

Children and Bilingualism; Raising Bilingual Children

Abstract

Raising bilingual children nowadays appeals more families. Growing up with more than one language certainly has its advantages in today's global village. Even though many people have put the theory of bilingualism into practice, both the negative perceptions and the benefits often overlap to create confusion among parents. The existence of this paper will not just discuss some benefits of raising bilingual children. It also shares ideas dealing with factors for parents to consider in raising bilingual children, how to raise children bilingually and even some myths and facts about bilingualism. The ending of this discussion comes to a conclusion that bilingualism enables people to communicate with a wider range of people, improves cognitive skills, and even prevents dementia in old age.

Key words: bilingualism, benefit, raising, children.

A. Background

Holmes (1999) stated that more than a half of the world's population is bilingual, and many people are multilingual. They acquire a numbers of languages because they need them for different purposes. Most of us consider bilingualism as something good. The knowledge of another language enables people to communicate with members of other cultures in their own language. It provides a means for furthering cooperation and understanding among nations and peoples.

In line with the above statement, today, with greater recognition and celebration of cultural differences, people are more likely to maintain and share their primary language with their children and to promote bilingualism as a reflection of ethnic pride and identity. The importance of developing bilingualism at home becomes more obvious. Many parents decide to raise their children bilingually (ASHA, 1997).

The enthusiasim in raising bilingual children is also based on the assumption that every normal people have innate capacity to learn languages. Many linguists believe there is a "critical period" in which a child can easily acquired any language that

he or she is regularly exposed to. This means that it is much easier to learn a second language during childhood. Children do tend to develop more native-like pronunciation when bilingualism begins before adolescence (Moon, 2005).

The above assumption makes the idea of raising bilingual children is both appealing and possible for more and more families these days. Moreover, growing up with more than one language certainly has its advantages in today's global village. Bilingualism isn't something that simply happens. There are many things to consider before deciding to raise bilingual children.

In contrast, some negative perceptions also come to the bilingualism on children. The negative perception grow to be myths about bilingualism, they are: 1). learning two languages confuses a child and lowers his intelligence, 2). using languages at early age causes language delay and language disorder (King & Fogle, 2006). Further, some other myths are: 1) the learning of the second language would retard or negatively influence the learning of the native language, and 2) it would intellectually retard the development of thinking and such cognitive capacities (Steinberg et al., 2001).

On the basis of the above phenomena dealing with bilingualism, I would like to discuss some problems concerning negative and positive perceptions of bilingualism, how to raise bilingual children and what benefits of raising bilingual children are. The discussion of this topic is expected to give more understanding and provide input for parents who are planning to raise bilingual children.

B. Discussion

B. 1. Bilingualism

People define bilingualism as an equal ability to communicate in two languages. Bilingualism can also be defined as the ability to speak or write fluently in two languages. There are two types of childhood bilingualism. The first is simultaneous learning of two languages that happens when the language used at home is different from language used in the community or school. The parents, caregivers or other family members might not speak the language of the school or the community, or the parents

could speak two or more languages but have made a decision about which language they speak with the child. The second type of childhood bilingualism is called sequential or successive bilingualism. This happens when a child has one established language before learning a second language, whether in preschool or later (the age of three usually separates simultaneous and sequential language learning. Some children and adults, of course, usually learn a second language formally through school or language classes (Rosenberg, 1996).

B. 2. Myths and Fact about raising bilingual children

There are some facts dealing with myths in raising bilingual children, that is, language confusion in which children often mix the two languages they used and language delay. King & Fogle (2006) in their research found that even though many parents' fear that using two languages will result in confusion for their children, there is no research evidence to support this. On the contrary, use of two languages in the same conversation has been found to be a sign of mastery of both languages.

In addition, De Houwer (1999) said that there is no scientific evidence to date that hearing two or more languages leads to delays or disorders in language acquisition. Another research indicates that many normally developing bilingual children mix their two languages, with the type and amount of code switching depending on environmental factors, such as how much the parents or wider community engage in code switching.

