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## LANGUAGE STRATEGIES IN BILINGUAL FAMILIES

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**Abstract.** The number of parents and children confronting bilingualism issues grows as the number of multinational marriages and immigrant households grows. As a result, some authors underline the importance of additional research on techniques to foster bilingualism in families. This article sought to address some of the challenges in bilingual children's early education by offering various methods of family language policy (FLP) in bilingual homes. After examining different linguistic strategy approaches to parenting a child in a bilingual household, we may conclude that how parents and children deal with the obstacles of bilingualism ultimately depends on them. However, experts agree that whatever policy is adopted, the most important thing is consistency in following the rules of the linguistic method. Furthermore, these rules should be natural and suitable for the parents and in line with their living situation.

**Keywords:** bilingual families, one person one language approach, mixed system approach, family language policy

### Introduction

Due to the increase in multinational marriages and immigrant families, there is a rise in the number of parents and children who are facing the challenges of bilingualism. Although much more is known today about the language development of bilingual children and the effects of different upbringing approaches of bilingual families, it seems that there is no final answer to the question of which approach is the best. Some authors (Wei, 2011) stress the need for bilingual family language strategies to be further explored. The aim of this article is to tackle some of the issues in the early education of bilingual children by presenting different approaches to Family Language Policy (FLP) in bilingual families.

### Bilingualism

Bilingualism is considered a complex phenomenon, influenced by multiple factors: age of second language acquisition, continuity of language exposure, the relative level of knowledge and use of each language, and the environment in which each language is acquired (Gottardo & Grant, 2008). Regardless of the complexity, in its simplest form bilingualism can be defined as "knowing two languages" (Valdés & Figueroa, 1994). Depending on the manner and age of acquiring a second language, we can divide bilingualism into two types: simultaneous and sequential bilingualism (Baker, 2011).

Simultaneous bilingualism is defined as the acquisition of two languages simultaneously, whereby both languages are introduced to the child before their first year of life (Baker, 2011). The main difference compared to monolingual development is that both languages are present at the same time and the child often merges them into one. Therefore, language blending can occur - using the base of a word from one language and adding a prefix or suffix from another. After some time, the child begins to differentiate the two languages and to use them as separate systems. The child generally associates each language with a specific person, group, or situation and learns to adapt the language to the environment,

constantly switching from one language to another (Barron-Hauwaert, 2004). Some of the proposed strategies for parenting in bilingual families are based on these observations, implying that for proper bilingual speech development, it is necessary that in the child's immediate environment there are clear rules as to which language is used in which situations (Barron-Hauwaert, 2004). However, not all authors agree with that, claiming that even in families where members switch between languages several times during one conversation, the child can find regularities in switching and make a distinction between languages (Ruiz Martín, 2017).

In contrast to simultaneous, sequential bilingualism is defined as the acquisition of two languages in which the child begins to acquire the second language after the first year of his or her life. The acquisition of the first language is similar to that of monolingual children, with the focus being on acquiring the second language and managing any interference between the two languages. The following are some differences between acquiring a second language compared to first language acquisition (Baker, 2011):

a) the child can use knowledge and experience from the first language during second language acquisition.

b) how quickly the second language will be acquired depends on the child's temperament. A more social child will learn the phrases that are needed to interact with other people faster, simply because they will be involved in interactions more often, while a more withdrawn child will have a "silent phase", in other words, they do not communicate in groups of people who are using the language that is being acquired.

c) exposure to the second language compared to exposure to the first will have a significant impact on language acquisition.

### **Bilingual family**

Dickinson and Beals (1994) argue that the interaction between adults and their children has a direct effect on children's language development. Some authors even suggest that this interaction, in terms of providing an opportunity for children to take turns as active participants in conversational exchanges in a variety of contexts and responding and encouraging children's linguistic efforts, has a greater impact on successful language development and reducing the level of linguistic confusion (failure to differentiate the language systems), than parent/language distinction, often used as a method to avoid the confusion (Goodz, 1994).

It can be challenging to determine the best approach to raising a bilingual child due to various factors that influence language development, particularly the social environment, including family, which plays a crucial role. When defining a bilingual family, one should take into account the language the mother is using as well as the language used by the father, language used by other members of the immediate and extended family, the influence of the environment and the dominant culture on the family itself, whether the languages used in the family are minority or majority languages, whether these languages are supported in the social community, the attitudes of the family members towards each of the languages and whether the family is geographically stable or often moves, changing the needs for other languages.

