



# Issues in Bilingualism

ESL PRO SYSTEMS



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# I. The Benefits of Bilingualism

**Why bother learning a second language? Here's why:**

If you are bilingual, you will be able to:

- speak, read, and write in two languages
- be open-minded to other cultures
- actively seek multicultural friendships
- form stronger problem-solving skills
- have enhanced cognitive development
- express greater creativity: “think outside the box”
- easily learn a third and fourth language
- embrace differences in people

## ➤ **What exactly is bilingualism?**

Definition 1: The use of more than one language.

Definition 2: The ability to communicate naturally and fluently in more than one language in all areas of life.

Between these definitions lie worlds. Somewhere in between we want to see our children. And as we know that life means learning in our constantly changing world, we understand that bilingualism is a process, not a result.

The basic principle of bilingual education in the USA is to use the student's native language to teach academic content while providing additional English language instruction at the same time. In this way, limited English proficiency students can learn English and still keep pace with native English-speaking students of the same grade level. The goal is to combine equal access and excellence in learning for all students.

All good teaching uses the learning tools students already have as the basis for building new skills and acquiring new knowledge. Most children enter school with basic language skills, in English or other languages, already in place; it is up to qualified teachers to use those skills to help them develop the academic skills they need to succeed in life. Children learn more effectively if they learn English through the use of their native language, which provides a contextual basis for learning and allows them to keep pace with their peer group while acquiring the language they will need to learn in order to interact effectively in today's society.

There are several other benefits to the use of bilingual education, in addition to its basic effectiveness. First, it preserves children's sense of pride in the

language of their parents, allowing them to move freely in an English-language dominant society while retaining an important link to their cultural and linguistic heritage. It helps protect their sense of identity, which is also strongly linked to the language and culture of their family and heritage. Today, there are also economic advantages in bilingual fluency and literacy; many jobs pay higher salaries to their bilingual employees. In an increasingly global society, the ability to speak and write in several languages is becoming necessary to effectively compete in the job market.

## Summary

Most researchers agree that bilingual learners develop more skills in cognitive areas. This might explain why these students usually achieve better scores in verbal intelligence, conceptualization, global thinking and the discovery of original approaches to problem solving. The bilingual learner is also able to approach language learning with an advantageous distance from language mechanics. In this way, the teaching makes sense for the learner, and he can see the immediate benefit to gaining this knowledge.

Research shows that the earlier a child begins to learn a second language, the better. This is partially due to the general abilities of younger children and the importance of stimulation at this stage. At a later age, auditory discrimination and the ability to imitate sounds begin to fade (thus, a first language accent will be retained), but fortunately it is possible to learn a second language at any age. Younger students tend to be less fearful of making mistakes and are more willing to go with the flow of communicating in another language.

## II. Common Myths About Bilingualism

Despite a considerable body of research on the nature of language, first and second language acquisition, and the roles of language in the schooling of language minorities, misconceptions about these topics remain. The following explores some persistent myths about bilingualism in general.

- *"Learning two languages confuses a child and lowers his intelligence."*

Old, poorly designed studies done primarily in the United States claimed to show that bilinguals had lower intelligence than monolinguals. Newer research has revealed several flaws in the studies. The most obvious flaw is that the bilingual children were recent immigrants, with poorer knowledge of English and more stressful life situations than their monolingual counterparts. Newer studies with more careful controls have shown that bilinguals are better at some specific tasks, such as language games, but that otherwise the differences between bilinguals and monolinguals are negligible.

- *"A child should learn one language properly first; then you can start teaching the other."*

As in the myth above, this is an old belief based on flawed research. Children who learn two languages in a loving, supportive environment learn them both well. Children who learn two languages in a stressful environment may have language development problems - but so will children learning only one language in that same sort of environment.

- *"A child who learns two languages won't feel at home in either of them. She'll always feel caught between two cultures."*

Relatives, friends and strangers will often caution about the "identity problems" children might develop if their parents insist on maintaining a bilingual home. The children, they believe, will grow up without strongly identifying with either of the languages and, therefore, the groups that speak them. Adults who have themselves grown up bilingual, however, generally report when asked that they never had problems knowing what groups they were a part of. Some even find this concern to be rather bizarre. Children who feel accepted by both their cultures will identify with both.

- *"Bilinguals have to translate from their weaker to their stronger language."*

The vast majority of bilinguals can think in either of their two languages. They do not, as some monolinguals assume, think in one language only and immediately translate into the other language when necessary.

- *"Children who grow up bilingual will make great translators when they grow up."*

By no means all bilinguals are good at translating. Nor have any studies shown that growing up bilingual gives one an advantage or a disadvantage over those who became bilingual as adults when it comes to translating. There are many other skills involved, and bilinguals, just like monolinguals, are too different to allow for easy generalizations.

There is one important exception here, however. The sign language interpreters you may have seen on television or at public events are most often hearing children of Deaf parents, who grew up bilingual.

- *"Real bilinguals never mix their languages. Those who do are confused 'semi-linguals'."*

Bilinguals sometimes "mix" their languages, leading monolinguals to wonder if they are really able to tell them apart. Usually, the problem is not genuine confusion - that is, inability to tell the languages apart. Far more common problems are interference, when words or grammar from the one language "leak" into the other language without the speaker being aware of it - analogous to a slip of the tongue - or "code-switching", when the speaker more or less intentionally switches languages for effect - analogous to mixing jargon or slang in with standard speech. Many, if not most, bilingual children will use both languages at once during the early stages of their language development. Semi-lingualism is a far more serious, and relatively rare, situation that occurs when a child in a stressful environment is trying to learn two or more languages with very little input in any of them.