Even though some other parents still believe that bilingualism may cause language delay and language confusion, Bosemark (2010) claimed that it makes sense that a child learning two or more language systems might take more time, since they are actually learning twice as many words. Dealing with language mixing, she also mentions that parents do not have to feel worry. This tendency will soon disappear once the child has built a large enough vocabulary around the age of four or five. Monolingual child often struggles to find the right word, and, for that matter, adults don't always find it easy to express themselves.

Another myth in raising bilingual children is that it would retard thinking skill and cognitive capacities. Dealing with this, Nicolandis et al., (2006) found that bilingual children achieve higher scores than monolinguals on a number of tests of cognitive ability, including mental flexibility, non-verbal problem-solving tasks, understanding the conventional origin of names, distinguishing between semantic similarity and phonetic similarity and capacity to judge the grammaticality of sentences.

Then, learning second language would give negative influence in learning native language is also another negative perception. In accordance with this issue, Steinberg et.al. (2001) found that no harmful effect either for language (first or second) or intelligence. In fact, some research suggests there may even be beneficial effects. Similar to the previous idea, Pigulskaya (2006) also found that knowledge in one's native language enhances the learning process in English. In addition, for bilingual children, transfer skills exist across languages and improve performance on English tasks. One's literacy home experiences have an effect on the development of language : the better the literacy stimulation, the greater the literacy skills in later life.

On the basis of the discussion above, the writer would like to conclude that bilingualism tends to give some positive effects on children. Some research evidence do not prove myths dealing with raising bilingual children. Language confusion and delay are considered as a normal phase that will be experienced by bilingual children and soon will disappear as the children gain more vocabulary. Then, language mixing, or using of two languages in the same conversation has been found to be a sign of mastery of both languages. That is there's no more reason for parents to feel doubt in trying to put the theory of bilingualism into practice.

B. 3. Bilingualism; Benefit or Problem?

One of the limitations in early studies on bilingualism is the context was never properly taken into account. Many of the bilingual students sampled were in subtractive bilingual environments, not their bilingualism, may placed them at a disadvantage. Then, there was no proper matching was the other limitation. To compare the the cognitive ability of a group of bilingual children with monolingual students requires that

the two groups be equal in all other respects (for example, socioeconomic status, gender age, type of school attended, and rural/urban contexts). This did not occur, and these other factors ‘confounded’ the results (Ministry of Education of New Zealand).

Early research on bilingualism concluded that bilingualism resulted in cognitive deficiencies, lower IQ scores, and even mental retardation. Indeed, these studies often associated bilingual children with terms such as ‘mental confusion’ and ‘language handicap’. The early research assumed brain as a ‘container’, where it was thought that learning another language impacted negatively on or ‘pushed out’ the existing language, reinforced the perception of bilingualism as a problem. It has since been found that this is not the way the brain works; rather, languages are linked in the brain by a central processing unit, meaning that people can easily learn two (or more) languages (Ministry of Education of New Zealand).

Further, Nicolandis et al., (2006) stated that there can be significant disadvantages regarding children’s loss of home/ heritage language, which is often deeply intertwined with family, emotions and identity. Loosing the home language can be overcome by using appropriate method. Other beneficial strategies are consistency, quality and quantity. Consistency means keep using the home language as well as the second language in the environment, quality means the interaction is significant, meaningful, for children to expose to the second language. And the last quality means using a balance time usage for both home and second language.

In the contrary, Rosenberg (1996) stated that knowing two or more languages truly gives kids so many advantages in life. Bilingual kids have the advantage of knowing two cultures, of being able to communicate with a wider variety of people, and of possible economic advantages in their future. Further, Kim (2007) said reserachers in Canada have found that speaking two languages over the course of one’s life can help to delay the onset of dementia by approximately four years. Dementia is defined as a progressive decline in brain function due to damage in the brain beyond what might be expected with normal aging.

Based on the above discussion, raising bilingual children tends to be more beneficial. In general, those who are able to speak more than one language have the

ability to communicate with more people, read more literature, and benefit more fully from travel abroad. Knowing a second language also gives people a competitive advantage in the workforce. In other words, it tends to prepare children to be a more qualified young generation in the future. Therefore, it is necessary to consider to raise children bilingually.