Depending on the language used by parents and the language used in the country of residence, Hoffman (2014) divides bilingual families into four types. The first type consists of parents who speak different native languages one of which is the language of the country in which they live. The second type is the parents who speak different native languages but neither of the languages is spoken in the country in which they live. The third type is parents who share a native language that is not the language spoken in the country in which they live. Finally, the last type is parents who speak the same language, which is the national language. In this case, a second language that bilingual child is acquiring comes from the sole decision of parents to teach their child another language from a young age or an educational system that forces learning a second language from a young age.

## Language strategies

The Family Language Policy (FLP) states that the way children learn and use language depends on their parents' beliefs, choices, and methods regarding languages and literacy. It also takes into account the wider social and cultural context of family life. (King & Fogle, 2013). According to Spolsky (2004), FLP consists of three basic components: language management, language strategies, and language ideologies. Therefore, to study the dynamic structure of FLP amongst bilingual families, besides examining the influence of these 3 components on the wider social environment, it is necessary to examine how language strategies are implemented in language interactions between family members and how this shapes the development of bilingualism.

We can define language strategies as patterns of language use within the family, through which family members realize, negotiate, and modify their FLP in face-to-face communication (Andritsou & Chatzidimou, 2020). There are different types of language strategies depending on the patterns of use of the language inside a bilingual family (Ruiz Martín, 2017):

- **One Person, One Language (OPOL):** where each parent speaks a different language with the child.
- **Mixed Language Policy (MLP):** where both parents speak both languages with the children in the same conversations, sometimes even in the same sentences.
- **Mixed System 1 (MS1):** the minority language-speaking parent generally speaks the minority language, and the majority language-speaking parent uses both languages with the children.
- **Mixed System 2 (MS2):** the majority language-speaking parent generally uses the majority language, and the minority language-speaking parent uses both languages with the children.
- **Minority Language at Home:** both parents generally speak the minority language with the children, who are learning the majority language outside the home.

The first and best-known strategy is the **One Person, One Language (OPOL)** approach (Barron-Hauwaert, 2004). The biggest advantages of this approach are that the child is learning two languages from birth (simultaneous bilingualism) and the fear of mixing two languages is reduced as each parent becomes an equally good language model for the child. According to Brettenny and de Klerk (2008), this seems to be the most effective strategy, and there seems to be a sufficient amount of experimental evidence to support this.

There have been several case studies that have demonstrated the benefits of the One Parent One Language (OPOL) approach (Grosjean, 1982; Leopold, 1970), which have contributed to its popularity to the present day (Banasiak, 2019). Still, some possible downsides of this approach need to be mentioned. First, it can be difficult for children to have equally balanced experiences with both languages. The language that the parents speak among themselves, the language that the child uses to communicate with sisters and brothers, other family members, as well as the language of the community in which the child grows up, influence the child which cannot be controlled.

Also, the task of balancing languages and respecting the rules of using each can be very tiring for parents, which can affect the dynamics within the family. According to this approach, parents should try to be as consistent as possible (Barron-Hauwaert, 2004). However, studies done in Flanders (De Houwer, 2007) and Japan (Yamamoto, 2001), showed that strict use of OPOL was rare. Rather, the two most common patterns of language use reported in bilingual families were mixed language policy (both parents addressed their children in both languages) and mixed system (one parent addressed children in only one language while the other parent addressed children in both languages) (Palviainen & Boyd, 2013).

**A mixed-language policy** seems to be a much more prevalent language strategy than expected. Although language confusion is a possibility, new evidence suggests it is a normal part of language development (Guiberson, 2013) and does not lead to permanent problems with language blending and mixing. Such children often change the language they are using when talking with other bilinguals like themselves, but this does not happen when

communicating with monolinguals. OPOL families regularly shift to this model when children have satisfactorily mastered languages and switch them depending on the context of interactions and/or the topic of discussion with their parents (Andritsou & Chatzidimou, 2020). It appears that regardless of the language strategy adopted by most families, they tend to end up using a mixed language approach, which is often initiated by the children themselves (Banasiak, 2019). However, this should not discourage parents from sticking to their language policy. In fact, it should be seen as a positive sign that the child is developing both languages effectively. In the end, when the family has been using some other, more structured model for some time, this strategy can be a good next step.

**Mixed System (MS)** is a bilingual family language strategy defined as a mixture of one-person- one- language and minority language at home strategies (Noguchi, 1996), which means that one parent uses only the minority language and the other parent uses both the majority and the minority language with their children (Mixed System 1), or that one parent speaks only the majority language and the other parent speaks both the minority and the majority language (Mixed System 2) (Ruiz Martín, 2017). Research in this domain showed that there are many important aspects to take into account when opting for either of the two Mixed System approaches. Majority-language parents interested in using the Mixed System at home should have a good command of the minority language as they need to communicate with their children in both languages (Ruiz Martín, 2017). Exposure to and need for a minority language seems to be the key factor (Thordardottir, 2011) when opting for this approach. Parents must therefore decide how to provide both quality and quantity of language exposure (especially to minority languages), primarily through social interaction, based on their language proficiency and language preferences, as well as the community in which they live.