- *"Bilinguals have split personalities."*

Some bilinguals do report feeling that they have a different "personality" for each language. However, this may be because they are acting according to different cultural norms when speaking each of their languages. When speaking English, they assume the cultural role expected of them in English-speaking society. This is different than the cultural role expected of them in German-speaking society, which they assume when speaking German. The change in language cues a change in cultural expectations.

- *"Bilingualism is a charming exception, but monolingualism is of course the rule."*

No accurate survey of the number of bilinguals in the world has ever been taken; for fairly obvious practical reasons, it is likely none ever will be. But it is very reasonable to guess that over half the world's population is bilingual. Most of those who will read this live in countries where monolingualism is the rule, but are seeing a very unrepresentative sample of the world.

- *"Be very careful; if you don't follow the rules exactly, your children will never manage to learn both languages!"*

Some people maintain that "the only way" to raise bilingual children is to follow one specific pattern, usually by speaking both languages in the home. Practical experience, on the other hand, has shown that children learn both languages regardless of the pattern of exposure, as long as that pattern is reasonably consistent (and perhaps even that is not a requirement!).

- *"You'll never manage to make him bilingual now. People really can't learn a language after age X."*

Language learning is easier the younger you are when you start, and there are biological reasons why very few adults can learn to speak a new language with a native accent. However, people can learn valuable language skills at any age. Establishing a bilingual home when your first child is born, if not before, is the easiest for all, but it *can* be done later if you for some reason must do so.

### III. Tips for Raising Bilingual Children

The best method for raising bilingual kids depends on your family situation, and what works for you. It is highly personal and individual. However, there are clearly some approaches that allow the child to develop the consciousness of two language systems more quickly than others. For example, the most often cited is the “one parent – one language” approach. Although certainly not the only method, it is probably the method that yields the quickest and most sure results in terms of your child’s ability to discern the two languages and make that necessary separation. The period of confusion between the two languages is reduced a great deal, because the child has a very immediate way to recognize who speaks which language.

Another very successful strategy if it suits your circumstances is the family language vs. community language division. Use one language within the home, if you have a native language common to both parents, and leave your child to acquire the community language through his environment. In this way, the minority language gets maximal exposure, particularly in the early years, which provides an excellent foundation for the child. The community language will play a small part initially, through friends, the general outside world, and TV. However, given that the community language is likely to become significantly dominant once the child attends playgroups, preschool and school (and particularly so when the child reaches the age where conformity with peers is all-important), the value of this foundation in the family language cannot be overestimated.

As with any approach you choose, though, the key is consistency. Decide as early as possible how you want to organize the multiple languages in your home, and be as firm as you can about sticking to your ideas. As long as you remain consistent, the multilingualism will come – and it may seem very soon that it never stops!

## IV. When & How To Start Learning a Second Language

### » Introducing the family language from birth

Most linguists recommend starting as early as possible, i.e. when the child is born. Introducing a second/third language later in a child's life is also possible. Some families might wish to start with the second language when the first one is firmly established, i.e. when the child is about 3-4 years old. However, no research has shown that this strategy is better for the language and literacy ability of the child.

### » Introducing the family language later than English

Monolingual children might be introduced to a new language as a special thing, gradually, starting with explaining words and songs, stories, books, using special occasions, making it a game with lots of fun and no stress. You can introduce 1 or 2 words a day, depending on the age of the child, stimulating the visual (pictures), hearing (songs) and tactile (object itself) senses. To see if the child absorbed a word, let it choose or point at the object you name and as the last learning step the child will be able to repeat the word itself. For older children you can label objects in your home, such as *door*, *table*, *shelf*, and so on.

### » More tips to help your child with language learning

Bilingualism is a process, it doesn't simply happen... But we can work at it. To enable your child to speak a language well, you have to communicate as much as you can. The more opportunities your child has to practice a language the faster this language will be learnt.

Here is what matters in successful language learning:

- ▶ Decide what kind of bilingualism suits your child and your family situation. Do you like to have your children just understand the family language or enable them to speak, read and/or write it as well?
- ▶ If you speak in a language other than English, stick to it! Be persistent, perseverant and patient.
- ▶ Follow up with music, books, stories, tapes, and computer software in your language. Create language games according to your child's development.

Make your own collection of rhymes and riddles that you can use over and over again.

- ▶ Speak your language well. Use the appropriate names and make whole, short sentences. Develop your own language skills by reading, talking and writing in your language. And please, don't mix your languages!
- ▶ The child needs to hear the language from many different speakers (old, young, male and female voices, various accents and dialects, different media like phone, radio, tape). Enlist the help of family members of your language, like grandparents. Mix with other people who speak your language in different situations and environment. The child learns how adults communicate while listening to communication between same language speakers.
- ▶ Use proven supplementary learning resources to help children master a second language. ESL Pro Systems offers a wide suite of products designed for English learners at all levels and ages. The broad collection of titles provides a solution for anyone who wants to learn or improve his or her English. ESL Pro Systems also offers excellent test preparation materials for the TOEFL® iBT and TOEIC® tests. ESL Pro Systems' award-winning software is today's best solution for learning English skills for business, education, or travel.

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