B. 5. Raising bilingual children

Children do not just “pick up” a language. They need a strongly supportive and rich environment learning to speak. Children learn to speak only when they hear people talk to them in many different circumstances. In raising bilingual children, live interaction is mentioned as the most effective way (De Houwer, 1999).

When kids are learning two languages at the same time, parents need to work out language strategies that emphasize boundaries between the languages. For example: 1). one parent, one language. Each parents consistently speaks one language while the other parent speaks another language (usually each on speaking his or her native language to the child and possibly the common language to each other, 2). both parents speak one language in the home and the second language is used at school, 3). one language is used at home and at school and the second language is used in the community and 4). both parents speak both languages to the child but separate the languages according to speaking situations and alternative days (Rosenberg, 1996).

Among those four strategies, one parent one language is the most common family language system. This language system provides simultaneous bilingual development and has worked well for many families. It gives sufficient exposure in both languages and creates a firm foundation for the two languages to grow in a balanced way. In contrary, the most common strategy is not always the best. Therefore, Multilingual Children's Association (2004) claims that it is true that the more consistent you are, the better and faster your child will learn, but consistency shouldn't come at the expense of the child or the family. In the long run, what feels most natural to you will work best. Remember, raising a multilingual kid is at least a 4-year commitment to reach basic speaking skills (and obviously, continued exposure for maintenance after

that), and the commitment is longer if your goal is full literacy. Circumstances in your family life may change during such an extended period of time. It's best not to put undue pressure on yourself, but to find a routine that works for you and can be adjusted as your situation changes.

Raising bilingual children requires parents to be good listeners and good models by introducing rich vocabulary and varied conversations. In raising bilingual children, parents need to provide right environment for children to use languages they hear. Providing books, music and videos in both languages can serve as a positive entertaining source of support for language learning, but human interaction is the best method for fostering both first and second language. In relation to this issue, researchers have found that live interaction (e.g., reading or talking to children) is more effective than exposure to recorded sounds (e.g., television) (Kuhl, Feng-Ming, & Huei-Mei, 2003) cited in King & Fogle (2006). Other studies have found that, for older children, being read aloud to in the second language increases second language vocabulary much more than watching television in that language (Patterson, 2002) cited in King & Fogle (2006).

One thing that must be remembered by parents, that is, children do not have a fully developed native language on which to base the learning of a second language. In order to develop their native language skills fully, parents should support them in both their native language and English. Then, the most important thing is parents should be encouraged to be aware of the quantity and quality of their children's exposure to both languages and to think about creating a "safe space" for the minority language to flourish at home (Coltrane, 2003).

To conclude, raising bilingual children requires more effort on the part of the parents. It is a commitment at first, and planning then. Parents are required to provide enough language exposure through meaningful interaction and other media to support them in both native language and English. Parents must use the strategies to work out the two languages consistently and ensure that the child has a balanced exposure to the two languages in terms of quality and quantity.

C. Conclusion

More Parents nowadays are enthusiastic to raise their children bilingually. Bilingualism itself is defined as the ability to engage in two languages in spoken and written form. There are some reasons for raising bilingual children; including becoming part of the two world, communicating with more people, getting a better job, etc. The myths and facts dealing with bilingualism often overlap, but the myths are not proven. The myths are assumed as initial problems at the beginning that are normal and soon will disappear once the children have built more vocabulary. Therefore, the writer concludes that raising bilingual children tends to give more benefit.

In order to get the benefit in raising bilingual children, parents play the most important role. There are many things for parents to consider, such as commitment, planning, consistency and also a balance in using the two languages and also language strategy to use. Then, parents need to provide right environment for children to use languages they hear. Therefore, Children should be exposed to the two languages through meaningful interaction. The forms of meaningful interaction are reading and talking to children using the two languages. Reading aloud is beneficial to increase children's vocabulary in the second language. In addition, parents also are expected to engage their meaningful interaction with the use of music, videos, television and any other printed media. Another important task for parents is to be consistent in terms of quantity and quality in using the two languages in order to prevent a language loss.

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