more than a few very simple English sentences after these four weeks" (1954, p. 27). By the end of six months, she had straightened out most of her problems with German pronunciation and syntax.

Upon her return to the United States, the adjustment process was reversed. At first she was unable to say more than a few words in English. After a few days she could converse, and after two weeks she had regained fluency in English with some interference from German.

After a month, English and German were "in balance," and after four months she had difficulty speaking German. By the end of six months, she had overcome her reaction to the new linguistic environment and had begun to speak both languages fluently. During her seventh year, her bilingualism became more complete, but English continued to develop as her dominant language.

Leopold observed that the natural tendency for both children and adults is to operate with one language system unless bilingualism is cultivated with effort (1954, p. 30).

This observation, I think, reflects the experience of many parents who have not been as fortunate as the Leopolds in cultivating bilingualism in their children. While the one person:one language strategy may help motivate children somewhat during their early years and perhaps again in later years, there seems to be a period of time during which the influence of peers is overwhelming (James, 1981). It is apparent from Leopold's study that the six-month stay in Germany had a tremendous impact on Hildegard's bilingual development. As a matter of fact, Leopold's younger daughter, Karla, whom he also observed in much less detail over a period of several years, never developed fluency in German, even though he spoke to her in German as he did with Hildegard.

Another interesting case study in which the one person:one language strategy was employed is that of Fantini (1974). Both Fantini, whose first languages were English and Italian, and his wife, whose native language was Spanish, spoke to their son, Mario, exclusively in Spanish. They also insisted on speaking Spanish at home with their bilingual friends. In addition, the Fantinis had monolingual Spanish-speaking nursemaids living with them for much of Mario's early life. Thus, the language of the home was almost exclusively Spanish.

Mario's paternal grandparents spoke English and Italian and his first exposure to English came through visits from them. During the early part of his third year, Mario began attending an English-speaking nursery school where, for the first time in his life, he had no access to Spanish speakers for a large portion of the day. For most of his third year, he attended various preschool programs where he was exposed to English for a large portion of each day. During his fourth
and fifth years he spent only about six months total attending preschool and kindergarten. The remainder of the time was spent at home or on extended visits to Mexico and Bolivia. At the age of six, when Mario began the first grade, his dominant language was definitely Spanish, but he was fluent in English.

Fantini makes a point of the fact that a consistent separation of languages was maintained throughout Mario's early development; Spanish was consistently spoken with parents, maternal grandparents, Spanish-speaking friends and maids, while English was spoken with paternal grandparents, schoolmates, and English-speaking friends. Fantini makes no mention of any conflict in Mario's choice of language due to peer influence, except to say that when he began nursery school, he sometimes attempted to use English words at home. On such occasions his mother insisted that he use Spanish. This relative lack of peer influence must be due in part to his frequent trips to Spanish-speaking areas, as well as to his continued interaction with monolingual Spanish-speaking individuals in a monolingual English-speaking community.

As can be seen from the foregoing examples, the one person:one language strategy by itself does not produce bilinguals with equal proficiency in both languages. Typically, children develop both languages until about two and a half or three years of age (or the age at which they begin to have extended social contact with children their own age) and then they begin to exhibit a preference for the language of their peers. At that point, if the other language is to continue to develop normally, additional influences appear to be necessary.

The strengths of the one person:one language strategy lie in two areas: 1) it exerts a certain amount of pressure on the child to interact in both languages, especially until the child finds out that the parent with whom he or she is interacting understands the other language; and 2) it is relatively easy to maintain a consistent pattern of exposing the child to a particular language.

The single greatest difficulty with the strategy seems to be the influence of the peer speech community on the child's willingness to continue to interact with his parent in another language, particularly where the child knows that the parent can also speak the language of his peers. While this phenomenon has not been carefully studied, it appears to have presented a barrier to bilingual development in most of the diary studies.

Strategies of Place

There are two different interpretations given to the notion of strategies of place. Both of these overlap considerably with the strategies of person. One involves physically moving to an area where a second language is spoken while maintaining the original home
language, or it involves sending the child to a school or other location where the second language is spoken. In this strategy, the one person:one language is maintained, but often outside the immediate family environment. The Fantini study is an example of this overlap.

Typically the family is immersed in a second language environment and both parents speak to the child in the language of their former place of residence.