De Houwer (2007) conducted a study that found that 93% of families where parents spoke to each other in a minority language had children who were able to speak two languages. In contrast, only 36% of families where parents spoke to each other in the majority language had children who were able to speak in two languages, suggesting that mixed system 1 is a better option when it comes to promoting and sustaining minority languages among children in the household. Vitale (2011) also confirmed that the language used by parents between themselves plays a crucial role in determining the level of minority language used by their children.

The **Minority Language at Home** strategy is commonly used by parents who speak a minority language in their social community. This strategy involves using the minority language at home while the child learns the language of the community outside of the home. (De Houwer, 2016). Bilingual settings involving a minority and a majority language can form a hierarchical relationship that frequently leads to societal conflicts (Darquennes, 2013). Such conflicts can also occur within families, influencing parental language attitudes and language choices (Anderson, 2002; De Houwer, 2015). For example, parents may feel compelled to speak a majority language to their children. Problems that often arise as a result of this approach are insufficient knowledge of a majority language when starting school, which hinders the child's attendance and progress, as well as socialization with peers. Schwartz (2008) emphasized the positive impact of family literacy practices on the academic performance of children in minority languages. Some of the literacy activities that can enrich the home literacy environment in relation to home languages include parent-child shared reading, child-independent reading, explicit language learning during parent-child shared reading, parental supervision during writing activities in the minority language, and literacy practices that incorporate cultural content. Additionally, parental involvement in creative language activities and children's active reading in the minority language were linked to an extended vocabulary knowledge.

After examining all of the listed language strategies, we can conclude that the OPOL strategy appears to be the most successful one, which is why most bilingual families choose it. However, it is also the most structured one, and many families struggle to follow it completely, which often leads them to switch to a mixed language policy or mixed system policies. Mixed language policy has had a bad reputation for a long time due to the risk of

language confusion. However, new evidence suggests that it is a normal part of language development and nothing to be afraid of. This makes this language strategy more appealing for its naturalness in family dynamics. When considering a mixed system approach for raising a bilingual child, it is important to note that this strategy works best when both parents are proficient in the languages being taught. The language spoken between parents will have a significant impact on which language the child will excel in. Therefore, if the goal is to maintain a minority language, it is recommended that parents speak that language with their child. Regarding the Minority Language at Home strategy, which emphasizes learning the minority language within the family, the biggest challenge arises when children start school without sufficient knowledge of the majority language.

In the end, it is important to emphasize the influence of other agents that play an important role in the early bilingual development of speech, such as friends, neighbors, mass media, and kindergartens... that should also be taken into account. It is important to keep in mind that children are not passive recipients of the Family Language Policy (FLP) imposed on them. Instead, they actively participate in the process and can influence the linguistic and cultural practices of their family members. This is particularly evident in cases where: (a) immigrant families are involved, and children are socialized into the dominant community, acquiring a higher level of proficiency in the new language than their parents; (b) immigrant parents adapt their language use to meet their children's new needs; or (c) parents practice their skills in the dominant language at home or while supervising their children's school assessments (Luykx, 2005).

One thing most researchers in this field can agree on is that lack of consistency in the implementation of language strategy is a major reason for less-than-optimal outcomes in children's language development (King & Fogle, 2013) which can be taken as a take-home message for parents.

## Conclusion

After analyzing different language strategy approaches to raising a child in a bilingual environment, we can conclude that in the end, it is mostly up to the parents and the children themselves and how they will cope with the challenges posed by bilingualism. However, experts can agree on several points that parents should keep in mind. For example, consistency in the rules of use of each of the language strategies is advised. But also, those rules should be natural and suitable for parents. This means that parents should not force an approach that is not in their lifestyle and acquired competencies. If a parent wants to teach the child a language in which he or she is not competent enough (first-generation immigrants), the parent should be aware that a lot of effort and dedication is needed to provide the child with a good language model (Ruiz Martín, 2017). They should build the child's communication skills by maintaining communication with the child in such a way that they constantly demonstrate grammar and vocabulary at a level slightly above that of the child. Using music, songs, recitations, and language-based games can increase a child's motivation to learn a language and help them understand the culture associated with it. (Barron-Hauwaert, 2004). Finally, while forcing a child to demonstrate the knowledge of a second language in society is potentially counter-productive as it can cause shame and a feeling of not belonging, rewarding and praising spontaneous language use is useful for improving the child's "language ego".

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