There are numerous studies of this interaction pattern in the literature (Kenyerés, 1938; Valette, 1969; Chamot, 1973; Tits, 1948; and Burling, 1959). One of the most detailed of these is that of the Kenyerés (1938), who studied the bilingual development of their daughter Eva in French and Hungarian. Born in Budapest, Eva spoke only Hungarian until her family moved to Geneva when she was seven. Her initial reaction upon arriving there was one of rejection of French. After six months, however, French became her dominant language and she began to resist speaking to her parents in Hungarian. Upon her return to Hungary at the age of nine, Eva went through an adjustment period similar to that which she had experienced earlier. Within a few months, however, Hungarian began to dominate and she only spoke French with her parents.

The strength of this strategy lies in the fact that parents are able to take advantage of peer influence and the environment to assist the child in the development of the second language. Unless the family is able to move back and forth between the two environments until the child has reached adolescence, however, the parents run the risk of having the child not maintain the first language. A major disadvantage, of course, is the fact that most families cannot move abroad whenever they wish.

Many parents who are unable to move to an area where a second language is spoken choose to send their children to a school where the second language is the medium of communication. Examples of this strategy are abundant. Most countries of the world have private schools where children of the wealthy are sent to be educated from infancy or adolescence in a second language (Fishman, 1976). These schools often serve the children of foreign service personnel from the countries in whose language they are conducted. Also in many countries long-term residents of foreign descent (particularly Jewish) have established schools where their children can acquire or maintain the language of their forefathers (Fishman, 1976; Spolsky, 1978).

In recent years, a number of "total immersion" programs have been established in the public schools in Canada and the United States where children are educated in a second language. One of the earliest of these was studied by Peal and Lambert (1962). Children of English-speaking parents were sent to a school where bilingual teachers spoke to them entirely in French. Results showed that the children acquired fluent, but not native-like, French without suffering any loss of achievement in academic areas.
The most successful of these public and private school programs with regard to language achievement are those in which children acquiring a second language interact with children who speak that language natively.

One obvious advantage of the immersion school program approach is that the parents do not have to be fluent in the second language. Also the fact that their children are socializing with peers in the second language provides added incentive for rapid language development.

A principal disadvantage, of course, is that such programs are not always readily available and when they are available, they are often expensive.

**Strategies of Time, Topic and Activity**

There are no case studies in the literature of parents employing strategies of time, topic or activity at home. These strategies seem to be limited to school programs. There are numerous bilingual school programs where the particular language used is determined by the subjects to be taught or time periods assigned to that language. The Dade County bilingual program for Cuban refugees is an example of this approach (Mackey, 1977). Children were taught for half a day in Spanish and the other half of the day in English. This approach has been shown to be quite effective when consistently maintained.

Informally, several people have reported to me having attempted to utilize this strategy in their homes. My own family attempted to employ it for a period of time. We established a rule of speaking Spanish every day from the time we got up until I left for work and the older children left for school.

The greatest problems with this strategy are consistency and motivation. It is difficult to always remember to speak the appropriate language during the predetermined time, and it is difficult to keep the children motivated to go along with the arbitrarily imposed rule.

**Strategies of Alternation**

The most controversial strategy identified by Schmidt-Mackey is that involving the alternate use of two or more languages. The major objection to this strategy seems to be that it makes it difficult or impossible for the child to identify the separate codes and thus results in language mixing.

It has long been believed that the alternate use of two languages with children not only resulted in language mixing but that it retarded linguistic and cognitive development and confused the child. Two
recent studies have compared the development of bilingual children whose parents spoke to them alternately in two languages with that of parents who maintained a strict one person:one language pattern. In the first study, Bain (1976) examined the cognitive development of 48 children aged 22-24 months, 15 of whom had experienced the one person:one language interaction pattern, 17 had experienced the indiscriminate use of two languages, and 16 were unilingual. Although the data indicated a trend in favor of the one person:one language group, as compared with the other two, differences were not significant. In a similar study, Doyle et al. (1978), examining the effects of this strategy on vocabulary development, found "no suggestion in the data that complexity of conditions under which the two languages occur affects ability to learn lexical items."

While these studies must be interpreted cautiously, they suggest that the current use of two languages in interaction with children does not affect adversely their cognitive and linguistic development.

It would seem, however, that the alternate use of two languages would compound the social and psychological problems of motivating the child to use a second language not used by his peers.

Summary

In summary, then, becoming bilingual at an early age does not appear to have negative consequences for intellectual, linguistic nor social development. Strategies of person and place seem to have some practical advantages over time, topic and activity in that consistency appears to be more easily maintained and the impetus for overcoming language suppression due to peer influence seem to be greater.

REFERENCES


